

## Shifting the Culture in Fashion: Creating Adaptive Clothing for People with Disabilities - Part 1

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- MINDY SCHEIER: 00:08 [music] I am just so happy that my son is going to grow up in a very different culture and society than there was even 10 years ago, even 5 years ago. That he will be considered part of our mainstream world is something I am just thrilled and incredibly grateful for.
- ANNOUNCER: 00:36 Fashion Meets Accessibility is a Kessler Foundation podcast that takes you into the fashion industry. We'll discuss inclusion, accessibility, and adaptive clothing for people with disabilities. In this podcast series, we'll chat with fashion designers, models, everyday people, and caregivers who are making a fashion revolution come to life. The industry predicts that adaptable fashion will earn up to \$400 billion by 2026. In this first part of a two-part series, Shifting the Culture in Fashion: Creating Adaptive Clothing for People with Disabilities, we met up with Mindy Scheier, the Founder and CEO of Runway of Dreams. Mindy works with mainstream brands, like Tommy Hilfiger and Zappos, to make adaptive modifications to their existing clothing lines for people with disabilities. Her journey began when her son Oliver, who has a rare form of muscular dystrophy, wanted to wear jeans to school but couldn't manage the buttons or the zippers. Mindy realized that millions of people also struggle to access fashionable clothing that met their needs. She envisioned a world where clothing was available with modifications that would make them accessible for people with disabilities. After spending 20 years in the fashion industry, Mindy decided to combine her experience and her passion to address the unmet need by founding the Runway of Dreams Foundation. Listen in as Nicky Miller, our Social Media Specialist, interviews Mindy about the start of her journey into the world of adaptive fashion.
- NICKY MILLER: 02:17 Welcome, Mindy, and thanks for joining us today. You know, you and I met a few months ago, in January--
- SCHEIER: 02:23 Yes.
- MILLER: 02:23 --at our Employee Communications Meeting, where you were a guest. And I was completely blown away by your beautiful, colorful rainbow shoes.
- SCHEIER: 02:31 Thank you, as was I.
- MILLER: 02:32 Jodi told me I had to bring that up today [laughter] because she loves your shoes.
- SCHEIER: 02:37 Thank you. Thank you, Jodi. I do as well.
- MILLER: 02:40 But I was not only blown away by your shoes, I was blown away by your inspiring story and how you're able to help people with disabilities and create inclusion in the fashion industry. So I just wanted to say welcome again and to--
- SCHEIER: 02:53 Thank you.
- MILLER: 02:54 --give you the opportunity to talk about yourself and to share your story.

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SCHEIER: 02:59

Fantastic. Well, first of all, it's an honor to be here. And I'm so excited to have this platform to be able to communicate with the population so that everybody knows that we are working fast and furiously with the fashion industry to make sure that people with disabilities are included in the fashion conversation because they're people, too, and we have to wear clothes. It's not an option. So why shouldn't everybody be able to wear what they want to wear? So I am a fashion designer by trade. I was that little girl that dreamed of being a fashion designer and really had very high expectations of being a global brand. I like to say that I have it all in terms of that I got married; I had kids; I had an exciting career in the fashion industry. And then, as life would have it, my path changed. My middle child was born with a rare form of muscular dystrophy called rigid spine. And we learned early on that he really was going to struggle with everyday tasks, one of which was the very thing that I loved more than anything, and that was getting dressed every day and thinking about what I was going to wear and how I was going to show up to the world. And that very task or action was something that was so difficult for Oliver in terms of being able to manage buttons or zippers or putting shoes on or fitting pants over his leg braces. Every aspect, really, of the dressing process was a challenge. And then on top of that, to see his brother and sister be able to do it within 30 seconds, and he couldn't manage it at all, was just a daily reminder of how he couldn't do what everybody else so easily could do.

