

Article 19 Podcast, Episode 13 – Mentorship Matters

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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 fellow 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 Malloy [ph], chief of staff and catalyst at Tamman and I am the host for our conversation today. I am joined, and I'm so excited by this, by a previous podcast guest, my colleague and now I'm happy to say co-host for Article 19, Nimit [ph] Carr. Hello Nimit!

Nimit:

Hello Marty.

Marty:

I'm so glad that you're here. This podcast would not have been possible without you today. Our guest today, who you brought to us, is Kristen [inaudible 00:00:56]. Kristen is a multi-faceted professional with many years of experience in program management, administration, teaching, writing in a wide variety of academic settings. She's a passionate advocate and skilled communicator and she has a track record of success in meeting the needs of faculty, students, team members and partners. Fake fact about Kristen – the song "Bad Reputation" by Joan Jett and the Black Hearts is really about her. I want to give a little context for our conversation today. This podcast is a call for others to join us in a bigger conversation around the ADA, digital accessibility and access to information. At Tamman, we are working to build the inclusive web everyday, but to do that, we need all of us working together and learning together. Thanks for listening to Article 19 and let's get this conversation started. Let me formally bring in our guest, Kristen. It's so nice to meet you.

Kristen:

Thank you so much for having me Marty. As I was saying earlier, if Bad Reputation ruins the rest of my career life, I expect some compensation, but thank you!

Marty:

It did OK for Joan, so I don't know. We'll see. We're so glad that you're here. Can you tell the listening audience a little bit about you, your background, orient us to you?

Kristen:

I am a teacher. I'm a writer. I'm an editor. I am a mother, a wife or partner, depending on who you ask in the marriage world, and I happen to be blind. I've been blind since I was born, so that's been my world for my whole life.

Marty:

That's amazing. If you don't mind me asking, how old are your kids?

Kristen:

They are 10, 5 and 2 right now. And I don't know when the podcast comes out, they might be 11, 6 and 3. Somewhere in there.

Marty:

That is a very busy life that you have, being a mother, a spouse, a teacher, a mentor, an advocate, everything that you are. I can't wait to dive into all of it. Let's start with the teacher and the mentor, as you are. Someone who can write curriculum, someone who teaches, someone who has done a lot of this in the education space. Can you tell me a little bit more about that work and your students?

[00:03:09]

Kristen:

I teach in many ways. I am a content editor right now for a program called The College Success Program, and in that role I am either developing or creating resources for college students who are blind or have low vision. In that space, it's really important and in fact critical to address these students directly, and that seems like a pretty small thing but when I first started, most of the resources were directed to parents or professionals and there wasn't that much material directed to the students themselves, so that's been my guiding star I guess. The thing I live by, making sure whoever is the audience is actually at the center and the people with disabilities are at the center of things. Right now I am also teaching four students who are blind through a small New Jersey based company called Business Education Partners, run by a wonderful teacher and advocate who lives right here in Highland Park and she sends teachers directly into school districts and so they work with the students several hours a week and help them to achieve their goals. That's the teaching I do.

Marty:

I'm curious, you've been doing this now for many, many years. This isn't new to you. But when you were first getting started, I'm going to brag about you since you haven't mentioned it yet. You don't have just your Bachelor's Degree from an

amazing and elite institution. You don't have just one Master's Degree. How many Master's Degrees do you have?

Kristen:

So I have three Master's Degrees. I have one in teaching gifted students, one in teaching students who are blind or have low vision and then one in creative writing and fiction. It is an ill-advised path, filled with much debt and much joy in learning, and I don't know that I'd recommend it to anyone but I loved it and I aspire to earn a Doctorate someday. The time hasn't happened yet, but someday it will come.

Marty:

Sure. You're a little bit busy with children and everything else going on. But I'm curious then, how much of your own journey and your own pathway do you find now in your teaching? The struggles, the opportunities, the excitement? Is there a direct link or is it separate? One is a professional, one was as a student, and then neither of the two shall meet?

Kristen:

That's such a profound question. I feel like I could answer it either way. I think learning as a blind student prepared me for teaching them, but at the same time, everyone's struggles and joys and challenges and aspirations are so individual. I work with people, except for when I write resources, but when I teach people, I teach one-on-one, and every single person is unique and their journey is unique. In some ways, when you meet a new person you are starting all over again.

