

Kristi Avalos

Founder and CEO of Accessology

Interview conducted by

Amanda Moore

In 2016 in McKinney, Texas

Disability Studies Minor

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Biography

Kristi Avalos was born in upstate New York in 1960 and lived in Iowa, Florida, and Texas throughout her life. She started working with people with disabilities in 1977 when she worked at a convalescent home for children. After a specific night helping these children, she decided that she was meant to help people. She was hired by American Airlines and helped them implement the ACAA (Air Carrier Accessibility Act) for the company.

While Avalos was working for American Airlines, she started Accessology in 1990. In 1994, Avalos decided to quit American Airlines because she was working on a large product deal for her company. Once that deal fell through, she accepted Baylor Hospitals in Dallas as her first client. She assessed their properties and helped them decide what needed to be changed for better access. After that, Accessology specifically dealt with helping companies understand the compliance and laws associated with access.

Currently, Accessology helps countries set their minimum standards for access as well as helping American Title 2 institutions with their transition plans and inspections (Title 2 institutions include school districts, city governments, and universities). Avalos trains future designers about federal laws in order to help them understand the laws and protect themselves from lawsuits.

Topics discussed

- Working in a Convalescent Home
- Working at American Airlines
- Helping to create the ACAA
- Starting Accessology
- ABLE Office (a program meant to help people with disabilities in an office environment) and Georgia Tech

- First Client with Baylor Hospitals
 - Licensing with Texas/RAS (Registered Accessibility Specialist)
 - Helping Title 2 Entities
 - State and Federal Compliances
 - Training staff and future Designers
 - Writing disability legislation for Peru
 - National and international attitudes about disability
 - Visiting India
 - Visiting a leper colony
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Moore

This is Amanda Moore interviewing Kristi Avalos for the University of Texas at Arlington Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is April 26th 2016 and I am at Accessology in McKinney, Texas. I am here today to talk with Kristi Avalos about her involvement with helping businesses become accessible to everyone with disabilities. Thank you for participating in the university's oral history program.

Avalos

My pleasure.

Moore

We'll just start with the basics; where are you from, when you were born, and anything about your family.

Avalos

I was born in upstate New York, just outside of Syracuse. April 24th 1960. I just had a birthday two days ago.

Moore

Woooooo! Happy birthday!

Avalos

Thanks! So, I am 56. I've been doing disabilities issues since 1977. I was 17 when I first started.

Moore

Oh, wow.

Avalos

<topic>Working in a Convalescent Home</topic>

I was born in upstate New York, then I went to college in Des Moines, Iowa, then I moved to Orlando, Florida and then I moved to Texas. I've had four separate lives. In Iowa while I

was in college— I started college when I was 16— so in my second year in college, I worked at a place that was a convalescent home for children. There were kids, ages infant to 17, who have been institutionalized because of their disability, which was common back then. I fell in love with the kids. There was one little girl on this one particular day, I can tell you it was February 12th 1977. On this one particular day, there was this little girl. Her name was Sherry. She was 4 years old. She had multiple disabilities undiagnosed. When they introduced me to her, they said that she'll never walk. My first thought was "how do you know?"

That night I was giving Sherry her bath and getting her ready. There was a little boy named Shawn who was 2 years old, born without eye lids. I've never seen anybody since, or even up to that point. I've never seen anybody else born without eye lids. He had these big, piercing blue eyes with no eye lids whatsoever. They had just done a surgery and they took a piece of skin and brought it down on each side of his cornea. He had a tracheotomy, I can't remember exactly why he had that trach.

That night I was taking Sherry into her bath and when I went by Shawn's crib, he was batting at this little mobile. I just sort of tickled his toes and went on by and took care of Sherry and got her to bed. I came back, his pillow was wet, which means he had been laying there crying. Because his face was so... there was no emotion to it really. I missed it. I figure when there's phlegm in the trach tube that needs to be suctioned and it burns. I suctioned his trach tube out and then I just sat there and held him. I thought, sometimes I think my problems are so huge but [this] little boy tried to get my attention the only way he knew how, which was batting at that mobile and I missed it completely. I felt horrible. I rocked him until he fell sleep. The only reason he was there is because you had to lubricate his eyes every 15 minutes because he didn't blink. His parents worked, so he was only there Monday through Friday. His parents picked him up on Friday and brought him home for the weekends. Whereas some of the kids, once they were dropped off nobody ever came to visit them.

