

Down to the Struts

Episode 6: Artreach, Part 1

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Guest: Charlie Miller

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For more information: www.downtothestruts.com

Introduction

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya 0:10

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to a very special episode of down to the struts. This episode marks the end of our very first season. But never fear, we'll be back with more episodes about disability, design, and the need to find intersectional solutions to complex problems when we return for season two. This week's episode will come in two parts in the first part we'll listen in to my conversation with Charlie Miller. Charlie is the director of strategic partnerships at Artreach, a Philadelphia based nonprofit organization that creates advocates for an expands access to the arts, Charlie will discuss how artreach programming elevates art access as a human right. He'll talk about how tools like audio description and tactile models can enrich the experience of art for all of us. In the second episode, we'll take a deeper dive into audio description with Philadelphia based audio describer Nicole Sardella. If you want to learn even more about disability, and the arts, and the importance of access, check out Episode 89 of Alice Wong's Disability Visibility podcast. You can listen in on Alice's conversation with Amanda Cachia, a disabled curator who explores how curators can incorporate access into the experience of a museum exhibit. Okay, let's get down to it.

Thank you, Charlie, so much for being with us today on down to the struts to talk about your work with art reach, which we will talk about in a minute. So can you start by just introducing yourself telling us a little bit about who you are? And what got you interested in art access?

Charlie 2:24

Yeah, great. Well, thank you for having me on the show. This is amazing. It's always great to be able to talk about the work of art reach and the amazing communities that we get to serve and

work with. So my name is Charlie Miller. And I'm the director of strategic partnerships at Artreach. And I started at our reach in 2014, I had just returned from Palestine, Israel, doing peacemaking work, and wanted to settle full time in Philadelphia, and was applying at different places, but really wanted to find something that I was passionate about. And also wanted something that that would challenge me, I wanted to grow professionally. So I found out about Artreach, and the amazing things that they do. And they happen to have an opening rate when I became aware of them. And I applied, I originally started off as a program coordinator in 2014. The rest is Artreach history, you know, with me being able to join the staff and grow as the programming grew.

Qudsiya 3:32

That's fantastic that, you know, you kind of fell into this early on in your work and have become a part of this community. So Charlie, can you tell us what is Artreach?

Charlie 3:45

Yeah, that's a great question. So Artreach is this tiny but mighty nonprofit, that has become a force in the Greater Philadelphia region. And we exist at our most core of who we are, we exist to make sure that cultural experiences, so museums, theaters, public gardens, anything you would consider arts and culture, right, that everyone has access to it, right, we want everyone to be able to experience the amazing things that arts and culture give to our lives. So we do that, by focusing on people with disabilities and low income communities. That's that's the two communities are groups that we say that is how we are going to focus completely on access to the arts and one of our core values is art as a human right. If you make a statement like that art is a human right, then what do you actually do? What is the what is the outward facing work that you do? Right? So Artreach is a six person staff. And, and we get a lot accomplished when people find out how small we are. They're they're very, very surprised by what we're able to do together. But anytime that a museum opens its doors, we are concerned with how a person with a disability engages with that museum, from getting there to getting in the front door to getting to the admission desk that you know, the different exhibits, the the main collection, the traveling collections, the customer service. And take it a step further, the website, how they communicate out to the public, you know, so we're super concerned with that from a disability standpoint. And then on top of that, we are very concerned with socio economic justice, and the fact that a lot of times arts and culture experiences are too expensive for people. And that low income communities and low income families should have the same access to arts and culture, regardless of if they are on some type of welfare government assistance program, or experiencing temporary poverty or temporary homelessness or anything like that. We still say that the arts and culture can be a positive experience in their life. So we try to remove the financial barriers. So that really is Artreach at its core of like, why we exist and what we do.

Qudsiya 6:18

Thanks, Charlie. It's really helpful to get that history and background of the organization. So we've talked a lot on this podcast about this evolution from disability rights to Disability Justice, the idea that it's important to tear down the barriers that disabled people face when it comes to accessing things like the arts, places of public accommodation, for example, a museum, but the

concept of Disability Justice is this idea of creating access for people and ensuring that access is sort of built into the design of things. And so that being said, I'm curious, how has Artreach's approach to art access evolved over time in the context of this evolution in the disability rights Disability Justice Movement?

