

Hummingbird Humanity

an LGBTQ+ owned business

Conversations of Hope, Heart, and the Human Spirit

with Mindy Scheier

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Brian McComak: Okay, happy Wednesday, everyone. Looks like we have a good group in the room. Thanks, everyone for being with us today. I am so excited about today's conversation. Of course, I love every one of my guests, but Mindy has a special place in my heart. So I'm so excited and I'm so glad you're all here with us today, so, thank you for being here. And as Liz mentioned, if you'd like to introduce yourselves in the chat, feel free to introduce yourselves. This is a great way for everyone to meet and network and share information. So, please, by all means, share LinkedIn profile links and if you have resources or content that you want to share or if you're hosting your own events, share away. This is a community and we're all here to support each other. I think I'll go ahead and get started. It looks like we have a good group, so fantastic. Well, again, happy Wednesday, and welcome to "Hope, Heart, and the Human Spirit". I'm so grateful that you have all decided to be with us this afternoon and I'm delighted to be joined by Mindy Scheier, who I love and admire and who has become a friend and as we've done work together. So, so excited for our conversation and our shared passions and hopefully you'll enjoy our time together this afternoon. Before I come to Mindy, I wanted just to step back for a moment and just share particularly for anyone who might be new to this series that Hummingbird Humanity is a new organization that I founded, it's just about two months ago, and the focus of Hummingbird Humanity is to work with organizations to create human-centered workplace cultures. So, diversity, equity and inclusion is a big part of that work and that's really what this series will center around for the most part. As we move forward, we're going to expand the conversation into corporate philanthropy and social impact or social justice work, wellness, and there's a variety of aspects of organizations that are really important for heart and soul, for the company and particularly for the people that work there. And certainly the work that Mindy and I do very much connects to all of those other areas that are adjacent or sometimes come into our Venn diagram, if you will, of the work that we do. So more to come as we grow Hummingbird Humanity and our community and certainly welcome your ideas and suggestions along the way. Without further ado, you're here to hear about Mindy. So, I'm so excited Mindy's here. She is the founder and CEO of Runway of Dreams and Gamut Management, and a phenomenal human. So, before we talk about your story, would you just share with the group a little bit about what those organizations do and then we'll come to like why you started them in just a second.

Mindy Scheier: Absolutely. Well, can I give a quick shout-out to Jen Welty 'cause I saw that she's on. Hi, Jen, it's so nice that you joined. I'm happy to be reconnected with you. So, Runway of Dreams is actually an organization that I started back in 2014 with really the sole mission of educating the fashion industry to be inclusive of people with disabilities. I am a fashion designer and mom of a child with muscular

dystrophy. So, my worlds collided very quickly and very forcefully in the white space that there was in terms of mainstream clothing for people with disabilities. So, Runway of Dreams really works exclusively with the fashion industry to educate them on the size and spending power of the population of people with disabilities, as well as encourage mainstream adaptive clothing. But from a nonprofit perspective, we really focus on raising money to be able to give out wardrobe grants to those that cannot afford new mainstream clothing, inspiring the next generation of designers to focus on adaptive clothing and really make it a part of our mainstream conversation in fashion so that someday it just becomes another category just as plus size or petite, and we just really focus on raising awareness to the need for mainstream adaptive clothing. Because of Runway of Dreams and the honor that I have in the movement that we started, it became a natural pathway in starting Gamut Management, which is actually a for-profit talent management company exclusively for people with disabilities, as we feel everybody has a talent, whether that is being a part of focus groups, testing product, having a voice in products that are developed for this population, all the way up to being a part of the entertainment industry and having representation in the public eye for people with disabilities. And I realized, based on the amount of other industries or other brands that were reaching out to Runway of Dreams to be connected to people with disabilities that there must be an opportunity there because we're nonprofit. There was no mainstream management companies that focused on people with disabilities and we found out pretty quickly that there weren't, so we became the first one and Gamut Management, we launched in 2019, with Runway of Dreams being our nonprofit partner. So, as you'll all find out, I don't tend to do things the typical way. So, generally you don't start a nonprofit and then start a for-profit, happens the other way around, but such is life.

Brian McComak: Hey, that's something you and I share. I never follow the journey of everyone else, like, let's blaze our own trail. I love it, I love it. Well, and I made a note, we're going to come back to size and spending power 'cause that's a cool stat. But before we get to business, a big part of this series is to hear the personal stories behind the work we do. We all have a reason that we chose to be in this space, or more than one reason, and I know you have a beautiful story about why you got into this work that's so touching. Would you share that with us?

