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 the Special Olympics and the work that we do. New episodes come here every other Friday at 10:00 AM Eastern Standard Time, anywhere you get your podcasts.

You're listening to the third episode of season six of the Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. My name is Novi Craven. I'm your host for today's episode. Today, we'll be talking with Tim Shriver Jr. and Soeren Palumbo. Two inspiring individuals dedicated to fostering and inclusion respect for people with disabilities and the co-founders of Spread the Word campaign.

We're especially thrilled to have them join the show as we celebrate the 15th anniversary of Spread the Word campaign, March 6th. The milestone marks the beginning of another 15 years of breaking down barriers, uplifting communities worldwide. Welcome Tim and Soeren to the Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. We are so excited to have you here today.

Tim Shriver Jr.:

Thank you, Novi.

Soeren Palumbo:

Awesome. Thanks for having us.

Novie Craven:

To begin, could you please share with our audience some details about your background and the story of how you first met?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

Well, my background, so I grew up within the Special Olympics' movement from a very young age, was wrapped up in playing unified sports and going to games and volunteering as a fan, as a volunteer, as a friend, as a unified partner.

And I, during my summer, right after my first year of college, decided to go intern at Special Olympics International, and I walked in the door on the first day and I was sharing a cubicle with Soeren Palumbo, and that is how Soeren and I first got to spend time together that summer scheming in a cubicle at Special Olympics International's headquarters.

I knew of Soeren. Soeren was quite the legend in our world. He had given this incredible speech in high school that we had all seen on YouTube. I'll let him talk more about that. But so I knew of Soeren, but didn't know Soeren until that moment.

And we became best friends and began scheming. Spent that summer scheming of how young people like ourselves could play a key role in, we didn't have the language then, but in what was really the inclusion revolution. How do we bring the message and the mission of Special Olympics to the world?

How do we bring it to corners of the world where it wasn't yet having an impact? And specifically, we're thinking about high school and college students. We had just gotten out of high school, we had just begun college, and we wanted to figure out what are ways we, as young people, could be a key part of leading that and pushing that.

And so that was how we met. We met in that cubicle and spent a lot of time that summer coming up with lots of hair brain schemes, a few of which to our great luck, worked out.

Novie Craven:

Awesome.

Soeren Palumbo:

Yeah, that's right. And I'll jump in. So the backstory that I walked into that cubicle with, so I grew up a bit differently. I did not grow up a deep member of the Special Olympics family or the Special Olympics' movement in some sense, in a formal sense.

But I did grow up very close to the experience of intellectual and developmental disability. I have a close sibling with an intellectual disability, one of my three younger sisters.

And so grew up on the front lines, in the front row seat of the challenges, the stigma, the joys, the beauty, the opportunities, the lack of opportunities, all of those things that come with having a developmental disability in the US.

And so from that, was on my own journey to understand what that meant as a sibling, to understand what that meant eventually as a friend and as an ally and an advocate. And so in my high school years, I became more and more aware of what this meant.

How damaging the stigma and the discrimination was. And also how unfortunate it was that so many people had shut themselves off to the joy that my sister brought to the community around her. The value that she brought to her classrooms, to her community.

And so as a senior in high school, I had an open mic opportunity and shared some of my thoughts about what it was like to be her brother. And specifically what I saw as one way this discrimination was captured and communicated, which was the R word, the word retard. And the exclusion, the distancing, the discrimination that it laid upon people like my sister.

And ultimately, the thing that separated... One of the ways that it separated people without disabilities from those with disabilities. And so from that moment on, realized that there was an opportunity to bring these people with and without disabilities together and to chip away at the stigma and the discrimination as many before have dedicated their lives to.

And so from there, had an opportunity to become more involved with the Special Olympics movement and realized that it was full of people who were on that same life path. Who were dedicating themselves to that same revolution of inclusion that I was just becoming more and more aware of.

And so that also led me, after my freshman year of university, to be an intern at the Special Olympics International headquarters. And as Tim said, to spend that time cooking up schemes to engage other young people in what we thought and still believe is the issue of our time, which is how do we empower young people.

And I'll say young adults, older adults, all people to face difference with positivity, in other words, to become better at, more skilled at inclusion. And we continue to embark on that adventure to this day.

Novie Craven:

Can you both take a moment to explain what the Spread the Word campaign is and what inspired you both to start the movement?