[00:06:24]

Marty:

That's amazing. When you meet a new person, you mentioned this, and Nimit, I want to try and bring you into the conversation a little bit here intentionally, but Nimit first introduced you to Tamman as her mentor and I'd like to talk a little bit about what that means to you when you mentor students, beyond just teaching them. What does it mean to be a mentor for you?

Kristen:

That's a great question. I started out by mentoring students through a program called New Jersey EDGE. EDGE is an acronym. The blindness world loves acronyms like everyone else, and it stands for Employment Development Guidance Engagement. Nimit was one of my first students in that program. I also mentor for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and I'm excited about both of those mentorship opportunities. The AWP mentorship is not specifically about disability or blindness or employment, so that was in a way a step to the side, but at the same time, I've been working with writers with disabilities, so I feel right at home in that space. But in both of those programs, I really hope that mentorship is

a meeting of the minds, that Latin root of mentor, and what I mean by that is, almost trying to figure out what a student is thinking about the challenges that they're having and really addressing the thoughts that they have. It does not always work. Mentors are assigned in programs like this and I feel like that's a little bit different from when I was seeking more mentorship because I reached out and met mentors and it was sort of developed organically and naturally and not like, "This person is your mentor," and I feel like that's a little bit different now, with the students who are coming up. Mostly that's good, I think, giving students access to a mind [inaudible 00:08:24] is crucial, but because they're assigned, sometimes it doesn't always work that way. But you know, in an ideal mentorship relationship, I think really getting into what a student is thinking about as they grow and change and mature is crucial.

Marty:

So Nimit, as you think about having been mentored by Kristen, what are some of the responsibilities of being a mentee?

Nimit:

The biggest responsibility of being a mentee is keeping really good communication line, because when you are assigned a mentor or when you find a mentor, either path, it is a way for you to have an access to an individual who can [inaudible 00:09:09] your experience or has walked in your shoes before and it's a network for you to go to for advise or even just normal life talk. Just have a conversation and a person who can understand. Because a lot of the time, some of the challenges that people with disabilities can face in daily life, sometimes not many people understand and so not many people can understand those experiences, so having a mentor who can empathize and understand what you're going through and you can talk to and get the advice, very useful. I always tell incoming high school students who are going through the New Jersey EDGE program or similar programs right now is use all of the resources you have because as a high school student, we already have – any student, regardless of disability or not – we are already at a stage where everything is overwhelming for students and having to talk to someone can sometimes be like, "Oh, I have to do that too?" So I always tell students yes, it might be like a responsibility for you to attend meetings and have the conversation and tell about yourself and give updates, but in reality, I look back to those years when I was in high school and was a part of that program and similar programs and look back to all of the resources that I was provided, I think are the resources that shaped me today to who I am and gave me the necessary skills for inclusion and mainstream access.

[00:11:02]

Marty:

That's amazing. In other words, good job Kristen.

Kristen:

Thank you. I always feel that people get the ideas of mentorship. A mentor is not a God, and they are coming at things with their own personal biases and their experiences and also their limitations, and so it is much more helpful for a mentor to hear, "That idea might be good, but it doesn't work for my situation and here's why," than to just be like, "OK, I'll do it," and then you know they didn't or they aren't really telling you. People aren't being authentic with you about how they're feeling. I think I learned so much from my mentees about life and technology, what's going on, what's coming, and that's a really valuable gift for a mentor.

Nimit:

That's where communication comes in, because having a communication is very crucial. These days, as Kristen said, mentors are typically assigned, so the first connection might not have been right away. That's where you can go to the program and say, "Maybe I can benefit from another mentor." Sometimes we just don't have that connection in the first place, like I did with Kristen, so in that case, either way, communication is the biggest responsibility for any mentee, I think.

[00:12:28]

Marty:

So you both bring up communication. You bring up connection, Nimit. I'm curious how or if things have changed because of Covid. I'm making the assumption that the two of you, Kristen you were really mentoring a younger Nimit, that that was happening in person. One, is that assumption correct?

Kristen:

Sort of.

Marty:

Two, has it changed? Is there – both from a mentor/mentee relationship, as well as from an educator perspective, as more of this has gone online and been sort of forced online, we're doing this podcast in four different places, is something lost in that or is actually something gained? I'm curious what your thoughts are around all of that?

Kristen:

EDGE was a pretty virtual program, except for the group events where people met and I didn't even do the high school program. There were maybe two or three events a year, people got together in person, and that was a big group. Mentorship mostly occurred over the phone. Nimit and I met a few extra times in person, due to her living near my mom's house, so we ended up meeting geographically. We also send What's App messages, these long voice mail messages, to each other.

