

Shaholly Ayers, a top model with a disability who had been leading the fashion runway

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SHAHOLLY AYERS: 00:05 Know your worth. I've seen where companies will say, "We're not going to pay you because we're doing you a favor."

NICKY MILLER: 00:14 Today, we're talking with Shaholly Ayers, a top model with a disability who had been leading the fashion runway. Ayers has been featured in Nordstrom, the Today Show, ABC News, and Glamour and People Magazine. Today we're chatting with her about disability and inclusion in the fashion industry. Welcome, Shaholly. Thanks for joining us.

AYERS: 00:36 Hi, Nikki. Thank you so much for having me.

MILLER: 00:38 To paint a picture for everyone who's listening in, can you share a little about your disability?

AYERS: 00:44 I'm a congenital amputee. I was born missing my right arm, right below the elbow. That's essentially [laughter] my disability.

MILLER: 00:53 Shaholly, what inspired you to be a model? Everyone always says how tough the industry is. What made you want to be a part of that world?

AYERS: 01:02 When I was younger, I wanted to be a model. So when I was a kid, it was something I wanted to do. I was kind of a ham and liked to be in front of the camera. And then as I got older, I was kind of a tomboy, and I didn't really pursue it until I moved to Hawaii when I was in college. And I pursued it, and I was told by a modeling agency that there was no way I would ever be able to be a model. So that really became the inspiration for my-- I guess, my drive to want to model because I had been told I couldn't do things in the past. And I really wanted to change that perception of disability and make it a conversation like we're having now about why we value beauty, why we value certain things. And so that became my real motivation at that point.

MILLER: 01:59 Did you have any inspirations, any models who were an inspiration?

AYERS: 02:03 I'm sure I did. I mean, Tyra Banks was a big deal back then. I think I really liked her. There was also Adriana Lima and other supermodels that I liked, but there were no models with disabilities at all 10, 15 years ago when I tried this. So it was definitely a new territory for me.

MILLER: 02:23 Well, I'm hoping you will be someone's inspiration in the future. You're definitely ours, seeing the amazing work that you're doing.

AYERS: 02:30 Oh, thank you.

MILLER: 02:31 How have you paved the way for yourself in an industry that isn't always welcoming to people with disabilities?

AYERS: 02:37 It was definitely very difficult. When I tried, like I said, 10 to 15 years ago, this was a time when there wasn't really a push for inclusion. So I went to modeling agencies and was told, "No, you're never going to do this." And in order for me to do it, I had to kind of create my own path. So I had to work with photographers and makeup artists

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and produce my own photo shoots. I would even work with-- I would call up local magazines and tell them I wanted to model for them and I'd do it for free. And I'd call up boutiques and say, "I'll model this for you for free. I'll give you free advertisement," and then I'd put together these photo shoots so that I could get what is called a tearsheet so that I could get an ad, essentially, and show "Hey, I did this job." So I did that for 10 years without getting paid. And I put a lot into that career because at that time, there was nobody assisting or helping with that. So it is a very challenging industry. I think since then, we do have different agencies-- there are different inclusive agencies with inclusive departments. There are some agencies that are catered to people with disabilities and talent with disabilities. So a lot has changed in that time, though I do still think it's somewhat challenging because it is a challenging industry.

- MILLER: 04:08 How long have you been in the business? And could you tell us about the ups and downs of choosing a career in this industry?
- AYERS: 04:14 So I've been in it for about 15 years. I really started to get my foot in the door the last, maybe, six years of my career. But the ups and downs, I mean, there's so much rejection within this world. So if this is something that you're interested in pursuing, it's something you have to have a thicker skin because they're looking for specific people, certain ages, so it can be challenging.
- MILLER: 04:43 You talk about rejection. What was that like?
- AYERS: 04:45 When I was rejected, initially for me at first, it was very jarring being told you could never do something. But after a while, I realized, "Hold on a second. This is just like any other time that somebody has told me, 'No, you can't play basketball. You can't do this,' and I proved them wrong." What I did was I decided I was going to do it anyway like I had done with other aspects of my life and just went for it. As far as getting rejected now [laughter] for certain jobs, I mean, it's really just the nature of the industry. You might have multiple castings, and you might only book one job out of multiple castings that you do. Think that as long as you're doing what you want to do and you're striving and you're making changes, I think that's fine.
- MILLER: 05:30 Were you ever discriminated?
- AYERS: 05:33 Yes. So initially, I was told by an agent, "No," that "you're never going to model because you have one arm, and there's no way anybody is going to take pictures of you."
- MILLER: 05:44 How does that make you feel, Shaholly, hearing something like that?
- AYERS: 05:47 I mean, it was very upsetting at the time. But again, I'm kind of used to it because I was born with a disability. So I've heard these kind of things before, which doesn't make it okay whatsoever, but it's something that I had heard. And I knew that it wasn't correct, and I knew that I could do it. I would just have to show them that I could do it. I had to prove it, had to prove myself to them, and that's just kind of the stance that I took.
- MILLER: 06:17 I read online that you're one of the first amputee to walk in New York Fashion Week with a prosthesis. What was that moment like?