Soeren Palumbo:

I'll jump in and lay some groundwork and then Tim can build on it and bring his brilliance on top. I would say that the Spread the Word movement is a campaign to bring especially young people, but not exclusively young people, into the conversation about inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Now, let's unpack that a little bit. There are a lot of ways to improve the skills of inclusion. There are a lot of ways to make a workplace, a school, a community more inclusive. One of those ways is to be reflective on the language that we use and the individual actions that we take.

There are other ways that might include policy, that might include procedure, but here, let's talk about the words that we use and the individual actions that we take. And that's what Spread the Word is most closely aligned to, most closely built on.

Originally, it was very, very focused, almost exclusively focused on the, I'll say, the elimination of the specific slurs that focus on disability. We were in the late 2000s, early 2010s, very focused on the word retard. That was at the time...

And not to say that it's gone at the time was a very, I would say, widely used and known discriminatory term towards people with intellectual disabilities especially. And our work was to not only raise awareness, let people know how hurtful the word was.

But also bring people in to make a commitment to a more inclusive language towards people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, essentially to end their use of that word. What we found was that's a great gateway, that's a great first step, but there is incredible potential beyond that.

And so very quickly realized, let's not just remove a word, let's not just ask people to stop doing something, but what we heard an appetite for was give me a chance to start doing something. Give me an opportunity to commit to not just being less exclusive, but being more inclusive.

And so very quickly, it became an opportunity to not just give a pledge to end a word, but to give a pledge to take action for inclusion. And whether that was taking action to be a unified partner, taking action to be a participant in Best Buddies, or just to say, come sit next to me in the lunchroom, or come be my friend in the workplace or in the community.

And so Spread the Word is now a global, very much global campaign that gives people a platform to make those individual commitments for inclusion. And it continues to evolve. It continues to be driven by the creativity and innovation of young people, of people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities who take it and say, how can I best adapt this to fit my school environment?

Whether that is an elementary school in the US, a middle school in Nigeria, a high school in India, or anywhere in between. How to make it best fit my school context and best fit the cultural milieu that I work in or that I go to school in.

And so it is, I would say, a commitment campaign, an action campaign that is inviting people to take this first step towards being an agent of inclusion and making their own communities more inclusive environments. Tim, what did I miss?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

As you-

Novie Craven:

No, you said it perfectly. You definitely said it perfectly like when-

Soeren Palumbo:

Well, thanks.

Novie Craven:

... people say the word, the R word, I look at them like really? You think I'm like... No, I'm not that. I'm something totally different. If you watch what I do when I play sports, you'll see it.

And then they were taken aback with it. It's like, well, I didn't mean to say that. And it's like you just got to understand. You see somebody with an intellectual disability and you automatically think, oh, they can't do something. We can do a lot of things.

Soeren Palumbo:

No, this is beautifully said, and I'll let Tim jump in a second after I say something else here. One of the things that we found in the evolution of Spread the Word was exactly what you were saying, which is that there is an opportunity to raise awareness, that there were interactions where people said, wow, I didn't know that.

I didn't know that whether it was this word or other behaviors had that effect. And then the question is, now that I do know that, what should I do about it? It's not... Knowledge is a great first step, awareness is a great first step, but if it's your last step, we're not going anywhere.

So we said, let's not only find a way to share that knowledge, to share that experience, to share that awareness, great first step, but then also give people a chance to commit to doing something more. To commit to taking an action, commit to...

Again, these are just examples, things like being a unified partner, things like being a better classmate, things like being a better coworker in the workplace, people with intellectual developmental disabilities. Tim, what do you think?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

Well, I just wanted to react to what you shared, Novie. I mean, in particular, something you said, which was what I heard you talking about is them assuming they knew something about you and you said, watch me on the sports field, watch what I can do on the field.

And what strikes me about that, the use of sport to show what you're capable of and to turn their assumptions on their head takes me back to a moment that was really formative for me and why I ended up a part of this work.

Soeren shared his story with his sister and his work in high school. For me, it started in second grade when Loretta Claiborne, a well-known, world-renowned athlete and leader within the Special Olympics movement, the chief inspiration officer of the Special Olympics board, she came to visit our second grade classroom and she was showing us all the things she was capable of.

She was showing off her gold medals. She was teaching us to play soccer. She was telling us about running the Boston Marathon. And I don't think at that time any of us had any sense that she had a disability.

We just saw the incredible capabilities and the incredible accomplishments that she shared. But the last thing she did was she was about to leave the room, she said, "Do you guys all know the rhyme sticks and stones?"

