

NARRATOR: RIT is considered to be one of the most accessible college campuses in the world. Today on Intersections: The RIT Podcast, NTID President Gerry Buckley and RIT Director of Disability Services Catherine Lewis chat about how that accessibility came to be, including the signing of the landmark 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act. Gerry and Catherine provide their perspectives on the history of accessibility in higher education – how far we’ve come, and how far we have yet to go.

CATHERINE: As we get started, Gerry, the ADA recently had its 30th anniversary at the end of July. And from our conversations, I know you were around and involved when that act was initially passed. Can you talk about what that was like, being there for that and what it meant to you?

GERRY: It really was an exciting time. I had the honor of being a guest of Sen. Robert Dole, who was one of the co-sponsors of the bill, and just several thousand individuals with disabilities, their parents, their advocates, and the business community all coming together to celebrate the passage of the civil rights act for individuals with disabilities. It was a really historic moment and a very proud moment. And it was a result of several years of strong lobbying and advocating for the importance of that civil rights legislation. When we were at the White House that day, it was a sense of “We did it. Now the hard work of implementing the law begins.” And now, 30 years later we look back and we can see the successes. But we can also see, as you and I have discussed Catherine, the work that needs to be done, and that’s part of the discussion today.

CATHERINE: Absolutely. So, as we think big picture about this, both in terms of your own personal life and in terms of systems, what do you think has changed since that time 30 years ago when the ADA was first passed?

GERRY: I think fundamentally now, there’s a commitment in both the public and the private sector to access for individuals with disabilities. It’s legally mandated now, so discrimination on the basis of disability in the private sector is outlawed, and that’s opened doors in employment and in transportation and in all areas of life that allows individuals with disabilities to participate in the mainstream of society. So, I sense that what we had 30 plus years ago was kind of a voluntary spirit by the private sector if they wanted to provide accommodations for individuals with disabilities. Now, for the last 30 years it’s been mandated by law. So, we’re beginning to see an increasing number of individuals with disabilities who have taken advantage of that law and are rising up in American life and in the American community and participating in the mainstream of life in a very positive and constructive way.

CATHERINE: Yeah, it’s a powerful thing. And as I heard you talking about how when the law was passed we thought about how much work was yet to be done, one of the things I try to keep at the front of my mind is that the law is the floor, not the ceiling. And so, I think even though I was just in preschool or so when the law was first passed, it’s been interesting for me to reflect on how things have changed from when I was in public school and when I first started college to now working in higher education. I don’t know if you feel the same way, Gerry, but it seems to me like we’ve got to strike this balance

between celebrating how far we've come and thinking pretty hard about where we have yet to go. I'm curious what you think, just in terms of where we do have yet to go. What did you already expect might be happening 30 years later that's not yet?

GERRY: Thirty years later, especially in the area of employment, I expected to see more gains. I expected to see the unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities significantly lower. I expected to see disabled individuals who had access to higher education, now with accommodations, I expected them to be progressing, and that's happening. We see more individuals with disabilities graduating with their MDs, their PhDs, their law degrees, and their engineering degrees. And we slowly see business and industry really trying to create opportunities to take advantage of these individuals' skills. But if you look at the overall data, you see that in the area of employment we still have – for example, in the deaf and hard-of-hearing community – 50 percent of our citizens with hearing loss who are deaf and hard of hearing not working and capable of working and contributing to the American economy. And so that's where I see work needs to be done.

CATHERINE: Yeah, I agree with you. Those numbers are pretty solemn when we think about what could be versus what is in terms of the employment rates of folks. And as somebody who both lives disability herself and supports students along their path to reaching employment and living fulfilled whole lives, it's tough to meet students and see all their potential and work with them to put the supports in place so that they can equitably engage and then see that that support does not always carry forward into the workforce. So, what do you think is missing there? What's the disconnect, especially when folks enter into employment?

