

## Shifting the Culture in Fashion: Creating Adaptive Clothing for People with Disabilities - Part 2

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MINDY SCHEIER: 00:07 The notion of developing products for people with disabilities has got to include people with disabilities in the process.

ANNOUNCER: 00:15 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 second episode of Shifting the Culture in Fashion: Creating Adaptive Clothing for People with Disabilities, Nicky Miller, our social media specialist, interviews Mindy about the business end of the world of adaptive fashion.

NICKY MILLER: 01:01 Can you tell us how easy it is for companies to make adjustments to make adaptive clothing accessible? What do you say to companies who are like, "Well, it's expensive. I can't do it. That's not our demographic." How easy is it?

SCHEIER: 01:15 Well, one of the kind of phrases that I always like to say in any meetings is that inclusion isn't an initiative. It's a business strategy. It's a new revenue stream. And when you kind of break it down to, especially when I'm working with companies about understanding how to adapt their products, it's kind of re-calibrating how they feel in terms of including people with disabilities. That this isn't something that should be considered a charitable initiative. It should be considered a new revenue stream, including a new part of our population and the largest minority that we have on our planet, and it should be something that they look at as a business opportunity. And once I start to position it like that, it's kind of understood in a different way. That, yes, it is the right thing to do. It is social good, which is very important in the business world right now. But on top of that, it's a business opportunity. So it is - I wouldn't use the word - easy to adapt, but more of that it is-- it's possible. And that it doesn't mean that you have to start from scratch. It means that you take what already exists and modify it to make it easier for people with disabilities. And I think once brands and industries understand that they don't have to recreate the wheel, it's much more manageable for them to kind of get their heads around. And the fact that-- the fact that I can name five mainstream brands that are already invested in this population makes future conversations much easier.

MILLER: 03:14 Mindy you're no longer designing anymore? Are you just consulting?

SCHEIER: 03:18 The way that I wanted to structure Runway of Dreams, and actually, I didn't even think I got to mention this when I spoke here, is that I started a second company actually called Gamut Management. That is a for-profit that we have clients from all over the world with all different types of disabilities. We are the only company that solely represents people with disabilities from a talent perspective. And I use the word talent because we believe that everybody has a talent, whether that is being a part of a focus group or filling out a survey or fit testing product, all the way up to

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being on a runway or in the entertainment industry. And we are just solely representing people with disabilities. So now when brands come to us, we are connecting the population to brands and saying, "You want to learn how to start to understand this population? Fantastic. I'm going to bring the population in, and you're going to meet," I'm using quotation marks with my fingers, "and understand who people with disabilities are because they buy your side, and with Gamut helping you and our expertise are going to help you understand this population, how to create products for this population, how to market to this population, how to have people with disabilities in your commercials and your movies, and re-branding who are people with disabilities are in the public eye."

MILLER: 04:55 That's really brilliant.

SCHEIER: 04:58 It's very, very exciting.

MILLER: 04:58 It's so brilliant. Yeah.

SCHEIER: 05:00 So if anybody listening wants to be a part of Gamut management, it's very easy. The only thing we require is that you have to have a disability. So [gamutmanagement.com](http://gamutmanagement.com). Check it out. We would love to have you.

MILLER: 05:12 What goes into the process when your patterns and textures? I was just talking to my colleague the other day who is a multiple sclerosis warrior, and she was telling me she has to stay away from certain patterns because it's disturbing to her eyes. What goes into the process?

SCHEIER: 05:29 Well, it's a very interesting process because the avenue that we went down is to have product for the masses versus more custom product. So, for example, your colleague, products that would be very specific to MS would be different necessarily from muscular dystrophy, who wouldn't necessarily have pattern issues or vision impairments, etc. So putting that kind of process to the side, we try and focus on what are the highest levels of the challenges for vastly different disabilities and kind of approach it from that perspective. So even between the two disabilities I just mentioned, MS and MD, muscular dystrophy, commonalities between those are very much fine and gross motor skills. Having either hypotonia or hypertonia. So the actual process of putting clothing on the body and doing closures is really challenging from a dexterity perspective which, of course, then relates to the aging population. Relates to the cognitive population who have to have the cognitive wherewithal to know that a button goes through a buttonhole. So I just mentioned very different disabilities that have one commonality right there and that's closures. So being able to find different ways to have the product close on the body is something that just helped many, many, many people with very different disabilities. So from the perspective that we like to take as opposed to other brands or smaller designers that are focusing a little bit more specifically on individual disabilities, we try to look at it from a higher perspective to see what are really the top three challenges across different disabilities as it relates to clothing.

