**Trinity VDP, Towards Inclusive Clubs and Societies, November 2021**

Harry 0:00

Hello, and welcome back to the Trinity ability Co Op podcast. I'm your host Harry O'Brien. The Trinity ability Co Op is a cooperative movement led by students with disabilities toward radical inclusion on Trinity campus. This podcast is part of "The towards inclusive clubs and societies" project which began over the summer. And this project aims to support the development of clubs and societies in Trinity that are inclusive to disabled students, basically making sure that all students can attend, like all societies, and all events and all that. In this podcast series, we'll be speaking to leaders in those clubs and societies and ask them what changes are being made to become more inclusive to disabled students. Basically, some societies are accessible students abilities, some aren't. So we're going to speak to the ones that are and see what they're doing right. You can find out more about this project on our website abilitycoop.com. So that's abilitycoop.com. Today, I'll be speaking to Hannah and Niamh, Hannah and Niamh are from the VDP society, and they're a pretty accessible society. So we're gonna get chatting to them. So Hannah, Niamh thank you for joining us today. I suppose we'll start with you Niamh, if you could just tell me a bit about the VDP society.

Niamh 1:14

Yep, so my name is Niamh. I am the president of the Society and Hannah is our accessibility and inclusion officer. And so basically, Trinity VDP is a charity society and a volunteering society. And so we do a lot of work in the inner city with different types of service users, so we work with children, we work with vulnerable adults. So that includes adults with intellectual disabilities and elderly adults. And we also work with those experiencing homelessness. And then as well as our work with service users we do different activities where... because those activities require like vetting and training, but you would do all of that, like through us as a society. And then we have other activities that don't require any vetting or training. So we do things like a food bank, and we do letter writing every week to nursing home residents. And we usually do sets and costumes for annual Panto, and things like that. And we do a lot of fundraising and stuff throughout the year as well.

Harry 2:13

Okay, so it seems like your society would be a natural fit to become more accessible, because the people you're working with would be like, it'd be a lot of disabled people but also people with... how would you say, people that aren't let's say thriving, people in nursing homes or people who are sick or that kind way, so you'd be a sort of compassionate society. So you'd be a natural choice to kind of fit in with this project. I'll of course go over to you Hannah. So Hannah, you're the Accessibility Officer. What's involved in that role?

Hannah 2:56

I am this years accessibility and inclusion officer for VDP. And I'm the second ever elected Accessibility Officer. Last year, we had our first one Jordan Collins. So there's a lot kind of involved in the role there's responsibilities around getting involved with cooperating with other societies and organizing collaborations with them, especially a society such as the sign language society and other compassionate societies, as you say, like Amnesty and, the fill, just things like that. But there's a lot that we've done to make sure that VDP is an accessible society for everybody, and is a very welcoming place for disabilities, and anyone really on campus. No matter kind of what walks of life you're from VDP is just really a place for everybody. So some of the things that we've done to make sure that VDP is accessible is we've introduced alt text to our website and our social media, which means that there are short written descriptions of images and just any kind of media that we put out. And we have also introduced plain text versions of our newsletter and website. So this just makes everything a bit more accessible for everybody. And I've also put together a list of pubs and bars in Dublin that are accessible. And I shared this with the Co Op as well. Because unfortunately, a lot of these venues are not accessible for people with disabilities, especially wheelchair users. So we've really kind of made a really big effort to make sure that if we are hosting an event that it is accessible for anybody who would be interested in joining. And other than this, we're trying to organize sign language classes for volunteers, once in semester one and once in semester two. And this just kind of really breaks down the barriers for everybody. You know, for the kind of between everybody else and say, the deaf community or the hard of hearing community, and it really just makes VDP more accessible to them as well, and gives everyone kind of that basic skill that I think is just, really vital for everybody to have. We're also running a disability and inclusion survey, which we ran last year. And we're running it again this year just to see kind of what improvements could be made, I suppose to VDP being an accessible society and just give all our volunteers a voice to say what could be better, or kind of what hasn't gone right for them, and just kind of makes sure that they have an input in what VDP is as an accessible society. And just other things like running educational campaigns to break down stigma about different types of disability, educating our activity leaders and volunteers, providing closed captions for our online events, offering sign language interpreters at any events where there is a need for them. And of course, things like early access to venues for wheelchair users and hosting events in wheelchair accessible spaces. So this is kind of just the work that VDP has been doing to be an accessible society, for everybody on campus.

