

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 79: Disabled Candidates

Guests: Amanda Siebe

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, hello, hello! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. For the last four years, I've been a co-partner in Crip the Vote, which is an online movement encouraging the political participation of disabled people. Getting involved can mean voting, volunteering, attending a public meeting, or running for office. Learning about the issues counts too. Today's episode features a conversation with Amanda Siebe, a disabled candidate who ran for a congressional House seat representing District 1 in Oregon. Please note that Amanda and I spoke last year, before the recent May primary. Unfortunately, Amanda was not elected as the candidate for the Democratic general election. But you will hear about her experiences running for office, her platform, and why political change and representation is so important. Are you ready? Away we gooooo!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, Amanda, I am so delighted to have you on my podcast tonight.

AMANDA SIEBE: I'm so excited to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

ALICE: And today we wanna talk about your campaign to run for office and all about your experiences as a disabled candidate. So, to get started, why don't you just introduce yourself and tell folks a little bit about who you are.

AMANDA: All right. My name is Amanda Siebe. I am from Beaverton or Hillsboro, Oregon. I was born and raised in this district. It's been my home almost my entire life. I went to school down at Western Oregon University, and after school I decided I wanted to be a paramedic and firefighter. And so, I moved down to California to go to a paramedic program. And while I was saving up for the tuition, I actually fell at work. And what should've been a simple sprained ankle turned into full-body Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy, also known as Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, all because my employer was allowed to place more priority on their profits than they did on my functionality and quality of life. So, I had to abandon my crutches and keep working as normal. And it just got worse and worse until I went to the point that I couldn't work anymore. And I've got to see all the downfalls and all the ways that our safety net that has been there for the injured workers and for the disabled have been cut almost to the point of un-usability and

leaving so many falling through the cracks that I couldn't help but run, you know? It was something that I always wanted to do, but I never [chuckles] thought I'd ever be able to because it seemed like, you know, there were so many reasons why I wouldn't be able to. But yeah. So, now I'm taking it on and taking my wheelchair and my service dog, and I'm running for office!

Why running for the House of Representatives for Oregon?

ALICE: Yeah. And you're running for representing District 1 of Oregon. And I'm curious about why you decided to go for the House versus other offices. What drew you to represent, to wanna be part of Congress?

AMANDA: I really wanted to go for an office that would have a big impact. I mean, in Congress, we have so few disabled women. I mean, Tammy Duckworth is really our sole representative. And it's time that we had more people in Congress. And I was, in 2017, Bonamici did a deep dive into the opiate epidemic. And the opiate epidemic has caused patients who deal with chronic pain to lose their opiate pain management, which in many cases, is a life-saving medication. And Bonamici, she didn't talk to the patients that rely on these medications, and she wouldn't listen to us when we said we needed them, and instead advocated, for reductions. And I saw that as an opening. We need somebody that is better, that listens, that will take the opportunity to hear from people who are left out of the conversation systematically. And the disabled community has been left behind for way too long. So, I wanna get out there, and I wanna make disability rights front and center in the 2020 election issue.

ALICE: And who is Bonamici again?

AMANDA: Suzanne Bonamici is our representative here in Oregon, District 1. She's been in the United States House since 2012, and she is very much a centrist Democrat. And when we ask about disability rights, all she talks about are the elderly and the disabled vets. And while those are both very, very important and valued members of our community, we have such a diverse community that needs so many different changes that it's time that we addressed it.

[sound break: wind chimes ring out]

The process and costs of getting on the ballot

ALICE: What did it take for you to declare and form a campaign and just get on the ballot? Especially for people who are kind of, don't know much about what's involved, can you describe the process in terms of becoming a candidate and all the steps that you had to take?

AMANDA: Yeah, I actually started out doing a lot of this on my own. It was kind of a solo mission at first, and I've been lucky to pick up some really, really amazing volunteers along the way. But the process is, for me, I'm really lucky here in Oregon. To get on the ballot here in Oregon, you either need to pay a \$100 filing fee or collect 500 signatures. Which 500 signatures doesn't seem like much, but when you're so mobility restricted and, you know, I don't own a car. And so, getting out is really, really challenging for, in a lot of ways to get out to all parts of the district, which has presented the biggest problem for me. But since I was able to raise the funds for that \$100 filing fee pretty fast, it was amazing. I mean, I'm really lucky 'cause like Shannel Pittman down in California's District 34, I mean, her filing fee is \$1,750, and she only has a couple of weeks to raise that money. And so, I know she's really scrambling. And I know it makes it really difficult for disabled candidates in other districts who have a large filing fee or a large number of signatures that they need to collect.