And there's something about hearing people's voices where they have a long time to just spill whatever is going on and dwell on it in their speech and then the other person comes back with their response. It's a combination of being somewhat spontaneous and still being able to think about what you want to say. That's really neat in that mentorship context. Most of us who are blind are not used to living near other blind people. We're very comfortable with the virtual space. Covid certainly intensified that. I haven't seen Nimit in person since 2019, but at the same time, we make it work.

Marty:

It almost sounds like the letter writing, as you describe it. It's a lost art.

Kristen:

Yeah, it is. And we're making a comeback. It always makes me sad about the lost art. I really value the books of letters from authors and people say, "Letter writing is a lost art. Start writing letters." If people wrote me letters, I couldn't read them. Come on guys! There was a problem with the lost art. We're trying to fix it. But Nimit, I interrupted you. You were going to talk?

[00:15:00]

Nimit:

No worries. This question actually made me rethink my time again. So in high school, when I was in the high school EDGE program, I actually did not meet you that often.

Kristen:

I only met you in the college program.

Nimit:

College program, so there was transitioning college and at [inaudible 00:15:20] associates years, mostly. And we just continue. I think most of the programs happened before pandemic. They were in person for group events, but most of the actual one-on-one mentorship actually did happen online, via phone calls mostly. Got to a point where sometimes having a phone call was a little bit conflicting with schedules, so we came up with What's App and I think we just continued. I currently don't have an official mentor. I graduated from that program at 22 years old. That's the highest the state would take in those programs, but we still continue the conversations online. It's like monthly or bi-monthly basis, but that continues today.

Marty:

That's when the relationship did click and the meeting of the minds did work. I appreciate that. I think it's amazing that you two are still connected and relying on

each other. I think when that mentor/mentee relationships, I know in my own mentor/mentee relationships, they are ongoing. There is no time limit. So I appreciate that. I want to turn the conversation a little bit, kind of back to education if I may. Kristen, as an educator and a curriculum builder, I'm really curious how you approach accessibility and whether or not that is something that supersedes content or is interwoven as part of the content? I'm curious if you think intentionally?

Kristen:

I have two different answers to that. As a curriculum builder, my primary focus was on the content is the article, telling a good story, is it communicating its message clearly? Does it all make sense on a sentence level, paragraph level and article? That kind of thing. And it's thrown into the platform and boom, we test the platform and it's accessible, so they are very separate journeys in a way. We do think about content in the sense of not having videos without transcripts or not having visual videos, but in a way we don't really think visually anyway when we're creating these things, so maybe the accessibility is just sort of organic to what we're doing. As a teacher, my role is a little different because I am going into students' lives and making sure that all of the things they are doing are accessible to them, so I'm occasionally connecting with teachers who are working with the students in the general education setting to make sure they understand the accessibility and how to make an assignment meaningful for a student. If I'm creating content, it's about teaching the student a specific skill or maybe helping them to do informational interviewing or going over Braille contractions. In that context, probably the accessibility is the most important aspect of what I'm doing.

[00:18:24]

Marty:

I am doing a lot of head nodding, by the way, just to let you know, because I think a lot of what you're saying is really resonating. I am curious. You just mentioned Braille contractions, and I had read something somewhere, this is a terrible question because I haven't researched it at all but I'm going to go with it anyway, that there is a significant percentage of individuals who are blind that do not read Braille. What say you about Braille and blindness and things like that?

Kristen:

Since I didn't have time to research the answer, I'm just going to put that disclaimer in there.

Marty:

This is the best kind of dinner conversation. We just kind of go off the cuff. We're making up facts as we go.

Kristen:

I don't want to be a misinformation spreader at all, so just throw that disclaimer in there. But it's something like 30 to 40 percent of blind adults have gainful employment, which I believe means employment that fits their education and credentials and life experiences, and of those, something like 90 percent of them are Braille readers. And then like 10 percent of people are learning Braille. There are so many factors. One is just all of the technology and the screen reading software, which has made life very convenient and certainly I use it daily, so I'm not going to knock that. But sometimes people use that as a primary method of reading and haven't been exposed to Braille. And then it's also very much cheaper to get a software program and it is to get a Braille display. There are changes in that, but if you want to keep up with the tech, it's usually cheaper to get a screen reader than it is to get a Braille display. That's then an unfortunate hit for Braille, I think. But there's something about Braille that, learning it and this again is a generalization and does not apply to every single person, but Braille enables people who don't have access to print to really understand the shape of language, the structure of it, how sentences are formed, how words are spelled, and I feel like I should really just send you a New York Times article to absorb the rest of it. There's something really special about having the tools of language being given to you in that way. It's not usually quite the same with audio, unless you put in the work to break things down by character, word, sentence, all the time, which people don't always do.