Harry 6:24

You're doing a lot, you're possibly one of the most accessible, if not the most successful society in Trinity, how much extra work is it to make your society that much more inclusive.

Hannah 6:36

But it's not that much extra, because I think really, the thing that has stood out to me so far in this role is just thought being accessible really is just so basic, you know, I think people kind of think that, you know, being an accessible society means kind of extra things. But I think in a way, a lot of the time, it is just just kind of making sure that that basic need for everybody is there. And that, you know, you are just doing something as simple as hosting an event in a venue where there is wheelchair accessibility, there might be wheelchair accessible bathrooms, just kind of considering that there might be somebody who has a disability who might want to attend the event. And I think it's just really about that awareness and being conscious that Ireland has, and Trinity as well has a lot of people with disabilities. And it's just being aware of them and making sure that there really is just accommodation for them really an accommodation for their needs. So it's kind of just thinking of those things before you organize something. So it's, it's, it's pretty, pretty low key

Niamh 7:51

You know, we can think that like, oh, we need to make so many accommodations and things like that. And in order to be like fully accessible on stuff. And what we've experienced is that that just isn't true. You know, it's actually like, once you find the venues and you find the spaces that are accessible, it's very easy then to plan the events or plan the activities there. And a lot of our activities, especially our activities with adults are physically accessible. And then in terms of other accessibility, like we like to regard VDP as kind of like a little family or like a very large group of friends, you know. And so to kind of facilitate that, that's why we have things like activity leaders. So if anyone is nervous about going to an activity, they can find out the name of the person who leads that activity that can go to them to ask about things like accessibility, to ask for support and help, especially if it's something like, you know, they're nervous about coming for the first time, that's a great point of call. And then we've also introduced and VLO office hours. So our VLO on our committee is our volunteer liaison officer. So his name is Hugo and his whole job is to do with volunteer well being. So we have office hours now for him every week, and where he just sits in our committee room. And if anyone has any queries or worries or anything, they can go to that if they want to talk about it confidentially. And we also do like tea time during the wake, which is purely social, that's just for volunteers to come and like meet each other and chat to each other. So we tried to make VDP as accessible as possible in terms of a social sense as well, hopefully, in the aim that like people will be able to come to any of our activities and feel welcome and feel included. And Hannah's role is a relatively new role. You know, the first time we had an Accessibility Officer was last year. But I think it's a really important one. And I think it's one that like other societies, you know, if they don't have accessibility and inclusion officers, it's a really good kind of rule to implement. And because then it just means that you are always thinking about accessibility and there is, you know, one specific person whose job it is to think about accessibility, which is great.

Harry 9:55

So you think... That's actually kind of what I wanted to ask you about is, Were you around when the Accessibility Officer was first included? Because Hannah is the second ever. So there's obviously a new thing. Is that right?

Niamh 10:11

Yeah, I was. So I was in second year at the time. Yeah. Cause our first Accessibility Officer was last year. And and I'm now in final year. And so the way that we did it was we have a constitution for this society. And I'm pretty sure every society does have a constitution. And basically, it says in our Constitution, that if we want to elect a new member, or like if we want to elect someone to a certain position, and that that has to be kind of done by a vote, and because within the society, all of our activity leaders are kind of asked to do their role so the only elected members are the executive committee. So that's myself and the other five members on the executive committee, and then other roles you either apply for, or you get asked to do. So the way that we incorporated this role was that we had a big meeting. And and people were told that it was kind of sort of like a referendum, and a vote as to whether or not we would like to include this new position, and everyone voted in favor of it. So that's how we came to the conclusion of having an accessibility and inclusion officer. And then the process for actually choosing one is that we would have our AGM every year around March or April, end of march start of April. And then once we have a new executive committee they send out like a Google forum or basically an expression of interest. And for anyone who'd like to apply to be the Accessibility Officer, and Hannah applied. And we had many other wonderful applicants. But myself and the rest of the committee looked through all of the applications. And ultimately, we thought that Hannah would be best for the role. And so we reached out to her and thankfully, she said, Yes.

