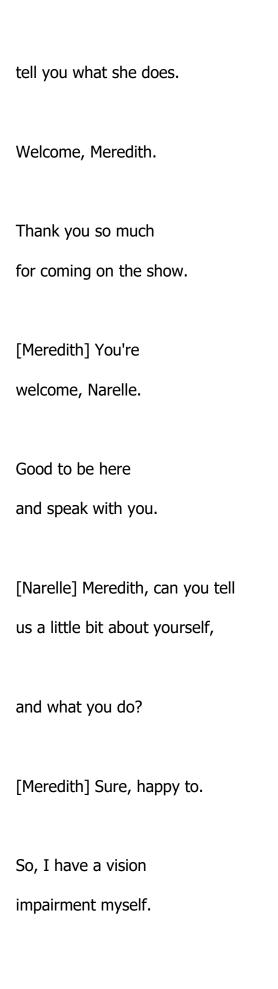
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[music playing]
[Narelle] Hi.
Welcome to this week's episode
of the Digital Access Show.
We talk about what it's like to
have a severe vision impairment,
or to be deaf,
or we've talked to people
with dyslexia, dyspraxia.
I'm lining up some
people with autism.
There's a group of people that
are always going to struggle
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to come on a website,

a podcast, I should say. Actually, they struggle to get on websites as well. I cannot tell you what their lives are like, because I don't know. It's people that are born deafblind, or become deafblind as they get older. Now, that's an issue that is, I'm not sure of the population base in Australia, but there are many people that have that issue.

We all know the story about Helen Keller, and the remarkable work that her governess... did to help her become part of the community, and to live the life that she led. Here in Australia, there are people with deafblindness, and I want to introduce you to Meredith Prain. Meredith herself is not deafblind

but she's going to



I lost my vision when I was 17. I have Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy. And I studied speech pathology, which was really challenging with the vision impairment, but I did get through. And so, I've been working as a speech pathologist with people with deafblindness for 30 years now. It was 30 years this month July, yeah, 1995 I started.

And I still have

a tiny caseload, but I predominantly work in projects and research now. So, I completed my PhD studies in 2012, looking at interactions between people born deafblind and their support workers. But my current roles are... managing the Deafblind Information Australia project. And I also work as the National Head of Research, and Centre of Excellence in Deafblindness,

with Able Australia. I also have a job as a research fellow with Melbourne Uni, where we're working on a project... of family members of people with deafblindness or other complex disability, looking at individualised supported living training. So, lots of things going on there. But I mean, in all of those jobs,

there's a lot of digital access that's required and that goes on.

And I guess I learned the most about digital accessibility

and the needs of people with deafblindness,

in our DeafBlind
Information Australia project,

because we had thought our website was pretty accessible.

We prided ourselves on it being accessible.

And then in undertaking an audit,

we're pretty shocked by the level of fails that we had.

So, we've all learned a lot and been on that access journey.

[Narelle] Can you tell us a bit more about the Deafblind project

that you're working on, what are you looking at there?

What are some of the findings that you're coming out with?

[Meredith] Sure.

So, it's an NDIA-funded project,

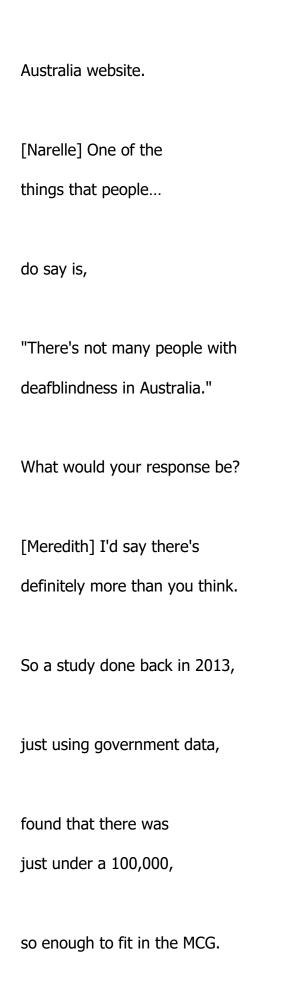
under the National

Information Program.

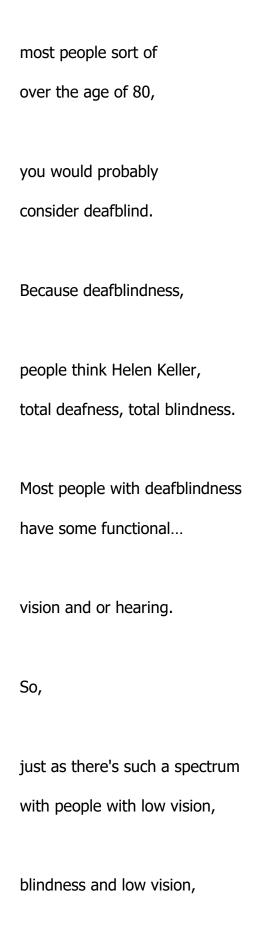
So, the aim is to be getting information out

to people with deafblindness, to their families and to service providers, and supporters about basically all things deafblind. [Narelle] Yeah. [Meredith] We've got a bit of a focus on people born deafblind, because they often fly under the radar, and are not picked up as well... by some of the peer support groups around Australia. But really there should be information on that website,

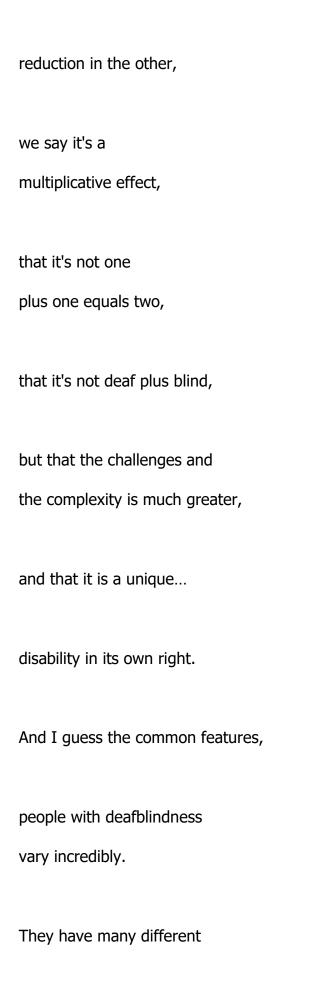
that's sort of your DeafBlind 101 go-to as a resource. We run regular face-to-face training for service providers and family members. And also, webinars and develop resources, so there's fact sheets. But lots of videos, webinars, like a range of information... sources all found on that website, that DeafBlind Information

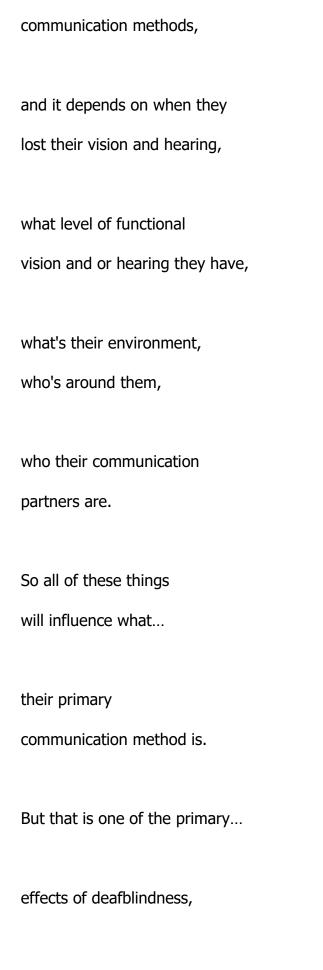


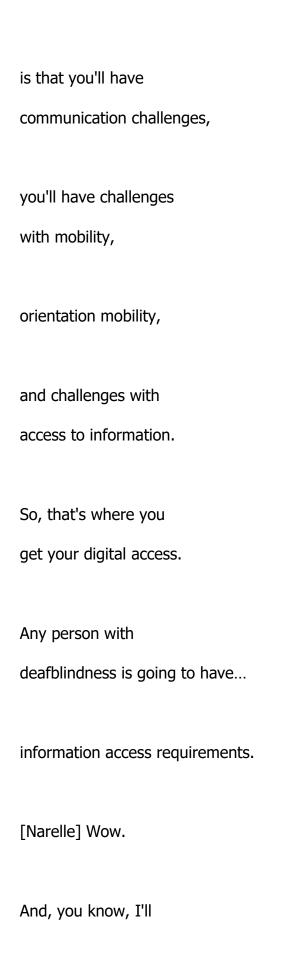
But I mean, this is a huge issue in the field, is that most people with deafblindness... don't identify as having deafblindness, and we don't have good ways of capturing them and finding them. So, I'll give you a classic example. Our ageing population... with the high incidence of age-related vision, and hearing conditions,

