

00:00:00:21 – 00:00:34:02

Beth Blick

Well, good evening and welcome to Speaking on Ability with Beth Blick. On this podcast we center all kinds of quality of life issues for people with disabilities. Tonight, we will be having a conversation with activist and Bush Foundation Fellow Mai Thor, Minnesota about her work in the disability community. I had the pleasure running into my disability pride in Chicago

00:00:34:02 – 00:00:57:00

Beth Blick

In July. Mai has been stirring the pot, causing trouble for a while now. And I want to sit down with her and pick her brain about what's going on these days. I'm going to let Mai introduce herself, and then we'll get started with our conversation. Go ahead.

00:00:57:02 – 00:01:25:16

Mai Thor

That. Great. Thank you Beth, and thank you so much for having me tonight as your guest. I'm truly honored that you would think of me to to have me on tonight on your podcast. Yes. As you said, I'm a 2021 Bush fellow. And I just wrapped up my first year and and it's a two year fellowship. So I am just at the beginning of my second year.

00:01:26:17 – 00:01:42:18

Mai Thor

Kind of makes me sad because it's probably going to go really fast and then all life will be boring again after that. But it's been a wonderful, wonderful journey. And so thank you again for having me.

00:01:47:19 – 00:02:02:08

Beth Blick

Thank you, Mai. Can you talk a little bit about how you have continued the push for change and a better quality of life for Minnesotans with disabilities?

00:02:02:17 – 00:02:45:15

Mai Thor

Sure, I'd be happy to do that. Okay. So, yeah. So, you know, just going back to my Bush work, you know, the. So there's a lot of component. Well, there's two main components to being a Bush fellow. One is the leadership development component, which is really about like you know, lots of self-reflection and self-discovery and just sort of a lot to do with Bush.

00:02:46:01 – 00:03:15:10

Mai Thor

But the other part is the transformational change part, right? The change where you want to see in your community and the world around you. And so we're talking like real high level impact here, you know,

big impact. Right. And so so that's where I, I work in the last year here as a fellow focused on disability justice. And so disability justice is really like the work of my life, really.

00:03:16:19 - 00:03:43:17

Mai Thor

I never really had a name for it until I learned what Disability Justice was. Right. And as a disabled Hmong woman, you know, I've been doing this work forever. I lived this work right. And now that I know this new justice is, you know, I. I want to be instrumental in making that happen for all disabled folks in Minnesota.

00:03:44:06 - 00:04:12:13

Mai Thor

And then I think, you know, the truth is Beth, I think a lot of us have already been doing disability justice work. We just didn't probably know that either, you know, similar to me because it you know, it's a newer movement and it's, you know, folks aren't as familiar with it. But like, I don't I don't think it's a radical activist movement that people tend to see it to be.

00:04:13:09 - 00:04:46:20

Mai Thor

It is. It's something that I think lots of folks, like I said, have already been doing. And like you don't have to storm the Capitol in order to do the disability justice work. Right. You can just do what you can from your own home, you know, or you can do it virtually or you can do it and, you know, small steps to to help, you know, your your fellow disabled brothers and sisters and within your community.

00:04:47:06 - 00:05:13:05

Mai Thor

So I think there's a lot happening already that use disability justice and, you know, is creating good change and a better quality of life for Minnesotans who are disabled. So we just we just want to make it we want to elevate that even more. We want to amplify that as much as we can. And that's what I'm aiming to do with this, with my fellowship work.

00:05:14:05 - 00:05:43:16

Mai Thor

I mean, I guess I just want to really see this really justice incorporated in Minnesota to the point where, you know, wherever I go that I will one day feel completely and seamlessly included and welcome no matter what space I choose to take up. Right. I mean, can you imagine that happening? I hope that day happens sometime soon.

00:05:43:23 - 00:06:02:19

Mai Thor

You know, and I mean, and that that could be at my place of work or in

my community or, you know, a place of worship or just taking the bus or driving. Right. I just want to be able to feel like I am fully a part of the world around me. Basically.

