

Opening Doors, Season 1, Episode 2

Troy Coalman: How THEY see US / How WE see ourselves

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 first season, we aim to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color with disabilities, and to learn how race and disability impact their access to arts and culture. Here is your host, Elizabeth Ralston, founder of the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium.

Elizabeth Ralston: I am here today with Troy Coalman, who is a passionate leader, fundraiser, and tireless advocate for the disabled community. He currently works as the Director of Donor Impact at Wellspring Family Services in Seattle. His two-decade long career in fundraising has spanned all facets of the sector. He has worked with causes ranging from the arts, education, domestic filings, LGBTQ activism, homelessness, economic development, and community building. His positions have carried from Seattle to Florida, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. He has served on the Board of Directors, both the Association of Fundraising and Professionals Advancement Northwest. He has written on the subject of accessibility and advocacy for the blind and disabled community. As a gay, legally blind, biracial executive, his motivational speaking engagement touches upon that rare but critical intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are thrilled that you are able to talk with us today on our podcast. So, welcome!

Troy Coalman: Thank you! I'm glad to be here!

ER: So, let's dive right in. As a biracial man, what have your challenges been in being a voice for the disabled BIPOC community? BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color. In what ways do you think allyship manifest?

TC: It's an interesting question you have because most don't identify me as anything but Caucasian because on first appearances, that's what most people identify me as. Although in my day to day life and my professional life, I identify as biracial because my mother's side of the family is Mexican and I'm very proud of that. I walk this interesting line between understanding what racial inequity means because of my mother sharing her upbringing in what I've seen around me but also, walking in the shoes of someone who has privilege because I uh- I appear Caucasian. It's an interesting opportunity, it creates its own internal tension for me because I really want to be a strong voice of equity and sometimes, that's difficult to be taken serious because of the- outward perception of the community. It just means that I have to be a little louder um- and be a little more passionate and make sure that I'm coming from a position of support.

TC: On the same token, it allows me, as an ally, both for the disabled community and for marginalized communities of all types to be a voice within the white community of someone who understands that tension and be an example and be a leader. Sometimes I think within the context of racial issues, just setting an example and leading by example does a lot, especially for younger generations. That is true, both as someone who identifies biracial and as someone who identifies as legally blind. It's kind of what I call being an "in betweener." It's like I'm not one nor am I the other. So- but being an ally and having this unique position has really been interesting and afforded me the opportunity to speak and share my story but also understand. But it does create a lot of internal tension because sometimes I want people

to understand that I'm right there with them and- but they don't perceive it that way because they see me based on the color of my skin. But internally, I definitely identify as part of the BIPOC community.

ER: I relate to you so well because I'm also white and I'm also part of a marginalized community as a deaf person so I often experience that tension too, that fine line of being what I call in no man's land. Very similar to what you said.

TC: Yes.

ER: So, I am always trying to find ways to be an ally and I thought you brought up some really good points in that. And so, that brings me to my next question. You mention in one of our recent conversations that the culture and racial sensitivity is made more profound by the simple lack of access. What exactly did you mean by that? What are the gaps? I mean, this all ties into what you were saying earlier, right?

TC: You know, it's such a complex issue because you know, when it comes to racial equity, but it also comes to access equity. They work hand in hand, especially when you're dealing with communities of color. They aren't separated and they tend to be looked at as separate issues. And they're really very intertwined, one can't exist without the other and I have to emphasize that across the board. I was doing some recent reading on blind people and their perception of color, of race. You know, the same cultural attributes that exist to create racism exist for someone who can't see. And so, we have to break down those walls and we have to break down those levels- those barriers that may exist whether they're- have to do with language or they have to do with behavior. Whether they have to do with- with access, you know. They don't work separately; they work hand in hand. Some of those. . . issues. . . you know, are also grounded in racism and you know, some of my experience in my lifetime, has really [sighs] seen this exist within parts of the cultural arts community that don't welcome those of color. They just aren't welcoming.