GERRY: I think the disconnect – and it's changing with the national movement toward the disability equity index and the private sector now beginning to establish expectations for itself. But I think that last sector of convincing the business community that individuals with disabilities have much to offer from an economic perspective and not seen as just a cost but as part of the diversity picture that the company wants to embrace and the inclusive environment that the company wants to promote. And we have to continue to stay very, very focused on that and helping companies to see that accommodations are part of the cost of doing business. They're not extra special, they're not a burden, and they really are a part of the enhancing of the diversity and the inclusive approach. I do see some progress, it's just slower than I would like. And I think also we need to be knowledgeable that individuals of color who are disabled have also brought it to our attention that they haven't enjoyed the same gains and privileges that white individuals with disabilities have experienced. So, therefore, we have work to do in the area of racial justice and social justice to make sure that individuals who are disabled who are people of color, who are BIPOC, have the same opportunities as individuals who are not. And I think we have work to do in that area – that racial discrimination, in addition to disability discrimination, really is still a fact of life in many situations, and we need to address it through the enforcement mechanisms that are in place or, if those things have been ignored or neglected, we need to advocate for the

more strict enforcement of the regulations and the laws and hold companies accountable for fulfilling their commitment to diversity and inclusion.

CATHERINE: I couldn't agree more with you, Gerry. I think one of the most important things we can do is take an intersectional look at who folks are. None of us live single-issue lives. None of us are single-issue people. And somebody who identifies within the disability community, that's one facet of who they are, and all of our facets intersect. So, thinking about layers of inequity, people of color, LGBTQ people, first-generation folks navigating new systems, there are so many ways we need to pay attention to different needs, different contexts. That's powerful stuff.

GERRY: And I think RIT and NTID as an employer can play a role in being a model to the Rochester community, to the regional community, to the nation, and the world in our own employment practices and goals. So, RIT has a commitment to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and we have goals and targets that we honor and we work toward. I also think NTID, through its national outreach role and through our Center on Employment, has a special responsibility to help employers in the American workplace make the adjustments that are necessary. It's really fascinating when you really ask why businesses don't serve or employ individuals with disabilities. It's often based on a myth or a misunderstanding about costs. But it's not as expensive as they perceive it to be, and the benefits far outweigh the cost. But I think we have more of a job to do to be informing employers and, in particular, the realities of what the costs are and how they can meet those responsibilities as employers.

CATHERINE: I think you're so right that attitudes are a really key ingredient here, and it makes me think about how we define disability and what I perceive to be some misconceptions in terms of what disability really means. And for me, as somebody who identifies personally as a disabled woman and who spent her whole life so far digging into disability and what it means for folks, I think we really need to disassociate this identity with deficit. To really think about disability as Haben Girma, a disability rights lawyer says, she calls disability an opportunity for innovation. You know, what really could be more RIT? Disability is an opportunity to be creative, to do innovative things, to try different routes, different processes. Not in spite of who we are, but really leaning into who are as disabled people and what that means for what we can contribute. I've thought a lot about how to define disability. It's such a massive term that can encompass so many things and so many people. And from where I sit, the only sort of philosophical definition that feels right to me is this idea of necessary creativity. I think when you live in a body or a mind or a way of being in the world that's atypical, you inherently learn to embrace alternative possibilities. And so, I think as you speak about employer perspectives, not only thinking about what is right in terms of equitable hiring practices and sort of the letter of the law, but thinking from this really empowered, excited framework. What can somebody bring to the workforce certainly, absolutely because of who they are? I wonder how that feels for you. Do you find disability or deaf identity to be a really core part of who you are and how you function in the world?