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- AYERS: 06:27 It was really scary. [laughter] Not going to lie. That was my first big runway show, so I had never walked in a show that big before. This was Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week. And I was horrified, but in a good way. And I remember walking in that show, and I wasn't wearing a prosthesis in my first runway show. And when I walked out, I could hear all these-- there's photographers lining the stage, and I could hear, "Ooh! Ah! Ah!" And I was so nervous because I didn't know how they would take my arm. So when they started doing that, it was really kind of exciting. I really felt accepted for the first time in the industry. And by the time I hit the end of the runway, I stuck my little arm out, and all these flashbulbs went off, and that resulted in my photo being published in different newspapers and magazines around the world, really, big magazines. So that was huge. That was a really big moment. It was really scary moment, but for me personally, it provided an opportunity or a moment where I really felt accepted. It was cool and it was good that I was able to be myself.
- MILLER: 07:48 Talking about acceptance and doing New York Fashion Week, did you ever have a moment in your life where you're like, "Wow, I made it"? Was there an "Aha!" moment for you?
- AYERS: 07:59 The very first, I think, "Aha!" moment was when I booked my first photo shoot with Nordstrom. I've modeled with them multiple times since, but the first time, it was my first-- think it was my first time working in New York City. So I flew from Hawaii to New York, and I modeled in this big studio, and I took pictures of everything in the studio, and. [laughter] That was a big deal for me as finally being in a real production because I had, like I said, created my own productions. I had no idea what it would look like, and here I was in New York City, doing a photo shoot.
- MILLER: 08:38 Do you have any regrets choosing this career path?
- AYERS: 08:41 It took me a long time. And I would have had regrets, probably, if I had done this and I wasn't able to do or I wasn't able to achieve what I wanted to achieve, but I got really fortunate. So a few years back, about five, six years ago, I met other organizations and people pulling and advocating for disability inclusion, and that gave me my in, I guess, into the industry. And because it's my passion and because it's something that I absolutely love to do, I'm glad that I did this, and I'm glad I went through all the trials and tribulations and all the hard things to do it, because it is something that I love to do.
- MILLER: 09:30 Shaholly, have you walked the runway with people of all abilities, or do you just working exclusively with people with disabilities?
- AYERS: 09:40 Initially, I had walked in shows that-- well, all the shows I've walked in are inclusive. So you have able-bodied models. Some shows I've walked in are purely with the models with disabilities. So I've done both, I'd say.
- MILLER: 09:59 What is that experience like? Do you ever get people asking questions like, "Could you tell us a little bit about that?"
- AYERS: 10:06 I don't think I've had anybody ask me questions about my disability in a runway show.
- MILLER: 10:12 Or making you feel like you don't belong?

