

You First Podcast - Accessibility Outside the Box Episode 3: Fashion

Keith Casebonne: You're listening to "You First," the Disability Rights Florida podcast. On our third episode of our series, Accessibility Outside The Box, let's learn about accessibility in fashion.

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Keith: Hi there, I'm Keith, co-host of the You First podcast. We are excited to be back with the third episode of our series, Accessibility Outside the Box, all about fashion. Our listeners have loved the series so far, and we think you'll love this episode, too.

Maddie Crowley: Definitely. Hello to new listeners, and welcome back to returning listeners. I'm Maddie, the other co-host of the podcast. We've covered some great topics so far, but I think we will all be able to connect with this episode.

We've all struggled to find clothes that fit well, feel good in, or are right for the occasion we are going to. However, as our guest will talk about, these everyday struggles for people are heightened when you have a disability.

Keith: Very true. On our podcast today, we've got Kathy D. Woods. She is the first African American little person to create a clothing line designed by and for little people. She's leading the way in accessible fashion and pushing the fashion industry to be more inclusive.

Maddie: We're thrilled to have her on. I even got a little star-struck. We hope you enjoy the episode as she shares some insight into her career and shares her personal life lessons and values.

Hello, Kathy. Thank you so much for being on the You First podcast today. We're thrilled to have you on the podcast. Tell us a little about you and how you got started in accessible fashion.

Kathy D. Woods: First of all, thank you for having me. My name is Kathy D. Woods, and I am the first African American little person to ever create a fashion line for little people. The reason why I decided to start a fashion line, because of the necessity. There was a lack of clothing that was accessible for little people.

It started with my own struggles, not being able to find the proper clothes that fit. As a little girl, I watched my mother alter all my clothes on her hand. I got tired of paying for costly alterations. Buying a garment off the rack and getting it altered, it's like paying double for the garment.

I had been thinking about it for years. One day, after my son was born, I told my husband, I said, "We got to do something for our community to change things in the fashion industry."

What I basically did, I formed a team of well-versed people that were well-versed in the fashion industry, a team of professional people who knew the ins and outs of the fashion industry.

I joined this incubator called Fashion Business created by Frances Potter. I learned the ins and outs of fashion. I didn't know a thing about how to get started or anything. I got up under her and my team. I didn't do a whole lot of talking. I just listened.

Once I felt like it was time for me to create the line, that's when I started talking. That's when I started going to fabric companies, and talking to manufacturers. To find out they weren't willing to do business with me, because, one, little people, we're not of the mass market.

Because we're not of the mass market, they didn't want to do business with me because we don't bring in the numbers. Lo and behold, my team stuck behind me and I kept pressing and pressing. No matter the barriers I faced, I overcame them. Finally, I convinced someone to do business with me and KDW was born.

Maddie: Wow. Thank you so much for recounting the history of your brand with us. It's a shame that this is something that a whole community of folks need, but a lot of people didn't necessarily believe in your mission and believe in what a lot of folks needed in this accessible fashion. Fashion for little people is incredibly important.

What is the process that you take or had taken as you created your brand to make sure that your fashion line was suitable for a lot of little people? I'm sure a lot of little people are all different shapes and sizes. What was that process like to create the line to ensure that it was going to be accessible for all little people?

Kathy: To start, first of all, for those that's not involved is that it's over 250 different types dwarfism. Dwarfism is the medical term. The best advice that I got and how I started the process, I started with the most common, which is achondroplasia, which is my type.

With achons, it's still different body types with achons. I got fit models. Basically, I started from small all the way up to extra large. I got all their measurements and we did a test run. That took, I'll say, about five or six fit parties.

We invited little people to a fit party, where they got to try on different garments in the sizes. Once we perfected the sizes, and we basically produced the sizes to fit those five or six different models. It fell into place. After that, we had more fit parties, and then we had hundreds of fit parties.

That's when we knew we got the right sizes. Most of my clothes, in fact, all of them, they fit all the achons to a tee, little to no alterations. It also depends on the height of a achon, if you have little to no alterations. With me, I have a little more alterations than a achon that will be 4'9, or 4'8, in between four feet under.

As far as achon, we started with the highest height, and then we went from there. It's like average-sized people. Most of the time, manufacturers start with an average-sized person as far as the length, the height, and then they work their way down, if that makes sense to you.

