

Disability Deep Dive Episode 107: WCAG Explained: Mark Miller on Digital Accessibility

Keith Casebonne (00:00:18):

Many state and local governments are now required to meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA, the standard for making websites, apps, and digital content accessible. So what does that actually mean in practice? Well, today we're talking to Mark Miller about that and more on Disability Deep Dive.

Jodi Beckstine (00:00:37):

Welcome to Disability Deep Dive. I'm Jodi.

Keith Casebonne (00:00:40):

And I'm Keith.

Jodi Beckstine (00:00:41):

Today we're talking with Mark Miller of Inclusion Impact Accessibility about what digital accessibility actually requires and why so many organizations still treat it as an afterthought.

Keith Casebonne (00:00:51):

We get into WCAG, the W3C Accessibility Maturity Model and what it takes to make websites, documents, apps, and online content accessible for people with disabilities.

Jodi Beckstine (00:01:01):

We also talk about the April 24th, 2026 DOJ rule and what it means now that many state and local governments are required to meet these standards.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:11):

This is a practical conversation about planning, accountability, and making sure people can actually access the information and services they need.

Jodi Beckstine (00:01:19):

Let's get into it with Mark Miller.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:23):

Before we get started, we'd like to begin with a quick visual description for listeners who are blind or have low vision. I'm Keith. I'm a white man with brown eyes, brown hair, a graying beard, and I'm wearing a black shirt.

Jodi Beckstine (00:01:34):

I'm Jodi, a white woman with dark blonde hair that's in a bun, and I'm wearing a black and white striped shirt and glasses.

Mark Miller (00:01:41):

And I'm Mark Miller, a white man with dark peppered with gray hair and a dark green shirt on and a bit of a beard.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:52):

Well, Mark, for listeners who may be meeting you for the first time, can you introduce yourself, share a little bit about your work at Inclusion Impact Accessibility and what brought you into the world of digital accessibility?

Mark Miller (00:02:03):

Yeah, I would love to. Thanks, Keith. And thanks, Jodi. First of all, I want to say thanks to both of you all for having me on the podcast. I'm a huge fan of the podcast and I don't know if Keith has told you, Jodi, but I was on one of the very first versions of these years and years ago. So it's super exciting to be back around and to be in a different role and it's great. And I just really appreciate all that you guys do in general, but also with this podcast.

Keith Casebonne (00:02:35):

Yeah. And hopefully a much better, what more polished podcast than it was back then.

Mark Miller (00:02:38):

Oh my goodness. You're absolutely right. Your website looks so professional. It's funny because I think in the beginning I was doing a lot of podcasting and you were looking at me going like, "Oh, how do we..." And then I looked at you and I'm like, "Well, the student becomes a teacher."

Keith Casebonne (00:02:54):

Yeah, exactly.

Mark Miller (00:02:55):

You guys got it all figured out. It's great. It really is.

Keith Casebonne (00:02:57):

Sweet.

Mark Miller (00:02:57):

And you've got great guests and you guys do a fantastic job and it's an honor to be back. But yeah, I'm Mark Miller. I'm founder and CEO of Inclusion Impact Accessibility. I think the easiest short way to describe us is we're a digital accessibility consultant. And what that means is that we help organizations make their digital assets. So think websites, mobile applications, documents, any sort of digital outreach that they're doing where there's content that people consume or actions that people perform. We help them make sure that that's accessible to people with disabilities. And of course that means a whole lot. There's guidelines, there's all sorts of things that go along with that. And we also help organizations improve their ability as an organization to output accessible digital assets. So it's not just about coming in as a consultant and giving them a service or a product that makes these things accessible. It's also about coming in and saying, "Here's the things that you guys can do as an organization to be accessible." So that's in a very small little nutshell, that's the business.

(00:04:14):

And I've been doing that as you know, Keith, for 13 years now. My business is newer. It started last year, but my experience in the industry is 13 years. I'm also part of the W3C's working group that creates what's called the accessibility maturity model. So AMM, if you ever hear me say AMM, I mean Accessibility Maturity Model and that is a fancy sounding term that people might not know what it means, but what it means is it's a model by which you can evaluate an organization to understand their level of maturity. So what are they doing? Where are they in terms of their maturity? And when I say maturity, I mean their maturity, how mature they are around the capability to output accessible to digital assets, websites, mobile applications. And what are the gaps? That's the important part of it. It's like, here you are, here's your ability to do it. What are the gaps and what could you do to improve that capability to make it more consistent, more efficient, more measurable? All those things.

(00:05:25):

So the W3C, creating this model is also the people that create the guidelines for accessibility. I'm sure I know you guys know that. I'm sure a lot of your listeners do, but for folks who don't, there's the web content accessibility guidelines, WCHE that help people understand what they need to do to be more inclusive to people with disabilities and their digital assets. And then on top of that, I do a lot of podcasting, a lot of speaking in the industry, a lot of advocacy. The company's main, what we call our prime directive is a value first prime directive. So we don't have a traditional marketing program as much as we try to put as much value up community as possible and we try to provide value to anybody that we speak with whether or not we're doing business with them. So we do a lot of that kind of community outreach as well. And I think the other thing that you ask is how I got in this business?

Jodi Beckstine (00:06:30):

Yes.

Keith Casebonne (00:06:30):

Yeah.

Mark Miller (00:06:32):

And I like this question. It's one I ask people a lot because it's so interesting to hear how people, like why does such a niche industry and it's one that you'll find if you brush up against the industry that the people who are in it are passionate about it. It's not just another job, it's actually a passion and most, I think you guys would reflect this, but for me it's like I feel lucky that I get to work in an industry that I'm so passionate about. So what happened is that I've got a sales and marketing background. I've got a publishing background. Back in the '90s I actually published a magazine on art, theater, literature, music.

Jodi Beckstine (00:07:13):

Nice.

Mark Miller (00:07:14):

And in doing that, we were a small company doing that and we built the entire technology infrastructure to do that. It was the first time in history where a couple of guys, it was me and a friend of mine who's no longer with us, his name is Mark Lingenfelter and he and I could do this because technology had reached the point where a couple of guys could sit in their basement or living room or whatever it was at the time and put together a magazine

we could provide what the printers needed electronically and go from there. So we had to build this infrastructure and that brought me into technology. So at one point my wife said, "You've been doing your own business for a while and I want to do this thing with a friend of mine." And I said, "Okay, fair. Fair is fair." She went and did that and I got a more corporate job in technology.