[00:21:07]

Marty:

Sure. So we're going to talk about employment in a little bit, but that correlation is astounding, and even from a 30-second Google search, it seems like you're on it there with the correlation of Braille literacy and employment. What is the responsibility then, as an employer, that I should have at least a rudimentary understanding of Braille and the assist of tech that's related to Braille?

Kristen:

That's an excellent question. I mean, I think by the time people get to employment, they've either learned Braille or they haven't. People can certainly learn Braille as adults, and they do, but it's slower and a lot harder.

Marty:

Like any language?

Kristen:

Like any language. Braille is across all languages. It's not a language, it's a writing system, but when you read with your fingers when you're a small child, you're very sensitive to those differences. If you are older, it just takes a lot more effort to

learn that same thing, so if people come into the employment space and they're fully capable employees and they're not using Braille, then it shouldn't really reflect badly on them. They just didn't learn it and they've gotten around other tools. I think in the education space, there are a lot of difficult conversations about when do people learn Braille and traditionally, it was people who couldn't see at all or who maybe could only see a little bit clearly couldn't read print. But if people could read print, then people were told, "You read print, so you can read it," and even if it was slower or really hard, it was like, "But you're still a print reader." I think that is changing now in the education space and people are looking at what is going to be the best method? Even if a student can struggle through the letters now, is that struggle going to work when they have lots more to read or listen to or just keep up with? Is that person's vision going to change or deteriorate or is there a possibility that would happen? And if either of those things are true, then Braille is something they should be learning, even if they're not using it for everything right away. It's a conversation for sure in the education space, but I think on the employment side, you know, maybe just making sure that if people want a Braille display to do their job and they feel, "I'm a pretty good listener and I can listen to this document that you just sent me but it would be really great if I could actually read it," but the Braille display is \$6,000 and the screen reader is \$1,000, maybe just thinking about how can this worker be comfortable? Would a Braille display be useful for more than one person or say this person were to move on, I could still save it and use it in the future? Maybe just looking into all of the tech options and thinking about the benefits of all of them, even if they cost more.

[00:24:01]

Marty:

Absolutely. Kind of sticking in this assistive tech space, is there a piece of assistive tech that you really want to recommend? That you say, "This is absolutely essential," when you're working with your students?

Kristen:

No, because by the time I recommend it, something else will come out.

Marty:

That's great.

Kristen:

I'd also, quite seriously, my students all have newer Braille displays than I do. I still have a Braille Note 8x. Nimit, you probably know about this, but they're like 10 years old at this point. Mine is still working, and so I'm going to use it until the thing dies. I am knocking on wood because it's going to die any day now, but it's another \$4,000-\$6,000 to get a new display, so yeah, I use the old tech right now. My students use the newer tech and I'm happy about that.

Nimit:
I completely agree.

Marty:
She needs newer tech. I'm way off script here, but I'm really interested in this. Are there foundations, are there grants, are there programs that assist maybe not professionals making their way in the world and have a significant income and living wage and whatnot, but are there programs and foundations that assist with getting assistive tech into the hands of children and others that need it?

Kristen:
Well, right now, honestly, mostly the best route would be to go through your state's commission for the blind or different –

Marty:
[Inaudible 00:25:24]

Kristen:
Yeah, [inaudible 00:25:25]. They will provide technology. They'll do technology assessments. The sooner you know that you need it, the sooner you should make that phone call because sometimes they can take a while for many reasons. But that's really the best way to get started, up until when you're working, is to just contact your state organization.

Marty:
I want to dive into advocacy for a minute, while I have you here. I just got back from ADACon in Baltimore this week, and I had the opportunity to hear a speech by Dr. Anjali Forber-Pratt. She is the new head of the National Institute on Disability and Living and Rehabilitation Research, and in her talk, she talked about her own educational journey. That led those of us who were listening, a group of us, to talk not only about education but also employment and I promise we're going to get back to employment on this. I'd really like to hear some of your perspective on the gaps and the opportunities to improve and deepen educational practices, for those living with disabilities, but specifically in the blind community. I'd like to start with the gaps. I mean, what are some of the gaps in expertise of professionals at all levels of the educational spectrum, from the primary, secondary and higher ed areas?