SCHEIER: 05:01

So my husband and I-- our kind of solve of the problem, when he was of school age, was for him to wear sweatpants every day because we needed to make sure that he'd be able to go the bathroom on his own, that he'd be able to safely wear his leg braces under his pants, and feel like a typical boy. And to be honest, I didn't think very much of it. It felt very normal, so to speak, to have him wear sweatpants every day. But when he was eight years old in first grade, he came home from school and said, "Mom, I want to wear jeans tomorrow. I'm so sick and tired of wearing sweatpants every single day of my life. I see that other people in my class get to wear jeans. I want to wear jeans." And it was truly such an aha, kick-in-the-stomach moment that here I was in the fashion industry, obsessed with my clothing and what I wear every day, and I forgot the most important part of what clothing can do for people, and that is give them identity, give them self-esteem, confidence, and show the world who they are as people. And I needed my eight-year-old to remind me of that. So I looked at that little face, and I had a choice. I could say to him, "I'm so sorry. This is not an option for you," or I could have looked at him and said, "You bet. You're wearing jeans tomorrow, so you better go to sleep because it's going to be a huge day." [laughter]

SCHEIER: 06:40

I opted for the latter, and he went to bed. I sat at my kitchen table and admittedly cried for probably the first hour about how I missed this, and started just ripping apart a pair of his jeans and replacing it with peel-and-stick Velcro because it's really all I had access to at 2 o'clock in the morning and didn't have time to kind of redo his whole pant. So when he woke up the next morning and I showed him what I like to call my arts-and-crafts project, because it's really about as good as it was, he beamed. He immediately transformed. And it was something that was so overwhelming to witness in that, number one, it was the first time he was ever able to dress himself in anything that had buttons or zippers in it, and it was the first time he went into school wearing anything other than sweatpants. So it was a very transformative moment for

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both he and I. And what that did was kind of resonate so strongly with me that if he was so profoundly affected by this at eight years old, how in the world did the almost one billion people on our planet that we're experiencing this at very different stages of their life with very different disabilities-- how were they managing this? How were they dressing for an interview? How were they going to the first day of school? How were they having first dates and not having clothing options?

SCHEIER: 08:13

Because, first of all, I was new. I was a new parent to having a child with a disability. I didn't even think about how clothing affects. So this was such a huge moment in my life, and certainly his, and this was back in 2013. And it truly was the defining moment that I decided to take my background of being a designer, have a small goal of changing the fashion industry to be inclusive of people with disabilities. Because upon my searching of Google of clothing for people with disabilities, the only thing that showed up was, first of all, clothing for the elderly and nothing for kids and certainly nothing I would have dressed my son in because it wasn't fashionable. It was very medicinal. And so I decided to start Runway of Dreams and go on a journey of really figuring out how to modify mainstream clothing to be wearable for people with disabilities.

MILLER: 09:17

Tell me a little bit about Runway of Dreams and what it's able to do for people with disabilities.

SCHEIER: 09:23

So Runway of Dreams was really started, again, with the notion of figuring out ways to modify clothing - existing clothing, mainstream clothing - to make it more wearable for people with disabilities. And kind of the interesting part of the inception of it was that I only knew my world with Oliver. I did not know what somebody that was in a wheelchair full-time needed or somebody with a limb difference or autism or Down syndrome. Were there commonalities between all these different disabilities and clothing challenges? So I actually did research for the first year. That's all I did. I went to schools and hospitals and facilities and did focus groups and surveys and really tried to understand what the challenges were and were there commonalities, to the point that I could gather it all together and figure out ways that modifications could help the masses.

SCHEIER: 10:21

Fortunately, I was able to really understand that there were commonalities and translate that into modifications that could be embedded into mainstream clothing. And that was, in the inception of Runway of Dreams, really our first objective, to not only educate the industry on the size of this population, the spending power of this population, the fact that people with disabilities are consumers, too, and really need to have clothing options also, but the fact that modifications could be made to clothing to make it easier for people with disabilities to wear. Now, was it going to be perfect for every disability out there? No. But would it make it easier for people with disabilities to get dressed? Absolutely. And that was really kind of the main objective in the beginning of the journey of Runway of Dreams, which has now evolved, five years later, and we are really now focusing on more specific programming in that, first and foremost, we believe that everybody deserves to have new adaptive clothing.

SCHEIER: 11:41

So we do a wardrobe grant program for facilities or even individuals or families that cannot afford new adaptive clothing. We provide wardrobe grants for them to be able to purchase it, as well as we do scholarship programs for design students that are

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using their education to specifically design for people with disabilities so that they can further their education truly, and as well as just continuing our path of raising awareness within the industry about the power of this population. And it's very exciting to know that in a super short amount of time, being that we really didn't start working until 2014, the fact that we partnered with Tommy Hilfiger in 2016 to work together to create the first ever mainstream adaptive clothing line. We now work with Zappos for Zappos Adaptive and Target on their adaptive line, Kohl's on their adaptive line. Nike also is in the game. There's some very exciting brands that are emerging in 2020 that I'll come back and talk to you about in future podcasts.