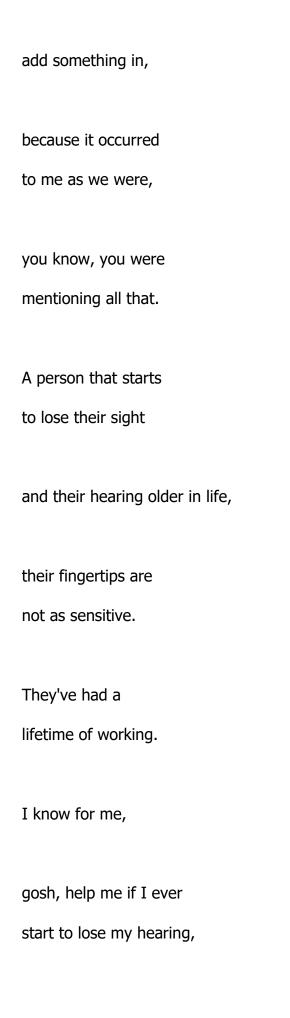


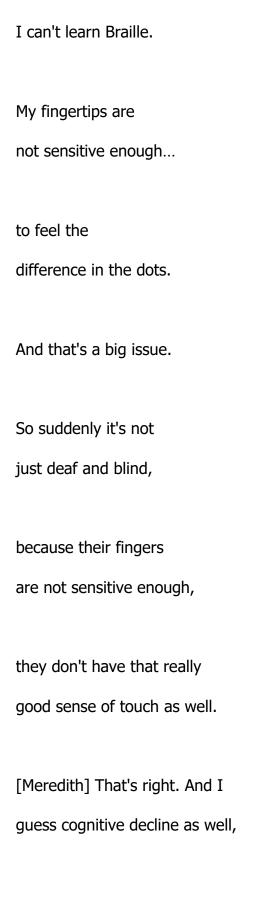
so too deafblindness, like you can be fully deaf, right through to mild hearing impairment. If you're blind with a mild hearing impairment, you can't fully compensate for the loss of one distal sense with the other distal sense. Like, they're our two main ways of accessing the world, and they lie heavily on the other. If one is reduced, and then if you've got

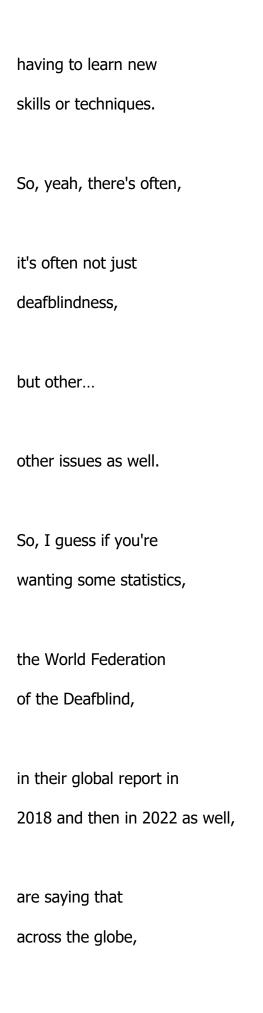


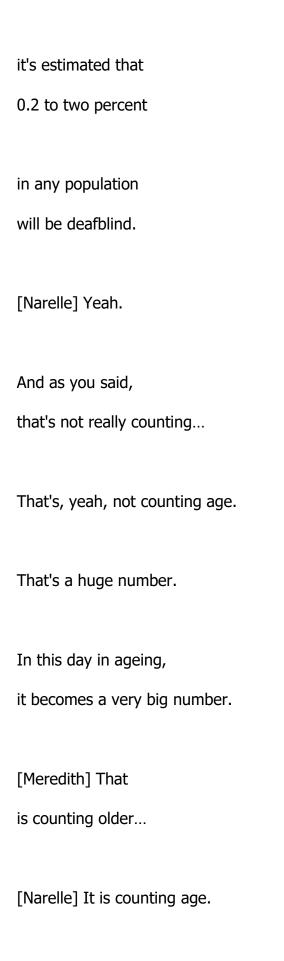












[Meredith] When you get to two percent of the population,

that's a big chunk.

