

Episode 55: Disability Employment Awareness
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[00:00:00.52] TORAL PATEL: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees. Welcome to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. For the next few months I'll be joined by guest co-hosts. And for today's episode, our guest co-host will be Bert Odom-Reed, who many of you know and recognize as our sound engineer.

[00:00:23.50] BERT ODOM-REED: Thank you, Toral. Today we'll be interviewing Erin Sember-Chase and Andrea Haenlin-Mott to discuss Disability Employment Awareness Month and how disability impacts the Cornell community. My name is Bert Odom-Reed.

[00:00:37.81] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:39.31] BERT ODOM-REED: And you are listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:44.28] TORAL PATEL: Erin and Andrea, we're so excited to have you join us today. Thank you for coming. Before we get started, do you want to share your names, your pronouns, your roles, and how long you've been here at Cornell?

[00:00:55.68] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: I'll go first. Hi, everybody. I'm Erin Sember-Chase. She, her, her's. And I work at Student Disability Services. I've been in that role since 2015. But I've actually been at Cornell since 2002. So I guess next year will be 20 years that I've been here, in a couple of different roles. And outside of my job I also serve as one of the co-chairs of the Disability Colleague Networking Group at Cornell.

[00:01:25.84] TORAL PATEL: Thank you, welcome.

[00:01:27.08] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: And I'm Andrea Haenlin-Mott. I am the ADA Coordinator for Facilities and Campus Services. I've been in that role since 2006. Prior to that, I came to the University in 1995 and worked in Industrial and Labor Relations for 11 years before I came. So yeah, this is my 26th year. And I am the disability representative of the Employee Assembly. And I am the executive vice chair of the EA this year. My pronouns are she, her, hers.

[00:02:05.31] TORAL PATEL: Welcome. Both of you wear multiple hats at Cornell. As both of you know, we normally start our podcast with a question of the day. And today I have the privilege of asking that question. And I'll tell you that this question was really inspired from a project and essay that my kids wrote at the beginning of this school year. And so they started in their English class and it was talking about heroes. And so they talked about-- a lot about their superheroes, you know, Superman and Spider-Man, those kinds of superheroes.

[00:02:34.71] And then kind of dwindled that conversation down to everyday superheroes. And then they ended up writing their essay on who they thought their everyday hero was. So I'm going to ask all of you the same question, is, who do you consider to be your everyday hero? And I can start. So that gives you just a few more minutes to actually think about your answer.

[00:02:55.90] And for me it definitely has to be my mom. I think a lot of our audience members-- and you all know that my mom has gone through a lot this past year. She was very, very sick, not from COVID but from something else, and was in the hospital intubated for about a month and a half. And didn't-- nobody thought she was going to survive or come out of that. And she or she is a year later. She's surviving. And I've been really thinking about her a lot lately, just-- she's coming to visit me next week, so I'm looking forward to that. And so it's who I refer to as my everyday hero, for sure.

[00:03:32.10] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: My superhero was my mom as well. She-- unfortunately it'll be in January where she has-- it has been 10 years since she had died. But she was just fierce and absolute, 5 feet 3 inch force to be reckoned with. When I acquired my disability, and I'll certainly talk about that, she just was like, OK, Andrea here we go. You're 18 years old. This is not going to define you. This is going to be something that we will work through. Our family will be with you every step of the way. And she just was the definition of fierce.

[00:04:17.44] She had stopped smoking for 30 years and then got lung cancer. So they didn't detect it right away just because of that. But she fought the good fight and was optimistic, and to her very last breath. And I just will tell you one story about my mother. She was vacationing with my dad in Washington, DC. And someone stole her purse. And she chased them down. And it was in Union Station, and it was this big, burly football player guy, and chased him down the street until he dropped her purse, just to get this woman away from him. To be able to do that tells you how fierce she is.

[00:05:09.36] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, definitely.

[00:05:10.14] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: So I don't know if I could top that story, but-- but I will keep with the inspirational trend of saying my mother, as well. Who is-- I'm very happy that she is still well, and frankly in better health than I am. She takes much better care of herself than I do. I always say that parents have their own disability experience, parents who don't have disabilities but have children with disabilities. And I was born with my disabilities. I always say that parents have their own unique disability experience, that is no less of one than what the individual's is. But it's different. It's very specific to them. And so, you know, anything I'm able to do now-- whether it be to advocate, whether it be to speak up, speak out, stick up-- stick up for, not put up with-- anything, that all comes from her. From her doing it, for the first time in many years, and role modeling for me how to do it. So, yeah. That's what I would say.

[00:06:16.88] TORAL PATEL: Well, that's awesome. That's incredible.

[00:06:18.82] BERT ODOM-REED: It is a trend coming up here, isn't it? I think I will choose my mom also. My mother in South Louisiana was the first woman and the first woman of color to be elected on the school board.

[00:06:36.40] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Wow.

[00:06:37.03] BERT ODOM-REED: And during the election process we got death threats. We got all kinds of other ugly things. Because they'd never had anybody even on the school board in Greensburg, Louisiana. Hello, 70441. So that's my hero too.

[00:06:57.25] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Well, that's great.

