

Article 19, Episode 12 – Equal Entry

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 Molloy, chief of staff and catalyst at Tamman, and I'm the host for our conversation today. Joining us is Thomas Logan, owner of Equal Entry, and his colleague, Meryl Evans, accessibility consultant for Equal Entry. After helping large companies and government agencies meet their accessibility goals for over a decade, Logan decided to start Equal Entry to improve public education about accessibility and to close the gap between what was being taught and what was needed to be taught. Together, Thomas, Meryl, and the Equal Entry team are working on building the inclusive web, awareness across communities and evangelizing the gospel of access and equity. True fact about Thomas and Meryl, they have a great origin story. Thomas, how did you and Meryl first meet?

Thomas:

Meryl helps me with all of my marketing and all of my communications at Equal Entry so it's the most pure natural meeting completely via social media, and actually one of the success stories where you meet someone through social media. Meryl started showing up in my feed on LinkedIn. I'm like, wow, this person really does an amazing job communicating. I was following her and liking her content just totally naturally, organically, and so it really speaks so much for the skill that Meryl has a marketer and communicator that we did just meet via social media and I'm so thrilled to work with her now and all the stuff we do at Equal Entry.

Marty:

It's like a true digital accessibility meet cute. So also with us today is my friend, colleague, and boss man, Michael Mangos, CEO and co-founder of Tamman. Hello, Michael.

Michael:

Hello, Marty. Thank you for having us on again.

Marty:

I should note that I'm the only non-co-founder on the podcast today so we are just swimming in co-founders all around because Meryl not only is she the accessibility consultant for Equal Entry, but Meryl, you have your own digital marketing business as well. Is that right?

Meryl:

You would think I would learn remember to move the microphone after, what, a year? Anyway, so yes, I've been doing that full time since 2005. Technically I'm a freelancer, but I tend to work with a few companies for a long time, for years. One of my first clients, I still work with, and I've been working with

them since 2002. And I met somebody before her that I worked with until he passed away. So I've been very fortunate. But now I have Equal Entry and another accessibility company, and I just love doing this work.

00:02:53

Marty:

Well, we are so happy that you all are joining us today. Thank you so much. I'd like to set the stage for our listeners before we begin our conversation, 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 you use constraint a user may have, be it due to a temporary, situational, episodic or permanent condition or disability, 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, Tamman, Equal Entry, everybody, working together and learning together. Thanks for listening, and let's get this conversation started. Allow me to formally, formally bring in Thomas and Meryl. How are both of you today in your respective places? Thomas, we're talking to you in Japan, Meryl in Texas. How are you guys doing?

Thomas:

Thomas here from Tokyo. It's 7:40 in the morning so I'm drinking an energy drink to get myself waking up here, but I'm doing great. And I'm actually going to come back to the United States for the first time in about a year and a half next month. Going to get the vaccine. So feeling excited to see my family and the United States that I haven't seen in over a year.

Marty:

Where's home for you, originally, then?

Thomas:

North Carolina.

Marty:

North Carolina.

Thomas.

Raleigh, North Carolina.

Marty:

Meryl, how about you? How are you doing today?

Meryl:

I'm doing fantastic. It's been kind of a quiet week by way of excitement, I've been doing some traveling. It's a busy month because this month is Global Accessibility Awareness Day. I know it's a day but things are happening all through the month of May and then as soon as it's all over, I've got a son who's

graduating from high school in early June so I've got to get ready for that as well. I'll have a little celebration at home. Exciting time, busy time, lots of speaking and panels coming up next week. So one day at a time.

Marty:

One day at a time, indeed. Congratulations on your son. That's so great. OK. We like to start nice and easy. We're going to give everybody a very simple question first. I'm going to start with you, Mr. Mangos, if I could. What is the best thing you've eaten recently?

Michael:

My wife, I'm very fortunate that my wife is a fantastic cook. So I have to say that it doesn't have a name, but she will open up the refrigerator, just find a whole collection of random things, and then whip it together in this meal that you would not think could come out of that refrigerator, and it's just delicious. She did a fantastic salad the other day with avocados and these tomatoes that she's growing and some other random things and some variety of cheeses that she's been collecting. I got to say, although I would not ordinarily put salad on my list of best thing I've eaten, it really is the best thing I've eaten recently.

Marty:

Jealous. I remain jealous. Meryl, how about you? What's the best thing you've eaten recently?