And we all repeated it back to her. Sticks and stones may break... We're all very proud. We knew the words that Loretta had asked us, whether we knew. And she said, "I've been hurt plenty of times in my life by sticks and stones, but the most hurtful thing that's ever come my way have been the words and one particular word, the word retard. And so I challenge you, I ask you make sure never to use that word and make sure that people around you don't use that word. "

And for me, in that moment in whatever, a seven or an eight-year-old, I really took that on as a charge. I really felt I had so much respect and admiration for Loretta. She was a dear friend of my dad's and my grandmother's. And it felt like this charge that I think many siblings like Soeren grow up feeling in their bones a sense of, I have to speak up and speak out.

But I think... And so that became a charge that I took through growing up. But it was always hard. There's always moments. It was hard to speak out with a buddy who you really like, or on a sports team, or on a field, or at a party where you don't want to be the one that's making people feel uncomfortable.

So I really did my best growing up. But the reason I share all that is because I think when Soeren and I ended up in that cubicle together and we were thinking about what could we do particularly around this word, one of the most powerful pieces is I think we had this shared experience that probably I couldn't articulate at the time though, that many of us wanted to speak out people with and without intellectual disabilities.

But oftentimes, we were in groups by ourselves where we're the only one who had to stick their neck out and be the one to say something. And I think a driving force behind Spread the Word to End the Word was the effort to put a movement of people, a community of people, whether they were in the room with you or not at the time, that could be behind you.

And you knew they were behind you when you had to stick your neck out and say something at a moment when it was hard to say, when it was hard to speak up. And so I think for me, that experience of having known it was hard to speak up for me when I was younger.

And part of I think the motivation, but also the success of Spread the Word was creating a community of people that could speak up together. And I think that was further... Fuel on the fire was the social media that was just taking off. Facebook had just come online, and this was the first moment where young people around the globe could connect and support each other and brainstorm together.

And so a lot of that was, this was this powerful moment of a lot of different threads coming together both in my life, and I think in Soeren and I's lives together, but in this movement. And a lot became possible in that moment that hadn't been possible before, and that was pretty exciting.

Soeren Palumbo:

Yeah. So another thought here, and Novie, I don't want to go off script, but if you bring both of us on, you're going to get some riffs. But one thing that I would reflect on, and either Novie, Tim, either of you for your reaction, is if we think about the Disability movement with a capital D and we reflect on the fact that it is incredibly complex.

And that there are an enormous number... To great, I think misfortune of our society, there are an enormous number of ways that the discrimination and the stigma towards people with disabilities, including those with intellectual developmental disabilities, manifest, show up.

It is in lower employment rates or higher unemployment rates, if you want to think about that. It's in lower life expectancy. All things adjusted for. It is in lower education outcomes. It is in the parents who fight to get their child's IEP here in the US.

It is all sorts of things, all sorts of things that require action in so many different dimensions of life. Better policies in the workplace, better policies in our community, better policies at all sorts of places.

And coming up against that, whether as a sibling, an ally, or just someone sitting in a high school cafeteria, you would say, what role do I have in all of that? I'm not going to be the one who flips the disability unemployment rate from where it is today.

I'm not going to be the one who fixes the significant gaps in healthcare as it relates to people with disabilities. Now, I might contribute to it eventually, but I'm not going to be the one that does that. I think some of what Spread the Word was and is response to say yes, and you do have a role to play.

You can come in and be part of this movement, and it's a much lower barrier to entry than you think. You don't need to come in and have the solution to these issues that have plagued human civilization since it started.

And that a lot of incredibly passionate and brilliant people have been working lifetimes to be able to fix and making great progress, but still a lot to go. This was a way to bring those people in on a specific dimension of this broader set of issues and say, look, again, you don't need to have the solution to something that has been very difficult for a lot of people to solve.

But you can think about the language you use, and you can think about how you spend your time, and you can think about what you do when you encounter difference. When you walk down the hallway, if you don't have a disability and see someone who does, what do you do?

Do you smile? Do you engage? Do you see that person as a friend? Or do you see that person as an other, different, less than you? What do you need to do to be a better friend and an ally to someone with an intellectual developmental disability?

And so much of it comes from that. So I place it in that context not to understate its impact, not to overstate its impact, but it is one piece of such a broader puzzle. But in some ways, it is a piece that is easy to get into. It's not asking for years of someone's life.

It's not asking for an advanced degree, it's not asking for thousands of dollars, it's asking for what can you do right now to make an impact in this way? And I think that's been a key piece of how it's worked over the past 15 years now.

