

Transcript  
BUSPH Public Health Conversation Starter  
In Conversation with Carl Richardon

Yvette Cozier:

Hello, everyone. My name is Yvette Cozier, I'm the Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice at Boston University School of Public Health. Thank you for joining our latest Public Health Conversation Starter. Today's conversation is part of our SPH Reads series. SPH Reads is a school-wide reading program hosted by the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice. It aims to encourage critical thought and discussion among all members of the BUSPH community and is centered on a carefully chosen, thought-provoking book. The selection for the 2023-24 academic year is Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century, edited by Alice Wong.

In conjunction with this year's book selection, I'm having discussions with leaders who are working to advance the health of disabled populations. Today I have the great privilege of speaking with Carl Richardson. Carl Richardson serves as the coordinator of the Americans with Disability Act at the Massachusetts State House. In his position, he ensures that all programs and activities at the State House are fully accessible for all individuals. Welcome, Carl. Thanks for joining us today.

Carl Richardson:

Thank you for having me.

Yvette Cozier:

Sure. Can you give us a little background of your journey and how it's led to a commitment to disability rights and accessibility?

Carl Richardson:

Sure. So, it's been a road well-traveled. My original journey was not to work in the field of persons with disability. I was born hard of hearing, so I've always been part of the disability community, but I wore hearing aids my whole entire life. I originally went to school for my undergraduate degree in the world of film and television, I wanted to make movies and TV shows. And I didn't find out that I had Usher Syndrome, which is one of the leading genetic causes of deaf blindness, until I was a senior in high school. But at that point, I still had my dreams set on becoming a filmmaker. I loved film, I grew up watching film, and that's what I wanted to do.

So, I did go out to LA after I graduated with a degree in film from Emerson College here in Boston, and I worked in LA for a few years and I did work on a number of TV shows and film. And my eyesight was starting to progress worse, to the point where I

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had to give up driving. And this is the early '90s, so you couldn't really get around LA then. Uber didn't exist, public transportation wasn't there, the subway wasn't there.

And I was working on a movie set on a low budget picture, which meant on a low budget picture was non-union and you did whatever people told you to do. So I was helping the electrician set up these Klieg lights up in the rafters of the sound stage. And because I couldn't see what I was doing, I knocked them down and I destroyed the movie set. I got fired because, to put this obviously, and I was like, "I'm sorry, I'm going blind." "Well, you should have told us." The ADA had just passed, nobody knew what it was. I didn't recognize I was disabled. I wasn't out in the open about it. I didn't know what to do. So I came back home.

I drifted around for a few years. I always worked, but I just did hourly jobs just to pay the bills so I could eat, but I was drifting around. And one night my friend and I were sitting and we both were doing the same thing and we said, "This isn't enough." And he said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I got to get either a cane or a guide dog. I got to move into the city where I don't need to depend on driving. And I want to get a job working back in media again." And he gave me his aspirational goals, and we both gave ourselves a year to do it. And he is now the Director of Senior Services for the City of Cambridge. So he has achieved all his goals and I'm now doing what I'm doing.

So, I did get a guide dog, I did move into the city. And I started networking and I landed a job at the Media Access Group for WGBH in Boston, which made film and television more accessible for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, and visually impaired. Perfect. I got to combine my love of film and television and media, but also learn about accessibility for people who were deaf, blind, hard of hearing, which I fit in a little bit into all those categories. And I learned about things such as captioning of television and film, and audio description, which I see where we'll talk about more later. And I was the marketing guy to promote and sell those services so that people would hire WGBH to do caption and audio description. So I flew all over the country with my guide dog to meet film producers, television producers, other PBS stations, to get them to hire our services.

And then during the downturn in the economy, we had offices in LA, New York, and Boston, they closed down the New York office and the New York market, and people had more seniority so I lost my position. It wasn't a performance thing, it was just downsizing. So I didn't know what to do. And for a little while I was out of work, and I had just met my wife, Megan, shortly before I lost my job. And, Megan, who also works at Boston University with you, Dean Cozier. And, I didn't know what to do. And I kept

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getting job interviews because I had an impressive resume doing marketing for the largest PBS station in the country.

