**Down to the Struts**

Season 3, Episode 4: Disability Access and Inclusion in the Workplace

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Guest: Kathy Martinez

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

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**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to another episode of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Before we get started, I wanted to let you know that Down to the Struts is now on Patreon, a platform where you can support content creators and help them continue to make the content you love. I'll share some more details later in the episode, but if you're interested, you can follow the link on our website or just go to patreon.com/downtothestruts. today. We'll be listening in on my conversation with Kathy Martinez. Kathy is the President and CEO of disability rights advocates a leading disability rights organization based in California. Kathy is an International Disability Rights leader whose work spans across the private nonprofit and governmental sectors. Cathy shared her story of growing up blind in California, before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, her work to elevate disability access and inclusion as Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Obama administration, and as Senior Vice President for disability and accessibility at Wells Fargo Bank, and the future she envisions for disabled people in the labor force. As a blind woman of color myself, I look up to Kathy as a role model, and I hope more disabled people will follow her path to leadership. Okay, let's get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks so much, Kathy, for joining me. I'd love it if we could start with you telling us a little bit about yourself and your journey and what brought you to LEED Disability Rights Advocates?

Kathy Martinez:

Well, let me just say it is a pleasure being on this badass show, which I love. And I think you are just incredible. And it's just so great to see how you know many people of color with disabilities, especially women are just busting out and doing their incredible thing. So it's my honor, and I will tell you about my journey. So I was born blind. And I'm 62 years old, just you know, in fairness of full disclosure, I think it's you know, some people don't like to tell their age, but I don't care because I think it gives a good context regarding, you know, well, especially for my experience, and you know, where disability was when I was growing up. So my family is from New Mexico, my parents are from New Mexico, although they had recently moved to California before I was born. So they were, you know, kind of recent transplants, they came from a primarily Spanish speaking part of New Mexico and northern New Mexico, that part of New Mexico remained relatively isolated until like, you know, the 30s when the WPA came in and started building roads and dams and bridges, so my parents both spoke fluent Spanish. And so when when I was born, I'm the third of six children. And I should say, for the record, that I do have a sister who is blind, and we are the two middle blind kids out of siblings of six. So Peggy and I are, are the two middle of six kids. We have two above us that are sighted and two younger than us that are sighted. So we don't know why we're blind because everybody asks, you know, well, what happened? Well, we don't know. And fortunately, my parents focused on making…on the fact that we were blind. We were on the planet, we were, you know, there's like, okay, they're blind. You know, we don't know what the cure is ever going to be. And we should focus on their existence as blind people in the world. So when I was growing up, the concept of mainstreaming education was relatively new. Peggy and I were some of the first blind people in public school. We were not the first in California, but we were, you know, some of the first so we started school, from kindergarten on so I bring this up only because that experience had a huge impact on my life, in that I was in the room for the first time with non disabled kids, about 20 of them. And up until then, I had been, you know, mostly around relatives or parents or cousins. I have a massive family and everybody knew that I was blind. But when I first came to this school, like all other new kindergarteners, the kids had, you know, didn't know any blind people. So they asked many questions, as you can imagine, but eventually, you know, they got over the fact that I was blind and I became Part of the team, part of the furniture. And I, I bring this up because, you know, it was a real big change in my life because I was only five. But I realized, you know, being around a bunch of the sighted kids, that, you know, I had to manage the world differently. So I had to figure out how to get from point A to point B without tripping over bikes, other kids, you know, knocking kids down. You know, as a kid does, I realize I've got to do things differently. And I had never realized that until I was like, five, and then I, you know, it was a group of all non disabled kids. And it was like, oh, wow, this world is basically not cut out for me. So I realized that but at the same time, as I realized that I think the kids realize that and so they figured out ways. I call it authentically accommodate me. So like authentic accommodation, meaning that it grew out of our situation. So the kids had not learned how to hate yet or feel negative feelings about people with disability. So their ableism