Maddie: That makes so much sense. What a joyous and exciting process that must have been to be able to continue to work hard on the line, but also see in your own eyes how something that

you had to experience growing up of having to constantly alter your clothing and adjust things that you had bought at the store.

To be able to share accessible clothing with other folks, knowing that they're not going to have to go through all of those alterations constantly, what did that feel like? How did you feel starting this line and providing little people with the clothing that they've so long needed?

Kathy: It's a dream become true. Here's the thing, my parents has always told me, whatever you do in life, do you best. I'm this type of person, and I teach my son this, hard work pays off. You're not going to get everything right.

The thing is, as far as the clothing line, because it was a struggle on mine and other little people, instead of complaining, I wanted to do something to change. I wanted to make a change, and I wanted to be that change. I hate complainers.

Maddie: [laughs]

Kathy: When there's a problem, I always say, "What can we do to fix it? What can we do to make things change?" That's what I did as far as the fashion line. What I did was I turned my struggles into a testimony. I made a change.

Maddie: Your hard work has certainly paid off for just not you, but the broader community and accessibility in fashion as a whole. I'm sure folks have seen your work, even if it's not related to fitting for little people.

Maybe folks in wheelchairs and things like that who have definitely been able to see your drive and your passion and grow from there and provide some inspiration, for lack of a better word, to continue to push for these things in their own communities.

Could you talk a little bit maybe about what the highlights of your career have been so far, and what exciting thing do you see on the horizon?

Kathy: Oh my goodness. One of the highlights of my career is being invited to the White House by the Obama Administration twice in recognition of my work. I was there the first time during the anniversary of ADA, and then the second time, I was invited and I was on a panel. I was on a fashion panel with the Tommy Hilfiger CEO and Nike CEO.

What that did for me was show me my hard work paid off to be invited with such an elite panel, a panel with these people who was making a difference in other people lives. I got to see not just a broader community, a broader community of the disability world. It was just not little people.

It was all kind of people in the disability community. That's when I look and when I felt like finally, our voices are heard. Are they heard enough? No. Absolutely not. However, we've made some progress, and that's all that matters. We still have work to do. That is one of the highlights of my career.

Maddie: That is incredible.

Kathy: Meeting Barack Obama. I wanted to meet with Michelle Obama, but I think that day, she wasn't there, but I would have loved to meet her. That's one of my dreams is to meet her and to meet one of my favorite designers is Diane von Furstenberg, and because she's the inspiration why I created the wrap dress, even though she's the original creator.

With little people body, with our figures, a wrap dress complements our figure. Everybody needs a wrap dress in their closet.

Maddie: [laughs]

Kathy: I'm serious. Every woman needs a wrap dress in their closet. That's the best thing Diana von Furstenberg could have ever created for women. I would love to meet her. I would love to meet Michelle Obama.

Another person I would love to meet is Shaquille O'Neal. I want to have a conversation with him. Let me tell you why. One, he would get with all the things that I'm doing in my community. Because he's not of the average size or the normal size, he has to get things specially made for himself, whether that's clothes, whether that's a home.

He understands our pain. I would love to meet with him and have a conversation with him and how he could use his voice to help change some of the things in our community. That's a little off subject.

Maddie: It's not necessarily off subject. What's so powerful about your mission and your reach as far as being able to attend multiple things at the White House and meet these folks is that you are expanding your influence.

I don't think that these dreams and folks that you want to meet and connect with is far from your fingertips. What's important, hopefully, Michelle, hopefully your fashion icon, and Shaquille, they're all listening to this podcast and they will reach out to you. [laughs]

Kathy: Let me tell you something. If they reach out to me, I would be no good. I'd be very grateful and thankful. I don't have to do nothing else in life.

[laughter]

Kathy: The reason being, let me say this, too. I'm the type of person, again, I like change. I like to make change. Instead of complaining, I like to make things happen. Those three people who I named has made things happen.

They have made something in their life inspire them to make a change in the world. Their struggles have inspired them to make a change in the world and to pay it forward. That's what my family is about. See this shirt?

Maddie: "Life in the woods. We want to help you understand." I love that shirt.

Kathy: Thank you. That's our brand. That's what we do. We do things to help people, we pay it forward, and we make changes. One of the things that we have, we have a nonprofit. My son, we try to change things for him. He has Asperger's, so he's in the disability community.

