

Shit We Don't Talk About Podcast

Episode 61 Billy Price – Universal & Inclusive Design

Mia Voss 00:05

Hi, Billy.

Billy Price 00:06

Hello.

Mia Voss 00:09

Here we are. Let's dive in. I'll put it out there, we had a previous recording in zoom, and mercury and retrograde. I'm going with those two. Got a little crazy on us. So I'm excited though, because we're going to dive in even deeper than our first talk. Sometimes you need a training wheels chat. So now we're really gonna dive in and talk about your experience. I'm really excited to talk about adaptive, the difference between adaptive universal and inclusive design. And that's what you're going to fill us in today on right.

Billy Price 00:44

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So I mean, we're a shoe company, Billy footwear, I'm Billy price, one of the two co-founders. And we really started our brand based on universal design. And to me, that wasn't a foreign term because I went to school for engineering. When I graduated college, I worked at the Federal Aviation Administration as a mechanical engineer. So the word universal design was really introduced to me more through like the architecture side, being able to create buildings that worked for everybody, very easy spaces for people to navigate, for both, you know, for the people, but also the equipment and stuff to do its job. So we took that term universal design and applied it to fashion, because we wanted to create a widget that really worked for everybody. And, you know, like myself, being a wheelchair user, we wanted to be able to make a shoe that would functionally work for me, but yet sit on the shelves of major retailers like Nordstrom or Zappos or Kohl's or QVC, or whatever it may be. So, for us universal design really meant something that levelled the playing field that worked for everybody. So that's how we like tout that name.

Mia Voss 02:03

Right. So that's the big overall picture. And now I want to tell the listeners how this is such a lived experience for you, obviously, you've already said that you are in a chair, talk about how that first started out for you. And what an interesting piece, thank you for weaving that in that you came to this experience of being in a wheelchair already, like you said, in engineering or having an engineering background or that you had, were already interested in it. And then you had the lived experience.

Billy Price 02:31

Sure. So I went to college. And within the first two weeks of school, I fell out of a three story window. And when that happened, it was the head first fall on concrete. I broke my neck, I broke my back, it was a spinal cord injury in both locations, and really instant paralysis. So I went from a fiercely independent kid, to all of a sudden a very dependent kid needing to help of others. And like through the years, that was in 1996 so it's been a while, but through the years I have figured out how to do a lot of things, how to drive, figured out how to you know, buy a condo, move into it just really get along with life and get a job and how to dress myself, brush my teeth and but the one thing that really scared me was putting on shoes, because it really wasn't out there in the marketplace. There wasn't anything that one, I could put on independently. But secondly, and probably potentially more important, something that I would want to wear and feel good about wearing. So that was like the kind of mindset that we went into when we started building footwear, to be like create something that worked for me but also to work for really anybody. That like this religion that would transcend it was like yeah, you had a disability to qualify yourself with a brand anybody can do it.

Mia Voss 03:50

I love that too. Because that's and you know from again, being in design, being an architecture. And I love that you mentioned that too because for you listeners out there, you know that my other hat that I wear is a hardhat and so I've been in the construction industry for 20 plus years and I've seen a lot. And what's interesting too is knowing what from an ADA standpoint, from the design standpoint, what you need to incorporate so that it is adaptable, I will say my experience and this is why I love this one to have this conversation has always been adaptive and it can from the design for condos, hotels, things like that. They seem to stand out so much like this big, this is for adaptive

as opposed to being this inclusive thing and it almost I felt like it really separated people out as well. I mean thank God for it though this the safety piece of it and I know it from walking into rooms. And I gotta tell you, Billy, I've worked at a couple of hotels where I'll walk in and because I come in at the tail end of bed I'll say now are you sure they've, I've caught a few things where that like the tub spout wasn't far enough over or the control valve so that people, for those of you out there are not familiar with this, so that somebody didn't have to lean in really far to turn things on and fall over or even the radius for being able to turn in a small bathroom area, right? And how...

Billy Price 05:20

...you use those bathrooms. If the handles on the toilet are on like the wheelchair side of like the toilet, yes, it's a real bear to like, reach across and risk of falling into the bowl. You don't want that.

Mia Voss 05:33

We just, you know, the condo I just worked on for my again, my inspection business, we caught that on a few. And if you're just not in that mindset, and I know there does feel like there's some pushback for people like, oh, we have to modify, we have to follow these rules, because they really do forget what that lived experience is that you have had to worrying about falling into the bowl, guess what, I'm just not going to flush this toilet because you put that...[laughs] you're on your own people, right?