00:05:55

Meryl:

Well, I've truly haven't had anything interesting in a while because I am very boring. I tend to eat the same thing most days just to keep it simple so I don't have to make decisions. I'd rather save the hard thinking and the decision-making for work, what really matters. But I've very excited. I love watching Food Network, especially the cake, the baking shows, because I love to bake. And so I'm really excited because I'm really going all out for my son's graduation cake and doing two tiers which I don't order very often, and it'll have congratulations and it'll have his high school and year of graduation and a P on the bottom because he's going to Purdue. Boiler Up! y'all.

Marty:

Go Boilermakers. That's awesome. Great. How about you, Thomas? What have you gotten recently?

Thomas:

I'll go with Ichiran Ramen. So it's a ramen place right by my office where I work here in Tokyo, but it's so good. You buy your tickets from a vending machine. You can customize the ramen exactly how you want it, customize your spice level, customize the heat of the noodles if you want, pork in there if you want, green onions – Everything's totally customized, and yes, it's so delicious. That's my go-to when I'm needing something that I just really crave and love.

Marty:

Hey, Thomas, I have a question for you. Do you prefer the pork bone broth? Or do you prefer shoyu or miso broth?

Thomas:

I actually probably like the pork bone broth the most. That's what I generally get, but I like all of them.

Marty:

OK. We need to go get some ramen together, my friend. This is the portion of the podcast where we're going to talk about Japanese culture for awhile as Mike is also lived there not as long as you, Thomas, but for a year. I don't know if we've talked about it on the podcast yet, but obviously Kay is Japanese and your kids speak fluent Japanese and go back to Japan pre-COVID pretty regularly, right?

Michael:

Yeah. Every year. I mean, they trek across the ocean about 14 times back and forth to Japan, so – I'm a ramen experience and devotee.

Marty:

For me, I'm kind of with you, Meryl. I'm pretty boring by and large, but I must say that for every special occasion, so for my wife's birthday or for Mother's Day that just passed, and anytime that we have a family gathering, we order from this restaurant in Media, Pennsylvania, called Bittersweet Kitchen, and they make just the greatest food. I mean their huevos rancheros is magical. They have a French toast BLT. I don't know what they do, but it is the best food, and everything we've ever ordered there is incredible. So that is absolutely the best thing I've eaten recently. Let's get into talking with our guests, Thomas and Meryl. Thomas, I'd like to start with you. Can you orient our listeners a little bit more about who you are and how you got to where you are?

00:08:51

Thomas:

I have done my entire career in digital accessibility and have this passion for accessible technology. I was fortunate. I did undergraduate in computer science at University of North Carolina, Tarheels, and I was working my senior year with a team project where we'd gotten the opportunity to work with a student who was blind in the classics department to make ancient world maps accessible to him. He was doing research in the classics department. It kind of blew my mind at that time. I think it still blows my mind in 2021 that maps need to be more accessible. That was 2001. I was really exposed to the idea that information cannot be accessible or available unless it's put into these alternative formats. So ancient world maps was my introduction to the idea of access, how can we translate that information into different ways.

Michael:

When I was working at NASA, one of the things that I had to work on was using satellite imagery and different types of non-visual data taken from space about Earth to find the original city walls of the ancient city of Troy, which were at that time undiscovered. So back in the 90s, this was being

discovered, and we were using satellite data that I was helping to manipulate and process in that search, which was pretty amazing.

Thomas:

That's awesome. Yeah, there's a lot of information there and a lot of things to study in that domain. I think I've always been Mr. Tech so I'm not someone that's as good on our classics and ancient history. I always joke if it's pre the 80s, I don't know probably enough about it.

Marty:

Meryl, how about you? Can you tell the listeners a little bit about yourself?

Meryl:

Well, first of all, thank you for having me, Marty, I appreciate it. Well, I am from Plano, Texas, so obviously I know about your love of rancheros because things in Texas, you have to know about Tex-Mex food. It's a requirement when you're a native Texan. Anyway, I'm from Plano, which is right next to Dallas. I am an accessibility contractor for Equal Entry. I am an author and a speaker who talks about caption accessibility and deafness [inaudible 00:10:59] which is just another way of saying I'm profoundly deaf. Many people, including accessibility pros and one US vice president assumed I know ASL or sign language. I don't. That is it's neither a good thing or a bad thing. There's no right or wrong. And deaf people are just as diverse as anybody else. And next time you meet a deaf person, they will probably not be anything like me.

Marty:

That's fantastic.

Michael:

Yeah. That's so true, and it's interesting not just about deafness but about all kinds of disabilities, that each person has their own unique situation, their own unique life experience that has lead them to be a very unique individual. And I think it's one of those things that we talk about a lot, but I'm so happy that you brought that up. I feel like we could have a whole podcast just about that very one topic.

