Spotlight Session & Special Olympics #8

[00:00:00] What does accessibility mean to you?

**Josh:** Hello and welcome to another episode of the Special edition of the Inclusion Revolution Radio collaboration with accessiBe's Spotlight Sessions. The Special Olympics World Games, Berlin 2023 have officially concluded. We're so excited to be speaking with an athlete today to relive the games from her perspective.

My name is Josh Basile, I'm your co-host for today's show. I'm a C four five quadriplegic, paralyzed below my shoulders, and a power wheelchair user on the community relations manager at accessiBe and a passionate disability rights advocate and trial attorney focused on breaking down barriers to access and inclusion for people with disabilities.

**Novie:** I'm Novie [00:01:00] Craven, your other co-host for today's show. I'm a proud Special Olympics athlete and employee of Special Olympics International. I play bocce, basketball and about any other sport you can think of. I love Special Olympics and the work our organization does to promote friendship, respect, and of course inclusion.

**Josh:** Today we'll be talking with Shanaia Xuereb, Special Olympics Malta Athlete, Health Messenger and member of the Athlete Leadership Committee. Thank you so much for joining us today, Shania, and welcome to the Inclusion Revolution podcast.

**Shanaia:** Thank you for inviting me on this podcast.

**Novie:** Can you give us a recap of the games and share some of your favorite moments?

**Shanaia:** Berlin was an unforgettable experience. Because of Special Olympics, I have had so many great experiences! [00:02:00] At the World Games, I've got to meet new people, make new friends, and share ideas with people from all around the world. It was such an incredible experience. The opening ceremonies were unbelievable. I can't explain the joy I felt attending them.

**Josh:** Well, I heard that you attended the Athlete Leadership Conference. What was your role leading up to and during the conference?

**Shanaia:** At the Global Athlete Leadership Conference, Special Olympics athletes led the way to a more inclusive world. Athlete leaders from all seven Special Olympics regions came together to share their ideas and projects.

I was first approached to join the Congress last year by Ms Anna Calleja, Special Olympics Small Town National Director, and my mentor Lorna [00:03:00] Callus. From there, I started to work on a project to carry out together with the Athlete Leadership Committee. The theme of the congress was “Athletes Leading the Way”, because of that, we built a project with the aim to “Lead to Empower Athletes”.

As an athlete leader, I got to represent the athletes of Special Olympics Malta.

**Novie:** What was it like connecting with Athlete Leaders from around the world?

**Shanaia:** Leading up to the congress, I got to meet other athlete leaders virtually, but it was so incredible to finally meet everyone in person at the World Games! The athlete leaders were from all over the world. We spoke different languages and were from different places, but we were [00:04:00] united by our love for Special Olympics.

**Josh:** And Shania, how did you first get involved in the Special Olympics? And what sports do you compete in?

**Shanaia:** I joined Special Olympics Malta in March, 2009, and the first sport I participated in was swimming. My first World Games was in Greece 2011. In 2015, I once again took part in another World Games.

This time in Los Angeles, California. Now I take part in aquatics and bowling at both the local and national level. As an athlete and athlete leader, I want to begin giving back to the Special Olympics community. I work with younger athletes to help develop their skills, both on and off the playing field. I love being a mentor to other athletes.[00:05:00]

**Josh:** Shania, in what ways did the Special Olympics kind of change your life?

**Shanaia:** Before I joined Special Olympics Malta, my life was completely different. Special Olympics changed my life for the better! Because of Special Olympics Malta, now I have friends who share the same interest that I do.

Special Olympics helped to build my confidence and because of the movement, I am now a more independent person. My focus had always being on being my best, and because of Special Olympics, I feel like I am reaching my goals every day.

**Josh:** I love that you're being your best and reaching your goals. I love your journey, Shanaia.

**Shanaia:** Thank you.

**Novie:** Tell us more about what a [00:06:00] Health Messenger for Special Olympics does and why Health Messengers are so important for our movement?

**Shanaia:** What some people don't know is that Special Olympics is not just a sports movement. We also focus on Athlete Leadership, Education and Health. Special Olympics Health Messengers were created for athletes to be advocates for athletes. A Health Messenger helps to serve as a health and wellness role model for the Special Olympics community. As Health Messengers, we strongly believe in health equity for everyone. I enjoy representing my fellow athletes and helping them to change their lives for the better.

**Novie:** As athletes, we have a powerful voice. How did the World Games amplify your voice and voices of other athletes? [00:07:00]

**Shanaia:** Our agenda in Berlin was planned, every day was different. During the Athlete Congress, athletes had the opportunity to take part in activities and workshops. I enjoyed this because it gave me another opportunity to meet fellow athletes.

One important topic that was covered during the congress was the empowerment of women in society. This topic is one that is important to me and the president of Special Olympics Malta, Dr. Lydia Abela. I felt so proud to be part of this workshop, to be honest with you, having the opportunity to represent our project. As an athlete leader for Special Olympics Malta was such an honor. The project focused on empowering athletes regardless by their age, ability [00:08:00] or what sport they play. Special Olympics athletes can meet and also beat any expectations that are set for them!

During the Congress, every active leader had the opportunity to search their project.

And feel proud of what they have achieved. The Berlin World Games may be over, but the work that the Global Athlete Congress does has just begun.

**Josh:** And Shanaia, speaking of the voices, what would you say to companies and organizations who are not as inclusive of people with disabilities?

**Shanaia:** As athletes, our request is simply, We want to be part of our community.

We want to be part of our society. We want to feel counted. We want the same rights. We want the same respect. We want to be [00:09:00] treated equally as others in the community.

**Josh:** Why should these companies and organizations listen better and change their ways?

**Shanaia:** We are all different. We have different identities, different experiences, different goals, different expectations. Including people with disabilities in everyday activities, and encouraging them to have important roles within organizations and businesses will create more collaborative environment. I believe this makes our society more inclusive.

**Josh:** Thanks, Shanaia

**Novie:** Shanaia, can you tell us what does accessibility and inclusion mean to you?

**Shanaia:** Accessibility and inclusion are important puzzle pieces that make sure that everyone, regardless of their [00:10:00] race, gender, sexuality, or disability, are treated equally. Accessibility and inclusion, that everyone feels valued, respected, and given the opportunity to reach their full potential. I would like to conclude with a motto that our Athlete Leadership Committee have created for our project. Dream it, believe it, achieve it. Working together as a team, we can achieve great things.

**Novie:** Thank you, Shanaia, for joining today's episode of Inclusion Revolution Radio Podcast and Spotlight Session collaboration.

You are a perfect role model for our movement and an incredible leader, Special Olympics is so lucky to have you.

**Shanaia:** Thank you for this great opportunity!

**Josh:** Shanaia, I love that slogan that you live by. It's a great way to keep moving forward. But again, just you, you can, everyone [00:11:00] else and all of our viewers.

You can learn more about accessiBe , Inclusion Revolution Radio and Special Olympics by subscribing on YouTube, following us on Instagram, facebook and LinkedIn finding us on our handles at accessiBe\_ community and at Special Olympics. Thank you all and we are looking forward to our next episode.

Thanks, Shanaia! Thanks Novie! Thank you.