**The Art of Inclusion Episode 6 – Willing and Able**

**Speakers: Andrew Maxwell, Annabelle Williams,** **Gwynnyth Llewellyn**

**FULL TRANSCRIPT**

Andrew: Sharing memories from our childhood, we all do it but for Annabelle Williams things were a little different.

Annabelle: Apparently, one day we were probably in kindergarten, so five or something. Her mum said to her at the end of the day, “How does Annabelle go when she has to change from her school uniform to her sports uniform, with her shoe laces. Does someone help her do that”? And Claire said, “Why”? And her mum said, “Oh, you know cause Annabelle's only got one hand”. Claire said, “Oh, does she”?

Andrew: Acceptance and understanding of people living with a disability doesn't necessarily translate from kindergartens to workplaces. People living with a disability experience almost double the unemployment rate of fellow Australians. Stereotyped as either victims or as an inspiration. But, what if there was another way.

I'm Andrew Maxwell and I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects the traditional custodians of this land. To the elders past, present, and their descendants on whose country this recording's taking place. This is the Art of Inclusion, a podcast from Diversity Council Australia or DCA. In this six-part series we peer into the lives of fascinating people, who's stories shed light on the wider social issues facing Australia today. We flip the script on who we include, who we don't, and how we can all do better.

Today we meet Annabelle Williams, she's the legal counsel of the Australian Olympic Committee, and former gold medal winning Paralympic swimmer. Oh, and there's something else she wants you to know.

Annabelle: Being born with a disability, I think you're almost born with a pretty high level of resilience. And so I don't know if there was a moment of realisation for me. I do remember teachers saying to me, you know if you ever need any help with shoelaces when you're going from your sports uniform to your school uniform, or vice versa, just let us know. I remember going home and saying to mum and dad, the teacher said that to me and they didn't say it to anyone else, so, I don't know why they didn't say it to anyone else. But, obviously I have to learn how to tie my shoelaces by next week’s sports class.

I spent the whole week, I wouldn't let anyone in my household leave for work, before I did their shoelaces. So, the next week we went to the sports lesson, and at the beginning of sport I said to my teacher, I'd like to tie everyone's shoelaces in the class. The poor teacher probably thought, oh this annoying kid! But, she probably felt she had to. I remember sitting there tying up everyone's shoelaces and it was before the other kids knew how to tie. I mean, we were so small. So, I think I've always been really determined as well.

Andrew: So, here's how disability plays out in Australia.

Gwynnyth: I'm Gwynnyth Llewellyn, and I'm the director of the Centre of Disability Research and Policy, at the University of Sydney. There's around 18 percent of people in Australia who have a disability. We know in relation to employment that Australia is a long way down the league tables of employing people with a disability. More difficult than that for me to live with, really, because my focus is on inequality for people with disabilities, is that the work that we do monitoring change over time, shows that the unemployment rate for people with disabilities has not changed between 2001 and 2015. Which, is the latest data we have in Australia. We've had a lot of approaches, policy, different initiatives, but we're not yet making the difference. This is really important because often we see big initiatives and think that will fix the problem.

Annabelle: I started swimming when I was very young. I was born with my disability and I grew up loving sport, all sports. It didn't matter if it was a sport that most people would think required two arms or two hands, I gave it a go.

Andrew: This focus helped Annabelle in her academic life as well. It allowed her to move beyond the inspirational athlete narrative that differently abled people are often framed by.

Annabelle: Probably the best bit of advice I got, which is the reason why I was able to balance my swimming career and my career outside the pool, was from mum and dad who said to me; this is the start of an amazing journey for you. Who knows where this could go for you. You could become a Paralympian, you could compete at the Paralympic games. Which is extraordinary, but, remember that will end at some point and it's probably going to end before you're 30, so, this year is year 12 and it's really important. I'd always been very academic, I'd always been very interested in studying and working hard. So, it was apparent to me probably because my parents helped me realise it, that it was really important that I balance swimming with school work. So, that I could then go on after my swimming career and have a strong career in law.

Gwynnyth: There is so much diversity within disability. There's diversity in the community both urban and in regional areas. We need to have more than one approach. We need to actually approach that diversity in all its diversity and start to think about how do we make the difference for young people living in rural country towns. How do we make the difference for a middle-aged person with a disability who happens to come from a culturally and linguistically diverse background? How do we get employers to feel confident and supportive of a young woman, who I know for example, in Melbourne who is a very proud advocate in the Gay and Lesbian Community and is in a wheelchair?

I think the first myth is that disability, or a person with disability is somehow not me, and if it's not me then how do I know about it? Lots of people have never met or even seen a person with disability. What that leads to is being totally unaware of how a person with a disability might be in their everyday life, how they might be at work. How they face the world, what their perspective on the world is.

The other myth that goes with that is that often people think a person with a disability, this is the most common myth. The most common thing people say to us is, is a person in a wheelchair very obvious, or a person who's visually impaired with their assistance dog. We know that, because we're seeing people in wheelchairs with their assistance dog. We're seeing them out in public transport. We've got specially allocated areas of trains and buses and so on and so forth. If that's what your experience of disability is, then you are missing the majority of people with disability.

Annabelle: I've been a lawyer for about seven years now. I've never come across another person with a disability in my line of work. I thought that's pretty unbelievable, when you think that a quarter of the population, one in four people have a disability. I know not all those disabilities are evident when you look at a person. But, it's pretty incredible that I have not seen another person with a physical disability when I deal regularly with clients and people, a range of different clients. Certainly, in law for example, people with disabilities are regularly represented. I'm sure a lot clients, you know, if they have a disability they would feel very comfortable if they knew that some of their lawyers working for them understood the position they were in. It's a hugely missed opportunity for employers. Companies don't make themselves attractive to people with a disability. They don't make it clear that they want people from the LGBTI community, the disabled community, these minority groups, Aboriginal community. They don't go out and say we are an employer that encourages these people to apply for roles and it's not going to be an issue. So I think that has to happen first.