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- AYERS: 10:14 No, I never felt uncomfortable. I never really felt uncomfortable because of my disability, but I did find out that some of the runway shows were not paying models with disabilities, but they were compensating the able-bodied models. So after I learned that, that was very obviously uncomfortable to learn that. But no, I've never had someone disrespect me because of my disability at a runway show. I mean, to my face, anyway. [laughter]
- MILLER: 10:47 That's interesting to learn and get a little bit of information or insight into that world, because you think that it's so vain. So I was just curious to know. But what is it like for you when you get to see other people and other models with disabilities. and you get to work with other models with disabilities in the industry?
- AYERS: 11:05 So it's very emotional for me. I think I've cried multiple times in different shows, because it's special. I know how hard I worked, how long I work to break into this industry, and I can only imagine how hard the other people I'm meeting have worked and gone through all sorts of different types of discrimination to get there, and here they are. We're all standing on stage together and showing the world or showing whoever's there watching us that we are capable, and I think that's important.
- MILLER: 11:41 From a business standpoint, why do you think the fashion industry should hire more people with disabilities?
- AYERS: 11:48 People with disabilities make up a large population. We are into fashion. We are people too. We need clothes. We need clothes that work for us, that fit our bodies, that we enjoy wearing. And once businesses look at that and see that there is a need for us, I think that they will benefit because there aren't a lot of companies that make inclusive clothing. So if you're one of the few, you'll have more people buying in your product. You'll have more people rallying for your success.
- MILLER: 12:28 What do you think the fashion industry should be doing differently when it comes to diversity and inclusion?
- AYERS: 12:34 I recently learned that Levi's was the first company to create an inclusive brand around 1950. So here I thought, "Wow, we're really progressive." We have Zappos. We have Tommy Hilfiger's adaptive line. We have all these adaptive companies, but when you look back and realize that Levi's started this in 1950, you realize we haven't really come that far since then. I believe in giving credit where credit's due, and we do have different companies that are making adaptive clothing, but we still have a very long way to go at the same time. So I think what companies need to do is they need to look at making things that help people across the board. For instance, because of my limb difference, zipping a dress in the back is difficult for me. But that's something that's difficult for most women, so why not make something that all people can wear, that makes it easier for them to wear? It's difficult for me to zip a jacket, and Tommy Hilfiger makes a magnetic zipper, so it makes it easy for it to connect so you can zip it. Why not do that for anybody anyway, just across clothing? It just makes it easier for everybody anyways. So I think as long as they start thinking in those terms, like this could help more of the population, the elderly population, as they get older, they have mobility issues. Maybe it's difficult for them to do these things too. I mean, all of us are affected at some point in our lives with some sort of mobility issue or disability, so why not just make life easier for everybody?

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- MILLER: 14:16 You are a brand ambassador for Global Disability Inclusion which is a consulting firm that helps companies diversify their workplace by including people with disabilities. Can you tell us about that collaboration?
- AYERS: 14:29 I was really fortunate to meet Meg O'Connell from Global Disability Inclusion. She's the founder. And I met her at a time when I had quit modeling for a year. And through another model, I ended up meeting her. And I told her what it was that I wanted to do with disability and change the perception, and this was something that she had been doing in the workforce. And so I was fortunate to work with her, and we kind of partnered in 2014, maybe a little bit earlier. And she really helped to give me the opportunities because before, I had been doing everything on my own. But Global Disability Inclusion helped pave the way. They made sure that I was getting paid. They made sure that I was able to get to a lot of these runway shows. They sponsored a lot of my opportunities, and I think together, we've been able to talk about disability inclusion in a lot of different ways on the Today show and different magazine articles. And that's because of both of us coming together and because of our passion with disability inclusion.
- MILLER: 15:48 Why was it important for you to take that opportunity that Meg O'Connell gave to you?
- AYERS: 15:53 Well, I wouldn't have ever said no to that opportunity. It was too good to be true. I had no other help before I met her, and she really was one of the first people to believe in me, taking a chance on me as an individual and a person with a disability, and see what I was trying to accomplish without have ever achieving anything at that point, so. And she taught me a lot along the way. I learned a lot from her company.
- MILLER: 16:23 What are you hoping to accomplish as the brand ambassador for that company?
- AYERS: 16:27 I hope that through modeling and through these different speaking engagements that I'm able to show visually that people with disabilities, we're just people. We're just like everybody else. Certain things might be more challenging for us, but we deserve opportunities to do what it is we want to do, to work in the jobs that we want to work in. We're just as capable. I think me being the brand ambassador, I can showcase that in a visual way.
- MILLER: 16:58 I agree, Shaholly. We live in a very colorful world. And I think that sometimes, the fashion industry can be very black and white. And I think that by including people of all abilities, it becomes more reflective of the surroundings that we live in. How does fashion and modeling make you feel as an individual?
- AYERS: 17:19 I love modeling. I love it so much. For me, it's just an artistic, fun outlet. I love working. To me, it's a collaboration. You're working with photographer, you're working with a makeup artist, you have a stylist. You're all working to achieve something out of it, something artistic, something that looks nice or that says something. And for me, I guess the artist in me really enjoys that and really enjoys working as a team to create something like that. So for me, I really like to do that.
- MILLER: 17:52 Let's talk about clothes for a second. Have you had to make any modifications to your clothing? If so, could you walk us through that process?

