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HALI JAMA: From Wisconsin Sea Grant, I'm Hali.

BONNIE WILLISON: And I'm Bonnie.

HALI JAMA: And you're listening to *The Water We Swim In,* stories about the Great Lakes and the people working towards equity.

BONNIE WILLISON: Wisconsin Sea Grant is based at UW Madison, which occupies the traditional land of the Ho-Chunk people. The stories on this podcast span the area we now know as Wisconsin, where the lands and waters are cared for by the 12 native nations that call Wisconsin home. Today, we're talking about Wisconsin's waters and disability. It turns out the country's most accessible beach is right here in Wisconsin. We meet Damian, the man who made that project happen.

But we were also curious about the rest of the beaches across the state. We talked to Wisconsin Sea Grant intern Courtney about how accessible it really is to visit our coasts. Then we go inland to the North Woods, where we talk to John, who started an accessible cabin retreat. Let's get started with Damian Buchman.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: So basically, from hip to ankle, essentially, in both my legs I'm metal and plastic. But I found so much freedom when I got in a kayak and was able to slowly glide down a river, or use my upper body, which works just fine. My legs had nothing to do with the kayaking.

And just being quiet and a part of nature, where I could forget the pain, I could forget the disability, I could put it aside. And this had nothing to do with me, but me being on a river using my arms. And it felt really free. It kind of felt like I could run again.

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DAMIAN BUCHMAN: I was diagnosed with childhood bone cancer when I was 13 years old, and that immediately put me in a space of being an athlete to on crutches and in a knee immobilizer, literally, within 24 hours. And since that day, which was, I suppose, March 6, 1991, I have been an individual with an ambulatory disability.

And then I got re-diagnosed in my left leg when I was a freshman in high school. So I've had bone cancer in both of my legs. I have had 27 knee replacements and revisions, and have really found that the world is not accessible to people with special needs, at the end of the day.

HALI JAMA: That was Damian Buchman.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: I am the founder and executive director of an organization in the greater Milwaukee area called the Ability Center.

HALI JAMA: Damian called himself temporarily able-bodied. He points out the fact that most of us will have some type of disability at some point in our lives. For him, it came with his diagnosis. For others, it might be coming with age. After his diagnosis, Damian made it his life's mission to help other people with all types of disabilities have accessibility, and allow them to have their kayaking moment just like he did.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: The Ability Center's objective and goals-- to really put it in a nutshell, or our tagline is to play together. And so we make it possible for people impacted by disabilities, and individuals around people with disabilities, to play together.

BONNIE WILLISON: We also got the privilege to speak with Courtney Gunville.

COURTNEY GUNVILLE: Sure, Hi. I'm Courtney, and I was in the role of being an intern last summer at the Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute. So I worked on a project there, and also I do preschool teaching.

BONNIE WILLISON: Courtney also worked alongside Natalie Chin at Wisconsin Sea Grant. They focused on accessibility in the Great Lakes coastal access sites. Their overall goal was to start--

NATALIE CHIN: --looking at different features of coastal access sites, and whether or not there are accessibility features available. So that was things like path width, and accessible bathrooms, accessible parking spaces. I'm sure there's a lot more that we could look at. We could think about interpretive signage, and whether or not that's available in different languages. If that's accessible for someone who can't see.

BONNIE WILLISON: Courtney is deaf, so she relies on her sight when she's out in nature. Her interest in mapping was sparked when she was--

COURTNEY GUNVILLE: --I would say maybe about seven years old, when we did a road trip around the US. And my parents gave me a physical map. And I just got really intrigued in looking at where we were, how far it would be, how long it would take to get there. So because of that trip with my parents, I had this interest. And it helped me to start to visualize mapping.

And it just became something very conceptual to me that I always thought about when I would go anywhere. I think it's interesting to look at what geology is like, what landmarks exist, what terrain is like. So I have just always enjoyed that, and enjoyed being outdoors.

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BONNIE WILLISON: However, with just looking at a map it can be kind of hard to tell if a location is going to be accessible.