MILLER: 07:41 What has your feedback been this far? Positive feedback? Negative feedback? Share your thoughts.

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SCHEIER: 07:46

I think it's probably the greatest part of my job or in the creation of Runway of Dreams is that we-- there is not a day that goes by that we don't get emails or LinkedIn messages or Facebook messages with either how grateful they are or ideas that they have or feedback on the product. And this is why I always say I feel so lucky to have had Oliver for every reason in the book, but also because he exposed us to a world that we knew nothing about. And for a population that is so vocal and so loyal and so interested in supporting each other is exactly what the feedback has been in that we are all in this together. And that is something that why I named Gamut gamut is because we are all a part of the gamut. That notion of that it runs the gamut. Well, our world didn't include necessarily people with disabilities into the gamut so to speak. So it is something that I love the most about the feedback and the ideas and the hacks that people with disabilities have come up with to help their lives in their individual lives, they're bringing to us, and we're able to translate that in a mainstream way is really, really exciting.

MILLER: 09:30

What has the feedback been from Oliver? How does he feel about this and your family?

SCHEIER: 09:34

It's been phenomenal for the whole family, actually. I have a daughter, who's 17, and another son, who's 10, and to be able to even specifically show my daughter that women can do it all and be moms and entrepreneurs and run businesses and take a problem and turn it into something that ultimately hopefully helps the world is a wonderful experience that I get to share with her. Oliver, I would say the most profound effect that this has had on him is that he no longer feels alone, in that, his version of muscular dystrophy is extremely rare. He's 1 of 70 cases in the world. So the likelihood of him even meeting anybody else in his life that has rigid spine muscular dystrophy is probably not going to happen. And the fact that he has been so exposed to other rare diseases or other people that were born with deformities or missing limbs or cognitive issues makes him feel a part of something, way, way, way bigger than him, which has been amazing. And even with my younger son, he's growing up in a world that he knows no different. It is very typical and normal for him to be exposed to people with disabilities and has no fears about it. If he sees somebody that can't communicate or their communication is even grunting or through a computer it is-- it means nothing to-- this is very typical in our life. And I love that. I feel like it's been a gift to our whole family. My husband also. And I'm incredibly grateful for him because he is-- as I mentioned, holds down the fort.

MILLER: 11:47

How do you feel now that your son is able to wear clothes he can relate to and present to the world? Present himself to the world?

SCHEIER: 11:54

It's something that I-- I think the best way to answer that question is, it has become his normal now in that he doesn't even necessarily think that, "Oh, I'm wearing adaptive clothes. It's just clothes." And I know that we will get to that place in general where our world doesn't necessarily view this as clothes for people with disabilities. I think that eventually, it's just going to be another category in the fashion industry for different shaped bodies. And the reality is, who wouldn't want to use a shirt that has magnetic closures over having to button your shirt? I think this will eventually bleed

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out that everybody's just going to wear clothes that have different types of closures or different ways to get in and out of them. In that, it's just going to be integrated into our mainstream vernacular. No different than the fact that you are wearing very cool glasses right now. Well, glasses - as are you. Purple frames. I love it - started out as a medical device that was only worn by people who had sight impairments. Now, it's a billion-dollar accessory business that people that don't even necessarily need glasses, wear glasses because they look cool, and they're fashionable and they're stylish. I really feel that it's going to be the same methodology with our product.

MILLER: 13:30 That was my next question. Accessories. Are you going to be doing anything with accessories?

SCHEIER: 13:35 I think that this-- yeah. The answer is yes, and especially footwear is the next category that is going to be tackled. It is without a doubt the most common e-mail I get asking when footwear is coming. Because footwear really is very far-reaching in that it can affect different disabilities differently. Whether the foot itself is different sizes and/or if you wear braces or orthotics or prosthetics very much affects the shoes that you can wear. And it is something that it will be the next evolution of our adaptive mission.