TC: It's kind of been perceived as a white man's world, as it were. And, you know, that continues to exist in- especially in the performing arts, you see that divide. And you know, when you're trying to marry or merge these two issues of racial equity and access, you have to- you have to look at the history that goes behind them and then you have to look at how do we bridge that? And I'm talking a big huge [chuckles] 30,000-foot perspectives but, you know, understanding is really important. But, you know, I think we have to understand that blind people. . . you know, understand racism as well as anybody does and so we have to be conscious of that.

ER: Yes, and you mentioned the common theme of feeling welcomed and included-

TC: Yes.

ER: and this is a common theme that's come up. Can you make this tangible for our listeners? What does it mean not to feel welcome? Like what are the subtle signs that- or overt signs that you've experienced?

TC: Or not so subtle signs. You know, I- I myself am biracial but everyone identifies me as white, but you know the interesting thing is, my husband is Asian. My husband is Filipino and from the Philippines, and I can tell you that, the simple act of sometimes walking into, for say, a gallery and having the eyes of the manager on you the entire time is uncomfortable. You know. . .

ER: Mm-hm.

TC: It doesn't make you feel welcome. Now a lot of the time, I'm not conscious of that because of my vision but the people present with me are conscious of it. In museums, I've experienced this um. . . and theatre, not feeling as welcome to sit in certain parts of the theatre or just the overwhelming feeling of not feeling really welcome in that environment. It's more profound depending on what type of art we're talking about or type of environment we're talking about. I think museums, galleries, where the visual arts exist, it can be the most interesting because as someone who's legally blind, a lot of times I need to get close to the artwork to see it. And that's not possible so my experience is vastly different. Someone who's blind, who doesn't have a description of what they're experiencing or the ability to touch, or have a sample of texture. . .you know, add to that. If they're a person of color who may not feel welcome in that environment to begin with and that's very common. So, when you add that all together, that feeling of welcome, part of it is before you even go. Do I feel welcome in that community to begin with? And I think that's something the arts really has to pay attention to, and it doesn't matter what pathway you're in or what channel or- what it has to do with is are you creating. . . an environment that is both welcoming to those that are from the BIPOC community - and or those that have accessibility issues, whether they'd be blind, whether they'd be deaf or have physical access issues.

TC: What I see a lot of the times, it's skimmed over and we may put out promos or uh. . . imagery that shows people of color but sometimes, the language doesn't reflect that. Sometimes, the experience at the venue itself doesn't reflect that. And so, you know, we wanna make sure that we marry all aspects of it- you can't just promote to the community you're welcoming, you have to act it. When it comes to access, again, it's complex and I think it's really complex as you know, Elizabeth, for the deaf community is there's a spectrum. There isn't one singular answer. You have to have a variety of-

TC: touch points, you know? Because someone who's legally blind, the experience is different for every legally blind person, every blind person, every deaf person because no two people share the same acuity or. . . ability. And there is a lack of understanding of that so you can't just have one solution, you have to have a variety of solutions available.

ER: Yes. I feel like there's so many non-verbal cues so you could really pick up the aura of the place or just the energy of the place in which you feel welcome or not feel welcome. And I, particularly, am sensitive to that and I would imagine you are, too. When you go into a space, you can immediately feel whether or not people want you there and I think - I really agree with you about the cookie cutter approach. It's not one size fits all, you kind of have to meet the person where they're at and I think there's a lack of understanding or knowledge about . . . disabilities, in general. You really have to set the tone before you go into the space to make people feel welcome. There's a lot of work that needs to be done even before people arrive in the space, like you said.