And I had done some development work for the Museum of Science, raising \$6 million. So I always got the interview, but when I got in for the interview I always lost it right away, because I was walking into the job interview with hearing aids and a guide dog. I still remember interviewing at a Fortune 200 company for a marketing associate position, a fairly decent job. And the only question I can remember them asking me is, "How are you going to get to work every day?" And I blew the interview right away because I said, "If that's all you care about, then I'm not the right person for you. You should be concerned as whether I have the knowledge and the ability to do the job. Not whether or not I can physically get to work." And I literally almost got up and walked out the door. But we ended the interview and I left. And I knew I blew it that day because I was, not hostile, but I was like, "You guys are focusing on the wrong thing."

And so I was out of work for a while, and then finally I just took a job just to stay employed, to keep my resume current. I was a telemarketer. It wasn't really challenging. I didn't really like it, but I did it. But it was a telemarketing job with the Secretary of State's office, and that gave me access to other job listings within state government. And one person popped up and said, "Hey, the State House is looking for an ADA coordinator, and the biggest issue they want to tackle is captioning of their television broadcast," or one of the biggest issues, there were a lot, but that was one of them.

And I said, "Well, I know how to fix the captioning. I can do that in 24 hours." So, I wrote a resume and cover letter. I reached out to, in the state, every job listing has an ADA coordinator for each position. So in this case, and I normally don't do it, but in this case, I acknowledged that I was a qualified person with a disability and I would like a shot at interviewing for the position. I found a lawsuit that created my position, it was publicly posted. I read it in detail, I took detailed notes. I came into the State House, took the tour, walked the whole entire building and said, "This is what I would fix. Took down notes. This is what I would fix if I get the job." I interviewed for the job, several people from several different agencies, the Attorney General's office, the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf, the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, the Viola State Office, I don't know. Several agencies interviewed me for this interview, and I landed the job.

And also, because I work at the State House, I'm exposed to a lot of people with a lot of backgrounds, other state agencies that serve the disability field, a lot of advocates.

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And as that has grown, my advocacy outside of work has grown, and the number of things I do and the number of people I can have contact with. And I know that's a long answer to your question, but that's basically how I got into it. So I grew into advocacy. And as my disability progressed and it became to the point where I could not hide it, I had to be more obvious about it. And I really wasn't fooling people even when I thought I was.

And as I was doing things, I was like, "Hey, it's not right that I don't get to walk into the building with my dog whenever I should." Or, "Hey, it's not right that I don't get to access the internet the same way other people do." Or, "Hey, it's not right that I don't get to watch television the way other people do." And I started to advocate and hopefully be an effective advocate and leader along with my other colleagues and advocates from the community.

Yvette Cozier:

That's a fantastic journey. And you mentioned early on about the Americans with Disability Act had only recently been signed when you had the job in LA, or it was pretty new. So can you tell us a little bit more about your position as the coordinator of the ADA?

Carl Richardson:

Sure. So, as you mentioned, it's basically my role to make sure that all the program services and active... When I first started, I was hired for the Bureau of State Office buildings, and I used to do a lot of buildings across the Commonwealth that were State owned. But eventually the State House wanted to create their own agency, and since it was the State House that was sued, they kept me. So basically my role today is to make sure that all the program services and activities are accessible to people of all abilities. And that can encompass architectural access, so as we do capital improvements, I sit down with engineers and architects and make sure that we're thinking of principles of universal design. And we're not only sticking to code, but in some cases hopefully going beyond code. And that's hard to do in a 220-year-old building where access wasn't thought of then, or even 20, 30 years ago.

It can be communication access for the deaf and hard of hearing, where I provide interpreters and real time captioning. It can be information access, where I sit down with the legislature and incorporate web accessibility guidelines and make sure that the web is accessible for people like myself who use a screen reader. And I don't use a mouse, I'm listening to all the information on the computer. And making sure that web

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pages are accessible and documents are accessible. So I may hire a web developer to incorporate guidelines.