Billy Price 06:05

Well, I think it's important remember that having a cool ADA space, it doesn't necessarily need to scream adaptive, right? I mean, even, if we're gonna take your page from our old playbook, with our shoes, we wanted to create something that would work for everybody. So when I look at a coffee shop, for example, if I'm gonna go into that coffee shop, there's no stairs in front, it's very open, I can go in there and have a successful transaction with the barista or whoever to be able to get that, you know, cup of hot chocolate t I guess in my case, and then go to the seat and have like just a pleasant time. When you go into that space, it works for me, it works for the ambulatory person, it doesn't scream adaptive. So even my own condo, when I moved into that space, it wasn't built for a wheelchair, like the hallways were narrow, the kitchen was small. The bathroom, I couldn't go and you know, do a 360 in it, I couldn't really navigate to the toilet it had to be tough. It was very challenging for me. So we went and remodeled it, we made the bathroom larger, we push the

kitchen out a little bit, made a kind of a breakfast bar to add, I can pull up in my wheelchair. And we recently sold our condo. And the folks that bought the condo, they were not wheelchair users. And when they bought the condo, they came into that space, not knowing that the previous owner was in a wheelchair, just because it was a nice open layout. A very comfortable, warm, easy space for them to navigate but also me too. So in my mind, that's where that word universal design really comes into play. It's just something that works for everybody. And just, I don't know, it's nice, comfortable space or whatever it is.

Mia Voss 07:53

And I would think the only thing that would stand out would be any kind of grab bars in the bathroom. Like that's the only way you would think okay, well that's a nice addition to it to. The word just keeps coming up for me is ease. Right? Even you going into the coffee shop, and think any kind of design, where you are not, in a way not drawing attention to yourself by struggling to get through there. Just being able to roll through, being able to reach things, being able to see things and have it with ease.

Billy Price 08:24

Yeah, great point, you know, it's funny, what you'll notice is that when you're going to go into the airport, and you have the escalator and it's right next to the stairs, everyone's ride the escalator, they're not going up the stairs, it's that easy. Like we as the people like typically gravitate more towards the easier path just to be able to, I don't know, make them more efficient, like energy, saving energy, whatever it may be. But, you know, people are gonna lean more towards the ramp over the stairs. And just that way to get from point A to point B.

Mia Voss 08:54

One of the reasons why I want to have this conversation with you too, is to get people thinking about this, even if you have no problems at all getting around that you could take the stairs if you wanted to. I really like to get people in that mindset of starting to notice things so that you can start calling it out. And one thing that I do is Google reviews quite a bit. And I have been rattling the cage, this one restaurant in my hometown that I love and they have this terrible design. And I really started to notice it, I took my mom's in there. And she was having some foot problems. And so I noticed that there's these wide open stairs and it's an older building, so I get this, but the way

that it's designed, there is no center handrail. My mind really goes to that and I would like for people's mind to start going to that of thinking about what if something happened you were on crutches, you have a big stroller, right? Even things like that, that aren't necessarily an accident but diminish your capability. Right? So I thought about that.

I'm like, if they had just put like a big handrail in the middle cuz she's having to go all over to the side anyway, I was on quite a rant, they still haven't fixed it. But my mom went the other day, I like Mom, take some more pictures, we'll keep going at it. And that's what I would like to encourage people to do, too is think outside of their own experience.

Billy Price 10:16

Oh, most definitely, most definitely. And there's a lot of things that just little, little things to make things easier. Yes, when you're talking about grab bars in a place, we did put grab bars in our condo, well, we actually doubled them as towel racks. So like, aesthetically, it looked like it was meant for a towel, but it worked perfectly for also a grab bar. So you can work that type of architecture or that type of design inspiration into the layout, and really not make it seem adaptive.

Mia Voss 10:46

So I know you just moved out of that place, but you don't happen to have pictures of that do you?

Billy Price 10:50

We I do.

Mia Voss 10:52

Okay. We're gonna put them in the show notes. So go to www.shitwedonttalkaboutpodcast.com. Also, I want to remind everyone we are speaking with Billy Price. He's the co-founder of Billy footwear. And we do have transcripts in the show notes so that this podcast is adaptive for hearing and visually impaired. And I think that is something too that people are really starting to work on as well. Let's do, what does Mindy call it, the identifier. So I am a blonde white woman glasses in my 50s. How about you Billy, what do you look like?