00:11:53

Meryl:

In fact, it's interesting because today on LinkedIn, somebody was talking about their child who was autistic and they said that when you meet one autistic person, you've met one autistic person. I say the same thing. When you meet one deaf person, you met one deaf person, not all of them. So I can never speak for all deaf people because we all have different opinions, different preferences. Some do ASL, some speak, some do both, some switch later in life.

Marty:

Unlike some of these computer science nerds, I am a polisci person and a politics person. I'm really curious, can you tell me a little bit more about a vice president who was deaf? I'd love to know more.

Meryl:

I can tell you and my daughter have something in common. She just got her master's degree in public affairs so she's very into that, and she met Madeleine Albright. I have a picture to prove it. Anyway, vice president. Yes. I lived in Washington, D.C. for six years after I went to American University, and after I graduated from there, I went to work for FAA. And we had a town hall meeting and the VP, Vice President was the guest speaker and gave us the opportunity to ask questions. I brought up something — that I was deaf. The VP signed thank you. While I know that sign, I wanted to make the point that not all deaf people know sign language and I said to him, I'm sorry, I don't know sign language because I want everyone to know we need to stop assuming. And I have been talking about assumption for more than 20 years now.

Marty:

That's going to be a lifelong battle, Meryl. No doubt, no doubt.

Michael:

It's funny, because I think for a lot of people, there's an analog here, right, where my wife being Japanese, she doesn't love all sushi just because she's Japanese. When I was an American living in Japan, just because I'm American doesn't mean I speak every language that's European in origin. I got a lot of people saying, you don't know what the word "fogel" is? And fogel is the German word for bird. Like I happened to speak some German, but I would get all these words that were borrowed words in Japanese and then you find out there's just this misconception about people that are non-Japanese. And I think anyone who's had that kind of experience needs to translate that experience into people's disabilities or maybe people with different abilities than themselves. And I think that's kind of the thing I try to give as a takeaway whenever I talk to people about this, that there's a lot of instances where we can easily misjudge one another and I think that's your point, which I just love.

00:14:49

Marty:

Speaking of making initial sort of assessments of different people, I know the minute I met Thomas, the minute I went on Equal Entry's website, I just felt like Tamman and Equal Entry — I mean these, we're cut from the same cloth. We share the same values. I was immediately intrigued not only of the great work that Equal Entry's doing, but that your values come through so clearly, and each aspect of your site, from the things that you're writing to the things that you're doing. I'm really happy to have both of you here, but Thomas, first, if you could talk a little bit about the intersection between your values and Equal Entry and the work.

Thomas:

When I really think about why I have the passion for accessibility, I think I connect for myself growing up gay in the South in the '80s, 90's experienced a lot of discrimination, had a very difficult time as far as just communicating with my family, and society's perceptions of that. And that's something I think I immediately connected with when I did get to kind of start working with the first person I knew with a disability on that map project that I mentioned. I just really thought about it from that discrimination

perspective, and I do think that's where the drive comes from for me, and the values is that call the company I have Equal Entry. I completely believe that everything needs to be equal and open for everyone to pursue their opportunities, and definitely something I think about in accessibility and the values that our company has, well, one specific thread, it's like, if you're a person with a disability, you don't need to have a job in accessibility consulting or in this world. You should be able to do any job. You should be able to follow your passion and do everything. So I really want all software, all things that are needed, to be used in every different type of job to be available to people.

Meryl:

I have to add on to Thomas about passion. I didn't start working in accessibility sort of two years ago when I first began at AccessU, at the launch, and it grew from there. Even though I cared about captioning and quality captioning long before that. It really started two years ago and slowly grew from there. And then last year, when I went to AccessU, which is a digital disability accessibility conference, I was like, it was over – When the conference was over, I was depressed because I felt like I found home in my career. I felt like I found my people, something I could be passionate about. In 2019, I made so many videos about captioning. I couldn't believe the creativity I did with those videos, especially just side by side, and that only happened because I love it, I'm passionate about it. I enjoy other work I've been doing with the non-accessibility clients, but there's just something about accessibility that just draws me in and I get most excited about the things that are happening and I want to make a difference. So I would echo Thomas, that passion just makes such a huge difference.

Marty:

Can people still access some of those side-by-side videos? Are they on YouTube or anything?

00:17:50

Meryl:

Yes. Definitely. Meryl dot net. I have them. I actually have a lot of them on one page, which is Meryl dot net slash side by side, if I remember right. Or you can just go to Meryl dot net slash caption and it'll take you to them.

00:18:04

Marty:

Thomas.

