

*[Music by Molly Joyce 00:02 - 00:15]*

*Bonnie:* Welcome to *Included: The Disability Equity Podcast*, brought to you by the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center. This podcast challenges stereotypes of disability by sharing stories, data, and news. Each season digs deep into topics, offering multiple perspectives, and will expand your view of disability. We are your hosts. I'm Bonnielin Swenor, director of the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center.

*Nick:* And I'm Nick Reed, assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. Our guest today is Ms. Keyonna Mayo. Keyonna lives in Baltimore, Maryland, where she is a business and community leader. She's a mentor and peer counselor with Women Embracing Abilities Now, W.E.A.N., the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, the Trauma Survivors Network, and The University of Maryland Rehabilitation and Orthopedic Institute. Informed by her own experience with a spinal cord injury, Keyonna teaches classes for newly injured people. In addition, Keyonna was Ms. Wheelchair Maryland for 2017. She's joined today by her legal representation, Cory Warren, an attorney from Disability Rights Maryland.

*[Music 01:33 - 01:40]*

*Nick:* Thank you so much for joining us today.

*Keyonna Mayo:* You are so welcome. Thank you so much for having us.

*Cory Warren:* Thanks for having us on.

*Bonnie:* Ms. Mayo, recently you filed a lawsuit in the city of Baltimore for violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act. We're hoping you can share with our audience a little bit about that lawsuit and what led you to file that lawsuit.

*Keyonna Mayo:* Well, I think this one may be best suited for Cory.

*Cory Warren:* Sure. I'm an attorney with Disability Rights Maryland, which is the protection and advocacy organization for people with disabilities for the State of Maryland. We are co-counseling with three other organizations—the Civil Rights Education and Enforcement Center, Disability Rights Advocates, as well as Dardarian & Ho, which is a private firm that focuses on civil rights cases. We are working together as a team because we have consistently heard and seen just really outrageous conditions of the

sidewalks that have impacted people like, Ms. Mayo in their day-to-day life. Specifically, CREEC and DRA have previously filed successful lawsuits in other areas, such as Long Beach, California; Philadelphia; and Portland. We decided that it's time for Baltimore to be held accountable. We reached out, and we heard from people from the disability community such as Ms. Mayo as well as our other plaintiffs and received feedback that, yes, this was wanted. This was needed. So we moved forward with the case.

*Nick:*

Thank you. A really broad coalition that you've put together. Ms. Mayo, a recent survey by Disability Rights Maryland found that in Baltimore City approximately only 1.3 percent of 37,806 curb ramps that were surveyed were actually compliant with the ADA. I'd love to know more about your experience. Are you surprised by that number? What are the ramifications of these gaps in accessibility?

*Keyonna Mayo:*

Well, I'm definitely not surprised by that number. In my travels—and I do a lot. I do take the Paratransit, but I'm also on the Light Rail, on the subway. In a lot of my travels, if it's an area that I'm not really familiar with, a lotta the times, you just kinda ride in the—I'll walk in the street because you just don't know if you'll be able to get off of the sidewalk if you are able to get on at one end. That has happened to me a lot in the 15 years since I've been in my chair. Now, a lotta the times, I don't get on the sidewalk in areas that I'm not familiar with. I think some people just don't really understand that. If you're not in tune with someone who may have different challenges, you're not [*unintelligible 04:48*] lookin' at the conditions of the sidewalk.

It can be a mom with a stroller. It's just not about me and my wheelchair. My mother, who has arthritis, she's not gonna see herself as disabled, but if there are no curb cuts or it's a really high sidewalk, just tryin' to step up, that's really challengin' for her or my aunt, who's had a knee replacement. It's bigger than just one—just little old me. It's about us as a community.

Then too, right now I'm actually a part-time employee of the city, which I love. Born and raised in this city, so I love it, but in performin' my duties—just this week I had to go to a school, and goin' to that school, because it is in walking distance of my home, I just—“Okay, I'll just take this walk on this nice Monday,” which I got rained on, but that's either here or there, which I didn't mind it. Just a little water. But partway down, I had to walk in the street because the sidewalk just was not accessible. In trying to perform

my duties for the city, it's just not accessible to me. That, at this point, is just really unacceptable.

*Bonnie:*

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. I think that idea that people with disabilities are kept back from doing the things that we're just trying to do every day is a common theme on this podcast. Thank you so much for sharing that. You've noted on prior interviews that this lawsuit isn't just about disability equity issues but, in your perspective, also about racial equity. Our audience to this podcast is national and may not necessarily understand Baltimore City, and so we'd love for you to talk a little bit more about that from your perspective.

