

Transcript

Chapters4Change Podcast Episode 1: Access in Education

Speakers in order of appearance: Colette, Janice Desroches, & Michelle Cousins

Colette: [00:00:00] I felt really alone because the fact that everyone, even the ME kids are outside safe, I'm stuck in a stairwell.

Janice: [00:00:12] Welcome to Chapters4Change, where each episode we will share the storytelling of individuals whose stories may often go unheard. We all have stories to tell, but whose stories are we taking the time to truly listen to? I'm Janice Desroches.

Michelle: [00:00:30] The funny thing is, there's another wheelchair user in her school. Same thing. He would be in the same boat. So? So we need to. We need to figure it out.

Janice: [00:00:40] Episode 1: Access in Education with Michelle and Colette. This episode will share the storytelling of Michelle Cousins and her 14-year-old daughter, Colette, as they discuss Colette's access issues within her high school in Toronto, Ontario. Every school day since the start of the new school year, Michelle has been sitting in her van, parked close to the school to ensure she is available to assist Colette when needed.

Michelle: [00:01:09] The accessibility issues directly to toileting and navigating the school and co-ordinating the EA's. That's been the biggest piece, but there's been a lot of other things that have emerged that really were shocking for for me for 2022 and then just really spoke to how she's dismissed, you know or persons with disabilities are dismissed.

Janice: [00:01:32] I had the pleasure of meeting Michelle and Colette virtually on Sunday, November 6th, 2022, where they openly shared about some of the access challenges Colette is facing at her high school. Here's Michelle.

Michelle: [00:01:46] Very early on, I was told that I would receive the fire safety plan and I would need to sign off on it. And I get this document and I read it and it's I think it's called the fire evacuation plan. And ironically, she's not evacuated. And I and I look at it and I find out that the plan is, depending on the time of day and what floor of the school she's in on, essentially depends on what stairwell she would be left in, but that she would be left alone. They were planning on leaving her alone. And I had to sort of. So the Vice Principal, I go into his office, I say, yeah, I'm really not okay with this, I said. And I explained. I said, Number one, Colette has an anxiety disorder, but secondarily, a lot, it's not uncommon for kids, as has been explained to me by medical professionals, it's not uncommon for children in wheelchairs to develop anxiety disorders, the logic being, which I'm sure a lot of us can follow, is that persons in wheelchairs often feel more vulnerable to threats because they can't respond to a threat to their personal safety in much the same way a typical or able-bodied person could. Right? They can't necessarily run away, that they can't necessarily defend themselves in the same way, so they feel more vulnerable. So it was really shocking to me that they would leave her alone in the stairwell.

Michelle: [00:03:04] So I immediately said, no, this is not okay. And he said, well, I said and I said, why is she not evacuated? The words verbatim were well, was because she does not walk. And I thought, well, that is the wrong, in my head I went "wrong answer". And I said, well, what about all the other children that have special needs in the school, the ones with multiple exceptionalities, etc.? I said, what about them? Oh, yeah, the EAs evacuate them. I said, okay, but because Colette can't walk, nobody evacuates her, Correct? I said, what about all the other students in the school? They're evacuated. I said, okay, so Colette is not evacuated because she cannot walk? Yes. I said, okay, you need to go back to your people, and you need to fix this because this is not okay in my books. And the suggestion he immediately made was that, well, we can have a teacher wait with her. I'm like, okay, that's a little bit more humane. I'm like, Okay. She's not alone. But still, I'm like, we're missing the piece here of evacuating my child. So I let them go back to, I think to their health and safety people and I went and I called Toronto Fire and I said, yay, you know, let me know, walk me through this. And he's like, oh, we don't get involved in fire evacuation plans.