[00:06:58.57] TORAL PATEL: Thank you all for sharing. I think it's really for me, it was just that question. It's been inspiring. I've been thinking about it, right? Since my kids wrote the essay. And my son, I'll tell you, wrote the essay about his fifth grade teacher. And he's now in seventh grade. And I emailed it to his fifth grade teacher just to say, hey, it's been two years, two tough years through the pandemic, and you had-- you still have made an impact. This is how large of an impact it was, right? That when he had to write about his everyday hero he chose you. So I had to share that with her. And so I've been thinking about it, and that's why I was like, well what a perfect question to ask all of you, just in the context of getting to know you a little bit better as well. So thank you for sharing.

[00:07:42.64] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: That's great. Perfect question.

[00:07:44.83] TORAL PATEL: Mhmm, definitely. Yes.

[00:07:46.69] BERT ODOM-REED: In the context of your experience, can you share a time or an experience here at Cornell where you felt you were included or supported? How has the campus climate been for you?

[00:07:57.93] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: I think for me it's changed a bit over the last 26 years that I've been here, I have experienced just some absolute heart warming examples of inclusion. I remember working late one night and coming out to my car. And I use a wheelchair. And we had gotten, of course, right after all of the custodians and most people go-- and it was late. It was like-- I had to work till 7:00 one night. And we'd gotten maybe like 6 to 8 inches of snow between-- well, as it can happen. And I remember a second shift custodian just happened to be there and he looked at me, he's like, did you know that it was snowing a lot? And I'm like, no I wasn't-- I was focused, I was working on a project I had to finish. And he's like, we got a lot of snow.

[00:09:00.64] And at the time I was parking in a different place because of construction was happened. He shoveled and helped push me through all of the snow to get to my car. And it was just sort of like, it wasn't his job, you know? It was not anything he had to do. But he was just sort of like, he went above and beyond just to be able to address a situation. But as soon as he saw that I was still here, he saw the situation, and just

really made me feel taken care of. And it was great. It was fabulous. I don't know what I would have done without him. And every time I see him I remind him, you saved me.

[00:09:41.11] TORAL PATEL: And I bet-- what a great feeling for him, right? That you still remember even after however many years that he did that. And for him it probably was just like, hey I was just helping a colleague--

[00:09:50.23] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Right.

[00:09:51.01] TORAL PATEL: --at the time. And what I love about your story, Andrea, is the fact that it was this intuition. And it was just this individual just taking it upon himself to help you. You didn't have to ask.

[00:10:01.00] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Right.

[00:10:01.87] TORAL PATEL: That's what I absolutely love, that he just-- he saw that this was needed, and he said I'm doing it.

[00:10:06.82] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Yeah.

[00:10:07.42] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: I mean, I feel like that epitomized when I think of what inclusion is supposed to be. What I'm hearing is that he didn't necessarily just see it as Andrea's problem. He saw it as, this is a problem.

[00:10:19.65] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:10:20.90] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: This is a problem. This isn't good. And so what is my role in making this problem better, and making this problem go away. Which I think is really what we want for inclusion, as would other people.

[00:10:34.46] And I guess it hard for me, honestly, it's hard for me to think of a single example. But I think that the times that I have felt the most included happen when people have done just that. When people have sort of sat-- been the ones to say first, before me, hey, that's not OK. And that's not good. We need to be better. We're taking it upon ourselves. So for me, I have a hearing disability. And for many years at meetings it was like, I was like a broken record at every meeting. We need a microphone. We need a microphone. When I-- particularly when I worked in a very large department, so our staff meetings were like, 30 some people. And those echoey conference rooms on campus, I mean, that's just-- it's a nightmare. And so it just felt like, you know, always the same thing. A microphone, what a big deal.

[00:11:27.71] But then finally, you know, I don't know-- the skies opened. The world imploded. And finally it was just natural. And now when I-- now when I'm a guest at those meetings, I no longer work in that department, but whenever I go there, it's like-- it's just commonplace that there's a microphone. Nobody bats an eye. So that-- that's inclusion for me.

[00:11:49.62] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah, you know, Erin, what you and Andrea talk about-- as years and years of being an audio engineer, I can't tell you how many times I went to a room and it's, 30, 40, 50, 90 people. And they don't have a microphone. I'm like, hey, come on. This is an easy thing to do. We know how to do it.

[00:12:08.51] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Right. I'm so happy to hear you say that, Erin. That it is definitely getting better. Because it's one of those things that we've had people over the years just say, well I'm loud, you can hear me, everybody can hear me. And it's like-- no, use the mic. You have to use the mic.

[00:12:24.37] TORAL PATEL: That's it.

[00:12:25.16] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: And using that-- not necessarily calling people out because they don't understand that people might be using the assisted listening system. There may be other elements of it and a teachable moment that we have with that. So I'm glad to hear that it's been better. Because I've definitely have been, use the mic. And I think the word is getting out. Use the mic, they're there for a reason.