HALI JAMA: Yeah, and I actually learned that through my brother, who had spina bifida when he was-- well, he was born with spina bifida. And now he is not able to walk, so he's on a wheelchair. And every time we would try to go anywhere, or plan a family trip, either my sister, or my dad, or myself would have to go to that specific place and go see if it's actually accessible. Because you can't tell on a map if a place is accessible for a person on a wheelchair.

So we would go there, look around the area, make sure if there's elevators, or if there's any steep hills, if we would be able to have him go down there. If it's a park, if it's all grass, or if he's able to actually go into the playing area. We would look for things like that. And if we didn't find it, then we would make sure that we didn't even tell him about the trip unless we knew that it was going to be accessible. Because he's a kid, he's going to get really sad about it.

So we would go do all of that before we even told him we were going to go there. If that location didn't work out, then we would plan a whole completely different thing.

BONNIE WILLISON: Is there any particular memories that you have with finding a place?

HALI JAMA: Yeah, so we celebrate Eid. And at one point, we wanted to do some type of picnic. So we were like, oh, let's go look for a park where there's some type of table and he can get through. So when we would go to these parks, we would have to find a place that the seating area would be concrete instead of grass, or if there is grass, sometimes somebody can be pushing him and the other person could be pulling him. But we also have to look for holes where we don't want the front of the wheelchair to get stuck, because that's also happened to us.

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah, so you mentioned actually having to go out to that place to see if it's going to be accessible. Courtney would also do that with Great Lakes coastal beaches.

COURTNEY GUNVILLE: Sometimes I wouldn't go to a place and find out what I was looking for was not actually there. Sometimes, too, there was private land neighboring the place I wanted to access. And so I couldn't fully access all sides of the location. Sometimes I could see the places were not fully wheelchair accessible. And so the beach basically had no access for persons in wheelchairs. In some places, the sidewalk or path was really, really narrow, or made of pebbles and rocks, so not really accessible.

HALI JAMA: Damian also began to see that the world is not accessible for people with disabilities, when he was--

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: --coming out of a Starbucks, believe it or not. I'm walking out of a Starbucks, and I walk a little bit slower, and it could just feel like people were breathing down my neck wondering why I'm not moving faster. Which then made me think, how does it feel for someone when they push that push-button door and they have to wait for seconds in order for it to open, and the five people behind them are thinking, I could have already been out the door. And that's just not a good feeling. And when you don't have a feeling of belonging, you're not likely going to go.

HALI JAMA: Some people might argue that there is accessibility because you see things like when you're entering a place, there's a button for people with wheelchairs, where they can press. But Damian actually disagrees with that because--

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: --it's not that people with disabilities don't want access, don't want the opportunity. In most cases, they just flat-out know the opportunity doesn't exist, and that's why we don't see them.

And so if we simply make the opportunity available, make it accessible, not from a minimalistic approach, not from a, I have to do this because it's code and it's law, but from an actual space of intention to make sure that they feel like they've been considered here, and that they're welcome and wanted here, then you're going to see-- and we've proven it with the programs we've done, that people with disabilities want to be included.

BONNIE WILLISON: Courtney also urges us to consider that for a person who is blind--

COURTNEY GUNVILLE: --they might not always know which way is the direction to the beach, unless they have a guide dog, or possibly use a cane to then get closer and navigate where they're going. So sometimes those tactile cues are not always present at beaches.

HALI JAMA: Like he mentioned before, Damian is creating opportunity for disabled people through his work by doing more than just the bare minimum. Damian is based in Milwaukee. One of the main places people go to enjoy Lake Michigan is Bradford Beach. It is really long, sandy beach with volleyball nets and a few places to grab food. Damian has done a lot of work on this beach.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: Now we say that Bradford Beach is the country's most accessible beach. And we can get into why I say that, and what I think it is. And I would challenge anyone to challenge us on that fact. We built a significantly wide ramp that purposely wasn't switchback, and slowly finds its way, curved, onto Bradford Beach. But then the ramp didn't end once it was at its slope that it needed to be, and the grade it needed to be to get on the beach.