00:06:04:02 - 00:06:04:12

Beth Blick

Mm hmm.

00:06:08:12 - 00:06:22:01

Beth Blick

I know that both of us are working on keeping John Lewis spirit alive. I think we believe in a lot of the same things. We're kind of good trouble are you, causing these days?

00:06:25:11 - 00:06:55:08

Mai Thor

Well, I can't talk too much about all the trouble I get my self into. Got to keep some secrets. But as far as the good trouble, I think I could use some help with that. I definitely can use some help with that. You know, I as I have been on this fellowship journey, you know, I really I wanted to lay down some groundwork on you know,

00:06:55:16 - 00:07:47:17

Mai Thor

Helping disabled folks. Facilitating, you know, a space where folks could come together to talk about something that is really, I think, key to doing disability justice work, which is to talk about the trauma that we have experienced right. As disabled books and, you know, the work that I did to just sort of ground the ground this work of disability justice that I hope will happen for Minnesota and not just, you know, to talk about trauma, but like what you know, how is that trauma based within like, you know, ableism?

00:07:47:22 - 00:08:18:00

Mai Thor

Like how, you know, how did able is and play a part in that trauma in your life as a person who identifies as disabled? How have you healed from that if you healed at all or if you're in the middle of healing, you know, like whatever that is, right? Like wherever, whatever stage you're at in that process. And also, like, how is that, you know, that built up your resiliency, you know, throughout all of that.

00:08:18:09 - 00:08:51:06

Mai Thor

And so that's you know, I did a couple of conversations with a group of folks on those topics because honestly, I feel like if we as like disabled folks, we as Crips we we don't like to reflect upon ourselves and our own lived experiences and the trauma that we all of that. Then, like we can't go out and like try to save the world, right?

00:08:51:06 – 00:09:20:12

Mai Thor

We can't do disability justice in the world until we like really like understand where we're at. And, you know, I know that that's been a real gift and a blessing, actually, in my experience as a fellow, is that I have been able to do a lot of that stuff. I've been able to unpack so much, you know, and a lot of it does have to do, you know, it does have a lot to, but it's a direct result of ableism right in my life.

00:09:20:13 – 00:09:48:00

Mai Thor

And so that's been an amazing experience also. And I just feel like folks with disabilities just don't get to talk about ableism in that sense as far as like how that has traumatized them in their lives. And so I really wanted to create a space for that. And so from that, you know, once we had those conversations, you know, we kind of moved on to like, okay, so what's what's going to happen next?

00:09:48:00 – 00:10:11:17

Mai Thor

What's the next step? Well, the next step is okay. So we now kind of understand what all the baggage is that we're still sort of carrying around with us or are trying to unpack. Right. So what does that mean for disabled folks? For Minnesota? Right. And how can Disability Justice, I guess, kind of like spring from that. Right.

00:10:12:01 – 00:10:42:24

Mai Thor

And so then I also wanted to increase the capacity of, you know, increase the capacity to be able to do the work also. And so what I did was I put together a convening last June, disability justice convening. It was a virtual and we had like, you know, it was just an open invitation. We invited all folks with disabilities who wanted to be in that space to talk about this.

00:10:42:24 – 00:11:09:10

Mai Thor

We just systems are really like, you know, figure out like, how could this look like for Minnesota? Right. We obviously do have trauma. We obviously do have issues. And so what are we going to do about it? Right. What you know, using the existing framework of disability justice, which is rooted in ten principles, you know, how can we make that happen in Minnesota and address our specific needs?

00:11:10:13 – 00:11:35:06

Mai Thor

And so it was a great you know, it was a really good convening. And part of what I also did to sort of inform that process was I, I know that this was just this is happening in various parts throughout the

country right now. You know, we've got a strong disability justice community in California in like Detroit in Chicago.