MILLER: 14:19 When I met you in January, you mentioned becoming the next Betsey Johnson would have to wait. Are there any regrets by the choices you've made going in a different direction with your career?

SCHEIER: 14:29 That's a great question. And thank you for asking that because actually nobody else ever has. I think one of the kind of life moments that I certainly don't regret, and if anything, I feel so lucky that I had the ability to make a difference and make these modifications possible and have connections in the fashion industry to make this a mainstream notion is almost unbelievable that with my background, I was able to make a difference makes me feel that I am the Betsey Johnson of adaptive.

MILLER: 15:12 That's the way I feel. I look at you like that.

SCHEIER: 15:15 Thank you. So I feel that if anything I-- it worked out even better and bigger and more exciting than I could have ever imagined, and I feel grateful.

MILLER: 15:28 Are there any other success stories that you want to share with us today?

SCHEIER: 15:32 I think the greatest success stories that I can share are when I get to be a part of an experience of seeing somebody who has dressed themselves for the first time in their life and they're 20-years-old. Or one of my most favorite stories, we did a show - a runway show - in Vegas with Zappos Adaptive, and I had-- one of our models had a-- she wore a prosthetic. And I believe she was probably in her early 20s living in Vegas. We all know the temperature of Vegas. And after she walked down the runway, she shared with me that this was the first time she's ever publicly shown her prosthetic in her life. That she always wears long sleeves, no matter what the temperature is because she didn't have the confidence or feel that she was embarrassed and upset that she had this prosthetic, and that she could not believe the freedom that she felt being able to show the world and felt proud. And even as a ripple effect of that. And it

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was also the first time she ever even met anybody else that had a-- had a prosthetic or a missing limb and she felt a part of something and felt comfortable in her own body for the first time in her life is the greatest success I could ever imagine. That I got to be a part of her story and witness that is so magnificent that I feel honored.

MILLER: 17:15

When you are creating or collaborating, consulting, who do you think about? Models? Actors? Nurses? Who do you think about when you're designing?

SCHEIER: 17:24

I think about the population, in general, in totality. But this is very much a process of for the people, by the people. There really isn't a designer on the planet, myself included, that can design for people with disabilities without including people with disabilities in the process and caregivers and PTs, OTs, medical staff, because it really does take a village. There will never be a standard size 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 in the world of disability. Even within the realm of muscular dystrophy, there's 40 different versions of muscular dystrophy that affect the body completely different. So just even thinking about that and then expanding it to all the different disabilities out there the standardization is not going to be possible. So we had to bring kind of everybody into this and say, "All right. Let's work together and figure out how we can make some standardization of changes that are going to make life easier." And that's really what I think about each and every step of the process.

MILLER: 18:37

What's next for Mindy? What should we look out for? What's coming up?

SCHEIER: 18:41

I would say what's next is really the adventure that we're taking with Gamut Management. It has really put us into a position that we are re-branding the way people with disabilities are viewed, are marketed to, are designed for. And I really feel that this is going to be kind of our platform in changing the world and making it a truly inclusive place for people with disabilities. And from a business perspective, that people with disabilities have always been pigeonholed into charity and that it always has to be a fundraiser to help people with disabilities. And we are really working hard to say, "Yes, we did start out as a non-profit because that's the avenue that we had to take to make the fashion industry take a chance on us. But now that the market has been established, we can now spin off a for-profit that supports Runway of Dreams and change the world at the same time.

MILLER: 19:54

What do you say to someone following your example? What advice would you give?

SCHEIER: 19:58

I think the best advice that I could give is always focus on your goal, in terms of-- again, when I first started Runway of Dreams in 2013, I was very much a for-profit. I didn't know anything about a non-profit. I was a businesswoman. I worked in the fashion industry my whole career. The only thing I knew how to do was to raise money for muscular dystrophy. So when I first started seeding the ideas to any contacts I had in the industry, I was constantly met with the notion of, "Love the idea. We can't really take a financial risk on something that hasn't been proven, so good luck. Keep us posted and kind of let us know how it goes." And when you get many of those type of responses, you have to take a step back. And anything that anybody is building or starting and saying, "Okay. That path isn't working. So what is my goal?" My goal was to change the fashion industry to be inclusive of people with disabilities.