Harry 11:50

So it wasn't an elected role. It was decided by the committee.

Niamh 11:55

So that's the way it's been for the past two years, that could change this year. Because the role now... as so the role came in last year, but obviously, with COVID, it was very hard, you know, to implement. And so, you know, it could change this year, it might become another elected position where people run at the AGM, and things like that. But for the moment, it was like a vote to decide whether or not we would have that role, which was voted in, and then an application process.

Harry 12:29

Okay, and, Hannah, could you tell me a little bit about any differences that you've noticed to the society after bringing these bring in these new initiatives and making the society more inclusive? Like what benefits were brought to the society?

Hannah 12:46

Yeah, definitely. So I think introducing these different things has really made a massive impact on the society because I think there's so much more interest from the disabled community in Trinity to get involved in VDP. Because they know that no matter what they will be included and that there will be a place for them at every event, because before I think, you know, it almost feels kind of like embarrassing, maybe to kind of have to email and say like, here, can we please have this in a accessible venue and things like that, but now they know that it will be in an accessible venue, regardless so they won't need to ask for that, because they know that that will just be a basic requirement for an event. So I think there's so much more inclusion on interest from disabled students in Trinity, which is absolutely fantastic. And I think there is a lot more acceptance of disabilities and more kind of awareness around different types of disability because we're really interested in launching educational campaigns. And I know for myself recently with the activity leaders, we had a training day for, for them to kind of learn new skills for the job, I suppose and one of those things was I had to go around and train them up on being aware of accessibility when they're dealing with service users, and dealing with volunteers, and just the kind of vulnerable adults or children that they might be working with. So I had to teach them about this and say, well, here's some things to be aware of, you know, at events, say if somebody is you know, say stimming, which is a self stimulatory behavior in kind of times of distress or sensory overload, things like that, just to be aware, not to draw attention to it. And just to really be respectful and show everybody dignity and say, help a wheelchair user if they seem to be struggling. So just everything like that really helps. involvement from the disabled community because they know that there is acceptance, they know there is accommodation for whatever need they may have. And that the activity leaders are aware of their disabilityand so are the other volunteers. So there won't be any judgment, there won't be any kind of misunderstanding or stigma around their disability.

Harry 15:11

Has there been any, like, real tangible differences that you've noticed to the society? Since you've brought in all these inclusivity measures?

Hannah 15:19

I guess it depends on what you define as tangible. I think it's really more of the emotional sort of difference. I don't know if Niamh would like to comment on that, because he would be more involved in that side of things.

Niamh 15:35

Yeah, something that I noticed is just that, and I definitely have had more disabled students come up to me. And to say that, like, they're very interested in getting involved and that they've heard that we're an accessible society. So that, for me has been a huge difference, and especially after Hannah and myself spoke at the disability service orientation this year, and that was just before the first year Freshers Week. And I had so many students come up to me and said that they heard us both speak at the disability service orientation. So that was so promising. And that was fantastic. Because I feel like, you know, it would be rare, I think, at an activity that a volunteer would disclose that they have a disability. But I find that since making the society more openly accessible, and like being more vocal about the improvements that we're trying to make about accessibility, I definitely have had more students who have come up to me and have said, Hey, I actually have a disability. And thanks for bringing this, because it's been really helpful and stuff like that, you know. I had a volunteer who came up and you know, thanked me for like, having the tea times and stuff like that, because she was saying that with her particular disability, she find it difficult to, you know, maybe like interact with people and like chat to people. And so the tea times for her were a great way to meet other volunteers in a very casual sense before going to something else with service users, you know, and to meet people that she then you would be going to these activities. So I think for me, that's been the big thing is just the feedback from any disabled students themselves. And noticing that, like the work that we're doing, or like the ways that we're trying to make the society more accessible is actually having an effect.

Harry 17:18

Very interesting, we'll leave it there. And thanks a million guys. Thanks for coming today. And if people have any questions, if they want to reach out to you Hannah, could you give your email if they have any questions about how you implemented this?

Hannah 17:33

Yes, of course. So my email is accessibility@trinityvdp.com And you can contact me there if you have any questions at all.