

## AbleVu and Meegan Winters

### Speaker Key:

**AN**      **Announcer**

**CB**      **Chantal Boyle**

**MW**      **Meegan Winters**

**AN**      Welcome to the Sunflower Conversations, where we explore the Hidden Disability Sunflower, and its role in supporting people with hidden disabilities.

**CB**      Welcome to the Sunflower Conversations with Chantal. Joining me today is Meegan Winters. Meegan is the Hidden Disability Sunflower Programme Regional Partner in the US, and co-founder of AbleVu. So, this is very exciting. It's a new regional partner, and we are going to find out a bit more about Meegan and AbleVu. So, welcome, Meegan. How are you?

**MW**      I am so good. Thank you so much for having me.

**CB**      Well, let's start off, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**MW**      Personally, I'm the co-founder, as you mentioned, of AbleEyes and AbleVu. I live in the United States, in Michigan, near Lansing, Lansing is the capital of Michigan, in a little town outside of Lansing. I am a wife, I am a mother of two boys, 13 and 16, and I am just a super, super passionate advocate for accessibility and inclusion.

**CB**      So, I guess that then brings us on to AbleVu and AbleEyes. I think Able is obviously leaning towards accessibility, so can you give us some information about what service do you provide, and a little bit of background of how you created the company, and what the demand is like for it.

00:01:58

**MW**      Absolutely. My background is that I was a special education teacher, and I taught students on the autism spectrum. And through that experience, I just realised that the families that I was working with were not feeling comfortable, or able, to have the same types of community experiences as families that don't have a child on the spectrum or with a disability.

And the reason for that is that one of the common characteristics, and I'm sure that you and your audience already know this, but one of the common characteristics is that people on the spectrum have difficulty with transition. They rely on routine. They don't like going to new places all the time, it causes a lot of anxiety. And so, I thought what if I could come up with a solution for this problem?

And so, I was at a conference in Chicago, when I was still teaching, and I saw a virtual tour for the first time, virtual tours being where you can click through a space, and see it like on Google Maps. And I just so, so distinctly remember

thinking this is it. This is what I'm meant to do. I am meant to create something that helps people explore places beforehand, so that they can have really meaningful experiences, as a family.

00:03:20

And one of the reasons this story really stands out to me, when I was teaching, still, a parent called on a Monday morning, and she was sobbing. And I said oh, my gosh, what's wrong? She said no, these are... I thought something had happened, and she said no, these are these are happy tears. And I said okay, great. What happened? And she said, we went out to dinner as an entire family this weekend for the first time in my son's life.

I get goosebumps even telling that story right now, because I just remember thinking what? Her son was nine at the time in my classroom, and so, for nine years, that is something that that family never experienced. They never experienced someone having a selection of food to choose from, someone cooking a meal for them, someone serving them a meal, cleaning up their meal. That is something that I realise I take for granted.

I have a son that plays Travel Soccer, and we travel all over the place. And when we're hungry, we jump off the highway and we stop anywhere, and that's just not everybody's reality. The other part of my story that's really important is I had a dear friend, Jessica, she was one of my best friends. She was a wheelchair user and had muscular dystrophy. And her and I lived together in college.

Although we were friends prior to college, living with her day in and day out was really eye opening, as well, as to the types of challenges that come into play for someone with a physical disability. And not at all about accessibility or ADA, those things are really important, but it's just more about what to know ahead of time, what to expect. Is the rest room going to work? Because we needed a restroom that would fit her chair, me, and enough room for me to transfer her.

00:05:23

And that wasn't always the case. And even though they may have had an accessible stall, they're all just so different. So, knowing ahead of time would have made a really huge difference for us. So, Jessica, unfortunately, passed away several years ago, as a result of her muscular dystrophy. But what I do now is very much in honour of her and her time on this earth, and she's definitely on this journey with me.

So, those are the two things that started this journey. And 2017 is when the original company Able Eyes started, and that evolved into AbleVu. Able Eyes was a virtual tour search platform. So, the idea being that you can search by city or state, or by business name and find businesses that have virtual tours that you could explore ahead of time. Things were going fantastic. We were across the US, and actually, had just expanded into the UK.