That same night, there was a little 13 year old who had muscular dystrophy and his name was Larry. He kind of had a little crush on me. Sometimes I'd stay after work and play cards with him, that kind of thing. We were playing cards and listening to the radio and he was stretching to turn the radio up. I said "do you want me to get that?" And he said "no, no. I'll do it." He wanted to do as much as he could for as long as he could. He remembered walking. When I first met him, he was in a manual wheelchair. This was just three days after he had gone into a power wheelchair because he had a progressive disease.

We were talking that night, he said "I think I'm— we were listening to the radio— I think I'm going to be a DJ when I grow up." I said "why Larry, you like the radio?" He goes, "well not really." I'm like, "well why do you want to be a disc jockey?" He said "well, let's face it. What I really want to be is a pro football player and we all know that's not going to happen." There was just something about that day with those kids that pierced my heart. There were little boys and girls that had hopes and dreams and goals and desires. Because of whatever was going on in their world, they were placed in an institution and most of them forgotten about. It was that night that... with my belief system I feel like God just said your job is to break down barriers for people with disabilities and I've done it ever since. It's been since 1977.

<topic>Working at American Airlines</topic>

I didn't know what it meant at first. I felt compelled to read stories into [a] tape recorder for kids who were blind. I learned just basic sign language. The alphabet and that kind of thing

to teach to kids who were deaf. In '82, I got hired by American Airlines. I became all about what happened, both to our employees that were disabled. How is American treating them?

The building that I was in had these two areas on each side of the building where you'd go down 4 steps and that's where all the vending machines were. That's where the smoking lounge was for employees. We had an employee who was in a wheelchair who obviously couldn't go down those steps. Her only option was to... you only had a 15 minute break, but her only option was to go down in the elevator all the way outside. She was a smoker. Although I've never been a smoker, nor do I ever want to be, she had rights just like the other people who smoked. By the time she got all the way downstairs and out, it was pretty much time to come back and get up to your position because your 15 minute break was up.

I just started noticing things like that. Nobody was championing the issue. Nobody was saying "hey these people matter." Back then they were hidden, where they are not supposed to be outside. We assumed that they were sick. It was... It was heart wrenching. These are human beings. It became a passion. At American Airlines, we had to implement a thing called the Air Carrier Access Act, which is the airline version of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] I worked with the airlines to get that implemented. Every American Airlines flight had movable arm rests and it has board on wheelchairs.

When American decided that they were done with that project and I wasn't (small laughter), I left them completely and started this company. Accessology is all about access. I kind of take the bridge. There's the us versus them, us the abled body versus them the disabled. I tried to pull those together and remove that us versus them. Any one of us could join. The disability minority is the only minority that any one of us can join at any time. It doesn't matter what color your skin is, it doesn't matter who you know, how much money you make, where you live. Any one of us can join at any time.

Moore

Absolutely. At any point in time. That's the crazy part.

Avalos

Yep. That's what's one of the things that unique about the disability minority. The other thing that's unique is that it's the only minority that can be discriminated against based on the built environment. One step says you're not welcome. We've built our company around helping people understand that, helping people make good decisions that include everybody in their community.

Moore

Absolutely.

Avalos

That's the *Reader's Digest*, condensed version. (laughter)

Moore

Well that's great. Do you mind telling me a little bit more about your experience with ACAA and how that went about and everything. How it got started and everything with you?

Avalos

<topic>Helping to create the ACAA</topic>

Sure. Because I worked for American, we did a lot of legislative work. American was the largest, still the largest airline. We worked with the Year? Transport Association back then. My job initially, I started out in customer service—well I started out in reservations and then I went to reservation's customer service. Then I became the medical acceptance coordinator. I made the arrangements for all of the wheelchairs, if people needed a wheelchair on a connection, I made sure the wheelchairs got to the connection for them. We did stretchers and therapeutic oxygen and all that stuff. I was in the medical acceptance role. Because I already had a passion for the disabled, when they started throwing out questions to the airlines that built up to what the Air Carrier Access Act now is. I did a lot of the answering and the correspondents on behalf of American because I kind of understood the issues. Once it had actually come out,... It came out simultaneously to ADA, it came out in 1990. They started an interior group called the ADA Disability Task Force at American Airlines. I was the second in charge on that particular project.