We try to make things change for him. Whatever we do, what we want to do, we want to show people and we want people to see the God we talk about. That's it.

Maddie: Your advocacy for your family, for your community, for your son, will have a lasting impact to come. For folks that are listening, how can listeners advocate for accessible fashion and encourage and push forward this whole realm and opportunity and growth in the fashion industry?

Kathy: For one thing, reach out to a fashion company and express the need, and have a plan to meet the need. I've talked to quite a few people in the fashion industry, met a lot of people in the fashion industry. One of the things that I ran up against is that they couldn't see past the numbers.

The reason why, most business people, they don't care about nothing else. All they care about is numbers, most people in the fashion industry. Numbers is going to make them money. They fall short of meeting the need.

Get enough people to complain and to make people understand, just like my shirt says, "I want to help you understand." Then, if you can convince them and try to help them understand, then they will be open to change and they would try to make a change.

A lot of times, too, when you're in your comfort zone, and this is what I mean by people in the fashion industry, if you're in your comfort zone, and then when you're introduced the something new, and listening to other fashion designers, they don't want to fall short.

If it's something they don't have to address, they won't address it, because they don't want to look bad. Do you understand what I'm saying? That's what's part of the problem. They don't want to address the need. They don't want to go outside their comfort zone, which it's not that hard. It's not that hard. I guarantee you this.

Let me tell you what I think is going to take to change. If a fashion designer had a child with dwarfism, that would change a lot. The reason why I'm saying that, what is her name? Mindy, I can't think of her last name. She is runway of fashion. Has she changed things in the fashion industry?

Her son was born with cerebral palsy. I think cerebral palsy. She had a hard time finding clothes for him, so she partnered with Tommy Hilfiger and she changed everything for the fashion industry. Now, she has all different types of disability on her runway.

I say all of that to say when you don't experience certain things, you don't know our walk. Average-sized people don't know our walk. People without a disability, they don't know our walk, so they can care less. If people complain and knock on the doors of the fashion designers, they will make the change.

I think they will be willing to change. They're starting to change, but we need more change. We need more change. We do.

Maddie: You touch on such a powerful topic of empathy, and community, and how having folks doing this advocacy, getting their foot in the door, their wheel in the door, what have you, to be able to connect with these folks.

It's not just the disability community that needs to do this advocacy, it's the fashion industry needs to put in the work as well to be able to connect with the communities, all communities that need their fashion in a way that's accessible for them, approachable for them.

People need that personal experience to get to it, to feel the empathy, to feel that need and that purpose to create whatever it is, whether it's fashion, whether it's any other realm of our society, to feel what the community needs and to provide that need.

That's a perfect message to inspire folks listening to take their next step, their next move to continue to advocate for not just fashion, but anything across the board, to be the change that they want to see.

Kathy: Exactly. One of the things that I teach myself is that because you're different, everybody is different. Nobody is the same. Some people have different hair color. Some people have long hair, short hair. Some people have different skin color.

We're all different. Here's the thing, just because we're different, we are to treat people the way we want to be treated. That is with anything. I don't care if you're Black, White, gay, I don't care. You treat people the way you want to be treated.

Whether you believe in what they're doing, it doesn't matter. You treat people the way you want to be treated. You treat people with compassion and kindness. That's why I say when you treat people the way you want to be treated, that goes a long way.

Then, you can see beyond the person's need, then you can have some compassion. This little person needs, this person in the wheelchair needs this or that. If you can see past that, then you would know what people need. That's it.

Maddie: Definitely. Kathy, it's been absolutely wonderful to have you on the podcast and hear about your experiences...

Kathy: My pleasure.

Maddie: ...all of your trials, tribulations, and aspirations for the future. We are looking forward to following you and keeping up with all of your hard work and beautiful fashion, by the way.

Kathy: Thank you.

Maddie: We'll be sure to promote your stuff when we share the podcast.

Kathy: Thank you so much, and thank you for having me. It was my pleasure.

Maddie: Thank you, Kathy, for being our guest on our third episode of Accessibility Outside the Box. We hope you enjoyed the episode. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast. We're on all podcast platforms, Apple Podcast, Spotify, Google, Amazon, YouTube, and more. You can also find us on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.

Keith: We will be back next Thursday for our new episode. Thank you for listening to the You First podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback, questions, or ideas about the show to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org.

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