



GlobalPDX Podcast “Speaking Change” Season 1, Episode 7 Transcript

Andrea Johnson

Hello and welcome to the first GlobalPDX podcast of 2021. The New Year has continued to surprise us, and we are excited to keep this podcast going. We're trying to stay positive, creative and engaged during such challenging times and we hope this podcast provides connection, content, and support to Oregon's Hub of Global Changemakers.

My name is Andrea Johnson and I'm the Chair of the GlobalPDX Advisory Board, and the Executive Director of Green Empowerment. In today's podcast we are joined by Susan Sygall: CEO and co-founder of Mobility International USA. Mobility International USA is a disability-led nonprofit organization headquartered in Eugene, Oregon. They're working to advance disability rights and leadership globally. Susan is an internationally recognized expert in the area of International education exchange, and leadership programs for persons with disabilities. She's had a personal and professional commitment to disability rights and women's issues for more than 30 years. Susan's full bio can be found on the GlobalPDX website. Susan, thank you so much for joining us today (of all days)!

Susan Sygall

Yes, what an incredible day it's been so far!

Andrea

Yes for those of you turning in: (this podcast) is going to be recorded and then published later, but the inauguration just finished up so Susan I am just coming into this podcast with lots of feelings today.

Susan

Yes.

Andrea

So maybe you can start, Susan, just by telling our audience: What does Mobility International USA do? What's your mission? What are some of your programs? So the people know who we're speaking with today.

Susan

Yes. Well first of all thank you for having me! So as some of you may know Mobile international USA (or MIUSA as we sometimes call it), we are having our national headquarters right here in Eugene Oregon, and our mission is to advance leadership and Disability Rights globally. And how we do that in several ways: we ensure that people with disabilities are included in all international exchange programs which of course builds the pipeline of leaders with disabilities.



We are very involved with USAID (we have projects in Armenia and many countries) to ensure that people with disabilities are included in all aspects of society. So we work on everything from legislation, to creating disability rights laws, to creating Independent living centers, to fighting for justice for women with disabilities. And we also are very well known for our women's program where we are trying to build a pipeline of disabled women leaders from all over the world and our signature program is called WILD (the Women's Institute and Leadership and Disability). As well as teaching courses, doing consulting, and many of the many of the avenues. So we're just so excited! We're celebrating our 40th anniversary this year. We have over 2,311 alumni, we work with people over 135 countries, and we are right here in Oregon and we feel like being an organization that started in Oregon, we are really leading the way of around inclusive development. And it's exciting to be on this podcast with hopefully many other people who are really trying to change the face of International Development.

Andrea

Well that is an amazing and really comprehensive introduction, it's so exciting to have you given all of your years of experience. So I think for our listeners that might be nice if you shared a little bit about the history of disability inclusion, both in the U.S. and internationally and just kind of where you see it today, so that we can really ground ourselves and in understanding this issue more deeply.

Susan

Well as some of you might know, people with disabilities in this country really had to fight to get the rights, to get those things. Like people probably know The Americans with Disabilities Act and it's always a very personal story for me because one of the longest take-overs of a federal building happened in San Francisco, and it was the *Health Education and Welfare* Building where disabled people (and I was there for part of the time) literally took over the building peacefully and stayed for 26 days. It was actually one of the longest takeovers of a federal building. And that was a predecessor for 504 (which became the predecessor for the ADA) and then internationally people with disabilities around the world have come to the U.S. and seen some of the accomplishments of the ADA, and then have tried to replicate in their own way international disability rights laws. And in terms of international development, I think we have always pushed that every program (I mean we have worked a lot with folks at USAID, at Interaction) that you think of all of the programs (literacy, microfinance, health, education) the whole myriad of programs historically have not included people with disabilities. Not only as beneficiaries (like we have heard terrible stories of people with disabilities not getting HIV information) but also have not really recognized people with disabilities as leaders in international development and so that is why we are so excited, especially on this inauguration day, to really paint the picture of what would be possible. That hopefully the people who are listening to the podcast will think about what their role is in international development (or what they want it to be) and how they can be one of those changemakers to ensure that people with disabilities (all types of disabilities) really are included, and seen as leaders.