TC: I think that's one of the most important pieces that has been neglected or not given any attention within the arts, and not just the arts I think venues as a whole, whether they be hospitality or sports or whatever. Letting me know what I am going to encounter. . . um are there ramps? Are there a lot of railings? Are- how do I enter a building? How do I exit? I can't tell you the number of times I've gone to a hall um- I love the symphony, I adore the symphony. And I'd gone to the symphony all over the world and I cannot the number of times I have been so nervous until I'm in my seat because I don't know what to expect. I don't know if there's going to be someone to assist me, unless I have someone with me obviously and I don't always go with someone. I often go by myself but having some understanding of

the layout, having someone- an understanding of how to navigate the space, having some understanding of what's available to me. And I will say, a lot of the big halls do this. . . on a minor level but I think whether it's available in print or I can call a number or even just calling the box office to ask these questions. I can't tell you the number of times I've called the box office and said, "Can I ask you a little bit about your venue?" and the resistance has been immense.

ER: Yeah, I think- I think we really, us people with disabilities, we have to do extra work so that we can feel more relaxed in the space. I- I relate to you because when I go to the theatre, I always worry that I'm going to be scolded if I use a light to read a script so I can follow along, you know what I mean? If there's no captioning and I've grown up going to the theatre with the script and I can't tell you how many times people have come up to me and scolded me for a tiny, tiny pen light. [laughs]

TC: [laughs] I laugh only cause I so relate. You know how many times I've been scolded for using a set of binoculars?

ER: Hmm.

TC: Like, I will not go to the Paramount Theatre in Seattle because I find it a very difficult theatre to see in, especially if I can't be in the front 10 rows. And I have been scolded in that theatre for using binoculars cause like- I'm a tall guy, I'm 6'4.

ER: Mm-hm.

TC: So, when you add me using- my arm's up high, I've had people around me, and I've actually once had an usher ask me, "Can we seat you someplace else where you're not obstructing other people's view?"

ER: Oh, wow.

TC: Hell, I paid for this seat!

ER: Yeah.

TC: And you did not make available a seat that I could see in! So, that's another thing that theatres, in particular, need to take into consideration and some do, across the country, not all. Making accessible seat available and don't make me pay a premium because I need to sit in the front ten rows, that is asinine! That I should have to pay more so that I can have an equal experience in the environment. Some theatres have gotten awareness of this and have started to do this, some simply- calling the box office or talking the management in making those accommodations. Many often that's possible. But what's frustrating to me, and I know you'll relate to this cause we've talked about it Elizabeth, is that fact that I have to go that extra mile so that I can have a similar experience?

ER: Right and Troy, if you add another layer of complexity for people of color-

TC: Oh, yes!

ER: Can you imagine how much more difficult it is for people of color to get that exact same experience?

TC: Well, you know, and what's interesting is that they may have- we may have a shared experience if we're doing it by email and phone. But then you have to think about when a person arrives at that location. That experience is different for them versus you and I. And if there is an element of racism . . .

which there often is, their treatment- the fact that they likely will be ignored is increased. And I've seen it, I've seen it firsthand. I've been with friends who have experienced it and uh- it's, you know, [sighs] it's even more discouraging 'cause they don't want to come back! They don't want to, you know, the desire to- these are not inexpensive experiences and how do we cultivate a . . . a following and love for the arts when we don't welcome everybody? And whether they're Hispanic or whether they're Asian or whether they're black, it should not be relevant. But often, that is an issue and you know, Seattle were in a little bit of a bubble, but I have seen it very pronounced in other parts of the country. And it just breaks my heart.

ER: And that leads me to this thought. Let's try- you know me, I'm very solution- focused, right? I don't want this to be a gripe session, I want people to state very clearly what the gaps are and what's wrong and what's not working. But I also want to help people understand that there are solutions, there are things people can do to make all people with disabilities welcome, all people of color welcome with disabilities. And so, how can the arts arena better prepare people with disabilities, for example like your self blind, no vision, how can they better prepare? What do you expect?