It can be training. I train frontline staff on how to do disability etiquette and interact with people with disabilities if they walk into a building so that people feel respected and heard. And that's when I realized that most of my complaints dropped by 80%. The minute people felt heard and respected, they were willing to overlook something that we can't always control. But they still felt minimized to an extent because of those, but they felt heard and respected, so they were overwilling to look.

So it can be training. It can be, I become a referral resource for the 200 legislators we have in the building. If they want to know about how certain bills will impact the disability community or if they have a constituent in their community that might need access to some programs and services, I usually know the people that can help them get those programs and services. I think that covers, information access, programmatic access, making sure that they have access to all the programs, communication access, architectural access. I think that covers most of the things at what I do.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah, that's quite a bit. And you mentioned a term, universal design. So can you say a little bit more about what that is?

Carl Richardson:

Yeah. Universal design is when you design something in a way that works for all people all the time. And so, let me think of an example. Okay, yeah. For those who ride the buses, now how they've made the front door on the bus so that people with mobility issues can get onto the bus? Well now, mothers with strollers, people with luggage, people with bicycles are using that as a result. And that's helped everybody. I have a handicap accessible entrance here at the State House, where my HP power door operator was constantly breaking down, and I got tired of repairing it. So I said, "Just remove the button and let's make an electronic door with an electronic eye so that it opens no matter who approaches the door." And now you have caterers using that door when they're bringing in their catering supplies and people running off to the airport with their luggage.

And, another room, I just installed something called induction coil loop into a hearing room. So that when hearing aid users walk into that room, they just click a button on the hearing aid and the sound goes straight to their hearing aid. They don't need to ask somebody, they don't need to single themselves out and ask somebody to get an

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assistive listen device and wear it and sit up front. They can just be part of the audience and be seamlessly integrated, and nobody will be the wiser that they need an accommodation. So it's simply trying to make people feel included. And this is very important because the majority of people with disabilities do not disclose and they're not always... Like me, I'm part of the disability community, I'm proud of it, I will talk about it. But some people in the community will not, and don't necessarily know they always need help.

Another thing is I put wooden benches in this building all over the place, because this is a large building with a lot of walking. I see a lot of people sitting down and relaxing, and sometimes too to just have a cup of coffee. But at the same time, those benches are there for people who can't walk long distances, but it also creates a more comfortable welcoming environment. So basically when you design a space or a procedure, you're trying to incorporate things in such a way that everybody benefits, regardless of their ability.

Yvette Cozier:

Okay. Thank you. That is the total definition of equity. Everyone gets what they need. Thank you for that. And in addition to your role at the State House, you also serve as the Co-Chair for the Audio Description for the American Council of the Blind, correct?

Carl Richardson:

Yeah, The Audio Description Project. Yeah.

Yvette Cozier:

And can you just share a little bit more about that? You did start to mention that in your work with WGBH, but I'd love to hear more.

Carl Richardson:

I'm not sure many people know what audio description is, but audio description is a narrator describing the key visual element of a movie, film, TV show, whatever media you're watching, during gaps in dialogue. Describing time, visual elements, costume, place, action, so that the blind consumer can follow along with the television program. But again, they do not overlap dialogue of the actors or significant audio. They only do it in the gap. And most people don't know this, but for instance, I also serve as a member of the disability advisory committee for the Federal Communications Commission in Washington DC, and I'm involved with rules and regulation regarding

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television broadcast. Most people don't know this, but anybody can watch audio description if they want to.

