

## Article 19, Episode 9 – Web Design and A11y

*(Voiceover) Expression is one of the most powerful tools we have. A voice, a pen, a keyboard.*

*The real change which must give to people throughout the world their human rights must come about in the hearts of people. We must want our human beings to have rights and freedoms, which give them dignity.*

*Article 19 is the voice in the room.*

Marty:

Hello, and welcome to Article 19. My name is Marty Molloy, chief of staff and catalyst at Tamman. I am the host for our conversation today. Joining us is Karen Pellegrin. Karen is the senior web administrator and the city-wide accessibility coordinator for the City and County of Denver, and she is the co-founder of Chroma Key, a full-service design studio and consultancy, focused on accessible, equitable, and user-friendly digital experiences. Fake fact about Karen: backstage at a U2 concert in the 80s, with a Scotch in hand, she berated Bono that he'd better start caring about other people, and using his voice for good in the world, or else. So, that worked out. Also with us today are my co-host Amanda Roper, program manager of Tamman's accessibility initiatives. Hi, Amanda!

Amanda:

Hello, Marty. And welcome, Karen.

Marty:

And, as always, Tamman's head honcho, Michael Mangos, CEO, and co-founder of Tamman. Mr. Mangos, good evening.

Mike:

Hello, Marty, and thanks for joining us, Karen.

Karen:

Thank you very much.

Marty:

I'd like to set the stage for our listeners before our conversation gets going, that this podcast is born from the decision at Tamman to state clearly and plainly that access to information is a human right. The developers and designers at Tamman work hard to make sure that, no matter what use constraint a user may have, be it due to a temporary, situational, or permanent condition or disability, that they will be able to access the information designed and built by Tamman. This podcast is a call for others to join in a bigger conversation with us. We work to build the inclusive web. To do that, we need all of us, working together and learning

together. So, thank you so much for listening, and let's get this conversation started. So, with that, let me bring in Karen. Karen, how are you this evening? We're so glad that you're joining us.

Karen:

Thank you. I am doing well. Staying warm. We just had a little bit of snow outside earlier today, so, doing well.

Marty:

Awesome. So, because we record at the end of a workday, we usually start things off nice and easy, with a question that we can play with. Today's question is a 'choose one.' So, you have to pick one of these things, and you cannot say both. So, your choice, Karen, is: if you could choose to spend an hour with sweet, fuzzy puppies who lick and cuddle you non-stop, or a sumptuous gourmet meal of your choosing, which do you choose?

Karen:

That is a really tough question. I'm going to choose the fuzzy puppies, you know? I think it's long-lasting. I love food, but just being snuggled by a whole bunch of fuzzy puppies, I will never forget that moment.

Marty:

Good answer. Hey, Mr. Mike, what do you think? Are you the sumptuous gourmet meal, or are you fuzzy puppies?

Mike:

I think you know where I stand on this one.

Marty:

I certainly do.

Mike:

I mean, look, I love puppies, but I love food a whole lot more, so I'm going to pick the meal.

00:03:02

Karen:

I absolutely knew that was your answer, too. Just based on the Scotch conversation.

Marty:

Miss Amanda, I have a feeling I know where you're going to go with this, but I don't know. Surprise me.

Amanda:

I would always spend an hour with sweet, fuzzy puppies. Just, the cuddles and the warmth, and, like, the, 'oh, they're so cute!' Just watching them do their goofy little thing for an hour. Oh, yeah. Fill me with joy.

Marty:

I'm there with you. I am 100 percent spending an hour with the fuzzy puppies. And we don't usually do this, we're going to break the wall, but I'm actually really curious what our producer, Mark, would say to this particular question. Mark, are you a gourmet meal, or are you a fuzzy puppy kind of guy?

Mark:

Fuzzy puppies all the way. Fuzzy puppies. [laughs]

Amanda:

Oh, poor Mike's all alone with his meal. Such a shame.

Marty:

He'll be fine, it's more for him.

Mike:

I am perfectly happy to eat alone.

Amanda:

Bon Appetit.

Marty:

So, let's jump into it with Karen. Again, I'm so excited that you're here. I want to give you a second to start off, to orient listeners to who you are, what it is that you do, what do you love in the world? Tell us a little bit more about you.