Thomas:

That's another thing I was immediately kinship with Meryl, that she creates the side-by-side videos. It's, I think, one thing I'm very specific on with the work I do, is that an illustration or making things really real, and getting away from blocks of text. I'm very passionate about that. So when I saw Meryl's videos, that was another reason. I was like, oh wow, this person's awesome, and she's really showing real cases where captions have problems and things that people can learn from, like, oh, I do that too.

Meryl:

Yeah. Thomas and I both share a passion for example, when I see them. I don't Siri, I like actual literal examples and actually Thomas sent me some of his videos improve the captions so it took the captions from good to great. I wanted to show people how the smallest things can make huge difference with the captions. Not just accuracy and synchronized with the audio, but also the length, the cutoff point, and I think that most people don't think about.

Thomas:

Yeah, I think Meryl changed my whole perspective there too, and I've gotten very excited about that. And that's what's cool about working in accessibility, you meet people, you learn. But I would say that with the variety of clients that I've worked with, I was so used to just trying to get captions to be there, but now with Meryl it's really like, how do you get those captions to be great. That's the new bar, right, and that's what we should be expecting and requiring. It should be a great experience. Really appreciate learning a lot of that from Meryl.

Michael:

Meryl, you mentioned that you're speaking at AccessU, and you've been to that conference before, and you felt like you were home when you were there, which I think is awesome. Actually it touches my heart in a nice way. How do you find AccessU compared to other conferences like CSUN or some other conferences? Did you find yourself as at home at other conferences? Or what was unique about AccessU that made you feel so different?

Meryl:

I think for starters it was the first one I was very involved in so it. My first speaking opportunity which snowballed into many more. I have felt at home whenever I go to other accessibility conferences for example, one of the first speaking opportunities I got because of AccessU was a MeetUp. It was the Red Cross accessibility MeetUp. And it was just small because it was about 30 people. And they are so amazing. They were so funny, so sweet, so passionate about accessibility that it was like an extension of AccessU, a small extension. So yes, I felt at home there. It doesn't happen with all conferences. An accessibility conference earlier this year and I felt invisible. So it's not just any accessibility conference. There are some that are better than others. I can't explain it. The people are just more welcoming. They don't make me feel like I'm an inconvenience by anything I need. They will make sure I'm comfortable and covered.

00:21:08

Michael:

Understood. I mean, Thomas, I kind of have the same question for you. Have you been to many conferences, one? Two, are there any conferences like this in Japan? And three, have you felt at home at a conference like that in the way that Meryl has?

Thomas:

I definitely have lots of experience going to conferences. I'd say my experience is usually more I'm the one accessibility speaker at the conference, so then it's I guess nice in that kind of situation to realize that people do show up to that talk and people are interested in that and you do have to sort of take

that type of talk at a much different level and understand that people are really coming, usually a lot of times, with no understanding of what this great thing digital accessibility is. So I would say that definitely I don't feel at home like the conferences like CSUN. I specifically really liked the accessibility Toronto conference that's been happening. They do that as a single tract, and they keep everyone in the same room. And that was something I really liked about that conference compared to CSUN is CSUN's got so many different tracts you're not going to have the shared experience of seeing different talks. And one other quest – Yeah, the Japan thing, it's actually a pretty wild story. At my first accessibility conference that I had just signed up to from a Google form here in Japan, someone from IBM Japan recommended me to sign up for this live conference. I show up and it turns out that Shinzo Abe San's wife, so the former prime minister's wife, is the keynote speaker. I'm sitting, like, 30 feet from her, and there's no security. She stayed on the stage for about an hour, and it just really – Kind of interesting, Japan has different things where they're not as progressive on accessibility but kind of seeing her as a symbol there speaking, I'm like, wow, we wouldn't have that experience in America. I was trying to picture the analog of that experience, and there's no way that we would've had that.

Michael:

Speaking of Japanese culture, I will say the Japanese have had almost 100 prime ministers since 1945 so – They probably can't afford that amount of security. But sure.

Thomas:

It may be 101, right, coming up soon. How the Olympics goes.

Michael:

Yes, but Shinzo Abe was prime minister, I mean he's the second time around, right, and probably has one of the longest runs of any prime minister in Japanese history so that's definitely a big deal. I didn't want to minimize that. I just also wanted to say we've been through 46 presidents in but in 250 years and Japan's had twice as many in a quarter of that time.

Thomas:

Exactly.

