Novie Craven:

You are listening to the Inclusion Revolution Radio. I'm your podcast host, Novie Craven. I'm a Special Olympics DC athlete and a Special Olympics International employee. On this podcast, I interview athletes, partners, ambassadors, employees and supporters of Special Olympics. This podcast is for anyone and everyone who's interested in Special Olympics in the work that we do. New episodes [inaudible 00:00:29] every other Friday at 10:00 AM Eastern Standard Time anywhere you get your podcast.

You're listening to the fourth episode of season five of Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. My name is Novie Craven. I am your host for today's episode. Today we'll be talking with Dr. Jorge Alcaraz and Chris Morrison for Allison+Partners. Welcome Dr. Jorge and Chris to the Inclusion Revolution podcast. We are so excited to have you here today. Allison+Partners is one of our global partners, the leading marketing and communications agency. Dr. Jorge Alcaraz is trained diversity, equity inclusion professional. Chris Morrison is a content marketing specialist to integrate marketing with Allison+Partners. Dr. Jorge and Chris, can you share your professional journey? What drew you to work at Allison+Partners?

Chris Morrison:

First off, Novie, thank you so much for having us. We're excited to be here. I'd be happy to talk a bit about how I came to Allison+Partners. I've always loved writing and telling stories, even as a kid. And so when I grew up a little bit and decided on what I wanted to do, marketing is just telling stories, but about brands. I got a degree and did marketing for an environmental construction company, and then I joined A+P a year and a half ago, and it's been great ever since.

Dr. Jorge Alcaraz:

Yeah, and echoing Chris's point, I'll be super excited to be here with you. My story's a little different from Chris. I am a trained academic, so I was going to be a professor and teach about diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. That's my background and have been able to do diversity and inclusion work on college campuses, but decided ultimately that hey, I enjoy making places a better place for everybody to make them more inclusive and I have a skillset that I think I want to bring to a different space and really challenge myself.

And so I got lucky to get an interview with Allison+Partners and really fell in love with the company. We're always trying to see things differently and we're trying to build a more inclusive company. And that was really exciting to me. I would be the first person in this role and they've really created space for me to really go with the vision that I have, to really challenge us to have these critical conversations, much of what Special Olympics does as well. That's how I got to Allison+Partners, and I've been here for roughly about a year and a half now, so not too far away from when Chris joined. And so that's how I got here.

Novie Craven:

Sweet. Dr. Jorge, you shared that in college, you noticed that people who look like you had a hard time in college and that's what made you interested in working to promote inclusion and diversity. What would you say to that inclusion helps all people succeed, or does it just help people who have been left out?

Dr. Jorge Alcaraz:

Yeah, I'm happy to answer that. I grew up in the central part of California, so I identify as Latino and as gay. I'm in the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Growing up in the small town that I did as a very heavy Latino community, I was like, "Oh, everybody understands." And I get to college and I'm like, "Oh, this is a little different. People don't look like me. And the people that do look like me, they're having a hard time in class. People are not treating them as nicely in the city that we were all going to college in." And so I was really lucky to have different workshops to go into and a lot of professionals that work that said, "Hey, this is what inclusion means and this is what equity means and here's how we work towards it." And I was like, "That's so interesting."

I want everybody to have a good experience, not only for myself, but also learning more about the different stories that come with different racial identity groups, ethnic groups, nationalities, disability status, all of those items that we face challenges with and sometimes discrimination. And so I've always found a passion to help people. And so when I got to college, I was like, "I want to keep doing this. I think I can teach people how to do this. I've been able to learn so much more and that I can say, Hey, here's what I've learned so far, you can too." But also look how much where I've come so far.

And then when thinking about does inclusion help everybody? And the answer is absolutely 100%. By including somebody, you're not losing something or a privilege or access to anything. If anything, you're lending that extra hand to say, "Hey, this is where I'm at, here's how I can help you get to the access to the resources that we need." When we are looking at college, making sure we have financial access, being able to talk to faculty members, being able to access lecture halls. We know sometimes people use mobility devices and sometimes people use wheelchairs, and so can you even get into the space, right? When I think about where I came from and where I go, when I think about inclusion, inclusion means everybody is having a good time. Everybody is participating in the ways that they need to and want to. I'm going to stop there just because I think I answered the question, but if I didn't, please let me know.