TC: I think going back to an earlier portion of our conversation, that idea of knowing before you go, of providing a resource that anyone can access. . . to find out about the space they're going into or what they're going to experience or what accessibility. . . aids are available. And making that pronounced and easily accessible is critical. I think that the venues themselves, I don't- doesn't matter what the venue is, ensuring that there is racial sensitivity training and that racial sensitivity training should not only be on the general population but focused on the disabled community, as well. Because that's an additional layer. There are many ways to do that and I know sometimes, it's- it's a big ask of smaller organizations but there are many people in our community that can provide that support. And I think- I think part of understanding . . . within that context, part of understanding the disabled community is understanding the rainbow that is our community, like all parts of the community. But I think adding some additional awareness, consciousness, and compassion, and support is important! There's not a ton of work out on this subject, I'm always looking for resources, particularly in the blind community cause there's just not a whole lot of research and support for it. But I know that National Federation [of] the Blind, American Foundation for the Blind, are all doing work more and more in this area and I think it's really important.

TC: So, I think it's important for organizations to understand that there are resources to support them as well that, as much as you and I present, "Here's what you need to do". . . we say that but on the same token, what- where do I get the support? Where do I, as an organization, where- who can I turn to that the deaf community has associations, the blind community has associations? There are now more and more consortiums and consolidated associations for the disabled community to provide what access looks like and now I'm seeing, just in recent months, the American Foundation for the Blind is starting to do more work in the BIPOC space, which is great. And opening that up, so I think. . . knowing that these resources exist is a big part of it, that pre-experience I think is important. And then once someone's there and available and know they are welcome, then we can start to look at more what needs to be done in the space . . . to make it more welcoming and hospitable.

ER: You know, I have a non-profit background and when I've seen is there's a lot of turnover in the arts community and so, if people can't really leave or don't have anyone who's there long-term, they're not gonna understand the issues. So, that's why I'm hoping the consortium, the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium, will do in terms of being a clearing house of information so that arts organization know

where to go to find the information that you're talking about. And I wanna talk about the deaf, blind community. That is a community that doesn't get much visibility and I'm very concerned about the lack of access for the deaf, blind community especially those who are people of color. Do you have any insights on the issues that they base and any possible solutions that we can be thinking about?

TC: Seattle's an interesting place because Seattle has one of the largest populations of the deaf, blind community in the United States, partially because of the service and infrastructure that exists here as much as, as much as may complain about our bus system, it is one of the better systems for accessibility in the country and the deaf, blind community has so many challenges in front of it and this is just one more area of frustration. . . I would say that what's really needed is an understanding of who the deaf, blind community is and there's also a lack of understanding of how the deaf, blind community communicates. They use tactile ASL as much as they use traditional ASL. And there's a lot more physical touch involved with that, you know.

TC: They don't have vision- you have to do things with touch so understanding that from the first and foremost level, is really important. You then get into the complexities of proximity and providing space for an interpreter and they [sighs] the community struggles because there is a lack of understanding of who the deaf, blind community is and what the need is. It's not a very big community but it is. . . one that we need to- and I too need to understand better. I mean, I think I'm- I continue to consider myself on the learning curve to be totally honest. Then when, you lay on the racial equity, social equity issues, it gets even more complex and I don't wanna speak too much to that cause I don't have enough understanding of that on a in-depth level. I think what has to happen though, is an increased awareness that this community exists and what the need is to help support them. I think once we get there, then we can start to break down additional barriers.

ER: Yeah, I feel that especially with the pandemic, they are really at a big disadvantage because of the tactile communication that they use. So, they have so many challenges within that community. I want to ask one last question.

ER: When it comes to audio or voice description, what have you noticed are the gaps in these services?