00:23:40

Meryl:

I just want to mention a couple more things about the conferences that like that small one I'm talking about, I have to mention them, is WordPress San Fernando Valley in California. They're worth giving a shout out to. I just recently did TechAccess, Oklahoma. I was pleasantly surprised about that one. What I really liked about that one was it was over three days, and they only had a few speakers per day and it was one tract at a time with breaks in between. I really liked that. It was calmer. It felt like I don't the make choices between tracts, so I really appreciated that. And I also want to mention Microsoft just had an Ability conference last week and the reason I want to mention them is they have the best live caption I've ever seen at a live event because they were crisp. They were pop in captions that didn't scroll. Most live event captions tend to be moving, scrolling, but those would pop in and that is so rare because it's so hard to do, with live captions. I have to give the a shout out for the quality.

Marty:

Do you know what they were using or was there a particular service or was it just people just typing away? How did they get it to be so effective?

Meryl:

I'm not sure. I got the name of the service, but I haven't been able to find out if the platform helped as well or if it was just a service or – I don't know the story. The big companies, they're kind of hard to track down the details. I was just lucky that I even got the name of the company.

Marty:

That would be great. We would certainly post that in the notes of the show and anything else so I'll follow up with you on those kind of things. Mike, you had, as we're sticking in on this regional aspect of things that Meryl just brought up, you had a question for both of them. Go for it.

Michael:

Yeah. You know, Thomas you've lived in North Carolina. You've lived in Japan. Meryl, you've talked about living in Texas and going to this conference in Oklahoma. I'm curious. Have you seen regional differences in the commitment to digital accessibility? Are they doing better or worse in parts of the country? Not to throw any particular group of people under the bus, but rather just to understand, are the commitments to digital accessibility emanating from specific places, or is it something that's really a universal commitment that's starting to be adopted?

Meryl:

First of all, all these conferences were virtual and people are coming from all over. That was the really cool thing about it. Obviously I've met really wonderful people in California. I met the people in Oklahoma. I'm meeting people who have the same passion that Thomas and I do about accessibility all over the world and remember Global Accessibility Awareness Day is coming up on May 20, and I've been fortunate to meet the co-founder, and they are just brilliant people who just have huge passion for accessibility and they have gotten so many companies all over the world talking about Global Accessibility Awareness Day so I have been digging into all the old history and tweets about GAAD and it goes back to 2011 so this is the 10th year. And it's just amazing how many people, famous people, influencers and companies are doing in honor of GAAD.

00:27:09

Michael:

Thomas, have you found anything different in your travels or in your experience?

Thomas:

Yes, I'd say that I have fairly strong opinions but it goes back to what we were saying at the top of this podcast, that it's all based off of the various interactions I've had in my 20 years working here. But I think in my thing that I really celebrate in the United States, the fact that we have the legal system and we have the Americans with Disabilities Act and we actually have had litigation that is tying in the web

content accessibility guidelines, that's something I worked on and have worked on cases with. But I think that, this is a very American perspective, but I think that that's really one of the strongest ways it has influenced change. And I worked with a lot more different types of companies in the last five to 10 years of my career than the first 10 years of my career. I feel like I almost only worked with government agencies or huge companies like Microsoft in the first 10, and now we have that access, but I think in general I always find that there a lot of people that have that – They want to do it but at least in US culture, my experience is it's either procurement policy or it's litigation that is typically driving a lot of organizations to do the work. And I guess I've sort of seen a lot more from working with Léonie Watson from TetraLogical. She's based in the UK. I've been working with the people from Entopia in Australia and also from people that I've met in Canada, I guess I see that in those cultures and countries there's more of a, we're doing the right thing. This is our commitment. And I admire that, and that's something that I think is great, but I do perceive as a regional difference because I in my experience haven't felt that much with American companies. And then with Japanese companies, I don't know enough from working with them yet to have too much of an opinion. Trying to.

Michael:

Sure. Some of our clients at Tamman seeing that we're working with some municipalities, like local city governments, not here in Philadelphia but in other places around the country as well as some tech startups based out of Silicon Valley or other places, we're seeing that they actually have commitments. Sometimes it's out of the diversity, equity and inclusion department, but that's better than it coming out of legal. I think that I'm really excited to see that the DE&I commitment is actually extending to digital accessibility rather than it just being about HR, right? So, we're seeing that too. We're starting to get some work in that space. I'm not saying that people are beating down the door, but at the same time, we're seeing it come in and I think that's a really interesting marker for a shift in cultural mindset rather than it being sort of a legal requirement that everybody feels like they have to fulfill.

00:29:51

Meryl:

There's still a lot of work to be done because even companies that have DEI initiatives don't quite get it. There are some that exclude a group, so how many disabled people excluded from some of them. In fact California just issued a law that says any [inaudible] must have people who are from underrepresented groups. Guess what? Disabilities is not in that underrepresented group. You have people of color, people of different genders, and sexual preferences that they're all included. But as a representative group it does not include people with disabilities. So isn't that something?