00:11:35:06 – 00:11:59:12

Mai Thor

And yes, we did see each other at the Disability Pride Parade in Chicago. That was a lot of fun. But like, you know, so I've been traveling a lot just to learn as much as I can about like how people have stood up and, you know, elevated disability justice in their respective communities so that I can bring some of that back to Minnesota.

00:12:01:02 – 00:12:29:16

Mai Thor

So, you know, so that's kind of where things are starting to go right now is like we're going to continue those convenings. And, you know, if people want to get into trouble with me, they can absolutely be a part of that. We're doing those quarterly. The next one is October 20th, which is a Thursday evening, I believe. And, you know, I would love for more folks to be involved in that.

00:12:30:15 – 00:12:59:11

Mai Thor

And also, we're planning a disability. The very first Disability Justice Summit next summer in August 2023. And we're just starting to plan that now. You know, we're trying to figure out as far as like who we could partner and partner with for that. And we're trying to figure out what the key goals and takeaways would be for that day.

00:13:00:10 – 00:13:34:03

Mai Thor

And we're also going to offer that as a hybrid event. So you know, obviously the pandemic and right now it's going to be offered as a hybrid. So people have the option to go in-person or just to join is virtually wherever they are located, you know, located throughout Minnesota. And so, you know, I can talk a little bit more about that later, but so those are kind of those are the things that I've got my fingers in right now,

00:13:34:03 – 00:14:09:22

Mai Thor

Beth, and I would you know, I would love for folks to also, you know, be involved if they have interest for sure. I can give you more information about the Dreaming Disability Justice Convenings, which I mentioned are going to happen quarterly. The next one is October 20th, and actually I forgot to mention that. So the plan is to have a guest speaker at each of these quarterly meetings.

00:14:09:22 – 00:14:42:06

Mai Thor

And the one that's coming up and on the 20th is I met them actually at the Disability Pride Parade in Chicago. Okay. Disabled . . . the Chicago Land Disabled People of Color Coalition, they'll be our special guest to speak with us in October. And then I'm yeah, I'm lining up some other folks for the other convenings. The one after that is in January.

00:14:42:06 - 00:15:15:08

Mai Thor

And I think I have a good speaker for that one already figured out. But then I'll definitely send more information on the Disability Justice Summit as well. There's not a lot that's really been concretely defined yet for the summit. I do have a planning workgroup that's going to be meeting soon to start the planning process. And so we'll we'll we'll do the work and we'll put it together.

00:15:15:09 - 00:15:46:22

Mai Thor

You know, we're going to try to get folks to facilitate different sessions and we're planning on having a keynote speaker. So I'm like super, super pumped about it. I think that's going to be a really, really good event where people can come as they are. I mean, we're going to be super intentional in how we set up the space for this event, which, you know, which is going to be the first of its kind in Minnesota.

00:15:46:22 - 00:16:21:12

Mai Thor

Right. But, you know, I want people to feel like they can just show up as however they want to show up, right? And however they decide to present themselves to the world is exactly how we want people to come to this event. And, you know, we want you know, we want to absolutely center disabled folks at this event and so any I'm just going to ask all of our able bodied cisgendered white allies to take a back seat and just actively listen.

00:16:21:12 - 00:17:04:01

Mai Thor

They're more than welcome, but they're not going to be the folks doing, you know, the you know, they're not going to it's going to be disabled folks doing most of the talking, you know, for sure for you. But so, yeah, it's going to be, I think, just a really, really good, really good event. And I hope people get a lot out of it and also be sort of like a working event as well, where we're going to try to get a session together where folks can brainstorm and generate, you know, some ideas on like how exactly can this disability justice framework look like for Minnesota, right?

00:17:04:01 - 00:17:28:11

Mai Thor

And you know, a takeaway hopefully and be that we lay down some a good foundation on like how like an action plan. Right and that could look like anything. But then again, I want to go back to the fact the fact that this work is going to be community informed, right. Because without the community, the work wouldn't be possible.

