Pre-episode Intro

Tanner: We have totally blind screen reader instructors, we have sighted instructors, and we have sighted assistants throughout the program to make sure that you've got everything you need to succeed.

Chris: This is the Penny Forward podcast, a show about blind people building bright futures one penny at a time. I'm Chris Peterson.

Liz: I'm Liz Bottner.

Chris: And today's guest is Tanner Gears from Accessibility officer. I've known Tanner for a while now, through beep baseball and some other things, and I am really excited about his company. Because we all know that the underemployment rate in the blind community is shockingly high, and they're working really hard to put blind people into gainful employment, and to show blind people how to go about getting hired, among other things. So I'm really excited to hear about how Tanner's company got started, and how you might be able to take advantage of it if you're looking to increase your income and work in the accessibility testing field, and also some of his thoughts about how to go about getting hired. Tanner, thanks for being here.

Tanner: Chris, thank you so much, truly an honor, I'm really excited. Thank you.

Chris: Thank you. Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your blindness?

Tanner: Yeah. I'm totally blind. I wasn't born blind. I was in a really bad auto accident as an adult. I'd just turned twenty-one. I was in the enlistment process for the military. This was way back in, uh, 2003. My accident was early 2004. And, um, I woke up in the hospital. A tree came through my windshield, hit me in the face, and I just had a, you know, a broken back, a traumatic brain injury, that's how I lost my sight, and a bunch of other health complications, and, um, yeah. So I'm, I'm totally blind today.

Chris: Can you talk about what it was like to reinvent yourself after that, I mean 'cause that was a , an overnight kind of a change, right? So there must have had, had to have been a lot of relearning involved.

Tanner: Yeah. A tremendous amount of relearning, and, you know, acceptance, and, you know, it was just, there was a lot of things going on at that time. So just to give like background context, I, I was in a, a life threatening situation. I didn't even know that I was gonna live. You know, my accident was in March, I didn't know I was gonna live until February of 2005. So, but, at the same time, I'm like, I feel like I've wasted the first twenty-one years of my life. I didn't understand really, and, and so psychologically, I'm managing that. Right, that, downward spiral internally. That depressive kind of mindset of, like, I didn't appreciate the luxury, the privilege, the opportunity, the intelligence, the capacity that I had to really do anything with my life. I, I just, took it for granted. And so when I woke up totally blind, I have nothing to my name. You know, I feel worthless, meaningless, hopeless, my life is over. And, so, I was motivated by the idea that it could always be worse, and that, "I know I'm going to see again one day. And when I do see again one day, it would be a shame if I look back and did nothing with myself." So I've always been motivated by that, and, um, you know, before I knew about Jaws, before I ever heard about a screen reader, before I ever took O and M, before I knew anything about anything, about being blind, I enrolled in school, and before I knew I was gonna live, I enrolled in school. I just knew that, "Hey, I don't know what I'm gonna do, but as a high school graduate who's blind in 2005, 2004, like, I have to do something." So, that's how I got started.

Liz: What was the one thing that connected you at first to the blind community, and resources? Or did you have one thing that connected you? Or was, was that something that you yourself had to find out on your own, or, or did you have help with that?

Tanner: My mom introduced me to some resources initially. I was in a um, like an elderly acceptance group for visual impairment with one of the local agencies, right, where most of the community is people who are aging into blindness. And no one there was totally blind, right, everybody had, you know, was very high partial, and, not anything that could relate to me, right? I'm twenty-one years old. But, that kind of got me into, like the vocational rehabilitation pipe line. And, I'd never met a, a blind person before that moment. And, um, I think the first blind person that I like really met that made me understand that this was gonna be possible was my first vocational rehabilitation counselor. You know, very motivated, very charismatic, communicative, totally blind, just go getter. And, then, you know, the, I think the next thing that really helped me understand like "this is possible for me," even though it wasn't a significant sum, was just holding my first paycheck as a blind person. And I'm like, "I'm going to make it."