(00:08:07):

And then I bounced around technology and some other things for a while and I love technology so it was great, but I wouldn't say it was fulfilling. It was okay, but whether or not I sold another Cisco Switch or network cabling or memory upgrades, Microsoft licensing, it just was like, it was okay. I'm a geek so I like the tech and then I was also working in the mortgage industry, doing tech stuff in the mortgage industry and also some sales stuff in the mortgage industry and I ran into a guy there in that industry that I worked together with called, his name was Wes and he went out of that industry and he started working for this company that did this digital accessibility thing. So this was probably plus or minus 2010. I think it was maybe 2008 somewhere in there that he got this job and he would tell me about it and I'd be like, "Huh? What is this you're talking about?"

(00:09:24):

And then as I... And he and I would keep in touch because we would exchange ideas in a professional way and we were like a sounding board for each other and just friends. And I started to understand this and I'm like, "Wait a minute, this is helping people with disabilities and this is tech to wrap together. This sounds cool." Now when I had my magazine, one of my advertisers was a woman who was deaf And she, this is a whole story in and of itself, but long story short, she learned deliberate, she could speak, but we're in our 20s at this time and she was learning sign language because when a person who's deaf doesn't know sign language, they end up between two worlds. They're not quite part of the hearing world, they're not quite part of the deaf world.

(00:10:11):

So she was learning sign language and we became friends and I started to learn sign language with her and became part of the deaf community. So I had this real exposure early on to this. And then I myself have dyslexia and ADD and I actually really didn't think about that in terms of disability back then, but all these things and my friend working in this industry came together and I went to him one day and I said, "Listen, I like what I'm doing, but I love what you're doing. Can you please find a way for me to get into this industry?" Still not quite knowing what I was getting into, not quite fully understanding it, but understanding enough to know that this could be something that was meaningful to me,

that I would go to bed every night feeling like I had done something meaningful, but maybe I didn't even understand it that far yet.

(00:11:09):

I just had an instinct that I knew that that's what I wanted to do three years later. I spent three years back and forth with Wes, almost got an interview with DQ at one point, but they made some changes back and forth, back and forth and three years later he came to me and he said, "Mark..." And it was funny because I was starting to look for a change anyways and my philosophy is always create multiple good options, don't run away from a bad option. So I had really ramped up what I was doing at my current job and I was looking at another option and then I get this call from Wes and he says, "Look, I just interviewed with this woman and she... It was a great company. It's a small company that is what we do, exactly the thing you're trying to get into. I decided not to take the job though, but if I recommended you, they need you and they need your skill sets."

(00:12:13):

Now Jodi, Keith, I don't know anything about accessibility, nothing. But I knew sales and marketing and that's what they needed. So I interviewed with Kathy Wahlbin of Interactive Accessibility and thankfully she took this chance on me. And I think she was nervous because I didn't know anything about accessibility, But she took this chance on me. I learned quickly. She's like, "Can you learn?" And I was back there, like every time HP or Cisco came out with something new, you had to do these courses and so I could adapt anyways and I'm like... So it was really cool when I got in, I'm running deep on one subject versus all these things was really, really cool.

(00:13:01):

But Kathy, her husband, Steve, who was also in the business, took me under their wing. I learned accessibility and I had no idea, no idea how much I was going to match with this industry. It was maybe six months in and I literally had the thought of I'm home and I'm not leaving. I think when I joined Interactive Accessibility, there was five people and then I think we went down to three at some point and then we built from there and five years later, so this would be 2018, 2013, I got into Interactive Accessibility. I learned so much from Kathy to this day if you said who's your mentor, I would refer back to her.

Keith Casebonne (00:13:56):

She's one of the greats, yeah.

Mark Miller (00:13:56):

I have a bunch, but she just was an unbelievable voice, thought reader, and I feel so lucky that that was the crucible I was put in, was that company and under her direction to learn this industry and very thankful to this day for her and for her leadership and then the knowledge transfer over the course of five years. But we ended up selling to Vispero, which became, and we merged with Paciello Group under Mike Paciello, who is another incredible... I didn't work directly under him like Kathy, but what just incredible influence in the industry he's been and I use the term legend, I don't know if he likes it.

(00:14:44):

I use the term legend, but I consider him to be a legend as well in the industry as Kathy and he and I have developed a really good professional respect and friendship over the years as well, but he wasn't part of the Paciello Group at the time. He'd sold as well and moved on. And then I worked under the Sparrow umbrella for the next eight years. So that's my... Did that cover it for you? Maybe I told you too much.

Jodi Beckstine (00:15:12):

No, it's great.

Keith Casebonne (00:15:13):

No, that's wonderful. It's a great story.

Jodi Beckstine (00:15:15):

Yeah, absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (00:15:16):

It's a wonderful story. And it's a good story about just even finding your own path and finding what fits.

Mark Miller (00:15:21):

Yeah. And all the different things, how they fell into place to... You don't always know why you're doing things or what it's going to mean in the future.

Keith Casebonne (00:15:31):

I'm still never sure why I do most of anything either.

Mark Miller (00:15:34):

My wife's definitely not sure why I do most of the things I do. But yeah, no, I feel fortunate and I just think I do appreciate all the experiences and the way they came together to bring me to this podcast.

Jodi Beckstine (00:15:48):

Yeah. I think you hit the nail on the head with a lot of people who work in this industry have a passion for it and that's so important at your job, but what I wanted to talk, I wanted to break down some of the terms that you said in the beginning.

Mark Miller (00:16:02):

Yeah, for sure.

Jodi Beckstine (00:16:03):

They could be big to people that they hear them all the time, but they may not fully understand. So they hear WCAG and can get a little bit overwhelmed in plain language, what is it and why does it matter so much right now?

Mark Miller (00:16:19):

Well, when I hear WCAG, I still get overwhelmed. I don't know if we're going to unoverwhelm people, but yeah, no, that's fine. Thanks for coming back around that. It's so easy too to just start spitting out these terms, particularly when I'm sitting here with you and Keith who I know know these things. So the WCAG stands for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and they're a set of guidelines created by a volunteer group called the W3C, which stands for the Worldwide Web Consortium. And even if you don't know them, you know them because they're the people responsible for the HTML standard.

(00:16:54):

So when you log onto a website and your browser shows me, shows you, Jodi and Keith, what it shows you, it's the HTML behind there that that browser is able to understand and represent that visual and I'm talking visually right now. The web content accessibility guidelines are a set of guidelines that says, "Hey, if you also want that background structure to represent things to people who may experience that website differently, so maybe a person who's blind is using a screen reader like NVDA or JAWS and that content's being represented to them in a spoken word auditorily versus through a monitor visually, then it needs to be programmatically correct for that as well.

(00:17:46):

And that's part of what the WCEG guidelines would help inform. It says things like, "Hey, if you've got a video with auditory content in there, you need captions because a person who has a hearing impairment is not going to be able to understand that content if it's not represented in text." And it has a lot of things in there around keyboard navigability and all this stuff so that people with mobility impairments and can navigate around how the content should be presented so that people with cognitive impairments, which actually fall in that category because of dyslexia, that it's fine for them to navigate. So it helps organizations understand at least at a base level what they need to do to make sure that their content is perceivable in these different ways as well. One short bit about it, just I don't want to get too in the weeds because it's not a terribly exciting subject.

