

Opening Doors, Season 2, Episode 1

Nasreen Alkhateeb: Universal Design in Film

Narrator: Welcome to Opening Doors. A podcast about accessibility in arts and civic life. Brought to you by the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium and Jack Straw Cultural Center.

For our second season, we continue to amplify the voices of outstanding individuals with disabilities of all kinds. Here's your host Elizabeth Ralston, an accessibility consultant and founder of the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium.

Elizabeth Ralston: Hi, I'm here today with Nasreen Alkhateeb, who is an award-winning cinematographer, whose work amplifies underrepresented voices. Most recently, Nasreen served as lead cinematographer for Kamala Harris's successful vice-presidential campaign. In the last two years, she has led film projects for the United Nations, NASA, and the Women's March. Nasreen's credits in directing and producing include films screened at the Tribeca film festival, Slamdance, Netflix, Amazon, Independent Film Channel and Oprah Winfrey network.

Her ability to motivate audiences is a direct result of being multi heritage, first generation American, and making work through a disabled lens. She is senior production advisor and mentor at Respectability Lab and mentee at American Society of Cinematographers.

Welcome Nasreen. I'm so thrilled to be talking with you today. And I want to frame the conversation by identifying myself, by giving a visual description of myself. I am a white woman, with short silver wavy hair, wearing a red blouse, sitting on a brown couch, with a plain beige background behind me. And I'm really thrilled to be able to talk to you about your professional life and how it's impacted by your disability and your work in this arena.

So why don't we go ahead and get started. And then let me know about how, when you first became disabled. But first talk a bit about yourself, and tell me how when you first became disabled, the disabled community was there for you and how that translated into your professional life.

Nasreen Alkhateeb: thank you so much for having me. I feel really grateful to be here just having the conversation. So, thank you. My name is Nasreen Alkhateeb. I am a multiheritage woman. Both Black and Iraqi.

I am sitting in a multicolored chair and I have long tightly wound curly hair. I'm wearing a black t-shirt that has an image of Prince on the front of it, that says Purple Rain. And the pronouns I use are she, her and hers. I'm sitting on soil that is currently occupying a space on Tongva Land.

And I have multiple disabilities. The one that's visible - I have both visible and non-visible disabilities. My visible disability is sometimes I walk with a cane because I was in a hit and run and I acquired mobility issues to my left foot. And it affects how I move throughout the day. I feel pain from it every day. And then my invisible disabilities are, I get chronic pain from migraines frequently, and I have many food allergies.

ER: So, all of a sudden you found yourself in this situation. And how did the disability community rally around you in this instance?

NA: Walking through this world without thinking about mobility, up until the point I was struck by a car was a place of privilege that I was aware of, but that I didn't fully appreciate. And it wasn't until I had my ability to walk taken from me, that I had to reassess the world around me and my place in it and figure out how I was going to do the things I did before. It definitely gave me a new way of looking at the world. And at first it was very isolating. It felt like only things were taken and nothing was given.

And it wasn't until a year later, that I started to really get comfortable with the idea that "Yeah, I'm disabled. No, that's not a bad word. No there's no shame in saying that word or claiming that word."

And a big part of that was a big community of other film makers and other content creators who are all disabled. I got into the RespectAbility lab and I got to meet 20 other people. Who—none of them looked like me but they were just like me because we all had a disability. And it was awesome because we were able to connect on these multiple levels and it felt so good to be welcomed in a space where I didn't have to feel shame based on the fact that my body was working in a way that has nothing to do with me personally. I don't get to choose these things. These are things that I have to adapt to if I want to keep living, and keep working, and keep being human.

And that group of people really made me feel like - like I mattered, and that I was on the right path.

ER: And you can just be with these people and not feel like you have to explain anything. So, I totally get where you're coming from. I grew up pretty isolated from other people with disabilities. So, I was mainstreamed and really didn't know any deaf people growing up.

And it wasn't until I met my first deaf friend that I was like - It was like looking into a mirror. And I was thinking "Wow. What have I missed all this time?" And also, this privilege. Feeling like as a white person, I was born into privilege. I had a middle-class family who could afford to send me to good schools and help me with my listening.