Karen:

You got into a deep question. So, I am passionate about design. But I'm a passionate person about people being able to access design. So, my former life, I was in architecture. I have an interior architecture degree; I was all about experiencing the physical space. And I think that was the thing that kind of drove me in the beginning was, experiencing space, or having that feeling, that experience. As I got through that degree program, I also wanted to really help people. And I think that's been a driving force for me pretty much my entire life. And so, you know, the economy crashed in 2008, all of the architects, we all lost our jobs. It's just kind of the nature of how it went. And I retooled my career with all the design skills I had towards graphic and web design. And as I grew with that, I ended up working for the city. And I've been working for the city for almost 10 years, and I kind of got thrown into this position as the city's web accessibility coordinator, not knowing at all how to do that. And after a while, you know, I just had to teach myself, and then start connecting with people in the community, working with some of the organizations like the Blind Institute of Technology in Colorado. They helped me a lot. Just trying to figure out, you know, get my

bearings on what I need to do to make the city's digital experiences accessible. And as I learned more, I also realized that it needed to be equitable. So, they're very tied together, and it just kind of drove my passion for design and my passion to help people and blossom to what I do today, and I'm just continually growing, because as you know, accessibility is such a vast subject, you can kind of fall into the rabbit hole. So, I'm trying to navigate through that rabbit hole. And it's a fun adventure. I've been enjoying it.

00:06:05

Marty:

So, Karen, I'm curious then, as a government official, do you have a feeling of an extra layer of responsibility, to ensure both inclusivity and equitable environments for people to access the information they need to on the website? Or, how do you find the balance between what needs to happen from a government standpoint, and bringing accessibility and inclusivity forward?

Karen:

I actually think there are a lot of additional challenges because it's government. There are government mandates around accessibility that go beyond a lot of what is enforced in the private industry. But beyond just having to really push to another level, in terms of getting to accessibility, there's so much more negotiating with such a large organization around all of the people that you have to work with, all the people you have to educate, train, advise. You know, working with vendors, I work with so many people when I work on accessibility and equity efforts in the city. And it's the city and county, so that makes it even bigger. It's not just the city, we've got a county as well. So, it's a really large group of people. It's a little bit like herding cats, but it's a challenge. I think it's a rewarding one, because you learn a lot, you get to work with a lot of people, and they are really excited to help. There's kind of a culture in government around civil service, and being able to serve the community, so I think that helps. But then, there's a lot of, you know, your typical government bureaucracy of, 'well, we have to get this stuff out there. But we also have to make it be accessible and equitable,' and so there's a little bit of a chicken and egg experience in there. Do you get it out there first, and then make accessible? Or do you make it accessible, and take the time to properly get it out there? Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.

Mike:

You mentioned an interesting thing there, that government oftentimes has either a greater responsibility or more commitment to a mission, to making something more accessible. Maybe I'm mincing words a little bit, but I'm reading into what you're saying. Do you have an example of, like, where the government is going beyond maybe what private industry would do? And is that codified in law, or is that something that is really more taken up as a belief and expressed through, like, the corporate culture or the government culture, rather than being codified?

Karen:

At a base level, there is an increased requirement for government organizations to be accessible. But I guess there's a benefit when you have a government organization, especially a larger one, who also believes that this is important to their community, to do this kind of thing. Where then it becomes a culture, or they strive to make it a culture. Which I think is unique a little bit, in the city and county of Denver. I don't think that all government organizations have gotten to that point. They've only gotten to, 'well, this is absolutely what I have to meet.' We are trying to strive to be above that or beyond that—I don't want to say above, but—go beyond our minimum requirements. And even in that, we're having challenges with meeting some of the basic requirements, and fighting through that, and making sure that we innovate and get creative on how we meet those challenges. But then, we're constantly talking now about what we call the resident experience, where we're saying, 'we want it to be accessible, transparent, equitable for all of our audience. And so, let's start doing things like, writing in plain language. Because, not only is it good for just accessibility, but it's also good for search engine optimization, which is a business thing. It's good for translation; it's easier to translate your content when it's in plain language. So, we're looking at those kind of things, and trying to go above and beyond those minimum, federally-mandated requirements.

00:09:49

Amanda:

We worked together at the city for a little bit of time there, but you have such more insight into, like, how that started, and how that came to be. I know a big part of your role at the city is continuing to push for those changes, continuing to make sure that the city is meeting [inaudible sounds like: WICHAG20 00:10:08], or beyond that level. And you start with people who have never been introduced to accessibility, a lot of times. And you're educating them and you're kind of getting them from 0 to 60 really quickly. So, my question is, as an educator, how do you craft the messaging that sticks and resonates for just about any audience? There's one that you shared a few weeks ago, with the Russian nesting dolls, and it's such a good visual example, so, how do you do that, Karen?