(00:18:46):

Maybe it's just the three of us, but the web content accessibility guidelines, if you hear somebody say level A, level AA, level AAA, they come in three different flavors, A being baseline like, "Hey, it is not working at all if it's not at least A" AA being what most organizations, what we consider to be market for conformance and what a lot of regulations point to is that AA level. And then there's this AAA that's like, "Hey, if you really want to go the extra mile, there's this AAA and then beyond that you have to test with people with disabilities and really sharpen the experience even further." Does that cover it, Jodi? Does he think-

Jodi Beckstine (00:19:25):

Perfect.

Mark Miller (00:19:25):

Perfect. Okay, great.

Jodi Beckstine (00:19:26):

Perfect. Great job.

Keith Casebonne (00:19:27):

Yeah, absolutely. And once you get past the acronym and the terminology, you see that this stuff really shows up in so many places online. When you get that foundation in place, let's talk instead about where people run into barriers more often. So when you hear people talk about digital accessibility, of course they often think about websites, but this also includes PDFs and forms, apps, videos, all sorts of digital content. Where do you see the biggest accessibility problems show up most often?

Mark Miller (00:20:02):

Well, it really is the web and it's with that HTML, it's with everything we talk about because if you think about how vast it is, every business has at least one, if not multiple websites, every organization out there that maybe they're not a business, but they're just an organization. Individuals, if you love to cook and you want to start a cooking blog, you've got a website out there and then nevermind the things like social media and all that. So we are producing content on the web incredibly rapidly every day that content increases, increases, increases. And with AI, it's increasing even more rapidly. And there's a whole talk around AI, which we can get into if you want, but I'll leave it for now. But the way that we've taught people to create websites doesn't include accessibility. This is our fight is accessibility professionals. When you go to school and you learn in school how to create a website, it's becoming better and more and more of a thing, but traditionally that class wasn't like, "And here's how you make it accessible or this is the accessible best practice."

(00:21:29):

You see more and more of that. I mean, you've got wonderful places like the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. They're like half is like, "Here's how you do technology stuff." And the other half is a school for people who are deaf. So schools like that really are leaders in this. I know people that have come out of that that are... In fact, I sat down and had lunch about a month ago with a friend of mine, a friend of my son's, Joe Agnelli, who is a front end web person and he can talk about accessibility all day long because he did get some of that. So it's not completely absent, but it's not the norm. So it would be the web. But the other things to think about, Keith, just to round this out, I'm going to give you a more interesting answer. One of the things to think about too is that there's a lot of what I would call enclosed systems a lot of people would refer to as kiosks. So you think about when you travel and you go to print out your bag tags at that kiosk.

(00:22:24):

You have to go in, you have to put in your credit card or your ID or whatever and you can print out all your stuff. That is a piece of hardware with software in it and it needs to be accessible and these things are becoming prominent. Now you get past security and what do you do? You go to get a snack and there's five terminals and maybe somebody wandering around in that shop that can help you with one of those terminals, but you're now expected to do self-checkout using an enclosed system. So that would be the flip side of your question, Keith, that's the new frontier of inaccessible or hopefully accessible technology. So it's starting to stretch into that kind of thing as well.

Jodi Beckstine (00:23:12):

We know a problem that exists and it's whether people will do something meaningful to address the problem. I know there's some requirements that are coming up in April that are coming into effect. So what separates organizations that take this digital accessibility seriously from the beginning and ones that are backtracking or just ticking off boxes because it's required?

Mark Miller (00:23:41):

Yeah. So it's a really big subject. So I'll try to boil it down, but it's an important one. You're really putting your finger on the pulse of I think what a lot of organizations, I'll say struggle with, is how to... Because if you're a business, you've got a lot of competing priorities. We can sit here and be like, "Oh, this is important. This is important because it is." But we can't deny that a business is really trying to juggle a lot of different things. So they're always trying to figure out and some of them do it really well and some of them don't do it as well and all of that, but where this fits in those priorities. And then you brought up a really good point and that's building accessibility in from the beginning versus this retrofit. So I'll go into both of those things.

(00:24:34):

So first of all, there's a lot of reasons why businesses might embark on accessibility and you brought up a really good one, Jodi, and that's that there's a regulation and the regulation I think that you're referring to is Title II, the ADA, which says that state and local government entities, so think about your town, your state, anything that's funded or run by them needs to be accessible to people with disabilities. And the really cool thing, so this is under the ADA. So title III of the ADA says places of public accommodation and that's a federal, from the federal standpoint, or it's from everybody's standpoint. But if you think about a bank or hospital or anything, anything that serves the public needs to be accessible to people with disabilities under this federal guideline. And the title III has always said places of public accommodation need to be accessible. And then there's no enforcement, it's enforced and the courts is litigated.

(00:25:45):

So the litigation, the case precedent is pointed to these WCAG guidelines that we just explained. The cool thing about Title II is they actually came out and said WCAG 2.1, WCAG 2.2 right now, but they said this 2.1 version of WCAG at the AA level, this is something that you can use. So Title II is really cool and that it's given more clarity, Jodi, to the businesses. There's a little more assuredness in terms of the direction that they go to. And then they also said, Title II said by tomorrow, so April 24th, 2026, if you have more, 50,000 people or more in the entity, they use the word entity because what do we talk about with a town, a

town library or whatever or a state this or that, that you have until that date to be accessible. So a lot of organizations have been doing the first thing that you talked about, which is retrofitting, going out to the things they've already built and said, "We need to make these accessible." That's very inefficient.

(00:26:55):

So if you think, if we use like a car analogy, if you buy a car and then you're like, "I want a turbocharger on my car." or, "I now decided I need heated seats or a backup camera." or something like that that wasn't part of the original package of the car. It's much more expensive for you to go and add that to your car afterwards than it would be if that was installed in the factory. So the soapbox we get on is like, yes, you need to retrofit all this stuff, but going forward, and this is where the maturity models, all that, we're coming back around, we're coming back around. That's where we go, okay, now if when you create the designs for your website, if you make sure you pay attention to accessibility and design them with accessibility in mind, that's going to be much more efficient and less expensive.

(00:27:42):

And then if your developers have, if we educate your developers and we put requirements around them to code with accessibility the best they can, that's going to be more expensive. And then when the quality assurance people get in there, they're checking for it. So anything that people might not have quite got right, because those bugs and people think it's perfectly, that's everything, not just accessibility, they're checking for it that's going to be better. And then what happens is that it's way more efficient and cost-effective because you built it in from the beginning. And by the way, you're doing a bunch of different checks. Quality assurance is looking for a bunch of different things. Developers have a bunch of different best practices. So having accessibility be part of that is just in lockstep. It almost becomes like not an extra effort or once you have it implemented, implementing it and getting to that point takes effort.