So, I totally relate to that. Thank you for sharing that.

Let's shift to how your work as a filmmaker - you said that you don't put your energy into anything that doesn't change culture. And I was really struck by that: you know, culture shifting work and how do you advance diversity inclusion in your work. Tell me more about that. How do you do this in your work?

NA: Yeah, well growing up it was pretty apparent that you know I didn't look like other people and that my family didn't speak the same language other families spoke or eat the same foods. My body shape was very different than the girls around me that I grew up with. It felt like everything was different. It just felt like I was always going to be labeled sort of as a foreigner.

So, I had to figure out, you know, what my identity was past the things I didn't have control over. I don't have control over the family I was born into, or the religion they practice, or the countries they come from. Or my skin tone, or my ability to walk, or play outside. Like all of these things are totally out of my control.

So, I started to think about what makes up my identity beyond that. And so I started to connect with people based on those mutual interests.

Growing up, I was a kid totally obsessed with '80s music and movies. I loved horror movies and special effects and monster makeup.

ER: Ooh! [laughs]

NA: And so, I connected with people based on that. And that kind of was the basis or the anchor for who I was as a person.

And as I started to grow up and get older, and I knew early on I wanted to be a filmmaker, but my mother was a women's rights activist. And what she was doing, the work, all of the time and effort and energy she poured into her communities to shift culture, left a very strong impression on me.

And it basically . . . what I learned from that is, you know, the things you are given in life, the gifts that you have, or the privileges that have been bestowed on you. They don't belong to you. They belong to everyone.

ER: Mmm

NA: . . . and if the work that you're doing doesn't reflect that, then you're taking what you've been given and you're benefiting a very small group of people. So, if your work isn't creating a ripple effect that affects everyone in your community and outside of that community, then you're missing an opportunity.

ER: Totally. For so long, I did not "come out" about my disability because I wanted to fit in just like everyone else. But in recent years as I've started talking more about it, and more about my role in the arts and how accessibility is so important, not just for people with disabilities, but for everyone. So, when you think about the concept of universal design, you know, I think of inclusive design too.

When you plan things, you start from the very beginning, thinking about accessibility as you move through that planning process. So can you tell me a little bit more about that process? You know. universal design in film and TV production.

NA: Yeah, so, what's so important. You know, growing up, I've never seen someone who looks like me on screen. And that's probably a totally different conversation that we could have. But things are shifting very drastically in the last five years, especially in the last one year.

ER: Yes

NA: Right? Everything. The way we use language. The people that are getting cast in television and film. Growing up, when I walked into school and I was like the only person of color. It was obvious to me but it wasn't obvious to my peers.

I was always like, "Uhhhh . . . everyone here is white. Like, that could be a problem because of XYZ."

So, the more we have representation that reflects our actual—like if you're walking down a block anywhere in any city or any suburb, you're going to see, hopefully, you're going to see all

different kinds of people using all different kinds of mobility apparatuses, or with different accents, or, you know, different sexualities or different genders.

That has to be mirrored in film and television, especially behind the camera, so, what ends up coming out in front of the camera is reflective of that accuracy.

ER: Yes! Totally. And I agree, I feel like it's changing ever since the pandemic, especially, has kind of blown things out in the open. And I still feel like we have a long way to go, though. I mean do you agree that we're not casting actors with disabilities as much as we could be? I mean the tide is changing but for me it feels like it's going at a glacial pace.

NA: It is. I would agree with you. I think that the pace is too slow. I think we need to speed it up and we can speed it up. I think there are certain key people who are trying their best but we need support. You know?

ER: What does that look like? That support.

NA: So, you know as humans we interact with buildings and places and environments every day. We either walk or roll or cane into, like, a building. And that building either has stairs elevators or a ramp. If that building doesn't have a ramp or an elevator, you're basically cutting off a huge section of the population and forbidding them from going into the structure.

If that's a government building, if that's a production house, if that's the set for the day, you're basically discounting a number of people that could be helping, that could be a gaffer, that could be a director, that could be a producer, that could be a grip.

So, what ends up happening is: you're using the same people you've always used. And it's largely, you know, representative of just one type of person. And that doesn't help anyone. Content is always going to be elevated if it has a diverse voice behind it.

