Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 82: ADA 30

Guest: Alice Wong

Guest Host: Rochelle Kwan.

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey, hey, hey! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversation on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today is July 26, 2020, and in the United States, it is the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, also known as the ADA. I'm much more comfortable asking questions, but I'm gonna share my personal story with you all on this occasion in this interview by my friend Rochelle Kwan. The tables are turned! Rochelle is the Community Producer for the podcast *Self Evident* and the storytelling team lead at Think!Chinatown, a community organization based in New York City Chinatown. I first met Rochelle when she worked at StoryCorps, and we immediately bonded about Lunar New Year festivities and dumplings. You'll hear about my early years, the influence of the ADA on my life, my thoughts about the future of accessibility, and more. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] I'm not sure if I am, but…away we goooooooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ROCHELLE: So, I wanted to first hear a little bit about you. Because I know that we met in quite a flurry of activity and dumplings, but I don't think that I've really had the chance to get to know you and kind of your history. Could you tell me what it was like growing up Asian American in the Midwest?

ALICE: So, my parents got married in Hong Kong in the early '70s. And my dad had a job offer, of all places, Indianapolis, Indiana. So, he and my mom moved out there in 1972. Two years later, I was born, and I mean, it was a unique kind of experience because, at least for me as a kid who was born disabled as well, in almost every situation growing up, I was almost always the only Asian kid and pretty much always the only disabled kid. And it really made me very self-conscious at a early age because, you know, I clearly was not like any of the other kids. And I never knew anything else but that. So, as I got older, I really wanted to find community. I think a big part of my life has been all about finding and creating community.

[mellow music break]

The 30th anniversary of the ADA and developing a disability identity

ROCHELLE: One of the reasons I'm really excited to have this conversation with you is because this year is the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA.

ALICE: Yeah. I love how you are younger than the ADA.

ROCHELLE: [laughs] I know!!

ALICE: Oh, I love that because this is so funny. ‘Cause I think, I don’t know if we would call this an intergenerational conversation, but I guess it is, right? I think it is. So, it’s really a delight to also talk to you about this. So, I was 16, a sophomore in high school when the ADA passed. And to be totally honest, I don’t really remember that much about it. I mean, I think at that time in my life, I was not really all that connected with any sort of consciousness about having a disabled identity other than my own kind of diagnosis. And I know that I was disabled, but I never said the word “disabled,” you know. And I think that was just the time I grew up in and just the, you know, I struggled. I think I felt already, just being a teenager, no matter what decade you’re in, it is just, it’s a lot! So, I dealt with a lot of being uncomfortable in my own skin. I felt ashamed of myself. Like I was embarrassed. I was like just, you know, I really wish, as a wheelchair user, I would just melt in with the background, but I never could. I just really wanted to be invisible sometimes because I felt so hyper-visible, you know.

I didn’t have any role models. I did not have any adult in my life that also had disabilities that ever said like, “Hey, I’ve been where you’ve been. It’s going to get better.” And I don’t think, and I do wonder now, like, gosh, I really wish I had that. And I also wonder, if I had that, would I have accepted it? Because I was so in a place where I was just uncomfortable. I was, to be honest, to be around other disabled kids, sometimes I didn’t wanna hang out with them because I so wanted to just be like everybody else.

ROCHELLE: Yeah. It sounds like you weren’t connected with not only the disability community, but you weren’t connected to the identity of being disabled. Before you came into that identity, did you think of it as just like this was something that I have to deal with on my own?

ALICE: Yeah, I think I definitely started as, after the ADA was passed and just being a little bit older, as a teenager and reading and learning more, I just realized, oh, my gosh. There are things going on in this world that’s beyond my little world. And I think one of the first things I read was in *Time* magazine, there was an article about accessible transportation. And it’s right around the time that ADA came out. And at the moment I read that, I was just so floored by the idea of an accessible bus. And this is like, you know, you gotta imagine this: back then, it was just really rare. And I thought wow, what would it be like to live in a community where I could leave my house and take a bus or a train all by myself? I mean, at that point in time, I lived in the suburbs. My parents drove me everywhere. I did not have a driver’s license, so I didn’t go through the typical rites of passage that all my friends did. I just felt very stymied. And reading about other places like Berkeley, California, which really, it was an epicenter for disability rights and just accessibility in terms of California as a state, that really also planted a seed that hey, there are disabled people living right now in a world that’s much better and a world that’s much more accessible. And then one day, maybe I could have that too. And I think that kind of blew my mind, that there was this, there was another way. You gotta imagine this. Back then, it was just really rare.