(00:28:34):

And then the other brilliant thing is is that things don't enter into production, which means you don't put a website out there that is initially inaccessible, that now needs to become accessible. So you don't, I'm going to use a fancy term here, but you don't enter production with as much risk as you otherwise do. So not only is it more efficient to do, but it's safer from a risk standpoint to do it. So I think that covers all the different things that you're talking about. And the last thing I will say is that whatever your reason is for doing accessibility, zoom out. And what I mean by that, I have this blog post on my website called the Unified Theory of Digital Accessibility.

(00:29:20):

It means if you do it for compliance reasons, zoom out and look at all the other reasons why it's good. Look at the return on investment, look at the, if you're a business, look at the increase in brand perception and your market response and do it because it's part of your company culture to be a good steward and all that kind of stuff. So if you then zoom out and you look at all these other reasons why it's a really good idea, you're much more likely to sustain it. You're much more likely to put the initial effort it takes to build accessibility into all your processes, company, government entity, whatever you are. So did that answer your question?

Jodi Beckstine (00:30:00):

Yes. Great answer.

Mark Miller (00:30:02):

I'm glad I can bring it around to all those things that you mentioned.

Keith Casebonne (00:30:06):

Nice, nice. Well, and maybe even going a little bit further into it, unfortunately a side effect of the fact that so many businesses don't build their websites accessible in the first place and need to suddenly have a solution and they need, how do I fix this right away? There's unfortunately a whole industry now of these "accessibility overlays" that sell full compliance, full accessibility. And unfortunately it's just not the case. So it's a whole another market that's built to claim to solve a problem that it doesn't actually solve, unfortunately. So in lieu of going that route, I mean, what does it look like for a business, a developer, whoever, to actually build in that accessibility from the start, from concept to design, to deployment. Without getting too deep into the weeds, what does it look like to see accessibility just from the start?

Mark Miller (00:31:23):

It looks like everything else and that's the brilliance behind it. So the effort is in building the processes in the first place. The effort is in educating the developer. The effort is in creating the policies and procedures. The effort is in governance. Now that we've told, now that we've said this is what we should do, are we actually doing it? How well is it working? Once it becomes baked in, once you hit an optimal, what would we call an optimized state of maturity, there's a bunch of different ways to say it, but we'll say it that way. It's like everything else. So when responsive design came into the picture, responsive design is where you could have one website, one set of code HTML.

(00:32:14):

And if you went, it changed based on the portal size that you were using. So if you went on your desktop and you had your nice big monitor, showed it to you one way. But if you were at the grocery store hitting that website on your cell phone, it showed it to you another way, which in those ways were appropriate for the portal size. It was the same thing. People like, "How do we do this? Let's hire a consultant. Let's try and retrofit our existing website." All those things. But the world liked it so much that it is now just the way that we develop. And people would be like, "It's not any extra effort because it's just the way we do stuff." So that's the brilliance behind it all is that once you get to that state, Keith, it looks like everything else. It becomes baked in and it becomes a part of it.

(00:33:01):

And for the developer, it looks like best practices. So when you put an image into a website, you use an image element and then there's an attributes within that and you just automatically put what's called an alt attribute that describes the image so that somebody using a screen reader can hear a description of that image and give the same benefit as somebody who can look at the image. It's just habit, it's just part of it. And so that's really what it looks like. The one thing I think to point out is it doesn't necessarily eliminate the need for a third party objective audit in the end. And part of that is one, you want to make sure, just like anything else, you want to make sure an expert looks at it and says like, "Hey, this is pretty good. I found a couple of things to slip through. It should be easy to fix. Here you go."

(00:33:55):

And also because of the compliance aspect of it, oftentimes you really are looking for that authority that a third party objective party gives you so that you can... So if something does happen and you need to defend yourself or you need to be defensible, you can say, "Look, we disagree with this allegation because we actually have done everything that we're supposed to and here's the evidence." So that stuff will be a cost and happen at the end, but having them not come back with a bunch of stuff that's wrong, you then have to fix retrofit, that's good. Does that help, Keith? Does that answer-

Keith Casebonne (00:34:31):

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. And that's good news.

Jodi Beckstine (00:34:34):

Yeah.

Keith Casebonne (00:34:35):

It is. I love the answer. I think it's a brilliant answer that it just makes it just like everything else and it becomes standard, becomes best practice. But the audit makes sense too because if you're, this isn't 25, 30 years ago when all of our webpages are just pretty much static text and images and that, I could make an accessible website all day like that with no problem, but websites nowadays are pretty much apps. I mean, they're dynamic.

Mark Miller (00:34:57):

We do that stuff.

Keith Casebonne (00:34:58):

Exactly, exactly. That you can do your best to be as accessible as possible, but just like anything needs to be bug checked or reviewed or whatever, it's just another part of the process of the review, I think, is the accessibility. You got to make sure it's all there because there's a lot that can go wrong.

Mark Miller (00:35:15):

100%.

Keith Casebonne (00:35:15):

You have the best intention, but it can go wrong.

Mark Miller (00:35:19):

And you brought up the right thing, Keith. Another way to think about accessibility is bugs that affect people with disabilities. So if you think about that process that's already in place to just find and fix bugs and try to avoid as many of them entering into that production site in the first place as possible, it's just an adjunct to that process with some compliance behind it.

Jodi Beckstine (00:35:48):

Well, to close one more loop that we opened at the beginning, let's talk a little bit about the W3C Accessibility Maturity Model and how it can help organizations move from reacting to accessibility problems to actually building this longer, long-term approach.

Mark Miller (00:36:08):

Yeah. So thank you because I love the subject.

Jodi Beckstine (00:36:12):

Good.

Mark Miller (00:36:12):

We all have our little areas of the accessibility world that we get passionate about and one of the things that my geeky area to dig into is this organizational maturity, which is why I'm part of the group and I'm fortunate to be in a group that's led by a gentleman named Dave Fazio and we've got some just incredible... And then Sherry, I always mess up Sherry's last name, so I apologize, sorry. Do you want to say, Keith? Ballonharbor? We're not even reading it. I have to look at it [inaudible 00:36:47]. But anyways, she's an absolutely incredible voice in accessibility and just an unbelievable contributor to this industry and has made just... Anyways, I can't say enough about her and a bunch of the other people that are in this group.