Billy Price 11:26

It's so funny. Whenever, it seems like I'm always kind of on point when I asked for that identifier. I'm like, Oh man, what am I wearing? I have to kind of look at myself. But I'm a Caucasian male in my 40s, short hair, blue eyes, wheelchair user, there we go.

Mia Voss 11:42

And guess what you're wearing? You are very branded today.

Billy Price 11:46

Oh, how about that. I missed the whole point. So yeah, branded Billy footwear and hooded sweatshirt.

Mia Voss 11:52

It's a red logo of a Billy goat. I love Ah, man see. And when she said that the other day I realized how I had gotten out of the habit of even doing alt text in images on Twitter and so forth. And I do and I want to refer we'll put it in the show notes. My cousin Sheila Schneider was on here talking about being visually impaired. And she's an artist. So she's, I'll send it to you, you'll love it. But her vision, the center of her vision is impaired. So it's very interesting, like how she sees things as well. So thank you for that everyone. That was our commercial break of identifiers. I love that. Can you tell me a little bit more about your journey of you know, you mentioned you learn how to, you got a job, how to take care of yourself. But I know there was quite a bit of time in between when Billy footwear came to play and the accident. So you had to go through a lot. So talk to me more about that journey of discovery of or frustration if so, if you want to tap into that.

Billy Price 12:57

Yeah, no problem. So just to set the safe timeline. So broke my neck in October of 1996. I graduated college in 2001 or 2002.

Mia Voss 13:10

Right? That's where you got your engineering background. Yes.

Billy Price 13:12

That's engineering background. Correct. Then I got a job with the FAA in 2003. So Federal Aviation Administration. And I worked there for 16 years. And on the back three of those 16 years, I started side hustle with my dear friend, Mr. Darren Donaldson. And that later became Billy footwear. So that whole kicked off by Darren invited me over to a Christmas party at his house. And we're kind of catching up. And he was sharing with me what he did working on.

Just kind of like a something, a goal that he set for himself to try to challenge themselves to do something you've never done before. And that was make a shoe. Yeah, there's a little shoe thing going on. When he was telling me about this, I got really excited. And I shared with him, I said, Darren, you know, since being in a wheelchair, the one thing I haven't figured out is shoes, and I have not been able to put my shoes on independently, and at that time, 18 years. So I said, you know, I bet if we have a zipper on the shoe that goes on the outside around the toe, where the whole upper can unzip, and you can fold that over, I could actually step into it, like just put my foot into it unobstructed. And that I have enough dexterity in my hand that I could grab a zipper pole and zip that up and take back that independence. So it was enough for him to one be inspired, two like put a drawing together. And because he was already working on his own shoes, he had the contacts in place to make a prototype. And when he made that thing, he gifted it to me and I put my shoes on again for the first time in 18 years. So I was 36 at the time. I broke my neck and 18. So really literally half a lifetime later. I was taking back some independence. And it was so special that we knew we had to do something about it, we knew we had to share it. And I didn't really know what that looked like. I mean, Darren has been an entrepreneur all his life. So he kind of had a mindset for business. And he thought that we could actually not only share this thing, but to be able to create something where it could put food on our table. And we could be able to do this thing full time. So that's really when the grind started. And in 2018, it was when Darren and I could finally step away from our day jobs, and do this thing full time. So that's the whole timeline. And now in 2018, that's when things really started to catch fire, and just exponential growth ever since.

Mia Voss 15:49

Dude, I love that story. That got me teary eyed thinking about that moment when you got to put that on and how cool. So this was kind of a cocktail napkin serendipitous event with the two of you right of him just talking about it. And then you realizing Oh, my gosh, this has been a thing. I mean, you knew it, but the possibility for that to be a thing must have been amazing. And then having the engineering mind. Ooh, I love this.

Billy Price 16:15

Well, yeah, the engineering side of it accumulates into problem solving. Go look, you know what, here's a problem solve. Let's break this thing down. But it is crazy how, I mean, you think back at all the different conversations one has, when you're at some sort of gathering.

There's so many, like just ideas that fly around the table, you're sitting around, and they never really materialized anything. But for whatever reason, I mean, we just put action behind this. And it just seemed like a good idea. And I was really motivated to wear my shoes again, for one thing.