[00:12:51.38] TORAL PATEL: And to Bert's point, it's something simple that can be done, right? I think what resonates with me from what both of you said is this concept of when you felt the most included was when you didn't have to ask, right? That's something that's really like standing out to me. It was something-- like Erin said, like-- you know, you said you were just saying it over and over and over. And then all of a sudden, like you said, the water parted, right? Or something-- and then-- and then it was now a constant thing. And that's the moment when you felt included, when it became a constant and you didn't have to ask anymore.

[00:13:23.70] So I'm just going to ask you kind of the opposite of that question, right? And so when have you felt not included, or excluded, in a work setting? Have there been times?

[00:13:32.61] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Yeah. I think there were occasions that we would have a meeting in a room where it wasn't accessible. And there was this one time that the front of the room was accessible and I could get to and it was not a problem. But they put all of the food at the back of the room, that was up five steps. And it was sort of like, hey, wait a minute. You know? And everybody was lovely. And they're like, oh my gosh, what an oversight, we didn't even think about it. Can I get you anything? And so that was good. But the next time that we were in that room they made sure that the food was placed where everybody could get to it. And again, it wasn't just me that needed the accessibility.

[00:14:18.24] But I think it's just-- there's been times, like, that we're sort of an oversight. The thoughts about accessibility are not at the forefront of program services, activities, those types of things.

[00:14:32.10] TORAL PATEL: Go ahead, Erin. Did you have a time you want to share when you felt excluded or, like, lack of sense of belonging? Yeah.

[00:14:39.20] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: As good as it can feel to realize, OK, when I arrived to a meeting or an event, or something like that, like Bert said, as good as it can feel to be like, OK, good, I'm going to be able to easily sit somewhere. And I'm going to be able to hear and they have a microphone. Well unfortunately, for every one of those situations, you know, there's going to be another two or three where it's the opposite, right? And I remember once where-- Andrea reminded me when she said about-- and it is. The most common phrase is, I don't need a mic. Which just burns me up, because it's not about what you need to speak. It's about what other people need to hear.

[00:15:15.96] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Right.

[00:15:16.53] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: At the crux of it, it's the problem now, with that mindset. That privileged mindset is mainly focused on, well, I don't need it. So what's the problem? And not able to recognize, it's not about you, it's about other people. But I do remember one time in particular where the presenter, you know, said no, I don't need a microphone. And, you know, people did try to say, no you. You do need to use one. But they were so insistent. They refused, just flat-out refused. They said no, that's silly. And [INAUDIBLE]. And everybody backed down. Nobody pushed it. The presentation continued.

[00:15:52.53] And I was a good little employee who, you know, didn't have a backbone, didn't necessarily feel like I could say anything. But unfortunately the result was, I don't remember thing that presenter said. And it wasn't necessarily because I couldn't hear them. They were in fact very loud, obnoxiously. It wasn't even that. It was more that I was so distracted in my mind by the fact that they just were so obstinate about doing what was asked of them. I was mad at my colleagues that they didn't push it hard enough. I was mad at me that I didn't speak up. But I already felt embarrassed, because I knew everybody was asking for me. You know, I just could feel myself shrinking in the seat. And like I said, I don't-- it was a professional development opportunity that I missed out on because I just wasn't able to really listen and hear-- concentrate on what they were saying. Just because I was so overwhelmed by just how crappy that whole experience felt.

[00:16:53.79] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: I think that shows something. That when it comes to self-advocacy, it's really exhausting--

[00:17:03.99] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes.

[00:17:04.26] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: --to be able to do that. To always be the one. And so it's helpful when you have colleagues and friends that speak up for you. So, you know, again, that help, that we're not necessarily alone. Because again, it's not just you, Erin. You know? What about other people? But I can just say especially over the years, sometimes it's just exhausting to continue to do self-advocacy. It's exhausting to

advocate in general, especially when, for me within my role, I'm always advocating for universal design. Universal design. Make it universally accessible. And then for some people, are like, wow is that going to cost more money? Or is that going to be more complicated?

[00:17:56.47] And again-- and I understand, the bottom line is the bottom line to be able to do that. But at the same time, the feeling that universally accessible means to our students, our staff, our faculty, our visitors to the University. A lot of times our built environment and the programs that we create, if they're done in a way that just has people feeling as if they're able to effectively participate without even a blink. That's what we want to be able to do. And understanding that self-efficacy is exhausting.

[00:18:37.43] BERT ODOM-REED: Are you seeing over time that the community is incrementally getting better? Or are there some exponential places where the light bulb goes off, think of, well, this should be universal. Or this should be universal there. We build new buildings, we create new paths and everything else. Sometimes I don't think they think of it in an inclusive way. Are you seeing the trend change a bit?

[00:19:04.44] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: I think the trend is changing for the built environment. I still see some resistance to understanding what that universal is, versus checking a box for compliance. Well, wait a minute, is it code compliant, or is it accessible? Sometimes they're not one in the same. But it's more of the universal. I've seen more of this sort of approach to understanding that we need to do. At the same time I don't know if we always do what we can to have people feel included.