(00:37:03):

And so maturity models are a thing that exists. So you have a couple models out there. The ones that I really tracked were CMM and CMMI, so capability maturity models, which they actually started in the 80s and then they became CMMI capability and maturity integration in the '90s. And these models sprang up and they spring up in large places like the Navy and Microsoft and all this stuff to evaluate an organization's ability to do something and it could be anything. So in this case, we're talking about to do digital accessibility and what that really means is to output accessible digital assets and it's all the stuff that we've been talking about. And the way that these models work is you assess the organization and you used a great term, Jodi, and that's, I think you said this, you said... Well, I can't remember how you said it. Did you say ad hoc or something close to that? I'm going to say you said ad hoc, but it's this initial effort.

Keith Casebonne (00:38:13):

This isn't recorded. No one will ever know.

Mark Miller (00:38:16):

It's just the three of us. As I was saying it, I'm like, did you say ad hoc or something else? But whatever you said, it tinkled my spines and I'm like, oh, it's a great term. But anyway, and what that means is that somebody's gone like, "Oh, we need this to be accessible." And somebody's been like, "Oh, let me just grab the guidelines. Let me hire a consultant. Let me do this." And we've made this thing accessible and then over in the organization somebody else working on something else has done the same thing and so you've got

these two different areas of the organization that have figured out how to do this thing called accessibility with their asset. So the model would look at something like that and say, "Well, you're at an ad hoc stage." Or to use the terms from the W3Cs, they call that a launch phase. They go inactive launch, integrate, optimize, so you're not inactive, you know about accessibility and you're trying to do stuff, you're launching it and that launch effort is an ad hoc effort.

(00:39:24):

People adjust by the seat of their pants figuring out, which is beautiful and fantastic, but it's not sustainable. And that's oftentimes where you start to look at a model is when you're in that ad hoc stage. But we would look, how are you doing this? Why are you doing it? Do you have this implemented? Do you have that implemented? You're doing accessibility. Yes, we're doing accessible. How do you do it? When the product's done, we go and have an assessment done and we fix it all. Okay. Do you have any policy? Do you have a policy for your developers to try and include it? No, we don't have that yet. All right. Well, there is an area of improvement. So it's looking for those gaps and once you identify those gaps and you start closing those gaps, you move through these levels.

(00:40:07):

So like I said, with the W3C's model, the levels go in order inactive launch, integrate, optimize. So I've launched, I'm having assessments done, I'm fixing stuff, but now I've created these policies and in design we're reviewing the designs for accessibility. We've trained our developers. We've got a policy in place. We've got a policy in purchasing. When the purchasers buy a third party tool to integrate into our website, we evaluate it for accessibility. Now we've integrated accessibility into our workflows. And then optimize is we've evaluated the effectiveness of that integration and we've improved it based on those findings. That's a simple way to say it. So it's a model that allows that kind of process.

(00:41:00):

The other way I'll put this is you've got three things. You've got the why, you've got the what and you've got the how. The model is the what. The why is why do you need to do this? Well, we're being sued. Title II's coming down the line, so on and so forth. The what or the how is the model. I mean, I'm sorry, the what is the model. The what is, what are we doing well right now and where's our gaps? What can we do to improve? And then the how is a roadmap that you would build that the model informs. So that, Jodi is where this all leads to is this ultimate roadmap that gives you a set of incremental actions. And I love to say incremental because there's no light switch. You don't decide to do this and do it all at once. If you even have a notion of doing it all at once or even rapidly, it's probably not going

to be great. One step at a time is fine. And every step you take is a little more accessibility and a little more access and that's fantastic.

Jodi Beckstine (00:42:08):

Absolutely. That's perfect. I think that's what a lot of companies miss is that with this model, they do get, like you said, a roadmap and that will help you. If you haven't started it at the beginning, even if you are starting at the beginning, having these actionable steps that you can follow to make it happen is great.

Mark Miller (00:42:29):

And with every single one, you become more effective and more efficient.

Jodi Beckstine (00:42:33):

Absolutely.

Mark Miller (00:42:33):

Less money, less time.

Keith Casebonne (00:42:38):

Well, Mark, before we wrap up, we have a second segment in our show that we call the Deep Cut where we talk about media and disability spaces. So we always like to ask our guests, is there a book, a TV show, film, song, anything like that that's resonated with you lately that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Mark Miller (00:42:56):

Oh my gosh. I could go on and on and on and on. I'm going to start in a weird place.

Jodi Beckstine (00:43:05):

Okay.

Keith Casebonne (00:43:07):

Okay, go for it.

Mark Miller (00:43:09):

Have you guys been watching Bridgerton?

Jodi Beckstine (00:43:13):

Yes, absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (00:43:14):

I have not.

Mark Miller (00:43:15):

The new season of Bridgerton.

Jodi Beckstine (00:43:15):

Yes.

Mark Miller (00:43:18):

So my wife and I watch Bridgerton and I got another one for a year or two and there's a woman that is a character in that. She's one of the maids. So the premise of Bridgerton is it's society, elite society. It's fictional representation of elite society that's interesting and cute. And so you've got the elite and then you've got these maids and one of the maids doesn't have her full arm. You know what I'm talking about, Jodi?

Jodi Beckstine (00:43:57):

Yes.

Mark Miller (00:43:58):

And here's why I love this. She's just a maid on the show that doesn't have a full arm. There's no mention of it. There's no value signaling around it. It is just a proper diverse representation of the human condition and it's not addressed, it's not talked about. And there was another show, this is a really cool show. It took place in Boston, which is, I live in New Hampshire about an hour north of the city and it was called 30... I have dyslexia, so I'm not good at remembering numbers, but 36 Days. This is an interesting one. Watch this show. If you're watching it, don't watch it with the kids around. It's not that kind of show.

Keith Casebonne (00:44:48):

Gotcha. Gotcha.

Mark Miller (00:44:49):

I think it's on Amazon or something like that, but I was watching this with my wife and I'm like, "Did you see that?" And she's like, "What?" And they had an office scene. And by the way, if you're part of the show, this is a huge shout-out to you guys and I really appreciate

that. And in the background out of focus was all the workers in the cubicles and the desks and one of them was in a mobile wheelchair. Again, no explanation, no nothing, just the extras they pulled on board to have in the background of the scene with the main characters included people with disabilities. And I know it's a weird little place to go with that question, but those moments for me are such hopeful moments and there's a thousand examples of that. But being in tears during the pandemic, flying home from the CSUN Conference, wearing a mask with a college kid flying home on either side of me, tears streaming into my mask while I watched CODA is a moment I will never forget.