Novie Craven:

No, that was totally fine. I mean that sums it up. Chris, how does the idea of inclusion fit with your corporate mission?

Chris Morrison:

Sure. I'd be happy to. Inclusion's really at the front of our mission, and I think often ad agencies or PR agencies get a bad rap. People have watched too much Mad Men and think it's all like that. But contrary to that, I think one of the things I really love about Allison+Partners is the inclusive culture that's really baked into the company from the ground up. As Jorge mentioned, as employees, we're empowered to look at things differently and try and bring in a wide variety of viewpoints. Whether we're working on something internally or creating a project for a client, we want to make sure that the more viewpoints we have, the better that end product is going to be. And for that, as part of the things we've done here at Allison+Partners, we've created internal office teams focused on making sure that our work and our workplace is inclusive.

One of the things that I can highlight quickly is our content review board. As a advertising and PR agency, we put out a ton of content all the time for our clients, and we have an internal review board that makes sure that our content is inclusive, makes sense, isn't offensive, things like that. And that's really something that I haven't seen in a lot of other agencies, and something that we've done here just to add that extra level of making sure everything's inclusive.

Novie Craven:

I like that answer. I like that answer. Dr. Jorge, can you tell us why DEI has gained momentum recently and how Allison+Partners implements it?

Dr. Jorge Alcaraz:

I'm happy to. I'll answer the first part. I think one thing that companies are now faced with, and particularly in the PR and communications industry, is our consumers want us to provide brands or pivot position brands to be inclusive of all of us. Sometimes we know what it feels like to not be included. And so I think for many people, after sharing so many stories, and really in the summer of 2020 had us, as at least in the US, as a reflective point to talk about. Something's not right. Not everybody is being included. And I think that moment in time where we saw a lot of conversations about race and then that expanding to disability and LGBTQ+ issues, companies are now faced with, do you want to choose to include or do you want to continue business and not being inclusive?

And so I think that's something that we now have some accountability from people in society that are saying, "Hey, we want to work with companies that are choosing to be inclusive very much how Special Olympics does." And so when we think about the agency, and I'm going to remind myself. When we think about Allison+Partners and what we're doing to implement, we're thinking about this across two different spectrums. We're thinking about people operations and business operations. I'll start with the first. For people operations, we want everybody to one, see Allison+Partners as a place that they can grow, that they can be included from the day that they enter. And so for us, what that means is we're changing up the way we're recruiting candidates, we're going to different places. For instance, I was just in a different conference yesterday talking to people of Color in the PR and communications industry. And that partnership, that individual or that organization is really positioned to help us increase the representation of people of Color.

Now, other things that we're doing is that we're training managers on how to be inclusive. You don't know what you don't know. Some of us grew up in different places, some of us have different demographics and perspectives on the world. And so it's about teaching others how they can expand their perspective to say, "Hey, I'm not sure how I can best support you, but let's have a conversation about how you think I can." And then being able to open up that dialogue to make sure that we're being the best supervisors for everybody. Everybody has different needs. Sometimes we need accommodation, sometimes we just need a little bit more space and flexibility. And so really thinking about the internal ecosystem of Allison+Partners as being a place where you can explore your career path. You can have difficult conversations, you can be successful. And so that's part A.

Part B is also about the business. We know that being inclusive is better for business. What that looks like for us is really embedding DEI and multicultural strategies into our health practice, our sports practice, our corporate practice teams and really asking us when we get a opportunity to work with a client, how can we make their positioning or their interest to be much broader? To hit a total market is what we ask. So instead of saying general market, how can we make sure that a message that we put out there hits across all different consumers, whether you are a person of Color, whether you're in the LGBTQ+ spectrum, whether you identify as having a disability. And so really thinking about how we're building teams, and very much how Chris mentioned earlier, how do we build teams so that we have different perspectives to ensure that we're being inclusive of all in the best ways that we can. And knowing that sometimes we're not going to get it right, but how do we come back and say, "Here's what we miss and here's how we can incorporate it."

And so that's how we're implementing it at Allison+Partners. And I'm really happy to have colleagues like Chris who are doing this work in their client work. I'm really excited to have my senior leadership team to be really supportive. And so I'll stop there, otherwise I'll get too excited and keep talking.