And when I, last year in January, did a pitch competition, which was like a shark tank for tech companies, and I won, which I still, to this day, can't even wrap my brain around how much life has changed in the last year. And so, through that, they were looking to work with companies that would be infinitely scalable and

have an impact on the world. And I'm super honoured to say that we were one of those.

00:06:53

And one of the things that we realised, when we were reimagining this, was virtual tours are amazing, and, I still believe, best practice. However, we are preaching equity of access, and we were providing a tool that wasn't necessarily equitable to businesses. Because virtual tours come with a price tag. I wouldn't say it's a super pricey price tag.

We work with ice cream shops and coffee shops, and we work with hospitals and universities. So, a hospital and a university might not bat an eye at a price, where to an ice cream shop, that is a good chunk of their profit. They can't afford it.

**CB** What are the key differences then?

**MW** So, on AbleVu, if a business has a virtual tour, they can add their virtual tours on there, like the link to their virtual tour. But if they don't, that section just disappears. It collapses. Nobody knows otherwise. But then we added a tonne of other information. So, for example, we added a photo section, and we try to educate businesses on what would be important, as far as somebody who has a physical or invisible disability, like entrances, exits, and restrooms.

We even have a zoo that we work with that has, they took a picture of their family restroom, and in their family restrooms, they intentionally do not have hand dryers, because someone with sensory sensitivities, it might cause anxiety for somebody with sensory sensitivities. So, on their profile, they show a picture of this family restroom, and explain in the text information why they've done that.

And so, then people know ahead of time okay, we're going to this zoo, we know that we can go to one of these two bathrooms and find a bathroom that doesn't have a hand dryer. So, it gives the business a lot of flexibility to create whatever profile they think is going to best meet the needs of their visitors. So, there are pictures, text information, there's a list of accessibility features across all disabilities. So, do they have a quiet room? Do they have sensory backpacks?

00:09:06

Do they have Braille? Do they offer American Sign Language? Do they have accessible stalls? So, we really try to cover all of the accessibility features. But what we don't do is we don't rate, judge, critique, point out anything that anyone is lacking or not doing. We want this to be a really, really positive place, so that we can celebrate businesses that are willing to be transparent.

The person on the spectrum has very different needs from the person with post-traumatic stress disorder, or the person that's a wheelchair user, or the person that uses a cane. So, accessibility is just so different, and I know that you know that, because you guys work with so many different disabilities as well. So, how do you create a place where people can find all of that information? And so, that's what we're trying to do.

**CB** And I think, actually, what you're doing, the companies, the businesses that you're working with, because they want to be a part of it, it just allows the visitor, the

customer to then open up that conversation with that business directly, doesn't it? Because it's quite a challenge to meet everybody's accessible needs in one hit, but you have to start somewhere. And that's what we always say to organisations that join the Sunflower, just make a start.

00:10:44

Just make a start, join, and then the conversations will help to drive your approach to EDI and disability inclusion. So, it sounds fantastic, and you mentioned zoos. So you've got zoos, hospitals. Have you got the little ice cream parlours, as well?

**MW** We do, absolutely. Basically, anything that's open to the public. I used to say brick and mortar, but it doesn't have to be brick and mortar. We have beaches and we have parks, so just really anything that's open to the public, it is beneficial to have that information. And so, when they create a profile as well, there are two other features that I think really benefit the business. There's a place for accessibility questions, exactly what you just said.

So, somebody can ask a question. A great example of this might be do you have family restrooms? I was just talking to a mother, she has a teenage son on the spectrum, so it's not appropriate for him to go into the women's room, it's not appropriate for her to go into men's room, so they need a family restroom. So, she could ask the question do you have a family restroom? And that educates the business immediately.

So, maybe they do, and they, all of a sudden, think okay, we should have a picture of our family restroom. That's something that's meaningful to our visitors. If they don't, it becomes education as to why that's important, because maybe they have no experience working, or experience understanding why somebody would need to be in a bathroom together, so with somebody. And so, I like to think that this is going to be one, celebrating businesses, and two, educating businesses.

00:12:39

And then the second benefit for the businesses is they can take that URL link to their profile, and add it to their website. That is something that is lacking on so many websites, is one spot for all accessibility information. And that is also where the Sunflower Programme comes in, too.