(00:45:59):

That's Marlee Matlin who's an incredible deaf actor and a whole cast that came out of largely out of Gallaudet, so very authentically represented through the deaf in signing American Sign Language Community a wonderful representation. CODA stands for Child of Deaf Adult. So this premise that in this family they had two kids, two deaf parents had two kids, one deaf, one hearing and it was about the pressures that's put on the only hearing. It's about a lot of things, but I think the CODA, the title of it was about the pressures put on the youngest sibling, which was a daughter and her ending up being interpreted to this family and them not wanting her to go away and hard for her to express herself while being a part of this deaf family and her being a part of deaf culture, but also trying to find her way in hearing culture and all these things. But boy, I get choked up even thinking about the movie. Marlee Matlin, first of all, if you don't know her story, learn her story for CODA, everybody should see that.

Jodi Beckstine (00:47:22):

It's on our list. It's on our list to discuss.

Keith Casebonne (00:47:25):

Yep, yep, yep. One of the things we're going to talk about. Yep, absolutely. Good choice.

Mark Miller (00:47:33):

It's a great question. I appreciate the question, but man, could I keep going?

Jodi Beckstine (00:47:36):

Yeah.

Mark Miller (00:47:36):

Nevermind the blog posts and the content that's just put out there by the people in our community that doesn't rise to the Hollywood level that I just talked about. And the reason why I went that direction is because these are the things that everybody can look for and appreciate as I think these moments and these movies and there's a lot of incredible... It's a great world we live in. There's a lot of incredible stuff out that we talk about accessibility not being done well, but as much as we talk about that, there's things that are done well, including accessibility, including these moments like that. So thanks for that question.

Jodi Beckstine (00:48:11):

Keith and I keep coming back to every time to The Pitt. I don't know if you've watched that show.

Mark Miller (00:48:15):

Oh yes, I've watched every episode.

Jodi Beckstine (00:48:17):

And we're constantly coming back to the representation in it. Yeah. Yeah.

Mark Miller (00:48:21):

The psychiatrist and again, he's in a wheelchair, no mention of it. That's an incredible show. Thanks for bringing that one up.

Keith Casebonne (00:48:27):

It is. It is.

Jodi Beckstine (00:48:28):

We really love it.

Keith Casebonne (00:48:30):

Yep.

Mark Miller (00:48:31):

But I absolutely adore that handling of people with disabilities. The other interesting one, we're on a tangent. We're just making a second podcast here, but the other interesting one is Will Trent.

Jodi Beckstine (00:48:45):

Will Trent.

Keith Casebonne (00:48:47):

I've heard of the show, but I haven't seen it.

Mark Miller (00:48:49):

So the main character, Will Trent, who he's part of GBI, Georgia Bureau of Investigations, but he's dyslexic like me, which I really like. And it's not the kind of like what we were talking about. It's not like it's just placed in it is the way it is. They handle it, which is another beautiful... CODA handles the subject.

Jodi Beckstine (00:49:11):

Yeah.

Keith Casebonne (00:49:11):

Sure.

Mark Miller (00:49:12):

So this show handles the subject, which is another beautiful thing. All these things are important and it's great. He's very profoundly dyslexic. The experience that they portray in that show is different than my experience. He has a real hard time reading. I learned to read. I can read fine. I'm not a fast reader, but my reading, reading comprehension, it took me a while to get there, but I'm pretty good now. I still like to listen to stuff versus reading it, but he's on the, I don't know, dyslexic spectrum, if we can say that, where he can't read. But anyways, that's a great show just to explore... that explores that as well.

Jodi Beckstine (00:49:55):

We'll check it out.

Keith Casebonne (00:49:56):

Yes, indeed.

Mark Miller (00:49:57):

But The Pitt, I forgot about The Pitt. Thank you. See, that's a testament to The Pitt. It was so normative to me that I wasn't even... And we literally just got through watching that. Is there another example in The Pitt other than the-

Jodi Beckstine (00:50:10):

Oh, there's a bunch. There's actually a bunch.

Mark Miller (00:50:12):

There's the neurodiversity with a sister.

Jodi Beckstine (00:50:15):

The patient that comes in who's deaf and they're having such a hard time communicating with her. And how do they just keep putting it off?

Mark Miller (00:50:23):

Yeah, that was fantastic to represent that challenge. And then the interesting thing about the doctor with a sister who's autistic is the sister I believe has autism. I don't know if they say that outright or not. I can't remember, but I think the implication is the doctor is also on the spectrum just in a different place.

Keith Casebonne (00:50:44):

That's true. Yes.

Mark Miller (00:50:45):

And that's never spoken, but they do a very good job of floating that out there and showing the different lived experiences, the two people on the spectrum, on different places the spectrum had.

Jodi Beckstine (00:50:56):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (00:50:56):

Yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (00:50:56):

And the actor is-

Keith Casebonne (00:50:56):

[inaudible 00:51:00], but it's great.

Jodi Beckstine (00:51:00):

The actor is as well. She's on the spectrum as well, which is both actors, in fact, of those roles.

Mark Miller (00:51:06):

Yeah. I didn't dive deep enough to... I mean, I suspected that, but thanks for that confirmation.

Keith Casebonne (00:51:12):

Excellent. Great stuff. There's some good stuff out there. You're right. Well, Mark, thanks so much for joining us, helping us break all this down in a way that feels clear and practical and grounded, the kind of stuff that people really need to know to get moving with accessibility in their websites and other digital products.

Mark Miller (00:51:29):

Well, I can't thank you guys enough for having me on the podcast. And Keith, you and I go way back and you've been an advocate of mine and I hope you feel like I've been an advocate of yours.

Keith Casebonne (00:51:41):

Absolutely.

Mark Miller (00:51:42):

So I really appreciate that. And Jodi, we just met today.

Jodi Beckstine (00:51:45):

Yes.

Mark Miller (00:51:46):

But you and I have a future.

Jodi Beckstine (00:51:50):

Yes, definitely.

Mark Miller (00:51:51):

Like Keith and I do. And I really appreciate this and I appreciate the questions and keep up the good work.

Jodi Beckstine (00:51:59):

Thank you.

Keith Casebonne (00:51:59):

Excellent.

Jodi Beckstine (00:51:59):

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Keith Casebonne (00:52:00):

Thank you. Yep. Thanks.

Mark Miller (00:52:02):

You're welcome.

Jodi Beckstine (00:52:03):

After the break, we'll dive into this week's Deep Cut.

Keith Casebonne (00:52:09):

Today's Deep Cut we're talking about the 1932 film *Freaks* directed by Tod Browning. Before we get into it, we want to give a strong content note. The title itself uses a word that is harmful by today's standards and the film also includes outdated language, disturbing imagery, violence, exploitation, and scenes that frame people with disabilities and body differences through fear, shock, and spectacle.

Jodi Beckstine (00:52:34):

This is a difficult film to talk about because it can be read in more than one way. In 1932, it was unusual to see people with disabilities and body differences on screen as real performers, workers, friends, partners, and members of a community. But watching it now, we also have to talk about the harm. The film uses disability and body difference to create discomfort and it comes from a time when people with disabilities were often treated as public curiosities instead of full people.