- MILLER: 13:00 Oh, yeah. [laughter]
- SCHEIER: 13:01 But it's happening. And one of the reasons why I was so excited to be able to do this podcast for you is that it's so important for the population--
- MILLER: 13:12 Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.
- SCHEIER: 13:13 --to know that this product exists, that it's happening. And we are really working hard to make sure that every brand understands that they need to have adaptive options for people with disabilities.
- MILLER: 13:26 Mindy, you make it seem like it's so easy, right? Can you tell us a little bit about-- because I heard your story about how you started your collaboration with Tommy. Can you tell us a little bit about that night, how that process came about?
- SCHEIER: 13:40 Absolutely. And I appreciate-- thank you. I say it all with a smile on my face, but it was and still is a true roller-coaster of ups and downs and really navigating an industry that is really very set in their ways.
- MILLER: 14:00 Oh, very structured.
- SCHEIER: 14:00 And the fact that up until 2016 when we launched with Tommy, no mainstream brand had ever done anything adaptive or even knew what adaptive products were is almost mind-blowing, that it took this long for the industry to embrace that. But as I shared when I had the honor of speaking here, it took two months of prep work for the meeting, my initial meeting with the CEO of Tommy and his team. And I had to sit down with my family and explain to my husband and the kids that I am going on sabbatical of being a mother and that he has got to take the reins because I have to prepare for this meeting. It's going to be the most important meeting of my life.
- MILLER: 14:51 Of course. [laughter]
- SCHEIER: 14:51 And so please make sure that the kids are fed and go to school and that he can handle everything, and I'll check back in in two months. [laughter] So the meeting happened, actually, in May of 2015, and I actually bought two pieces of every item in the collection of the Tommy Hilfiger brand. One piece I kept as it was, and the other I modified with the developments that I made over the year of research to tweak the product to make it easier for people with disabilities to wear, for example, putting magnets behind the buttons so that the notion of putting a button through a buttonhole-- which, by the way, was developed in the 13th century, which is one of my favorite statistics because it's absurdity that we are still using technology from the 13th century. And I was dressed head to toe in Tommy. And I start the meeting, and I

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think it's going really well. And we're about five to seven minutes into the meeting, and the CEO, Gary Sheinbaum, slams his hands on the table and says, "I cannot believe no other brand has ever done this before. We're in."

SCHEIER: 16:06

And I could not believe what I was hearing. As I said, I already sweat through my clothes. I was shaking under the table. And I looked at him, and I said, "I really don't even know how to respond to that. I am overwhelmed with gratitude." I said, "But I haven't seen my family in two months. [laughter] I really haven't even eaten in two months, preparing for this meeting. So we're going to go to the end, and then you're going to tell me that we're in." [laughter] So we are really honored and thrilled to say that our relationship and partnership has grown so much. And the Tommy Adaptive collection, which is available on Tommy.com, is really viewed as just another division in the Tommy Hilfiger portfolio, is considered very much part of their mainstream line. And people with disabilities are absolutely part of their consumer base and something that, as a brand, they take very seriously and are really doing everything to be inclusive. And it's remarkable to be able to have been part of that.

MILLER: 17:28

How does that make you feel to see that you're a part of this and see the runways with people in wheelchairs and all these different-- how do you feel about that?

SCHEIER: 17:37

I struggle with finding the words to really adequately describe how I feel because it's two sentiments. Number one, I wasn't stopping until this happened. So in my mind, it was always happening. It had never been done before, so what did I have to lose? And I was going to keep pushing and pushing and pushing. So the fact that it is a reality is so exciting, but on the same side of the coin, it should have always been. So I feel so grateful to be present and a part of this evolution that's happening in the industry and, I believe, our world, that people with disabilities are really being included in conversations that they were never included in before. And really, on a more personal note, I am just so happy that my son is going to grow up in a very different culture and society than there was even 10 years ago, even 5 years ago. That he will be considered part of our mainstream world is something I am just thrilled and incredibly grateful for. [music]

ANNOUNCER: 19:04

Be sure and listen to part two of this series as Mindy talks about the business end of the world of adaptive fashion. This podcast was recorded on March 2020 and was edited and produced by Joan Banks-Smith, Creative Producer for Kessler Foundation. For more information about Kessler Foundation, go to [kesslerfoundation.org](https://kesslerfoundation.org). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts.