Down to the Struts

Season 8, Episode 5: Disabled Entrepreneurs with Diego Mariscal

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Diego Mariscal

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[music: jazzy piano and horn chords, bass and drums playing smooth R&B]

**Qudsiya:**

Welcome to *Down to the Struts*, the podcast about disability, design, and intersectionality, where we uncover the building blocks for a more just inclusive and accessible world.

I'm your host, Qudsiya Naqui. We'll listen in on my conversation with Diego Mariscal. Diego is the founder, CEO, and chief disabled officer of 2gether [pronounced like “together”] International.

2GI is a leading nonprofit startup accelerator run by and for disabled entrepreneurs. Diego and I talked about his entrepreneurial origin story, how he started 2GI, and his advice for aspiring disabled entrepreneurs.

Okay, let's get down to it.

**Qudsiya:**

Thank you, Diego for joining me on the podcast. I'm so honored to have you.

**Diego:**

Oh my God. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

My name is Diego, Diego Mariscal. I was born in the [United] States by accident. My parents, who are both Mexicans, were shopping, and I was born six months and a half into my mom's pregnancy. And as a result of that, I have cerebral palsy. But I had the fortune of growing up in Monterey, Mexico, which is a very entrepreneurial town. Everybody starts businesses at a very early age.

In fact, I remember being about six or seven and having a sort of sticker exchange business for the Pokémon cards. I got the entrepreneurship bug pretty early, but then for college, I decided to move to the US, thinking that it was gonna be this kind of paradise of accessibility, and thinking that all of my problems as a disabled person were gonna be solved.

And yes, there was a lot of benefits, I think infrastructurally, compared to Mexico, but people were talking a lot about lack of employment opportunities, and the perception that society had of disabled people. And to my surprise, it was a lot of the same issues that we were talking about in Mexico. And more importantly, there was nobody really at a systematic level talking about disability and entrepreneurship.

And so having grown up around entrepreneurs, and being exposed to entrepreneurship at a very early age, I saw an opportunity, because disabled people have to solve problems every day from, you know, how do we get dressed, how we drive, how we communicate.

**Qudsiya:**

I was recently listening to an interview that you did on Judy Heumann’s podcast—may her memory be a blessing, *The Heumann Perspective*—where you talked about working on disability and entrepreneurship as an act of social justice. Was there a moment in your childhood where you realized that you wanted to use your entrepreneurial spirit and knowhow to achieve social change?

**Diego:**

I don't think there was a particular moment.

It was more so a constant feeling of frustration. I originally came to the US—specifically to Washington, DC—thinking that I was gonna do international relations and policy work. I was always really intrigued by Model UN and thought that I was gonna change the world that way.

And I found myself being really frustrated by the fact that we were talking about all these policies and all these great changes, but I felt like we weren't actually doing anything.

And on the flip side, you have social entrepreneurs and businesses actually tangibly doing something and seeing change happen before their eyes. And so, it was less of a moment of realization and more of a constant feeling of frustration and being pissed off with the status quo that I said, *We have to do something.*

**Qudsiya:**

And I understand that your spirit and desire to make change and create new things didn't start after you came to the States. It started as early as high school. Are there experiences you had at that time in your life that made you realize, *Wow, I have the capacity to do this kind of work*?

**Diego:**

There were a couple of defining moments in my life.

One was when I accidentally became a professional athlete because I needed to do therapy.

So, my parents were trying to get me to be excited about physical therapy, and I've always been really competitive. And so, they thought, why not put him in competitive swimming? And I did really well in that. And so, that was the first time that I really saw what hard work and dedication could achieve.

Also, it was the first time that I started to see a community of disabled people coming together and exchanging ideas and the power of community as a disability collective.

My other sort of defining moment was when I was in high school, I had traveled briefly to Minnesota ’cause I needed surgery. And I had the opportunity to see the backbone of infrastructure, and how schools were different and how classrooms were different. And I wanted to take those learnings and teach my classmates in Mexico about what I had learned in the States.

So we started a student group that was focused around simulating what it was like to have a disability. So we would do things like eating without being able to see and using public transportation in a wheelchair and communicating without speaking, and that model grew very rapidly.

Within four years, we were in 15 high schools across the country; 80 percent of it was corporate funded, and it still goes on to this day, as one of the largest youth led movements around disability. I tried to replicate that in the States and it didn't work, and I think rightfully, because we got a lot of criticism when I tried to transition [it], comparing those experiences with Blackface, minimizing the disability experience.

But I think in Mexico, in a culture that that is less exposed to disability, it was a way to educate students about disability through experiences that they wouldn't otherwise have. And so that was my first taste of entrepreneurship. It still, to this day, gives me a lot of pride and joy to be able to see something that was just created out of my own passion slash frustration come to life.

[music: an upright bass twangs as a drum set is repeatedly hit in a slightly cacophonous manner, and as cymbals crash together brightly]

**Qudsiya:**

Frustration can sometimes give us a lot of energy, and if we channel that energy in a positive way, it can be really helpful. You are the founder and CEO of 2gether International. What is 2GI and how did it come to be?

**Diego:**

2gether International, 2GI for short, has become the leading accelerator for founders with disabilities.

Through a series of workshops, programs, coaching sessions, we support and accelerate startups led by founders with disabilities. The whole preface of our work is that disabled people are primed to be successful entrepreneurs because we have to solve problems every day. All entrepreneurship is solving problems at scale.

2gether was founded in this idea, but more importantly, the underlining mission was really always to redefine the way people think about disability, and to see disability as something to be proud of, as something to embrace, rather than as a limitation or as something that needed to be accommodated for.