Michelle: [00:04:22] He goes, school boards hire consultants, typically, and they come up with a template. And I explained what happened. I explained how their plan was to

leave her alone. And he said, well. He said, now he goes you know the stairwells and modern buildings are fire rated and they would last X number of hours. She'd be perfectly safe. I said, Uh huh. He says, but as a father, he says, I think that's absolutely terrible. And I said, Thank you. I said, It's not humane. Correct? He goes, you know, they could evacuate her if they wanted to. It's just they choose not to. He's like, there's lots of businesses that evacuate people in buildings. He's like, they just have to buy special things like a special chair or like they've installed slides. He goes, businesses do it all the time. I said, okay, thank you. You just told me that it's the school board's choice not to evacuate. Nobody's telling the school board not to evacuate. It's the school board's choice not to evacuate her. So I went back and they said, oh, we will have a teacher with her. I said, yeah. I said, do you understand that you're choosing to not evacuate her? It's not like it's a policy choice on behalf of your board. That screams to me that you are not, like it just screams to me that you are saying that my daughter's life is worth less than somebody else's.

Michelle: [00:05:37] That's ultimately when the, you know, when the rubber hits the road and it all gets digested, that is the the way it feels. And this caused a little bit of upset. He goes, well, we'd have to go back to health and safety. I said, you know, I'd love to talk to the guy in health and safety if I can, because I really want to understand where this comes from. And maybe he needs to hear it from from a parent. And at that point in time, an a, they were supposed to broker a meeting for me to speak to this person, and they never did. So they absolutely just said, sorry mom, and just ignored me. From that point forward, two weeks went by and I emailed my trustee and I said, look, I said, this is not okay. And I even went so far to say, you know, this is the Catholic Board. I said, you know, I don't know about you, I said, but in the eighties, I remember a saying, WWJD, "what ould Jesus do?" And I said, you know, the Jesus I've always learned about would not leave a child by themselves in a stairwell in the middle of a fire. So I'm not sure about the Jesus you guys all learned about, I said, he seemed like a pretty good guy, even somebody who wasn't who was secular and non-Christian.

Michelle: [00:06:43] You could probably go, yeah, he probably wouldn't leave the kid alone. So. So this started a thing and I've never heard back. I had to press them for an update. I was told that they were having all these sorts of meetings. What it boils down to, it seems, is they can't have an EA from the main floor come upstairs because you don't want them double backing into a fire. But the collective agreement prohibits a

teacher from lifting a child. And how can we not put a caveat or an addendum on that collective agreement that says, okay, yeah, you don't lift a kid, but in the event of a life-threatening emergency, you are allowed to help out. And it's amazing to me that we've created a structure where basically a teacher would not assist another person in the event of a fire. They did explain to me that, like they said, the teacher could wait with her. But they also made a point of saying in the event that the teacher felt that their life was in danger, the teacher could leave her there, so that somebody could leave her, abandoned her to perish in a fire, and it would be okay because that was keeping with the policy. Your policy is actually making my daughter a second-class citizen.

Janice: [00:07:52] After much internal struggle, Michelle signed the fire evacuation plan. On the Tuesday following our first meeting, I was shocked to learn the fire alarms had sounded throughout Colette's school and, following the plan, Colette was taken to the stairwell with her teacher, both unsure whether this was a drill. It was not.

Colette: [00:08:13] I was basically doing my work in class and the alarm rang and I honestly thought it was a drill. But then I noticed my teacher had like a look on her face. So usually, I don't bring my phone when drills happen, but this time I did. And some teachers were asking my teacher, what's going on if it was a drill or not, and none of them knew. So I called my mom on Facetime and she talked to me during this um this whole fire, and I was really scared.

Janice: [00:08:46] Collette shared some of the emotions she experienced as she waited in the stairwell.

Colette: [00:08:52] I felt really alone because the fact that everyone, even the ME kids are outside safe, I'm stuck in a stairwell.

Janice: [00:09:01] Michelle shared how she tried to calm Colette's nerves during the situation.