But certainly, the numbers increase as you get older.

[Narelle] Yeah.

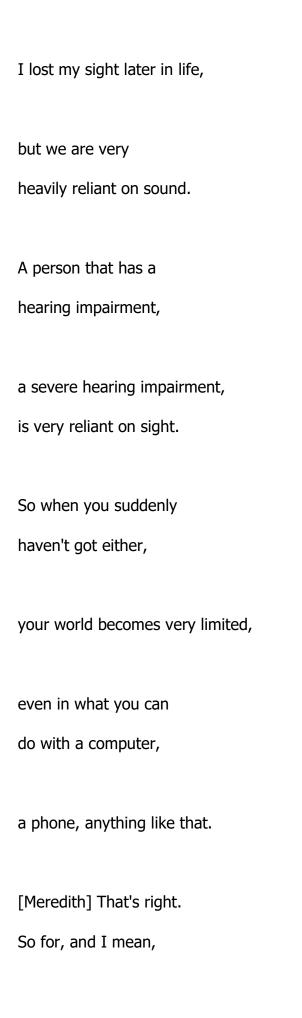
So, when we talk about digital communication then,

because a person that is blind,

like you or myself with our severe vision impairments,

we're heavily reliant on screen readers.

I don't know Braille because

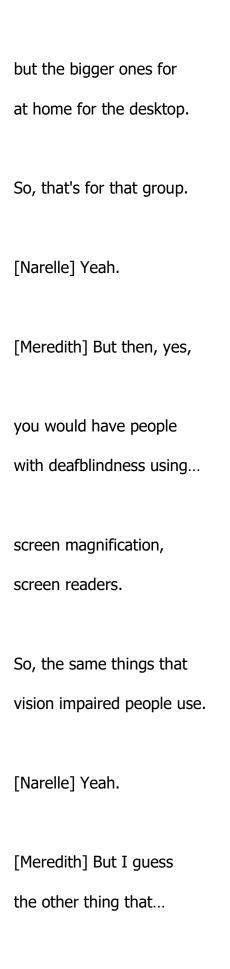


have sort of Helen Keller level of deafblindness, so severe vision or hearing impairments or loss. So, yeah, tactile, that's your only means. So, Braille is the only way they've got. So, you know, any video content needs to be transcribed. You need a transcription, because they won't access any audiovisual sort of material.

I certainly know quite

a few people who...

But refreshable Braille displays, and portable devices have been an absolute game changer, just for access. And being able to communicate with each other when they leave the home rather than needing the TTY at home. But yes, with refreshable braille displays, and those little portable ones are fantastic, so they can access the internet when they're out and about,

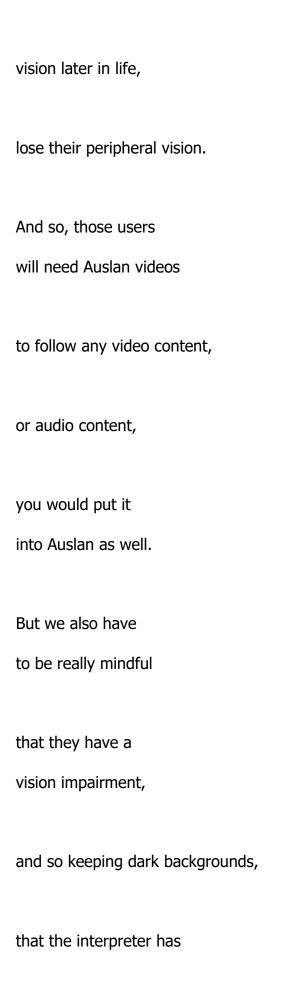


One thing we did get big ticks on our website for, was that we don't develop any video information that doesn't have Auslan interpretation. So Auslan is the Australian sign language, which a lot of, there's a condition called Usher syndrome.