hadn't started to sprout, how's that, and they just assumed that I should be part of whatever they did in unstructured time, like recess, for example. So when the teacher wasn't around, they figured out how I would play Foursquare tetherball whatever happened now, I did crash into things a lot, but I was part of the group. And we all figured out how I would participate. So having that as kind of a as a framework, and as a jumping off point, or I guess I would say it was kind of a foundational step for me, all through school kids figured out how I could participate, you know, until later when they, you know, figured out that people were different and, and, you know, I was bullied, but for the most part, being with other kids was a good experience. I mean, of course, kids can be mean and all that. And they were but I also had a lot of friends that, you know, protected me and, you know, stood up for me. And I was lucky because a lot of people with disabilities don't have that in mainstream education. Also, the fact that I have a blind sister meant that, you know, we could compare notes. So a lot of times, you know, if you're the only disabled person in your family and you go to a mainstream school, you don't really meet other people with disabilities for a while. And so the fact that I had another blind sister was pretty hard on my family in some ways, but for us, it was, you know, incredible, because we had each other, you know, we were touchstones to one another. So I went through a lot of different iterations, I first became a part of the Farm Workers Union for youth, you know, in the late 70s, and my Latina-ness had to shine and then I moved on to the women's movement, where I came out as a lesbian. And so that was kind of front and center for a while. And finally, I found the disability rights movement. And I was like, wow, you know, I have never seen a movement, never known that there was such thing as disability pride. Fortunately, I was in the Bay Area, in, you know, the late 70s and early 80s. So there was a lot of social change, happening or continuing to happen. I felt like I could identify, bring my whole self to the disability rights movement at that time. So as a lesbian, as a Latina, as a woman, and as a blind person. I felt like, gosh, I can bring all of me to this movement. And, you know, I know that, you know, if it wasn't another part of the country, it wouldn't have been the same. I was struck as a young person that, you know, the disability leadership was so white that the values of the disability rights movement at that time were very middle class, very white middle class, right? It was turn 18, get on SSI, get out and get out of your parents house. In many cultures, that just does not happen, especially if you're a woman. So I worked at the World Institute on Disability, my passion has always been economic justice. So everything I've done, you know, since I was like, 21, has been around, obviously, disability rights and diversity and inclusion, but it has been with in my mind, and in my heart, I think that the thought of people with disabilities, you know, we have to have more economic power, if we're gonna have any power in this particular society, which is a capitalist society. I was very anxious. I had gotten on SSI as a as a young person, but I was very anxious to get off I saw that it was a poverty trap and and I did get off but I also had massive payback. I had to pay, like Social Security back, I don't know, like since 15 years. So I worked at the World Institute on Disability. I started off as a special assistant and then I ended up working my way up to being the executive director. During that time, I really did get to know the Disability Rights policy and both domestic and international because WID at the time worked on a lot of international issues. I was able to work in Honduras and El Salvador in a number of different countries in South America, Africa and Asia working with disability groups to kind of spread the word and it wasn't really my goal to tell them what to do. But it was my goal to say, Hey, you know, this could be a possibility. And this is what we did, learn from our mistakes. And you know, you guys got to, you know, make your way in your country in your context. In 2001. I don't know, something hit me like, Hey, you know, you're doing all this work outside of the country, there's so much that has to happen inside this country. And I worked on a prison case, I was an expert witness for a case that went to the Supreme Court called Armstrong v. Wilson, I was collecting information from disabled prisoners all over the state of California, about the situation that prisoners with disabilities faced. So that led me to looking at Latino's, my own people. And, you know, how are they faring in this country, like going all over the world doing work on other soil, I'm thinking, Okay, I got to like, deal with my own people here, I started along with a number of other people a project called Proyecto Vision, which was an employment project for Latinos with disabilities. And, you know, we got to work with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, I felt like we really changed some hearts and minds in the Latino community, because there's a lot of shame and blame in my community around disability. So it was a tiny step forward, there's a lot to do, we did not fix everything, but we made a tiny bit of progress. So that inspired me to work with other groups, other people of color around employment, and also, you know, to work