Keith Casebonne (00:53:01):

So today we're looking at freaks through two lenses, what it meant in 1932 and what it feels like to watch in 2026, because this is not a simple "good representation" or "bad representation" conversation. It's more complicated than that because apparently one film decided to be an ethical obstacle course. So when you watched Freaks, how did you balance the 1932 lens with the 2026 lens? What felt groundbreaking for its time and what felt harmful watching it now?

Jodi Beckstine (00:53:36):

We mentioned in 1932 it was unusual to see people with disability or body differences on screen at all, especially portraying them with relationships and routines and feelings and lives that weren't hidden away. But watching it now, there are parts that are extremely uncomfortable. The title itself lends to a very harmful word and the film often depends on the audience's reacting to these people's bodies as something unusual and shocking. And it's hard to separate from the way that disabled people and people with body differences have been treated in real life. So for me, the balance is recognizing that the film did something rare for its time about being honest and that, but being rare doesn't automatically mean it's respectful. And in 1932, they may have challenged some viewers simply by putting these performers on screen, but in 2026 there's deeper questions that need to be asked about dignity, consent, and whether people are being treated as full human beings.

Keith Casebonne (00:54:58):

Yeah, yeah, sure. At the time it seemed important to have them on screen, but just having someone on screen is not enough. There's a lot more that goes with it. And so what we have here is a film that's historically important, but still pretty harmful.

Jodi Beckstine (00:55:14):

Yeah, absolutely. So the film seems to challenge the idea that disabled characters are the ones the audience should fear. Cleopatra and Hercules, two characters, are cruel throughout the film, but while the performers have loyalty and community, there's a reversal at the end. Did that reversal at the end work for you or did the horror framing get in the way?

Keith Casebonne (00:55:42):

Yeah, I mean, there were aspects of both, I guess. It was interesting to see how the Cleopatra and Hercules, they were the bad guys. They were the ones that were causing problems and all the other performers, the individuals with disabilities in the show, they

are very loyal to each other. They're protective of Hans, who's one of the main characters in the movie. And you can feel that there's a sense of community among them. The problem is that the film still uses disabled bodies and body differences as an element of horror, essentially, and really more so at the end.

(00:56:36):

So yeah, the reversal works in some ways, but that horror framing weakens it. And what I felt was... There were parts of it that I was like, "Well, this is an interesting portrayal." especially considering the date, 1932 at the time, like, "Wow, this is interesting what they're showing here." And then the horror part at the end maybe just throw my arms in the air and go, "Nope, nope, you ruined it. It's all gone now. It's all a mess." So yeah, it definitely weakened things because the idea is that the audience is supposed to feel uneasy because these individuals look different.

Jodi Beckstine (00:57:17):

Yeah. I remember seeing it for the first time and it's marketed as a horror film. And so I came into it as the assumption of we're going to see people with disabilities, how horrible and horrific. And then I'm watching it and I'm like, "This isn't very scary. This doesn't seem like a horror film to me." And then duh, duh, duh, and here comes the ending. And I was like, "Oh, that's what they need."

Keith Casebonne (00:57:38):

I was wondering... Yep, same thing. I was just like, "Why is this horror? This is ridiculous. Just because they have disabilities?" Oh gosh, okay. Now I get it. Now I get it. Well, so the world of the circus side show, I guess, it was definitely exploitative, but for some performers, it also offered stable work and income, even travel and community. And this is a time when people with disabilities didn't have a lot of options. So how do we talk about that history honestly without romanticizing it?

Jodi Beckstine (00:58:20):

Yeah, I think the way to do that is to not make it simple. It's more nuanced than that.

Keith Casebonne (00:58:30):

Absolutely.

Jodi Beckstine (00:58:31):

The sideshow world was built on people being stared at, it was marketed, come see this oddity, this unusual thing is entertainment and there's absolutely harm in that and it should be said very plainly. But at the same time, we don't want to erase these people who worked in that world. They had careers, they earned money, they traveled, built families and relationships and had independence for themselves, which before that time really wasn't available to them. So that doesn't make it right or fair or respectful, but the people that were part of this were making those choices where they had very limited options. So we can hold both of those truths that it was harmful and also good in some aspects and we can recognize them being exploited without treating them like victims in that sense.

Keith Casebonne (00:59:43):

I mean, one thing the film does well, and I think we talk about it more in a bit, but is that they do show a real sense of community among the members of the side show, which was really interesting and to some degree really heartwarming. Again, you have to look at it in the right context of things, but yeah, for some people I can understand that at the time it might've been a good choice for them considering the options at the time. Yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (01:00:16):

We've mentioned this in the first season of Disability Deep Dive. This is where the term midget came from was this era, this time period. A lot of other slurs like the title of this movie developed and became popular in culture and are still here today, even though that culture has gone away. There's still lasting effects and ramifications of things that happen then that are still in our lexicon of the world. So that's interesting to me.

Keith Casebonne (01:00:51):

No, for sure. The historical content of all of this stuff should definitely be kept in mind and noted while watching it and what is true about today's world and for the improvement, but also unfortunately what's still there that's bad.

Jodi Beckstine (01:01:07):

Yeah, absolutely. So the One of Us scene is probably one of the most famous moments of the film. The performers are trying to welcome Cleopatra and she responds to them and they're welcome with disgust. What does that scene say to you about belonging to a community that maybe you weren't born into or have been a part of?

Keith Casebonne (01:01:30):

Yeah, and that's one of the main scenes I was just alluding to that where there's this very strong sense of community among the members of the sideshow group. The scene is so important because they're not rejecting her. In this case, Cleopatra's the one who's "different". And they're inviting her in because there's a relationship of sorts between Cleopatra and Hans and they are welcoming her into their world because the two of them are together.

(01:02:06):

And so it's meant to be this welcoming, nice, sweet thing. But Cleopatra just shows immense disgust and is so angry. She clearly sees them all as very much beneath her, even though there they are trying to accept her and bring her into their world, which again, that community is important to them. And it turns the audience's attention back toward the idea of prejudice, who is treated as acceptable, who is not... It's a pivotal scene. It's a very pivotal scene for a number of reasons in the movie.

Jodi Beckstine (01:02:52):

Yeah. She can work alongside them and earn money alongside them, but she definitely doesn't want to be associated with them in a personal context, God forbid. But yeah, that scene is pretty powerful and pivotal in the movie because that's when things start to take a turn.

Keith Casebonne (01:03:14):

Absolutely. Well, so another thing that makes *Freaks* so complicated is that it featured real performers with disabilities and body differences, which is very rare in Hollywood, especially at the time. So did that make the film feel more human, feel more exploitative, or maybe again, a little bit of both?