Kristen:
To summarize all the gaps –

Marty:
Not all the gaps, but whatever comes to mind.

One gap that I am teaching in at the moment is the concept of special education diploma. It is a noble concept. It was developed because there are students who, for whatever reason, will not master grade level standards, will not pass grade level expectations, and therefore will not genuinely qualify for what's called a standard diploma. Sometimes these students will go to school, even longer than their peers. They'll get a diploma that says they went to school, but it's sort of considered a special education diploma, with a kind of disclaimer. While the intention of that is wonderful, the educators who work with them are wonderful human beings and the students are wonderful people, they haven't been always prepared to go into the full array of options after secondary school. So, for instance, they may not be equipped to go to a college with what they know. They may not exactly fall into the job programs that high schools can feed them into. They might have skills or talents that are a little bit outside of those, but then may not also be able to get the education to prove that they have them. I think one way that I am trying to look at that as I work with such students is to give them experiences and certifications that will make up for the lack of a college degree or the lack of a standard high school diploma, so that they can then go to prospective employers and say, "I have worked on mastering this piece of technology and I am ready to show other people how to use it or help them troubleshoot and this is what I have learned. It's not part of the high school curriculum, it's not part of a college curriculum, but it will help me to work for you." That's just an example. Or I have another student who wants to be a behaviorist and really just needs some experiences that would either approximate that goal for him or just give him the training that would then make up for the education. Just to think about those goals. There are some programs for people with disabilities that don't even really fit blindness, so it's just a really interesting conundrum. That's one gap.

[00:29:34]

Marty:

That's a huge one. When we were talking a little bit before we started recording, you mentioned a phrase that I think is incredibly powerful, that we've actually written a blog article about on our website, which is about learned helplessness. We were talking about it from the standpoint of maybe a toxic or apathetic workplace, but kids are smart. And they know the difference between these two things, and I think it's really interesting to hear you talk about ways in which you are going to provide tools and resources and opportunities that are outside of the IEP sort of structured world. Even though that IEP is also giving them access to resources and access to other things, the inequality of one, or even if it's the perceived inequality, but the inequality of one diploma versus another can create that sense of helplessness. When you think back on the students, not just the current students that you have but the students that you've touched and reached and worked with in

the past, do you feel like you've gotten through and past that learned helplessness for most of them at least?

[00:30:38]

Kristen:

This is actually a new thing for me, so ask me that in a couple of years.

Marty:

I will. I hope we continue this conversation beyond, because that relates to the employment question that I want to bring back to you.

Kristen:

Learned helplessness is not just on individual students. It is on the system of employment and I think sometimes people with disabilities experience the job interview as sort of a nightmare in the sense of going in, interviewing, and everything is going well, but they kind of have a suspicion that it's not, because of something that's already clicked in someone else's mind about disability and people's capabilities and then an employer. There are two things. One is obviously there are many candidates for a position and sometimes the person with disabilities may not have as much experience as someone else, so that is a legitimate consideration. On the other side of it is sort of the trap of either not being able to get those experiences to catch up or an employer seeing this person kind of making unconscious associations or biases, biased assumptions, and sort of thinking, "I can't hire that person. I can't work with them. They'll need too much." Almost the learned helplessness of employers, because in the education space, no matter how difficult a class is and there are some that are really challenging, there are teachers who definitely are worried about working with people with disabilities and make that known but ultimately if you persist, you will get through that class whether the other person likes it or not and you can go to somebody higher and say, "Look, I'm having trouble getting through this class," and eventually it's going to have to happen because the education world hopefully in most scenarios is like, "What can I do for you?" But when you get to the employment world, it's like, "What can you do for us?" It's the flipside of that and just the idea that people with disabilities can exist on this continuum of either pity or amazement which I've read in the disability community is like inspiration-torn, it's called. "Oh, you're so inspiring. You do all these things and you're amazing just for existing," and therefore you're up on this pedestal but you're also out of my world. You're detached from me. Using inspiration to sidestep a potential human connection, I think.