Michael:

I just wanted to add that I won't name any names but I have a client who asked me to help them with a design problem, and it was for a PDF to educate managers on how to engage people for diversity. But the PDF to educate the managers was not an accessible PDF, and we had to educate them that that also needs to be an accessible PDF. This is a demonstration of the commitment, and if you've got tens of thousands of managers, some of them are going to have disabilities, and you have to serve them too. We had to educate the DE&I people a little bit about digital accessibility, that that's actually part of that mission. It's not always obvious, right, so I thought that was really fascinating.

Thomas:

Yeah. I was going to just chime on to that, that I've seen – Meeting more and more working in the DE&I space, and I still find that some of the people I meet, they're like, we haven't included people with disabilities or accessibility into that conversation yet, and so I've always trying to help influence that or get them to think about that. I did want to mention the Valuable 500 is a new initiative of companies. They have about 500 companies signed up in this DE&I space. To join that group, they have to make a committee with teeth, so I was excited about that because I think that's where, switching off of my legal and procurement one, I think it's great then when you have those initiative and there's an outcome there that's measurable, such as employing people with disabilities on your team or the different outcomes that they commit to. I'm curious to learn what the outcomes are that they're committing to in that Valuable 500, but it's definitely something I'm starting to watch and learn from myself.

Meryl:

I like to point out that even a big company that's passionate about accessibility and people with disabilities, it may not be the entire company. I have a great example. I know somebody who works for a big company, an international company. In the United States, they are terrible about accessibility. They had this huge meeting in Microsoft Teams and it was not captioned. But yet in Europe, I know the guy in Europe, and interestingly enough, he's the accessibility person there, and they are so amazing about accessibility in Europe but the United States isn't. I find that interesting.

00:32:59

Michael:

We're also not using the metric system so – Everybody can't hear it, but everyone's laughing on this podcast.

Marty:

And now everyone's laughing at home as well.

Michael:

Yeah. Right.

Marty:

They're clapping. Well done. And I think, Mike, you and I would be a little bit remiss if we didn't mention our very, very good friend, Janet Fiore, who's been on this podcast, who works very closely with us. We have a joint venture with her. Thomas, you mentioned the Americans Disability Act, and everything we've been talking about so far has created a raison d'être for this collaborative that we have to get more people with disabilities employed. It's the one area of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The most significant civil rights legislation in our lifetime for the most part, that is not working, that is a failure, that we really have to put some spotlight intention on. Just a shout out to Janet who is a great friend of ours and is doing a lot of that sort of yeoman's work in the employment space with disabilities and accommodations. I want to move us a little bit along here though, if I could. So one of the reasons we really – I was so struck the first time I met you, Thomas, is you were talking about something that

just blew my mind, which was the amazing work in the virtual reality space. Can you talk a little bit about how you've gotten started, what some of the challenges are, in tackling that space? And specifically, how are you handling disabilities in that space?

Thomas:

Yeah. So I'm extremely passionate about that space. I guess being a consultant and always wanting to use the latest things. I had an interest in virtual reality even in the 2000s but it was so expensive and at that point to me didn't seem realistic. So it's exciting now in 2021. It's much more realistic to picture people having these devices and doing lots of new ways of learning, new ways of job training, all of these things. I am pretty passionate about taking the lessons we've learned from the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, and I was immediately applying them into XR. So that's one of my positions that I've had is I really don't want to wait a long time to build some of the core baseline standards that should be there. And captioning is a great one, where I was like, OK, you have multimedia content. Just because it's shown in virtual reality, it still needs to have captions. There's a lot of design work and more specifications that need to happen for the best ways to do that, and to do that in 360 degrees, but it should've already started when these things launched with that core requirement, like, well, we at least need to have them displayed. I think that's one of the challenges is that even some of the very low hanging fruit of accessibility are the things that you would expect to be there, aren't there yet. The companies are making strides in this area, but that's something that I definitely want to support to push forward. And I'd say the other big barrier, which is true for all technologies I think, is the tools that people use to build these experiences don't have accessibility plumbing put into them so if you use the Unity engine or the Unreal engine, those are the two most popular products, to build XR experiences, they don't have a way to set an accessible name or an accessible role, for example. So those are things that then mean the developers have to build that all themselves. And every time we put that onus on developers, many times accessibility gets put behind other features that they have to implement to ship. I think that's definitely an area that I want to see – And I know that those companies are working on that, but it's like, let's get that sooner than later, and I want to help evangelize people to use those features when they're available.