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- AYERS: 18:02 So for me, I'm fortunate now that I live in Hawaii because I wear short sleeves. [laughter] But when I lived in Oregon, it's very cold where I grew up. I always hated wearing long sleeves or coats because the sleeve just dangles there. So my modifications were usually I'd take the sleeve and I'd tuck it the bottom of the sleeve inside, and then I'd pull the rest over so it's kind of tucked in. So I'd always modify my sleeve so it wasn't hanging all over the place. And I always have a difficult time. I can't, even to this day, can't in zip a coat very well, so I still have to ask for help with that. So I guess that's a modification.
- MILLER: 18:52 Yeah. That all goes back to designing adaptive clothing that people of all abilities can utilize. What advice would you give to someone with a disability who's chasing a career in the fashion industry?
- AYERS: 19:06 I would say, first and foremost, definitely know that it's difficult. Like we've been saying throughout this podcast, it's a difficult, challenging career path. It took me 10 years to break into it. So definitely have to have a thick skin and know that you might not book every gig. It might be really hard. You might have to work harder than other models. Unfortunately, as a person with a disability, you probably already know that. But the biggest thing that I would say is if you are pursuing this, know your worth. That just something definitely to be mindful of. I think a lot of times, I've seen where companies will say, "Well, we're doing you a favor, so."
- MILLER: 19:55 Oh my God.
- AYERS: 19:58 "We're not going to pay you because we're doing you a favor." [laughter] So just know, even though this might be your dream or your child's dream, you should be getting paid. I will say runway doesn't pay very well, but anything print-- I mean, and definitely see if you can find an agency to represent you, an agency that has a diversity-- or is a diverse agency or has a diversity department, because then they can kind of help you with that stuff. Because I know, I mean, look at me. I wanted it so bad, I did it for 10 years for free. So I understand it, but you're worth more than that. Just know that.
- MILLER: 20:41 Has the process become easier with getting jobs now?
- AYERS: 20:45 Yes and no. So a positive thing for the industry is definitely there are a lot more models with disabilities then when I started. So that's fantastic, but also makes it harder. [laughter] So then you have more competition when you come to-- there might only be a select few number of castings for a certain shoot, and you're now competing against thousands of people with disabilities. So in a way, that's really great because it shows that there are a lot of people with disabilities that enjoy fashion, and I think it's wonderful. And at the same time, it might make it a little more challenging to book that job.
- MILLER: 21:30 You mentioned that you quit modeling earlier. Why did you do that?
- AYERS: 21:35 Well, it had been 10 years of working, and I wasn't getting paid. It was frustration. There wasn't a big push for inclusivity. And I think I was frustrated, and I was done with not getting anywhere. So I was really lucky to meet Meg and Global Disability Inclusion, and kind of get set back on that track again.

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- MILLER: 22:04 Well, we talked on the phone the other day, and you mentioned that some people in the industry, when you would apply for jobs, they expected you to look a certain way, as if you were too beautiful to have a disability. And you mentioned probably not getting jobs because of it, right? Did you want to talk a little bit about that?
- AYERS: 22:26 It seems that there is a look that they're going for. And I've had instances where I've tried out for different brands and they said, "You look too much like a model. She's too pretty to have a disability." So I mean, I feel like that's strange too. If you're going to have an inclusive photo shoot, it just doesn't make sense to me either way. I don't know. [laughter] It's weird. I mean, people with disabilities are people. We're attractive too.
- MILLER: 23:05 It's weird, it's disheartening, it's disappointing that we live among people who think that way. And I just hope that people like you and companies like Global Disability Inclusion continue to create paths for people within their industry.
- AYERS: 23:25 I hope so too, and I think hopefully, they will. I see more and more companies doing it. So hopefully, they'll look at these successful companies and jump in and do the same thing.
- [music]
- MILLER: 23:37 Thank you for joining us today, Shaholly.
- AYERS: 23:39 Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.
- ANNOUNCER: 23:43 Tuned into our podcast series lately? Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Soundcloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded remotely and was edited and produced by Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation.