

[Video Transcript]

Accessibility for All: from Inspiration to Reality

[show title screen]

[Betsy]

Hello everyone. I'm Betsy Dalton from the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County. I serve as chair of the Disability Justice sub-committee of our Social Justice Team and I am here with my UUCSC colleague and friend, Myron Waldman. We are happy to share this story of our Commitment to Accessibility – from Inspiration to Reality.

Have you ever had this experience where someone tries to explain something to you but you become lost after the first sentence? While I have lots of experience in the disability and technology fields, this certainly doesn't make me an expert in other areas. At a church coffee hour, someone came up to me to tell me about her investment strategy. Frankly, I was lost after the first sentence. I knew nothing about exchange funds so I was lost, and I felt badly about not really understanding her situation. As the conversation continued, I realized that I would never catch up. Later, I realized that I did not have the courage to tell her what was going on – I was fearful of being wrong. Me, with a PhD, lots of published papers, and worldwide professional recognition.

That night, I realized that I was guilty of exactly the same thing that I had experienced – putting others in a position of fear, due to lack of knowledge. For years, I pressed the board to add an automatic door at our building entrance ramp. It was a simple accommodation that would make it possible for someone in a wheelchair or with other mobility needs to enter our building on their own. It made great sense to me, but my position was never embraced by others.

Shortly afterwards, I became a member of the board of trustees and was again focused on getting my automatic door opener. A few things stood in the way – first, the board needed to recognize and feel the real need for this automatic door; and second, we needed to solve the money issues that came with it. Then, the unexpected happened. I became dependent to a walker because of severe arthritis in my knees and hips. I was no longer able to enter the church building on my own. And that was important to me, as I found myself at the church at least three times a week.

My shift from temporarily abled, as most of us are, to temporarily disabled proved to be the perfect example to get my point across as to why we needed the automatic door opener. The board and others could relate to the need much better now – they could see how this can, and likely would, happen to many others. We ended up agreeing to move forward because of our SHARED recognition of need – but still had to face the money questions. Here too, opportunity and creativity helped out. We found out about a local grant possibility to support accessibility. A few board members got together, spent some personal time gathering information to make our case, and happily, we were successful in getting the help! This grant was partial, but was then matched by church funds approved by the board, and now we could finally get our automatic door opener!

Since the installation a few years ago, we've seen more people with mobility disabilities come to church. Several of these folks have shared how happy they feel to be at UUCSC, because they now FEEL that they are truly welcome – the door opener is a tangible sign that we want

EVERYONE to come. It was a \$5000 investment that really paid off for us, because we attracted many more people.

Dealing with my visible disability at the time paid off. But what about invisible disabilities?

[introduce Myron]

Myron Waldman, a member of our congregation, is spearheading a unique approach to getting more hearing loops into the Rhode Island community. His approach is to get the state to cover up to half of the cost of the hearing loops in private venues through grants, in an effort called Hearing Loop Rhode Island, and now supported by the Governor's Commission on Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Myron....

[Myron]

Thank you, Betsy. Over the past 15 years, I've tried to get accommodations for people like me. Actually, I'm deaf. Without clear acoustics like an echo-free environment, I hear the voices but can't understand the words. I kept coming to UU services because of the music and the fellowship, but could not hear much else during our services.

In years past, I could never seem to get across to our church board what was so important to me. That was the ability to understand the words spoken during Sunday services. Since I struggled with profound hearing loss most of my life, I made a study of it and created devices that I needed in order to get past just survival in a hearing world.

Even though it is a fairly common disability, hearing loss is indeed invisible and is still very poorly understood. Unless I tell someone that I do not hear well, they will color me thick, antisocial, uncaring among other things. So, in church, it was not common to see me express the same emotions as others for the simple reason that one reflects what they hear. It was kind of embarrassing. I needed a fix for this.

Asking for people to care about an invisible disability doesn't work – they just cannot relate to something they can't experience. I needed to make it visible.