[00:33:23]

Marty:

Absolutely. I agree with every single thing that you said. I'm really struck by this comment you're making about moving from "what can we do for you?" to "what can you do for us?" And I would go so far and to be so bold as to say that the ADA, the landmark legislation, civil rights legislation of my time, I'm in my 40s, is still not breaking through the barrier for employment. It's failed on the employment. It hasn't moved employment from 1990 when it was passed to now, and it is still the one area where it's OK, because of that feeling, and even if the intention is sort of good of, "I don't think I can support this person or I don't know if I can," that employers are still OK to discriminate.

Kristen:

Part of the problem is that employers are not allowed to ask their questions or bring up their apprehensions. There's a good reason for that, because the questions people used to get were totally awful. If they're not allowed to ask about disability, and if the person with the disability then doesn't bring it up, which is really hard in an interview to have to force the conversation in that direction, and sometimes even if they do bring it up, but if it hasn't been brought up, then the apprehensions remain. Also when you get that letter saying, "We decided to go with another candidate, thanks for applying," you don't know if it was because of the disability. Nobody is going to say that because they'll get sued, and therefore there are 100 other reasons it could be. Sometimes it could be true and sometimes it might not be, and you will never know. The system is not designed to move because disability has been taken out of the discussion.

Marty:

This is really important. Nimit, I want to bring you back, because we work together.

Kristen:

Nimit, I'm really sorry because I just probably scared you about the whole rest of your working life!

Marty:

But the truth of the matter is, Nimit, you frankly, and I appreciate it, allowed us, allowed me in particular, to ask some of those questions. I had never worked with someone who is blind before, and I want to hear it from you now. What was your experience coming into this particular working space with Tamman, where we were asking you questions about your service animal? We were asking you questions about the layout of the office or whatever it was, where we were unsure but you made it OK? What was that like for you?

Nimit:

One thing I noticed at Tamman is that you guys have a passion for accessibility that I haven't seen at any other company I worked for. Usually I don't always disclose my disability in the beginning stage of job seeking process. I usually do it either the

day before interview or just depends on the situation really, but when it's about asking questions after hiring, like what can we do to make this more accessible for you? I personally find those questions to be helpful, because I would rather people ask me questions than go on about their own assumptions and create actions from them. In my personal experience, I would want people to ask me questions, but not when they walk in the door and see a service animal and they would start to make assumptions about the dog or my physical, visible disability. It's really a process I think. It gets to a point where these questions do need to be addressed, but it has to be the right time. I haven't found that a problem within the Tamman workplace, but I have found where when I disclosed that I am blind, as Kristen said, it's like you get either cancelled or, "We'll call you back," and nothing happens. Again, you don't know if that's because of the disability, but I've had companies that have been very good about listening to my disclosure and acting like, "What can we do to make this process accessible for you?" Like Tamman.

[00:37:42]

Marty:

At the end of the day, so much of this is about human connection. And being able to forge that connection and trust quickly enough so that both parties can ask those questions. It's really clear from our conversation today, Kristen and Nimit, that there's just a lot of awareness building that needs to continue to happen. We really want to continue to use a lot of different platforms, podcasts being one, webinars being one, blogs being another. Wherever we can talk about this to help build awareness because I think so much of it is rooted in assumption and ignorance, myself very much at the forefront of that often times, that we have to be curious. We have to ask questions. Without the guides and, frankly, without the mentors, not just to each other but the others, that's how we're going to learn and that's how we're going to grow and be able to bring in people with disabilities into the American workforce and the worldwide workforce as well. I am passionate about the fact that as more and more baby boomers retire, as more and more of them leave the workplace, deservedly so, and have this huge gulf of employment and work that has to get done, the way we're going to fill that is an untapped resource, which is people living with disabilities who aren't engaged in the American economy as it is. There's work to be done on the education space, there's work to be done in the employment space, there's work to be done by employers specifically. That's that, but I really appreciate this conversation because I think it's lifting a lot of things up. Kristen, I can't leave this conversation without talking to you about being a writer. You are the first author that we've had, published author, that we've had on the podcast, at least that I know of, and you've written two works of fiction. The Transcriber and Outside Myself. Can you talk a little about those two books for us?