ER: Yes, and I think we need to do a better job of making people feel uncomfortable, don't you think? I mean, if, like if you say, everyone used the same old voices so no one's gonna be able to get out of their comfort zone. And so, I think we need to shake things up, I think.

NA: I think so. I mean I was speaking to another activist: Charis Hill. And they weren't the ones that made this up, but they continue to use the term, because it's accurate: you're either disabled or you're pre-disabled.

ER: Yes! Oh my god. That's amazing.

NA: At some point in our lives, we're going to have to adjust how our bodies worked before or never worked before—and adjust to an able-bodied environment. The problem with adjusting to an able-bodied environment is that we're saying one is normal and one is not, which isn't the case.

Both are normal. We just have to figure out a way to design buildings, to design production sets, to design schools and government buildings, and planes, and busses, and trains so that whoever wants to access that space is not just able to, but they feel welcome.

When you feel welcomed into a space, you blossom as a person, you're able to have conversations more freely. You're able to bring walls down that you have. I mean it's not just

about like, the physicality of accessing a space. But it's also about feeling welcomed in that space. Feeling like you belong there.

ER: Yes. And I have a public health background. So, I'm always wondering how public health is infused in this conversation. I mean, when you think about loneliness for example, that's a public health problem because people are not feeling connected for one reason or another. Maybe it's because their spouse died. Maybe it's because they have become disabled and so they cannot get around like they used to.

So, I, oh my gosh, I so agree because - elderly people, for example. This is a rapidly growing population. And as you get older, you get more and more things breaking down in your body. So, we have to prepare. We have to prepare our society for this onslaught of new disabilities.

But people ask me: Well, is universal design more expensive? What do you think? How would you respond to that?

NA: I think if anyone wanted to access a space, and should have the right to do it, but also should also feel welcomed to do it.

If you think about design in the beginning stages, then it doesn't have to be more expensive. I think it's only more expensive after you've designed it - like let's say it's an award ceremony. Let's say it's an award ceremony at a ballroom that doesn't have access to a ramp for the stage. Only stairs.

And you know, maybe a sound designer or a director who uses a wheelchair or who uses a cane can't use those stairs and they've been given an award. And now we have to figure out a way to get them onto this stage. And it's after the producers have basically created the entire event, but now they have to backtrack and add an extra budget line for a ramp.

If they had thought about this at the very beginning, then they would've chosen a ballroom that already had ramps. Or they would've worked that line item into the budget early on. And basically, that ramp could have also benefitted other departments like lighting and costumes and whoever else has a wheeling apparatus.

So, if you think about design at the beginning - you know, we're already starting to ask ourselves questions like, "Do you have any food allergies? You're going to be a part of this event that I'm putting on. Do you have food allergies? What pronouns do you use?" So, these are already two questions that we've accepted as "normal questions to ask."

Why aren't we also asking the question, "Is there anything that you need that will make you feel more welcomed in our space?" Why aren't we asking that question?

ER: Yes why? And I want to apologize, I didn't say my pronouns at the beginning. Elizabeth Ralston, she/her. And I'm always telling people, please when you introduce yourself, please use your pronouns and state a visual description. Because that's the first step to being inclusive and welcoming.

And this is exactly what I've been preaching when it comes to virtual events. You're talking about live. But this also applies to virtual events. Because so many more people now are able to attend virtual events than ever before. But of course, accessibility has been left behind.

You know, so there are so many things that can go into making a virtual space a lot more welcoming and a lot more inclusive. But you have to start at the planning process. And I've been telling people, yes it may seem overwhelming at first, but if you do it at the beginning it gets easier and easier. And don't forget trust. The community will start to trust that you will be there, and you will be providing these options. Right?

NA: Totally. I totally agree with that. I think if you're not part of the disabled community, it can be intimidating because you don't want to make the mistake of doing or saying something wrong. So, it's just a matter of getting over that hurdle.

We're not scary. The things that we need on set are so simple. Like if someone uses a wheelchair, you just have to make aisles four feet so they can turn their chair around. Or you just have to draw a map to let people know where the accessible bathrooms are

Or making sure that, you know, if you have someone who is deaf on set, that there are pens and paper on every surface so people can communicate with them if they need to.