Michelle: [00:09:06] And so to say to her, everything's fine, the fire trucks are here. But, you know, like. And I even walked out because I was in my van. So I walked to the front of the building and I saw the fire trucks and then said, look, see, there's fire trucks. They're calm. Don't worry. They're getting back. They're driving away. But, you know,

like I'm trying to provide her with facts. Right. And I'm trying to remind her to find her breath and take some deep breaths. But sometimes if you have an anxiety disorder, you just you just go and it's really challenging. Even though I try to remind her of her strategies and techniques, it's it's really challenging. So that on top of the fact that, you know, it's just probably terrible to leave her even with the teacher, but when you have an anxiety disorder, it just makes the suffering, if you will, that much worse.

Janice: [00:09:49] Although everything turned out okay, Michelle is determined more than ever to continue advocating for change within the school system, not only for Colette, but for other students as well facing access barriers.

Michelle: [00:10:04] I would expect a system wide rollout. This isn't just about my daughter. It's also about you changing the mindset of how you treat people with disabilities. And that's fundamentally what it comes down to, is changing the mindset of of of how you listen to them. You know, I like I said, I felt like from that day of the assessment, we were dismissed and not even asked. You know, and in health care, there's a movement towards being more people centered, client centered. And and that was a failing that that transpired in June with the OT where and then they sort of dug their heels in and weren't listening to the person, weren't listening to the client. And and it took me really pushing back because they were unwilling to accept what she was capable of and never really properly did the assessment. That's what it took because nobody was listening. And that should not be happening after after so many weeks. People should be listening a lot more. And that's that's fundamentally what it is.

Janice: [00:11:09] These things really need to be taken into consideration when they're building new schools so that we don't have to backtrack.

Michelle: [00:11:16] Absolutely. You know, one of the challenges we had when she was going into grade school, she went into a fairly brand-new grade school. The great when they build accessible bathrooms, they're pretty much one size fits all. You put a little girl who's six into that bathroom, she can't reach the grab bars, she can't reach the toilet paper because all of those are almost at adult dimensions. The sink was too high, everything. So they had to turn around and modify and spend ultimately \$50,000 in modifications to make it child sized. I sat there and said, hang on a second, you have two accessible bathrooms on this floor. Why didn't you just make one of them child

sized? Wouldn't have that, you know, honestly, even when it came to the buttons, the door openers, it was a circle button, and there's a range. The way the building code is, there's a height range that they can install it at. They chose, whoever it was in their genius at a grade school, and decided to install the button at the highest level, so Colette could not touch the button. Why would you have done that in a grade school? Whoever was doing the installation, whoever did the schematics, did not think that this was a school. Now, if you were an adult in a wheelchair, and if it was low, you could reach it and you could reach it if it was high.

Michelle: [00:12:36] But if it was a child, they couldn't reach the high one. So wouldn't it of, wouldn't it have made more logical sense to install it low? Now, what they ended up modifying was now there's these long almost rectangles that go from the floor to up and those it's not a single button anymore, it's almost like a rectangle, so anybody of any height can push the button. But it's just like there are solutions. You have to be forward thinking. You need to plan. The building code does not make allowances for the for the end users of the building so they don't go, oh, it's a great school. They don't! They don't look at who the end users are. And part of the reason, as I understand it, the reason they would never take one of those two bathrooms and make one child sized is because that does deviate from the building code and they don't get funds from the provincial government to offset the construction if they deviate. So it's ultimately about money. But then I'm making you, through a complaint, making you change it so you're out of the money anyways, right? So I agree with you that there needs to be a lot more proactive design elements to ensure accessibility.

