Spotlight Session & Special Olympics S2 Episode #1

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United is a proud partner of Special Olympics' Capitol Hill Day, and remains a passionate advocate for our mission to end discrimination against people with ID.

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 Spotlight Sessions. My name is Josh Basile, and I'm your co host for today's show. I'm a C4 5 quadriplegic, paralyzed below my shoulders, and a power wheelchair user. I'm the Community Relations Manager here at accessiBe and a passionate disability rights advocate and trial attorney, focused on breaking down barriers to access and inclusion for people with disabilities. Every year, the Special Olympics hosts its signature federal government engagement event, Capitol Hill Day.

It's a day where Special Olympics athletes and leaders gather on Capitol Hill to meet the members of Congress and share the amazing impact of their work. Today, we have a privilege of hosting three incredible individuals who played important roles in this event. Haley Waggoner is a Special Olympics athlete and works on the Government Relations Team for Special Olympics International. She's passionate and an advocate who participated in Capitol Hill Day to champion a more inclusive society. We also have Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski, who represents Illinois 13th Congressional District and is a member of the House Agricultural Committee and House Committee on Veteran Affairs. Finally, we have Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick, who represents Pennsylvania's 1st Congressional District and is a member of the Ways and Means Committee and House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Thank you all for joining us today and welcome to the Inclusion Revolution Podcast. Hello everyone.

**Nikki:** Hi, great to be with you.

**Josh:** I'm so excited to have everyone on today. This is going to be a jam packed podcast with incredible stories, voices, and just really thank you so much for being a part of this with us.

We're going to start with Haley. I'd love to know, how has your involvement with Special Olympics impacted your life?

**Haley:** Before joining Special Olympics, I was very shy. I didn't talk to anyone. Through a transition program, I got a job at a bakery and I didn't spoke in full conversations to my coworkers or my boss for five years.

And of course, but of course I had to speak to customers, but since joining a Special Olympics leadership course, I gained confidence in myself to able to speak to my coworkers. And I, for the first time, I spoke in a full conversation to my coworker and she said, Oh my gosh, I can't believe that you just talked to me. And from there, I am now happily engaging with coworkers, peers, and even members of Congress. And I wouldn't be where I am today without Special Olympics' help.

**Josh:** That's awesome, Haley. And can you share any personal highlight or powerful moment from your experience during Capitol Hill Day?

**Haley:** Yeah, I'd say one of my favorite moments from this year is when a member of, a member of Congress from my home state of Nebraska, remembered my artwork that I showed her during Capitol Hill Day, four years ago. I was one of nine athletes selected to help create the 2022 Special Olympics USA Games logo and that, which I use thickened paint, to pipe my design. I'm a cake decorator, so I use cake tips for my design part of the logo. And having a member of Congress remember that moment was really important to me, and that I felt like I was seen as well.

**Josh:** That is awesome, Haley. You are multi talented. I love this so much. And we're going to turn now to, to our Congress members. We'll start with Congresswoman. What inspired you to participate in Capitol Hill Day with Special Olympics?

**Nikki:** First, let me just say, Josh, it's great to be with you, and also Haley, and always nice to see Congressman Fitzpatrick.

You know, Special Olympics is really personal to me. I was really excited to welcome a delegation from the Special Olympics into my office just this week. My oldest nephew, who is 13, Noah, was born with Down syndrome. He is a Special Olympic athlete himself. He competes in the state of Illinois in state tournaments for basketball through the Special Olympics.

And I can just say from my family and I's perspective, I have seen the first hand impact of how special and important the Special Olympics are for individuals with disabilities, to participate in athletic sports, and how much my nephew has learned and grown from those experiences, how much it has meant to us as a family to be cheering him on, and so it was really special for me to get to welcome the delegation and to have the opportunity to work with Congressman Fitzpatrick on a number of different issues in our legislative capacity to advocate for the great work of the Special Olympics.

**Josh:** Thank you so much for sharing that, Congresswoman. And I'm going to put it right back to you, Congressman. Congressman, what inspired you to participate in Capitol Hill Day with Special Olympics?

**Brian:** Yeah, first, thanks for having us on. I really appreciate this. And my only brother is Special Needs, he's my best friend, my dearest advocate, and I just love the special needs community and I love the Olympics and I love athletics and you merge them all together and you get an amazing program and you hear so many great stories. There are two areas in my community, both in North Penn and Southerton, that really focus on the Unity program, unified sports programs. And it's just so, it's so inspiring just to watch for me to see all of the things that athletics really teach us. There are things we learn in the classroom, there's things we learn at home, and there's things we learn out in the sports fields, and they're all unique lessons.