Novie Craven:

Dr. Jorge, as a worldwide public relations firm, how can Allison+Partners be a leader in showing the benefit of inclusion to clients and to the public? And what steps are you taking to lead others to help them understand the business benefit of inclusion for any organization?

Dr. Jorge Alcaraz:

Definitely. I think I'll answer the first part. How can we be a leader showing the benefits of inclusion? I think we're ultimately a PR and communications agency. You can look at the different awards that we've won to demonstrate our ability to really develop client work that really speaks to very inclusive audiences. We have work with Kimpton where we just brought different global influencers. Some people identified the LBGTQ+ spectrum, some people were identified as having a disability, different nationalities, and so different world experiences where we're able to show, "Hey, this work that we did with this client is global and inclusive." So it's a clear demonstration of how we're signaling to the industry, this is what we're doing and why we think that being inclusive is better for all of us, but here's how we're demonstrating how us being inclusive of our people within our own company is leveling up the work that we've been doing. And that can demonstrate that other agencies also need to follow suit.

And we can speak larger to other just corporate work where the more inclusive you're being, the more diverse your teams are going to be. And the more diverse your teams are, the more diverse your perspective is going to be on the work that we're producing. And when we have that beauty of diversity and inclusion... So you can have a team that's diverse, but if you're not including their voices then that's not great. We're taking the step of, "Hey, let's have a brainstorm session. Let's talk about a strategy. What is it that we're missing here? What are we maybe not seeing? How can we strengthen and who can we bring in when we feel like we're falling short on the conversation?" And so that's where I have the privilege of hopping into some client work and being able to leverage the thoughts that we're having.

Now in terms of what are some steps that we're taking to lead others, I'll take a personal perspective here. One thing that we're doing, and I know I talk a lot about Chris, but Chris does a lot of inclusive marketing work for us in terms of adding closed captioning to items. And so, one of the things that I've talked to Chris, and he can hop in here where he'd like to, is teaching people... We use closed captioning, but some people may not know why we're using it. Well, it's to be inclusive. Not everybody can hear.

And we can be the most accessible when we add more opportunities for people to engage or read in the dialogue that we're trying to connect with. And so for us, how do we teach others is using internal training to say, "Hey, here's how we do this in practice," but also having a conversation of, and here's why we're doing it. There's not only we want to be inclusive, but also here are the different experiences that people have with social content. And so I'll pause there to see if there's anything Chris wants to add there to elevate the dialogue.

Chris Morrison:

Yeah, absolutely. I can jump in. As far as creating social content or really any content for marketing campaigns, it's much, much easier when you start with inclusion. I've seen brands try and do it at the end, and that gets complicated logistically as well as in other ways. Really starting when you're doing those brainstorming sessions like Dr. Jorge mentioned, really making sure that you're starting with inclusion at the forefront. And that way when you actually start putting out content like blogs or videos or what have you, it's much easier to have that already included in that content, whether it's closed captions, whether it's alt text for images, the ability to have a blog read aloud by a computer, whatever that may be, inclusive language, it's much easier to get that off the bat than to go back and try and add it later.

We really try and encourage our clients and in everything that we do to try and really bring that to the forefront and create that. And when you're thinking about marketing and branding and communications or just trying to sell a product, you want the most people possible to be able to see what you're producing, to be able to access your product, and to do that, including things like closed captioning and the other things we discussed, makes it so that your product or your idea or your message will be seen by the most amount of people.

Novie Craven:

Can either of you tell us more about the Allison+Partners partnership with Special Olympics?

Dr. Jorge Alcaraz:

Definitely. I'll start off and then I'll hand it over to Chris. Our partnership, it comes together in two different variables. The first one is volunteering to make an impact within our communities alongside Special Olympics. And the second part is providing support with media and communications strategies for the different chapters across the US, but particularly the ones that are in our local areas. For instance, I'm in Chicago, so we support the ones in our local metropolitan area. I think one thing that I want to share is that as we're thinking about this partnership, earlier you asked me how is Allison+Partners really demonstrating their commitment to DEI and being a leader. And I talked about people and business operations. Well, an extension of our business operations is partnering with organizations that are choosing to include, that are in alignment with the work that we're seeking to do, and how can we leverage our skillsets to help others continue to make the impact that they're doing.