on the ABLE Act, Achieving a Better Life Experience. That's what it is, you know, the whole idea was, so that is so that people who are on SSI , so they can save money by creating one of these accounts. And then I was nominated by President Obama to be an Assistant Secretary of Labor for the Office of Disability Employment Policy, I accepted the nomination and was confirmed by the Senate. Between 2009 to 2015, I worked as an Assistant Secretary, where we started lots of other wonderful projects, including working even more thoroughly with minority chambers of commerce and the NGLCC, the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. And my goal was to really weave disability into the ethos of those organizations. Again, we took, you know, it was a little step forward. But it did. I think it moved the needle president had established section 503 as an executive order, which basically mandates that federal contractors hire people with disability. So while it was in the regs before this was strengthened, and there's a utilization goal of 7%, after that was established, I was telling you earlier, you know, I'd give these speeches telling everybody, Hey, you guys got to go work for the private sector. You know, we want to really show them that there's qualified people with disabilities that can do this work. And I just thought, What am I doing, I'm telling everybody else to go to the private sector, I should go. So I did. And I was lucky enough to work for Wells Fargo. It was a huge learning curve. For me. It was like, I gotten out of the disability bubble, like I show up at Wells Fargo, and I'm like, Oh, my God, you mean there's not, I can’t just walk out of my office and assign something to somebody? I was hired to lead Wells Fargo's accessibility and disability strategies. And it was a huge learning curve. I had to basically drink from a firehose in so many ways a, I had to learn about financial services industry. I had to really kick it up a notch regarding my own knowledge of how to use my technology, because I didn't have a administrative assistant at a time, I eventually did get an administrative assistant, because Wells Fargo realized, hey, we're not paying you to spend four hours filling out a travel voucher, you know, so so they got that, right. It was an amazing experience. And again, we move the needle, it's a marathon, not a sprint, at Wells Fargo, I really felt like connecting with other BIPOC folks and people with a broader intersectionality. And folks, I think what we did at Wells was, you know, we worked on both physical, digital and cultural access, meaning that, you know, of course, for our customers and employees, we had to make things accessible, you know, digitally, we have to make sure that our mobile app is accessible on our website, we have to do all that. But I think as an employee, just our culture had to change. Right. And so one thing I will say that I'm super proud of is that wells expanded the conversation using, you know, a variety of methods, you know, both fireside chats and various panels and brown bags and any way we could we expand the conversation to include people with a really wide variety of disabilities. So it wasn't just blind, deaf and physical disabilities. It was like people were out about their, you know, their mental disabilities, they were out about non evident disabilities. So we were able to increase the number of people who identified as having a disability. I think when I left it was around 6%. And the utilization goal for OFCCP is 7%. So it went from point oh 8% in 2015 to 6%. And I think that speaks a lot to the fact that people were passionate about this issue. You know, I would say that when I left Wells Fargo to join DRA, there is a cadre of super talented people that have religion, I would say, you know, more than me almost in some cases, but I really believe, you know, sometimes in our, in our movement, some of us stay too long in our leadership positions, and we don't move out of the way so other folks can take those positions and make their changes. I felt like, you know, I had done what I could do at Wells, this work will never be done, at least not in my lifetime. So I found an opportunity to kind of jump back into the disability arena. And here I am at Disability Rights Advocates. Now, that’s a long ass answer.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's such a great story. I loved your answer I, I really resonated with so much of that, as a South Asian woman myself, I understand the questions about culture and the disability rights movement, kind of being sort of middle class and white and how that doesn't necessarily jive with this crazy, but beautiful, intertwined family life that we have in our cultures. And a lot of that is very similar. And the I have had to do a lot of teaching myself inside of my own family, inside of my own culture. Because there is also a lot of shame and blame when it comes to disability in my culture as well, that really spoke to me, and I think will likely speak to many of the listeners of this podcast as well. And you did a really nice sum up of of kind of where you started with wells and where you took it. And I wanted to dig a little bit deeper. So when you first got there, and you took on this role as the Senior Vice President and head of disability and accessibility strategy at Wells Fargo, what were some of your initial observations, as you kind of left your disability advocacy space and entered this corporate space? What What did you observe at first?