Mindy Scheier: Absolutely. So and I do agree with you, I think many you know amazing things that happen in our world come from a personal experience. So as I mentioned, I am a fashion designer, I've worked in the industry for over 20 years and my middle child was born with muscular dystrophy and he really opened my eyes to something that I, even being in the industry, never even thought of, never heard of. Never heard of the word adaptive, never heard in any design conversations, "Well, how do we include people with disabilities." And when Oliver came into my life, and it was very clear that he would struggle with everyday tasks, one of which is the very thing I love to do every day and that's dress myself. That for him was quite the opposite and something that was immediate anxiety, pain provoking, really challenging on a self-esteem, so when it became time for him to go to school, our solution was for him to wear sweatpants and a T-shirt every single day because it was certainly the path of least resistance not having buttons or zippers, but also having it easily go over his leg braces, and he was a boy, not to be stereotypical, but it felt a little bit okay that he was just wearing sweatpants every day and truly, Brian out of the mouths of babes, he came home when he was eight

years old and very emphatically said to me, "Mom, I want to wear jeans. "I don't understand why I'm the only kid "that doesn't wear jeans. "I see other kids come in and they have choices, "they're wearing different things and why is that not me?" And I really had a complete kick in the gut moment that here I was not only dedicating my career to fashion and clothing but I was a poster child for what you wear identifies who you are to the world and I needed my eight-year-old to remind me of how critically important that is to every human, whether you care about fashion or don't care about fashion, you can't get away with being naked every day. So what you wear is a choice and it's a decision that Oliver was not able to make due to the fact that there were no clothing options for him and the 1 billion people on our planet that have a disability. It just wasn't a conversation in the industry. So, being that I was that little girl that thought I was going to be a global brand, I was never a small thinker. I came in guns blazing thinking that this was my path, this was my calling, and I was going to change the fashion industry to be inclusive of people with disabilities. And thankfully through a lot of research, talking to as many people as I possibly could at hospitals, schools and facilities, I was able to develop modifications that could be implemented into mainstream clothing to make them wearable for people with disabilities. And actually where my path crossed with Jen. In 2016, we partnered with Tommy Hilfiger and made fashion history by developing the first ever mainstream adaptive clothing line for people with disabilities.

Brian McComak: Wow. I love it, I love it. And so, is he wearing jeans now?

Mindy Scheier: Oh, yes. And actually, now he's 15, almost 16. So, he has his own style, which by the way, is absolutely the opposite of what I thought his style was, which shows you what I'm dealing with here. He has very much his own style, I don't even know how to put a name to it. But jeans are a part of them and the fact that he has choices is something that I will be forever grateful for that the world is for sure changing to be inclusive.

Brian McComak: I love that. And you may have said it, what is his name?

Mindy Scheier: Oliver

Brian McComak: Oliver. Yes, I have heard this before, so I should know by now.

Mindy Scheier: Yes, Olly, Oliver, that's his name.

Brian McComak: I love it. So, I'm curious, how does Oliver feel about his story being the start of this journey for you and the work that you're doing?

Mindy Scheier: I think it's really interesting because I really believe it's been a cathartic process for both of us, me as the mom, he has my child with a disability that is so rare that he may never meet anybody in his lifetime with his version of muscular dystrophy. But even further than that, actually, I think it's been cathartic for his siblings, for my husband in that we were able to be a voice to something that needed to be talked about, needed to be addressed. I am, again, forever grateful that he opened, he was the catalyst and opened our eyes to this unbelievable world of people with disabilities that, I used to say that I was lucky to not really had been a part of before, but now I feel quite the opposite. I am lucky to be a part of this population and to have the knowledge and to have been able to meet incredible people like you in my journey, and I think that it's been a gift. It's been the silver lining for sure in something that we cannot control, which is Oliver's disability, in something that we feel that we've had a part of a movement in leading.

Brian McComak I love that, I love that. Well, and I want to mention about how we first met here in a moment, but I just remembered and I have to apologize, I forgot to introduce Liz.

- **Mindy Scheier:** Oh, Liz.

Brian McComak: I was so excited, I was so excited. And so, Liz Roy is my esteemed colleague and so I'm sure you're all chatting with her online. So Liz is here and just helps to make sure that Mindy and I stay on track. So, welcome, Liz, thank you for being with us.

Liz Roy: Happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me, Brian.

Brian McComak: Of course, of course. Well, you're a joy, so this is a room of joy and happiness.

Liz Roy: It is.

Mindy Scheier: It definitely is.

Brian McComak: I love that. So, Mindy and I met, is it almost two years ago now. CFDA had pulled together a conference for diversity in the fashion industry and Mindy was on a panel, which is when I first became a fan, and one of the members of the panel, I think her name is Jeanine, if I have her name correct.

Mindy Scheier: Yes.

Brian McComak: Something that she said, I have used, I've said it so many times since then, which is, "Not for us without us." And I'm sure that that plays into the work that you're doing every day and it's so important. For the group here, do you want to add some context to what that statement means especially when it comes to fashion and what it means to you in the work that you do?

Mindy Scheier: And I think it's such a powerful statement because it embodies exactly what we are all trying to do in that, and I say this with a lot of confidence, that I don't feel that there's a designer out there, myself included, that can design products for people with disabilities without including people with disabilities in the process. It is something that is so critically important, again, which goes back to what Jeanine said that you just can't do it without without them, it's theirs. It is such a powerfully important step in the process, and to be honest, Brian, I think it should be a step in every process to include those that you are, if there is a focus or a goal to what you want to accomplish within a certain demographic, it is impossible to reach that goal without including those that are affected by it into the process. And that really is something for sure in the fashion industry and developing products for people with disabilities, but I think it really has a ripple effect outside of the industry into other industries and the simplicity of that, right? Why are we making guesses or thinking about what people would want, who will be buying this product without including people in the conversation?