And so when it comes to the media side, it's working with local chapters to really strengthen and provide that support. We have a lot of strategies, we have a lot of experts in the area, so how can we collaborate with these teams to ensure that they're messaging is impacting the communities that they're seeking to impact? And so for us, that's exciting work for us. We don't always get to do that. And to the fact that we can in each of our local offices... And we're across the US. We have New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Portland. We're everywhere. To be able to have that impact on that local ground level while also still being partnered with Special Olympics at this larger bird's eye view, it's something that's really impactful and powerful for us that we feel is a strength of ours. And so that wraps up the part B, but as I first mentioned, volunteering is the first part. And then I'll kick it over to Chris to provide some more insight there.

Chris Morrison:

Yeah, so I can talk a bit more about the boots on the ground volunteering. One of the reasons that Allison+Partners originally approached Special Olympics for this partnership was because we saw that our employees really had a passion for volunteering and we wanted to support a good cause with that. And so I personally have been involved with several volunteer opportunities here in the San Diego area or southern California area. I was able to do one of the Plane Pull events with you guys as well as one of the doctors events, the health checkups. And both of those were amazing experiences, awesome opportunities. And the employees in our offices really appreciate the opportunity to be able to come out to things like that, to be able to engage with the community, hang out with the athletes, see what it is that you guys do, both as an organization and on individual level, day in, day out, and be able to do some cool stuff.

I mean, at the Plane Pull, we got to pull a jet down the runway. I mean, when do you get to do that, right? I think it's opportunities like that that really hammer home the point on the local level of how special this partnership is and how very good as an opportunity to be able to work with the Special Olympics and come out and volunteer at these events.

Novie Craven:

Chris, Allison+Partners have won awards for helping some clients secure great stories. For any Olympic programs that are listening now, do you have any tips to help Special Olympics programs get news or media coverage and how to bring more attention to some of our programs including inclusion program, like our unified boards and Unified Champion Schools?

Chris Morrison:

Sure. The local level is really where it all happens. And I've worked with franchise systems before for marketing and it's a similar idea where you have a large organization at the top and then smaller local organizations are trying to market within that. Like I said, the local is really where it matters. And so as local organizations, Special Olympics offices have the opportunity to really highlight some of the cool stories that happen. You mentioned the Unified Sports program. And I think that's a fantastic example to be more involved in the community for local offices to work with a school, to work with a sports organization where Special Olympics athletes are able to work with those teams and the community that the office is in can really see the impact that it makes. Similar to what I was just talking about, how our employees were able to go to those volunteer events and see the impact.

And then the idea is to, at those events, to create as much content as possible, especially if you're looking at doing social media marketing or even creating a highlight reel to take to media to pitch a story. Either way, you want to have those stories and that content around that visual content locked in so that you're able to either put those on social media through a brand campaign or take it and pitch it to media to be able to put on in local publications and things like that. It's really focusing in on those stories. They're at the heart of Special Olympics, and then broadcasting them.

Novie Craven:

In a few words could you answer the question, what does inclusion mean to you?

Chris Morrison:

Sure. I can start off and then I'll hand it to Dr. Jorge. For me, inclusion means creating an environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and appreciated for the unique qualities. And that's something that both of us have talked about quite a bit during this podcast is where you can create a team and bring in so many different points of view, it really makes the end product a lot better. And so from a brand perspective, when you create marketing materials or media materials and start with inclusion from the beginning, start with accessibility, making sure that everyone can see that instead of it being an afterthought, the result is always better for everybody.

Dr. Jorge Alcaraz:

Great answer. Now I have to figure out a better one. I'm just kidding. I think I would just add to that where Chris really highlighted it, and I would just add part B to that is, to me is inclusion is a practice. It's a decision that we make every day to be that individual that can make a change in the way that we run meetings, the way that we're thinking about inclusion, right? Chris mentioned we have to bring it at the start. Inclusion as a practice, for me, the definition is I come in as a leader and say, we're going to start with this at the start and not as an afterthought. And so for me, that's how I would define it. And I would say that I bring that to work every day and I encourage everybody else at Allison+Partners to do the same.

Novie Craven:

Thank you, Dr. Jorge and Chris for joining Inclusion Revolution podcast. It was great to talk to you today about how Allison+Partners continue to be a leader in creating content that aspires and includes. We appreciate all the work that you continue to do for Inclusion Revolution.

Thank you for listening to the Inclusion Revolution Radio. Don't forget to subscribe. Tune in again in two weeks for a new episode.