We had a daunting task of educating the airline, which meant all of the pilots, all of the flight attendants, all of the customer contact employees. All 7,000 employees. We wrote a training program and we went to all of our major hubs and all of the customer contact people had to come to the training. We had to do, the Air Carrier Access Act called for a carrier program. That carrier program basically said here is how American is going to respond to this law. It gave them everything from, yes, we are going to accept wheelchairs on the plane. We had to redesign some of the airplanes to have room for the board on wheelchair. We had to redesign some of them for some accessible restroom options for the twin aisle aircraft. All of that was part of the Air Carrier Access Act. As long as we had a list of things to do... once that list was done, then American shut down the task force. That's when I decided that I really had a passion for it and I wanted to do it full time. I figured people were going to pay somebody, it may as well be somebody who actually cared.

Moore

Right?

Avalos

That's how Accessology got started.

Moore

I mean, it's groundbreaking. There's not really anything that I found like it. Yours is the one company that seems... that's very interesting.

Avalos

Yeah. It is a very unique, very niche market. There are some architectural firms and some engineering firms who try to do what they can do, just to capture some of the market. But I found that the most successful people, the most successful companies in this arena are the ones who have the passion for the issue and not the passion for the dollar.

Moore

Absolutely.

Avalos

That's kind of been our... I wouldn't say it's a motto but it's our growth. Our whole strategy has been, you have to have a passion.

Moore

It's the heart.

Avalos

<topic>Starting Accessology</topic>

It is, it is. It's the heart. It's going home at night and know that what you do actually makes a difference. That became important to me because as much as I loved working for American Airlines, there was no mistake I was a butt in the chair. If my butt wasn't in that chair, somebody else's butt would be in that chair. You're a number when you work for a large corporation. I wanted to know that what I did actually mattered. So Accessology was born out of passion. We've had good years and bad years, like any company. Ups and downs, but I love what I do and that's all that matters to me.

Moore

I've seen when I looked [you] up before that you worked for the Department of Transportation. Is that true?

Avalos

(makes a noise to indicate no)

Moore

That's what I thought. I only saw it in one place, so I was like "I'm going to ask about it, just in case."

Avalos

Yeah.

Moore

It sounded interesting. Why don't you tell me about starting Accessology, like when you started it and the issues and the great things you had to go through when getting it started?

Avalos

<topic>ABLE Office (a program meant to help people with disabilities in an office environment) and Georgia Tech</topic>

Okay. It's kind of interesting because I always knew I wanted to deal with access issues. I was working at American still and I went to a conference. In that conference, there was this thing called ABLE Office. ABLE Office was a computerized office system that... where someone with a high level quadriplegic, who is a high level quadriplegic, would be able to work independently in an office environment. It fascinated me.

One of my closest friends is a high level quadriplegic. I think about Carl at work. Carl's hands are permanently straight; he has no functional use of his hands at all. He is Deputy Attorney General for the state of California. He went through college and law school as a quadriplegic. Yet he can't turn a page himself. This product made me think of Carl. I started talking to the person who had the product and I found out that it was developed at Georgia Tech. One of the things that Georgia Tech does is they develop a product and get it to a certain point and they sell it. This was one of their development products. The guy called me about three weeks later and said, "we are at the point where we want to sell this." They sell both the manufacturing and the marketing rights. I went, I can handle marketing but I don't know anything about manufacturing. He goes, we have to sell them together because if we don't have anybody manufacturing it, there's nothing to market. Well that makes sense. I said let me think about it for a little while.

Two weeks later, I was on a plane going to Tampa and the guy I sat next to was the President of the Federal Prison Industry System. I thought this was interesting. We talked the entire time. His name was Bill Valentine. We talked the entire time about ABLE Office and it becoming a product that could be manufactured throughout the prison system. He said they love, love to have products like that because it teaches them about people with disabilities. It teaches them something that has heart to it. There's a whole industry inside of the Federal Prison System. He was telling me that this was the perfect product.

A couple of weeks later, I'm flying up to Washington D.C. and I'm talking to this guy about them having the manufacturing rights and me doing the marketing. We put this deal together and we take it to Georgia Tech. We have this red line thing going back and forth. You do this, we'll do that. Of course I had our attorney looking at it and after it had gone back and forth. Right about this point I decide it's time to leave American. I got something big that I've got to deal with here. I had been with American... I had gone to part time nights so I could build my business during the day.

In June of 1993 is when I decided to leave American altogether. About four days later, the contract came back from Georgia Tech. They had done something that my attorney was very angry about. They made a major change to the contract but didn't red line it. If he hadn't have read every word, we wouldn't have caught it. He looked at me and said "you do not want to get into business with somebody who would do that." It would have greatly benefited them and really had been a detriment to us. The fact that they didn't red line it, he felt was shady and said you do not want to do this. The whole thing fell apart.