[00:19:45.05] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yeah, I mean I think that, unfortunately, it's a large part of the problem. Which is to think about being disability-inclusive is not just about changing your thoughts, or your feelings, or your attitudes. It does sometimes come with actual money or action on the part of others, right? People actually have to do something different. Construct something differently. Retrofit something, whether it's a physical thing or whether it's a policy or practice or way that we conduct meetings, and this is the way we've always done it. Whatever it is, it does require having to turn it around a little and do it differently.

[00:20:21.15] And I think that's the part that keeps us stuck unfortunately. Because everybody may have really good intentions and very much want to do it, but that doesn't always translate to actual action. It may be very not intended that way, not from a place of ill intent. It just involves somebody being able to think outside of themselves, and think about the environment and what they're doing to construct it.

[00:20:47.40] I also think that because this campus is 150 plus years old, we hide behind that sometimes. We say, well, it's an old building. You know, what are you going to do, it's an old campus. Instead of thinking about, OK, what can we still do with what we got? Because we could be doing more to make the existing areas better. Being 150 years old, that's not the reason why the dumpster is blocking the accessible elevator, you know?

[00:21:13.16] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:21:14.30] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: That's not the reason why there's two trash cans up against the only accessible stall in the bathroom. That's got nothing to do with being 150 years old. Come on. We could be doing better at routinely assessing-- I don't want to say focus on the built environment, because again, it's also just about our practices. You know? Everyday actions, what we're doing, how we're conducting business, how we're serving people.

[00:21:38.64] And so when you asked that question, Bert, about whether it's gotten better, there were things that went better over the past year when a lot of business had to be done virtually. Obviously none of us wanted to be living during a pandemic, but the reality is there were things that were made more accessible. Being able to conduct business virtually, being able to do more things over Zoom, over the phone. It opened up a lot of doors in that way. And that wasn't a bad thing. And so it's interesting now to see how much people are retaining of that.

[00:22:11.03] Like, I know where I work we're still doing a lot of meetings over Zoom. Because frankly, the students prefer it. It's legitimately more accessible to them. Whether it's because they have a physical disability, or whether it's because they have a medical or mental health situation, there is draining on their energy. It's just easier for them to be able to engage and be focused, when we're not making them travel across campus in between everything else they have to do. Well, you can say the same about staff and faculty, too. We feel the same way, you know? We're trying to conserve energy wherever we can. And so those kinds of things, again, that's adopting different practices and different ways of working, that are in fact, more accessible.

[00:22:51.90] BERT ODOM-REED: The things that changed and the pandemic, even the little button in Zoom that says, live transcript.

[00:22:59.03] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yeah.

[00:22:59.45] BERT ODOM-REED: The number of departments, including my own, University Relations, that has changed where some of the departments, they just work remote.

[00:23:07.83] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yeah.

[00:23:08.19] BERT ODOM-REED: And it's more efficient, and then, if you think even bigger than that, you're helping to save the planet. Because you don't need to drive here or there to do some of the things that you had to do and-- in concert before.

[00:23:22.08] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Yeah, and I think for some people with disabilities it's physically draining to do that. And I just know, like, when I'm working remotely I start work early. Super early. Earlier than I would if I was physically in the office. Just because I don't have a half hour, 45 minute commute to be able to do that.

We're able to work later. So that work-life balance was a little off at times during the pandemic.

[00:23:52.02] But I think it's one of those things that for people with disabilities, as well as medical conditions, not obvious disabilities, because again, that's the disability realm that I think we really want to highlight, is that a lot of times people can identify with disability. But they don't necessarily say, oh I'm a person with a disability. But the medical condition that they have, the obvious or not obvious thing that they live with on a daily basis, affects their ability to perform those essential functions. Living, breathing, working, caring for oneself, performing, walking, talking, those types of things that all affects us in different ways. Obvious or not.

[00:24:39.75] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, Andrea, I remember in a previous conversation that we've had, Erin as well. Both of you mentioned to me-- and this was something that, until you said it, I was like, oh I don't think I've ever looked at it that way, that disability is the largest diversity group that exists. And there's two things, right? The second one was that every single one of us will identify as being part of a disability group at some point in our life, right? And then the third thing was that this is the only diversity group that we get into after we're born, right? It's a different type of identity-based diversity group. In previous conversations we've had, it was something that I've never thought of in those contexts, right? And so I thought each one of those individual statements was just very profound, and just led to a lot deeper reflection on my part too.

[00:25:31.41] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Yeah. It's one of those things that we've all experienced it in some way. The flu makes you certainly feel as if you're dying, right? And as well as other types of things that we've-- and it ebbs and flows. But for some people with disabilities it can be lifelong. Or you're born with whatever condition is, as Erin has been so eloquently stating. To be able to understand what that means in the long run, obvious or not. People talk about hidden disabilities. And I always sort of cringe. Because it's not hidden--

[00:26:06.81] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: No.

[00:26:07.21] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: --it's just not obvious.

[00:26:08.64] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Exactly.

[00:26:09.54] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Because hidden makes it feels like you're hiding it from other people. And that-- I think that's the moniker we want to get away from.

[00:26:15.48] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: I agree completely.

[00:26:16.29] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: It's just not obvious--

[00:26:17.79] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes.