Like these are very, very simple fixes. And they're not intimidating once you start to unpack it. I walk with a cane sometimes, and if I'm on my leg, or my leg is just being angry that day, I need an apple box to lean on throughout my day. That's not an overwhelming ask. That just means we have to make sure there's an extra apple box to lean on. That's it. You know? I think that people are more likely to discount disability as a thing than to include because they don't want to be wrong.

But what that costs them in the long run is - one trillion dollars actually. Because if you're discounting an entire community of people, which is 20% of our population, I might add. And a trillion dollars of the market according to the Nielsen company, then you're not only shooting yourself in the foot, no pun intended, financially--

ER: [laughter]

NA:--but you're also not including us. Like, trauma, and people who are disabled are so much more interesting than storylines without disability.

ER: I agree, I totally agree. You took the words out of my mouth. Cause that was my next questions. About filling in that trillion-dollar gap. I mean, tell me a little bit more. Let's go just a little bit deeper into that. What is that gap, and how can people with disabilities fill that gap?

NA: So according to Nielsen, sourcing information from the US Department of Labor, consumers of content with disabilities, their families, their friends, their colleagues, that community represents a trillion dollars. And right now, I can name maybe two or three shows on TV that represent that.

So, there's a gap in our entertainment content in television and film. If you make your lead characters disabled, and especially if you make them disabled and the storyline has nothing to do with that. Like just a love story. Or - they don't have to be like a superhero.

ER: [laughter]

NA: Like, you don't have make them like this . . . like, they don't have to be Batman. They just have to be a regular person. There is a huge group of people who is ready to spend money to consume that content.

ER: And you brought up a good point. It's not just them. People don't like to go alone to entertainment. They like to go with people. And so, take a senior citizen, for example. If they start to lose their hearing. Or they start to lose their mobility, they're not going to go.

And, what have you lost? You've lost their friends, you've lost their partner, you've lost their neighbor. You've lost all the people who could go with them and appreciate that with them.

NA: Totally, I mean if you look at the *Sound of Metal*, if you look at *Peanut Butter Falcon*. There is a market. There is definitely a market.

I don't care who you are. You want to see yourself represented. You want to know that people care enough to know who you are. And if they do care, there are characters that are being portrayed on film and television that represent us accurately because we were a part of that content. We were writers in that writer's room. We were cinematographers behind that lens. We were directors and producers of that content.

And so, if we get to see ourselves on screen, we get to feel welcomed into all of our communities that we occupy.

ER: Nasreen, this has been incredible. And you've hit on all the points that I wanted to hit on. So, thank you so much. And I wish we had another half an hour to unpack things like the *Sound of Metal* because that was an incredible movie, and I have so many thoughts about it. And I'm sure you do too.

But I think what you shared today has been incredible and I really appreciate your time and talking about universal design and planning and how people with disabilities really can close that gap. That trillion-dollar gap. So, thank you so much for your time.

NA: Oh my god, thank you for having me. I always want to talk about this kind of stuff. Especially people that represent groups in our society that basically need a higher place and a higher voice in our society. So anytime you want to talk about this, I'm around.

ER: Thank you so much.

Narrator: Opening Doors is produced by the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium and Jack Straw Cultural Center. This podcast was made possible by the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, the Washington State Arts Commission, the National Endowment for the Arts, and individual donors, with in kind support from Jack Straw Cultural Center, Sound Theater Company, Jennifer Rice Communications, and the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium Steering Committee. Music performed by William Chapman Nyaho, produced through the Jack Straw Artist Support Program.

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Join us for our next episode featuring an interview with Elsa Sjunneson, an award-winning deaf blind writer and editor.

Elsa Sjunneson: I think it's hard being different, especially in high school. But I think what I would tell teenagers specifically, and also just adults who are struggling with it, is that being kind to yourself is one of the most important things that we can do as people. That, you know, kindness to yourself includes accepting who you are and what your body is capable of.

Narrator: Hear the whole interview on the next episode of Opening Doors available at soundcloud.com/openingdoorspod and wherever you get your podcasts.

Thanks for listening.