Brian McComak: Oh, absolutely. Well, and we could probably both point to some of those mistakes that have been made. Some of them have been tragic mistakes where a well even a well-intended, intentional design and inspiration landed in a terrible way on the runway or in a product. And having had the opportunity and to talk with the diversity of leaders at some of those companies, of course, the leaders are mortified and they understand that they got it wrong, some leaders more than others, some people have to go on the journey. But what I've learned in each of those conversations is really the gap was, there wasn't the diversity in the room for someone to say, "Hey."

Mindy Scheier: "Hold on. "I am the end product of this and that's not good."

Brian McComak: Yes, exactly. And then the other thing that I've also seen, and this is the other part of it is, and I want to sort of lead into another question for you here, which is around they creating the culture for this. So there is the person in the room who has a point of view, who can offer something, you know, a perspective, an insight or even say, "Hey, I'm actually not the person "but I know what we need. "We need to get that person in the room." But then there's also the the decision makers listening to those people when they raise their voices, which requires education and understanding and awareness and recognition. So, as you're working with organizations, how are you taking them on that journey to develop that understanding? I think about Tommy Hilfiger, I love that they have an adaptive brand, but my guess is, I'm gonna assume for a moment, that there was also a journey of getting people on the same page of understanding how do we do take this journey?

Mindy Scheier: Yes, absolutely. It's almost a life journey. Let's take away the fashion and the brands and whatnot. Just seeing the change and how people are viewing people with disabilities and understanding that they are people first has made this even though part of the or I would say the greatest challenge was just that having to almost dispel misnomers about a population that has been grossly misunderstood, not only in who they were but the size of this population, the spending power of this population and, again, that they are people first. So, I hope that through this journey and educating and having brands and those working on the collections really identify that, "Oh my god, I didn't even think about "the notion of how difficult a button and a buttonhole "must be for those that can't use their hands, "those that have to be dressed 100% of the time, "those that are missing digits or they have limb difference "or cognitively can't understand "that a button goes through a buttonhole." And by the way, I always have to say this fact, this little tidbit, because I think it is as good as you showing me how to not have your phone ring on your computer. Second to that is this. Liz, Brian, take a guess when the button and buttonhole was developed. Take a wild guess.

Brian McComak: I'm gonna guess 100 years ago.

Mindy Scheier: Liz, wanna take a go?

Liz Roy: I was gonna go with 1850.

Mindy Scheier: Country where the first time the button and buttonhole was developed as a way to get clothing on and off the body and to keep it closed. So the fact that we can run our lives through this little gadget, and we are still using "technology", that is the button and the buttonhole developed in the 13th century.

Brian McComak: Wow.

Mindy Scheier: Bananas! It's hard to believe. So where I'm going with that is not only did I have to educate that including this population was so unbelievably important to really designing for our world in totality, but also, let's rethink how things were done. Maybe there's better ways to do it than how we've done it. And that was probably as much of a challenge as having brands and designers understanding the power of this population was kind of pushing them slightly to rethink how a garment gets on the body. Why do you have to put it over your head? Couldn't we go in arms first and have the clothes in the back? Just because it's always done one way doesn't mean that it can't be done another way. And obviously that's a powerful statement for many industries, but specific to the fashion industry who is so deep-rooted in how things are done, how they're produced, the marketing behind it, how you launch a collection, although it's fairly systematic. So slightly poking a hole, we're turning

people around to say, "Let's look at it this way, "let's think about that", was equally almost as challenging as having them even get their head around people with disabilities.

Brian McComak: Yeah. One of the other messages from the panel that you were on when we first met that I've shared with many, and I don't remember who said it on the panel, and it might have been you actually. So I might have been quoting you and not giving credit, sorry. Is if you're looking to drive innovation, ask a person with a physical disability, they've been hacking their lives since the day they were born.

Mindy Scheier: 100%, that's absolutely accurate. Everything that I have learned, and this is such an important note to what you just said. When I took up the mantle, that was based on all the research that I did, and I thought I'd nailed it. I thought I'd really, really got it until I did my first focus group with a whole slew of people with all different types of disabilities, and what I thought was absolutely brilliant. They were like, "Wrong, wrong and wrong, "it's got to be done this way." This is how I've been doing it my whole life of living in a wheelchair. So everything that I have learned has come from the population. They've been innovating, as you said, just to get through life, just as a part of their everyday normalcy.

Brian McComak: Yeah. And I added the word, I say added the word physical disability there, and I know you and I had this conversation yesterday. Of course, there are invisible and visible disabilities, physical, mental, other things that are happening in our bodies. I guess I'm sort of curious, did I add the word physical or was that was that the right add there? And how do you think about invisible disabilities?