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How was I going to reach that if brands and companies were not willing to take a risk, a financial risk, on something that had never been done before?"

SCHEIER: 21:17

So the best way that I could think about doing that was to take the financial risk off the table. Become a non-profit, so that if I was absolutely dead wrong they, A, felt good about what they did, B, got a tax deduction, and C, I felt strongly that, even though it was something that I needed help to even figure out how to do, I knew that the market was going to reveal itself. I knew that people with disabilities would show up when product would start to be created for them. So that's kind of a long-winded answer, but my advice is focus on the goal. If the path that you're taking isn't working, figure out another path. And if you don't even know how to necessarily do that path, go to people that do. Figure out ways that you can understand and learn and use mentors. And I got myself educated on what a 501(c)(3) was. What did it mean? How do I do it? I actually think I spoke to Elaine way back, in the beginning, to pick her brain about being a non-profit. Any advice she had. And don't be shy to ask for help. I think that entrepreneurs, in general, maybe are hesitant to ask for help. But that is the greatest thing that you could do in pursuing your dreams is knowing that there's people out there that are smarter, more educated, in the arenas that maybe you're not in. So take advantage of them. And I did and that's how Runway of Dreams foundation was created.

MILLER: 23:05

What do you say to any moms out there who find themselves in a similar situation as yours? You're a working mom. You're a mother of a child with a disability.

SCHEIER: 23:13

I would say this, and I do hope that it helps other moms out there, in that, I have to reiterate that I was, I guess, lucky in the fact that prior to Oliver coming into our life we had no experience with disability. We didn't have anybody in our circle, our family circles, that had a disability. So this was all new to us. Muscular dystrophy, to me, was the Jerry Lewis charity event that happened-- telethon every year. That was the extent that I knew about muscular dystrophy. So it's a very-- being a parent is hard enough. And then being a parent of a child with a disability goes to a place that I didn't even know existed. And I think that you have to give yourself a break in that there's just no rule books or guides on how best to do this. And this is something that I learned over the years, and Oliver's 15 now, and I'm still making mistakes in that we'll have-- I'll give a perfect scenario. Is the last trip that we took, I had us doing-- we had one stop in our flight pattern. And as always, the flight came in late. And so, therefore, we had to really hustle to get to the next one. And I didn't even-- which is so upsetting to me to even say this now. I didn't even think about how in the world was I doing that with Oliver.

SCHEIER: 24:59

He can't run. He can't run through an airport. What in the world was I thinking? And so, of course, there were no wheelchairs available. The cars that go through were not available. So my husband had to throw him on his back and off through the airport we ran. But I did, of course, beat myself up over that. And then I took a step back and breathed and said "Okay. I made a mistake. I won't do it again. I'm very clear that decisions have to be made based on what's going to be best for Oliver, and everybody else in family is just going to have to come along with that. And that non-stops are really the only way that we're going to have to travel, unless it's a big layover, or-- all

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right. Lesson learned. Won't happen again." But it's that notion of giving yourself a break. And when you have other kids that don't have a disability, you try to do what's best for the family and maybe even your finances. Probably I took that flight because the one stop was more affordable than the non-stop, but I didn't think of the ramifications that it would have had on Oliver. Lesson learned won't happen again.