Here I was. I had just quit American. I had this big carrot dangled in front of me and then I went "Well, okay. Now what?" I had actually started the company name Accessology back in 1990. In November of '90 is when I started the company name but it was just a shell of a company at that point until I figured out what Accessology was going to be. I thought it was going to be ABLE Office and that type of product.

<topic>First Client with Baylor Hospitals</topic>

About two days after that happened, the entire Baylor Hospital System in downtown Dallas, all five hospitals, called me and said, "I heard you understand a lot about accessibility. We need you to do an assessment of our entire complex and help us figure out what we need to do." I'm like, "okay." I had not a clue what I was doing but I spent the next seven months looking at everything in every hospital. I put together a report for them. They were thrilled with the information. Accessology was born from that. They made a public comment on how they enjoyed working with me and how knowledgeable I was and I didn't even know I had that kind of knowledge.

They recommended me to my next big client and I never advertised. People just started coming out of the woodwork. That's why I said everything I do is faith based. I feel like it was put in my lap and I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to do.

Moore

That's awesome!

Avalos

Accessology has grown. We have done some of the largest projects. We did the new Dallas Cowboy Stadium and the new Parkland Hospital. We've done some really cool projects. It's a passion.

Moore

Of course. It sounds like that's all you, is passion. I like that. That's awesome.

Avalos

Then I got to point where I needed some help, so I hired an admin person to handle certain things. In 1994, the state of Texas decided they were going to implement the Texas version of ADA. We had at the time the law was article 9102 of the Texas statutes that was the law. Then we had the Texas Disabilities Standards. The state had decided that they wanted to be the leader. They set up the plan review and inspection program where everything that was 50,000\$ or more in construction costs had to be reviewed for accessibility. Once it was built, it had to be inspected. That process still goes on today.

<topic>Licensing with Texas/RAS (Registered Accessibility Specialists)</topic>

You have to have a license with the state of Texas and I was actually in the first class that went through this. Back then, we were called ICPs, which were independent contractor providers. Now they call them RASes, which is registered accessibility specialists. There's a long history into that as well. That came out in April of '94. In February of '94, the head of the program at the time came to me and said we are getting ready to do this; I would love for you to be involved. We worked with; it's called the TDLR, Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, and got this process going.

They originally were going to have each city do their own plan reviews and inspections but the cities weren't interested. They decided that they would open it up to individuals. I'm licensed, I have several licensed Rases here in the company. That's what they do is the plan reviews and inspections. At one point in 2008 decided to change directions. January of 2009 we went down. We went from 22 people down to 4 people and now we are back up to 11 and we're growing. We went down to change direction.

<topic>Helping Title 2 Entities</topic>

Although we still do RAS work, our big focus now is helping Title 2 entities, which are school districts, universities, and municipalities develop their transition plan. They're all required to have them but none of them do. They're starting to get denied federal funding, federal grants and things like that for not having a transition plan. As soon as I saw that was coming on the horizon, we changed directions.

Moore

That was smart.

Avalos

We do a lot of ADA transition plans. We are one of the few in the country that even know what a transition plan is.

Moore

That's so interesting though. I never would have thought about that.

Avalos

Nobody I know does, and I think that is why we are successful because nobody thinks about making a business out of something like this, and yet it is necessary. These transition plans, we've done big ones like the Oklahoma Department of Transportation. We looked at every ODOT building, every maintenance shop, every weight station, every welcome center, every sidewalk, every intersection, over 18,000 intersections.

Moore

That's a lot.

Avalos

We looked at absolutely everything that was either built, owned or operated by Oklahoma Department of Transportation. That was phase 1. Phase 2 was taking all of that data and prioritizing it and categorizing it. Phase 3 is going to be implementing recommendations from all of that data that was collected. Now we are doing the Tennessee Department of Transportation and we are doing city of Coppell [in Texas]. We helped with the city of McKinney. We did Bryan and College Station. We did Frisco. We're talking now with Irving and Plano. They all need them. All these cities need them, all these universities need them, and all of the school districts need to have these transition plans. That's our primary focus right now.

Moore

Sounds like you're going to have a lot of work coming up then, huh? (laughter)

Avalos

It does. As a matter of fact, I just got back from New York City. We met with the New York-New Jersey Port Authority. They own all five airports, Kennedy, LaGuardia, Stewart, Newark, and there's one more, I can't remember the name of it. They have five airports, they have the port, they have all of the tunnels. They have a subway system, it's not the New York subway, but there's a subway system that they have that has 38 stops to it. We met with the Port Authority and New York City Transit Authority, which is the subway. We're looking at possibly getting some pretty big contracts out of New York.