So if they are born deaf, signing deaf,

and then develop retinitis pigmentosa,

so get tunnel



high contrast for their hands,

to their clothing and the background.

So, if you've got a white or pale-skinned interpreter,

you're wanting them to be wearing dark clothes,

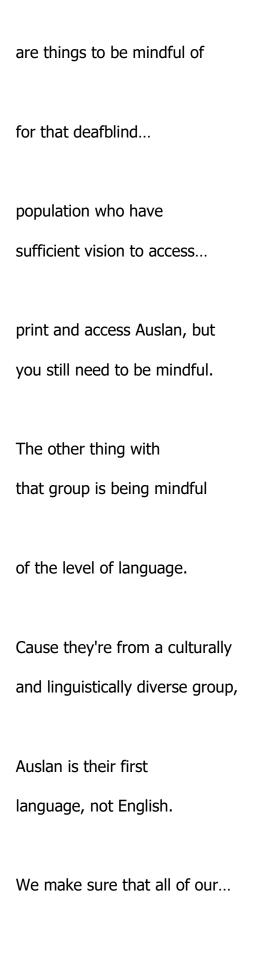
so their hands are contrasting.

And just to minimise glare from the screen with the video,

and not have animations or any other stuff,

and just position them, you know, centrally and facing forward.

All of these sorts of things



print content is at grade9 reading level or below,

because 44 percent of the Australian population...

can only read, like not higher than grade 9 reading level.

So going for grade 9,

or going as low as you possibly can,

is the best tip but making sure it's not over grade 9.

And there's a great free app called the Hemingway Editor

that I use all the time to check reading level.

So, there's a few apps you can use, free apps.

So that's just a free way of making stuff more accessible,

for everybody immediately.

Just using plainer language,

using bullet points instead of long sort of rambling sentences.

If you're going, oh,
we went to, you know,

or if you're talking about technologies, you might say,

Braille readers, this, that, the other,

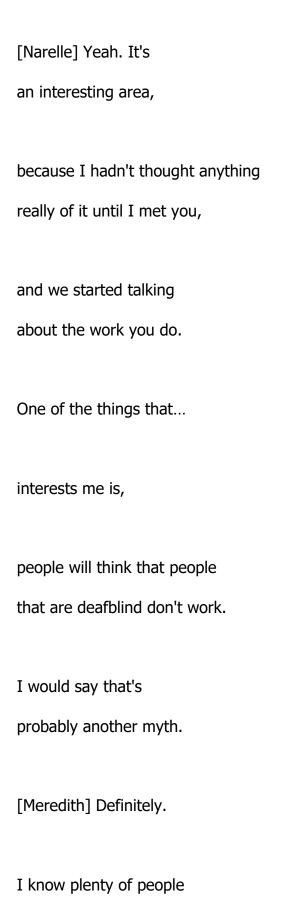
but put them in point form

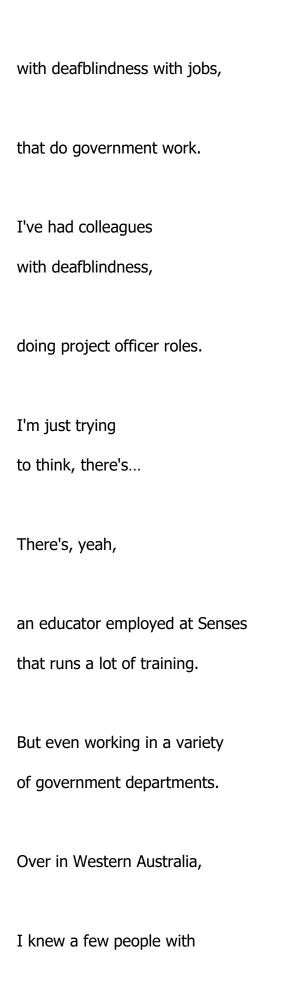
rather than in a long sentence. So, just a few tips like that that simplify it for people. [Narelle] And this is it. While I was thinking about that, you were mentioning Auslan, I don't think people realise the number of actual sign languages... in the world is what, about 300, isn't it? So, if... we here in Australia use Auslan. However, you go to America and they use American Sign Language.