[00:26:18.12] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: It's one of those things that people aren't aware of. Because I know, like, when I pull up to an accessible parking spot, I'll have people look at me, like, well why are you parking there? And it's like, oh gosh, here we go. And so I pull out my wheelchair and my little piece of validity, and they're like, oh OK, you're OK. And I'm like, jeez, what if I had a medical condition that wasn't obvious? Are they going to say something to me? And unfortunately I know there are people who do-- who are like, those are not for you. And it's like, wow you just don't know what people are dealing with. And that person, for me, parking close is certainly helpful in the wintertime. As we've talked about, wintertime is not necessarily wheelchair-friendly. But for some people it's that distance is much more important to them.

[00:27:09.36] I had somebody say this. It's like, well wait a minute. At the mall you want to park closer. But then you're walking around the mall. So what difference does it make? And it's like, well, for a person who has difficulty walking for whatever medical condition that they've got, if they don't have to expend all of their energy out getting from their car into the building, that means they have more energy and stamina to be able to do what they need to do inside. And you just don't know.

[00:27:39.15] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Well-- and actually that's exactly what we've heard from colleagues in the community. Going back to the things that were actually better when people had to work remotely. It was just that-- that realization that they weren't spending half their energy just trying to work.

[00:27:56.22] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Right.

[00:27:56.52] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Well, they could actually just spend all their energy working and doing a job.

[00:28:00.76] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Right. What a concept!

[00:28:03.45] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Well, yeah, I mean-- and isn't that what we want? I mean--

[00:28:06.73] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Yeah, of course.

[00:28:07.78] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: That's completely what we want. And I think also about what we've heard from some of our colleagues. That's why some of the things that are challenging right now, with the transition back to working in person, or trying to figure out if you're going to work hybrid or completely in person. I think that that's been really hard because there have been people that have really had to fight to be able to show that I was a better employee this past year. Why can't you just let me keep going-- working the way I was, because I'm actually better. I'm a better, more effective employee.

[00:28:42.10] And yet they're being-- being told no. They're being told they have to go back to just the way it always was. And-- just, the shortsightedness concerns me. That

shortsightedness of our University as an employer, to not realize, they're trying to be their best self at work. And they're telling you what they need and they were able to do it effectively for years. So why wouldn't we want to continue? If we want them to be able to keep working for us.

[00:29:13.24] BERT ODOM-REED: Some of us learned from the last year and a half and some of us didn't. And I guess we have to open up our ideas on how to explain it. There is fatigue in trying to explain the same thing over and over. Being African-American, for instance, there are certain things that we've had to explain.

[00:29:32.94] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes.

[00:29:33.84] BERT ODOM-REED: How much of that responsibility is on the individual versus the rest of the group or society?

[00:29:43.11] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: That's so perfectly stated. It's one of those things that I think, it sort of lends into a lot of our discussions of working with colleagues who have experience in disability, or colleagues who don't have any experience. And talking about one of the times that stands out to me where I felt really included and valued was when the custodian was giving me a hand during snow. Well, he never participated in any of the diversity and inclusion trainings. Maybe he had personal or family experience with people with disabilities. I don't know. But it didn't really matter at that point in time. He just was a human who saw another human who needed a hand, to be able to do that.

[00:30:35.89] And I think that as we talk about people and promoting the disability-- the belonging of people with disabilities on campus, it's with people with disabilities themselves, who-- friends, family, who understand, sort of, the experience. But it's also for folks who are allies. And I think that having that conversation with people to be able to say, yeah you may not experience this personally but this is how you can help, people feel included. And I think that's an ongoing discussion that I don't want to downplay. I think it's something that's a vital discussion as we need to-- moving forward.

[00:31:22.15] TORAL PATEL: I agree. And so just kind of keeping that in mind, what can other members at Cornell do to be an ally in this space, particularly for individuals with disabilities?

[00:31:32.52] BERT ODOM-REED: I think the best thing they can do is they need to adopt their moms as a superhero. And then do what their moms told them to do when they grow up.

[00:31:41.76] TORAL PATEL: That's step one, for sure.

[00:31:43.95] BERT ODOM-REED: Do what your mommy told you.

[00:31:45.42] TORAL PATEL: Exactly. There you go.

[00:31:47.58] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Well I have been thinking about that a lot, about what being an ally looks like. And I think about it because I hold a couple of marginalized identities, being both a woman and a woman with obvious disabilities. But I also hold some privileged identities as well, you know. And-- so it's hard, which I have considered, actually, a blessing. That I can hold those, because that actually is what helps me to understand privilege better, is because I understand oppression really well. So it makes it a little easier.

[00:32:19.24] But I guess the thing is I do think sometimes we oversimplify what being an ally is. And I think we have to recognize that that also comes with risk. Being an ally is a risky thing too, and there's various degrees to whatever risk you can take as an ally. Bert and Toral, you both are allies by the fact that you wanted to have this conversation today. And you literally are giving us the microphone to be able to speak and share this.

[00:32:46.42] BERT ODOM-REED: But you can't take it home.

[00:32:47.61] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: I know, I've been eyeing it up here, just thinking how awesome would it be to sing to this. Yeah.