GERRY: Sure, yeah. We are very fortunate at NTID that we have a critical mass of 1,200 deaf and hard-of-hearing students plus several hundred deaf and hard-of-hearing faculty. And all of them have the opportunity to kind of find their identity and find out where they fit in the world as a deaf person and a deaf professional. And seeing role models, the importance of that, the importance of our young deaf students seeing deaf people who have completed law degrees and medical degrees – because like it or not, individuals with disabilities still often hear negative messages about what they're capable of or not capable of. And so, the power of role models on our campus, and meeting someone who's deaf with a PhD or an MD or whatever. And hearing the positive messages, "Yes you can. Yes you can." And feeling comfortable in your own skin as a deaf person and being able to say, "Yeah. I'm comfortable calling myself deaf. I embrace sign language. I embrace the culture that's involved in it. I embrace the community that's involved in it. It doesn't limit me, it opens doors for me." And it's fascinating how many companies right now are very enthusiastic when they begin to understand deafness from a cultural perspective. They begin to say, oh yeah, just like we have other cultures in our workforce, we need to be inclusive of deaf people who come from that culture, that experience, use sign language, and have their own norms, and so forth. And so the RIT campus kind of reflects that. When you walk around campus and you see the signing and you see the commitment to access, you see people who are sensitive on an ongoing basis, you see the respect for ASL on our campus, you know it's really a model of what I wish all campuses and all communities had. We're not there yet, someday we'll get there, but Rochester is a very special community, and RIT is a special place because NTID has been home there for 50 years.

CATHERINE: Yeah, you know it reminds me of – the other day, I was on campus and I took a break over the lunch hour just to scoot around campus and see some folks. I think, especially in the middle of a pandemic, I'm so hungry for incidental interpersonal interactions and I just took a scoot around on my scooter. And it was the first time as a professional – I'm 34 years old, I've been working for coming up on a decade – and it's the first time that I saw a number of other folks who use mobility devices who navigated in ways that were similar to me. And it was just this feeling of, wow, what a place where I can find community, to see myself represented. And even though I'm in a leadership position here, I'm still hungry for that sense of precedent, community, critical mass, as you put it, and I think that is one of the things that's so special about being here at RIT and also one of the areas where I think we can continue to grow. When I worked in college admissions, it was a really interesting thing, thinking about how we do a lot of work to reach out to all different kinds of underrepresented folks, and sometimes I think folks are fearful of doing that same kind of outreach to draw in folks with disabilities to campuses. And what would happen, what could we do if we really wove disability into diversity more broadly? Both in cultural programming, in admissions practices to say, "You belong here, and we're so excited to have you here because of what you bring to this community." And so, yeah, RIT is a really special place, I agree.

GERRY: And we're fortunate to work there. And in this COVID-19 environment, it's also something we live with daily and it is very unique. We've had to think multiple times

about how we're going to deal with communication issues, face masks, ASR recognition devices, and on and on. How do we make sure even in this environment, which is unique and strange and kind of eerie, how do we really provide equal access? And I'm really – I've been very proud of the community overall. I haven't had to – in my role, I've often had to say, "Don't forget about this." But many times now people are already ahead of the game and say, hey, we have 1,200 deaf students, what are we going to do when they show up into the food service and everybody's masked and they can't communicate effectively? Or what are we going to do when an interpreter or captionist is wearing a face mask plus a shield and all of a sudden the acoustic ability is significantly reduced, what are we going to do? And what we found is many of the solutions are benefitting all students. And if we can continue to advocate for universal design on campus – to use the partnership we have with IBM for their translator. When we've used that in classes where we thought deaf students were going to sign up and then deaf students didn't, and then we tried to withdraw that automatic speech recognition captioning, the students objected because everyone wanted access to that, they thought it would benefit them. So, I think those are just an example of where RIT can continue to be a leader in advocating access for everyone.