ALICE: Yeah, and it's not just the filing fee, but it's also just running a campaign costs a lot of money. And as we know, even though people say how representation is so important. But for marginalized folks who are living at or near poverty, it is incredibly difficult just to have the same, you know, it's not an even playing field. So, can you speak to those kind of dynamics?

AMANDA: Yeah. It's not an even playing field at all, and that's part of the reason that I'm pushing for publicly-funded campaigns so unbelievably hard, because right now, I mean, I'm just like everybody else. I'm living off of \$735 in Social Security Disability, you know. I mean, I'm not making a dime off of this campaign, and I'm still struggling to make ends meet. And I guess if I were to give any advice to other disabled candidates, I'd say focus on your endorsements. That's where a lotta your kind of support is gonna come in. You know, focus on your endorsements.

ALICE: What were some things that really surprised you, or shall we say shocked you, about what it takes to be a candidate?

AMANDA: Honestly, I've really tried not to change me at all. I think authentic is my biggest strength. The best thing that [chuckles] Shannel and I were actually talking about this today, about ways to kind of make ourselves more accessible to people. Because sometimes when people see somebody in a wheelchair or somebody that is disabled, they feel weird about approaching us or talking to us or, you know. And so, one of the big things that I have that has made me more approachable is my service dog, Dobby. Everybody loves to see him, and it's really provided an opening. So, finding little tricks like that. It wasn't something that I was kind of expecting, you know? I mean, when I first started running, the first question I was actually asked, the very, very first question from the very first person was, "If you're disabled, how can you run for office?" I mean, we all are valuable in our own amazing way, and we just need to find what we can do. And we need to be celebrated and praised for what we can do, rather than constantly told what we can't do. And that's what I really wanna change.

ALICE: And you mentioned one of the challenges is getting out to your district and meeting folks, because you don't have a car. So, how have you been able to engage with folks? And what have you learned from your interactions with the public especially people in District 1?

AMANDA: Public transportation has been a lifesaver to me. I mean, it gives me the opportunity to go out and converse with so many different people, and at a time when they're all just kind of sitting there not doing anything else. And so, we've turned MAX rides into little community meetings because that's the time that you get the most to engage with people, when they're actually focused and can sit down and have a conversation. So, that has been a huge asset to me going out and just kind of riding public transportation around and talking to people and seeing what the issues that they face are. Because, like I said, a lotta times, people feel kinda hesitant approaching me, especially in the wheelchair. And so, anything that I can do to kinda open up that little bit of conversation and that little bit of time to kinda show them that I'm [chuckles], I'm not somebody that is just trying to run because I saw somebody else do it, and I wanna give it a try. But I am a serious candidate, and I should be taken seriously. And that's something that I'm constantly working on and trying to work, or trying to fight to do, is be seen as a legitimate candidate.

[sound break: wind chimes ring out]

Amanda's platform and hopes for election and the public's response

ALICE: What are some of the major policy priorities you have on your platform? What are the issues that are front and center and part of your campaign?

AMANDA: I mean, I'm running a social justice campaign. So, I wanna bring equality and justice to all people and not just the disabled community. I mean, the disabled community, we have so many things that we need. We need pain management and to ensure that opiate pain management is still an option for those that need it. You know, we need to make sure that Social Security Disability are all a living wage because we have 554,000 homeless people in this country. And of them, 40% are disabled and 30% are over the age of 65. And if we just start investing in people and giving them the means to live for themselves, we would make this country so much better. We also need, again, for the disabled community, we need to improve caregiver hours, which have been cut. Rare disease research. We need healthcare. Healthcare is a huge thing, and not just for the disabled. Across the board, we need universal healthcare. The Green New Deal. None of us will be living if we don't fix our climate crisis, you know. The level of incarcerated people. I mean, we have the most incarcerated people out of anywhere in this world, and it's time to fix our Department of Justice from the top down, every layer, from the people at the top all the way down to the way our policing is done. I mean, there's so many issues that need to be changed, and we have the ability now to do this. [chuckles] Trump has provided a unique situation where he has messed things up so much that we can go in and fix things the way that they need to be fixed.

ALICE: What are your hopes if you are elected? What are some things that you'd like to change?