Karen:

I am a fan of the metaphor, so, I always try to put the technical into more of, I don't want to say layman's term, but more of an approachable way of, kind of identifying how things work, and why we do things. So, one, the metaphors really help kind of put things into a different perspective, that are more attainable, more understandable, so that's where the nesting dolls came in. And that had to do with the headings and heading hierarchy. But there are other ones like that, and one of the things that I really strive to do is put a humanistic element to all of this, of 'why are we doing this?' And it's not about just, 'oh, here's the list of types of people who have disabilities that we need to make this content accessible for.' You have to think about things, like, I'm getting older, and I now have to wear glasses. So, my vision isn't as good as it used to be. And do I have to squint to look at smaller text now? Well, if I have to squint, that means a whole lot of people probably do, too.

And should we actually be making the font a bigger size? And then I start using resources from the ally community to back that information up and say, 'well, I have a hard time seeing this, so you might have a hard time seeing it, and so maybe we should ask the ally community.' And they say, 'well, 16 pixels is actually the standard body font size, and it's because it's easier for everyone to read.' And so those are the kind of things that I do where, I identify with the people I work with, the people I communicate with from the ally community and our residents, and ask them, you know, 'what are your challenges, and how can we improve the web experience to meet those challenges?'

00:12:20

Marty:

As a designer, then, Karen, I'm curious, when those things are in conflict, right?

Karen:

Oh, yeah.

Marty:

So, when your accessibility hat is on, right, and you're like, 'oh, yes, this should be 14, 16-point font. But it ruins my design!' How do you reconcile that within yourself as a designer, or how do you help bring a designer who might be a little bit newer to accessibility along on that journey?

Karen:

That's a really tough one. It's taken practice. [laughs] It's taken practice for me to kind of learn that, 'no but,' conversation. No, we really shouldn't be doing this, but here's why. And if you actually—sometimes I use examples—if you look at this page, and yes, it might not seem right here. And then you look at the design when it's more accessible, and you do some comparisons, you're actually able to say, 'this is actually more easily readable design for anyone.' It kind of goes along that universal design. You're designing for the universe. You're designing for everyone. And sometimes, even though it looks really complex and beautiful, it may be really difficult for a large group of people to read or understand. And so, a lot of times you just have to walk through that kind of thing. Through, you know, looking at the designs, or just having that discussion. And then you get those certain points where it's like, 'well, you know what? I know it's really tough, but if we're going to meet the needs of all of our viewers, then we need to do it this way.' I usually don't have to get that point until the very end, I can usually get before there, but every once in a while, yeah, you have to have that tough conversation.

Marty:

Bring the big stick out at the end if they're still not getting it.

Karen:

Yeah. I hate doing it. But sometimes it happens. Most of the time, it's more about connecting with the humanistic element.

Amanda:

When the designers are at the beginning, and maybe their eyes are starting to open up a little bit, they're starting to get excited. What are some of the most common accessibility mistakes or misguided assumptions that you run into in those beginning, introduction to accessibility areas?

Karen:

So, the first one that comes up all the time are headings, and understanding that headings aren't created just for the way they look, but the way they guide people through your content. I always talk about the Sherpa, and headings are your Sherpa, to get you through the content of a page or a site, so they know how to go from high-level topics to the second level, to the third, you know. You're going up the mountain. You start at the base level, and you move up. And sometimes you move back down. But you have a guide to walk you through, and so you structure your content with the headings first, and then you style them. And that has been very eye-opening. And the other thing that's been eye-opening is color. Everything around color. Color contrast, and then things that blow people's mind are color-dependent [inaudible sounds like: sticky widgets 00:15:08]. Like, really into the weeds. So those are probably the biggest.

00:15:12

Mike:

I love how you've used the language, 'Sherpa,' because we often talk about that at Tamman, too. And I've spoken publicly about that. About guiding clients or partners up a mountain to reach a certain summit. One of the slides that I've used in the past is of this famous line-art drawing called, 'The Disaster on the Matterhorn,' with people falling off the mountain. And the idea that the whole party started falling off the side of the mountain. And I used that as an analogy for people that are deeply steeped or have a long history in graphic design, or what they think is user-experience design, but oftentimes, it's built on these old ideas or these old notions that don't really include accessibility at their core. How do you address people, or how do you tackle that fear that a lot of people have? Like, when you're educating, how do you tackle that fear that they're not falling off the mountain, it's just a different way of climbing?