Kathy Martinez:

Well, first of all, like I was clueless, you know, I had just come off of being an appointee. And you know, the culture was very different. Every work culture has its own idiosyncrasies. And first of all, I had to get used to, you know, I moved back to California, because I had, I had a house and I rented it out, but then I moved back into it. But the first thing that happened, which did impact my perception was I moved back to the Bay Area. And I did expect to have to live in a hotel for a month, but my renters didn't leave. And I had to live in a hotel for four months. That was kind of an experience, what I experienced at wells were a lot of good people afraid to do the wrong thing. I was on the diversity team at the time in marketing. And so these were great folks. You know, they have the commitment, they have the heart, there was a lot of things that were not accessible. As you can imagine, people really did help me with workarounds. And I was able to get my work done, I was so terrified that the lack of kind of day to day knowledge about disability, you know, people had to get used to me, they had to get comfortable, they were afraid to do you know, to say the wrong thing, or do the wrong thing. And so I think, you know, that kind of made them a little reticent, but then they got to know me, and I was like, okay, you're just they had to learn how to make documents accessible. And I think the team grew in a way, but I also did, too. I mean, I had to learn, you know, how to market the strategy, how to develop an internal and an external disability strategy, I had to learn a lot about web accessibility, I had to learn a lot about mobile banking. And now they did have a disability, er G and employee resource group that was really helpful. And I met other folks with disabilities right away, I tried to reach out to people that I knew, and then they connected me with other people that they knew. And so that was really good. You know, like, I could call somebody and say, Hey, you know, how do you do blah, blah, blah. And, you know, there was some very smart blind folks that work there, who also use the same computer screen reader that I use. So after I made connections, I was much more comfortable and a lot less scared. And, you know, I also had to learn the physical space around the office in San Francisco, where to buy food, where to get coffee, folks were really nice. They assigned me a buddy. And they assigned me a mentor. The buddy was on my team and the mentor was an executive vice president, God bless her. She realized pretty quickly that like this person could use some mentoring. And she was incredible. And she gave me a lot of time and I asked a lot of questions and took a lot of notes and then and you know, she kind of helped me discern the lay of the land because there's 250,000 people when I got to Wells Fargo, So wasn't just like, you know, the Department of Labor where there's like, maybe 8000, which was still a lot, but you know, I was a leader there. So people knew me. And then as I started working with like the technology team and the, you know, various teams, our personnel, folks and our outreach, folks, everything takes a little time you got to get used to somebody, you've got it explained, a lot of times I had to educate, which, you know, I know we get tired of doing but I just realized, like, Okay, I have to do this, even though I'm tired of it. Because these people are interested in the learning. And I don't want to say, well, you go find out the information somewhere else, even though I felt like it. Sometimes I just thought, Okay, this is my, this is what I have to do. Like, I have to do it. And sometimes it's you don't want to answer questions about blindness. But I did. And I think people responded in a really positive way. And the best thing I think we did is to really have conversations about non evident disabilities, I really think that was a huge step for the bank.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really interesting. And I think that is something that a lot of companies are grappling with now. And well, first, I should say full disclosure, I bank with Wells Fargo. And now I know who to thank for the fact that I can do so online accessibly. So thank you very much.

Kathy Martinez:

Well, it was not just me, it's a team effort. Believe me, nobody does anything alone at Wells Fargo. Except for maybe the head of Wells, it was me collaborating, and them collaborating with me. And, you know, we really, I mean, it was like, this massive team of people that care about this issue. Yeah, and those hiring more people with disabilities, so that our perspective is part of the fabric of the company. I think one of the things that I learned, I know, we know this, in theory, but in practice, you have to bake it in, you cannot bolt it on, and that, you know, especially is relevant for everything for physical disabilities, online work, you've got to bake it in, it's got to be part of the design and the development. And same with the culture, the more people you have with disabilities in the mix, right, the more people will like say, Hey, this is part of the deal. This is just part of the deal.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, and that and that brings me to my next question, which is that especially since the events of 2020, and 2021, the pandemic, the battle for racial equity, and justice, you know, so many companies and so many organizations in the for profit industry, in the nonprofit industry, in government across sectors are trying to create inclusion, equity and diversity in their organizations. And a lot of the time, in my observation, and the observations of others I've spoke to has been, that focus has really been on inclusion, equity and diversity, Visa V, race, and ethnicity and oftentimes, disability and also intersectionality, get left out of the conversation. So what advice would you have for these companies and organizations and government agencies that are really sincerely engaged in an effort to embrace inclusion, equity and diversity, to ensure that both disability and intersectionality the idea that people don't have just one identity, they, as you described about your own journey, you identify as a lesbian, you are Latina, you are blind, you are disabled? And those all those things don't exist in a vacuum? So how do we create an environment that is effective, both for the work of whatever organization, but also for the person existing inside of that organization? How do we create an environment that's going to work? I was curious about what your thoughts were about that?