Mia Voss 16:47

It looks good, too. That look good. Yeah.

Billy Price 16:51

I'm glad you touched on that, because that was something that was critically important to us. Because we, yes, the brand was inspired by, I guess my story. So it came from like an adaptive space, it came from a need that we need to overcome. But the last thing we want to do is, we didn't want to put like a, quote, adaptive looking shoe out there on the market. We wanted to create something that anybody would want to wear, because that was important to us. And we will remember, you know, being on the playground growing up, if somebody was wearing something different, the kids around him would point that out. I mean, they would make them feel...

Mia Voss 17:28

Very vicious man, kids are vicious.

Billy Price 17:31

Yeah, I mean, it was just early bullying. And so the last thing you want to do, the last you want to do is bring somebody in the market, that would make someone feel different than they already feel. So we wanted to create something that, again, a universal design, but really inclusive. And I think that a word inclusive is, you know, become a synonym for adaptive. In our vision of the word inclusive is we want to be able to create something that if you think of a party, we want to create a party that everyone is invited, and everyone can have a good time. I mean, it's not a matter of creating something specific for a person or group, because that's still like it keeps us in silos. We

want to be able to take down blow up all the silos level the playing field for everybody. So that's where they were, our inspiration is more universal design side, the inclusive side. And it really brings equality, and makes us all, I think it really resonates a sense of community.

Mia Voss 18:32

It does. And thank you for the soundbite for the podcast. That was such a mic drop description of it. Thank you so much. I want to reference Mindy Scheier who I just interviewed was the episode before this one that you introduced me to. So thank you for that. So Mindy is one of the founders of Runway of Dreams and then also has Gamut Entertainment. That's, you know, getting models out there. And she mentioned something that we talked so much about how that need to feel included in that fashion piece like how much that lends itself just to your sense of wellbeing and the fitting in and you mentioned it to that early bullying of anything different, even off brand. And I think we mentioned this before, like Abercrombie and Fitch sort of being this somewhat awful brand of being so exclusive, excluding people that if you couldn't afford it. And so Mindy worked with Tommy Hilfiger to originally create a pair of jeans for her son that had disability issues. And so I love that she's been able to create that, but we really did talk about the piece that you just touched on, which is that fashion and the function that, what a magical combination.

Billy Price 19:49

Yeah, I mean, you got to feel good about what you wear. I mean, it just builds confidence. And it's crazy we get so many reviews that come in after people that have purchased our shoes and you can just feel the tears between the lines. And there's so many different examples. I mean, granted, there's a bunch of other ones you're selling like, like design, cool color delivered. And typically that's more from like the audience that just loves the convenience. I mean, me as a parent, like having a three and a half year old, anything we can do to get that kid out the door faster, is always a good thing. So having a zippered shoe like really, really helps facilitate that need. But those that have situations where they've never been able to put their shoes on before, or a parent that's now able to help facilitate their child's needs easier than ever before, you can feel the tears between those lines. And in those situations, it's more than a shoe. It's like a life transforming deal. And it always touches my heart so severely, because it takes me right back to the day I put my shoes on again, for the first time. I'm lucky, that type of stuff like really, I can feel that I can relate to that. And it's that type of stuff, those stories that we continue to share. It really generates a movement, a

movement of inclusion, a movement of empowering independence, a movement of just growing on this huge movement. And I don't know, it is just really exciting to be a part of it.

Mia Voss 21:18

I have goosebumps. And I do want to say when you mentioned that again, that moment, I really got me teary eyed thinking, like I said, just what that must have felt like of this sense of freedom. And I think you just really did it for every parent out there mentioning that. Because every meme that I see, it always seems like it's the shoe thing. It's the shoe thing that gets them at the very end. If you're in a hurry, or you're rushing out the door, and just that's the best, but how great for the combination for you and the kids as well. And you're right, though sharing that out. And I think the normalization of this to, of that it doesn't have to be an exclusive thing, or just specifically only for people with disabilities. So where do we go to get the shoes? I know, it's gonna be in the show notes but I want to pop this in there right now, I want to promote.