The four broadcast networks, NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox, and the top five cable rated network, which are, History, oh God, Hallmark, Discovery, TBS, and I'm forgetting one. But the nine channels are all required to carry about almost 90 hours, 87 and a half hours per quarter. So you can turn on the TV any night of the week and watch audio description if you simply activate your SAP program, your SAP button in the audio set, which stands for Second Audio Program. And it's often also used to listen to Spanish, and you will hear an audio description track. Also, most of the major streaming services are now offering a significant amount of audio description, Netflix, Disney+, Paramount, Showtime, Hulu, Max, which used to be HBO Max, Prime Video, they're all offering shows with audio description. So if you want to watch a show, you simply have to go into your audio settings when you're watching a show, turn it on, and then it'll stay on and you can watch programming with audio description.

And as my role of Co-Chair of the Audio Description Project for the American Council of the Blind, we basically advocate for more audio description and quality audio description. And that committee is made up of, oh, about 30 of us, and we have five or six subcommittees. One is the media subcommittee, which I chair, which has to do with film, television, DVD, streaming services, that sort of thing. You can also go to the movie theater and watch movies with audio description, if you go up to the customer service desk and ask for a headset, and then you'll be able to watch a movie. And most of the movies now come out with audio description. There's another group, Performing Arts and Museums, which has to do with the theater, live theater, and museums. And the National Park Service has an audio description.

We also have a BADIE subcommittee, BADIE, B-A-D-I-E, Benefits of Audio Description in Education, where we work with children in the K through 12 to become critics of audio description. And they have to write an essay of what they watched in their class, usually with their teacher, and then critique it so that they learn what audio description is about and become future advocates and viewers of it. And I love it, it's so fun reading the kids' essay and then awarding them an iPad.

Yvette Cozier:

Oh, wow.

Carl Richardson:

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And then we have an award subcommittee where we give awards annually to people who do excellent work in audio description. And then we have, I know I'm forgetting, a Section 508 committee, Section 508 is part of the Rehab Act in the federal government, which requires that video put out by federal agencies are accessible, that include things like caption and audio description. And that's made up of blind and visually impaired 508 and ADA coordinators who are trying to create more knowledge within the federal agencies.

And then we have a conference committee, annually we hold a conference and we try to educate people about audio descriptions. So it's a very active project committee, but it's what I do when I'm not working here. And I do it, for one, because I'm a strong believer in it and a component of it, but I also do it for selfish reasons, because I want to watch TV and film the way I used to. For a while there, when I was going blind, I lost my love of film and television and audio description gave it to me back. And it allowed me to do simple things such as watch a movie with my wife, and it's that simple. Where if I didn't have audio description, and Dean Cozier, you know Megan, she's a kind woman and wants to make sure that everybody feels included, and she would take herself out of it and spend the whole time describing the TV show and then have no idea where she was.

And that's ruining it for the both of us, because I'd be upset that she wasn't enjoying the film or movie with me, and she wouldn't participating, and she would be worried so much about making sure I was part of it. And now we watch things together with audio description and we can simply go out on a movie on a Friday night if we want to. And that's the beauty. And I was told by an executive from Netflix, when I gave that statement to a Netflix executive, when he heard, "All I want to do is go out on a date with my wife," he said that's what sold him.

Yvette Cozier:

That was it.

Carl Richardson:

And he said from that point on he was going to be committed to audio description, because who doesn't want go out on a date with their wife, right?

Yvette Cozier:

Yep.

Carl Richardson:



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I mean, well, I do. Anyway. So, that's why I'm involved in audio description. And we're also finding, and this isn't exactly universal design, but we're also finding that... Well, it is in a way. That it's benefiting, say you want to cook in the kitchen, you can just turn it on on your iPhone and listen to it, and you could cook a meal. Or, for those on the spectrum who don't necessarily understand interaction between people and facial expressions, the audio description is describing that a little bit and stating what's going on. And so, it's benefiting more people than just the blind and visually impaired communities.

Yvette Cozier:

Wow. I love how this has come full circle, from when you first went to California after college to now, and what an incredible impact that has.