Novie Craven:

Well said. Well, well said.

Soeren Palumbo:

Well, thank you.

Novie Craven:

Well, Soeren, how did you get people involved in the campaign and commit to take the pledge? Can you share some of the best activations you saw?

Soeren Palumbo:

Yeah, so I would say, let me say a couple of things. One, and I'll speak for both me and Tim because I feel I can do that. The two of us did not get all that many people involved, but we did get the right people involved.

And what I mean by that is so much of the Spread the Word campaign is not Tim and I going out and doing stuff. It is putting tools in young leaders' hands and now older leaders as well, and saying, here's how we think that a school can engage in this. Make it better, make it work for your school.

You don't need a fancy anything. All you need is a tablecloth and a set of markers and ask people in your cafeteria, in your gym, in your hallways to come by and sign a pledge. And I don't want to overcomplicate this conversation, but there's something in that action.

And this is what... I think that there is a beauty in the simplicity of this, which is it is literally a tablecloth. I have run these pledge drives and we have gone out to a store and bought a tablecloth and have written on them, I pledge to make my community more inclusive.

I pledge to use more inclusive language. The pledge has evolved over time, and a couple of things happen. One, on an individual level, people come over, they gain some awareness, they ask, what is this for?

Why is this important? And it's explained. And then they take some small action, they turn that knowledge into something and they say to themselves, I'm going to take that knowledge and I'm going to change the way that I am.

And they're starting to think through some concrete way that they're going to make that change. So we've had pledges where it's just sign your name, just make a pledge to use more inclusive language.

And as they sign it, they say to themselves, this is the way that I'm going to change. I'm going to use more inclusive language in my life as it relates to people with intellectual developmental disabilities.

And then what else happens in that ecosystem, that community that surrounds them? Well, other people see their peers making that commitment, and all of a sudden, they say, well, this is something that my community thinks is important.

This is something my school thinks is important. Look at all those other people around that table. And then at the end, you have this, again, it's just a tablecloth with all of these signatures, and it ends up being this artifact, this symbol of what's important in our school, what's important in our community.

And everybody can see that. And when that hangs up on a wall, they say to themselves, not just, I've made a commitment, but now I'm part of a community. I'm part of a group of people who thinks that this is important.

And so all of a sudden, it reinforces from these different angles where they say to themselves, well, I've committed to make this change as an individual, but now I have this accountability surrounding me because I'm part of a community that now thinks this way.

And so there's this positive peer pressure, if you like. I mean, there are a lot more complicated psychological terms that we can use than that, but it's this positive peer pressure that then says, not only am I making commitment to be different than I was, but I'm part of a big group that's doing the same thing. And I can get it reinforced from all the different angles that surround me.

And now we start talking about not only changing individuals, we start changing about schools and cultures. And I think again, it's just a tablecloth with people signing it. And there are a lot more complicated and highly produced and incredible things that people have done in terms of activations.

And they've been amazing, and I admire all of them. But my favorite is just the very simple, you have a table, you have a tablecloth, people come and sign it, you hang it up at the end. Because I think that that at an individual and community level can have such incredible impact over time.

Novie Craven:

Amazing answer. Tim, what challenges have you faced in advocating for inclusion and how have you overcome them?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

Two come to mind, one of which I kind of nodded at earlier. I think growing up, it always was tough to be the one that was always the one calling people out or calling people in as we prefer to say these days or prefer to do these days.

But saying on the baseball field, in middle school, at a friend's house in high school, in the classroom. I remember an English teacher in my classroom in high school. Being the one to raise your hand, being the one to jump in, being the one to say, "Hey, that word is really hurtful. I know a lot of people for whom that's really hurtful. Would you please just use a different word?"

I think especially around middle school and high school boys, it's really tough. I'm sure girls are tough too, but I have the experience of being a boy in middle school or high school around using kinder language, or using gentler language, or being more inclusive isn't always the cool thing to do.

So I felt that a lot growing up. I think I felt... And there was moments where I was proud that I did speak up and moments that I felt ashamed that I swallowed my words and didn't speak up where I should have.

And I think as I said earlier, I think that's why the movement was so important, both for me personally, and I think for a lot of the people that came and joined us was because we need to know that there are a community of people backing us that say, this is the right thing to do.

This is the cool thing to do. This is the inspired thing to do. This is the inclusive thing to do to give you that steel spine, you sometimes need to speak up in situations where it doesn't always feel like it's easy to do. And I think Soeren mentioned that this is a lot of this wasn't Soeren and I.