Moore

Wow. You're just all over the place. You pretty much are like the only one in the nation, one of the very few.

Avalos

Yeah, we are one of the few. It's a very niche market. There's architectural firms and engineering firms that have some people who are dedicated to access, but as far as a company that does nothing but what we do, I don't know that there are others. There are some nonprofits that will do some of the work. There are individuals here and there, but as far as making a full company out of it, I'm not sure that I know of any others that are like ours.

Moore

You were telling me a little about it already. What is the experience like working on the state and federal level of all the compliances? How does that work for you?

Avalos

<topic>State and Federal Compliances</topic>

You have to be able to change hats. We specialize in ADA, and ADA has its own set of guidelines. Then there's Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and that still affected Title 2 entities today. It affects school districts and colleges and universities. There's the Fair Housing Act, which is a whole 'nother animal. There is the Texas requirements, every state has its own state requirements. We have to stay on top of all of those. When we are doing work in Florida, we have to look at the Florida State law and we have to look at the federal laws. You have to implement the strictest of each. We've gotten very good at knowing what laws are in effect in what state. It is kind of a juggling act.

<topic>Training staff and future Designers</topic>

I usually in training people, train them to get really good in one law and then we can expand it to another law. If you try to train them on all of them, it's way too difficult to keep them separated. A lot of times, we'll get calls and people go, "well I was told that under Fair Housing Act I don't have to do this." You don't under Fair Housing, but you are using state money and therefore under State Residential Code, you have to do this. It becomes almost an art of knowing which laws are going to apply, where's the funding coming from, who's responsible. It does get confusing. There isn't a good way to train on that, it's more of a "follow me." I'll do some of these and you watch and then we'll pass it off for you to do because they have to get their hands and their brain wrapped around it before they can really do anything.

People think as long as I meet this law, then I'm okay. Well, no. I always tell people that the risk is at the federal level because that's where all the lawsuits come through. There's the federal court system. ADA has attorney's fees built right into it. People don't sue under the state law because really the state law is a construction law. The federal law is the one where they're vulnerable. ADA has no punitive or compensatory damages but 504 does.

Helping them understand where the risks are, I see a lot of what we do as risk management. You are more likely to get sued over this issue than this issue, so let's fix this one first. If you only have a dollar to spend, let's figure out where's the smartest place to spend that dollar. That makes us somewhat popular because we're not coming in saying "you have to spend a million dollars today." We are coming and saying what do you have

and where should we spend it. That helps them understand that we're working with them and not against them.

Moore

I read that you love training. (laughter)

Avalos

Yeah, I do.

Moore

What is your favorite part about training and helping others understand the compliance and all the laws?

Avalos

There is a point in every training class that I do where the lightbulb comes on. You have people come in with their arms folded, "I have to go through another training class. Ugh." Then all of a sudden, that light comes on, their arms unfold, they get interested in the topic. They start recognizing that this is more than a law that the government is telling us to do something, it actually has meaning and has purpose and it effects people.

When I'm talking to architects, I get them to see that what they do matters. By the design of the building, they either welcome somebody or they turn them away and by the design of the building, somebody can either have a good experience or a bad experience. They see that the control is in their hands. That what they do makes a big difference. I love to see that lightbulb come on. I think that's probably my favorite part.

The other part is, it's a dry topic. When you have a dry topic, federal regulations... A lot of times you go to these classes and you listen to people sit and drone over... my background, I did stand-up comedy for a few years so I bring humor into it. I like to watch people get engaged in what is happening. Like I said, they always start out with (sighs). I even say that, I'm like okay how many people here wish they could fake their death? They are like, ugh, I don't want to talk about ADA for eight hours. At the end of it, they'll come up to me and they'll go, I really enjoyed this. I like to turn them. That's probably my own little secret thing while I'm doing the class, it's like I'm going to turn that guy. That guy, he doesn't like ADA. They come in hating the law. That's probably why I love training. I love watching that change.

Moore

Have you ever had a difficult training session?

Avalos

Oh, yeah. You have people who absolutely hate the law. They want to argue with you about every bit of it. To which I tell them, I didn't write the law, I am teaching you about the law. So you can either learn it and keep yourself protected as a design professional or you can continue fighting with me about it, but you are not going to learn anything and you are not going to know how to keep protected. Then you are going to have to call me when you get sued. I do expert witnessing on ADA cases, or access cases of all types. I would rather work

with you now and teach you how to stay out of the courtroom than have to meet you in the courtroom later on. Sometimes that will turn them around. It's a modernized version of "don't shoot the messenger." I'm just trying to tell you what you need to know, and if you don't want to know it...