Charlie 7:13

I love that question. And I love that you said, Disability Justice. So when I started in 2014, so it was like, you know, right around our 30th birthday, as an organization, our reach existed really, as a middle person, between the cultural institutions, so the museums and the theaters, etc. And the disability community and low income community. And what I mean by middle person is the cultural community would give us free or deeply discounted tickets. And we would then distribute those tickets to our member agencies, right? These are organizations that serve people with disabilities, and low income communities. And that was fine, it was great, but it was only serving about 17,000 people per year, which is no small number. I, you know, I don't want to, I don't want to poopoo on that. But our current executive director, John Orr, joined the organization in the beginning of 2015, and made some bold choices and restructured the organization and decided that we needed to expand what we do and how we do it, right. So instead of just saying, oh, let's bring people with disabilities to a theater show is actually working with these theatre companies or these cultural institutions, from the beginning, right. And in the, in their design of programs, their, their desired intent, if it was a, it was a theater show, you know, or something or an exhibit coming in, or something like that, is that they would bring Artreach into the conversation early on, so that we could help them build out the accessibility needs of the disability community, right. So that it's not an afterthought, and it's not reactive, it's proactive. So we created a program in 2015, called Encore. And it was this idea that we don't want people with disabilities to be passive observers of a theater show or a museum or a special exhibit. We want them to become more involved, right? And take accessibility and like and really like just give it a huge jolt, and make sure that people knew that the accommodations that we were providing that there was a baseline, there was a there was a bar that we were setting, and they needed to meet, meet that bar, you know, at least meet that bar. So we started working with places like the Pennsylvania ballet, I went to them and to their community engagement program, and I said, we love that you're giving us free tickets to the Nutcracker and to Swan Lake and we love all that but we want people with disabilities dancing with Pennsylvania ballet, which is a pretty radical idea, right? So we came up with this amazing program. And we took six students from a special education school. And they learned a contemporary ballet piece with members of Pennsylvania ballet's second company. And it was videotaped by an amazing director. And it became a 40 minute documentary called I am. And what it showed us is that when we take two different populations, right, but but people that are the same age, right, and we asked them to do something together, there's learning in both ends. And it becomes collaborative, and it's a partnership. It's not charity based, right. So, that has led now, the Pennsylvania ballet has specific programming for children with various disabilities, usually intellectual or cognitive, in different parts of the Greater Philadelphia region because of that project. It has expanded. Artreach has moved away from it, right, we're not managing that those programs anymore. But the Pennsylvania ballet has embedded that programming in what

they do with the community engagement, right. And that was a huge, that was bigger than anything that Artreach had ever done.

Qudsiya 11:16

So that's sort of that's interesting. It's, that has multiple facets. When I think about it. On the one hand Artreach helped the Pennsylvania ballet build its capacity to engage with the disabled community. And I also think it's interesting in terms of the actual art itself. So you know, this idea of bringing disabled people inside of the art so that they become part of the art and not just, you know, as you were saying, passive observers of the art.

Charlie 11:42

Yeah. And I want to give you another example of something that still is one of my favorite, or each experiences is audio description, or verbal description for people who are blind and low vision. So the Barnes Foundation, one of my favorite art spaces in the city, beautiful, amazing collection of some of the best artwork in the world, I started thinking and really obsessing over young people who are blind and low vision not having access to the pieces of artwork. So I worked with the Barnes Foundation, and their and their community engagement people. And we started doing these beautiful, amazing gallery tours in the foundation, in the collection, that is reinforced then with an art making activity after. So we would take students from Overbrook School for the Blind to the Barnes Foundation, we would go into one of the gallery rooms, and I'm just going to say, we put them in front of a, I don't know, a saison, and the saison has flowers in it. So we would print off the piece of artwork. And volunteers would take hot glue, hot glue gun, and outline all the shapes and everything on the piece of art. And we would pass around the students so they could actually feel the art with you know, and see the art with their fingers. And then at a certain moment, as the dosent guide was talking about the painting and talking about the flowers, they would open a Ziploc baggie that had cotton balls dipped in essential oils with floral scents, and we would open it in front of their nose, so that it sort of was a you know, extra sensory experience. After the gallery visits, we would take them into this art making room. And they would make an art piece based on what they had experienced up in the gallery. So once again, enforcing not just this passive observation of masterpiece works, right. But that afterwards, how did they reflect back to us what they experienced in the gallery, so telling us and the Barnes employees, what what it meant to them, through them making art. So that it was another way for us to work with, you know, the Barnes Foundation, the work that they have stuck in time right in perpetuity. So we can't change the galleries, we can't change, you know, the way that the art is arranged or anything like that. That's limited. But what we can do is raise the bar and accessibility, which is what I think we did in that case.