Karen:

I mean, I think you said it. You know, you just have to reframe the conversation to, 'this probably isn't as scary as you think it is.' It's just rethinking and walking them through, re-understanding how websites should be built and structured. So, to the point of kind of, the Sherpa and the map, you start talking about things like, the navigation of a website. And let them know that you're passing them through all these things. And once they've gotten through that level, that's to the point of skip navigation. They've already seen that navigation. Unless they need to get back to that navigation, they're ready to get into the contents of the page. And so, you just kind of have to walk them through the whys of, why we're building them this way. And most of the time, you can win that conversation, if you start talking about, not just the how, but the why. And that again, goes back to that humanistic level. We're doing this because it works this way. Why are we doing this? Because it's

easier for people to find their place and follow content and understand what they're listening to, or what they're tactilely feeling, from a tactile keyboard, so that they understand that this is a section of content, and that now I understand this is a list, because I'm using the proper structure for this list. Or, now I've moved to another content area that is the footer of my website, and maybe I don't want to always hit the footer of my website. And maybe I want to skip that, too. So, it's just giving them the understanding of the purpose of why we build this stuff, and why we're building it this way, and that we're, again, walking them through the map, so to speak. Up and down the mountain.

Mike:

I love what you said, by the way. You're crushing that answer, so thank you.

Karen:

Thank you.

Mike:

What's, I think, really interesting, is that people that are willing to go down that road are the ones who are going to carry the load for the rest of us that want to make accessible solutions. There probably won't be a future for a lot of people who don't get on board, you know, eventually. I mean, it'll take a few years, but I really like this idea that, what's going to speak to most people, and people who don't do it for a reason, people who are there saying, I'm just designing because I design, not because I have a reason to design, probably are going to be left behind. Sad to say, hope I'm not offending any of our current customers. But, like, the idea being that, I think we have a real opportunity to inspire people to do this for the right reasons, and I think the why gets at that. So, I love what you said. I get behind it wholeheartedly.

00:18:28

Karen:

And I would say that, throughout all of this, a lot of it is about inspiration, you know. If you really care about your customers, then you're going to inspire them to do the right thing.

Amanda:

Every time, Karen. Yes. You get me.

Karen:

Passion, y'all.

Amanda:

Yeah, no, seriously.

Karen:

Oh, thank you.



Amanda:

Yeah, no, I really mean it. In your mind, you've been steeped in accessibility for six, seven years now?

Karen:

Six years.

Amanda:

And I know that you're actively taking part of, a lot of those conversations. What do you think is being left out of the accessibility conversation today?

Karen:

Things that go beyond the bare minimum. That this isn't just about meeting legal requirements. We should be doing this, again, because we care about reaching everybody. And that we're not excluding part of the world community; that we're speaking to everyone. And that's why we started rolling in the digital equity. And that's why I talk a lot about, you know, it's not just somebody who has obvious disability, a visual, very noticeable disability. We have to think about people who have dyslexia. When you copy out there that's in all-caps, a lot of people who are dyslexic, or even people who have autism, they have challenges with that kind of content. So, we have to think beyond just the obvious, and think about all of the different scenarios that cause challenges in how we access content on the web.

Mike:

I think also we need to encourage everyone to stop writing in all-caps, because it is yelling. Stop yelling.

Karen:

Yeah, no kidding! Stop yelling at us. Even if you don't have dyslexia specifically, nobody reads the web, let's be honest. We're not reading treatises and stuff like that. We are scanning for the things we want to get done. I want to know how to do this, or I want to find out about this information now. I'm not spending more than 15 seconds to do this. And so, trying to figure out all-caps when your brain kind of doesn't work that way is harder to do. Even if you have nothing else going on.

Amanda:

The web is my tool as much as it is your tool, so.

Karen:

Oh, and I am very online, I will tell you. Almost to, like, a shameful point. So. And it's funny, because I'm on Twitter a lot, and I have had to train myself to be accessible even on Twitter. That's been interesting.

Amanda:

So, Karen, we have one more question in this segment, and then Marty is going to take us home. So, if you could wave your magic wand—and we all know that you

definitely have one—what is one thing that you would ensure every designer starts doing right now?