Carl Richardson:

Well, and it's allowed me to stay in the world of film. I just recently had a friend of mine visit me from California who was still in the business, and I talk to him all the time, and I still have regrets of not staying in the business, but he came and saw some of the work I did. And then one night I showed him an audio described film, and he watched it and he goes, "You know, Carl, you're making a difference for people with disabilities to have access with film and television. You're doing as much as you could have done otherwise." And this is a guy that's edited for David Lynch and George Lucas, he's done Star Wars stuff, he's done Twin Peaks stuff. He's well accomplished, well known in the industry. And he was saying, "Carl, you're doing it." And I think he's done far more than I'll ever do, and he's like, "No, no, no, no." So that made me feel good, I have to admit, that made me feel pretty good.

Yvette Cozier:

You should, you should. That's awesome. So I want to turn a little bit to, you've been in the news within the last several months about your guide dog changing over. So you have a new guide dog now, named Tigger, who's one of my favorite Winnie-the-Pooh characters, by the way.

Carl Richardson:

Yeah, well, and he's appropriately named. He's got a lot of energy.

Yvette Cozier:

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A lot of energy. And some of the coverage was about your recently retired guide dog, Merrick. So can you tell us about the experience with your guide dogs and how they've been able to assist you?

Carl Richardson:

Yeah. And thank you, I'm also a strong advocate in the field of service animals. And a service animal, under Title II and III, is allowed into all public places of accommodation. And I've been a service animal user for 25 years, since I was 30 years old. And I started out with my first guide dog, Kiva. And when I got her, because my mobility was slowing down, my ability to feel confident to go out in places and travel was slowing down, I was starting to shelter myself. And Kiva gave me my freedom, my mobility, and my independence back. And it's that profound.

And I'm now on my fourth guide dog, Merrick, who I just retired, who's 12 years old, who I still have and worked for me faithfully for almost nine years throughout the State House, and public transportation, and all over the country, and wherever I go. I retired just because he was getting older. And I now have a new guide dog named Tigger, who I just went through, well, about four or five months ago now, I went through two weeks of intense training with. And we're still learning how to communicate and talk to each other and understand each other, but he's doing a good job.

Yvette Cozier:

So we were talking, of course, about the book, Disability Visibility. And one of the chapters, written by someone that you know, Haben Girma, who also identifies as deaf blind. And the chapter that she wrote for the book was Guide Dogs Don't Lead Blind People, We Wander As One.

Carl Richardson:

Oh, absolutely.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah. And one of things in the chapter was, if a blind person doesn't have confidence, then the dog and person both end up lost.

Carl Richardson:

Well, that's true to an extent. It depends on the dog a little bit. Like my first dog, if I didn't know where I was going, she always did. But all my other dogs, if I'm nervous, they get nervous. If I'm confident, they're confident. If I'm calm, they're calm. You do

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become one. You think as one, you move as one. I can't explain it. And my wife, Megan, is sometimes jealous of the relationship I have with my dog and thinks I love the dog more than her. And we're never putting that to a test, by the way. But the running joke is, if there's ever a fire in the house, I'm grabbing the dog and I hope she gets out. I don't know if that's true, but you do think as one.

So when I go to an establishment and my dog gets refused, I don't think the dog getting refused, I feel like I'm being refused. Or we're being refused as a team. And that's the best word I can think of. We're a team, but we're a team acting as one. They're so in sync, and I'm so in sync with them, that we know we're communicating almost telepathically. Now, we're not quite there with Tigger because he's new, we're getting there. It usually takes about five or six months to get there after you get a dog. But when you get there, and you're walking down the street, and all the cylinders are hitting, and everything's moving, it's the most amazing feeling in the world. When you're there with a dog and you're just moving through the crowd seamlessly, and you're just going where you're needing to go. And it's just, I can't explain it, it's the most incredible high you've ever felt.

Yvette Cozier:

Wow. Wow. That's great. It's certainly something that many of us don't appreciate, how valuable and wonderful that experience is.

Carl Richardson:

My wife, Megan, even wrote an essay once, called *The Other Woman*, where, basically, she said she had to compete with affection with my first dog, Kiva. And so she should give you a copy of it, I'll make sure she gives you a copy.