Moore

I'm just trying to keep you from hurting yourself. (laughter)

Avalos

Right.

Moore

If you are going to keep doing it then...

Avalos

Yep. The doors aren't locked. If you want to leave, you are absolutely welcome to leave.

Moore

What would you say, since you love training, that you don't like about training? Just little aspects about training that you would change this about it if I can.

Avalos

I would say the only thing that I don't like is when I stop to give them a break, it is usually because I have to go to the bathroom, but they all come up to talk to me during the break. It's like, you guys don't understand. My bladder gets full too. (laughter) That's the only thing. If I have somebody come with me like Alicia or somebody from my staff comes with me, I tell them ahead of time, hey can you help make sure I get a break? (more laughter) Because I'm talking so much during, I'm always drinking water. So when we take a break, I want a break. (more laughter) That's the only thing that gets somewhat uncomfortable because people come up and I don't want to turn them away and I'm answering their questions and all of a sudden the break's over and I'm like dang. (small laughter)

Moore

Be like, I have to extend this break because I have to go to the bathroom. (laughter)

Avalos

Especially if we... If the training is in a hotel and everybody goes to the restaurant to eat, then they want to sit at the table and they want to talk business through the whole lunch. I'm like I really want to rest my brain too. (laughter) I always try to wait until everybody's seated and then sneak in somewhere. Not that I don't want to be social, I'm very social. It's just that sometimes I'm trying to plan what's going to happen next or I'm trying to look up questions that they asked in the beginning. I just need a little bit of time.

Moore

Yeah, you need a break.

Avalos

Yeah, exactly.

Moore

Everybody kind of needs a break. That was all the information that I at least researched about you. Is there anything that you would like to share with me? Anything that I did not touch on, a story that you want to share?

Avalos

I'd love for you to understand that it started in the U.S. but it's spreading to other countries. The international aspect of it is fascinating. We were honored and blessed to be able to write the disability legislation for the country of Peru.

Moore

Oh really?

Avalos

<topic>Writing disability legislation for Peru</topic>

It was a very, very cool experience. It was an unbelievable story. It's one of those stories that I couldn't make up if I tried to because I'm not that creative. (laughter) That was a really, really cool project. From there, the World Bank and the United Nations decided that they were going to do an amendment to the 1968 Human Rights Treaty. It had been amended a number of times over years, but they wanted to include people with disabilities. The eventual outcome they really wanted was, so that no World Bank or United Nations' money would be spent to rebuild any country unless that country's minimum access standard was met.

We had Iran and Iraq, those both had a coalition the rebuilding of Afghanistan and the rebuilding of Iraq. It was a really cool program to include people with disabilities. Some of these countries, these war-torn countries, they have a lot of people with disabilities. They pretty much become second class citizens. As a matter of fact, in most countries people are considered damaged and they become the property of their family and their family gets to decide if they are going to nurse them back to health or let them die. That's really the way that it is in most countries.

They realized that not every country had a minimum access standards at all. They put together a team of people and looked at every country and put them into two categories. Either they had one or they didn't. If they didn't, then they would assign an access code based on similar attributes or similar areas. Finally, in August of 2010, that started in 1998, in August of 2010 they got that signed. Right now, both the World Bank and the United Nations will not lend money unless access is something that is included into the rebuilding. We got a set of plans back in, gosh maybe 2005, for the first fully accessible school in Afghanistan. That was really cool. There was a guy who was using some World Bank money who was building 18 orphanages in Ethiopia. All of those were built accessible. It's just cool to see that there is some international reach that I think is going to continue for many, many years.

Moore

Your company is definitely transnational. (laughter)

Avalos

Yeah, it is. I love doing international work because until I went to Peru the first time, I never even thought about access outside the U.S. You get to a Third World country like that, and there is nothing. We've been to India now. It's really interesting to see how people are treated. As a matter of fact, if you ever get a chance look up or go to Youtube or the internet for Nick Vujicici.

Moore

How would I spell that?

Avalos

V-u-i-j-i-c-i. [Vujicici is the right spelling]

Moore

Okay.

Avalos

I think. I'll look it up for you before you leave.

Moore

Okay.