You know, I actually wrote a letter to the editor, and it was published in *Time* magazine. And I think that really was, when I was still in high school, that might’ve been the first scene of the starting to be on that journey of identifying and also being kind of engaged with the world. It was part of the awakening, I think, as I got older, graduated from high school, and definitely when I went to college, and really learned a lot more about this Disability Studies. And I kind of realized, all this stuff that I did for myself, isn’t gonna help other people and isn’t gonna make a difference. So, it’s really about systemic change. And I think that was a real switch for me as I became a college student and then went to grad school. I just really realized I could find so much to get something better for myself, for my accommodations as a student, but until we actually change policies, the next year, another student's gonna have to do it all over again. And that got me angry. I think that's what really drove me to think about how do we do this? How do we make a difference. And also, how do we work with others? Because it's not just about what I care about. It's not just about what I need, but what all kinds of people need.

[mellow music break]

ROCHELLE: And I guess when the ADA started, did you imagine the ADA as that alternative world, that better world for the disabled community?

ALICE: I think people have a lot of misconceptions about the ADA. I think there's a lotta expectations, but it did not, let's say, solve everything, you know. Things didn't just magically become better overnight, especially in 1990, when it passed. I think it took a lotta years for, after it passed, for really, for all of us to see the changes, right? Like curb cuts, elevators, just some of the basic things that we take for granted today. All of the things had to still be fought for. There are cities that talked about, oh, we can't afford these things. Or, why do we have to plan this law? There was always a lot of resistance toward complying with this law. Even today, there's this, this struggle is still really real.

But I will say that what the ADA did was that it gave us a law that we could call our own. It was the law that was for us, and it was the law that's enshrined in our legal protections. Like, we were a protected class. And this is kinda the latest iteration. There were other laws before that, but the ADA really was the one we could use as a tool. And I think it's a tool. It's just the beginning of creating change. And the law can only really do so much. I think sometimes we put too much stock and weight into laws, because it's really about the spirit behind the law. What does it really mean when we say that you belong in the public like everybody else? And how do we get our culture to that place where everybody believes that? And I don't think we're, you know, it's sad to say, but it's very real that 30 years later, we're not at that place yet. We're nowhere close to it. Change does not happen easily, and there's a lot of people who are afraid of change. And there's a lot of people that know the value of inclusion, especially with disabled people who've had a history of being segregated and institutionalized.

ROCHELLE: And I wanna expand on that specifically because— Mm. Actually, let me back up. So, you said that the ADA is really, like when it came about, it was finally something that was for you all and meant for you all. How do you also see— Because with the ADA being a law, it's not something that only impacts the disability community, you know, that it's something that everybody not only has to become more aware of and has to implement into their own lives, but it's something that actually, it's not something that we have to implement into our own lives only for the disability community. Because these regulations are meant for everyone.

ALICE: Yeah. I really hope that people, anybody who listens to this oral history thinks about that the ADA, while it is, I think, for the disability community, really important, it does benefit every single person. And I think one of the ways it talks about that is that number one, discrimination is not OK. That's one of the basic things. And I think number two, this idea that accessibility, if we build it into our infrastructure, if we build in access as a value and a practice that all of us practice, this makes the world better for everybody. It makes the world more accessible. It makes the world more flexible for everyone. Everyone benefits.

And I think, you and I are talking in May, 2020. We are right in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. And I think one things we've seen during this pandemic as so many people have been staying at home, is the benefits of accessibility. So many people now realize, oh, disabled people have been organizing online already. Or there are some people who've been learning and working from home already, way before this. And now, all these other people who've never had to do that realize there's more than one way to socialize and to celebrate each other. And I feel like that's a lesson that so many people can take, not only during this pandemic, but really about what disabled people already do every day just to adapt into a world that still was never really built for them.

During the pandemic, everyone can tap into disability community's organizing and work strategies

ROCHELLE: That is one thing that I have been thinking about a lot recently, is this, as we're in the middle of a pandemic and everybody is at home, folks are tapping into these methods and organizing strategies that the disability community has been using forever, you know! And have built their communities from. And are people giving credit to the disability community?