Here's what happened. I asked the board for a small fund to cover the cost of two small speakers to be placed at ear level close to four pews. They agreed. I installed them along with a wall sign inviting people who wanted to hear better to seat themselves near the speakers.

After many months, people migrated from the rear (yes, the rear) of the church to sit near the speakers. I found that people with and without hearing aids claimed these new seats.

I made it a point to talk about hearing loss with people that moved their seating. I wanted to bring hearing loss from silence to discussion as I needed to know how they were benefiting from the change.

This gave hearing loss some visibility. The sign and the speakers could not be overlooked. At this point, I figured that I made hearing loss visible enough for my next step.

This is when Betsy became president of the board of trustees. She was familiar with hearing loss issues and technology. I asked her to support an effort to have an induction hearing loop system installed in the main sanctuary. She agreed that this was important and supported the idea. These systems typically cost over \$6000 and are coupled with an existing sound system because the sound system uses microphones. Good microphones are a requirement for a decent hearing loop system.

Why a hearing loop? These systems work with 70% of hearing aids. There is no need for a special receiver or headset device. It's discrete. The sound quality makes it possible to understand the speaking voice better than any other technology. It works anywhere in the room and no one will know that you are using it.

I made my presentation to the board with Betsy as president knowing that I needed another advocate to assure the funding of this project. No committee offered to fund the hearing loop. I was hoping that one of the hearing aid wearers on the board would add strong support. Unfortunately, none did. I was about to leave the meeting when one board member stood up and with great enthusiasm and conviction, carved the path for funds for the project. She was the board president when Betsy got her automatic door opener for our ramp entrance. She inspired the board to agree to bypass the budget and get others to personally donate funds for this project.

We were able to install a system well under the normally expected costs, due to volunteer help. That was a few years ago. Since that time, there is hardly a service where someone does not thank me for the hearing loop. The high-quality microphones that were acquired as part of this system are wireless mikes, and now serve additionally to help our minister and others to move easily around the congregation and involve others, and still be heard.

Here is the equipment that we added.

[show pic of hearing loop amplifiers and hold for 4 sec]

Last year, I came up with a plan to improve the sound quality for everyone by adding lots of small speakers. The plan was approved. Speakers installed. Now, there is not a service where someone does not come up to me and thank me for the better sound.

At the end of this session, on the ending screen, copy down the URL. It includes a short extraordinary video that lets you experience hearing segments of a church service with and without a hearing loop.

[Betsy]

In both of our stories, we relied on visibility to get our points across. We also learned on issues of accessibility, persons with disabilities may not necessarily be our best supporters – supporters often come from unexpected places, and for many different reasons.

Just as I had blanked out when my fellow parishioner brought up investment funds, people on church boards and committees can do the same thing. To really get our points across, we made the experiences real enough to strike home by adding a strong visibility component for both visible and invisible disabilities. You can't miss the automatic door entrance or the entry signs describing the sanctuary's hearing loop and how to use it. Our congregation now takes pride in its commitment to accessibility. Most recently, several members of our Facilities Committee made sure that we expanded our handicapped-accessible parking spaces from just 2 to now having 6 spaces, as we need these to support the increase in folks now attended our services – isn't that a wonderful thing!

Accessibility does not, and should not, end with just getting in the front door – accessibility of materials, attitudes, and opportunities to connect must always be part of our concerns and our planning. There are so many ways in which people differ – and these differences build our diverse communities.

Our attendance before COVID-19 was at record highs. People feel more comfortable bringing guests of all levels of ability BECAUSE this church clearly demonstrates both willingness and commitment to accommodate, and welcome everyone – and we continue our commitment to accessibility.

[show ending screen]

Thank you so much for letting Myron and I share with you the story of our Commitment to Accessibility. Please take time to copy the link to online resource at the end of this video. [www.pagecliff.com/uuga/poster.html] There you will find information and ideas to help with accessibility at your church.

Thank you.

[end of transcript]