Qudsiya 14:08

That's such a cool story. And it reminds me of an experience that I had in Philadelphia, when I was a law student a visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which has an office of accessibility. And I remember the experience of experiencing paintings by touch which I had never done. And one of the pieces I was looking at it was it was kind of in different layers. So each sheet that I was handed that had, you know, different kind of raised, you know, representations of the painting helped me understand like, the foreground, the background, the different layers and

textures of what was being presented in the painting. And it was such a powerful experience because as someone who lost vision over time, I just assumed Okay, if I can no longer see a painting or a piece of art, I no longer have access and that's actually really not true and You know, what I, what I learned from that is, I could then engage and add value in the discourse about the work, which is what kind of what you were describing with the Overbrook students, you know, they experienced the art through touch through scent, and other types of sensory experiences. And then they were able to interpret what they saw in making their own pieces of art. So it's sort of just a really cool way of of being able to not only experience the art, but also respond to it and engage and enrich the discourse about the art as well. Yeah, that's so so very neat. Also, I wondered if, when you talk about audio description, I often think of it as adding to the piece of artwork itself. And I'm curious if you've had an experience like that, where the description sort of becomes part of the piece of art.

Charlie 15:52

Yeah, that's, wow, that I've experienced that in different ways. I'm thinking about the Flower Show, right, Philadelphia tradition every year, and put them by the Philadelphia Horticultural Society. And what we do is we take individuals who are blind and low vision into the Flower Show, which is a massive space, right. And we give them an audio described tour. So our audio describer, Nicole Sardella, who is just absolutely amazing, goes to the show, usually two or three times before the tour, takes notes, decides the best path laid out, you know, to get from point A to point B, the highlights of the show, because the show is always themes, we want to like, hit the highlights and how it connects to the show theme. And then, you know, these individuals show up super early in the morning. And we get VIP tickets so that it's quieter, you know that like the VIP tickets are meant for, you know, a quieter, less crowded experience. And Nicole will start the tour. And as she's going, she'll start explaining something like, let's say we're standing in front of a lemon tree, right, so explain the tree, explain how many lemons if there's any lemons on the ground. And then there's a moment where someone is allowed to touch the lemon, right. And if you touch lemon, you're going to get lemon oil, you know, when your fingers and it becomes part of the experience, right. We've also, in past years, when the Flower Show theme was the national parks Volcano National Park, we asked them to pull out some of the lava that had harden and let people touch it. And then at the same time, hand them a flower that was in the display, and you know, tropical flower, and for them to actually touch it and smell it and get that experience. Like brought right forward right to them, you know. And so it's not just the audio description, but their fingers are touching it. And once again, the smell of it is part of it. So those are those experiences where audio description becomes like you said, it is part of the tour. Right? So they do have full access to it because the tour has been adapted specifically for them. So that they get to expect you know, and some of the people that we work with who are blind and low vision. You know, like you said, they've lost sight over time. And let's say they were a gardener, or they love being outdoors or going to places, you know, arboretums and different, you know, public gardens and stuff like that, that is our way of giving them back that experience in very tangible, very tailored ways. And it becomes one of my favorite days of the year. I love the audio tour, the audio described tour of the flower show is one of my favorite days of the year, because of that experience.

Qudsiya 18:49

Yeah, and I've often heard from sighted people that when they hear something that's audio described, it actually enriches their experience as well. It's just a value add to the experience. Yeah, absolutely.

Charlie 19:02

Yeah.

Qudsiya 19:03

So you know, fast forwarding a bit to the present when you can't gather together and touch the flowers and so on and so forth. I'm, I'm curious about what how the pandemic has transformed that work that you're doing and, and you know, what that experience has been like and how that's shifted your programming.