*Keyonna Mayo:*

We have deep inequities in this city. We're a city that is predominantly African American, Black. I've seen discrimination in the city. You have business owners that will—before my injury may have followed you around in a store. That's never a comfortable feeling. I won't frequent that store. What it is, we just really all wanna be seen. We just all really wanna be valued. Because some of these problems are systemic problems—lack of jobs, lack of housing—I tell people all the time, it's not just gonna be one mayor or the crime, one police commissioner, is gonna be able to fix it. It's gonna take all of us collectively wantin' to see the change, bein' really targeted in our approach to how we can see the change.

I've had this talk when people say, "Okay, what about defunding the police?" It might not seem to be a popular phrase, but we defund education in this city all the time. That's my background. I have my bachelor's in child development. I taught preschool for six years before my injury. We constantly defund education. We can never find the money to educate people, but if you're not educatin' people, then they're unable to find jobs. What's the alternative? People are gonna get involved in things that are—in crime, different things that'll bring them more opportunities to—gettin' stopped by the police, havin' a record. That impacts their ability to have a job as well.

If we're not gonna address it from the bottom level, from my preschoolers on up to high school, we're never gonna get ourselves out of some of these situations, which I really think we can do it. We just need to really do the work. We gotta put in the time and the effort for it. I think that's what we're lacking and what we're missin'.

*Bonnie:* Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. Wholeheartedly agree. I think so many people miss that idea of that interconnectedness of aspects of life and how it relates to inequities and discrimination for the disability community or intersecting identities. I think particularly for disability, it's viewed as accessibility in this one space and that only affects—that's it. You focus on accessibility maybe in a building, and that should solve the problem, *[laughing]* right? To your point, you have to take this holistic approach. That's my take of the importance of this lawsuit that you've brought forward is, you need to be able to get to the buildings and get to the job—

*Keyonna Mayo:* Yeah.

*Bonnie:* - and the interconnection between that and where that is in the city and the opportunity for education. It's all so interconnected. I think in my own work, in the work that Nick and I do, people tend to really miss that part.

*Keyonna Mayo:* They do.

*Bonnie:* Yeah, so thank you so much for sharing that.

*Keyonna Mayo:* They do, and that's the approach we need. We gotta have that targeted approach. Some of it is just changin' people's hearts and minds. It's not that they don't want things to work for everybody; it's that sometimes they just don't know what part of the system truly isn't workin' for people. Every system and every inequity, people with disabilities doubly feel that. I know people who are in—have to stay in nursin' homes because they don't have—because of the lack of housing and accessibility. I just really lucked up to get the house that I'm in because my mother's house was not accessible. It's just really a safety hazard. A lot of things really lined up for me. I was one of the lucky ones. I know that. I appreciate that. I just try to let other people know that. I want someone else to be lucky as well. That's why I'm workin' so hard to just get us all there.

*Nick:* That's a wonderful outlook. I really appreciate that you're leading this forward to help everyone. Along those lines, we talk on this podcast all the time about how disability equity issues often have downstream effects to improve society for everyone. I think this is a great example of this. Do you see—and could you comment on—how accessibility within this context impacts people beyond the disability community?

*Keyonna Mayo:* It does. That's what people just don't see. They're like, "Okay, we'll fix the sidewalk for you," but it does benefit everybody. I mentioned my mother and her arthritis and my aunt with her knee replacement. How many people do we know in life that have some type of—any type of challenges? They're not as quick on their feet anymore, hip replacements—just whatever it is—or the mother with the stroller. It would help all of us. It's the benefit of the community as the whole. It's not just relegated to "Okay, these people in these wheelchairs." It's just not us that it would benefit. It's gonna benefit all of us.

*Nick:* Well said.

*Bonnie:* Let's talk a little bit about what you view as the path forward. Currently the ADA is designed so that the onus of that law really lies on the individual with the disability to bring forward a complaint or a lawsuit to make change, much like in this situation. I'm curious what you think about that approach where you are. Has that brought about change for the disability community from your vantage point?

*Keyonna Mayo:* I think it has, and I think that we need to improve on that. I'm grateful that we do have the ADA 'cause other countries do not have that. I'm grateful for that, but I feel like there needs to be a shift. Why do we have to sue now for things to get taken care of at the base level? How about when you're building a building? We have these code inspectors and all of these people who have all of this input. Why isn't there someone to make sure that we're ADA compliant at that level off the bat?

I'll give you this example. In my duty, they have this nice new school built, which is great. It's a nice school buildin', wide open spaces, but no one thought about the curb cuts on the sidewalks. The buildin' is nice, but I have to go around to this one side where there's actually a curb cut that would allow me to get on the sidewalk to access the building. That doesn't make much sense to me when this is a brand-new school building. How 'bout in the—that, to me, it just really blew my mind that, okay, brand-new school building—it's a nice building, but you can't get on the sidewalk at one end. You can only do it at another. It just boggles the mind, really.