Kathy Martinez:

Well, I see it every day online, I talked to people of color with disabilities and people who are. doing DEI work, asking the question, how can we include disability? disability is a part of diversity, and I think more DEI, I don't know what they're called, like, professionals or DEI gurus are learning that but not quick enough. And not enough, you know, not enough of them are. I think part of the answer is that the disability rights movement, and the social justice movements have to come closer together, we have to acknowledge that we are a part of each other's lives. And that I think it's really important to acknowledge that in the Latino and African American communities and Native American communities, you know, there's a higher incidence of disability for very many reasons, you know, whether it's poverty or AIDS or high injury jobs, or we get illnesses and we, for example, diabeetus can spawn so many secondary disabilities, AIDS, you know, it's being controlled now. But if it's not, if people don't get diagnosed, and if they don't get medication, then AIDS can result in secondary infections. So addiction, there's so much that our communities face that bipoc communities face that, I think we have to acknowledge that disability is a is a part of our communities. And then on the disability side, you know, we have to train our leaders of color more and bring folks into positions of power and leadership. for corporations, I would say the fact that disability is a part of DEI can no longer be ignored. And they need to get called out or as Rebecca Coakley says, you know, we can call them in and work with them. I think there are companies who acknowledge that disability is a part of their diversity overlay. And there's been proof that disability should be considered a part of DEI work. And, you know, of course, there's the Accenture report that says that businesses that hire people with disabilities do better. And, you know, there's a lot of proof, it's way past the motto of do the right thing. You know, it is a business imperative for corporations to realize that people with disabilities should be a part of the DEI work. And if it's not, the disability work will fail. Because as I used to say, a long time ago, you cannot put disability on the special shelf, right? disability, if anything is special, if the budget gets thin, that special thing gets cut. The other thing I would say is that it's really important for all organizations, whether they're nonprofits, whatever the DEI work, and the disability work cannot be based on you know, someone's passion, it has to become a systemic operational policy, it has to be woven throughout the fabric of the organization, it cannot be, you know, based on somebody's passion, because when that person leaves, you know, the House of Cards falls down. If it becomes systemic, like accessibility, you know, you've got to build it in, not bake it on, people use the blueberry muffin analogy, right? You can't, you can't add blueberries to the top of the muffin after it's baked. And I think the main message I want to give is that it has to be woven into the structure of the corporation or nonprofit or the organization.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I think that's so true. And I think that's really the battle that many of us are fighting inside of the organizations that we all work for. And, you know, on the on the flip side of that coin in many of us are currently engaged in the project of developing employee disability related employee resource groups, and other types of internal advocacy. So sort of on the flip side of this, what advice would you have for disabled people inside of these organizations, government agencies, nonprofits, in their sort of advocacy, and as they really try to work hand in hand with their organizations to build disability into the conversation about diversity, equity and inclusion?

Kathy Martinez:

Well, first of all, connecting with each other is very important. And I would say, what I have seen work is when disability groups reach out to other minority groups and discover commonalities, you know, I know at Wells Fargo, one time I was involved in a conversation with the women's ERG, we talked about like women really are at the front lines when it comes to disability. At least in this country. I think most of the world, but you know, we are primarily caregivers. Now, of course, there are wonderful men who do caregiving, like my brother Carlos, I will say, but more women are in the caregiver role. So when somebody becomes disabled in their family, they often are the person who has to leave their job and provide care. So what I'm saying is that I think getting people together, talking about the commonalities of in Latino culture, I remember, I was speaking at a company where we talked a lot about high injury jobs, you know, people are brothers and sisters some sometimes, but mostly brothers fall off roots, they they're in construction jobs, they're in dangerous jobs and meat cutting plants. So disability impacts us that way. They you know, they pick our crops, they get cropped, dusted. There's so many ways that the Latino, you know, Latinos in this society are impacted by disability. And so I think we have to go to our communities and say, Look, this is where we connect on this issue. And I want to, you know, just say again, that connecting with other social justice organizations and working with them to build an understanding that disability rights are civil rights, you know, disability, rights, impact, everybody, anybody that can get a ramp and no matter what color they are, or whatever that does impact the BIPOC communities

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, and likewise with the sort of non evident disabilities you were talking about. Those get so left out, even in those communities, they talk with so many people who are they count themselves out of the disability movement because of the stigma around non evident disabilities, particularly mental health related disabilities. And I think you're right. I think it's educating people bringing people into the fold, the family is big, we're a quarter of the US population. So I think a lot of solidarity is really is really important.