Chris: Wow. That is, uh, pretty profound. So, you found out you were blind, you didn't know what you were gonna do, but you enrolled in school, can you kind of give us a snapshot of what has occurred over the last twenty years with your education, your career, even any other details you think are important for us to know about the journey from then to now?

Tanner: Yeah. I think the big thing is like, I'm gonna set the context for this. It really takes I'm in the perspective of like knowing that it can always be worse, and being a half glass full type of person, but you just have to find the blessings. And I can share one that just happened to me this past weekend, and I can share the one, uh, that helped me find what rock bottom really feels like, and when you're at rock bottom, that means there's only, only up. And, and when you've lost everything, and you're down to nothing, it gives you the courage to go through the darkness, through the depths of the blackness, internally and externally. Right, to just find the light. To find a way forward. And it does take winning or learning. Right, it's not about losing; it's about winning or learning. And I've learned a lot, and so, across these learnings, I got my first guide dog. So, I went blind in my accident was May of 2004. I got out of the hospital in May of 2004. I found out I was gonna, I enrolled in school in August of two thousand and four. I found out I was gonna survive in February of two thousand and five. I went into independent living school, I graduated April 14, 2005. April 15, 2005, I sign my lease on my first place. July of 2005, I get a guide dog at Guide Dogs for the Blind. August 2005, I'm enrolled at University of Arizona full time, living on my own. May of 2006, I get my first job. It was May of 2006 I get my first paycheck. May of 2008, I find out about beep baseball. In 2009, I find out about what the javelin is. In two thousand and ten, I decide like, "Oh. Yeah. I want to be a Paralympian." In May of 2011, I'm in my first track meet. July or August of 2011, I make MVP for beep baseball for the first time. Earlier that year, I make the US National team in track and field. In November of 2011, I make the Parapan team, I win a gold medal. I'm ranked fourth in the world. 2012 I'm in the Paralympics track and field hundred meter and long jump. 2013 I'm in the world championships in ... France. 2015 2016, I'm in national championship for the track cycling in the kilo. I win a couple more MVP’S along the way in beep baseball, and in 2015 2016, I find out about digital accessibility job boards. I start selling those. The Paralympics had a great athlete transition program. I started doing that, and when I started doing that, I'm like "Holy sh (sensor beep.) Digital accessibility's a career path. This is an, I have a screen reader, I'm blind, this is," for the first time, this was like "This is, this is what's made, I'm made for this!" Like, "I'm, my blindness is a competitive advantage in this world of digital accessibility testing!" Got really excited about that, got my first job, uh, as a tester. A few promotions later, I'm the executive director of a nonprofit, building up the agency, we almost sell it to the American Foundation for the Blind. That deal fell through, but Kirk Adams brought me over to AFB. I started working with them to build that consultancy, got out of nonprofit, in 2019, went to the private sector. Sales heavy, software heavy, uh, accessibility company called Usable Net. Great company, love all those guys there, learned a ton. In late 21, early 2022, it was in December of 21 was when we organized, but in 2022, get accessibility started. My, uh, co-founder and I, Heather Burns, digital accessibility business was coming, it was really great, but I knew way back then that when, "When I'm in an opportunity to hire blind, I'm gonna do that." Couldn't source the talent with the technical skill to do the job at the level at which it needed to be done based on my experience, so we built a training program. Through my relationships in New York, with Helen Keller National Center, we piloted it in 2022 as a vocational rehabilitation job training program. What I'm talking about is the Certified Accessibility Tester Program. That was really successful. We went nationwide. We're like, "Hey. How do we change society perceptions? Stigmas? Like how do we really erase these antiquated beliefs from the, from the generational, unconscious bias about people with disabilities? Our vision is that the US disabled unemployment rate is the same as the US unemployment rate, and we've got to get a lot of blind people jobs to do that. The number one question that people get asked that you've never met before, and it might be the first, maybe it's the second, but it's 'What do you do?' And so we've got to get blind people trained and certified in technical careers, where people identify, have a lot of their identity wrapped up in their career. And we've got to get competitive, integrated employment ready candidates to do these jobs, so that they can start earning money, and wrapping their identity up with what society wraps their identity up with." And that's how we start to be, make progress, and actually realize that vision. The US disabled unemployment rate is the same as the US unemployment rate.