[00:32:53.72] [LAUGHTER]

[00:32:57.84] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: And, you know, I also want to say to Andrea and I, as much as we're being people with disabilities today, we're also being allies. Because we recognize that our roles is-- with the EA and the DCNG, a lot of people are entrusting us to help represent what the concerns and the issues are. And unfortunately a lot of them don't feel that they can speak up. All those things we talked about earlier, they have good reason to be concerned about being able to speak up and speak out. It doesn't mean we're not also kind of, like, what are people going to think?

[00:33:29.70] Over the last year I've taken it upon myself to do a lot of communicating on the behalf of the disability community about the concerns related to reactivation, return to work. But also all the belonging surveys that have been happening at Cornell over the last several years, consistently are showing that our colleagues with disabilities have the lowest sense of belonging at this campus. That is really, really sad, concerning, as somebody who's worked here a long time. And so when I'm asked what you can do to be an ally, you could care about that statistic. And you can be asking questions, and figuring out, wait, why is that happening? This is a large group of diverse employees. I mean, how much more clear do they have to make it than through anonymous surveys. They do not feel a sense of belonging.

[00:34:17.53] I guess I want to see that prioritized at our institution. That we recognize, hey, that's not good, did all those people leave? That's a considerable number of employees that we lose. And I don't truly believe Cornell wants that. I wouldn't stay here if I didn't really believe that this is a place that really wants to live up to its values of any person, everybody welcome, and we want everybody to feel a sense of belonging. But

then we have to make the time and the effort to figure out why aren't they. What's going on, you know, that they aren't?

[00:34:47.38] And I guess my last thing that I'll just say to that is when I have put myself out there and spoken out, and, like I said, compiled information to send to leadership to reflect what the community thinks, several people will often reach out to me individually to say that they really appreciate what I'm sharing and what I've said and that they support it.

[00:35:07.90] And that is being an ally, because they're telling me that, which is really good. But I always wonder why don't they feel they can publicly acknowledge that? It goes back to, what's going on in our culture and on our campus that, even to be an ally, feels risky. And you could be an ally privately, but publicly, that might be a little risky. And they've actually said that. People would say, I don't know that I can-- but I want you to know. I do want you to know I'm right there. I'm not judging them. I get it. I get it. But I think those are the questions we need to be asking a little bit more. What is going on in our culture, and on campus, that people feel silenced? Whether they are an individual with a disability, or in that way.

[00:35:54.46] BERT ODOM-REED: The University should be asking the question, if you've marginalized someone what good and productive information did you miss out on because they just didn't even bother to share it?

[00:36:06.01] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: And a lot of times people don't even realize that they're marginalizing. I don't believe that anybody sitting back and saying, what can I do to discriminate against people with disabilities-- I don't believe that that's the case. At least that's in my heart of hearts. But at the same time if people are not given the opportunity to freely express how they're feeling, how they're working-- I had to say a lot of things just about overall accessibility and approaches and programmatic things. And it's sometimes just met with silence.

[00:36:42.32] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes, yes.

[00:36:42.92] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: And that's where it's definitely frustrating to be able to do that, working in a variety of roles in order to answer the question of being an ally. And I have allies that I work with in Facilities and Campus Services that have no experience with disability at all. And yet they'll bring stuff to me and say, Andrea, this doesn't look right. What do you think? And just will notice it. And you know, unfortunately we've had some colleagues retire, and it was just sort of like, I'm going to miss that person and their insight and their willingness to learn, and say, I'm not really quite sure about this. But it's related to disability, but it's also just related to their openness and willingness to learn and understand and ask questions, and not be afraid to show a vulnerability.

[00:37:39.44] Because there's times that people have brought something to me and they were like, oh is this right? And I'm like, no it's fine. I personally don't have any

problems with it. To be able to do that, it's within code and it allows us to do these types of things. And it gives people with disabilities choice with the particular route or those types of things. And so I think that there is pockets of that out there. And we can't teach people some of that stuff. We can teach others to be able to do. But I think that discovery, that willingness to communicate, is what is the path towards people feeling like they belong a little bit more. I wasn't surprised by some of those belonging surveys--

[00:38:23.05] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Right.

[00:38:23.39] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: --for people with disabilities. But here's our opportunity to improve it.

[00:38:27.65] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes.

[00:38:28.34] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Because I wouldn't be here if I felt like it was not something we could do something about.

[00:38:34.13] TORAL PATEL: Thank you for sharing that.

[00:38:36.38] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Ooh, the feedback from somebody, it's like, well how do you think things are going? And it's like, it's a work in progress. And sometimes it's just not necessarily productive work culture in general. And add disability to that, it's not necessarily been a positive thing. And again, it's Cornell. We are siloed a bit. And it's one of those things that I don't know how we help facilitate a stronger culture of inclusion, inclusive of disability. I've got ideas about how we can certainly do that. We're talking about a continuum. It's a long and ingrained process that we need to adhere to.

