

Explorable | Season One, Episode Three: Transcript of interview with Rosemarie Rossetti

JOSH: Hey everybody and welcome to the Explorable podcast. We couldn't be more thrilled to be talking today not only about universal design to find out what it is and why it matters but how it connects to travel. Today we're joined on the Explorablel podcast with, of course, with my co-host Toby. Toby, How are you doing?

TOBY: All right Josh. Hi Rosemarie.

ROSEMARIE: Oh hi. How are you two doing? Well? Good to see you again as always.

JOSH: Hey! Yes, doing great. Today on the show we've got Rosemarie Rossetti. Rosemarie is a powerful internationally known speaker trainer consultant author and publisher focusing on universal design. Some of you might not know what that means but we're going to dive in a little bit more about what that is and why it matters. She's the author of universal design toolkit that provides resources solutions and guidance for making homes accessible.

She built a national demonstration Home and Garden in Columbus Ohio and built the universal design living laboratory. This is the highest rated universal design home in North America. That is impressive.

It earned the universal design national certifications and her articles about designing homes have appeared in Ultimate Home Design 50 plus magazine and magazine special living magazine Columbus monthly and ability magazine. Her presentations and continuing education classes for professionals and consumers helped people integrate universal design accessible design and green building features.

Rosemarie is paralyzed from the waist down with a spinal cord injury and and Rosemarie I'm going to start out with a couple of questions really that kind of connect back to travel and because we're in these covert times. First welcome to the show. But before we dive into deeper

conversations about universal design tell us where was the last place you traveled before the pandemic and where you're headed next.

ROSEMARIE: Well professionally the last place I traveled by plane as a professional speaker was in Kalamazoo Michigan. I was speaking on February 18th to the meeting professionals international Michigan chapter and my topic to them was how to accommodate people with disabilities at meetings and events. And it was very well-received I flew home and that was my last trip as a professional speaker. I had I think five presentations that were either canceled or were made virtual for the month of May.

So I was really looking forward to a lot of work. In May of this year that did not happen in person but virtually some of were totally successful even more so than they would have been with a larger attendance. Had they been in person and and where you're headed to next. I'm excited I just received word after a long wait that the meeting professionals International in north Florida are actually holding their in-person meeting on September 4th and they've invited me to speak and it's again on accommodating people with disabilities at meetings and events.

But now it's being expanded to also the virtual meetings and events. So I get to talk to them about what they need to be doing that they aren't doing in terms of servicing those who have vision problems and hearing problems. That is something that everybody needs to focus on now for sure. It's not just that physical space but the virtual space as well.

TOBY: That's a good point in the COVID world this is such a relevant topic and I'm looking forward to working with Rosemarie to make her travel ability summit the first virtual full virtual event this November more inclusive.

And on that note can we back up a little bit maybe. Rosemarie we heard Josh's introduction about your professional qualifications and I know a little bit from working with you through Expedia group and your relationship with our verbal brand.

But curious if you could just walk us through your background a little bit more and tell us how you got here and if you feel comfortable sharing a little bit more about your disability and your experience with disability.

ROSEMARIE: Yes. Professionally I'm educated at the Ohio State University I have a bachelor's degree a master's degree and a P H D my Bachelor's was a dual major with agricultural education and horticulture all my graduate work was an agricultural education I taught horticulture at a career college for three years at the high school level and I've also been on the faculty at Ohio State University for 11 years full time when I was there on the faculty I taught public speaking classes marketing classes as well as teaching methodology classes.

I left the university in 1997 to start my business Rossetti enterprises. I was doing the trainer programs and presentation skills training throughout North America. Life was grand. I had left the university. Everything was fine a year and a half later I was celebrating my third wedding anniversary with my husband Mark. We went for a bicycle ride on a beautiful Saturday. This was June the 13th of 1998 the day that changed my life forever. While we were riding my husband heard what he thought was a gunshot but it wasn't a gunshot at all. It was the sound of a large tree that was halfway to the ground and in an instant I was crushed by a 7000 pound tree and paralyzed from the waist down.

So that's the turning point in terms of I was not trained in the design of homes. I had no knowledge of universal design or accessible design and suddenly I came home from my hospital in the summer of 98 in a wheelchair. And what a rude awakening to realize the home that we had built when we were first married is now intensifying my disability.

JOSH: You know, I think that's something that both regardless of whether somebody has an injury and is immediately facing disability and in certain challenges when it comes to mobility or those potentially who have always had a disability there's questions about where to turn when it comes to accessibility. And of course there's a lot of opportunities and guidance out there but you were one of the first to really kind of based on your disability think about universal design but not only personally but professionally.

I'd love for you Rosemarie to tell us how you define universal design and then a follow up question. How does that connect back to travel and tourism?

ROSEMARIE: Well if I could give a quote from what is the definition of universal design. The term was coined by Ron Mace, an architect who had polio and used a wheelchair and he assembled a group of fellow design professionals to create the idea of universal design in the mid 1980s.