Liz: You've mentioned how Accessibility Officer got started. What services does your company offer?

Tanner: So we're a digital accessibility consulting company first. So we provide manage accessibility services, audits, testing, document remediation training, what we learned through that process, you know, we've got to be competitive. You know, we're competing against other companies that don't have the same values or mission that we do. We have to compete against companies that are really software heavy, that are offshore heavy, that don't prioritize people with disabilities, maybe they do usability testing, it's so silly, they'll put it up front, or they'll organize it in a way that doesn't make sense. , Where, we have people with, who are blind or visually impaired, you know, seventy plus percent of our technical team are people that happen to be reliant on assistive technology. And so, as you can imagine as a blind person, we know, I know, is that in some situations, blind people are just slower. In other situations, blind people are faster. But there's things about digital accessibility that, they're just slower. Right? And, so, how do we build the tool that makes all that slow stuff way faster? And that's what we built internally, we've been operating on it for a while, over a year, and then it was like, "What's the vision? All right, we've got to support more blind people being competitively integrated in their employment journey, especially within digital accessibility testing. And so now we just started to make it more open to the public, and, and again, the whole idea is, is like, "How do we help blind people do their job really, really well?" And that's what Dart Suite does.

Chris: Can you talk about the Certified Accessibility Tester program? I've known a few people who have gone through it, uh, I've seen a lot of people announcing their graduation from it on social media and so forth, and yet I, I would love to know more detail about what the program is like, what kinds of things do people learn there, and then what happens when they graduate?

Tanner: Yeah. Great question. So, vocational rehabilitation is client driven, and our apprenticeship program is separate from the job training program. It's something that we do to fulfill our vision and, and exercise our mission. But, uh, you know, we believe that vocational rehabilitation really needs to organize more job training programs with apprenticeship programs. Because when we have that gap in knowledge acquisition and application, all the skills diminish. We see it in our program day after day after day, or program after program after program. When people fall off, or stop, the skills diminish, and, and then, and employability, you know, reciprocates. So, but the, the CAT program, the Certified Accessibility Testing program, is an apprenticeship program. It's an instructor led, fourteen-week, fully remote program, that is designed to teach someone the entry level technical skill and ability to test and report on WCAG guidelines, Wicag, 2.2 in 14 weeks. Successful graduates will sit for two final exams for the Trusted Tester, DHS Trusted Tester Cert, and then for the CAT 2β. Uh, for those that don't know, Trusted Tester's against Section 508, and then our certification is against the current accessibility guidelines, which is Wcag 2.2 double A. Every week, week to week, there's of course, there's the online LMS and curriculum and readings and quizzes and discussion posts and exercises and homework. There's all that stuff, but there's also the lectures. And the hands on workshops. And the one on one instructor meetings. And then the mentorship meetings as needed, for every individual to make sure that, hey, not only are we learning the material, but in the workshops, you know, the lecture's like, "Hey, this is the success criteria. This is the, the technical rules of what we do." And then the workshops are, "This is what we do. This is how you test. This is how you report. This is, as a screen reader, you not just test from a blindness perspective, but you test from the holistic perspective. WCAG guidelines are for all disabilities. Sensory, mobility, and, and cognitive. Not just screen readers. So, how do we do that?" and so that's what the workshops are for. And then the one on one instructor, uh, meetings are making sure that you get the one on one support week to week to week, on exactly the things that you need help with. That aren't addressed in the workshops. Everything's super interactive, there's often people sharing their screens, or, or asked to by the instructors, we have totally blind screen reader instructors, we have sighted instructors, and we have sighted assistants throughout the program to make sure that you've got everything you need to succeed. There is a prerequisite assessment to make sure that you do have the skills baseline to actually do succeed in the program, everybody has to do that as a formality, and then what happens is, you earned your certifications, I'm gonna give you a job. Right, you got trained, you got certified, you deserve a job. You deserve a chance. And so, we're a digital accessibility company first, so we have the opportunity to give graduates, we prioritize graduates in the program, to do work. We have a lot of government work uh, local and state municipalities, and private businesses as well. B to C, online retailers, uh, software companies, just different accessibility projects. And then that's when you develop, throughout the program, though, and throughout the apprenticeship, is we really hammer home, professionalism. Right, we want to, you know, it's like, "You've got the technical skill and ability, but, like you also have to be able to like, orient yourself appropriately during a meeting. Have the right etiquette. You know, professional communications. So that's heavily emphasized in the apprenticeship program, where you're actually working with clients, interfacing with clients, meeting with clients, and of course, delivering digital accessibility testing, reporting, remediation guidance, and consulting, uh, to live, real deal, real world clients.