00:36:32

Marty:

And there's some controversy that I've learned a little bit from you and you pointing me in particular directions around simulating disabilities. How are you tackling that? How are you going about that? Because as we've already talked about, when you've met one deaf person, you've met one deaf person. When you've met one person with pick your use constraint, you've met one. How do you do that so that you're doing it in a way that is authentic? I don't know if that's the right word, but it's going to be the one I go with.

Thomas:

For me on that topic, and I'd love to hear Meryl's perspective, but I am pretty much never going to tell someone, oh, you shouldn't do that or don't do that. And my feeling on this simulation of disabilities, I don't currently have an opinion of, no, you should not do that, yes, you definitely should do that, but obviously the companies – I think a lot of times the people that build these things, they have no dialogue

with people with disabilities, and they just assume that there's going to be this empathy experience. And so I think I would much rather hear that they have worked with a large population of people in that space, learned from those people, I mean actually hear from people, is this good? Does this help? Because that would be the right way to measure if your product or that experience is meaningful.

Marty:

Meryl, what do you think about this?

Meryl:

When you were talking, Marty, you brought something back to mind. Something that happened this week. Somebody was talking on LinkedIn about a presentation he was going to give, and he was running into a Schrodinger's cat situation. You're going to run into that with disabilities as well and accessibility. For example, here's a good example; some people can't have on bright because it's too bright so they use dark mode. Well, some people can't use dark mode but fortunately you can switch between them. But the point is that you can do something to your digital product or website that would bother somebody else while helping somebody else. So to me accessibility is about progress, not perfection. It's very hard to get it perfect, so the important thing is to be doing something, to positioning and being open the dialogue and making changes as you go.

Marty:

I love that. That is going to be my new email signature is that it's about progress not perfection. That is so perfectly, perfectly stated. Yeah, Michael.

00:38:53

Michael:

So Thomas, you mentioned about the two most popular VR engines don't really have accessibility paradigms built into them. Right? Do you think that's an analog for some of these larger design systems or content management systems that big companies are buying into that don't have accessibility features built in? Or do you think that the VR platforms are more fundamental than these things like CMSs in the web world? Because I think for a lot of people VR is a bit further away in their minds, where the web feels very real to them. I'm kinda curious. Where do you think VR is relative to where the web world is and where do those frameworks or technologies line up?

Thomas:

I definitely think that these authoring tool requirements, and there's that whole W3C group and set of guidelines just around authoring tools, that's the key. So I think it really depends on what type of system we're talking about. There's some content management systems that I feel like do a decent job and then there's some that literally do nothing or probably introduce more barriers that you can't even work around in the content management system. So I definitely of course support the ones that are making that commitment, but I would say that I think that's still an open opportunity for people to really be excellent at on the web. There's not someone right now that pops into my mind that's like, oh, they do authoring tool accessibility excellently and it's seamless. I think of something like YouTube with the captions editor is definitely something great and is a great example of something that works well and is

understandable. But that's still not even in the workflow of prompting you to get do that or making it almost a required part of the workflow. It's something that people that know they need to do it go and do it. I definitely would like in most of these systems for this to be the natural thing. I think on Slack when you add an image it does make that spot for you to add the alt text more straight up. You see that in the dialogue. Then there's other systems where they have that, but you have to know look for a button to add the alt text. I would say that –

Michael:

If they have it at all, right? That's the question.

Thomas:

[crosstalk 00:40:54] Exactly.

Meryl:

Thomas was talking about workflow, and I'd like to bring up that TikTok and Instagram have recently added automatic caption to the application. I'm very excited about it, but I'm prepared that it's not going to go very well because people go free-for-all with captions. They try to get creative. Captions are not meant to be creative. They're meant to be basic. Anyway, my point is I'm hoping it's a start of creating a new habit for creators and make caption part of their workflow and accessibility part of their workflow.

Marty:

OK, guys, stop for a second. Thomas, I just saw your note. We need to say goodbye to you.

Thomas:

Yes.

Michael:

It's quite a lot longer than 20 minutes.

Thomas:

Thank you.

Michael:

It's been great.

Marty:

This was such a good conversation.

Thomas:

You guys are awesome. I love that you guys are making this. I look forward to hearing.

Marty:

And please come back, OK?

Thomas:

OK.

Marty:

Don't be a stranger. We really want to continue the conversation with you, OK?

Thomas:

Yes.

Michael:

Thanks, Thomas. Really appreciate the time. [crosstalk 00:41:51]

Meryl:

Thanks, Thomas.

Marty:

I really appreciate the time.