Jodi Beckstine (01:03:35):

Yeah, again, it's the dual language. It's both at the same time. Which makes this movie so complicated to talk about. There's something very powerful in the fact that these are real performers that we're viewing. They're not actors pretending to have these disabilities, which is something we talk about on the show quite a bit. It's something that we want to see happening more often and be the standard. So you feel like the characters have their own presence, their own personalities, that the way they move through the world is real. And that matters, especially in 1932, because people a lot of times were out of public view unless they were in this type of situation. But the film is smart. The director is smart knowing that the audiences are looking at these performers as something unusual. They

market the movie that way. Yeah. You're going to be astonished and horrified and all these things.

Keith Casebonne (01:04:42):

It's named the Freaks. I mean, come on. Yeah, that was their intent.

Jodi Beckstine (01:04:47):

Absolutely. So when it gives the performers this humanity, like many films of that time didn't have, it's a double-edged sword. So again, just because they're there doesn't make the film respectful. A lot of people say, "Oh, well, they used real performers." Yeah, that's great. They used real performers with disabilities. That doesn't make it automatically okay in a pro disability film.

Keith Casebonne (01:05:18):

No, not at all.

Jodi Beckstine (01:05:19):

And I think that's what makes it worth discussing and viewing from 1932 in a 2026 dual lens because it's so complex and so dual both sides. And I'm glad we picked it to talk about.

Keith Casebonne (01:05:42):

For sure. For sure. And unfortunately, that changes near the end. That both sides thing.

Jodi Beckstine (01:05:53):

Yeah. Yeah. The ending is where things become extremely uncomfortable. The performers protect Hans. He's one of them, they love him, but the revenge that they take on Cleopatra is filmed like a horror film. The lighting, the camera moves, everything changes and the audience goes, "Oh, this is what's happening." How do you feel about that ending?

Keith Casebonne (01:06:25):

Boy, it was... Sorry, this was just very hard to even put into words in a way. So okay, emotionally, the story is framing the performers as protecting Hans after Cleopatra totally humiliates him and tries to really physically harm him. The problem is it becomes very uncomfortable the way the ending scenes are filmed. What was bright and open during the majority of the film suddenly becomes dark and foreboding and now these individuals with disabilities who show this group support and camaraderie and even trying to invite

someone outside of their group in, now they are, and I'm using words to frame it the way the movies, they're monsters.

(01:07:26):

They're meant to look different and scary and they're plotting and they're going to attack and who knows what harm they're going to do to her. I'm going back and forth throughout the whole movie and I'm really trying to understand it. And I'm like, "What is going on here? There's so much depth here. I feel like this could be looked at so many different ways." And then that all starts happening and I'm just watching it like, no, oh my, this is how it wraps up. And I was just so disgusted and uncomfortable with that at the end because yeah, they become monsters and it reinforces every prejudice that the film seems to sometimes challenge. There were some moments where I'm like, "Wow, for 1932, they're showing a different side than I was expecting." No, no, they totally ruin it. They totally ruin it at the end.

Jodi Beckstine (01:08:28):

It goes from happiness and look at how fulfilled and rich their lives could be to not only are they horrible to look at and see, but they're really horrible people inside and you should be very afraid and it just plants this, "You never know what's going to happen." Yeah. The ending.

Keith Casebonne (01:08:54):

Oh, yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (01:08:56):

It was like whiplash.

Keith Casebonne (01:08:58):

Yeah, it was. It was. And it's funny because then when I thought about it later, I was like, in the beginning of the movie, in the very beginning, they allude to that. I didn't really see it as being something that was going to be horrific or that they were going to be attacking or deadly or monstrous, but the language in the beginning is you realize what they're really saying is, "Don't mess with them because you will pay." Again, they're not monsters. This is not a creature feature from the '70s or '80s where... I don't know. It was just-

Jodi Beckstine (01:09:39):

You see where they got their horror genre from? They went straight to it, straight to it.

Keith Casebonne (01:09:47):

They did. They did. So when we watch Freaks now, what do you think modern viewers should take away from it about disability representation and the way media can both challenge a prejudice and carry that same prejudice all at once?

Jodi Beckstine (01:10:03):

Okay. So for me, seeing Freaks for the first time, it's personal because I saw Freaks in a film class sitting in a room of people. I was the only person with a physical disability and to have dwarfism. We haven't mentioned, but the main character has dwarfism. So it changes the experience for me than it would for someone without that lived experience. So you're in film class and you're talking about framing and the history and what the director was trying to say in the cinematography and all that, but those conversations are great in that context. But for me, I'm in a room thinking about what are they laughing at? What are they uncomfortable with? Whether the people watching are understanding that this is not just an old movie wondering about the context that they're seeing about the people with disability. It was a very different framing for me.

(01:11:11):

So watching it now, again, years and years and years later, I still feel the film is historically important as a film because of some of the things that it did, but I think people need to be aware of the context of it in modern 2026 that it could be important historically, but we still need to view it in the correct context. Gone With the Wind is another example of a movie that it has its place in film history, but it also has its place in how we view the world and how the world has changed and what's prejudice and wrong with how we see things then and still now. So study the film, but really talk to disabled people on the representation and talk to people who can relate to what the film is about.

Keith Casebonne (01:12:26):

Yeah. And it's a reminder that representation has always been very complicated, but progress means asking better questions about power and dignity and who gets to control the story because clearly they were not in control of the story at all.

Jodi Beckstine (01:12:42):

Absolutely. Well, Freaks is not an easy film to talk about and maybe that's why it still matters. It shows us a moment in film history when people with disabilities and body differences were visible on screen, but it also shows how that visibility was shaped by fear, staring, and exploitation.

Keith Casebonne (01:13:01):

Watching it in 2026 means we can recognize its place in history while still being honest about the harm and its language framing and horror imagery.

Jodi Beckstine (01:13:10):

That's why it belongs in our Deep Cut conversation. It gives us a chance to ask how representation has changed and what has stayed with us and why being seen is only the beginning. The deeper question is whether people are being seen with dignity, agency, and full humanity.

Keith Casebonne (01:13:28):

Thanks for joining us for this episode of Disability Deep Dive. We want to thank Mark for helping us break down digital accessibility in a way that feels practical and connected to real world examples.

Jodi Beckstine (01:13:38):

You can find more episodes and additional resources at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.

Keith Casebonne (01:13:45):

And if this discussion resonated with you, please share it with your community.

Jodi Beckstine (01:13:48):

Disability Deep Dive is a podcast that is brought to you by Disability Rights Florida, where real conversations about life, culture, and ideas meet the lived disability experience. Follow us on YouTube, Spotify, and wherever you get your podcasts. You can also find us at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.