Chris: So, do I understand you correctly that you're saying everyone who gets certified, has a job.

Tanner: It's a direct path to employment. That's correct.

Liz: You mentioned prerequisites. What are some of the prerequisites that someone would need to have, prior to being assessed, and then also, what is the cost to an individual for the certification program?

Tanner: Uh, there's no cost to any individual. Uh, Vocational Rehabilitation fully sponsors this program in every state that we're in, so the skills assessment, and the job training program, and then the apprenticeship, uh, there's no cost to clients of vocational rehabilitation. We have tried to do it outside of VR, and it hasn't really worked, and so we shut that down. Uh, so you do have to be a client of VR. This is specifically designed for people who are blind or visually impaired, uh, but we've expanded that out to include other disability types, and have since brought on apprentices in other disability categories as well. However, the skills, uh, baseline, is general computer skills, and strong assistive technology skills, specific to the user. So you've got to do things like general computer, like file management, E-mails, attachments, joining meetings, calendar management, you know, understanding the general stuff about updates, and browsers, and chrome, and, you know, ex-- how to use extensions, like normal, baseline employment readiness stuff. On a desktop computer, Windows based, right, with Jaws or NVDA. And the reason we mandate Jaws or NVDA, Windows based is because this is, 99.99 percent of digital accessibility testing is done in these environments. There is additional stuff sometimes on, on Mac, with Voiceover, but when it's mobile apps, or mobile, it's, it's Voiceover on IOS, and then the, even the, like, five standard deviations away from the main, we might see Mac, Voiceover. So it's predominantly Windows based, NVDA or, or Jaws, and then we want to see strong assistive technology skills, based on your need. So, if someone's a mouse user, they have enough visual acuity to do that, it's gonna be easier. You don't need to rely on a screen reader and experience the same kind of barriers that a screen reader's gonna have in testing and reporting. So you're gonna be able to do things differently. If you're a Zoomtext user, and you've got stable acuity, and you can use the mouse well, and I'm not talking about the people that, whose vision's regressing. We see this, right? And you're, you know, your face is right up on the screen so you, that's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about people that have like, stable visual acuity and can use a mouse. If, if your vision fluctuates day to day, you're gonna need strong screen reader skills. Now, understand, digital accessibility is a service based business, that's primarily measured on two variables. Right, how fast can you find the accessibility violations, and then of the violations available, how many of those are you grabbing? Right, and then there's other nuances to it, right, like how well the reports are, and actionable they are, the kind of information you provide to the technical teams, but from a tester perspective, it's how many violations are you finding, and how fast are you finding them? And so, if you're screen reader reliant, then you better be pretty fast with that screen reader. You don't have to be as fast if you're a zoomtext user, or you can use a mouse, right? Because all you need to do is hear what the screen reader is saying. Um, you can point and click and then leverage the screen reader at will. But when you're reliant on that screen reader, we want to see really strong assistive technology skills.