Charlie 19:25

Yeah. So that first few weeks of the lockdown in March, were when we were really faced with the reality that we were not just going to stay safe at home for two weeks. This is going to be a longer term thing. As an organization, we had a moment where where we had to look at ourselves in a staff meeting saying what like what does Artreach do? If people are not going to museums, they're not going to theaters and not you know, they're not going out to places to our cultural partners. What do we do? And immediately, because you, you spoke about justice originally, had to like remind ourselves we're a Social Justice organization, a Disability Justice organization. Because what we were noticing was all of our arts partners or cultural partners, were pumping out virtual and digital content at a furious pace, because they were trying to stay relevant. And what we noticed was, it wasn't accessible, hardly ever captioned, definitely there were experiences for people who are deaf, where there was not ASL interpretation for them. And the population that I was most worried about was actually was the blind and low vision community, because that is super isolation. If the cultural communities only putting out virtual and digital content, and it's not being audio described, the isolation just just grows right at an exponential rate. So we immediately started reaching out to partners and saying, we love what you're doing love, it's virtual. We love it, it's digital. But we need to work with you on audio description, captioning, you know, these things that to a lot of people would just seem superfluous, but it's not. Right. It's the way that people were going to engage with the outside world for a few months. So that rolled into more trainings, we did some video projects during the summer where we like worked with different partners to do like introduction videos, to what, maybe a special exhibit or to mosaics or something like that, but that the person would embed the narrator, the tour giver, would embed audio description or verbal description into what they were doing. So it wasn't an afterthought. And since then, that's another thing we've been working on is it just like every day, I talk about the blind, low vision community, and what we need to do to serve them. You know, which is Disability Justice. So that has created a very interesting nonprofit that is not going out and not visiting museums and visiting theaters and stuff like that. But that we realize that that their art, what they do has value still. And because one of our core values is art as a human right, we have to remove those barriers, and we have to knock them down. So it is a constant sort of furious battle, and reacting to what this new

normal is in 2020. But making sure that the communities that we serve are not forgotten about, you know, and I think that that is a common theme people with disabilities are within especially within the civil rights movement and different social justice, you know, movements are forgotten about a lot. So we constantly are sort of like banging that drum of, you know, we are not going to leave people behind.

Qudsiya 22:33

Yeah, that's, that's really amazing that you all were able to pivot so well into the digital space. And a couple of questions for you on that. So first is do you do you feel like the pandemic has actually expanded access, in some instances for disabled people that you serve in the sense that because travel is no longer required, and mobility barriers have been removed in a certain way people can experience are in their homes now, they don't have to necessarily travel to a museum, which can create often create challenges for certain certain people, do you think that your audience or consumers of this accessible art has expanded or changed in some ways because of the pandemic?

Charlie 23:22

Yeah, that's an interesting one, I want to say it's a double edged sword. And what I mean by that is, you're right that, in them being able to literally deliver art and culture to somebody's living room, or bedroom or whatever, you know, it is amazing, right? Because you know, if there are mobility concerns, or you know, depending on the physical disability, or the, you know, the make up of the, of the museum, or the theater that maybe it might be better for that individual in their family. But what I don't want to do, and this is the other side of the sword. But what I don't want to do is I don't want people to think that digital and virtual programming is enough, or that's the accommodation. When this pandemic ends, you know, and we start returning back to the places that we love that museums and the theaters and you know, and the cultural institution that we love, that is not going to be good enough of Oh, well, we have a video of the space now. You know, I'm going to come back and be like we we still have to talk about access at its most basic. So it is it's it's a hard one, it's I think it's sometimes it feels like we're like walking a tightrope of Yes, thank you for making, you know, virtual experiences a priority, but not forgetting that the access to the actual building or the access to the to the show on stage or the public garden, we're still going to be fighting that fight.

Qudsiya 24:36

Yeah, that's absolutely true. And still making sure that access is a primary consideration in the design of spaces. And honestly, I think that you can consider access and still have something. I think access adds value for everyone in a lot of ways. And my other question is one of the things that I found about the mission of Artreach the thought was really important is the tenant of and this is, you know, a tenant that came out of the disability rights movement of nothing about us without us. So this idea that disabled people should participate in anything that's related to accommodations, or to access and should be part of the conversation at all times. And so I'm curious about the ways in which through your partnerships, and so on, you engage with that community. And, you know, seek that feedback and make sure that the programming is really designed to meet people's needs.