CATHERINE: Absolutely, yeah. And you're right that the pandemic has brought to light and highlighted different accessibility needs that folks have in some pretty powerful ways. And I think not only about the really critical considerations in terms of communication access that you alluded to, but folks with chronic illness, folks who are at higher risk during the pandemic, that is a disability issue. What is your safe access on this campus? Folks who are navigating mental health as part of their life might be really strongly impacted by what's going on in the world today to a degree that impacts their ability to engage comfortably in the world. And so, accommodation coordination is different now than I think it has been before. It's tough right? Think about, for example, a person who has chronic migraines for whom all of this screen time that we're engaging in can cause a really tough issue. You know for folks who, for example, receive information in unique ways. If you're getting all of your content in a visual medium, how do you find a way around that? And even as we were thinking about how to keep campus safe, thinking about the sanitizing of door handles in the same breath as we think about the sanitizing of automatic door openers and other ways to navigate space. I think one of the most exciting things for me over the last few months has been thinking about not only what the new challenges are, but as we move forward what we can take away from this pandemic as far as what we've learned. And I think one of the things that is really powerful is new ways of engaging in academic work. A lot of students for a number of reasons related to those underlying health conditions, perhaps related to mental health, a number of different issues, chronic illness, are asking to engage in classes virtually. And in the past, we would have said, "You know what? That's really fundamentally altering what it means to be an RIT student or anywhere in higher ed." And we see that with a little bit of innovation, or I guess a lot of innovation, that it's possible. And doors are being opened not only for the folks who need that access in a really acute way, but for all students who've been pushing for different ways to engage. So, I think, we can't go backwards, you know what I mean? Even when, fingers

crossed, this pandemic winds down, I'm hoping that it will have broadened our understanding of what it means to engage actively in higher education.

GERRY: And, as you and I have talked about, it's not limited to RIT. When we think about employers, one of the biggest barriers has been, well, transportation and things. Now that we have shown that remote working is possible and can be effectively done, that should reduce one of the barriers to employment that individuals with physical disabilities often face with public transportation not being accessible. So again, this is where RIT through our training programs, through being able to show these students that completed a co-op or internship remotely, they demonstrated the skill. The employers now should be looking at that and saying, "Hey, you did a co-op with us remotely and you did outstanding and you were productive and you were effective. Would you consider a permanent placement with us?" And so I'm excited. The last thing I wanted to say about this is that we've learned – I think also if we look at the number of individuals on campus that have asked for some kind of accommodations, not necessarily through your office, but through their supervisor – we have a lot more individuals with disabilities than we realize. And so again, the inclusion of these individuals strengthens us as a community, it doesn't take from. It really strengthens us when we can think of creative ways to allow individuals with mental health illnesses or whatever to participate in the workforce through technology and through the support that's available through technology. Then it's a win-win both for RIT and for the individuals. So, I just see a lot of – six months ago people would tell me, "Oh, that function or that job couldn't be done remotely." But we've proven that it can be done remotely in many situations. So, I just see this opening up all kinds of doors. The same thing for meetings like this where we would've normally had to drive 20 miles each, park our cars, and do everything. Now we're doing it in a Zoom room. Is it working? Yeah. Does it require some adjustment on our part? Yeah. There's a lot of exciting possibilities there, and RIT can be really the center of innovative research looking for ways to help facilitate the employment success of individuals who are disabled and deaf through the use of innovative technology. So, I'm excited about the years ahead and I'm looking forward to personally meeting you when we're on campus!

CATHERINE: Likewise. You know, we've had all these virtual interactions now, but I don't think we have physically been in the same space so...

GERRY: We will. We will. [laughter]

CATHERINE: I love the tone of what you just said. This idea of possibility and sort of excitement of what's to come because, from where I sit, one of the things I hope to see change in years to come is this sense of fear or stigma or "I'm not sure if we should talk about this, I'm not sure if it's appropriate," when we discuss disability and accessibility. And I see it in our students as well, some fear in our initial conversations about how accommodation support can be possible here. Students will be able to breathe a sigh of relief and say, "I'm so glad we got these supports in place, I thought this was going to be much more difficult, much scarier than it actually was." And so that's the kind of culture change that I hope for, is to see pride in disability identity, pride in

accommodation use as a tool to create equity and then in terms of thinking about what RIT can be in terms of taking a really global leadership role in terms of access and inclusion. I'd like eventually for those of us who coordinate accommodations to work ourselves out of a job. You know, if we continue to grow in this spirit of universal design, we won't need to apply these sort of retroactive solutions. And I think that's what we're starting to see is that the world becomes better, all of us become better, when we are more inclusive and as we start to chip away at the barriers that exist. I mean, what a possibility that is.

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