Now historically the Americans With Disabilities Act was not signed until 1990 so universal design came before and it really is more than a D.A. it is looking at the definition as the design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation or specialized design. What's important about that.

It has nothing to do with people with disabilities as an exclusive definition. It's usable by all people. People who have no disabilities, people who are seated who are standard who are vision impaired who are fully able to see people who are 6 4 or 4 1 people who are 3 years old versus one hundred and three years old. So it's about designing the environment as well as the products that are used like your cell phone.

I mean there's a great example of wonderful universal design features in cell phone design. So it's a framework, it's a thought process. It's inclusive design. It is not equal to a D.A.. I want to make sure people understand that. And then from it just as a follow up from a travel and tourism perspective you know we of course know so many different venues whether it's on a cruise ship to an airplane to of course homes when it comes to short term home rentals can in some way shape or form be more accessible and potentially bring in universal design.

JOSH: What are your thoughts for people in travel and tourism if they have questions about universal design. Of course you have a toolkit. Well what do you say to them as tips to help kind of bring them down that path of understanding?

ROSEMARIE: Well every aspect of travel and tourism needs to have universal design is the mindset to be inclusive and to think in terms of can everyone use this equally. So it's about the spaces it's about the products.

There is a lot of features in all areas of tourism as we embark upon a cruise ship. Can we get on that cruise ship as we go down the hallways of the cruise ship. What's the carpeting like,

what are the worst of those hallways as we approach the door to our suite. Many times there's a lip there in order to get into the suite. Well that doesn't work out so well.

The shower design in any hotel to what extent there's even a small lip doesn't matter if it's only two inches it's an impediment for someone in a wheelchair. So we're looking at a lot of avenues of travel and tourism in terms of airport design in terms of airplane design. In terms of taxi design and transportation for public use as well as the restaurant accessibility.

TOBY: Hey Rosemarie I know you and I have talked about this a lot and Josh understands deeply many of our listeners who live with disabilities or some sort of accessibility need or limitation whether they identify with the disability community or not. We understand that this is the right thing to do. It's simply our social responsibility as citizens and businesses to include everyone. But sometimes that's not enough to sell people on the idea that they need to lean in and learn and actually execute on this stuff. So can we compel people with a business case for inclusive design or universal design.

ROSEMARIE: There's a huge business case everyone wants to be selling products or services and making profit. So let's take a look at the population of people with disabilities. The Center for Disease Control just came out this year with their estimate there are 61 million adults in the United States that live with a disability. That's 26 percent of the population. Do you realize this is the largest minority in the United States and as people grow they will grow older and acquire a disability if they live long enough.

The data also shows that there are thirteen point seven percent with mobility disabilities in terms of serious difficulty walking or climbing the stairs. That impacts the design of public spaces as well as rentals as well as residential. And then we have the cognitive disabilities ten point eight percent difficulty concentrating or remembering or making decisions.

The hearing impaired five point nine percent with deafness or serious difficulty hearing. And then you're very familiar as vision impaired. That's four point six percent of the population and I always like to point out that these are U.S. numbers but this rings true around the globe. And for those of us who travel internationally and to work in the travel industry on a global scale.

For those listeners we want to point out that there's about one point three billion worldwide people with disabilities estimated by the World Health Organization. And it's estimated that we're spending 95 billion a year on travel. So these are very significant and real business opportunities. Yeah that's definitely.

TOBY: Those numbers are so impactful and for whatever reason those numbers somehow don't come across the desk of a lot of people oftentimes in travel and tourism. But it's great to hear them shout it out here whether it's in the U.S. or internationally. There are a lot of people with disabilities that want to travel and have dollars to spend. So I just want to go back and kind of reiterate the question about where we start when it comes to universal design.

And of course Rosemarie you know your journey started when you became disabled and when you went to your house and saw that there were impediments or challenges whether it was the carpet or or width of hallways or any other challenge and you were able to overcome those and you have this amazing tool kit.

I want to make sure that we can reinforce where people can go whether it's connecting with you or in some other capacity to really start to understand the value of universal design whether it's a corporation or whether it's you know somebody as an individual that has a home that wants to put it on their short term rental market. What would be the one of the first things that they need to understand and do when it comes to universal design.

ROSEMARIE: Well it's depending if it's a remodel or if it's a new bill or if it's just something they need to do as a home modification. So there's various degrees of modifying the home with some universal design especially for safety. As we look at tripping hazards and we look at how we can put in more grab bars in the bathroom area and we look at changing the entrance to the home so that it is step three.

So there's some simple things that can be done with hiring a subcontractor, a carpenter or plumber to help you put in some of these safety features to prevent falls. But then on a larger scale if you're looking at remodeling or building a new you need to hire the right design professionals the architects the engineers the interior designers who were trained in our experience in creating

homes that are livable for a lifetime with these inclusive design features and then getting input from people with disabilities to review those plans.

If you're building a new hotel you should have a committee that's helping you to look at the mock up of these rooms to be on those planning committees and see what your plans include for the entrance for the reception area for registration for the swimming pool for the locker room for the restaurant for the shower the entire facility needs to be looked at as a whole unit.