And when we launched that first year, I think when we came up with the idea to launch, I think we had 10 colleges represented on board. We were at the international games in Boise. By the six weeks later when our first annual day launch, we had 30 universities on board, and we kind of were shocked by how fast it grew from there.

The next year was 100, then it was 500, then it was over 1,000 within a few years, and then it was in multiple thousands after that. Events going on across the country and across the world.

And I do think coming back to my own experience of that, and this might be me projecting, but I heard it from enough people that we actually didn't realize, or I'll speak for myself, I didn't realize how many tens of thousands of young people with and without intellectual disabilities had that same experience as me, had wanted to speak up, had sometimes spoken up, had sometimes not. And needed a movement behind them to have the strength to do it time and time again, even when it was hard.

And so I think that's point one. I think just speaking out in the first place is hard. And then one very specific story I have is that my friends who grew up with me, I went to the same school with the same group of guys and girls, but close group of guy friends from second grade to 12th grade.

And they had heard this early on and they knew, they knew we didn't use that word in our crew. And I'll never forget coming back from college, we'd all gone off to college, we'd gone to different places. I had left our hometown for college.

Came back and within the first week being back, I heard two friends use the word, and I hadn't heard them use it for over a decade growing up. And they both did this whole reset. And they're like, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Tim. I realize we're not allowed to use that word around you."

And I had this moment, I was like, you guys don't get it. It's not about me. It's about about changing our language wherever we are. And it struck me that it wasn't enough to be one friend, one person making that ask. We needed to have communities all across the country, and particularly at that time, on campuses across the country that could be sharing this message.

So even friends of mine, friends of mine that had grown up hearing this, having me chirping in their ears. Coming out to Special Olympics events with me being a part of the movement, even they could forget pretty quickly.

And so it was a powerful lesson to me about how important it was to have communities all across the country sharing this shared message because it takes time and it's also countercultural.

And when it's countercultural, you need reinforcement. You need communities to be sharing this message in lots of different places because it is easy to forget. It's easy to move into spaces where maybe you don't have your friends with intellectual disabilities or siblings with intellectual disabilities nearby.

Maybe you don't have your friend who's deeply engaged and is sharing this message consistently. And so making sure that this was not just a few individuals of us speaking out or trying to speak out where we lived, where we went to school, but making sure that this was a national and international community of folks that were ready to share this message, run these pledge drives like Soeren showed, run these pledge events.

The success of Spread the Word, and the extent to which it spread as fast as it did in ways that Soeren and I never could have dreamt of, was based on the fact that there were thousands and thousands of people like us, like our friends with and without intellectual disabilities that wanted, that needed a campaign and movement behind them. And that took it upon themselves to spread it. And so it was incredible for us to watch it as it took off far beyond anything that we imagined.

Soeren Palumbo:

And I would say one of the phrases that Tim and I have used is it is a campaign of co-founders. That there are... It is not a campaign that has two co-founders, a campaign that has many, many, many, many co-founders, because Tim did it on his campus. He was the founder of it, probably with a co-founding team on his campus.

I did it on my university campus with a team of co-founders. But we did not go into the hundreds, if not thousands of elementary schools, of middle schools, of high schools. In each one of those, there was a founder, a co-founding team that made it possible in that school, who knew what it was like to do this campaign in that school. Who picked it up, adapted it, made it work there.

And so we... That's why you hear us joke about what did we do to reach all these people? We had a role, but we were not the founders of it in John Adams High School in some, pick a state in the US. There was an incredible co-founding team there that did that.

And that was led by passionate young people with and without intellectual disabilities, a supportive, empowering set of adult allies who worked with them. And so much of the growth and success and impact comes from that co-founding team of thousands of people across the country that we live in and also many other countries around the world. And we would have had much less impact if it were just Tim doing it at his school, me doing it at my school, and then that was it.

Novie Craven:

Soeren, can you discuss the impact of language and terminology, attitudes toward people with disabilities and how Spread the Word addresses this issue?

Soeren Palumbo:

Yes, yes. Let's talk about it. So let's put something aside at the very front. Some people like to make a distinction between the words we use and the actions that we take. I think that this is a pretty misleading distinction.

The words we use are an action that we take. The way that we label the world around us, the way that we choose to describe people, places, things, these are actions that have consequences.

They can cause great joy, they can cause great pain, they can cause great nothing. But very rarely do they cause great nothing. Very typically, they cause joy, they cause pain. And so the words we use are actions that we take and we should all be held accountable.