And what we learn through athletic engagement and competition is the importance of teamwork, determination, so many life skills that you really can't get, or at least to the same extent, anywhere else. And to be able to see our special needs community fully engaged and displaying all their talents and abilities is just a, it's a great, great sight to see.

**Josh:** And it's fun. It's just the amount of smiles, the amount of memories. It's always, it's always a beautiful day when people can get together and compete. And Congresswoman, I would also love to ask you, were there any specific stories or insights shared by Special Olympics athletes during Capitol Hill Day, that had a lasting impression on you?

**Nikki:** Yeah, there was one young gentleman that came in, he's 18, so a little older than my nephew who's 13, but he too has Down Syndrome, is a Special Olympic athlete, and a basketball player as well. And just some of the stories he shared about, you know, he had had experience with being bullied in school. He had had the experience that I know my nephew, you know, he's not the first kid to always be invited over for sleepovers, and it really resonated his story that he shared with me this week. It made me think a lot about my nephew. And, but really the bottom line of it was he shared which, how much the Special Olympics has really opened up doors for him to meet new people, to make new friends, to build his own network and support system within the school that could support him, and his athletics, and his interests, and his goals.

And so, you know, that's what I've seen the Special Olympics do for my nephew. That was the story that he was able to share with me this week, and it's a very powerful story. And I'm so proud to do my small part in Congress to help support more stories like his and my nephew's, and the impact of the Special Olympics.

**Josh:** That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. And Congressman?

**Brian:** Yeah, I had two amazing constituents come in, Christian and Reese, and you know, Reese was, was just sharing, you know, a lot of the things that we heard earlier about, you know, the enhanced communication skills that are generated as being part of a team.

Christian, my other constituent, shared with me that he, he met his girlfriend through the Special Olympics. He was sharing pictures of her. So it's just, there's, there's so many good things about the program. I'm a fan of athletics across the board. I'm particularly a fan of this because it brings a smile to people's faces, and it teaches them so many important life skills.

But, Christian and Reese share plenty that, that, plenty of, examples with us about people they met that they otherwise would have never met. Coaches that inspired them to maybe pursue a path or engage in an activity that they otherwise would have never done before. And that's, that's my favorite part of the program is, you know, all of us have hidden, you know, skills, talents that are baked into our genetic DNA, and our job is to really to identify that and further that interest.

And what, Reese and Christian shared with me, was that involvement in this program allowed them to explore their inner talents, that they never knew they had, and to, and it brings a smile to their face, so huge, huge fan of the program, and Christian and Reese did a very good job as ambassadors, by the way.

**Josh:** That's awesome. Yeah, there's so much about sport that brings out, all of our unique abilities and tests them, but at the same time creates an environment where we get to live, we get to love, we get to laugh, and it just, yeah, the people that came to your doors kept a whole day. There's a little of everything.

I love that story of romance as well that you said that they found, I love that. And Haley, I would love to jump back to you. As a self advocate, what challenges have you faced due to stigma and stereotypes, and how did it communicate, how did you communicate these challenges to lawmakers during Capitol Hill Day?

**Haley:** One of the stereotypes that affects me the most is the idea of people with intellectual disabilities can't live an independent life. I think many people think that just because I'm a person with a disability that I shouldn't work, I shouldn't live on my own, or I shouldn't speak up for myself, and I shouldn't be independent.

And that is not true. Just because I have a disability doesn't mean I should be isolated. We are worth the investment. I was able to communicate these challenges to lawmakers and society by sharing my story and speaking about how Special Olympics has given me opportunities and given me the guidance to be independent and a person with a disability who can achieve personal and professional goals.

Sharing my story is more impactful than a diagnosis on a page.

**Josh:** What I love about that is just your voice. You have a powerful voice and being able to get to Capitol Hill, Hill Day, it's just your voice gets to be amplified to those to hear it and then doing it alongside other athletes, your voice has become that much louder.

I just, I love what you're doing and the difference you're making for sharing your story, so thank you so much for that. And Congresswoman, how can Congress team up with organizations like Special Olympics to make healthcare more accessible and address inequalities for individuals with disabilities?

**Nikki:** I think one legislative initiative that I'm actually leading on with Congressman Molinaro in New York is actually the Down Syndrome Diagnosis Act. And that's just one example of how we can help support parents and individuals with special needs reach their full potential and become Special Olympic Athletes.