Avalos

<topic>National and international attitudes about disability</topic>

He was born with no arms and no legs. He went through when he was about eight years old, wanting to commit suicide. He didn't understand... Well he was in Latvia and in Latvia if a baby was born with a disability, they are taught... their belief system says that it's possessed. Therefore you can't kill it because it releases the spirit, so you have to bury them alive. They are required to bury a baby with a disability alive. He was there speaking and their government was there, there was a lot of people there. He was speaking to the whole group and this woman had a three week old baby that was disabled that she had kept hidden. She holds the baby up, and Nick waddles over on his, he calls it his chicken foot, waddles over and kisses the baby on the head. The government of Latvia decided that day you no longer had to bury babies with disabilities. Just that act changed that country forever.

It's really, really interesting because people... I can walk down the street with a friend of mine here in the United States. I can walk down the street with a friend of mine who is disabled and you will see parents take their kids across the street because they are afraid they can catch it or they are afraid their child is going to say the wrong thing or whatever.

The attitude barriers are much bigger than the architectural barriers. It's really an educational... to teach people that they are... they're people.

When I was with American, I wanted them to put people with disability in their advertisements. They went, "oh, it's so sad." I said "it's not sad, it's just a part of life." We did this filming one day and we had people with all kinds of disabilities. They wanted to use an actor with a pretend broken leg. I'm like, no we have real people with real disabilities. Let's utilize that talent. We filmed everybody but the only one that made it to the commercial was the actor with the pretend broken leg. Everybody else was edited out. That's here in the U.S. So you can imagine what it's like in some of these other countries.

It's important to me that people understand that it's not "those" people. I mean today, if we were to put up a sign in front of a restaurant that said... pick your group, African American, Gays, not welcome. The country would come down on them, but that's exactly what a step says. People with disabilities are not welcome. We don't think of it that way. That message needs to get out that they're people. They deserve to eat in your restaurant and they deserve to get their hair done and go to the doctor and all the other things.

I had a friend, she literally just passed away. She down in that lower corner (points to the bottom left corner of a large canvas collage on the wall with pictures of different people) with the silver hair. She could never get her hair done at a hair salon. The thing that was really disappointing was she had never had a mammogram. With mammograms, you have to stand up. They didn't have any equipment that would... she had polio when she was younger so she was always in a wheelchair. They didn't have any equipment that could do a mammogram for her.

It's that kind of thing that you and I don't think about. We're able bodied people and I think that's also what made my voice louder. Every time I would speak to legislators, I was there with three people in wheelchairs and two people with their sign language interpreters and their Seeing Eye dogs and here I am. People automatically assumed I had a family member or a child or somebody with a disability and I don't. It's just where my heart is. It made my voice louder because I wasn't there on a personal agenda of any type. I was looking out for all of the different groups where each group was only looking out for their own individual needs. I think that's what got me where I am in the whole disability movement.

Moore

Absolutely. Another question that I thought about. You were talking about how you work transnational, international with other countries, what has been some of the barriers, like language barriers or cultural barriers. Has there been anything like that hurt you with helping them with their own compliance?

Avalos

Language barriers can usually be overcome. One of the meetings we did in Peru, the ambassador's daughter that I was working with is deaf. She speaks Peruvian Sign Language. Sign language interpreters often interpret American Sign Language, ASL. We had people interpreting from American to Peruvian, to Peruvian Sign Language and then English to... it's actually Portuguese. It's English to Portuguese. We had different interpreters, it was crazy. We had the different interpreters that would go from English to Portuguese, to American Sign Language, to Peruvian Sign Language. It was crazy. There's no way I could have kept up with it. I just talked. (laughter) I just talked and I'm watching all this stuff going on. I had to talk really slowly, which I'm not good at doing, so it had time to get from

one translator to another so it could finally get to the right person with a right voice so whoever that happened to be. That was kind of funny.

<topic>Visiting India</topic>

My biggest heartbreak was in India. We went specifically to see how people with disabilities were treated. Their big rehab hospital... now we're talking in Mumbai, where Mumbai has millions of people. As a matter of fact, there's a slum called Deravi in Mumbai. One square mile, one million people. Just to give you an idea of the size, and their entire rehab hospital has 24 beds. 24 people get medical attention, everybody else has to either wait or go home and die. That was heart breaking.

There was a man who had fallen off some scaffolding and he had a broken back. All he wanted us to do was help him get an ice cream truck. Even though this is a slum, having an ice cream truck to be able to do something while he was disabled to make money for his family, that's all he cared about. They had three kids, in order for any of them to be in that hospital, their loved ones had to be the nurses. They didn't have nurses. His wife... they had to leave their kids with his family so his wife could be there 24/7 to serve his needs. Both of them were away from their kids while he was in rehab. Nobody was making any money, no money was coming in. The work that she was doing, helped pay for him to stay there. All he was worried about was how am I going to take care of my family.