We should hold ourselves accountable. We should hold those around us accountable for the actions they take, including the words that they use. And then, so again, when those words are hurtful, we should be held accountable.

That's an action that hurts other people. When those words cause joy, we should be held accountable. The actions that we take that improve other people's lives, we should take great joy in those things.

So that's thing straight away, thing one. I think the distinction between words and actions in that way is one that's false. To me, the biggest question is how do we instill skills? How do we grow skills of inclusion?

How do we create mindsets and skill sets of inclusion? And now there are a lot of brilliant people who are studying this who have, again, better psychological terms and everything else than I do.

So forgive me that I'll use what I think might be the ultimate solution, but right now is just a metaphor. I think that these are skills that we build over time. It's a muscle that we build and what is it doing?

It is how do we encounter someone or something, but here's someone? How do we encounter someone who is different and have that be a positive encounter? How do we meet that difference with inclusion, with acceptance, with love, with respect, with dignity, rather than with fear, with anxiety, with exclusion?

And I think, again, this is my view, I think that this is a muscle that we build through repetition and through thoughtful practice. It's like anything else. It's like shooting a free throw. It's like throwing a ball. It's like learning to play the piano.

In the beginning, we're often clumsy. If we don't have practice at it, we're not good at it. I don't know if any of us is good at this innately. Maybe you might say a three-year-old is, but I don't know that.

So I think that this is a skill that we build over time, and it's a skill that we build through many, many encounters with people who are different in a structured way that gives us the muscle.

Someone teaches us how to do a bench press. Someone teaches us the proper technique to do a squat or how to run a 100-meter hurdle race. And then we practice and practice and practice and practice and practice.

And without that practice, we don't build that muscle. And Tim mentioned some of his experience of people who let that muscle atrophy. Who go away from encountering difference in that way and come back years later and slip right back into the habits of meeting difference with fear, meeting difference with exclusion, meeting difference with anxiety.

And I think one of the most powerful things about Special Olympics, or Best Buddies, or the Spread the Word campaign is it's a structured way to encounter people who are different. And to do it in a way that is positive is through teamwork, is through respect, is through collaboration and partnership and shared growth.

And so the Spread the Word campaign is meant to just be a front door into that, an invitation into that, come sign a pledge. Not because the act of signing is going to be transformative, but because the things that you do afterwards could be transformative.

The things that you are invited to, the teammates that you are invited to have, the friends that you're invited to have, the opportunities that you are invited to have to meet people who are different from you.

To meet people and to practice and to build this muscle of how to find that difference, find the joy and the beauty in it, and then go and do it again with someone else who's different, maybe in a different way.

So I think that this muscle of encountering difference with positivity is one that is transferable. And I think one that we can build through activities, through programs like Special Olympics, like Best Buddies. Honestly, I think that those are two of the most powerful ways, most effective ways that we can build that muscle.

And it's a skill set that the world desperately needs right now. How to encounter difference, not with fear, not with exclusion, but with positivity and inclusion. And I think that Special Olympics, and Best Buddies, and the spread the word campaign are great ways to be able to build that muscle.

Novie Craven:

Tim, how did you see the role of grassroots activism and community engagement advancing the cause of inclusion for individuals with disabilities?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

I think Soeren did a good job putting a point on this with his notion of this campaign having lots of co-founders, because I mean, grassroots organizing was this campaign from the beginning.

It was Soeren and I gathering a group of represent leaders from 10 colleges across the United States. We invited them to the World Games in Boise to get together to talk about what we could be doing on college campuses around the country with regard to language, with regard to bringing Special Olympics athletes and Special Olympics games onto campuses on a lot of fronts.

We weren't there just talking about language. But when one of the initiatives we settled on was Spread the Word to End The word, it became the ownership of the 30 or so of us to begin activating our campuses and inviting other campuses in. And it spread from there.

As I shared, as Soeren mentioned, there was a group of us at my college, there was a group at Soeren's college group over the course of the six weeks between when we made that decision and had the first day about 30 colleges. And those co-founding groups were made out of students, they were made up of Special Olympics athletes and staff, Best Buddies joined thereafter.

And it was all led by grassroots organizing. As Soeren mentioned, we put a bunch of materials online and pointed people to it. Here's what a poster could look like. Here's what some campaign materials, wristbands to handout, posters and flyers to post, language to use, guides to the kind of events you can run. We put those out there.