**CB** You are listening to the Sunflower Conversations with Chantal. To learn more about the Sunflower, visit our website. Details are in the show notes. I was going to ask you, what has your journey with the Hidden Disability Sunflower been? How did you discover it? What do you think about it?

**MW** It is one of my favourite things in the whole world. And I'm guessing that I probably discovered it on social media. It's been a few years now, and I likely just reached out and said I would love to learn more about this. And I have two stories that are really, really meaningful to the mission behind the Sunflower Programme. One is when I was going through college, I also worked on an in-home programme for children on the spectrum, who were at risk of being removed from their home, due to really significant behaviours.

And it was difficult, it was dangerous for families, and dangerous for the siblings. And so, there was a programme that was state funded that would bring someone

into the home to assist in those situations. And so, I would take clients out in the community, and in their home, we'd practice daily living skills. And I took this little girl out to dinner one time at a restaurant, which we did often, because that community exposure was really important.

00:14:29

And she became really upset in a parking lot, and dropped to the ground and she started banging the back of her head on the cement parking lot. That's terrifying. And so, I immediately ran over to her and put my hands under the back of her head to protect her head, so that she didn't injure herself. And as I'm trying to deescalate this situation, and trying to help her through this moment, there were cars driving by honking and yelling stop hurting that girl, stop hurting that little girl.

And so, when I think of the Sunflower Programme, I think of how it creates empathy in the world. Because had the Sunflower been something that everybody knew about, and had she had a Sunflower lanyard on, somebody would have maybe been less judgmental and more empathetic, or maybe even offered to help. And so, that's where I see that going, it becomes a tool that creates empathy in the world, and creates awareness in the world in that situation.

And how many parents, again, back to my story of parents aren't going out into the community, can you imagine why they don't go out into the community? If that is the reaction of people in the community.

**CB** Yes, exactly. That's why it's been created.

**MW** And my second story is really personal and just happened a couple weeks ago. My mother has had epilepsy, and had really significant seizures for most of her life. And about 20 years ago, she had a brain surgery that clipped a section of her brain, that section that was creating the seizures, and it was supposed to stop the seizures. And it did. She has not had a seizure since. So, highly successful. One of the possible side effects of that surgery was that she would have memory loss.

00:16:43

And she does have significant memory loss, short term memory loss. So, she can remember her childhood, she can remember the streets that she lived on, and the addresses and the phone numbers when she was little, but she can't necessarily remember how to turn on a computer or turn on her phone. So, a few weeks ago, she wanted to go and visit a friend that lives in Virginia. And so, I bought her plane ticket, and I took her to the airport.

And I could only get her to TSA. So, after TSA, I kept trying to remind her of what to do next, what to do next. How do you prepare her for the whole rest of the airport? And right at TSA, I could tell that she was confused. They took her bag, and they searched her bag, because I think she had a lotion or something that maybe was questionable in size. And so, then they were searching her bag, and she didn't understand why they were searching her bag and she was confused.

And I thought oh, my gosh, I wish she had a Sunflower lanyard right now, because the TSA was getting... They were kind, they were super kind, but I could tell that they were maybe getting frustrated with her, because she was so unsure about what was going on. And one of the TSA officers did walk up to me and say is your

mother losing her memory? Does she have Alzheimer's? And I said no, she doesn't have Alzheimer's, but she does have memory issues.

00:18:16

So, I explained the situation, and she said I understand. My mother has Alzheimer's, and so I can see what's happening right now. And she said just so you know, in the future, you could go to her gate with her, which I didn't know. And then on the way back, I signed her up for TSA Cares, so that TSA would have some knowledge of her memory issues when she went through. And again, I had never participated in that with her, so that was a great experience.

But I remember, I was just thinking if she had a Sunflower lanyard on right now, a lot of this could have been a lot more easily understood by both sides.

**CB** Yes, absolutely. Definitely. And just picking up on your Mum's memory, I'm just interested, the memory loss, the short term memory loss, did that happen immediately, or has it accelerated over time?