[00:39:18.24] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yeah, I think the question that we had posed to the DCNG was in one word or phrase, how would you characterize the climate right now for employees with disabilities? And work in progress was one of them. Another one said hit or miss. And I think that gets to what Andrea just said, that people would say that in general Cornell is better than other employers that they work for, in terms of just that base level understanding and appreciation of disability. And I certainly would agree with that because I've seen a lot, just over the last nearly 20 years, of an improvement of campus awareness and understanding of that. But I think as Andrea said, when you drill down to the next level, maybe how-- what is your reality in your day-to-day, both in your department but also just the reality of words to actions. I think that that is where there's still some lost in translation, shall we say--

[00:40:12.86] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Right.

[00:40:13.15] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: --you know, that's happening.

[00:40:14.78] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: That's the balance. For people who have non-obvious disabilities, it's the disclosure question.

[00:40:20.66] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yeah.

[00:40:21.26] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: How much do I tell people about what I live with on a day-to-day basis, for those of us who have obvious disabilities. And I've got 30 years of experience as a person who uses a wheelchair. And a lot of times it's the assumption that I can't, or lack of expectation. And it's like automatically assumed that I can't do-- and I had a colleague recently who was just retiring. He goes, I was wondering about when I first started interacting. I was like, how could she possibly do this job, to be able to-- and then he goes, it's just something that you do. And you do it well.

[00:40:58.73] And I'm like, that is the ultimate compliment that somebody can give another colleague, is you're doing a great job. Who doesn't want to hear that? To be able to do it. But I know for so many people that need a little bit of help in terms of the accommodation process, there's so much fear that once somebody finds out about a non-obvious disability, or once they do, they're going to be treated differently because of that.

[00:41:24.56] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes.

[00:41:25.13] TORAL PATEL: I love that Andrea. When you said, it's the concept of-- that your colleague initially thought you couldn't, right? And then realized and actually acknowledged, right, that hey, not only can you, but you do a phenomenal job. And that's something that kind of stands with me. It's not just the can't-- and the other side of that coin for me is also the limit that gets put on individuals, right? It's not-- the first thought is, OK, I don't think you can do something. But then the second thought that immediately almost follows is, well even if you could there's only so much you can do. Right? That you can't possibly fully do it, like an individual that maybe doesn't have any disabilities.

[00:42:03.02] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Well-- and I like the vulnerability that he had where he was able to say to me, I was worried about how you would. And again, that's the comfort level that we have as colleagues. Just, the lack of expectation of people with disabilities I think is still probably the biggest attitudinal barrier of inclusion in my opinion.

[00:42:24.89] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: It is. And I think that Toral, you added onto that an important thing. That sometimes then, in addition to that, there's other limits that may be put on there, that the person with a disability might not even realize people are doing.

[00:42:35.63] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:42:35.75] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: But what concerns me is that the attitude then does extend into action. Meaning that, if the attitude's there, that could potentially lead to employees not being given the same opportunities. Not being given the same

professional advancement opportunities, professional development, really good constructive criticism, you know, that will help them grow as professionals. All that is potentially being compromised if there is that lack of expectation, whether it's conscious or unconscious. It doesn't matter. To me the fact that it's there is potentially impacting that person's ability to really excel as an employee.

[00:43:14.91] And I guess the other thing you guys are making me also think about is that we know the [INAUDIBLE], we have lived history and experience of those things happening. It does then sometimes put, I think, extra pressure on people with disability to prove, to do whatever they have to do to prove, that they are the ultimate worker.

[00:43:32.48] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:43:32.90] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: And that they're the ultimate employee. And in any sign of an absence, being late, or as Andrea said, having to, quote, "admit" that you might need an accommodation might knock you down a peg. Concern about coworkers' views is just as significant as concern about your manager's views. And that's disturbing, because I don't see us doing that with other things. Right? People should be able to feel free to say, I have leave early for a doctor's appointment. Just like you might say, I have to leave early to pick up my kid.

[00:44:04.64] TORAL PATEL: Mhm.

[00:44:05.09] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: I have to leave early to take my mom to the dentist. Whatever it is. But I don't think we're quite there yet, consistently that people feel that they could be just as honest.

[00:44:16.52] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:44:17.03] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: I think what we're talking about-- micro-inequities. And I think that's what-- but they turn into macro-inequities, you know? And it's one of those things that I think, oh Erin, I'm so glad to hear you say that. And it's one of those things, too. That people just don't understand the pressure--

[00:44:35.67] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes.

[00:44:36.71] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: --the advancement opportunities. And it's not just we are working towards employment of people with disabilities, which is a horrible unemployment rate, for people with disabilities. But it's not just about getting people employed. It's allowing people to advance within whatever employer they happen to be. As well as, like, assignments, you know? Advancements of those types of things. In my mind if we can improve that for Cornell I think we'll be in a much better place.

[00:45:08.60] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah, Andrea. Maybe what we can hope from this conversation is that the general population just keep its creative hat on and just look out, see what's there, see what could be better, and just improve it.

[00:45:26.44] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: It's true. Very good point, Bert.

[00:45:29.02] TORAL PATEL: So as we wrap up our conversation, I have one last question for the two of you. Keeping in mind that both of you wear multiple hats here at Cornell, taking off all of those various hats that you wear, what do you do to take care of yourself, and put yourself first?