*Cory Warren:* I'll step in for a second here just on the legal perspective. Jumping off of what Ms. Mayo was saying with the new construction and failures to make new construction accessible, we filed this lawsuit under Title II of the American Disabilities Act, which is a state and

local—basically, governmental entities are required to make sure that their programs are accessible, being sidewalks in this case. That's right of way. They are maintained by the City of Baltimore, which is a governmental entity. Therefore, they have an obligation to make sure that their programs are accessible under the ADA. But they haven't, and that's what we see really across the country is, even if organizations, be it Title II, which is governmental organizations, or Title III, which is public accommodations, which can apply to private organizations in certain circumstances—what we do see is a pretty consistent failure to consider what you're supposed to do. People aren't considering the impact that this construction and these buildings have on people with disabilities. It's just a failure from the start to consider that people with disabilities are part of our community and should be at the forefront when you are deciding and creating projects.

As you said, it does then place the onus on people with disabilities to complain, but they really—under the law, they shouldn't have to. That's one of the failures we've seen with the ADA for the last 30 years is just—the law is there; it's just getting that enforcement done is very frustrating. I think that's one of the things where I'm proud I work at a disability protection and advocacy organization because what we do at Disability Rights Maryland is we act basically as a private attorney general for the disability community so we can do these types of cases and bring that representation. I think people just need to be educated. I think that's really one of the big things. I think we've got the framework, but education and consideration of the community really needs to be pushed forward.

*Bonnie:*

Can I ask a follow-up then based on that? Thank you for that. Do you feel there is a space or a need for a way to design accountability?

*Cory Warren:*

Sure. With accountability, I think the biggest thing is people need to get input from the disability community. 'Cause one of the other things we'll see—and this isn't just sidewalks; this is something I see in my practice, and my co-counsel obviously would support this—is that that a lot of times you have people who are well meaning do the construction, build the sidewalks, but they've never talked with somebody who actually needs to use it. One of the biggest things we saw—so when we say 2 percent of the sidewalks in Baltimore City are ADA compliant, we're not just talking about sidewalks where the curb ramps aren't there. We're talking about curb ramps that are too steep, that are poorly maintained, that, sure there's a curb ramp there, but if you're in a wheelchair, you can't actually get up because they put it at such a

steep angle because they built the curb ramp, but did they test it? Did they get that input? No, they just thought they did the right thing, washed their hands of it, and moved on. We need more input from the people that this actually impacts. I think that's one of the things we're really prioritizing in what we'd like to see in a result, is making sure there is community input from people like Ms. Mayo as well as our other plaintiffs.

*Keyonna Mayo:* That's definitely a great idea. I've often joked that they have the test dummy for everything. I don't know what they need to do—bring out some little carts. I don't know what it is, but they definitely do need to have some way of having people with disabilities have that input to be able to help that. It's a collaboration. So many people wanna see it as us against them. It's not us bein' against anyone. We just wanna have access to be able to use the space just like everyone.

*Bonnie:* Yeah, I think, Ms. Mayo, what you said echoes something that I say all the time on this podcast, is everyone wants to feel valued and understood.

*Keyonna Mayo:* Exactly.

*Bonnie:* The exclusion of people with disabilities from the design and the planning and the policy is in contrast to that. I agree, that needs to change.

*Keyonna Mayo:* Yes, it does.

*Nick:* It does need to change. It also, as we've said, would have such a bold impact for everybody if we got more inclusive in our design processes. Such a strong point you're all making.

Cory, Keyonna, thank you so much for joining us today. Keyonna, we wanted to ask: You're doing so much. If our audience wants to find out more about you and your work, where can they go?

*Keyonna Mayo:* Well, for my clothin' line, Keyonna's Unique Designs on Facebook. You can type me into Google. I have a website. All of that is there. My Facebook page, Keyonna Mayo—you can find me there as well.

*Bonnie:* Cory, where can people find out more about Disability Rights Maryland?

*Cory Warren:* Sure. We are at [drm.org](http://drm.org), or you can call our intake line at 410-727-6352. We do a lot more than just sidewalks, so if you are a person with disabilities and feel like you've been discriminated against, please call us. We're happy to take a look into your matter.

*Bonnie:* Thank you both so much for taking time and being on our podcast. Ms. Mayo, thank you especially. I know that sharing personal stories can be tiring. *[Laughter]* We're really grateful for your willingness to share with us.

*Keyonna Mayo:* Well, you are so welcome. Thank you for doing this. I just hope our collective voices can really just make some change in our city.

*[Music]*

*Bonnie:* You have been listening to *Included: The Disability Equity Podcast*, brought to you by the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center.

*Nick:* Thank you to our *Included* podcast team and everyone that made this podcast possible, especially Prateek Gajwani, Curtis Nichimoto, and our guests. Music is by Molly Joyce. This podcast is supported by a Johns Hopkins Ten by Twenty Challenge grant.

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