00:21:04

Karen:

Making every document accessible. That is the hardest, hardest thing to make accessible, are documents. There's so much more complexity. People kind of think of it as an afterthought. If every designer could make every end design, presentation, flyer, you name it, accessible, that would just save my life. I would have only half the work I do now, just by making documents accessible.

Marty:

That was a great answer. So, Karen, I'm going to move us on to a segment we call, 'Three Questions.' And these are three questions that we ask every guest. Are you ready?

Karen:

Hit me.

Marty:

What is one personal accommodation that you make?

Karen:

Explain that one.

Marty:

Something that you do, perhaps it could be as simple as changing a setting on your monitor, it could be—frankly, I like the broadest view of, 'I need to step away after spending four hours at my computer and walk my dog.' Whatever it could be, what is one thing that you make sure that you accommodate for yourself to get through your day. Personal, profession, whatever it might be?

Karen:

Interesting. I make sure that I have time to just do heads-down work. And I listen to the low-fi hip-hop on Apple. And I just need to be able to escape and zone into work, because I, admittedly, am in meeting hell most of my life. I meet with a lot of people. I love meeting with people, I'm extremely social, but as a social butterfly, I just need to be able to step away and do heads-down work with the music on.

Mike:

Amen. We're in the same boat, Karen.

Karen:

Seriously. Sometimes you just need a break.

Marty:

Very true. Except for the low-fi hip-hop. Mike is not a music fan. He hates puppies and music, apparently.

Karen:  
What?

Mike:  
Oh, no, I love music, I'm just not into live music.

Karen:  
Oh, OK. You gotta listen to the low-fi hip-hop, though. It's just like a smooth ride down the river while you're doing code.

Marty:  
The second question is, what is something about the world that keeps you up at night?

Karen:  
One thing?

Marty:  
[laughs]

Karen:  
You know, it's 2021, which is just an extension of 2020. Cruelty, just in general. Just, the cruelty in the world. Boulder really hit hard, and I don't understand a lot of times why people have to be so brutally cruel. I try to make sure that I am considerate and empathetic with pretty much everyone I can meet and talk to, and I just don't understand, with something that I feel is so easy to do, that people have such a hard time and are so selfish. It hurts my heart.

Mike:  
Shameless plug for a prior podcast episode of ours is 'Radical Empathy.' So, I just want to throw that out there, that I feel like that could be a solution to a lot of things.

Karen:  
Radical Empathy. Tell me more later!

Marty:  
You can listen to more later. Anyway.

Karen:  
I will.

Marty:

We are log-rolling, and that's not good. All right, so finally, your final question: What is one recommendation for a game, a book, a movie, a TV show, a podcast, whatever it might be, that you would have for us right now?

00:24:00

Karen:

Oh, wow. That's a really tough one. I mean, I have some favorite books. The book I'm reading right now, that I read in college, and I feel like I didn't get as much out of it as I do now, is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I love that book, it's amazing, and it's super-passionate. One of my all-time favorite books, though, that I highly recommend, is *The Cyberiad*, I don't know if you've ever read that. It's a strange sci-fi book, with some interesting, like, short stories. It's almost like a kids' book in a way. I highly recommend it, it's called *The Cyberiad*. Other than that, if you ever need to escape, just go escape into a bunch of episodes of *Futurama*. That's my favorite TV show ever. Still to this day, I could go back and watch that any time, and always be happy.

Mike:

I love Zoidberg.

Karen:

I don't know if you know this, I wish I could share my desktop, but it's just a big red screen with Zoidberg's face in the middle. Zoidberg is my guy. That's my crab.

Mike:

That's great.

Marty:

I feel like you took us down the mountain from the heights of Zora Neale Hurston to *Futurama*.

Karen:

Yes, I did. Yes, I did.

Marty:

Nevertheless, I am so appreciative that you took this time with us today. And I really hope that you'll come back. I think we just started to scratch the surface on what we need to talk about. So please, come back, join us anytime, Karen.

Karen:

Thank you, I'd love to join again.

*If you like what you heard today, and want to explore more about digital accessibility, inclusivity, or to schedule a time to talk with us, you can find the whole Tamman team at [tammaninc.com](http://tammaninc.com). That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C.com. Or, follow us on social media, at tammaninc on Linked In, Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook. We'll talk to you again next time.*