We worked to make sure he got his ice cream truck. That's the only thing he could think of while he was in rehab. As soon as he had that truck, he relaxed and he could rehab. Until he knew how he was going to take care of his family, he could not even relax and get better. That was enlightening. He knew he was fortunate to be one of the 24 in the hospital, but he also knew something had to come afterwards. That was very enlightening. They still have things like bride burning there. We met people who were... do you know what bride burning is?

Moore

No.

Avalos

They're assigned marriages. If the male's family does not feel like the female lives up to what they should, they burn them alive. We met this woman who had been burned alive, she was all burned. That was the reason that she was disabled. She was petrified of anybody taking a picture because she didn't want her former in-laws to know she was still alive. That was enlightening.

<topic>Visiting a leper colony</topic>

The biggest thing, when we said that we wanted to visit different disability groups, we were actually taken to a... well actually there are two stories here... We were taken to a leper colony. In this leper colony, there were 6,500 people and nobody visits a leper colony. We didn't know that. They were so excited that we were coming. They assumed that we were journalists. They had the big sign that we couldn't read because it was in Hindi, but they translated for us. It said, "Welcome American Journalist!" (laughter) We met these people who lived in this leper colony their entire life. Now, leprosy's been cured. The last two generations didn't have leprosy but because they were related to people who did, they had to live in the leper colony. Nobody was allowed to live outside of that leper colony.

This particular group had found a way to make money and they did so by bootlegging alcohol. They actually had better living conditions than most of the places that we went to because they made tons of money bootlegging alcohol. One of the distributors decided that they were going to try to stretch the alcohol out and make more money. They mixed it with formaldehyde. People started going blind and dying so the government shut down their ability to sell alcohol. They ended up having to go back to begging on the streets, which is what they were trying to get away from.

It had been three years since the government said... cause people won't even buy something... it had a label on it [holding up an Ozarka 16.9 oz water bottle] that said it was made at this particular leper colony, nobody would buy it. The government said, okay make whatever you want, and then we'll label it as though it comes from the government so you guys can still make money. They were making incense, they were making mops, they were making brooms and things like that. They had this big stockpile of stuff to sell and the government hadn't actually done what they said they were going to do so they still weren't making any money.

Just watching how human beings were so ostracized just because of who their grandfather was. We met a guy, he was in his 90s that's all they really knew, one of the original lepers from that leper colony, [with] no fingers and no toes, all had been eaten by leprosy. Sweet, gentle, kind man. We weren't afraid to shake hands with him. We were the first white people since the colony was started in 1968. We were the first white people to ever shake their hands and they were flabbergasted that we weren't afraid.

It's getting to know people and their stories. They all have them, we all have stories, disabled or not. That's become part of the passion is finding the story behind the person. One of the places we went to in India was a... it was really a sweatshop. They called it an opportunity for people with disabilities to have a job. They made greeting cards and they made all kinds of things at this place. They were all kinds of people with physical disabilities. They weren't getting paid, it was a sweatshop. The one who ran it was very proud of the product they put out but he wasn't paying people to be there. He was just giving them something to do during the day.

Moore

Right.

Avalos

There's so much stuff like that where people with disabilities will settle for less than what anybody else would settle for because they've been told that they should expect less. My message is that they should expect no less. Whether you see, whether you hear, whether you walk, you're still valued.

Moore

You can do just as many things as me, it's just all about the access.

Avalos

Right, and it's all about the attitude. I was standing one time at Grand Central Station up on an elevated platform looking down at all those people. You could see from an elevated area the people in wheelchairs and it just hit me that day that every single person has a story.

Disabled or not, we're all here at this point in time, at this day for a reason. Somebody has something they are looking forward to, somebody has something they are dreading, somebody has something they are upset about, somebody has an upcoming wedding. They have all these different things and we look at them differently because...

Moore

It's not us.

Avalos

Yeah. They don't look the same, they don't do things the same. There's a fear of the unknown. I get questions all the time about... well like my friend Carl. "How does he go to the bathroom?" Is that really any of your business? Why are you thinking about that? (laughter)

Moore

I do [use the bathroom], that's all that matters. (more laughter) I'm still a human being, I still have to do that.

Avalos

Yeah, it's interesting, our fear of people who are different.

Moore

That sounds wonderful. This was amazing. Thank you so much for speaking with me.

Avalos

It was absolutely my honor.