Spread the Word again, at the time, shared it on Facebook and later, on other social media channels. And it was taken up by grassroots organizers on first in colleges, then at high schools, then in corporations and elementary schools, community centers of all kinds.

And so I think the campaign itself was only, I would say, community organizing and grassroots organizing that was the heart and soul or maybe better put, the methodology of the campaign and its success.

And I think the thing that was so exciting to Soeren and I is Soeren and I both had experiences like this, but I'll just share one, which is I remember running into someone, I don't know if it was on a plane, a train, or a bus, who was wearing a Spread the Word to End the Word T-shirt.

And it was in some state, I can't remember where I was, but I know I wasn't anywhere close to home or my university. And I stopped him. I said, "Where'd you get that shirt? I love to see that. We have Spread the Word in my school." And she said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I know the founder."

She said, "I know the founder. She goes to my school." And I said, "That's awesome." And it just gave me that sense of she understood that at her school there was a founder who had brought this campaign in, and she that person. Was the community organizer, was the activator, and had this sense of ownership that people around her saw her as the founder.

And I thought that was so incredible because it just spoke to the sense of ownership, the sense of... Again, the sense of co-founding that Soeren spoke about that we saw took off across the country and the world. So moments like that were really special for me. And just an example of how that community activation, grassroots organizing drove the success of Spread the Word.

Novie Craven:

Soeren, what advice do you have for individuals and community looking to create more inclusive environments for people with disabilities?

Soeren Palumbo:

I would advise... I would... Let me give two answers. One is that we should all be mindful of the important differences between different types of communities and some of the obstacles that they present for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

So what I mean by that is there are real roadblocks and obstacles in many workplaces for people with intellectual developmental disabilities. In many healthcare centers, in many community settings, in many residential settings, in many educational settings.

And each one of those has its own set of really important actions that need to be taken both by what I would call the policy makers and on the ground allies and people with intellectual developmental disabilities themselves.

So let's just take a moment to acknowledge how big those issues are and how much real action and commitment is needed to move the needle in those different ways. Now, to answer this question in a slightly different way, I do think that every individual in those settings has a role to play.

And that is so much at the core of Spread the Word, which is to engage those around them in what I would say is an early invitation to build this skill of inclusion. And so what that means is, create opportunities for people to engage across difference.

If that's in a school, bring together people who do and don't have intellectual and developmental disabilities. And this is one of the things I love about Special Olympics, give them something to do together. Don't put them in a room and ask them to look at each other. Give them a basketball and play. Give them a track and run. Give them a football and play.

And you will find... I mean, wind that up and let it go and come back in a little while. And you'll see teams form, you'll see teammate bonds, you'll see cooperation. You'll see respect and dignity happening.

And I don't say that flippantly. I say that because I've observed that hundreds of times where the introduction of sport amongst people who are different, all of a sudden, those differences don't disappear.

It's not that everyone becomes the same. It's not that everyone becomes homogenous. It's that those differences become the beginnings of respectful, dignified, collaborative, dare I say, loving relationships and friendships and all of these things.

And so I would say bringing people together, setting them on a common goal, setting them on a common program, and giving them the guidance. How do I best interact across this difference? How do I show the respect that I want to? How do I cooperate and collaborate?

How do I be a better ally? How do I be a better activator of the allies that can be with me to improve the school or community that I'm in? All of that. But to me, it comes down to how do I get them together? How do I build this skill? How do I run reps of this muscle building over time?

Novie Craven:

I like that answer. Tim, how can listeners get involved with Spread the Word campaign and support efforts towards inclusion?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

So Soeren just spoke generally to various places and ways to spread inclusion. I'll speak more specifically just to the campaign itself and be brief. Spread the Word global is the website. We've just passed our 15th annual day of activation.

And so if you go to the website, you can see some of that action. You can see some of those resources, you can see some of the different ways you can get involved in your community. You can see what's happening in your community, whether there's already activation going on, you can take the pledge yourself.

But I think the most important thing you can do is look at those resources, look at those stories, find the inspiration you need to take this to your community, your school, your corporation, your community center, your family. Sometimes it's the hardest thing to do actually in your own family. I've found sometimes it's your closest friends and family that sometimes it's the hardest.

And so taking the courage from the number of people that have been a part of this for a long time and have been taking these steps for a long time. And I think the most important thing I would say in addition to that is make sure that you are...

As you bring this into new spaces, make sure you find those co-founders, whether if you have an intellectual disability or don't find someone who looks different than you, that has a different perspective than you, that can bring a different perspective to you so that you can work together to bring those perspectives together to have an impact and spread inclusion in your community.