Mindy Scheier: We just expanded. We expanded on physical, 'cause physical is only one aspect of the population just as we have cognitive, we have physical. Within both groups, there's invisible disabilities and there's very visible disabilities. And addressing one without the other would not be to the benefit of the population and really having our world understand that disability comes in many, many forms. And some, we don't even say. There's many cognitive disabilities that aren't visible and until you may be engaged with that person, you may not know that it exists in there. As well as, I mean, my son would probably fall into the invisible disability, from a physical perspective. If you saw Oliver sitting next to another 15-year-old boy, sitting, not moving, I don't think that you would necessarily think that he had a disability. I know you wouldn't think he had a disability. But until he started ambulating, you wouldn't necessarily know that something was wrong, and even further than that, you may think that he just walked differently. I don't know if you would know the complexity of what his disability is, and in some cases, I firmly believe that having an invisible disability can be even more challenging than it being very clear, no questions asked, this person is missing a limb, that person is in a wheelchair, they have a disability. It's that gray area that, and I know I'm probably getting ahead, sorry.

Brian McComak: It's okay.

Mindy Scheier: But that is one of the areas that is a definite hotbed for mental illness and struggling because you can't fit into that bucket and you don't fit into that bucket of people with, able-bodied people or people that are very clearly have a disability, visibly. You're in this bucket. And not having a place to put yourself is very, very hard on your your mental capacity.

Brian McComak: Yes, stop predicting where I'm going, Mindy.

Mindy Scheier: Sorry, sorry. I get excited, I get ahead of myself.

Brian McComak: It's okay, it's okay, I love it. I love that you know where I'm heading. Yeah, and actually, there are some images in the space of mental health that I've seen that sort of depict the things that, and of course, as you know, I'm someone who's battled depression and anxiety, and I've heard those statements when someone says, "Just shake it off, get out of bed "and get on with your day and just put on a happy face." And I've seen these images that's sort of depicted to a cartoon where there's someone who has a real physical issue and they've been hurt in a fairly significant way and like, would you say to this person, "Just shake it off."

Mindy Scheier: Right. "Yeah, get up."

Brian McComak: When you can't see that, when you can't see it though, it's hard to understand it or to process it. It's intangible, right? And that can be difficult.

Mindy Scheier: Correct. And or, if it is tangible and the person is in a wheelchair, how do we know that they weren't in a horrific accident a week ago and have a spinal cord injury and this is a whole new world to them. They didn't know disability until a week ago that changed the whole course of their life. So, like many other iterations, you don't know what what you don't know the whole story.

Brian McComak: Right. There's always more to the story. That reminds me of one of my favorite memes scorecards, I've lost the plot on the lingo, but it says, "Be kind. "Everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about."

Mindy Scheier: I love that, yeah.

Brian McComak: It's just a great message. So, early on in our conversation, you mentioned about the size and the spending power of this group of people with disabilities. And every time I've heard you say this, I still almost I'm like, it's not possible. But of course, I know that it's real. So, I'm gonna just ask everyone just to wait. Get ready for it as Mindy tells us what's the size and spending power of this population.

Mindy Scheier: Get your asses down and sit down. So, just starting with the United States, there's over 60 million people alone in the United States, and let me just clarify that those are people that acknowledge that they have a disability. Then we have a whole group of people, that for a myriad of reasons, don't want to come forward saying that they have a disability. So, by every expert out there, that is a low number, and it's one in four. One in four Americans have a disability. It used to be one in five then it just actually increased to one in four. A billion people globally. A billion people on our planet have identified as having a disability, making it the largest minority that we have, by far. And if you think about it from this perspective, within every minority, every demographic, every everything, there is nobody that can escape having a disability, whether it is something that happens, that you're born with, happens in your life, or you just are getting old, and it's a function of the aging process. Every single one of us is going to be in the group of people with disabilities at some point in our life. I mean, the fact that we are not putting that in the forefront of something that ultimately we are all going to need, nobody is escaping it, is a little mind blowing, that it has been an afterthought prior to this, and also this is a fairly common, now it's common sense because I've been so ingrained in this. But even with millennials, for example, there is a 20% increase with people with disabilities within that demographic and it's estimated that every, what do we call that, demographic? What do we call that, the millennials?

Brian McComak: The generations.

Mindy Scheier: Generation, thank you. That goes on, it's going to go up and up and up of the percentage to, there could be some day that there's more people on our planet that have disability than not. Pretty powerful.

Brian McComak: Yeah, and I've been in rooms before where I was a participant in the audience and the facilitator at the front of room asked, "Who in here either has an issue with mental health "or battles mental health issues, "or knows someone that they love, or respect, who does?" And everyone in the room raises their hand. It is part of our lives, every one of us. But it's also something that we don't talk about a lot.

Mindy Scheier: Right.

Brian McComak: So, I have more questions I can ask but I just want to make sure that I encourage the group out there. Mindy is a great expert here, so ask your questions. Let's give her some really tough ones. Let's see if we can--

Mindy Scheier: Yes, I'm up for it.