- MILLER: 26:23      You live, you learn. You make mistakes, and it's okay to make a mistake.
- SCHEIER: 26:27      It's okay. And many more will come, I'm sure.
- MILLER: 26:31      Absolutely. Let's talk about fashion week.
- SCHEIER: 26:34      Yay!
- MILLER: 26:34      Anything happening? Any projects going on?
- SCHEIER: 26:37      Yes. Lots happening. And I'm excited to say, and I hope it's okay, that we do want to do more fashion discussions--
- MILLER: 26:46      Absolutely. We're up for it.
- SCHEIER: 26:45      --with this podcast. Because I think it's really important for the population listening to find out what's happening, what are the trends, who is doing adaptive products, etc. So our signature event for Runway of Dreams happens during New York Fashion Week in September, and we are definitely going to have our biggest event that we've ever had. It's happening on September 14th right in the middle of Fashion Week. We are going to have the most models that we have ever had. Last year, we had 40. We'll see if we can even beat that this year. And all of our models are all different disabilities, all different ages, all different races. We really tried to have a true spectrum of what disability looks like. And we have great brands supporting us with their adaptive products, from Target to Tommy to Kohl's to hopefully there's going to be some new brands on the runway. But what I love is now that this will be our fourth show during Fashion Week, we are considered part of the calendar. We are considered part of true Fashion Week. And that is a huge, huge, exciting voice that we are sharing now with the industry, and they're taking it seriously, and we're considered a part of the conversation and we are finally playing in the big leagues now. There's no bigger thing that happens in the fashion industry than New York Fashion Week. So it's going to be a really exciting event.
- MILLER: 28:33      That sounds awesome. Do we get tickets to your show?
- SCHEIER: 28:35      Why not? We will let you-- absolutely give you all the details.
- MILLER: 28:40      Oh, yeah. We can't wait to hear about it. That sounds awesome. What do you envision for the future when it comes to adaptive clothing and the fashion industry?
- SCHEIER: 28:49      My vision really is with the strong hopes that every brand, every designer, has adapted versions of their products. It should be considered the same way that even every building now is mandated to have handicapped bathrooms or cuts in the sidewalks for wheelchair users. I think this should be viewed no differently that a percentage of product has to be made adaptive for people with disabilities. And I also

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hope that we get to the point that we don't necessarily need to talk about it anymore because it just is. And it is no different than plus size or petite. It's just a different fit in the industry.

- MILLER: 29:36 I was on your web site. For anyone that's listening in, go check out [runwayofdreams.org](http://runwayofdreams.org). I was watching a video, and one of the young men in your video, he said he won Best Dressed at school. And that moment really stuck with me because people didn't see him in a wheelchair anymore. They saw him. They saw a bit of his personality.
- SCHEIER: 29:58 Absolutely. That was Garrison--
- MILLER: 29:59 How does that make you feel?
- SCHEIER: 30:00 --and he is every bit of how he was on that video. It's just a beautiful example that Garrison does very much care about how he looks. And he is always dressed to the nines and has a very clear style. And he actually had a spinal cord injury. So I believe that happened around 16-years-old. So he had a life before the accident and very much a life after. And the constant that was important for him was how he looked and how he dressed. And that he is very much going through his life, not letting the wheelchair be a hindrance to who he is as a person. And I think that is something that we can all learn from and something that we absolutely want to highlight and underscore in everything that we do at Runway of Dreams. [music]
- MILLER: 31:02 Thank you, Mindy.
- SCHEIER: 31:03 Thank you.
- MILLER: 31:04 That was awesome.
- SCHEIER: 31:04 That was fun.
- ANNOUNCER: 31:07 This is Joan Banks-Smith, the show's engineer. Stay tuned for a bonus question I got to ask Mindy. 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](http://kesslerfoundation.org). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Soundcloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. One of the questions I've wondered about was models. Where do you get your models from? Whether you put out in social media? Do you just stop people on the street? You have to have somebody to test this clothing out on.
- SCHEIER: 31:52 Absolutely. I would say getting models-- and certainly, one of the reasons why we created Gamut Management has been one of the - I don't want to say - easiest, but the most exciting part of what we do because it's an opportunity that people with disabilities just simply never had before in terms of a place where their voice could be heard. So whether that is putting out casting calls on social media, or I have been known to chase down people on the street and ask them if they would like to be a part of focus groups or whatnot. Certainly, the community at Kessler I welcome to be a part of this because, again, the notion of developing products for people with



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disabilities has got to include people with disabilities in the process. So we welcome anybody with any disabilities to contact us, to connect with us, and we will do our best to get your voice heard, or get you on runways, or get you in commercials, speaking engagements, whatever the talent is. Again, why we call it a talent because talent really is a very far-reaching word.