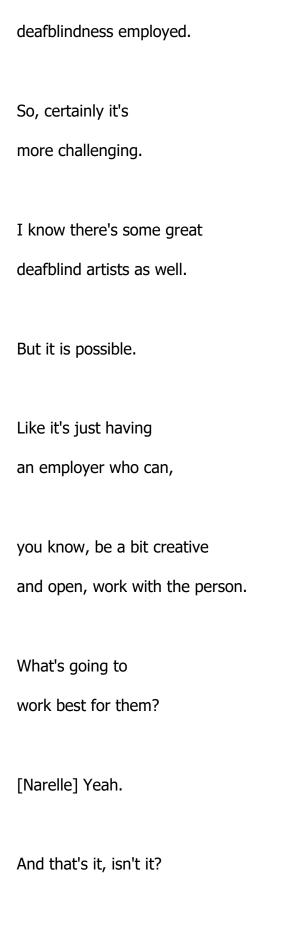
There will be some similarities. So, the captions are still incredibly important. [Meredith] Yes, the captions, you're right, Narelle. Everything has to be captioned. And I tend to have open captions, partly as sort of an accessibility prompt to encourage people to use it, but I think sometimes people don't know how to turn them on, so having them just there all the time.

We find lots of people benefit from captions, all sorts of people with access issues. Even hearing impairment, missing a word, but not just fully deaf, but people from from culturally, linguistically diverse backgrounds, who might not pick up the accent or understand the word, to have it there in print is really valuable.

So yeah, great point, Narelle.

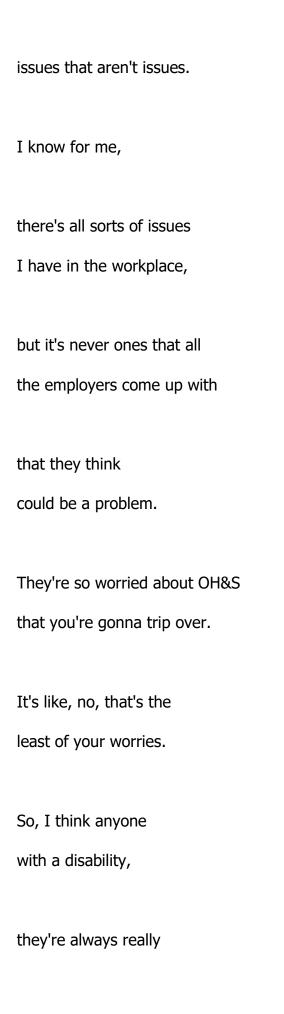


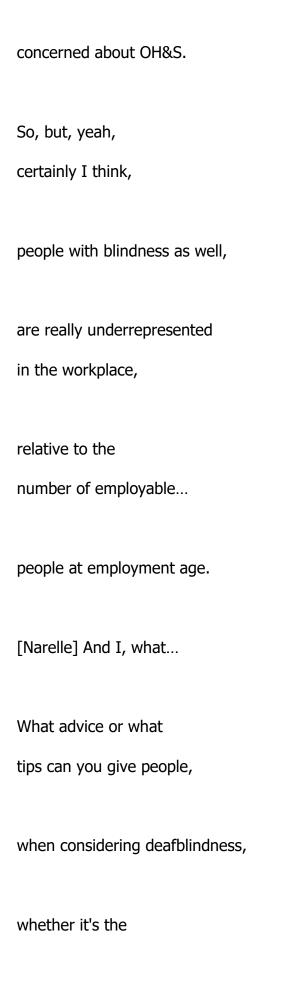


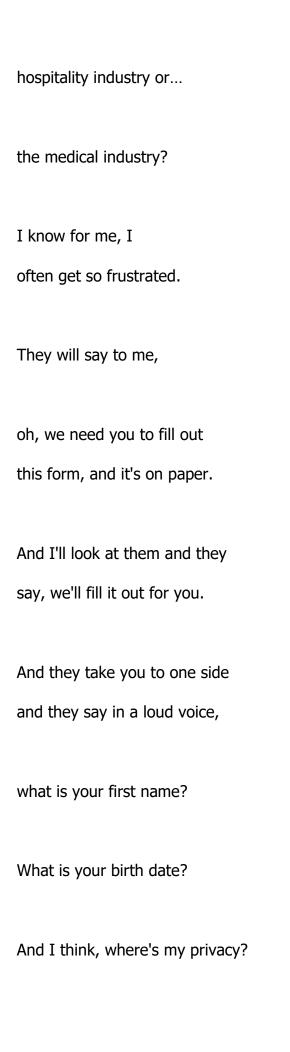


Because, you know, they don't think twice... about employing a person in a wheelchair, or a person that might have a missing arm, or a missing leg. [Meredith] I think they do think twice. I think people do think about being diverse. I don't know, but I think... a lot of people are very uncomfortable with disability