It actually extended a 200-foot seasonal mat all the way to the water. So now, even if you wanted to get in a beach wheelchair, you can, but you can also use your mobility device to go all the way to the water on your own, if that's all the experience you want. And you can get from the top of the beach all the way to the waters of Lake Michigan. Now, we also could have chose a five foot wide mat to go on the beach, but we chose a 6 and 1/2 foot wide mat so people can go side by side and have the same ease of movement that everybody that's walking shoulder to shoulder on the beach can have.

HALI JAMA: One of the things that makes Bradford Beach the country's most accessible beach is the beach wheelchairs. So if you've never seen a beach wheelchair, they are basically normal wheelchairs, but with really bulky wheels that allow you to just go over the sand, instead of where a normal wheelchair would get stuck because the wheels are so thin. These are so big and bulky that they just go-- they basically glide right over the sand.

BONNIE WILLISON: But even though that would be cool to have on every beach, I've never really seen one available, or maybe I just wasn't looking. Have you?

HALI JAMA: I have never seen this in my life. Even during times where my family would go to the lake, or something. There's no actual beaches in Minnesota, but there's a lot of lakes. So whenever we would go to the lakes and go see, we honestly wouldn't really bother even looking because we already knew that they wouldn't be there.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: I can't even begin to express how important that is. In most beach towns, in most water towns, at most lakefronts, even if there is an accessible beach wheelchair to check out, if there's one, that's rare. There's usually not more than two. So the fact that we are a non-coastal town with an inland lake, significant lake none the less, that there's four beach chairs people can check out, and then also for free.

And the "for free" is important because no one else has to pay to go on the beach. So if we're charging people to rent a beach wheelchair, and able to access it, we're really penalizing them for having a disability. And we think that's ridiculous.

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DAMIAN BUCHMAN: Giving access is justice, in a way. And so, you look all the way back to what happened with the movement with the ADA, and people were literally crawling up the steps of the Capitol in Washington DC, in order to get to their representatives-- congressmen, congresswomen, senators, to speak to the issue. There wasn't a ramp. There wasn't an elevator. There wasn't a way in for them, so they literally would crawl up the steps.

So I suppose whether we're talking about access to a forest, or access to a beach, or access to a park, all part of the environment, all part of play, all part of our world, everyone should have the opportunity to be able to access that.

BONNIE WILLISON: After the break, a trip to the North Woods.

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BONNIE WILLISON: Pine Forest Lodge is nestled next to Spider Lake in northern Wisconsin. There are so many lakes nearby that you might get confused as to which Spider Lake it's on.

JOHN STRATTE: There's probably like 15 Spider Lakes in Wisconsin, and one's only about 15 miles from ours.

BONNIE WILLISON: John Stratte's Spider Lake is on the Turtle River chain, near Mercer. That's where John and his wife operate the Pine Forest Lodge and their nine cabins.

JOHN STRATTE: 25 years ago, bought a resort in northern Wisconsin. And my priority, as far as finding a resort, was finding one that could be as accessible as possible and still being a top-level resort, in my mind. Which doesn't mean five star, doesn't mean pavement everywhere.

It means that people with disabilities had a reasonable opportunity, at a normal price, to get into a super cool place in northern Wisconsin, where they can do-- we do kayaking a lot. We have a pontoon boat that we removed all the furniture from. We have an ATV that's electric, that we can take people on-- we have 40 acres. We had a sit water ski there for a few years. Just all kinds of stuff.

BONNIE WILLISON: John has always been a really outdoorsy person. By the time he was 22, he had been to 49 states. He just went camping all the time, he went rock climbing, cross-country skiing, all of that. He was rock climbing in Hawaii when he got injured.

JOHN STRATTE: I was climbing when I was 22, which is, of course, a classic age to be stupid-- for men, men. I'm not insinuating you guys, of course. But I was climbing without doing any real research, just climbing on a mountain. It turned out I was on a much bigger cliff than I realized. And it crumbled beneath me, and I went down 150 feet, landed on rock, paralyzed from the waist down.