So there's lots of resources and stories that we have on our website. There's lots of resources, of course, through Special Olympics and Best Buddies and other great organizations. But there's still so much more work to be done. And I promise you, anyone that's listening, there is work to be done in your community right now today that you can be a part of leading.

Soeren Palumbo:

Go be a co-founder.

Novie Craven:

Looking ahead, what are both of your hopes and goals for the future of Spread the Word movement, and how do you both plan to continue driving change?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

I'll kick off here. My hope for the future of this campaign is to continue to evolve with the needs of our community. Whatever our community might look like, whether that's the community of Special Olympics and Best Buddies of people with intellectual disabilities.

And those who love them, whether it's the communities of our school, especially our young people. I think Soeren and I's thesis from the beginning is that young people are such an important both audience and leaders for a couple of reasons.

One, because we found it's the place where this language we is not inclusive, that is hurtful, gets used often the most. It's also this really formative time in our lives where shaping and solidifying the kind of ways in which we speak and act is really important.

And young people, I think, have some of those powerful tools. I mean, we thought back in 2009, we were like, Facebook, we've got the most powerful tools the world has ever known to share this message.

And now, of course, 15 years later, the multiplier on those powers has been exponential. So I think my hope for the campaign is as different words come up, we know that there are new words used often to be hurtful, that we evolve with those particular words that we spread to other countries that might have different language.

And to understand that language, understand the cultural dynamics and the linguistic dynamics that would allow us to address these kind of challenges in other countries and cultures around the world. And to start finding more ways to not just have people stop using words, but as Soeren said, start taking action and including people.

And so I think my hope for the campaign is that it continues to have the ability to evolve, the ability to listen, the ability to channel the needs of our community into resources and stories and inspiration that can drive the inclusion revolution forward.

Soeren Palumbo:

Yeah, and I think it's very well-said. I'll add just two things, one very general and then one much more personal. On the general level, I would love to see the campaign continue to be a gateway.

That nothing gives me more joy in this campaign than hearing someone who said, "Yeah, I saw this at my school. I saw this at my workplace. I saw this at my community center. I learned about it, and now I'm a unified partner." Or "I signed up to be a Special Olympics athlete," or "Now I participate in Best Buddies, and I am becoming a member, an ally. I am becoming a part of this community."

And I've heard that story many, many, many, many times. And I think that that is such a power of the Spread the Word campaign and the movement. So to continue to be a gateway and for many, the first chapter of a much longer story of becoming an agent of inclusion.

And then the second one, I mean, to bring it full circle for me, I became a part of this community because I wanted to do something for my sibling. I wanted to see the world be a better place for and with my sister, Olivia.

And I want Spread the Word to be a part of that story. And I don't say that that's the only reason, that's the driving reason behind any of this. Because every single person in this campaign, in this movement has their own personal reason behind it.

Everyone has the friend, everyone has the sibling, everyone has the cousin, the classmate, the coworker. Whether you do or don't have an intellectual disability, who you look at and say, the world would be a better place if they were included. If they were valued, if they were dignified, if they were respected, the world would be a better place.

Not for them, but for everybody. And so as much as Spread the Word can be a force for that, I would love to see it continue. And I'd love to see it continue having impact.

Novie Craven:

I love that. I love that answer. What does inclusion mean to you?

Soeren Palumbo:

I would say encountering difference with positivity. Encountering difference with respect, encountering difference with dignity, with a what can I learn and how can we grow together attitude and not what do I have to fear from this? So to me, inclusion is meeting difference with positivity. What about you, Tim?

Tim Shriver Jr.:

What just came to mind for me was a quote from Father Greg Boyle, who's a favorite author and thinker of mine. And he often talks about a circle of kinship and he says, imagine a circle of people. And now imagine nobody is outside of that circle. And I think that image to me, that circle of kinship, that circle where no one is standing outside of it, that's inclusion to me.

Novie Craven:

I like that. Thank you, Tim and Soeren for joining today's episode of Inclusion Revolution Radio podcast. Few people can claim to have started a global activation that motivates others to embrace inclusion and express in their own thoughts, actions, and words.

Yet both of you have accomplished amazing achievement. And for that, I express heartfelt gratitude on behalf of myself and every Special Olympics athlete. Thank you for listening to Inclusion Revolution Radio. Don't forget to subscribe. Tune in again in two weeks for a new episode.