AMANDA: My day one policies. I really want policy together that I can drop day one. And those big key three for me: I wanna ensure that pain management is taken care of. I mean, that affects so many. I mean, we have 100 million chronic pain patients across this country, and it's time that they had the treatment that they needed. Healthcare is another one. I wanna make sure that we are pushing for healthcare. I wanna make sure that we are pushing for a living wage for all people, workers and the disabled and elderly at the same time. It's wrong that we have people that are working two or three jobs just to make ends meet, or we have elderly people that are living off of \$1,000 a month or disabled people living off of \$735, you know? We need to do better for so many people across this country. And immigration is another one that we really need to address. We shouldn't have children in cages, and we shouldn't be running camps down on our border. I mean, there are ways to fix immigration that do not cause suffering and torment. And that's a lot of what I see our government causing, is a lot of suffering right now. And we need to change that.

ALICE: And what's been the response so far from not only the disability community but your district at large in terms of your campaign? And also, are there plans for a debate with you and Bonamici?

AMANDA: We are hopefully working on debates. I know the Oregon Progressive Party is helping me try to arrange debates with Bonamici. But the response has been unbelievable. I mean, like I said, I went in this as kind of a one-woman party, and now I have amazing support. And I'm flabbergasted every day by how supportive people have been. I'm amazed. I'm really thankful.

ALICE: So, let's talk about money again because I think there is a lot of, it's not an even playing field, and it's a real thing that people need to stay alive in terms of to keep their campaign afloat.

So, what's been the response in terms of the challenges you've faced when it comes to fundraising?

AMANDA: Fundraising is the biggest challenge I've had out of all of the problems. [chuckles] I mean, fundraising is the hardest. I mean, you know very well our community is extremely poor, and it's really, really hard until you have at least a few big endorsements under you to get that being taken serious as a candidate. And so, it has been a challenge, and it's one that I really hope to overcome, you know. And it's one that we shouldn't have, which again, is why publicly-funded elections are so unbelievably important. Because with publicly-funded elections, candidates like me would have that level playing field that we need so badly.

Political inspirations and getting involved

ALICE: I know that in our #CripTheVote interview with you, you mentioned that Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is somebody that you admire. So, can you speak a little bit on that in terms of people who are currently in office that really inspire you?

AMANDA: Oh, man. Yeah, I mean, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley are really the reason that I am running. I mean, without those four amazing women getting into office, it wouldn't have opened the door that it did for me to get into office. But Bernie Sanders is what really got me seeking a better political change. I mean, I'd always been working as an activist and helping my community, working on the tenants' union and for social change. But I never saw politics as a legitimate, possible, tangible future for me. But when Bernie started encouraging us to get involved and to be part of the change that really spoke to me. And that was something that is incredibly important to me. I've always been one that has been harping on leading by example. And that's always something I've strived to do, and that's something that he preaches unlike none other, and I respect more than anything.

[sound break: wind chimes ring out]

ALICE: I guess that's another thing about politics is that a lotta people have a lot of distaste for it.

AMANADA: Mmhmm.

ALICE: You know, they find it very slimy, problematic—

AMANDA: [laughs]

ALICE: —corrupt. And—

AMANDA: Divisive.

ALICE: Absolutely. So, for people who have this, I think, very legitimate aversion to politics, and you could say, political participation in general, what would you say is the importance of political participation, even with all of the grossness that's involved? But why is it important for you as an individual?

AMANDA: I mean, being involved politically, we, here in America, we have such an amazing opportunity to be part of that process at any level we want to, whether it's local, state, or federal. You know, we have that ability. And even though they've made it challenging and they've made it harder and there's so many biases, it's an amazing process, and it leads to real change. And we have a social obligation to get involved. And part of what makes politics such an icky, yicky,

divisive issue is that our politicians don't look like us. They don't represent us. They don't speak for us. They very much represent themselves in their own little worldview, and they occasionally throw us a bone. And that's not how it should be. And the only way we can change things and make it less yucky and make it less divisive is if we use our voice and we use our vote and we get involved and we make that change and we demand better. 'Cause change starts small, but it gets so big, so fast!

ALICE: I really appreciate that. And as we wrap up our interview, I think there may be people listening right now that are curious, and yet, they don't know where to start. So, just from your own life story, what's your advice for people who just kinda wanna dip their toes and just get more involved in their communities? What are some things that you could suggest?

AMANDA: Start small. Like I said, small turns into big change really fast. Find an issue that is important to you, whether it's disability rights, environmental activism, social justice. Find something that really speaks to you, and then do your research. Find a group that's near you. Find other like-minded individuals. If there's not a group near you, then start one. That's the best way to organize change, is to find people that are of the common mindset and start working on it. Find an issue you love and just decide what needs to be changed and just start going for it. I mean, start local and move up from there. The only way we can make things better is if we try.

ALICE: Yep. And I think that really well-worn quote that, "all politics are local," it's so true.

AMANDA: Mmhmm. Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Amanda at my website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Bye!!!!