JOSH: I think that's great. Just that he has it as a quick follow up you know explore bill as a podcast. I've shared this before.... But Explorable as a podcast isn't just about that far flung destination. But right now in code we're tight taking a lot of staycation. And what are the ways that we can make sure whether it's the home that we live in or that place that we want to recreate so far away once the pandemic goes away. That it is accessible and that there is some type of universal design thinking.

TOBY: One of the things I've learned from Rosemarie I think is really compelling is is like no cost things that homeowners can do to make their vacation rentals more accessible and then things that we can do ourselves as Handy people if we are like putting lever locks on a set of doorknobs. You know these are really low cost things that we can do to you know make the home more accessible. Do you have any low cost or no cost things Rosemarie like that you want to throw out there to people that they can do right away.

ROSEMARIE: A really simple one if you go to your local hardware store and ask for a swing away hinge to replace the door hinges on your existing doors. You can put those on and get from two to five more inches out of that door which would make it accessible on the exterior doors as well as interior doors. That means the difference between using that other bedroom or getting into that bathroom with a walker or scooter or a wheelchair.

So that's a real simple fix for maybe 20 to 50 dollars of an investment.

TOBY: Right. A few minutes and a screwdriver and most homeowners can switch those changes out. And you mentioned that two to five inch the gain that those swing away hinges might get one and that made me think that information sharing is half the battle if if you know Rosemarie as a traveler how wide that door is then you can make a better travel decision.

ROSEMARIE: So a free or no cost thing that people can do is just take better pictures of the property right and share what those measurements are. Well I stay in hotels quite a bit and when I make the reservation I always tell them I'm in a manual wheelchair I want a wheelchair accessible room with a rolling shower. So those are my parameters with that.

I talked to them about the door clearances and told them that they need a hand shower they need some type of bench in that shower and it should not have a curb. It should be curveballs. So those are my requirements. Sometimes I'm going online to make that reservation. So it's pretty clear to me when I'm going online they've described that room in great detail and I'll make that reservation.

I always arrive early though because things happen and I go into the room that they had assigned me to and I go "What were you thinking here?" I remember one in Florida I had a luggage handler following me into the room and he opened the door and the bed was right there at the entrance. I could not even get into the room because the door would not open due to the bed being there. And I looked at him and I said "Are you sure we have the right room?"

This is your wheelchair accessible room is that right. And he said "I think I better call at the front desk and see what happened. Do you find that people are maybe reluctant to get started down the universal design road because there's fear. You know we've talked about cost but there's fear that it's ugly or it maybe makes a room or a property less appealing to other people. You mentioned the bench in the shower and that made me think about it. That's you know you can go on. I can't take it too. The website now but yeah I'm sure Amazon even has these like fancy sort of you know beautiful mahogany or whatever kind of bench that you can put in the shower and that makes me think that there are beautiful ways to to build universal design. That was our intent here at the Universal Design living laboratory.

That's my home here in Columbus Ohio. Anyone that wants to see it. We have a virtual tour and a video tour and you can go look at our showers. You can look at our kitchen and I hope that you come away saying this was a beautiful luxury contemporary home that I wasn't aware of or had all these universal design features. So those products are out there and we have a lot of discussion in selecting the products to make sure that it does not look institutional.

TOBY: We've talked about some free and low cost and some more durable ways that homeowners and tour operators and hoteliers can make their property more accessible. So tell us how if folks are inspired to start this journey how they can get in touch with you and learn more about the work that you're doing and leverage your experience and resources that you have available.

ROSEMARIE: Well it's easy just hop on my Website which is the four initials for the universal design living laboratory. So it's just UDI dot com. So just hop on our Website. I have over 100 articles, most of them I've written our most recent one was in Forbes on the anniversary of the FDA. They featured our home. I'm also featured in Architectural Digest.

So you can reach me by any method if you prefer a phone if you prefer email or linked in. My other Web site is Rosemarie speaks dot com which is my speaking and consulting business. So I actually am going to have a bonus for anyone who would like a free chapter of the Universal Design toolkit. Just go to you d I I dot com and you can download the free chapter and use that as a guide when you take the tour because it's a list of the universal design features in our home room by room so it's fun to use that as you're going through on your own to see each of these features. Now I have a little game you can play if you'd like to. As you're taking the virtual tour look for the little orange tabby cat. Her name is Kiko, our photo bomber. During this photography shoot of over 700 photos so you'll see our cat in many of the rooms kind of in the background.

JOSH: Kiko that's awesome. And I strongly encourage all of our listeners to take advantage of Rosemarie's offer. She's wonderful to work with. She's brilliant and so open and honest and sharing so reach out learn lean in and learn and start designing with everyone in mind. Rosemarie I hope

people start to connect with you sooner than later and find out everything that universal design has to be able to positively impact disability travel and how to make everything more Explorable.

ROSEMARIE: Thanks so much.