And so I had kind of the good fortune, you might say, of being alive when I shouldn't have been. And two, being paralyzed from the waist down was a small price to pay for not dying. After about three months, I was able actually to walk again. It's not pretty, but it's still functional 44 years later, although now I use braces, and canes, and stuff like that, or walking sticks, trekking poles. And so I'm able to take walks, still, to beautiful places.

BONNIE WILLISON: John spent those three months in the hospital recuperating and learning to walk again. And the first thing that he did when he got out?

JOHN STRATTE: I went camping with friends that first weekend. Yeah, I really figured it out the first day I got out of the hospital. I figured it out. Well, this is how things work now.

BONNIE WILLISON: And right away, he started asking questions about why there were so few options for outdoor recreation accessible to people with disabilities. He made this into a career. He started a sports and recreation program, and he told me about his time working for an independent living center in Wisconsin. Independent living centers provide important services, but they usually don't offer sports and recreation. So John created a program.

JOHN STRATTE: We got people coming out, grudgingly sometimes, the first time they would come out to an activity, and you could see their demeanor, what am I doing here? I can't believe I got talked into coming here. And then at the end of that day, everyone's talking like they just had a party with all their best friends. And they're all excited, and chattering away, and I can't wait till next week, and what else is going on?

You'd see people that had so much fun. All of a sudden they're sitting up straighter in their wheelchair. All of a sudden they're smiling more. All of a sudden they're taking showers more often. And so I'm a big time believer of what getting someone out into nature, or any kind of sporting activity, how that can change someone's life.

BONNIE WILLISON: John's own relationship with nature has changed since his fast-paced days as a 22-year-old.

JOHN STRATTE: The amazing thing that, really, I figured out right away when I got a disability, was there's so much to look at. I guess they have names for this kind of stuff now, like forest bathing or something, where you just go sit in the woods. And I spend a lot of time sitting and looking around. And you notice the microorganisms kind of stuff that maybe you'd just breeze past if you were walking at three miles an hour, or whatever the average person might walk at.

And so it's not really a huge sacrifice to only walk a half mile, or a mile. I see just as much as you might. I might not get to that Shangri-La overlook that you're heading for, but I'll notice the mushrooms, and the little tiny plants, and this kind of stuff. My dog loved it, too, would always just wait for me at the next bench, and loved to be petted more. So I don't think that the dog even minded that much.

BONNIE WILLISON: John and his wife, Cherie, really tried to make Pine Forest Lodge cabins accessible. People with wheelchairs are able to navigate the cabins and the bathrooms. And to get down to the water, there's a gentle slope down. And the docks are accessible. And there's a flat area for bonfires, and picnics, and swimming, and outdoor games.

JOHN STRATTE: 20-some years ago, maybe there was every other week there was one person with a disability. Well now, every week there's an average of two or three, probably, people with disabilities.

BONNIE WILLISON: One thing that John will do with his guests is lead kayak trips.

JOHN STRATTE: We take trips all over. We'll go up to Lake Superior, Turtle-Flambeau Flowage, and so we take people all around. And we did about a six-mile paddle with two guys that were both quadriplegics. And they had some strength in their arms, and we could make the adaptations necessary-- adaptations to the paddle grip for them.

They were both able to paddle their own kayaks. And one made it the whole six miles, paddling by himself, got out of the water, hey, can I take the ATV out? Because there was a hand control, it had hand controls. And when he came back, he said, that was the freest I've ever felt since my disability.

BONNIE WILLISON: The water is also a special place for John.

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JOHN STRATTE: You know, it is a freeing thing. There's something so glorious about the water because you float better. I snorkel in our lake all the time. And people are always shocked that you see some pretty cool stuff in a freshwater lake in northern Wisconsin. Once in a while, I'll see a muskie or-- that's not necessarily my favorite thing, although it's the most memorable thing. But they got some big teeth.

But just little fish. Even little bluegills, or sunfish, or whatever. I snorkel throughout the whole season. And so I'll see them from being a tiniest little minnow, to growing a little bit every week, and getting different colors as they grow. So that's really fun. But frankly, most of the time when I come back someone will say, so what'd you see? I'm like, well, boulders, logs, weeds, and to me it's just all interesting.