Andrew: As it turns out, there are other reasons Annabelle doesn't see her experience reflected in the wider workforce. Disability exists on a spectrum and is not always visible.

Gwynnyth: It's really rather the hidden disabilities. That's a word we use, non-visible. It's not that there's types, it's simply that you don't recognise that that person may be disabled. A person with say, Type 1 Diabetes had it since they're quite young, at working age now say in their 30s or 40s, could well be having other types of difficulties. Health difficulties which go with the Type 1 Diabetes. Perfectly capable of working, but, they have a disability. But, you and I wouldn't know. We wouldn't see it. There's also a very large group of people who now refer to themselves often as Neuro Diverse and you will have heard that term.

Andrew: Could you explain that?

Gwynnyth: Yes. Neuro Diverse is a very sort of broad term really, it’s a broad-church and people with autism are now often referring to themselves as Neuro Diverse. But, so are people with significant mental health difficulties. For example, serious generalised anxiety disorder, they would talk about themselves as being Neuro Diverse too.

Andrew: For Annabelle this limited understanding is problematic.

Annabelle: My sense is that the disability community is still one, where their voice is not heard loudly. I'm not sure why that is. I think partly, well, people talk a lot about presence and people who are leaders they stand out. They often take up more space. That's often harder for people with a disability. If you're someone who's in a wheelchair or if you're someone who has whatever it is. Often your physicality is not, you can't match the people who are around you. So, maybe it's that, that then means they don't have a very strong voice. I'm not sure. Or if people just aren't really speaking, or people with a disability don't feel confident enough to speak up about it. There are certainly people who are doing incredible work in this area. People with a disability who are making change, but, I think the people who I've experienced who are trying to make change for people with a disability are often people who have quite a high profile themselves. Whether or not that's through sport or some other means. But, in corporate Australia it doesn't seem that there's a big community of people with a disability who are trying to effect change. I'm not sure why that is.

Andrew: For Gwynnyth the reasons are less mysterious.

Gwynnyth: One of the big misconceptions for employers in Australia is that employing a person with a disability will cost you more money. People automatically think we will have to do things differently, and that costs money. Or, the person will be performing at a lower level than a similarly qualified non-disabled person, and that too will cost the organisation. So, won't go there, too difficult, lovely young person, like to help, but I have to put the company or the corporate or the organisation, including public sector organisations, I need to put their needs first.

Of course, there’s the infrastructure of accommodations as well. Does the person need a special desk and so on and so forth. In our experience managers usually think about that and many corporates understand that there's assistance, financial assistance, for that in Australia, to help organisations employ people with disabilities. That busts the myth. One of the ways of busting the myth about it costs to employ people with disabilities, because there is financial assistance available.

Andrew: With the costs considered what else should employers know?

Gwynnyth: Setting employees up for success is actually I think about setting up the workplace for success. So, it's not just the employee for success, you want success for their work mates and for the whole organisation. Because it's not just to work for the person with a disability and their success, everybody has to have success. Often people say what about on day one. Actually, it's day minus one because what you need to do is be thinking ahead.

These are the tips: you need to think about first, have you talked to that person about how they would like to present themselves in the workplace. Do they want to disclose about their disability, they don't have to. How would they like any particular accommodations they need discussed before they start in the workplace. This is really critical. A person who the manager feels yes, I've talked to them, I understand they need rest breaks for fatigue, we're very happy to accommodate that. The manager's thought about it and said, yes I know they can have a rest break in that spare office, for example. If that's not explained to the work mates then you're setting up the person for failure. Because, that person goes off and has their rest in the office and the workmates say where've they gone, what are they doing, they're slacking off on the job, they're not performing like we are.

I think one of the challenges with disability action plans is that people come up with a range of strategies and a particular part of their organisation is given the responsibility to make sure they occur. Often what we see with disability action plans is a document on a shelf. The responsibility of a relatively junior person. What a recipe for failure. The major challenge is to bring it right through the organisation. How do you do that? Clearly, the CEO has to be involved and leading by example.

The Australian Disability Network runs a program called: Stepping Into. It's an internship program for higher education students, both in TAFE and in Universities to have a paid internship in an organisation. That is supported by the Australian Disability Network and supported by the organisation. That is a very practical example how a CEO can say our organisation will be part of that internship program, we will have interns around our organisation. People get then to meet people with disabilities become part of that process of inclusion and participation. Those are just one program, there's many of these. If it comes from the CEO the corporate changes or the public sector organisation changes.

Andrew: For Annabelle everything starts much earlier.

Annabelle: I hope there are kids out there with a disability who look up to athletes with a disability and think, those people have shown me that I can do anything, I can become an athlete, I can become a physicist, I can be a teacher. It doesn't matter what my situation is, what disability I have anything is possible. There's no limitations. I'm pregnant at the moment and we're looking for prams currently and we've gone to all these shops. People often say this pram is hard to collapse because you need two hands to be able to lift the bassinet off. It's made me realise that you don't actually need two hands for anything. You just figure out a different way of doing it. I think that's what people who have been successful athletes or in their various fields with a disability, hopefully they show people who are less confident or people who are younger that you can do anything you want. You won't do it in the same way that able bodied people do, but, you'll figure out another way of doing it, which will be absolutely fine.

Andrew: I'm your host Andrew Maxwell and this has been a podcast from DCA. Produced by Andrea Maltman, executive produced by Lisa Annese. And, with contributions from Catherine Petterson, DCA's communications director, and Tracy Hocking.

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Thanks for listening and we'll catch you in the next season!

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