and think of all these







In all this, what tips can you give people? [Meredith] So I guess one is for anyone with any disability, but definitely deafblindness, is ask the person, don't assume. And ask, would you like assistance? If so, how can I best assist you? So, and you know, we're talking about access today. What access needs do you have? What can we do to make this situation accessible,

to make this website accessible, make our information accessible,

make this forum, this meeting,

this whatever accessible to you?

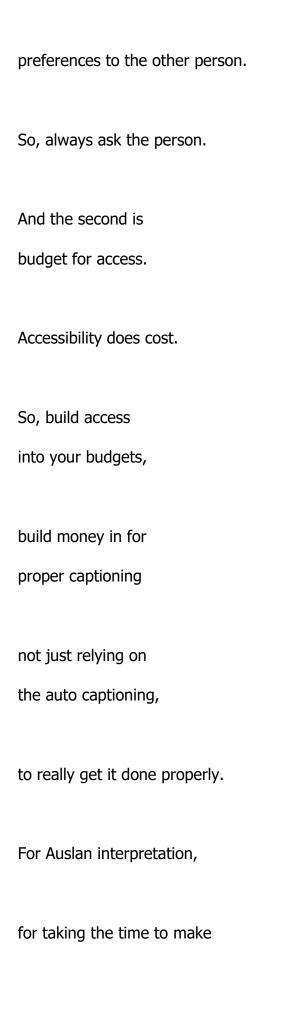
So, asking the question straight up and asking the person,

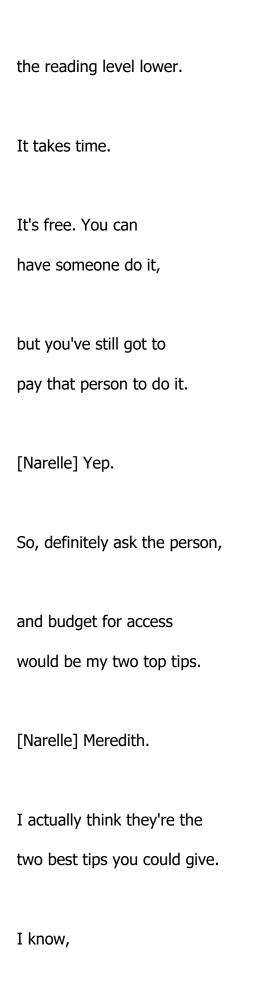
cause people have different preferences.