**MW** It happened immediately. So, basically, she had the surgery, and then as soon as she had the surgery, she could still remember. I think what does happen, though, so she could remember before the surgery, so basically anything before the surgery, she could remember. So, maybe immediately after the surgery, it wasn't as noticeable, because she could remember two weeks ago. But as it progressed, now it's a month ago, a year ago.

So, we, as her children, I really try to support her in a lot of different ways. Things that we call accommodations are like using Alexa, and using Siri on her phone, because her navigating through her phone, it just gets really confusing. But if she can just tell her phone what she wants, who she wants to call, and where she wants to go, those have been great accommodations for her.

00:20:11

**CB** They have some fantastic accessibility features, don't they, with the phone? I'm not promoting iPhones, but they really do. You just speak into it, and it tells you what you want and where you want to go. I use it as a dictionary, very often. But you don't actually have to be going into all of the icons and the settings, do you? It's really clever. And what ways do you use Alexa for her?

**MW** So, she can pull up pictures. She loves music, so I've posted some things on her walls of things that she can ask. She likes to ask for the weather. Because she cannot navigate her phone to find the weather, that would be too much. But she can ask Alexa about the weather. And so, we just have some things set up in her home, so that she can ask Alexa certain questions. She knows what she can ask her phone. FaceTime is a great resource for us, as well.

She subscribes to an exercise programme, it's a yearly subscription, but it's a streaming programme. And so, if her Wi-Fi gets unhooked, or something like that, getting her hooked back up to Wi-Fi can be really challenging over the phone. But when she pulls up FaceTime, she can hold it up to the TV, and I'm able to walk her through signing back in, or whatever it is, whoever she's ended up with on her TV.

00:21:48

**CB** The technology is really helping to bridge the gap, and allow people to be more involved in in their own lives, let alone everybody else's lives. So, why do you see the alignment between the Hidden Disability, it's such a mouthful, Hidden Disabilities Sunflower programme and AbleVu?

**MW** Well, I think both are on a mission to create more empathy and inclusion in the world. And so, for that reason, I think it's such a natural fit. The way that we envision this partnership when a business sets up a profile, they are in control of their information. And one of the sections is called programmes and certifications. And so, there are some programmes that we have decided that align with our values.

So, any businesses that sign up for AbleVu, which is, like I said, really inexpensive. So, when they create their profile, if they're under these programme certifications, the Sunflower Programme is one of the options. And so, when a business chooses that, then it shows on their profile. And what that tells users, and the platform is free for users, and always will be, but what that tells users is that this organisation has gone above and beyond.

00:23:54

They're not just doing the very basic things to meet ADA. They are really, really trying to be a very inclusive space. And then with that, there's a link to their Sunflower profile, so they can learn more about how to access or participate in that programme, once they get to that destination. So, to us, it is just a really great way of celebrating the businesses that have taken that extra step.

**CB** That's brilliant. So, how do you see the growth of it, the synergy between the two companies pushing forward?

**MW** Absolutely. And we will continue to advocate to the businesses that we work with, how important and powerful this programme is. And so, we have a partner page that has more information about the Sunflower Programme, and really hope that as businesses sign up and they're seeing it in that drop down, that they like I'm curious what this is, and hopefully, they sign up.

**CB** Just finally, how do people access AbleVu?

**MW** It's AbleVu, with an A B L E V U.com. Currently, like I said, we are only in the United States, but that's just for our V1 of AbleVu. We are actually meeting tomorrow, and one of the topics is discussing how we are going to expand internationally. So, more to come on that.

00:25:33

**CB** Brilliant. Well, we are very much looking forward to seeing where you take the Sunflower to, and really increasing people's opportunities to get out and have the experiences that they should be able to enjoy, and the journey that you're taking organisations on to consider their accessibility, and how they can make it inclusive for all. Thank you so much, Meegan. Thank you for your time today.

**MW** Yes, thank you so much.

**AN** If you'd like to share your Sunflower story or conversation, please email [conversations@hiddendisabilitystore.com](mailto:conversations@hiddendisabilitystore.com). Find out more about us, or listen to this recording again, by checking out our Insights page at [hiddendisabilitystore.com](https://hiddendisabilitystore.com). You can also find us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Please help, have patience, and show kindness to others. And join us again soon. Making the invisible visible with the Hidden Disability Sunflower.

00:26:53