Brian McComak: If we can stump Mindy, I would love that. So feel free to jump in with questions. One question that I wanted to make sure that we got to is, and I've seen different iterations of this and I've used different iterations of this. I continue to go back to using people with disabilities, but I've seen sort of other abled or differently abled, there's a variety of the other sort of ways that we try to, as our world does. But let's make it politically correct and let's make it positive when we can. And I love that, in many ways, and I think there's some interesting realities there. You live in this space in the community and have all these conversations every day. What are the words that you suggest we use? And maybe words that you suggest we don't use? What are maybe some of the stories you've heard of like, "This doesn't resonate, "and just in case you're still using this word, "just stop."

Mindy Scheier: Yes, absolutely. Well, I'm going to start with that, because I'm like a pearl of wisdom today. I'm going to share another really unbelievable tidbit. The word handicap. I beg of you all to please try to strike it from your vernacular. It's going to be very challenging because it is what our world identifies with as people disabilities, it's on our bathrooms, it's a person in a wheelchair blah, blah, blah. But, this is how the word handicap came to be. Back in the day, people with disabilities were considered the best thing that they could do was to be a beggar, somebody that put their cap in their hand to beg for money on the street. That is how, that is the derivative and that is the story of how the word handicapped came to be because that's all the people with disabilities were good for, is being beggars on the street, putting their cap in their hand. So, it's definitely going to be a challenge to rebrand something that has been a part of our fiber, but I think we can do better. I don't think it serves us as well and it is a curse word in the world of disabilities, number one, as far as what to say, I think in many other situations like this, I think that there's never going to be a perfect word. You're always going to find people that are anti the word you use or it's polarizing, etc. For example, I always refer to Oliver as being differently abled. I find the word disabled is what the traffic reporters use to talk about a car that's causing problems on the expressway that is "disabled", "broken down" and a problem. I refuse to refer to my son as that. However, when I started speaking publicly and would use the term differently abled, I got a lot of negative feedback from the population. And, again, there's definitely people out there that feel, "Call it what it is. "It's a disability, stop sugarcoating it. "It's not differently abled, it's not able, almost able "or all the other versions of you know what it is." Now, does that mean that I can't use it for my own son? Absolutely not. But I did have to have the respect of the population to think through and learn what was the least polarizing way to speak about the population, and through education and really speaking to as many people as possible. It is without a doubt, people or persons with a disability. Identifying that they are people first before they're anything else is the path of least resistance. So, you wouldn't say a disabled person. You wouldn't say the disabled community.

You would say the community of people with disabilities, people or person with a disability, so that the disability follows the fact that they are a person first. And that's what I've been using publicly. Again, what I do in my private home or how I refer to Oliver or how I want him to think about himself is certainly everybody's personal journey. But I think from the path of least resistance, that is the best way to go.

Brian McComak: Would you suggest asking someone what term or terms they'd like you to use? Actually, and it reminds me of, I have people in my life who are, I have someone I'm thinking of right now who's a lesbian, but she's like, "I don't use that word. "That's not how I would identify." And she's more comfortable with gay, a gay woman. But actually, whenever I ask, the answer is also, "Why don't you just call me by my name? "I don't have to be in a bucket." Which I totally respect. And, of course, I've chosen in my world that I really claim my identity because I also use my identity and my stories--

Mindy Scheier: Yeah.

Brian McComak: Others. But that doesn't mean that's her journey, right? So I'm curious how you like, I'm sure you've had some of these conversations as well. Do you ask how people want to be referred to or what's important to them?

Mindy Scheier: You know, I'm going to go with my experiences, certainly anybody out there listening, if their experience has been different, absolutely. But if anything, people with disabilities don't want to be defined by their disability. So, I think that they would absolutely answer by, "Call me Mindy. "That's my name, that's who I am. "And I happen to have cerebral palsy "or something to that effect." But I think even a little bit to that point is not necessarily asking them how they want to be referred to, but it's more, don't be afraid to ask what the disability is, educate me, learn about it. What is that on your leg? Is that a prosthetic? I've never seen anything like that. Rather than staring which is a very natural human thing to do. We all stare out of curiosity, but follow up that stare with a question and educate yourself to say, "I'm curious. "That is the coolest prosthetic I've ever seen. "How does it work or were you born like that?" Generally, there's absolutely going to be people in the population that don't feel this way, but the people that I have spoken with or worked with or have involved myself in, they would much rather you ask the question, than whisper or stare or give a stare or pity. And, again, just, they're human beings that have their own story and nine times out of 10, they're not ashamed by it. They would absolutely love to tell you. And that is a guiding principle on how I raised Oliver that especially during an age that kids are curious, and if they say to him, "Why do you walk weird? Why do you not run?" It definitely took time, that was really tough for him, those questions penetrated him because in his mind, they were making fun of him. But we had to do more role-playing for him to understand that they're not making fun of him. They're actually asking the question, why do you, you know, we're a tough word, but why do you walk different, and explain it to them, educate them and move on. By not addressing it only adds to the curiosity of it. And these people that are asking their questions are not answered to these kids, and then generally, that's what can spiral. So I would focus more on asking

about them and maybe about their disability versus how they like to refer to themselves, because I would imagine they're going to say, "I'm Brian. "That's how I'd like to be referred to."

Brian McComak: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely, thank you. Well, speaking of questions and asking questions, I think Liz might have some tough ones for you, Mindy.