ALICE: Yeah, real talk. I mean, it is ironic and a little bit bittersweet that there were conferences, years ago that I couldn't attend because I would need to be doing it through videoconference. But my goodness! Look how quickly so many conferences are now virtual.

ROCHELLE: Yeah.

ALICE: So many people, disabled people, would get turned down for jobs when they asked to work remotely. And now everybody, almost everybody's working remotely. And I think that's a very painful sticking point, because there's still major disparities in terms of the employment rate. And just the fact that so many disabled people have been rejected and turned down, and basically, they're requests have been because even though there is still the law, there's no teeth behind it. So, every law is imperfect, right? So, one thing about the ADA is that there's really no way to enforce it. There's no ADA police to check on businesses, right? So, basically, for a large part, when disabled people make requests, and if they're thought of as reasonable requests, even when they're reasonable, many times, an employer still treats it like a burden. And I think that still is a reason why so many people are afraid to eve ask for them. I think that's why so many people aren't in the workforce. And there's a lot of reasons why people don't even disclose that they have a disability in the workplace. Because they don't wanna be seen as different. And I think that's what's really sad, that we just don't really think about why we had to do this. I don't think anybody enjoys filing a lawsuit.

ROCHELLE: [chuckles]

ALICE: Most of the times, it's trying to rectify an unjust situation.

ROCHELLE: Mmhmm.

ALICE: And this is what I think, if there's any message I could share with people who are not disabled is the fact that access is so much more than just compliance to the ADA. Access is something that we all should have a responsibility for. And access is something that we all have capacity, in some way or another, to give to one another. So, whether it's hey, you know, if I say, "Oh hey, Rochelle, can we talk later tonight instead of tomorrow morning? I had a bad day, or I'm just tired," you could say, "Hey, yeah. No problem." That's a form of access, right? This is, it's not just these public entities that have responsibility. If we really, truly care about our community, we can provide access to one another. That, to me, is a form of love. And I wanna quote my friend, Mia Mingus, who gave a keynote address to years ago where she said, “Access is love.” And that, to me, I think is such a beautiful idea, because it really is an act of love, and it’s an act of love that we can all give to one another.

[mellow music break]

The Disability Visibility Project and pushing for a better future

ROCHELLE: Do you have any last words about the DVP as a celebration of the ADA and also a push to continue to better into the present and future?

ALICE: Yep. You know, I think as we think about 30 years with the ADA, there’s so much to be thankful for. There’s so much to celebrate. And this is on the shoulders of the elders and generations who fought so hard and countless people that we won’t ever know their names, but they made this happen. They made this possible. And I’m really just looking forward to the future and thinking about and dreaming big about what’s possible. I really think that there’s so much work to be done. The struggle continues. There’s so much to critique and to be really mindful of. But there’s also so much hope. And I think with younger people, it just makes me so happy to see kids who are growing up that are growing up with a community ready and welcoming them. That, to me, is just magical to be part of this older group who is welcoming the next generation and future generations. And I know, I just know things are gonna get better. And things are better now than we had 30 years ago. But yeah, the possibilities are endless.

ROCHELLE: Yeah. And as a final wrap-up question, what do you think that 16-year-old Alice would think of you and your work today?

ALICE: Oh, my goodness! I think 16-year-old Alice never thought she would live past 30, to be honest. I was told when I was a young kid for a long time that my future was uncertain. And growing up that way, I could not see myself as a 46-year-old person. So, that’s really heavy to think about: the 16-year-old me not even having that image, because it’s really true. I didn’t know what was possible, and I didn’t even know I would still be alive. And that’s part of the urgency and part of the intensity I have toward making the most out of everything. Because I appreciate every second, every conversation, every relationship, every friendship. Because I know things may not turn out, you know, things can go sideways easily. And so, that 16-year-old Alice would be just, I think, just her mind would be blown, because I think I’m living my wildest dream. I think I really am. This is just, even six years ago when I started the DVP, I had no idea what it would be today. And I’m just so excited for what comes next. And I’m ready for it. I am ready.

Wrap-up

[hip hop plays]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Rochelle and me on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Geraldine Ah-Sue. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

Subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Play. You can also support our podcast for $1 a month or more by going to our Patreon page at Patreon.com/DVP. That’s p-a-t-r-e-o-n dot com, slash DVP.

Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Byeeee!