Andrea



That's great so do you have any advice for where you think organizations could start if they haven't really been thinking about disability? Both from an inclusion-in-their-organization and leadership perspective, or in their programming?

Susan

Yeah, well, there's many different things that MIUSA does, we just started in the last few years a program called EDDI (Excellence in Disability and Development Inclusion) and it's a membership organization (fees based on the revenue of an organization). What we do is, we've got everyone from big organizations like *Save the Children* and *Comonics* to small organizations like *Trickle Up* and other organizations) we work with the leadership of the organization and different levels of staff, we create an action plan we have podcasts, we have resources, and they get to be in this network. We have found this to be a really powerful way that people don't have to know everything there is to know and how to do it, but we definitely have all of the how-to's. And we lead them through this path and it's one of those things where then everyone benefits. Whether it's learning how to ensure that people with disabilities are giving Covid-19 information in their projects, to making their offices accessible, to hiring more people with disabilities, (especially now with Zoom) how to make your Zoom calls accessible. We've been so excited because when people do it it's a win-win for everyone and it's an exciting and joyful path.

Andrea

I think you're highlighting a really important point about the joy and the benefits. Thinking about disability as another element of diversity and bringing different perspectives to your teams. So could you elaborate a little bit on that?

Susan

Yes I think right now with the Black Lives Matter movement, and other movements, that diversity/equity is really being looked at. And you know it's important, it doesn't always happen, but disability needs to be part of that conversation. You can't talk about equity/inclusion if you're not talking about disability. And of course as we always say that with people talking (rightfully so) about intersectionality, if you're talkin about people of color, people with disabilities, LGBT, women, whatever you're really talking about it's going to include people with disabilities. And also if you're going to do training, anti-racism training, and other trainings, and other information that disability needs to be on the table because we're only going to have the type of world that we want that's truly equitable if disability is part of this whole component of what is it means to be diverse and to have an equitable organization. And again, you don't have to know everything on how to do it (that is something that we can definitely assist with) but especially in Oregon I mean we should be the leaders in this. Oregon has always been a place where so much innovation happened so we're excited and people who are listening will be involved and really make Oregon a leader in this field.

Andrea

And just so folks know they can sign up to be a part of that EDDI Program and get other resources through your website, correct?



Susan

Yes the website is MIUSA.org so you can go there or send us an email. We also need to talk about inclusion you know one of the things that we've been talking so much about is: inclusion is aware that people have used for so many years and I mean I guess in my opinion it really hasn't happened and it's been very slow and not as fast as it should happen. So we talked about moving from *inclusion* to *infiltration*. And what that means is you can't just say "oh people with disabilities are welcomed" or "we don't discriminate" that organizations and individuals need to actually have an intentional plan to go and seek out people disabilities, to take these things out. And then we're telling people with disabilities around the world is: if they're anywhere in their country and they see a US funded program, whether it's on covid-19, literacy, HIV, leadership, water and sanitation, climate change, that people with disabilities also need to go in infiltrate those programs and say "hey, these are our programs too", they need to be sure that all people disabilities can utilize them. So we can weed to kick it up a few notches.

Andrea

So you've mentioned just in your comments a lot of big things going on in this moment in time, Covid-19, we're living in the middle of the Black Lives Matter movement, and both the protests and (hopefully) the calls for change upcoming, and then today is inauguration, so how have these kind of moments and movements increased attention or impact of the work day you are doing around disability rights and inclusion or infiltration?

Susan

That's a good question. I actually have seen that all of these movements like Black Lives Matter, I think they actually create some opportunity and open the doors. I work a lot with an umbrella organization of many CEOs from International Development Organizations and you know, some people are saying "building back better" and some people are saying "no let's talk about building back *different*". So however you want to phrase it, what has happened is that the status quo in the past has not served everybody. So when people talk about doing things different/doing things better, that people are saying "yes we admitted we have not really looked at disability as one of those issues" and it is sort of created, I think, a more open space for us to say "Okay well let's work together and make some things happen" and I think that's been a positive thing. So I think this is the moment. I don't know why we've been saying the same things for so many years, but maybe as many people of color have said: This is the time to make the change, the status quo is no longer okay.