Liz Roy: I do, I do. This question comes from Jennifer and she asked, "What have you found to be the greatest challenge "in getting leaders to recognize "and hire people with disabilities?"

Mindy Scheier: Well, that is a great question because as Jennifer knows, I'm assuming it's my Jennifer, 80% of people with disabilities are unemployed. So, we have a definite issue there. I think it's a function of connecting, I would say with the population, to, we have to rethink a bit, again, how things have been done in the past, as the methodologies of how we are hiring people or even how people are finding out about job opportunities needs to be tweaked for people with disabilities. It just does. I actually think the silver lining of the pandemic is that people with disabilities will now have more opportunity to enter the workforce because I'm sure you guys are in the same boat that I am. I've been working all from home for the past four months plus, and I think we've been doing a pretty good job. That in and of itself to remove the barriers and challenges of people with disabilities of travel, of the inaccessibility of many major cities and or the buildings that the companies are in is a very big problem that is going to take a long time to solve. I mean, I can't even share with you how many engagements that I've had that a, their websites aren't compliant and so therefore the people with disabilities weren't even able to necessarily utilize the technology, there were many stairs in the facility, that the buildings were landmark buildings and didn't have accessible elevators or basic things like that, or there wasn't a subway station that was accessible near the building enough. These are things that will go, will preclude people with disabilities from entering the workforce. So, I think the best thing that we can do is ride this wave as educating employers and leaders that there's a whole population out there that can work in this format. This is brilliant for them. And the fact that it has been documented that people with disabilities have two times the production as an able-bodied person, because they are so grateful and so excited to have the opportunity that they will do what it takes, how long it takes, and be the best employee that they can possibly be. Let's utilize it, tap into it. Let's find the silver lining.

Brian McComak: I love that. And it reminds me in some ways of the button conversation of there's this. How do we do work, just speaking in the work context. People come to an office, and they have to sit at a desk and they have to do the work at that desk and they have to do it between the hours of nine to five, Monday through Friday.

Mindy Scheier: Unless you work on the East Coast 'cause then you're required to work till midnight.

Brian McComak: True, true. But rather than saying, let's design work that meets the needs and the possibilities of what people can do and their lives and schedules, and--

Mindy Scheier: Let's rethink. Turn around, look at the problem differently.

Brian McComak: Yeah, and I think those people who you meet where they are, to your point, they're also like, "Wow, now I'm committed to this organization "and I want to do whatever I can to help them be successful "and I need to be able to do work that I feel good about, "providing an opportunity." But if we stay in our, this is the box that we have these rules that are defined by, we exclude people from that.

Mindy Scheier: And the other kind of byproduct of that which I know from being integrated into the brands that are including people with disabilities, what that does to the culture of the company, to other employees to say, "I have never been more proud to work "for the company that I am working for "because they are hiring people with disabilities. "They are designing for people with disabilities. "They are living the notion that people come "in all different shapes, sizes and abilities." I mean that is the best thing that you could do for your company.

Brian McComak: Yeah, I love that.

Liz Roy: Awesome, thank you, Mindy, for that super insightful answer. I do have one more question for you and this comes from Marnie. Marnie asked, "How can someone apply to be a part of Gamut Management?"

Mindy Scheier: Oh, my gosh, great. Great question, Marnie, and just to--

Brian McComak: That one is not as hard though.

Mindy Scheier: Not as hard, but very important. And this is something that I definitely want to underscore that the principle of Gamut Management is that we represent people with disabilities, period. There is no, you don't have to go through hoops, you don't have to. Our belief is that everybody deserves to be represented in whatever format that means. Again, whether that's just being a part of a focus group or being in a feature film. So, the best way I'd definitely encourage everybody is to go to Gamut Management. We kind of guide you through a process of becoming a part of the Gamut. It is free, it is open to everybody out there that has a disability because, again, we believe in

the power of numbers and the best way to change the way people view people with disabilities, the way our world views people with disabilities is getting, let's reframe the public eye. Let's talk about it. Let's engage with it. Let's get people involved in developing products that are made for them. Let's get them involved in how the best way to interview somebody with a disability via Zoom or any of those things. We are here, Gamut Management is here to support you in every step of the value chain of what it takes to either develop the product, to have somebody with disabilities on set or in a production, you've got to be earned. And that's really what we want to be the support to help you, to help leaders get to that place of inclusion. Oh, and also sorry, one more plug, Marnie, I think this was probably your second question is what is The Gamut Network? And The Gamut Network is an online talk show that we started that we actually had Mr. Brian on the show, because we are really featuring, not only spotlighting people with disabilities, but those that are making a difference in the world of disabilities. And it's really been an unbelievable journey. I highly recommend people use it as a tool to really understand who these people are and the unbelievable stories of just being humans. They don't want to be viewed as superheroes or inspiration, even though they are inspiring in what they do on a daily, but they just want to be people. So definitely head to the YouTube channel and check out The Gamut Network and see Brian's interview.

Brian McComak: I love that. Yes, check out my interview. I love it. I heard our friend Jennifer Brown is going to be on The Gamut Network, is that right?