Charlie 25:36

When I say that, for you know, nothing about us without us ,to people, it seems so basic, and yet, like it's a light bulb moment, and yet, it defines everything that we do. It's almost like I said, it's almost the drum that we beat in a very public way. To give you an example, we heard from people from Associated Services for the Blind, one of the most amazing nonprofits in Philadelphia, um, that, you know, there were individuals who felt like they were being left out of movement like that, like dance and the ability to use their bodies. And just like, you know, how we all want to dance when good music comes on. Right? So we worked with the Pennsylvania ballet and, and Associated Services for the Blind in a really cool way. So we listened to what they had to say, we want to move, we want to dance, we also wanted to not just be dance classes, but we want to experience what the Pennsylvania ballet does on the mainstage. So a teacher goes in, they do a movement class, multiple movement classes, with the people that want to sign up and are interested in movement. And they use the music from the upcoming show that they're going to put on, you know, the Academy of Music, and the music becomes familiar. And even the movement becomes familiar. And they use ballet terms as their teaching this class. And then that group of people gets free tickets to let's say, it's Swan Lake at the Academy of Music, they get free tickets to it. And then Nicole Sardella, our audio describer, then describes the ballet in full through little earpieces to these groups, so that the reinforcement is there, right. So it's they heard, they've heard the music, they've heard the ballet terms, you know, they're sort of used the lyrical part of ballet, the way that your body moves with the music, and especially when it's classical orchestral music. So as it's being described, they know it, they know it almost in their bones, and in their bodies, and they can feel the music in that way as, as Nicole is painting the picture, so to speak, you know, verbally on stage. So it's that once again, it's taking that nugget, that moment of we want to dance and we want to we want to move and we don't want to be isolated from dance and beautiful, amazing ballets. How do we do that? And we were and there were some we had we learned some things, you know, it's not always perfect the first time round, but what do we do we listen. Right? We ask for feedback from the people that were We were serving, you know, the members of Associated Services for the Blind, so that we could continue making it better. We don't rest on our laurels.

Qudsiya 28:15

What were some of the things you learn in that process?

Charlie 28:17

Right.. so did people learn in different ways, right? So I'm like, even for example, like, we make just assumptions about if I say, raise your left arm, there are 100 ways I can raise my left arm quickly, slowly, am I doing it in an arc? You know, there's just like, really, there's different ways to do that we had to learn to be more specific, and to show, you know, and I think we're missing that, the touch perspective that the teacher come over, bend your arm into an arc, and then show you the movement, you know, and how it should look, that's a different pedagogy and the way that we're teaching. So those adjustments over time, you know, were important. Also, Nicole, for example, is constantly getting feedback from people of, oh, maybe that was too much audio description, or actually, I needed more of this, right? Or like, I didn't understand this piece.

So it's it's that constant readjustment between the teachers, the facilitators and the audio describer. You know, that takes a while to make it. I don't want to say perfect, because it's never perfect. It's a shining example of what it should look like.

Qudsiya 29:24

Yeah, I think there's also definitely a lot of trial and error. I think of myself taking audio described adaptive yoga classes for example. And it will often take me a few times to understand what someone's describing and then you kind of get into a rhythm. But yeah, I definitely can imagine that. It's an iterative process. I'm curious about the instructors. And you know, you provided the example of the Pennsylvania ballet, doing, like a performance with some disabled folks. So I'm curious about you know, what, if any feedback you've gotten from the non disabled participants about how that experience changed their perspective about the art that they're creating and the art that's created by the disabled people they're collaborating with?

Charlie 30:10

Oh god, I love that question. And the reason I love it is because the answer or the feedback is universal. It has made me this is what I hear, it has made me a better teacher, a better artists, a better facilitator, a better docent. Like all these people, when they interact with access and accommodations, and universal design and things like that, every time, the feedback I hear is, it is making me a better practitioner. And I think that's so powerful, because it shows us what the disability community can teach us as a society, about how to make things better, right? Like when we when when people disabilities are included in all aspects of life, right, access is the focus, we as a society improve. And it makes us better. So hearing that from the dance teachers, the artists, the painters, the docents, the, you know, even the front, the front of house, people at a theater, you know, it just makes us better, over and over again. And that I think that's the beauty of the gift that the disability community gives over and over again, to society as a whole.

Qudsiya 31:19

Yeah, I think that's a, that's a really, it's a really beautiful note to end on. And I really appreciate all of the work that you're doing. And I also am a firm believer that art is made better, and there's no one way to do it. And I think that the things that we embed when we provide access, and we create access is also an art in and of itself. I think you know, what Nicole does, for example, audio description is an art in itself. I mean,

Charlie 31:45

Absolutely.

Qudsiya 31:46

I've heard some audio descriptions that are like just poetry, you know, beautiful. So I think I really appreciate all of your all of your thoughts and reflections on that. So with that, thank you so much, Charlie, for taking the time to speak with me. And thank you for all the work that you do for disabled Philadelphians and the Philadelphia art community.

Charlie 32:06

Oh, thank you for having me. This has been it's been a joy and I hope you can hear my voice how much I love to talk about it. So thank you for having me.

Qudsiya 32:14

Thanks, Charlie.

Thank you for listening to part one of this week's episode of down to the struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of Anna Wu, Adrienne Kong, Ilana Nevins and Avery Anapol. If you like what you heard from Charlie Miller, please remember to continue on to part two of this episode, which features my interview with Nicole Sardella, a Philadelphia based audio describer See you in a minute so we can get back down to it with part two.

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