Thomas:

Yeah. Thank you.

00:41:55

Marty:

So I'm going to start our next segment, before I do, I just want to make a note that Thomas Logan had to move on to his next meeting. He's a busy man. Thus the world of the co-founders. But we have Meryl with us with three questions. As we do with every guest, we ask them the same three questions at the end of our interview. So, Meryl, are you ready for your three questions?

Meryl:

Yes.

Marty:

All right. What is one personal accommodation that you make?

Meryl:

I work to ensure any content that I touch is accessible. That includes art tech for imaging, proper heading for articles, which is a common error. Making the right words. Not click here, learn more, and of course, captioning video. I really want to walk the talk there. I also share my dog food. I eat my dog food when I make a mistake or – like Somebody call me out when I forgot the alt text in Twitter because I wasn't used to it yet, and I wrote a post about it and I said, I'm sorry. I explained. Again, progress not perfection. It takes time to make habits.

Marty:

That's awesome. Folks can't see it, but Mike, his heart just grew three sizes when you mentioned headings. I think that's his number one thing in the world. If we could fix headings, we'd be almost there, everybody. So please pay attention to your headings.

Michael:

Amen, Marty. So true, so true.

Meryl:

You know what I would like to say about headings, right? Once accessible everywhere. Let me give you an example. If you're in a Word document, a lot of people, even I'm guilty of doing it for years and years and years – People when they create their headings, they bold it, they make them colored, they change the font. They do lots of fancy stuff, but they don't touch the heading, the style where you put, heading one, heading two, because they don't realize they can customize it. Anyway, when you use the style up there in Word, if you copy and paste your Word document to PDF, to WordPress, the headers will show up, you're running it on one and it will work everywhere.

Marty:

Careful, Meryl. Mike, he is smiling from ear to ear right now. This is his favorite thing. He wants to have you on record and he'll just play everything you just said to everybody because they're tired of hearing him talk about it. You know it's true, Mangos.

Michael:

Absolutely. Yes.

Marty:

Meryl, second question. What is something about the world that keeps you up at night?

Meryl:

The world is missing out on the contribution of people with disabilities. Seventy percent of disabled people are unemployed or underemployed. I know this is true with deaf Americans and blind Americans. Companies brag about their diversity and inclusion efforts but they overlook people with disabilities as I mentioned earlier on. And I mentioned the state of California passing a law about company [inaudible 00:44:48] people weren't included in that either. Considering more than 97 percent website frontpages still have weak tag errors. We have a lot of work to do to ensure people with disabilities feel included.

00:45:06

Marty:

Amen, again. Your final question, and then you're mercifully out of here. What is one recommendation that you have for us? It could be a game, a book, a movie, a TV show, something that you're loving right now.

Meryl:

I have been a terrible book reader in the last year or so for many reasons. I love books. I love to read them but golly by the end of the work day, I'm too tired to sit down and read a book because I fall asleep. But it just so happens when I was with my family last March, my mom was telling me about a book that she recommended, and my sister was recommending it. Am I'm like, they think that it would be a quick read. So I said, OK. The book is Kristin Harmel, The Book of Lost Names. It gripped me for the entire read. I read it in a week, which is very unusual, and what made this different is my mom tends to avoid books and movies about the Holocaust. It's a very tough topic for her. She was not in the Holocaust or anything like that, but we have relatives who probably perished in the Holocaust so but when she reads this book and recommends it, that says a lot about the book.

Marty:

Great recommendation. I will definitely check that out. Meryl, thank you so much for your insights and the knowledge that you dropped on us all this whole podcast. I think this is just the beginning through. I really do hope that we get to have you back on the podcast. We have so much more to talk about. We could pick any topic that you brought up today and make it a whole podcast about that. I want to wish you look with all of your speaking engagements and everything that you have coming up. I think it's important that folks know to check out Equal Entry dot com as well as Meryl dot net for more information about Equal Entry and Thomas's work as well as your work with him, and your own work going forward. I know I'll be checking out more about your work on YouTube and off of your website. So thank you so much, Meryl. We were so excited to have you. We can't wait to have you again.

Meryl:

Thank you so much, Marty, Michael, and Markus. It's been a pleasure. This podcast felt like home.

Michael:

Thank you, Meryl. That's awesome. I want to give a special thank you – I know he's not here. He had to jump off early, but I want to give a special thank you to Thomas Logan from Equal Entry for joining as well. It was great to have him on, and thank you both for coming on and making this podcast really special.

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 Tamman Inc dot com. That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C dot com or follow up on social media at Tamman Inc on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram or Facebook. We'll talk to you again next time.