[00:39:35]

Kristen:

Sure. I have a Master's Degree in fiction, creative writing, and I have been fortunate enough to be able to use it. Storytelling informs so much of what I'm doing, because in curriculum writing I'm hoping to tell a story, even if it's helping a student's story, and in teaching I'm trying to find out the story and in writing I'm telling the story. So my first book is basically the equivalent of a short story, but it's a small book for adolescent emerging readers. It's published through a wonderful small press called Gemma Media, which made the Gemma Open Door series for adolescents, and Trish, who runs that press, is passionate about literacy and bringing literacy to all of those who might not have received it adequately from adults who are learning English to adults who dropped out of high school to kids who are reluctant readers. It's a press that I truly admire and *The Transcriber* is a short book about a boy whose sister is blind and he is the only one who doesn't think this is a miracle or something to feel sorry about. In fact, he's usually annoyed about it and pretty irreverent and the story, I think, is in some ways about how they end up being closer together by the end of the story. In the meantime, he has a lot of irreverent observations about life as the sibling. I thought about it because my brother had to go through tons of stuff as my sibling. The other book is my first full-length novel, and I would say it's probably also for adolescents and adults, called *Outside Myself*, and it shifts between the perspectives of two characters who are both blind and it kind of goes back and forth between pre-ADA and post-ADA, which is really interesting that we're talking about that. Just the ways things have changed, the way they've stayed the same, and these two characters and how they build a friendship with one another. I am terrible at marketing my own books, but I hope that you will check them out.

Marty:

They sound amazing. Both of them. I'm really interested in reading them myself. I am not too old for YA literature.

Kristen:

No one is too old for YA literature. In fact, I think the older you get, the more maybe we need YA literature.

[00:42:05]

Marty:

Here, here. Absolutely. I am fascinated. I'm assuming – again, another assumption – that your brother read *The Transcriber*, is that right?

Kristen:

Actually, I don't know if he read it or not. I kind of wonder if he didn't ever want to read it. It wouldn't have taken him long if he did. I never heard back from him.

Marty:

I wasn't sure if he did some sort of editorializing on it.

Kristen:

This was out in the world and that might be the problem actually. I didn't give him any editorial control.

Marty:

That's excellent. So writer, advocate, teacher, so many things that you do now. What's on the horizon for you? What are you going to do next?

Kristen:

I am committing more fully to teaching students, so before and during the pandemic, I was primarily working for the college success program and then I was teaching one or two students part-time and the program is moving to a new company and I think that it's actually a wonderful move for the program because it's moving into applying this specific company and that's terrific, but I also thought, "OK, I just turned 40. Maybe this is my midlife crisis talking, I don't know, but this is where I have the chance to move and try something a little different." So I am teaching students who are blind students, so traveling between schools in central and north Jersey and I am home schooling my oldest child. My two younger ones have gone back to school, and I am actually looking for another part-time job to go with the teaching. But we'll see what happens.

Marty:

Absolutely. So exciting to keep tabs on where you're going to go next. Thanks Kristen. We're going to move to our final segment. Of course it's three questions. Are you ready for your three questions Kristen?

Kristen:

I am so ready for my three questions Marty.

Marty:

Excellent. Which living person do you most admire?

Kristen:

That is the world's hardest question, but I have to say that the person who inadvertently without knowing me guided me into the life of a writer was [inaudible 00:44:31] who is an author who started out her career by writing about different facets of the immigrant experience or the Indian American experience as a child of Bengali immigrants, but also really also about the human experience. She was the writer in residence when I was in college and I was pretty set by then on being a teacher and that is a good profession, I'm still a teacher, but up until that time I hadn't really considered being a writer. I thought, I live on the outside of a lot of

literature. People aren't really going to want to know what I have to say. So meeting here and learning about how she was a participating observer and how writing gave her that gift and also kind of centered her was very powerful for me and I sort of generalized a little bit as I thought about the connection between the immigrant and first-generation experience and the disability experience, which are obviously different but also have some commonalities. Now she is writing in Italian and translating and I am very badly, because I have so many other things going on, but I am very badly learning Italian as kind of an homage and also an exploration that I'm doing with a friend.

[00:45:51]

Marty:

That's amazing. Sometimes it's not inspiration born, it's just amazing.

Kristen:

I understand.

Marty:

We're just going for Italian now. That's incredible. I'm very curious to see where we go with this next question. As a writer, especially, and someone who has published works, who are your favorite heroes or heroines from fiction?