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah. I would love to read that. Yes.

Carl Richardson:

But, since you brought up the topic of guide dogs, if you don't mind, there's still a lot of advocacy to do in terms of guide dogs. And right now the area where anybody with a service animal, not just blind people with guide dogs, but anybody with a service animal is advocating for, is mostly to do with shared transportation services, in terms of Uber or Lyft, that sort of thing. There's an awful lot of denials and cancellation for those of us who use service dogs. And so we need to do some educating, and we're working with Uber and Lyft.

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And it's difficult, because a taxi cab, it's not that it doesn't happen, but you could always call up the taxi service, get the name of the driver, call the police, and they would have to enforce it because the taxi company has to have a license with the town. And then the Hackney division within the city or town would have to follow up. It's different with Uber and Lyft, they're so big and they police themselves. So, that's the biggest challenge. I haven't had this happen to me in a long time because it's fairly obvious when I walk in that I'm blind and also I make my dog behave well enough, but it still happens for many that they get refused when they go to restaurants or other places. So, we're still advocating for the needs of people with service animals.

Yvette Cozier:

So as much as we've had progress, we still have a long way to go.

Carl Richardson:

Well, just like any minority, right?

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah.

Carl Richardson:

Whether you be a woman, a person of color, LGBT community, it doesn't matter what community, you're always going to have something to work on.

Yvette Cozier:

Yes, exactly. So, as we come to a close, I just want to say the School of Public Health, we train our students and they come in with a desire to be activists, to promote public health and to be radical in its promotion. What advice would you give an incoming Public Health student, or a current Public Health student, who wants to be involved in making the world more accessible for all?

Carl Richardson:

Don't be afraid to speak up. When you do though, have concrete examples of why things need to improve. Because, as an ADA coordinator, I can tell you if I get documented examples or concrete stories, which I can back up, it then allows me to go to people of position and power to make the changes. Where if I just speak on hearsay, it's a little more difficult. So document, write things down, and always keep pushing to improve things. We can always do better.

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When speaking of other people with disabilities, or regardless, use people first language, "Carl, who is blind and hard of hearing," not, "That deaf blind guy, Carl." Treat people with respect, dignity. And when you are in negotiation to advocating, try not to blow your cool, you can get a lot more farther. And then if you have to, you can take it to the next step. Legal.

But I find that, there's a book written by a friend of mine who's also a friend of Haben, named Lainey Feingold, which is called, I think it's called The Art of Structured Negotiation. Where she doesn't believe in lawsuits, but she believes in structured negotiations where you may hire an attorney, but you approach somebody saying, "Hey, we'd like to help you to improve access." And sometimes companies are more willing to do things if you promise not to sue them.

And be afraid and just educate people. I mean, I was just in a restaurant before I joined this call, and as I walked in, somebody bent down to pat my dog, and I said, "I can appreciate you want to say hi to my dog, he is cute, but he's working. And if you pat him, you'll distract him. It's like if I were in a car with you and you were driving, I grabbed your steering wheel, it would veer you off course. You can't do that to him." And I did it very nicely, very diplomatically, and now he'll never do it again. So, just advocate.

And I will say, it never stops, ever. I'm shocked now, since I've gotten this job as an ADA coordinator, I can never walk into a building, I can never go into a place without saying, "Hmm, what I would do here?" You know?

Yvette Cozier:

Yeah.

Carl Richardson:

But advocate, but do it nice. Have facts, and also numbers help. If you can do it with multiple organizations, groups, and across disabilities, you'll be more powerful.

Yvette Cozier:

Well, thank you so much, Carl. This has been a wonderful, wonderful conversation. It's been great learning about the work you do, and yeah, just the many ways that you've impacted the world in which people live, which we all live. So I really appreciate your taking the time and sharing your experiences with us.

Carl Richardson:

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Thank you. It was a pleasure to be here.

Yvette Cozier:

Yes, thank you so much.