Billy Price 22:08

Well, thank you for that. Well, through the years, we've definitely grown. So yeah, the mothership is www.billyfootwear.com. It's an E-commerce or E-commerce site, on Socials we're @billyfootwear all over the place all the different channels. But when you go to www.billyfootwear.com, there is a tab that says store locations. And it's wild and so I don't even know what the word is. But when I click on that thing, now there is pins all over the globe. So we have retail partners throughout the US throughout Canada, throughout Europe, Australia, South America. We don't have any stores in Africa, yet. But there's definitely folks that reach out from Africa, we have lots of customers in Africa. We just don't have any sort of retail presence there yet. But it's just been absolutely just, I don't even know what the word is. I mean, it's just, I guess the word is surreal. I use the word surreal, quite a bit, just because of the number of not only customers, but number of other businesses out there that are excited to carry the brand. And, you know, for the mission to really add value to the planet and try to make a difference everywhere we can, so.

Mia Voss 23:18

I love it. Because that means your need, anything where it comes from your own personal need and then that helps other people be seen. I know it sounds so simple, but it's really true. And then seeing those pins that let you know, you're onto something. And you're also helping somebody else have that same experience and get out of that that feeling of helplessness, and kudos that y'all are still rocking and rolling and growing after coming through and we're still in it, but experiencing the pandemic.

Billy Price 23:47

Yeah, that was a bit of a roller coaster. I guess it still is, I mean, just it seems like you get through one chapter of it. And another chapter kind of like opens up like oh boy. Because it was like the social distancing, it was to be able to, you know, get into the office to be able to fulfil orders, but then that coupled into a big supply chain bottleneck. And then that all of a sudden that kind of got lopsided in terms of you have to order earlier, which then creates a cashflow challenge. And then as you have to buy all this stuff up ahead before you've actually sold this stuff. So it's been a balancing act for sure. But the strength of our relationships with our retail partners, the strength of you know, just a growing customer base. And just to brand loyalty is not only allowed us to grow, but it's allowed us to bring in the silhouettes that are out there that are needed. So for example, we just launched sandals, and I never would have thought we would have done sandals but that was a request from the customers out there saying like this is a gap that's out there. We need sandals, like okay, well we'll come up with a design and we'll see how it goes. We need a winter boots like we came up with winter boots and I don't know it's just been incredible to be able to have that relationship with the customer. And I suppose the trust with the customer that they can put in requests, and we'd love to be able to deliver overnight. I mean, when I say deliver, I mean, like, your request comes in, we'd love to be able to like, magically snap our fingers and make it happen instantaneously. But it does take a little bit of time to develop it. But we listen and thank you so much for all your loyalty but your support recommendations.

Mia Voss 25:27

That's a definitely things we don't talk about, shit we don't talk about what you just mentioned, what the small business owner that's in a distribution that's creating a product, one you've experienced, obviously, during the pandemic, and then this design piece, so thanks for bringing that up. Because I think people one, don't get listened to. There are a lot of companies that don't

listen, or they poopoo it or like sounds great, but you never hear again, but also informing people of that time element it does take to create the new product. So you definitely have a magical piece to this, one you're listening and two it's going to come out and then being honest, like it takes time for us to get this right.

Billy Price 26:06

Yeah, most definitely. Most definitely. I mean cash flow too, cash flow too. We talked about selling the condo. And the reason the condo had to get sold is because they had to go into shoes, so.

Mia Voss 26:17

It kinda went to shoes.

Billy Price 26:21

It's real. I mean, it's definitely real and stuff cost money, for sure.

Mia Voss 26:26

I love this conversation. Alright, we're gonna wrap it up. But you know, I'm going to ask you that question. Even though I know you don't swear, it's do you have a favourite swear word or phrase or something that you can use when you're frustrated.

Billy Price 26:39

You know, I'm not much of a swear. But I will say that, at times, there's just like this, you know, there's like, an emotion that like comes out that just like, you know, you don't need to know the language, you just know, it's just like, you know, just like, screaming at the wall. Like, come on. It can't be that hard, like what's going on? And that can be for anything. So my swear word is Ahhhh.

Mia Voss 27:05

It's emotive. It's a sound. And they do say that, obviously people talk about that swearing is like it's great for reducing pain sometimes and getting out frustration, but I think the noise is just as effective too. So that is Billy swear word is ah, and when we put this up on video, you have to see

the movement that goes with it. It's really good, because it comes across. I love it. Billy, thank you for taking the chance and being on this podcast. I so appreciate you.

Billy Price 27:35

Oh, my pleasure. Thank you so much for the opportunity.

Mia Voss 27:37

Thank you