Chris: Let's talk now about the job role or the job responsibilities of an accessibility tester. What is the day in the life of an accessibility tester like, and then you mentioned briefly Dart Suite, and I'm curious to know how that plays in to the day in a life of a tester.

tanner: Yeah. Great questions. So, the differences largely is gonna be in the tools that the company that is employing you uses. Right, so are you gonna be operating in Excel spreadsheets or Google Sheets, or are you gonna be operating like with Chrome extensions, are you gonna be operating in a platform, a browser based web application? Is it a combination therein? Or, maybe if you're a consulting company, are you dependent on the customer you're working with? Right, so like for us, we have everything from companies who work in Excel spreadsheets or Google sheets to remote testing environments with asier dev ops, and double authentication to get at. You know, so, it varies. Uh, depending inn your employer needs. But, uh, day to day to day, for a digital accessibility tester, you're going to be dealing with things like managing multiple priorities and different deadlines. You're going to be evaluating digital assets, and you're gonna be needing to use critical thinking and problem solving to find issues, to identify patterns, and then you're gonna need professional communications to document and report this stuff, uh, well. You don't need to be super technical, as it were, you just need to know the technical talk. Right? WCAG, you know, Heading Level 2, right, you know, Markup Language, you know, Aria, these are all terms that are no different than vocational rehabilitation, or beep baseball, or goal ball, right? There's a language that you use in these different environments. Once you learn that language, you can sound enough to be dangerous like I do. I don't know this technical stuff, I don't know code, but I do know what an H 3 is. I do know what less H 3, uh, greater than means. And, because I understand enough technical talk to get through it. And you'll need to do that as a digital accessibility tester. Because you're gonna be interfacing with project managers, you're gonna be interfacing with other testers, you're gonna be doing technical stuff, in a remote technical environment. And then as you begin to advance, you're gonna be interfacing with more customers. You're gonna be writing E-mails, direct correspondence with these customers. You're gonna be jumping on meetings. You're gonna be sharing your screen. You're gonna be on video. And then you can begin to expand out from there, in different niches within the field. So, that might be project management, that might be front end development, right, that might be program management. That might be sales. That might be leadership or management. Um, it could be security. So there's a lot of different, other, specialties or areas that you could go into, but from a digital accessibility testing perspective, if you're wanting to get better, it's like how, like, "How do I," every day, I come to the, to the job with like, "How do I get better at finding issues, how do I learn from other people, and how do I get better at documenting this accordingly?"

Chrris: Could you talk about Dart Suite and what that is and how it works?

Tanner: So, we built Dart Suite because we were trying to be competitive against other accessibility testing companies that aren't, you know, leveraging people who are blind and visually impaired as the majority of their technical team. So, you know, we've got things like screen shots and code snippets, and operating system information, and browser information, and what are all the things that take time for a blind person to do, that really don't take a lot of time for a sighted person to do, and just make that easy? How do we boil down the testing and reporting process for a blind person, or any assistive technology user, to be super super easy and simple? Right, how do we bring testing and reporting together into one browser experience? And how do we make that experience super fast, super light, super simple, and customizable, for the team using the tool? That's what Dart Suite is. It's tough to understand what all that means when you don't have a strong nuance understanding of the mechanics of digital accessibility testing, but what we've seen from the initial demos and feedbacks is like, it's fascinating to me that the digital accessibility field in itself has no real accessible digital accessibility testing and reporting software. And that's what we solved.

Liz: Do you have any success stories that you would be willing to share?