The Down Syndrome Diagnosis Act would just help once a parent has received or the child has received the diagnosis of being, having Down Syndrome, it helps that parent navigate the insurance system, making sure that my nephew benefited from early intervention programs immediately upon his diagnosis, Noah also had some other special health challenges. He was born with a hole in his heart, which is actually a marker of Down Syndrome. So he, at four months old, required open heart surgery. He is also majority deaf and so he required a lot of different early intervention programs. Because my sister and my brother in law were able to navigate their health insurance company, they were able to get him the care that he deserved, but it was overwhelming. It was overwhelming for them. It would be overwhelming for any parent. And so, what the Down Syndrome Diagnosis Act does is really help cut through the red tape with insurance companies, help the parents get, and the child, most importantly, get the care that they need upon their diagnosis. So, that's just one legislative initiative I've been trying to lead on again with Congressman Molinaro that I think helps our special needs community, helps all children become and have the opportunity to then become Special Olympic athletes.

**Josh:** How does this special bill end? I love that you're backing it and pushing it forward.

Thank you for being a champion behind that. And Congressman, what steps do you believe Congress should take to support individuals with disabilities in sports and education?

**Brian:** Yeah, so one of the things we've done in our district, which I encourage everyone to do, we have a special needs taskforce of community leaders from all different ability levels that really serve as my advisor to educate me and not just on the gaps in the federal system, but also the state system.

So they've inspired me to take a lead role in the Heads Up Act to remove barriers in the healthcare space that exists for people with disabilities. They've educated me and allowed me to work with our state legislature, so we have a lot of support on things like the Cliff Effects. There's a lot of structural support networks in place for kids, but once they graduate from the 12th grade, from high school, a lot of that support network falls away and it puts a real burden on both the individual and their families to make up for that difference on their own when there's no state support in that case.

So the taskforce that we have, it's comprised of many people, and there are my advisors and it's a way that we keep close to these issues because, there's so much going on, so many different fires to put out, both domestically and internationally that if you're not constantly engaging on an issue, sometimes it can fall through the cracks and we don't want that to happen. So, we're really lucky to have the group we have in our community that share what real life experiences on what they're living and seeing and where the gaps are in the system, you know, it might be a barrier to get access to health care, it might be, certain financial support, employment support, that they had at one point that they lost, and there's a whole host of reasons for it. So that's been really, really important for us.

**Josh:** Well, learning and growing together, and making sure that you have the right conversations, that's really, it's a good recipe for constant change and evolving with the times and making sure that the community has a seat at the table. So thank you for that.

And Haley, what advice would you give to other Special Olympics athletes who aspire to become advocates and leaders in their communities?

**Haley:** The advice I would give to other Special Olympics athletes is don't listen to the people who say you can't be a leader or that you can't speak up for yourself.

You have the power to be more than just an athlete. You can change the narrative by sharing your story and showing the world that people with disabilities can do any, anything that you put your mind to. Don't let anyone doubt your abilities.

**Josh:** That's beautiful, thank you so much for, I love that. And our last question, I want to have everybody answer this one and we'll start with Congressman. What does inclusion mean to you?

**Nikki:** Congresswoman, you said, Josh? I'm sorry.

**Brian:** I said Congresswoman

**Josh:** Fitzpatrick.

**Brian:** Oh, sorry. Okay. What does inclusion mean? It means that, everybody be allowed to start from the same place no matter what abilities or disabilities you're experiencing. And everybody's made better by inclusion. Before I was in Congress, I was an FBI agent. And, one of my collateral duties was, as a recruiter, we did the hiring for the Bureau, and we actively sought diversity in every single way we could, because we found that it made us better employees, it made us better crime fighters, the more people that we had around us of different experience levels, different paradigms, different views of the world, different levels of ability that, that made us all, you know, challenge our own paradigms and our own lens in which we view the world and inclusion in this context, I think means giving everybody a fair shot, allow everyone to participate, allow everyone to have access, not just to sports programs, but also healthcare benefits that exist for as, as a support network out there.

Give everybody a fair shot, no matter what circumstances, they have from their birth, and I think that's the important thing.

**Josh:** Well said. And Congresswoman Budzinski?

**Nikki:** I think it means equity. I think it means having a voice in Congress. I think to get to inclusion, we need to have voices in Congress that are working toward that. So I think that, that's what inclusion and inclusivity means to me.

**Josh:** Again, beautifully said. And Haley, what does inclusion mean to you?

**Haley:** For me, inclusion means that I get to play sports, go to work, and participate in a community setting where people don't see a disability. They just see me.

**Josh:** Okay, so three beautiful answers. I love it so much.

As we wrap up this special episode, let's carry the spirit of inclusion from Capitol Hill Day forward, inspired by the stories of Haley Waggoner, Congresswoman Budzinski, Congressman Fitzpatrick, working towards a more united and compassionate society. You can learn more about accessiBe, the Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast, and Special Olympics by subscribing on YouTube and following us at Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Find us on our handles at accessiBe\_community and at Special Olympics. Thank you all, and we are looking forward to the next episode. Thank you so much for everyone for being on this episode today.