[00:45:44.82] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Every day I find myself sometimes saying, whatever I need to do throughout the day so that I still am smiling, and it might be because I'm smiling because of something funny, or as long as I know why I'm smiling. And I feel good about it, then it's a good day, that I'm taking care of myself.

[00:46:06.99] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: You're right. And sometimes Erin and I just talk, or I talk with friends or colleagues, and I think that not losing my sense of humor is key. And sometimes you just have to laugh. Yeah, sometimes it's exercise. But sometimes it's a pint of ice cream. You know? I mean, that's the balance of trying to do that. And for me, it's just looking towards the future as opposed to looking back. Sometimes it's hard to do that. But I think it's an important aspect of it. It's like, OK, what else? Let's move this forward. What else can we do? What else-- what's the next step?

[00:46:48.51] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:46:49.20] BERT ODOM-REED: That's great.

[00:46:49.69] TORAL PATEL: I love it. Thank you. So thank you both for joining us today. Bert and I just had a fabulous, fabulous conversation with you. And I think I want to leave everyone on something you said, Andrea, and it's about finding the balance. If we can all find the balance we'd be in a much better place. So thank you both.

[00:47:06.18] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Thank you.

[00:47:06.60] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: Thank you. This was a great conversation. And again, for many of us hopefully it's the first of many conversations.

[00:47:14.27] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes.

[00:47:14.67] ANDREA HAENLIN-MOTT: So we can continue to have this be part of the narrative.

[00:47:18.93] ERIN SEMBER-CHASE: Yes, agreed. Thank you very much. It's nice to have the microphone once in a while.

[00:47:25.27] TORAL PATEL: Bert, what a great conversation we just had with Erin and Andrea.

[00:47:29.30] BERT ODOM-REED: Indeed, yes. Yes indeed.

[00:47:31.86] TORAL PATEL: What was your biggest takeaway?

[00:47:35.00] BERT ODOM-REED: Wow. There's so much in this episode. But I'd have to say, I thought it was interesting to hear how it can be fatiguing to have to self-advocate over and over and constantly. And it is the genuine helpful things that people do without having to be asked that can make the most impact.

[00:47:57.28] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I agree with you in that there are so many-- so many takeaways for me. And probably there's two that stood out for me. Both of the ones that you just shared, and the concept of not having to ask individuals to do anything. I thought that was something that was really profound. And then the other one that stood out to me is kind of the words Andrea used, in terms of the fact that this is still a work in progress, right? And I feel that way with a lot of things related to diversity. And especially with disability, that it's a work in progress. And I think it's work that's ever-changing, right? As disabilities change and as people experience disabilities throughout their lives, your needs throughout that process also changes.

[00:48:37.96] BERT ODOM-REED: I agree, I agree.

[00:48:39.10] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:48:39.58] BERT ODOM-REED: There's just so much in this one. I'm so glad we were able to get both Erin and Andrea here to record, because this was really good.

[00:48:49.42] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, yeah. And then I've been thinking about the question of the day that we asked, right? And we talked about everyday heroes. Now that I'm thinking back on it, and I should have-- I said my mother, which of course she's my hero, she always will be. But I also think of Andrea and Erin as everyday heroes, too. Because we talked about a lot of the many hats that both of them wear, right? It's not just the-- they have a full time job--

[00:49:11.21] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah.

[00:49:11.50] TORAL PATEL: --that both of them do. And then they take on these additional responsibilities as a volunteer, right? And you can also think of the two of them as everyday heroes for Cornell.

[00:49:20.26] BERT ODOM-REED: Oh I definitely see them as heroes, everyday heroes. Yeah. I mean-- the important kind--

[00:49:25.66] TORAL PATEL: Yes, yeah.

[00:49:26.02] BERT ODOM-REED: --because they are the people who I got from that takeaway. They do things without having to be asked to do them. And--

[00:49:35.53] TORAL PATEL: That's it.

[00:49:36.25] BERT ODOM-REED: --I mean, that's just-- being a good human being on the planet, kind of thing. So I wish--

[00:49:41.68] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:49:42.01] BERT ODOM-REED: --that more people could embody that type of behavior and personality.

[00:49:47.80] TORAL PATEL: Like you said, they both mentioned that the self-advocacy piece is very hard. And here they are in their volunteer roles advocating for everybody else.

[00:49:56.35] BERT ODOM-REED: Yes.

[00:49:56.78] TORAL PATEL: So how amazing are they?

[00:49:58.33] BERT ODOM-REED: Super.

[00:50:00.07] TORAL PATEL: Yeah? They're super. Perfect.

[00:50:06.70] Thank you for listening. Be sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to podcasts, and rate and submit a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps new listeners find us and the show. For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:50:26.74] BERT ODOM-REED: And my name is Bert Odom-Reed. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Belonging, in collaboration with the Cornell Broadcast Studios.

[00:50:42.74] TORAL PATEL: I want to thank Bert Odom-Reed for being our guest co-host today, in addition to fulfilling his role as our co-producer and sound engineer. Thanks, Bert.

[00:50:52.28] BERT ODOM-REED: My pleasure.