Just like walking down a trail, when I said I've learned by being limited in my range. Even if I can only walk to that first bench, I'm going to sit on that bench. And I'm going to see so much stuff that probably no one else is seeing. And then when I take other people with me, they might even be able-bodied, and they're like, well, I've got to stop here for a break. And then I'll point out to them, look at the coloring on this stump, or whatever. And they'll be like, oh my God, that's like a portrait. And so that's kind of what it is snorkeling, too.

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HALI JAMA: So back in Milwaukee, Damian Buchman's vision for accessibility includes everybody. He sees an opportunity for all people to have equitable opportunity for fitness, health, and wellness in their community.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: So mom, or dad, or parent comes down with the stroller, someone's coming down with a big cooler, someone's coming down with sports equipment, all the big stuff people take to the beach. From the minute we rolled out that mat, everybody used it. People came down on powered unicycles, people came down on their bikes, somebody skated down on their skateboard. Everybody used it.

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HALI JAMA: So Damian is working towards inclusivity. So what can able-bodied people and other people do to help raise awareness about accessibility, and create more access for disabled people in the Great Lakes? Here's Natalie Chin.

NATALIE CHIN: I think when we're thinking about impacts to historically marginalized communities, or vulnerable populations, we have to talk about it. I think it sounds like a very basic first step, but I think talking about it is really important. If we let those issues be invisible, they'll never get fixed. The alternative would be not to talk about it, and that's kind of what's been happening. That's not great. It shouldn't be people who are disabled being the only ones who are fighting for improvements.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: Beat the drum, I suppose. Jump on the bandwagon. It is so wonderful to see the DEI space grow, and see the space of inclusion, and people being genuine in that space, grow. Clearly since 2020, we had to go through a lot of growing pains. And some significant looking at the mirror on a multitude of issues. But unfortunate events forced those conversations, opened people's eyes, and so many of us, the majority of us, are willing to listen and start to make the change.

NATALIE CHIN: The more we make practices to help people in the disability community, just our regular mode of operation, the better it is for everybody. Even with things like captioning-- sometimes that's helpful for me, too. I can hear and see, but I think just normalizing those kinds of things, that could actually benefit everybody.

HALI JAMA: So let's think back to when Damian shared his story about kayaking and how free it made him feel. Well, Damian has been giving people with disabilities their own kayak experiences. But it has been a bittersweet experience for him. Here's a story he shared about a man by the name of Tim Ochnikowski, who was a director for the Milwaukee County Office for People with Disabilities.

DAMIAN BUCHMAN: Well, Tim was injured and became a quadriplegic on Bradford Beach in Lake Michigan when he was 17 years old. The day he retired from the county was the next time he landed on Bradford Beach, the day we opened it. That's pretty darn powerful, if I do say so myself, to think about here's a man-- it's both powerful, and also sad, though.

If we really point out the reality, we can all feel really warm and really good about that. But it's also, at the same time, sad that he's 62 and retiring, and he hadn't been able to get back on that beach since he was 18. And the Americans with Disabilities Act had passed 30 years earlier.

If we think about that, and just pause for a moment, it's a little bit-- I'm just going to say it flat out, it's a lot a bit unacceptable. It's a lot a bit unacceptable. If he wanted that opportunity, he should have been able to have that opportunity long before 2020.

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HALI JAMA: If you are interested in supporting Damian's work or participating in inclusive indoor activities like wheelchair basketball, tennis, or really any other sport you can think of, then visit tacwi.org.

BONNIE WILLISON: If you're interested in supporting John and his work, or staying at accessible cabins in the beautiful Wisconsin North Woods, kayaking, boating, you name it, visit pineforestlodge.com. *The Water We Swim In* is produced by Bonnie Willison and Hali Jama. Please subscribe, rate, and review, and share this podcast with a friend. You can find Wisconsin Sea Grant at seagrant.wisc.edu. You can find the Wisconsin Water Resources Institute at wri.wisc.edu.

Thanks for tuning in. We'll see you next time.

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