

Disability Visibility at USF Podcast Interview Series
Episode 2: Hawa Allarakhia

Liz: Hello everyone and welcome to another edition of the Disability Visibility at USF podcast. My name is Liz Kicak I'm the director of the Humanities Institute here at USF and today I am joined by Hawa Allarakhia. Welcome Hawa we're so glad that you could join us today. So why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself.

Hawa: So right now, I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at USF in the Doctor of Education focusing on program development major in the College of Ed. So I'm almost to the end of the finish line with my research and as a graduate assistant in the Office of Diversity Inclusion and Equal Opportunity on the Sarasota campus of USF.

Liz: That's awesome, so you're almost done with the dissertation?

Hawa: yeah right now I'm editing my proposal with my chair, so it's a longer process than I thought but so far it's going well.

Liz: so could you tell us a little bit about the research that you're doing?

Hawa: So the research I'm doing right now has to do with the knowledge and ability of faculty within the College of Education at USF in regards to students with disabilities and I'm going to use a survey as my instrument to collect descriptive information.

Liz: Oh cool so what kinds of things are you hoping to learn?

Hawa: So I'm really trying to learn how do faculty think they're doing while they're engaging with students with disabilities in the classroom? Do they think they're doing a good job? Do they have like a good amount of knowledge about accommodating students with disabilities? Do they have enough skill in terms of their interactions with canvas? How do they think their- what is their level of communication when it comes to discussing accommodations with students you know in their interactions in the classroom and outside? So I'm trying to get a picture of how the faculty they themselves think they're doing. And what I hope to result from the research is to promote uh more learning and hopefully put forth a program where new hires engage in professional development right when they start, in case they don't have that knowledge base already. And this is not just for College of Education faculty but faculty system-wide so but I thought it would be good to start with a smaller population of faculty and sort of build on that.

Liz: that's really interesting. What got you like excited about that topic to want to pursue it?

Hawa: um well to be honest, when I was a graduate student in the masters of education program at USF Sarasota between 2016 and 2018, the whole premise and culmination of that program is for students to create their own course. So what I did was I created a three-module course relating to accommodating students with disabilities. And that's really the brainchild or what started my whole journey into finding out this information about our faculty. So what I'm hoping to happen is um after I get those results I could propose that incoming faculty across the system participate in my course or even on the other hand possibly integrate it into the College of Ed curriculum for our students pursuing bachelor's degrees and who are going into the classroom right away. So either way that would be my ultimate goal.

Liz: Wow that's fantastic and I think that would be really helpful for a lot of teachers because I think a lot of us want to do better in terms of accommodations in our classroom, but we don't always know how.

Hawa: Exactly.

Liz: And I think our central offices can be sometimes a little overwhelmed in terms of fielding all of our requests for help so I think learning more early on would be really beneficial.

Hawa: For sure and I think that is especially true for our students who are going in to the academic realm of education those who want to become full-time professors, but also for our faculty who don't really have the educational background. That they've come from the business world or other areas and they're kind of coming into the world of accommodations cold turkey.

Liz: Yeah, no I think that's a great a really great project. Were you able to go to the event with Alice Wong last week?

Hawa: Yeah I was and she had some really enlightening things to say. I was- I never really spend a lot- I always spend time considering the world of disability in terms of my world in academia, so listening to her talk about it um in terms of media and like entertainment just got me interested in finding out more about what that means for people, so it's definitely piqued my interest and I'm, you know, looking into more information about the treatment of people with disabilities um in film and tv.

Liz: Oh that's that's great yeah she really she shared a lot that I thought was was great but especially talking about teachers she specifically said in the K through 12 system, but I think it applies sort of at every level, of being aware of, you know, what scripts we're to, you know, what texts we're teaching. Are we being inclusive of, you know, different ability levels in our- in the actual text that we're teaching, as well as, you know, how we're running our classroom. So that was something that I hadn't really considered was, do my students see themselves reflected in the novels that I'm teaching or the articles that I'm giving? So yeah I was appreciative of that um as a teacher.

Hawa: And that also brings up a really interesting point um in terms of, I don't know if you're familiar with the U Matter program out of the St Petersburg campus?

Liz: No I'm not actually.

Hawa: So this program- it just started in the Fall of last year I think and what it is, it's for students who have intellectual disabilities or ID and they- when they enter into this program, they get the full college experience. So they go to the campus twice a week to attend classes, they get academic mentors and peer mentors from other students, and they even live on campus with roommates. So fortunately, the College of Ed just received a grant for over two million dollars which is going to allow the program to possibly expand to the other campuses Tampa and Sarasota. So I'm really interested on how our faculty is going to accommodate um this new influx of students exactly for the reason you brought up earlier where you talked about considering text, because we know that this population of students has a lower reading level than our average student who's coming in.

Liz: That sounds like an amazing program, I'm gonna have to check that out.

Hawa: For sure, for sure. I actually hosted a sort of question and answer session for the office of diversity two weeks ago and I had the principal investigator and co-director of the program kind of give us a little overview of what the population of students looks like and just the program in general so I know they're very willing to listen to other people and give as much information as possible.

Liz: Oh that's great, because that's something I've been interested in is how our different campuses are tackling these things now that we're a united you know one USF. Because we've talked with students from St Pete and we've talked to students from Tampa and they have had very different experiences. So I think it's

great that there's work being done that maybe could expand some programming um, you know, to the Tampa campus and hopefully vice versa.