[Short, cheerful beats]

Intermission:

Hi, it's Qudsiya. . I hope you're enjoying the episode so far. I want to tell you a little bit more about supporting Down to the Struts on Patreon. This podcast is a labor of love, but it also requires resources, like our audio production equipment, transcription software, our website, and most importantly, the team of talented, dedicated humans who make it all happen. With your donation, you'll be able to help us with these expenses. And you'll also become part of our community, and another voice in the movement for Disability Justice, you can support us at three different tiers starting at just $5 a month. In exchange, you'll receive access to bonus content, personalized messages from me, and exclusive Down to the Struts mirch. If you can't give right now, that's okay, too. You can still support us in other ways, like rating and reviewing us on Apple, podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you love to listen, you can also follow us on social media, or just share the episodes with a friend. Okay, now back to the episode.

[Short, cheerful beats]

Qudsiya Naqui:

You spent time in the center of policymaking as you were Assistant Secretary of Labor. And so I'm curious from a policy perspective, what you think and I know this is a complicated question that probably has a long answer. But sort of on the top line, what are some examples of policies that could be put in place that could both support employers and employees who want to build disability inclusion and access into the workplace?

Kathy Martinez:

I would say that one thing I think is really critical is to have a clear accommodations policy for people with disabilities, you know, not just screen readers not just raised desks, not just sign language interpreters, but information around schedules, you know, if somebody wants to do work off hours, how can we accommodate that? And what is the process to get your accommodation? So not only on how we accommodate, or what, what we do, and very often you have to wait for the person to tell you what they need. Sometimes people don't know. But I think having a very clear accommodations process is a really good first step, then we want to hire people with disabilities. You know, people will say, Well, what is the best training about hiring people with disabilities? And the answer is hire somebody with a disability. You know, and it's risky, because a lot of people, like you said, are afraid to come out, especially if they don't have too much like the LGBTQ community, that's one thing we have in common is that we have a non evident disability or if people don't know we're gay, then is it safe to come out? I think the types of discrimination against people with non evident disabilities are very different. But they're nevertheless equally as painful. And as real, you know, there's a lot of suspicion and fear and like, people think, oh, what are they? Are they just trying to get out of work? Or because, you know, I have a lot of folks come to me at Wells Fargo to talk about whether they should come out to their manager or not. And these are all people with non evident disability. So I think a place to go where people can discuss this. When do you come out? When do you self disclose? When do you identify as you know, do you just do it for the affirmative action, you know, numbers? Or do you come out to your team? And how do you do that? So I think a place to go one thing that we did develop at Wells was a disability Employee Resource Center. And, you know, we were able to centralize some of this information. Again, hiring people with disabilities, having an accommodations process that is public. That's not like some hidden secret, you know, that only a few people know about figure out how to pay for accommodations. A lot of companies are doing centralized accommodations funds. And if you have questions, you know, ask go to an Independent Living Center or some folks like Disability In who do lots of work with different companies about integrating people With Disabilities within the ranks of corporations, and there's amazing advisors that you know that, that work with companies to build programs. So you want to have good outreach, you want to go to places where disability where people with disabilities are. And if you can find people of color with disabilities, I think that's fantastic. There's outreach, there's, you know, the actual recruitment process, then there's the onboarding process, you know, do we feel, do people feel welcome? Do they feel afraid to ask questions, you know, and then there's kind of retention, like, how do we keep people involved in our work? You know, what types of DEI work can we be doing at all levels. And then, of course, there's advancement, there's not that many people of color with disabilities in senior positions, that's something that really bothers me, you know, I don't want to be the only one and I shouldn't. And I'm not, let me just say, I am not the only one. But there are a few of us,