Andrea

And are you seeing any examples, whether that's from funding resources or other groups, that's actually converting that conversation into action? Because I think one of the fears of social justice rights advocates globally is that we won't capitalize on this moment and convert it into action. So are you seeing examples where action is coming as a result of these conversations?

Susan



Yes I've definitely seen many, I can give you two very specific ones: one we've been working with women's International Development/women's rights organization called *Madre*, a very feminist-oriented organization (not in Oregon but works internationally). And we did some long-term consulting with them and they have gone back and really strategically looked at what they've done. One of the things: they were giving out grants for girls empowerment but they were giving it to programs run by young women and they made a commitment that 25% of all their grants were going to go *not only* to young girls with disabilities, but programs that are *run by* disabled young women. 25% of all their grant managing I think that's a very specific and intentional change.

I can also tell you we've been working with *The MacArthur Foundation* that gives many large grants out to people and their program called "Lever for Change" that's administering this grant and anyone who applies to get any of these funds has to talk about how they're going to put reasonable accommodation in their budget. How they're going to include disabled people. Because when you talk about leveling the playing field for people with disabilities you have to have something in your budget that's going to pay (do you need sign language? Do you need accessible transportation? Do you need assistive technology so people who are blind can access information? Are your websites accessible?) So I think these are very practical things that we see happening and I think there has to be a commitment from everyone in the organization to do that and you need to have very measurable, intentional things to really show that you're doing it.

Andrea

I appreciate your comment about having it be both intentional but also funded. I'm the Executive Director, in addition to supporting GlobalPDX, at Green Empowerment. We're rather small so recognizing that to be intentional might have to come with a budget-line item but it also on the reverse of that, would hold you accountable to fulfilling that intention. So moving it from good intentions through to action.

Susan

Exactly.

Andrea

Do you have examples of some of the smaller organizations that you've worked with where you've seen success in them addressing these issues? I just know that a number of listeners and GlobalPDX members do work for smaller organizations that tend to be more focused on one or two types of projects, or one country, or things like that.

Susan

We are a small-but-mighty organization. MIUSA has been around, we are working globally all over the world, but we have a budget that is relatively small, all things concerned to other organizations. I think the size of the organization has nothing to do with the impact that you can have. First of all, the impact you can have in the world, as well as the impact you can have with disability inclusion.



So an example would be: a small organization (whatever your budget) we always suggest putting 1%-3% of your admin budget in any proposal, and maybe 3%-5% about the program budget, so you have something for accommodation so if you need it, you are ready. We know that many small organizations have internships. We can definitely assist with making sure the word gets out. Are you having interns with disabilities? That is something you know is we have virtual interns now of course. That is another thing that you can do. You may not have a lot of positions open, but when you have a position do you say things like “people with disabilities are encouraged to apply”?

But the thing that I think so many times people miss is: any project that you're working on (whether water, sanitation, literacy, climate change, etc.) I always say, “I can't think of one topic that you're working on that would not include people with disabilities”. Either as participants, or as leaders, on your Advisory Board. It doesn't have to be a disability project. People with disabilities have to be involved in climate change, and all those things that I mentioned. We've had some fabulous conversations with organizations who just go, “I never thought of that!” or “Yes, we're working in Ecuador” and I say “we have great people, we have so many alumni in so many countries. You can pretty much tell us almost any country that you're working with and if you wanted to work with organizations run by people with disabilities in that country, or let them know about your project and get some input”, those are things that we can help with. So yeah I would be really excited to work with some of those smaller organizations because it can really be a model of what's possible.

Andrea

I absolutely love that. We talk quite a bit at Green Empowerment about being “small-but-mighty” and also being “small by design” because a lot of times it's not really about us growing, it's about the movement or the impact in the countries where we work. And that's where we see growth. And so we like to think of ourselves as similar in that regard.

Susan

Right and I should (as we all self identify, and it's hard to know in a podcast) I myself identify as a wheelchair rider. So I'm talking personally, and also professionally, about my passion to be so excited to be on this podcast. Hopefully in the post-Covid-19 world, it would be wonderful to be able to meet some of the people listening to this podcast again in-person.