And just because you've met one person,

even if they've got a similar condition or level of vision,

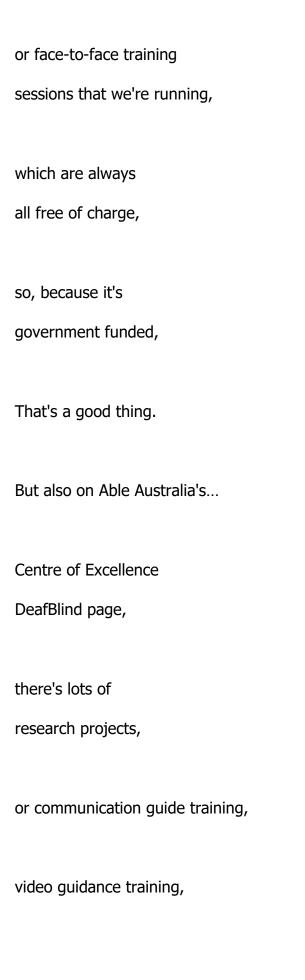
they still may have different



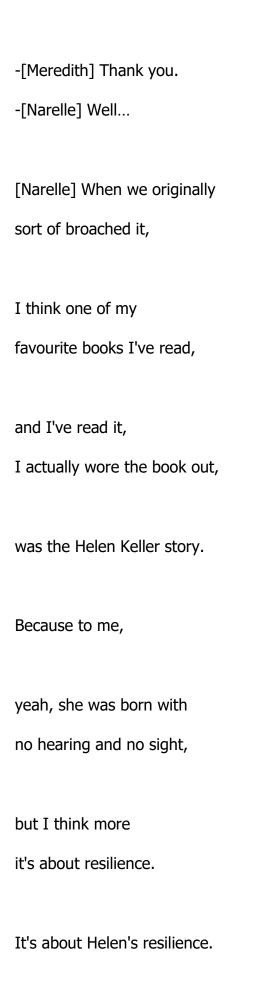


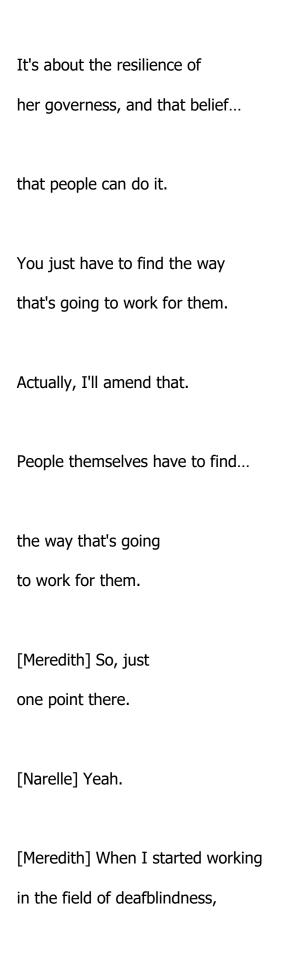
for me,
where I've worked previously,
it was always a disappointment when I couldn't do something.
when I couldn't do something.
I knew technically
I could do it.
I had the knowledge to do it.
The problem was the environment
wasn't going to let me do it.
And that's sad.
I really appreciate
having you on, Meredith.
How can people keep
in contact with you,

find out more about your work? I do think it is important work, so I'd love people to be able to find you. [Meredith] Thank you. Thank you for asking. Go to, if you Google DeafBlind information, we will pop up. So DeafBlind Information Australia, there's just a wealth of information on that site, and you can keep track of upcoming webinars,



there's some training that we run out of there as well. So, yeah, people can follow both of those, or follow me on LinkedIn. Yeah, I guess those would be my top three places to find me, and the work that we're doing. [Narelle] Yeah. Thanks, Meredith. Thanks for your time today. [Meredith] Thanks, Narelle. It's been a pleasure. [Narelle] It is a real pleasure.





I couldn't understand why people born deafblind had such...

complex and profound disabilities,

because I thought Helen Keller was born deafblind as well.

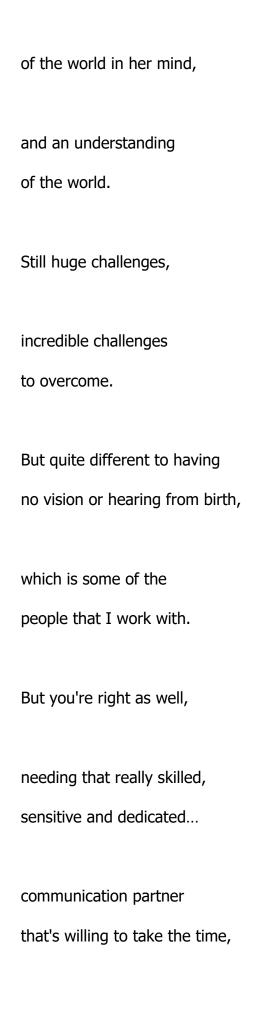
Helen Keller could see and hear until she was two.

And so you learn an awful lot about the world,

and you have an awful lot of language by the age of two.

So, that is a lot of the reason why she was able to develop,

she already had a map



and effort to work with you in a way that's meaningful to you,

to develop the skills.

So, yeah, amazing woman for sure.

[Narelle] Yeah, just so important.

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please like, share, subscribe, review.

We really do love feedback and we don't care if it's ugly.

If it's ugly, it means we're going to change things,