2gether is a 10 year overnight success because it took me 10 years to really get it off the ground. Everything from hitting up people in random Ubers to get them to fund our idea, to having multiple people in a one-bedroom apartment as an Airbnb [to] have some extra funding.

I think part of what makes us successful is that I can speak from experience. When I'm talking to founders and they tell me how hard it is to fundraise or how hard it is to start, I can tell them, “I've been there and I can relate to your experience,” and in that collective community, we all can learn from each other and thrive.

**Qudsiya:**

How do projects work with 2GI to get launched?

**Diego:**

So we run a variety of cohorts pretty much every three months, like a university. And that is about a 10 to 12 week program that accelerate startups, again, founded by disabled entrepreneurs. And so, you get access to peer-to-peer coaching classes, mentorship, some funding after a pitch competition, and so it really is meant to be an ecosystem that allows you to substantially accelerate your business.

There are some people that might not be ready for an accelerator; let's say you just have an idea, and you don't have any customers or you haven't tested your product or service. Then you would go to our other program, which is called Venture Labs, which is meant for people who are in the exploratory stage.

They're just exploring, toying with an idea. And that is, again, another 10 to 12 week program self-paced, so it's not necessarily on real time. We try, for 2gether International, to be the end-to-end funnel at all stages of entrepreneurship from the early stage to the more advanced stage. And something that I am currently working on is on creating the first ever fund for founders with disabilities.

There's [no] investment fund that exists exclusively for founders with disabilities, and so we're working to create the very first one. So again, what we wanna be is the end-to-end solution for any founder who is looking for support.

[music: uptempo upright bass and drums, with cymbals crashing together brightly]

**Qudsiya:**

We're recording this in October. It's Disability Employment Awareness Month. We hear a lot about the barriers that disabled folks face in the employment area, but can you explain a little bit about the particular barriers that disabled founders face? In other words: What are some of the specific problems that 2gether International is trying to solve in that space?

**Diego:**

Really, the main reason why disabled entrepreneurs exist in the first place, and there's actually data that shows that disabled people are twice as likely to be entrepreneurial, is because the employment space is so difficult to tap into, right?

I was just speaking to an entrepreneur today that acquired her disability. She had a traumatic brain injury and was trying to get employed, and she was a senior executive before her, her accident, and she was literally told by an HR professional that she would not be hired on the basis of her disability. And like her, there are many other disabled people that face systematic discrimination in the employment space.

And so, the first barrier that we're trying to solve for is to provide people economic pathways, right? Because even if you don't succeed as an entrepreneur—and 90 percent of businesses fail, right—even if you don't succeed as an entrepreneur, you're gonna be much more competitive in the workforce. Because you've gone through the entrepreneurship process, and so that's the first barrier.

And then when it comes to specific barriers that pertain to entrepreneurship, there are a number of them. So many accelerators are not actually accessible for founders with disabilities because they don't have material in Braille, or because the instructors don't do image descriptions, or there's no sign language interpreters. And not to mention the biases and the lack of understanding of disability.

That's the reason why we've succeeded really, and have become a leader in this space, because there's no other accelerator that it's focused on exclusively supporting founders with disabilities.

**Qudsiya:**

Now that you're in this space, have you seen other accelerators watching what you're doing? Is there a conversation about integrating some of those access practices into their programming? Is that a conversation that you think is starting to happen?

**Diego:**

We're very proud to be part of a collective—it's called the Moonshot Initiative—and it's an initiative that was started through the Clinton Global Initiative, and it is 10 accelerators around the world that are working in the disability space, and that are sharing best practices amongst each other, and really trying to collectively raise the disability market, and express sort of best practices in the disability space.

In the sort of mainstream entrepreneurship community, we're part of this, again, collective group led by an organization called Diversity VC that is looking at how do you support underrepresented founders broadly. So underrepresented meaning women, meaning BIPOC, meaning Latin founders.

And so, we're able to provide the disability perspective.

**Qudsiya:**

You've started a movement, Diego. [laughter] Now that you've worked with so many founders, people who are entrepreneurship-curious, what advice would you have for a disabled aspiring entrepreneur?

**Diego:**

What is your passion? And follow your passion. I would flip it and I would say, what pisses you off?

Because I think a lot of the best entrepreneurs and the best ideas have come from frustration. Even, you know, my story is an example of that. I didn't set out to start an accelerator and to support founders with disabilities. It stemmed from my frustration of lack of equity and support, and more importantly, lack of understanding of the disability community and the potential.

So my advice would be, follow your frustration, not your passion.

**Qudsiya:**

I love that. That's great. Again, it's taking that negative energy and channeling it into something positive.

[music: uptempo upright bass and drums, with the sound of cymbals crashing together brightly]

**Qudsiya:**

How can folks learn more about 2gether, and about your work, and how can they get involved?

**Diego:**

You can get in touch with me on LinkedIn, Diego Mariscal, on LinkedIn, and, and 2gether international: 2gether, 2-international.org, and you can see all our work there. I'm always happy to be a resource and to chat with anybody, especially disabled entrepreneurs that are wanting to learn more about this space.

**Qudsiya:**

Thank you so much, Diego. I personally have learned so much from this conversation and really appreciate your time.

**Diego:**

Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it. Really enjoyed it.

[upbeat instrumental hip-hop music featuring a heavy drum beat with a spirited brass sample looping over it]

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Thanks for listening to *Down to the Struts*. This episode was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol. With special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music.

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