00:17:28:11 – 00:17:52:17

Mai Thor

And so we want to have people to participate and share ideas and provide input and all that good stuff to really, like get a sense of, you know, what are the needs of disabled Minnesotans so that when we do start a disability justice work, that our needs are actually going to be met.

00:17:53:10 – 00:18:13:10

Beth Blick

So yeah. Okay. Anything else you'd like to leave listeners with, Mai?

00:18:15:07 – 00:18:59:21

Mai Thor

Yeah. I think one thing I would really like to talk about know as far as like what folks can do together now is I want to focus on one of the ten principles of disability justice, which I think is one of the more powerful ones, and that's interdependence and I love talking about interdependence because I think it's so critical in the work of not just disability justice, but like social justice overall, you know, and that's a key component in doing disability justice work.

00:18:59:21 – 00:20:00:18

Mai Thor

I think that that focuses on intersectional . . . being a person with a disability is like, we're not just a disabled person, right? We're not a monolith. We we have several identities because we're people. That's what people are. You know, we just we're not just like we don't just have one identity. We have multiple and we're multifaceted and, you know, so but the thing with disability justice is that it you know, it teaches us that no matter what our ability level, where we still are, valuable, your will and that we're still essential and we're not disposable.

00:20:00:18 – 00:20:31:17

Mai Thor

Right. We like we matter. You know, and I think that when you look at that from the perspective of justice work, disabled folks are always more more often than not, I shouldn't say always, but more often we're left out of those spaces right where justice work is happening. And we often have to sort of like fight our way in to really be involved in that work.

00:20:32:04 – 00:21:16:01

Mai Thor

But disability justice is all about, you know, the intersectionality of social justice and other justice movements, whether that's racial or whether that's know, gender justice or whatever. Right. It's all in all, it's a movement that should be welcoming to everybody and let what you do impacts me and what I do impacts you. Right. And so to go back to the principle of interdependence, that's really what interdependence is all about.

00:21:16:01 - 00:21:51:00

Mai Thor

It's all about, you know, as we move through all of these oppressed, oppressed oppressions that happen to marginalized communities, which yes, does include folks with disabilities, like we impact one another all the time. Right. And we need to do it together and we need to move towards like eliminating racism and sexism and, you know, all of the all of the marginalized communities and how they're oppressed.

00:21:51:07 - 00:22:21:10

Mai Thor

We need to do that together in solidarity in order to truly, truly reach justice, because, you know, justice is not like really it's not like true justice at all unless disabled folks are involved in that. Right. And so while we're trying to eliminate all these other sort of oppressions, we also need to remember that we need to eliminate embolism, which fits, you know, also under the umbrella of oppression.

00:22:22:10 - 00:23:00:21

Mai Thor

So I love talking about interdependence because it reminds me that, you know, we're all connected. We're all definitely connected. And my actions reflect upon, you know, not just myself, but the people around me and, you know, the energy that I give out I receive back. Right. And so definitely something that I love talking about. But I think it also reminds us that, you know, not only are we people and that we're connected, but we're also like sharing the same spaces and community.

00:23:01:05 - 00:23:36:05

Mai Thor

The land that we're that we're living on now is, you know, land that used to be occupied by indigenous folks and that we need to honor that and respect that as well. And that Black lives matter. Disabled lives matter. All of it. Right? All of it. It's all in this, you know, circle of like interdependence where we need to rely on one another and really, like try to achieve freedom for our people, you know, together in solidarity.

00:23:37:04 - 00:23:38:19

Mai Thor

That was a lot. Sorry.



00:23:39:18 - 00:24:02:05

Beth Blick

But it's beautiful. Thank you. This has been Able Media's Speaking on Ability with Beth Blick. Thank you for tuning in. Be sure to look for my next article from the Minnesota Women's Press and get involved in the conversation I'm Beth Blick, keeping you in the loop, one story at a time. Good night.