Andrea

Let's talk a little about the post-Covid world. One of the things I read recently really opened my eyes to a differing perspective about working remotely, is that there are disability advocates that are saying, “See! We told you!”. Reasonable accommodation for people who might work better from a home environment, or just need more flexibility in their schedule. Now that the corporate sector has moved online, I was reading that and I would love to hear any perspective that you have in terms of, as we transition into a different post-Covid world (and who knows what exactly that will look like) but how do we make sure that we retain some of the benefits of what this changed work environment has offered to certain people.

Susan



I think that's a good question and you know while we're in the Covid-19 world, we're teaching a lot of organizations how to make all their Zoom calls accessible. I mean we've talked about with this podcast to make sure that there's a transcript available so somebody who is deaf can access it. But we, like everybody else, are working remotely and I think this will be a lot more opportunities for people to work remotely. I think the idea is, like, maybe you don't even have to be in Oregon, or you'll have more staff outside, or you know the whole idea of flexible schedules. Everybody probably now is on a flexible schedule.

We teach at the course every year that's coming up at the University of Oregon called *Global Perspectives on Disability*. And we teach it remotely, eventually we'll probably go back and teach it in person, but it really demonstrates that everyone is pivoting and doing something differently. So I think again when someone with a disability might say they need flexible hours or they need this or that, I think it's going to be not an exception, it's going to be the same as everybody else is doing. So I think that's a good thing. No one knows exactly what it's going to look like but we've learned that you can work remotely and I think it's going to be a combination of how people come back to work to make it work for everybody.

Andrea

So I think one of the last questions I have is a little bit more personal: You talk about passion and excitement and we're speaking on inauguration day, but it's been a challenging time with both Covid-19, and politics, and kind of divisiveness here at least in the United States. Yet you've maintained such a passion and commitment and sound really excited about the future, so what's your trick? How are you staying so excited and passionate? You know you've been doing this work you mentioned for 40-some years.

Susan

You know, it's interesting, in the Women's Program that we are doing (I hope people will look at our website because there might be a way if you want to join us and we can hopefully do another WILD program this year) our mantra for a WILD program is "Loud proud and passionate". So this theme of being loud and being passionate. For me, self described as a disability activist, I think you have to maintain a level of passion, a level of optimism to do this work. This has definitely been a difficult year, I don't think it's over, but we actually (as a small organization) are continuing on. We have a Covid project to help disabled women deal with the Covid in pandemic. There is a lot of increased violence so we are seeing a lot of disabled women in other countries partnering with non-disability organizations who are giving services with the Ministry of Health. I think you just have to stay positive, you have to develop Partnerships sometimes that maybe you hadn't had before, to work together with the organizations. Just watching the inauguration (and I know this podcast will come out afterwards) I was personally moved by the young woman who is the national poet: I mean just so much admitting that you know this country is unfinished, but so much pride and what is yet to come. I'm excited about Biden, who has put out a call for more people with disabilities to be involved in his administration. There's been podcasts, I was on a Zoom call with other CEOs with Samantha Power who's the new USAID administrator who is just amazing, and really listening to the interests and the needs from the CEOs from the International Development space. So yeah, I think this is our time to "build it better" or "build it different". This is our time. I hope



people who are listening, you know, MIUSA has internships, we have lots of ways to get involved, but really everyone who's listening to this: if we all get out of our silos a bit of what we do, and say, "We never really thought about disability but we are going to do that this year". I always think the environmental movement should be joining with the disability movement (I mean it shouldn't be considered "green" if it's not accessible), should be combining with the Racial Justice movement. So I'm hoping that, you know they talked a lot about movement-building, I hoping all these movements will start working together and let's lead in Oregon. Let's us start leading that change.

Andrea

Well that is just an amazing way to end this conversation. For folks listening we will make sure to have the link to MIUSA's website with this podcast in addition to Susan's bio. Susan thank you so much for joining me today, and thank you for being such a passionate Global Changemaker.

Susan

Thank you, I am very much looking forward to coming to Portland someday and meeting you, and meeting hopefully other people who have listened to this Podcast, and thank you for all you do.

Andrea

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