Mindy Scheier: Oh, yes, she's on. She's already up there, she's already in it. And actually, a fun Jennifer Brown, which I think is really cool for what we're talking about, is, I don't remember if it was her panel or her interview or a panel I did for her, that wouldn't it be cool also if with the movement of identifying your pronouns, if you also identified that you had to spell a name. Like, how amazing would that be for Oliver to be able to say, "He, him, muscular dystrophy." Let's just get the questions all out. Yep, this is me, I have a disability, here we go. Now that that's, let's move on. Like, I think that would be a really, really cool addition.

Brian McComak: I love that. Well, and I have been inspired by that, and it's actually not there right now, I just noticed, but I've started to, after my name in the parentheses, I've started to have my pronouns and then to mention that I'm part of the LGBTQ plus community.

Mindy Scheier: Yeah.

Brian McComak: What are these invisible aspects of my identity that I want people to know about?

Mindy Scheier: Yeah, amazing.

Brian McComak: And it is not by far, not the most interesting part of me. It is part of me, but there's other parts and so like, hey, just put it out there. And so I've been inspired by that, so I will help you on that path. So let's get everyone to share openly. I wanted to just ask, well, actually, before I go to my next question, I want to just ask Liz, I know we have a few links of Mindy's that we want to share. I'm sure we want to share the Runway of Dreams link and then we've already shared the Gamut Management drink, Management link. I'm gonna say drink, apparently it's time for a drink.

Mindy Scheier: Agreed.

Brian McComak: I love it. And then, you did a TED talk.

Mindy Scheier: I did.

Brian McComak: Tell us about the TED Talk, we're gonna share the link.

Mindy Scheier: Thank you. Actually, it was a part of the Tommy x TED event that Tommy Hilfiger did as a company, a global challenge actually. You had to submit your, how you would kind of, wait, what was the actual, kind of they gave you a couple words to lean into of what you would do, what is your message to the world and how would you change it or be inspired to do that? So, it was an amazing experience that whittled down from North America, Asia and Australia to get to a small group, and fortunately, I was really lucky to have been a part of the finalists in Amsterdam and won, which was beyond my wildest dreams is to be a part of the TED culture is like nothing else I've ever experienced and it was really a gift of a lifetime because it allowed me to share my story in a much more personal and conversational way. Oh, the courage too. That was what the leading was, and then you had to fill in the blank. And my kind of tagline was I had the courage to look up. Look up from my own life and what was happening with Oliver and whatnot and share what I think would help millions and millions and billions of people out there by just looking up from your own life. So, it was a really life changing experience.

Brian McComak: Awesome, I love it. Well, I hope you all enjoyed the talk, it's fantastic. And then we've already mentioned The Gamut Network on YouTube, where you can see stories and in the concept of representation matters. That's really the spirit, I believe, of Mindy's series of these are stories that people and it provides them an opportunity to be seen. And that is a version of representation that is of really importance to hear people's stories and to give them the opportunity to share their story. So, thank you for doing that.

Mindy Scheier: My pleasure.

Brian McComak: So, I know I have two more questions in my mind, so unless there's some other tough questions from the audience, well, I should check with Liz. Is there another question?

Liz Roy: Nope, I don't see anything in the chat.

Brian McComak: Okay, well--

Liz Roy: Hopefully we'll get one more bristle to give us a tough question.

Brian McComak: I love it, I love it. Well, Mindy, beyond Tommy, are there other companies or organizations you admire for how they're demonstrating their commitment to people with disabilities, either in employment or in how they're represented them in their products or their marketing or, you know. Who do you admire in that space?

Mindy Scheier: I would absolutely have to say, Zappos, Target and Kohl's. Zappos because they started the Zappos Adaptive platform, based off of www.zappos.com, but, really their story is so authentic in that they created the platform of Zappos Adaptive based on the fact that they could not service a customer, a grandmother who was looking for sneakers for her son, her grandson that had autism and she couldn't find any sneakers that had Velcro that were appropriate for him. And they really, Zappos really, took that to heart and felt that how could they be the best company that they could be without being able to serve every customer. And not only did they do that, they did not do it in a silo, they formed a board, of which I have the honor of being on, of leaders in the community of people with disabilities and educated themselves, learned about it. Again, to avoid making mistakes, to say, "Should we call it?" It was first going to be Zappos Special Needs or something and I definitely added my experience and expertise in the fact that that is a polarizing word. It is absolutely. Let's not go into something that many people don't like, some people like. Go with something that is, we are creating, that is a category. It is a category in the industry and that's adaptive, no different than plus size. So, it's just avoiding pitfalls by, again, bringing in experts or the population or people that live and breathe this. I think they're doing an unbelievable job. I highly encourage people to check out Zappos Adaptive.

Brian McComak: Yeah. And you mentioned Target, which is one I still love. I saw the story of, there's an image that was above one of their clothing racks, of a, I think it was a little boy in a wheelchair.

Mindy Scheier: Yep.

Brian McComak: And the mom, with her son in a wheelchair, just looking up, and what it must have felt like for that young person to see someone who looked like them on a sign in Target.