TC: One, for- just to be available in general, and two, having equipment that works. Often, we'll go into situations where the equipment doesn't work, it's faulty because it's not maintained and that's very discouraging. Theatres more and more, movie theatres for example, are some place that have more and more started to offer audio descriptive devices and I've stopped asking to use them because half the time, they don't work. So I miss a lot of subtle nuances. The other part of that is that a lot of- a lot of the time, the voices that are used aren't necessarily enunciating or may have an accent that's difficult to understand. You know, I think there's more and more awareness needed in this area as well. But there is just a lack of understanding, what does this mean and where do I apply it? And then, there's also the expense associated with it. It's not an inexpensive endeavor so you usually don't see it in smaller theatre companies or smaller opera companies or any environment where there's just not a budget for it. So, I think we also need to be creative about how we do that. I am encouraged though as technology starts to take off with the smartphones. That there'll be more and more bandwidth and more and more technology that I can use my phone for this technology and then the theatres or the venues only have to provide the recording available via some app or technology.

TC: So, I see that as a great potential down the line versus having these individual devices, which others have used. So, I'm hearing more and more about this and I think that it is- it's kind of an exciting time. So as much as the challenges exist, I think the technology that exists today really is opening up more opportunities to bridge the accessibility gap. As much as I hate even this venue of Zoom, I will say that the fact that I can sit and have a communication- a conversation with you, Elizabeth, right now and see your face, is exciting!

ER: Wonderful! It's wonderful to see your face! It's so awesome!

TC: Because the last time I saw you, we were in a coffee shop. I could not see your face. So as much as this causes fatigue, you know, and the reason I divert into that is that to understand that we're in a really fascinating time in the history of accessibility and we need to apply more resources . . . at whatever level is necessary. To develop and innovate this technology so that the deaf and blind community or even other disabilities. There's great headway being made within autism and the spectrum of autism, for example, using technology for greater access. It's fascinating. So this idea of audio accessibility for those that are blind, I think right now we're starting to see a transition from old technology to new, but we also need to understand what does that mean? And what do we need? And a lot of it has to do with clarity, a lot of it has to do with, what are we describing? There's been a lot of work over the years done so we know what that is and now it's just a matter of pulling together those resources. And again, some of the national organizations are doing that and it's really exciting. But we're a long way away from it being something that all arts organizations can access, and I'm not sure what that bridge is. Maybe it's additional funding. As a fundraiser, I think there's huge potential to add to bring in new funding sources and diversify some of those funding sources to make some of these bridges possible.

ER: On that note, I think technology really is the key to improving everyone's experiences. I have been so impressed with how quickly things are catching up. I mean, we still have ways to go but it's very exciting, like you say. It's very exciting to see the changes that are coming down the pike and I have a little secret to how arts organizations can afford the audio descriptive equipment or anything. It's to integrate accessibility within the organization and put a line item in the budget for accessibility.

So, with that, thank you so much for spending time with me and talking from the heart. I really have learned a lot from you, and I look forward to our continued conversations. Thank you, Troy Coalman!

TC: Thank you, Elizabeth. It's been wonderful.

Narrator: Opening Doors is produced by the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium and Jack Straw Cultural Center. This podcast was made possible by The Awesome Foundation, Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, and individual contributors, with in-kind support from Jack Straw Cultural Center, Sound Theatre Company, Jennifer Rice Communications, and the SCAC steering committee. Music performed by William Chapman Nyaho, produced through the Jack Straw Artist Support Program. The mission of the Seattle Cultural Accessibility Consortium is to connect arts and cultural organizations with the information and resources to improve accessibility for people of all abilities. SCAC's fiscal sponsor is Shunpike. To learn more, go to seattlecac.org. Jack Straw Cultural Center, producer of the Blind Youth Audio Project since 1997, is committed to keeping art, culture, and heritage vital through sound. You can learn more at jackstraw.org.

Join us for our next episode, featuring an interview with King Khazm, an artist, producer, educator and community organizer.

King Khazm: We all need to do our part in unlearning prejudice and hatred and decolonizing our minds and looking deep into our systemic infrastructure and how we can all be a part of the solution. You know, what is the change that we want to see and how are we gonna get there?

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