Tanner: So, I can't share any yet 'cause I don't have, uh, permission to do so, but what I will say is that organizations that have seen the tool, and are providing other digital accessibility training programs like ours, immediately recognize, "This is going to help our students, we are going to be onboarding this, can't wait to get our hands on it and really integrate it across our curriculum," and, and this is what we're doing with our training program. Right, because it's tough to quantify like how much work that it does for the tester, and really boils down to the competitive advantage of a blind digital accessibility tester of that manual testing, it's tough to quantify, uh, how much effort it takes off. Because when we start to see people, like when we start to integrate this into our curriculum, more people are succeeding, more people are just better at their job. As a sighted person, it's tough to appreciate how much cognitive band width is required to just do really simple remedial tasks. Because we have so much other mental energy to just do things like operate a screen reader, and problem solve when we run into barriers, routing Jaws cursor to PC cursor, trying different screen readers, or whatever, people just have no appreciation for like, "Oh, what do you mean you can't just enter in your name into the field?" "What do you mean you can't click the button?" Right, and then, in the background, we're trying to critically problem solve this thing, where for a sighted person, or someone who doesn't have the same barrier, they just click. And, and it's like, those clicks add up. And that volume, at scale, is massive.

Chris: Looking at the clock, we're getting short on time. We always ask at the end of every episode, though, what kind of general advice do you have for blind people, either blind people that want to follow in your footsteps and start a company, or blind people that want to get hired in digital accessibility, or that want to become Paralympians, or whatever else is on the table I guess?

Tanner: Awesome. So the easiest thing to do in terms of increasing your outcomes with regards to sports, or employment, or anything, is increase your network, and specifically your strategic network. Which is how many people do you know in the area that you want to succeed in? And then, how many people do you know in that area that can directly advance you towards your goals? That is like, the fastest way to elevate your likelihood of success, is your network. Um, the best thing about that, is you can start to build it immediately, and expeditiously, pretty well.

Chris: Well Tanner, how can people get in touch with you, your company, get connected with the CAT program, all the details?

Tanner: Yeah, absolutely. So,

accessabilityofficer.com

that's access, ability with two A's,

access ability officer.com

we've got a vocational rehabilitation page there, or, you could just call. 518-718-2383, 518-718-2383, and, uh, and I can walk you through that stuff. That will, it will go to sales or customer service, and uh, if available, I will, I, myself will pick up the phone and walk you through it. I would love, like nothing makes me happier than helping blind people give, uh, get jobs. I love helping people get that shot, and uh, I would love to talk about you taking yours.

Chris: I love the enthusiasm. Tanner, thanks for being here. We really appreciate it.

Tanner: Chris, you're the man, Brother. Thank you.

(Chris Chuckles.)

Chris: Before we go, uh, we'd like to thank our sponsors, and our valued partners. Our valued partners are World Services for the Blind, they've been with us since the beginning, Computers for the Blind, who I think I've forgotten to mention the last few episodes. So, sorry, Computers For The Blind. I'll be better at that.

Liz: Thank you.

Chris: And also the APH Connect Center. Yeah, definitely. Thank you so much. And our sponsors are Wells Fargo, Thrivent, the Nazdaq Foundation, (pause.) Oh! And, Access Ability Officer. Is ...

Liz: Thank you.

Chris: Is a sponsor. So, thank you, Tanner.

(They laugh together.)

Tanner: Yeah. No worries.

Chris: Appreciate that so much.

Liz: It takes a village.

Chris: It totally does. All right. Uh, the Penny Forward podcast is produced by Chris Peterson and Liz Bottner, thanks, Liz.

Liz: You're welcome.

Chris: Audio editing is provided by Brynn Lee, and transcription is provided by Anne Verduin. The music is composed and performed by Andre Louis. All those people are blind, and incredibly talented. I love the talent that's in our community. Penny Forward is a nonprofit organization founded and led by blind people. We help each other navigate the complicated landscape of personal finance through education, mentoring, and mutual support. You can learn more about our online courses, weekly workshops, one on one financial and benefits counseling, on our website

pennyforward.com

or by calling 888-332-5558. They can't answer all your questions when you call in, ...

(Tanner chuckles.)

Chris: But if they can't answer your questions, do ask them to set up time with one of us, and we'll be happy to take you all through that. Now, for all of us in the Penny Forward community, I'm Chris Peterson.

Liz: And I'm Liz Bottner.

Chris: Thanks for listening, and have a great week.