Kristen:

Wow. That is the hardest question ever. Probably my first favorite heroine was Aunt Shirley from Anne of Green Gables, that whole series. That was a series I read over and over again, even as an adult. Although I cannot help but mention that Anne's children are remarkably well behaved. That's a little problem. My kids are wonderful, but they're not like those kids. That's a slight letdown. But still, she was quite a hero and a champion for the imagination and came along at a great time in my life. Francie Nolan from A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is another one and just the idea of overcoming adversity but also having it be a part of her experience was pretty magical for me. I don't know. Stephen Dedalus from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man was really powerful for me. His battles against religion and nationality and language. So those were kind of my heroes coming up as a young person and probably influenced my YA literature connection as well. And then I have to say, the ones I'm reading right now, I just reread A Wrinkle in Time as an adult, which was wonderful. I am very slowly reading Moby Dick and I'm sort of blown away by Ishmael as the, if you want to talk about the participating observer, Ishmael is the participating observer. He knows about everything, just when he needs to know it. It is not a book that would have been published now because someone would have said, "Herman, you've thrown in too much stuff here," but it is truly a work of art. It's going to live with me for a few years because I'm reading it incredibly slowly. I guess my final thing is, my son and I are reading My Side of the

Mountain by Jean Craighead George, and it is a book for kids about this boy who runs away from the city and lives literally on a mountainside, inside of a hemlock tree. Trains a falcon, hunts for his food, and it's incredible and just the way it starts with him being excited about getting through a snowstorm and living in the woods makes you want to go live in the woods.

[00:48:42]

Marty:

Awesome. We could have just done a whole segment on [crosstalk 00:48:47].

Kristen:

I will. I'll come back.

Marty:

I actually also just finished maybe a year and a half ago, 18 months, something like that, *A Wrinkle in Time* as an adult. Thought it was amazing. Gave it to my daughter. Then previous guest of ours, very recently, and I don't remember if he mentioned it on the podcast or not in the same space, but he's doing the exact same thing with *Moby Dick*. It's like working his way through it very, very slowly, and it's very interesting how parallel that was for you. Last question, what is one recommendation for a game, book, movie, podcast, TV show, anything you happen to be engaging with now? You just gave us a bunch of books, so maybe not steer there, but go wherever you want to go.

Kristen:

I think I'll just end with the hilarious, because I do go to books. That's my default. Hmm, game, I don't know, movie, TV show, I don't know. And podcasts, I sort of fell out of the podcast space when I didn't have any time anymore. But, my son showed me this bizarre Tik Tok called *The Sibling Anthem*, and first of all, Tik Tok is so not my generation and I don't have Tik Tok. He sees it on You Tube. And I'm like, "No, no, you're falling into the dark side." Then he showed me the sibling anthem about the oldest, middle and youngest siblings and most of those generalizations about them were hilariously true, so I'll go with that.

Marty:

I love it. That's so great. I will absolutely check that out. I think that's wonderful. My son is in the same boat. Gets the Tik Tok through the You Tube and it says a lot that I called it "the You Tube."

Kristen:

The inter-webs.

Marty:

Exactly. Kristen, thank you so much. I have so enjoyed this conversation and the time you have spent with us. Thank you for coming on and I can't wait to keep this conversation going with you.

Kristen:
Thank you.

Marty:
Nimit Carr, you're the best and I really appreciate you as a colleague and as a friend, so thank you for joining me on this particular conversation.

Nimit:
Thank you. It was great. I even learned a lot today. Appreciate that.

[00:51:00]

Marty:
We're always trying to do that, right? We're always trying to learn together. That's good. If you like what you heard today, if you heard something you disagreed with or maybe you have those specific statistics on the correlation between Braille reading and employment, we would love to hear from you. Please engage with us. We are on all social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn. Leave us a comment. You can find Article 19 on Pod Bean or any of the podcast networks where you might be listening. Please rate us. Please share a review. It really means a lot to us and to help build this awareness for all of the things we talk about and all of our conversations. In addition, if you check out TammanInc.com and we have a brand new website that just launched, you can find the podcast there. You can sign up for our lightning groups which we do monthly, where we talk about all sorts of intersection between the ADA, digital accessibility and we have a lot of fun doing it. You can sign up there, and you can also sign up for our upcoming webinar series in the fall. Thank you so much for joining us today on Article 19. We hope to continue this conversation next week. Thanks.

If you like what you heard today, and want to explore more about digital accessibility, inclusivity or schedule a time to talk with us, you can find the whole Tamman team at TammanInc.com. Or follow us on social media, @TammanInc on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. We'll talk to you again next time.