Qudsiya Naqui:

that makes a lot of sense. And even though I am someone who now identifies very openly as blind I didn't for a long time in my life, and I didn't use a cane for a long time in my life, for example, which is a very telltale sort of physical, obvious visual sign of blindness. And I experienced a lot of what you describe where people are kind of scratching their heads. And when you try to engage in the interactive process of accommodations, they wonder if you're just trying to get out of work, responsibilities, or whatnot. And it's really painful, it's really damaging to someone who generally wants to work hard and do a good job, but who is being undermined because of someone's lack of awareness or self education. And so I think all of those recommendations are so fabulous. And we will definitely link to some of the examples you mentioned, like Disability In in our show notes, so that any employers that are listening to this episode can check them out and bring themselves forward. And also, another thing I thought of as you were talking was, if you're going to increase the number of people who are out and identify as disabled among your staff, making it really welcoming and easy for them to disclose that by maybe linking to the accommodations policy on the job descriptions, or making it really clear that you have open arms and prioritize hiring disabled people. So that, you know, people feel comfortable when they are at the interview stage, to disclose or to be open about their disability and not have to worry about any repercussions or not being hired or any kind of discrimination. So I think a lot of the suggestions you gave really lead to those sorts of results and increasing the number of disabled people that are hired into these organizations and corporations and companies. So this has been such a great conversation. And I personally have learned a lot myself, just from your journey and all the work that you've done at Wells and elsewhere. Could you talk a little bit about your role now, disability rights advocates and any any parting words you have in that new helm you've taken as a leader in the Disability Justice and disability rights movements,

Kathy Martinez:

I have been at Disability Rights Advocates for a little over two and a half months, I started March 1, I wanted to have this job because I saw a lot of opportunity both for me and for our community. We know Disability Rights Advocates has been around for 30 years. It is one of the preeminent Disability Justice impact litigation and civil rights law firms. The work that we're doing is just I think, stellar. And I think that there's so much more that we can do to impact the lives of people with disabilities to keep putting the meat on the bones of the Americans with Disabilities Act in so many areas, you know, education, transportation, accessible sidewalk prisons, I talked about working in a prison representing people with disabilities, Disability Rights Advocates has done a lot of work representing people who are in the juvenile justice system, also with immigrants working with ice to help reduce the incidence of COVID by removing people with disabilities from detention centers, and also, you know, getting other folks more spread out so that you know, they're not you know, they're not packed in together education, you know, working with the New York City schools to reduce restraint and seclusion for special ed students who are primarily color or people of color boys of color. So I feel like the work that DRA is doing is a great next chapter for me. I wanted to get back into the disability arena, and I wanted to do work around, you know, kind of bringing social justice and Disability Justice together, bringing these two worlds together. And I think high impact litigation is one way to do it. There's many other ways and bringing awareness for people of color around what what their rights are and are working with people with disabilities. For my wanna become monitors, let's say we win a case. And sometimes DRA can't do the monitoring to get to the injunctive relief that was agreed upon, you know, what one thing we might do is, is to train folks to be monitors. And really, I think, the opportunity to reach out into BIPOC communities, to just let them know that this service exists, we don't charge our clients now, just keep in mind that, you know, we do high impact litigation cases. So typically, they're not, we don't represent one person, unless it really will help change a policy. So you know, we're about systems change. I mentioned, you know, you've got to change the system. We can't, you know, just depend on one leader, I'm really excited. Again, you know, we're working on our own DEI strategy, we are developing a strategic plan, overall, of which DEI is a big part and will play a big role. And I want to just say that we're having our fundraising gala on October 7. And we're very proud to say that we have secured Attorney General Eric Holder as one of our awardees. So I think we're in a good spot, we can always do better in terms of, you know, just we want to be more prominent in the minds of the disability community, all people with disabilities.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's wonderful. And I hope lots of folks will support the work of Disability Rights Advocates. It's really, really important work. And we will link to the website and where you can learn more about the gala. Which is it? Is it virtual, Kathy or will it be in person this year?

Kathy Martinez:

Now, this is a virtual Gala. Hopefully, it's our last one because we miss, we miss all the hugs and you know, seeing folks, but this will be a virtual gala, and we want to invite everybody to join us.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's fantastic. Thank you so much again, Kathy, for taking the time. I know you're extremely busy. And coming to speak with me. I personally learned so much. And I'm really really looking forward to sharing this with our listeners. So thank you.

Kathy Martinez:

It has been my pleasure. Thank you so much for inviting me to be on this incredible podcast.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for listening to this episode of Down to the Struts. Remember that you can subscribe rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you love to listen, you can follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And join our Facebook group Down to the Struts podcast to become part of our growing community. If you're able, you can also become a patron by visiting www.patreon.com slash Down to the Struts. You can also do none of that and just enjoy the conversations that you find here. Stay tuned for Episode Five coming your way on September 7 so we can get back down to it