Michelle: [00:13:46] And again, those recommendations made by the AODA around education for K to 12 actually has a lot of great ideas. They say, you know, you can't just have one elevator, you need two elevators because and it's happened. The elevator broke. Well, Colette doesn't go to school that day or that week, you know? So there's so many vulnerabilities built into the way things are currently constructive. Things could be better. You need people who are problem solver, innovators, to be honest. Technology exists, ideas are aplenty. So I agree with you. I know that sometimes architects, for example, my sister-in-law is an architect, incidentally, and she does build schools and she does, there are people she brings in. Actually, I think it was a city building, not in Toronto, but she had somebody who I guess had a consulting firm. They were a wheelchair user and she had them go through it very early on. But I would say you need

to have a child in a wheelchair, go through it before you complete construction. You need somebody who's visually impaired, maybe a child with visual impairment, whatever it is, whatever that to multiple exceptionality or multiple disabilities. They they might want to encourage members of their community, specifically children that are being serviced by them, by them to come in and do a walkthrough to really drive home how accessible things are.

Michelle: [00:15:07] I mean, the number of inaccessible bathrooms that are accessible in public spaces is astounding. Even something as simple as the button again is overlooked. At her school, the button is behind the door, so you have to actually hit the button and then go backwards in the wheelchair or step back to go in. They don't realize it probably should have been about three or four feet further out from the door so that somebody doesn't, so somebody has a clear path of travel that's unencumbered. But to ask certain people, depending on the nature of their disability, to go backwards in their chair might be very challenging. So it's something it seems so simple, but something is a couple of feet really makes a huge difference for somebody with a disability. And again, it's a it's able-bodied people making design decisions for people with disabilities. Yeah. You know, life for all of us is challenging as it is. And I think that there's some simple ways that we can make profound changes and make life easier for people, and that's fundamentally it. So yeah, I'm very vocal about this stuff as you gather. But I'm happy to because I really want to enrich the people, the lives of people who unfortunately don't always have a voice, don't always have a platform.

Janice: [00:16:26] Michelle has received some reassurance that Colette's story is being heard and considered.

Michelle: [00:16:32] Now, it was really something. So I had people who would say, you know, it's not like me to contact someone I don't know on social media or whatever it is. So I had that. But I actually went through the comments on the CTV article. There were over 1500 comments and a lot of them were also from educators, a lot of them from for EAs. A lot of them were from families. So people who didn't necessarily reach out to me, but people who had also were sharing their experiences in the educational space about challenges and hurdles that they were encountering. So there was actually, that is one of the one of the useful things about having gone public and having the media cover it is again, it raises awareness and it again, it's not just me. There are dozens and dozens

and dozens and dozens of people, and those are just the people willing to chime in. So I know that this this is a common experience and I just hope people keep talking about it, especially like right now with the labor dispute that's going on, there's opportunities for change. There really are.

Janice: [00:17:38] With educators, EAs and families banding together, transformative change is a possibility.

Michelle: [00:17:46] So yeah, it's a shame and I think like a lot of change, it has to be forced, unfortunately, for equity to be realized. I mean, how many laws have we, court cases and law changes fundamentally to get people's rights recognized? That's ultimately what it's going to come down to. I know I'm not letting this one go.

Janice: [00:18:09] On Thursday, November 17th, 2022, Michelle sent a letter to her MPP and cc'd the Minister of Education and Premier. Like Michelle, Chapters4Change isn't letting this one go either. Like several other parents who have joined Michelle in sending letters, Chapters4Change co-founder Jennifer Shelswell and I will be sending letters to our MPPs, cc'ing the Minister of Education and Premier. Now we call on you, our dear listeners, to fight for transformative change within Ontario schools. We call on you to draft and send your own letters. Visit www.chapters4change.com for an example letter and more information about this initiative. Together we can make change a reality.

Episode 2: Equity in Special Education will share the storytelling of Dr. Gillian Parekh.

Dr. Gillian Parekh: [00:19:19] It was the, it was this overt and persistent stigma that they faced that was tied to being pulled out of class, was tied to the location of the resource room to using equipment with the special education stickers all over it.

Janice: [00:19:36] Finally, a very special thank you to both Michelle and Colette for sharing their stories with us.

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