Mindy Scheier: Well, Brian, you can find out what it felt like on The Gamut Network because Colton, who is the little boy who was in the advertisement, is a part of The Gamut, he is one of our talent. And it is really unbelievable to hear what that meant for him being able to be a role model for Oliver, who was the little boy in the wheelchair, looking up at Colton and saying, "He looks just like me. "I fit here. "They understand that I am a little boy too." It was really powerful and really beautiful.

Brian McComak: I love that. And I knew that and I had forgotten, so I promise everyone listening, that wasn't a setup, that was intentional. I completely forgot but I didn't know that Colton was on The Gamut Network. So, definitely I love that. I'll definitely check out that story. Liz, did I see one other questions pop in?

Liz Roy: Actually two more came in and now we're short on time. So real quick, Robin asked, "What is the best way "for people without disabilities to advocate for "and be an ally to the disability community?"

Mindy Scheier: Great question. Really, really great question. First, let's keep the conversation going. And I think that is always the start of every important mission. That's how I started, by just conversing about the challenges and finding a solution for them. But, I would say to be a real ally is to value them as people and to not be afraid to ask a question out of curiosity, to speak to them as human beings, as no different from from anyone else. And that's just an interesting part because I believe that one of the reasons why it took so long to have mainstream adaptive clothing is based on fear of doing the wrong thing, designing the wrong thing, marketing the wrong thing. So it was much easier to just not do it. So, let's really work. If we're going to be allies, let's dispel the fear. Let's do our best to get rid of all those notions of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. Let's just treat them as human beings, and go from there.

Liz Roy: Fabulous. Thank you, Mindy. And, the final question, "How does the BLM movement work into this? "Do you find that people of color "add an additional disadvantage in this space? "And if so, what is being done to amplify their voices "and address their needs?"

Mindy Scheier: Thank you for that question because this is actually something that Brian and I were talking at length about yesterday. And I think the BLM movement needs to be a movement with the simplicity of that message. Will that absolutely trickle out to the population of people with disabilities in terms of those that we have that are black? Absolutely. And I believe that then we'll have our time

to have the spotlight and the stage to talk about how even more challenging it is to have a disability, be a person of color, potentially be somebody that's a part of the LBGQT plus, did I get them all?

Brian McComak: Oh, LGBTQ plus.

Mindy Scheier: Thank you. This obviously adds on the challenges. But I think if we continue to stick to the all Black Lives Matter, whether you have a disability, whether you don't have disability, whether, who knows all the other iterations of it, I think that's our path to least resistance.

Brian McComak: I love that. Thank you, Mindy. I have one more question for you but before we go there, just I realized some people may have to jump off since it's four o'clock. So I just want to remind everyone that we are coming together every Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. EST. And next week, joining us is Dr. Maya Bugg who's the founder of The Bugg Consulting Group. She also is the CEO of Tennessee Charter Schools. So, really fascinating person and someone that you won't want to miss. So hopefully you'll be able to join us next week and share with others, tell your friends and bring people with you. So, before we wrap up, though, Mindy, sort of going back to the goal of this series, which is about being human and just sort of going centering back in that place, what gives you hope today? There's a lot happening in our world. There's a lot of people struggling, a lot of challenge. What gives you hope?

Mindy Scheier: I would say what gives me hope is that in a relatively short amount of time, from 2016 to today, the fact that I can name five to six mainstream brands that are not only putting money, resources, and energy towards the population of people with disabilities and including them and understanding that they are consumers too is not the hope, it's the assurance that change is currently happening. It's not on its way, it's happening. As well as from the other side of the spectrum, the generations coming up that they are so socially conscious and the design students that I've had the joy of working with, this is so on their radar that I have no doubt that this won't be a conversation other than hopefully in the history books of, "When did adaptive clothing start and how did it happen?" That's what I want the conversation to talk about because I don't think that there'll be anything else left to talk about because adaptive and people with disabilities will just be a part of our mainstream fiber.

Brian McComak: Absolutely.

Mindy Scheier: And that was pun intended.

Brian McComak: I love the puns that just sneak their way in. I love it, I love it. Well, Mindy, thank you so much for being here. It was such--

Mindy Scheier: Thank you for having me. Thank you, Liz. Thank you, Brian. I always love, there's never enough time, we could talk forever.

Brian McComak: We could talk forever, absolutely. So, how do people reach you if they're looking, is it LinkedIn or what is the best way to connect with you?

Mindy Scheier: You can connect with me on all social platforms, either through Runway of Dreams or Gamut Management, certainly on LinkedIn. Please link with me or certainly you can email me at mindy@runwayofdreams.org or mindy@gamutmanagement.com.

Brian McComak: Actually, I'm clear on that, just a little bit ago, I'm like, I have to email Mindy, and one is a .org, one is a .com, and it makes sense because it's a nonprofit profit and a for-profit.

Mindy Scheier: From the opposite way but still good.

Brian McComak: Hey, you know what? Let's break the mold. Well, thank you again. Everyone, thank you for joining us today, I'm so glad you could be with us. I wish you all a happy Wednesday. Stay safe and be well. Bye, everyone.

Mindy Scheier: Thank you.