Hawa: Well I think, I mean I'm a very unique student in that I've had the privilege of attending all three campuses. I completed my undergrad at the St Petersburg campus and then my master's in the Sarasota campus and now my doctorate is out of the Tampa campus. But I think it just it all depends on the size. Size really impacts how professors specifically see and interact with students who have a disability. Heavily in undergraduate studies. So I think, you know, on the St Petersburg campus and on the Sarasota campus when you're first starting out and those smaller environments are very beneficial to um you know a student who's juggling a disability while trying to go to college because the professors and the staff of Student Accessibility Services, they do a lot of extra um just extra communication and there's just this comfort level that I've had myself where I feel like people are willing to listen and you know kind of go that extra mile to help you get where you want to go.

Liz: Sure no that makes, that makes total sense. And you know, one of the things that I hear from all of these interviews is how important community is um in any setting and how that really seems to be sort of the key to success. And feeling a part of the campus culture is a you know a supportive community.

Hawa: That's true. I mean that's not to say that every single interaction I've had through my years of at USF and other institutions have all been positive. I do have- I do have incidents where, you know, there was just real struggles and difficulty. I can give you an example. During my undergrad years at the St Petersburg campus, I was actually an elementary Ed major and I made it all the way to first internship. And when it came time for that, when I filled out the application, I seriously considered my skill and what I was comfortable with and all my previous volunteer experience and teaching experience, it all had to do with students with intellectual disabilities and in a self-contained sort of life skills classroom. So when it came time to select my preferred classroom level, I did- I selected upper elementary so between third grade and fifth grade because i felt like that student population would react more positively to my use of a scooter and just my- just in general because I would be able to talk to them and explain to them you know why I used a scooter. So I wrote a letter to the coordinators of the internship requesting that I be placed in the upper elementary level classroom and um they said they would do the best they could, but I would just that- and they would do my preference. But um I made this request two other times. The second time was when I filled out the official application and then the third time was after I got assigned to a first grade classroom and I reached out to them and I said this is not what I requested and I understand the difficulty but I see this request as an accommodation for my for my disability and you know I'm gonna do my best but I feel like you're denying my request. So I went through almost the entire internship and I really struggled with classroom management skills because we're talking about small children at six years old and sometimes they just didn't listen. So at the end of the semester, the two directors of internship asked to meet with me and they said because I struggled so much with classroom management, that they would want me to repeat the internship. And the thing was, I don't think it was actually my fault completely because the school I was interning at at the time didn't have ESOL students, so I had to go to a different school to finish those lessons. And so I contacted an old teacher of mine from elementary school and I asked her if I could come in for a couple of Fridays and I wish I had filmed that those lessons the way I did my other ones, because if I did, that would have proved to the cooperating teacher and the coordinators that I did- I could teach and control the students because those three Fridays I went to the other school went absolutely perfect. So um you know at the end of the semester they gave me a choice. They said you can either repeat the internship or you leave the program. And I said, okay you want me to repeat the internship? But this time you have to either put me in the classroom one of the classes I asked for to begin with, or if you insist that it has to be at the same level, then you have to let me um finish the internship at a

school closer to my home so that I can- I won't live on campus and it'll be easier for me to get there because I couldn't drive and I was actually carpooling with a friend of mine. So if I moved home my parents would be able to drop me off. And they refused my request and said, well we can't do that because it would put a burden on the system. And so I just decided, and with the help of an academic advisor, I changed majors and still graduated on time. But this is what we're talking about when um you know, accessibility- when requests are made and accessibility is ignored- and by people- by people who are in the field of education. I'm sorry, but that's just- that's not fair. If you're- the whole point is to level the playing field, not to make it easier, but at least make it fair.

Liz: Yeah that has to be really frustrating.

Hawa: You know it was really frustrating and it changed my whole path kind of because I ended up finishing in a different subject. But thank goodness I got back into my, you know, passion of education during after grad school. And now- and I'm so happy for that, but this was one of the toughest lessons, and you know, events in my whole life that I had to navigate. So I just feel like, you know, if even- we need to do anything we can to make our student population who have disabilities as successful as possible. You know we just- and I think that's what's so great about you know this podcast and what USF is trying to bring with all these different events surrounding accessibility.

Liz: Well, I appreciate that and it's it's so wonderful to have so many folks come here and share their stories and you know their experiences as students and as faculty and the research that they're doing and so I think it's- I think it's really encouraging some of the amazing work that's being done locally at the USF community. So I don't want to keep you too much longer, um so I wanted to thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else we didn't talk about you want to make sure that that we cover or did we get everything?

Hawa: um I think I got everything. The last thing I want to close with is there- in our whole community on the USF all USF campuses, there are people and resources to help people learn more. Whether it's accessibility services or the office of diversity equity and inclusion or even when faculty come across students, some people are willing to share their stories and to become better as a community, we need to- we just need to be willing to listen.

Liz: Well said, um wonderful. Well Hawa, thank you so much uh for joining me today. I really really appreciate it, you had some amazing uh insight into things and I wish you the very best, good luck on your your dissertation and your research, it sounds very exciting.

Hawa: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me and I look forward um to more work regarding accessibility from the Humanities Institute.

Liz: Thank you so much. And we encourage our listeners to please join us for our next episode of Disability Visibility at USF.