Narelle: Good morning. Welcome to The Digital Access Show. Our guest this week has been a previous guest, and he has the most amazing course on the history of disability in Australia. Tommy also runs two companies—Disbranded and Inclusive AF—and has worked in the disability sector for many years. Please meet Tommy Trout. Hey, Tommy, how are you?

Tommy: Hello and welcome. I've realised I haven't been in the sector for many years—I think I've been in it for all the years.

Narelle: Yes, I should have phrased that better.

Tommy: And then some.

Narelle: The last podcast was really interesting, and I've listened to it a couple of times.

Tommy: You poor thing.

Narelle: The history of disability in Australia is sad.

Tommy: There's definitely sadness in it. But my brother Jack and I also see a lot of triumph and incredible heroism throughout it. There are beacons of hope—people who came before us and pushed change. But when you think about how many lives were needlessly constrained or unfulfilled, and how much genius, love, perspective, and potential was lost because of how society operated… it's existentially crushing.

Narelle: The story I always come back to is the man in a wheelchair who wrote that book—I still can't find it.

Tommy: Jack and I have a bounty on that book. It's called Captives of Care by John Roarty. He was physically disabled but very bright, completely cogent, and living in institutional care. He wasn't even allowed to push his own wheelchair. He tried repeatedly to expose the truth, but his care provider blocked him. Eventually he got the message out, and that led to investigations that helped drive the deinstitutionalisation movement in the 60s and 70s.

Narelle: Another example is Helen Keller—people assumed she'd never amount to anything. Look what she achieved. Stephen Hawking too. So many capable people.

Tommy: Absolutely. One of my favourite figures is Temple Grandin—autistic, brilliant, and still advocating for neurodiversity. Her work in animal husbandry and humane slaughter practices reduced suffering on a massive scale.

Narelle: She's someone I'd love to hear speak. And here in Australia we have great people too. Have you met Emma Bennison?

Tommy: I've heard of her but haven't met her.

Narelle: She's just been appointed CEO of the Disability Advocacy Network Australia. Never had sight, but her clarity of speech and thought is extraordinary. Another amazing person is Dr George Tullianopoulos.

Tommy: Dr George is brilliant.

Narelle: He can cut through to the core of an argument like nobody else. And these are people who, in the 50s and 60s, would likely have been dismissed or hidden away.

Tommy: Absolutely. The talent is undeniable. And society is still grappling with the scale and complexity of disability. Human nature likes to simplify and label, but disability often defies neat categories.

I've got a friend who uses a wheelchair half the time because of a spinal cord injury. When he stands up, people get upset with him—"You shouldn't be using that wheelchair." It shows how society struggles with things that aren't simple.

Narelle: Yes. And today we still see cruelty and misunderstanding. Some issues get media attention, others don't because people don't understand them.

Tommy: Society is going through growing pains. And some people resist change like their lives depend on it.

Narelle: For example, a recent ABC story about a man born deaf—his Auslan interpretation allowance was cut in half by the NDIS. Effectively half his communication was removed. The comment was "learn to speak." Horrifying. Choice and control matters.

Tommy: The NDIS has a difficult job. If they don't regulate enough, you get fraud and neglect. If they regulate too much, you lose choice and control. It becomes a "be safe or be free" dilemma. I always advocate for freedom and better enforcement of fraud laws, rather than restricting participants.

Narelle: Society still has a long way to go. It's a mindset shift.

Tommy: And that shift is happening at different levels. We also see more late-in-life diagnoses, especially neurodivergence. Businesses are realising they must accommodate all people—not just commercially but morally. But they often don't

know how.

They sometimes pick one person with disability and say, "Tell us what to do." But disability isn't a monolith. No one person—lived experience or not—can speak for everyone.

Narelle: You can't make everyone happy. Each person has to accept their own situation. I know my eyesight loss affects me in certain ways, but I can't say how disability affects others. Even my own kids with autism and ADHD—I'm their mum, but I don't live in their shoes.

Tommy: Government and business look for silver bullets, but there aren't any. There are thousands of diagnoses, all manifesting differently, interacting with culture, identity, gender, age, religion… it's a galaxy.

Instead of a perfect solution, we need principles that benefit the most people possible. For example, how do you define inclusivity?

Narelle: Inclusion is acceptance—of yourself and others—without judgment.

Tommy: And how do you make that actionable?

Narelle: In a business, start with ensuring digital communication is accessible—following the Australian Digital Accessibility Standard and WCAG. Train staff to ask one question: "How would you like the information given to you?" Some want print, some web, some audio, some video.

Physically—ramps, wide aisles, counters at accessible heights, colours that work for people with low vision, enough space for wheelchairs or guide dogs. Culture matters too: modelling inclusive behaviours.

Tommy: So inclusion to you is closely tied to accessibility.

Narelle: Accessibility is part of it, but inclusion is really about how you treat people.

Tommy: My rule is: treat everyone the same unless there's a good reason not to. Don't assume incompetence. Good design is accessible. Clear communication helps everyone.

I used to introduce my brother Jack as autistic. I never introduced anyone else by medical condition. There was no good reason to do it, so I stopped.

Narelle: You can't make the world perfectly accessible, but we can improve the low-hanging fruit.

Tommy: Exactly. Let's get as close to the ceiling as possible—we're not there yet.

Narelle: We are on the journey. I'm seeing a change in mindset, especially in younger generations. My kids grew up seeing disability as normal, and their friends picked up that mindset too. They instinctively helped, advocated, and included.

Tommy: I've been studying on campus with 19-year-olds, and I've never felt better about the future. They get criticised for being "soft," but they're incredibly socially aware and morally aligned. For them, inclusion is normal.

Narelle: Very different from how we grew up without the internet. The digital world has negatives, but many positives—especially awareness.

Tommy: Institutionalisation is still within living memory. In the last 60 years we've made enormous progress—arguably as much as in the 200 years before it.

Narelle: Agreed. What are some takeaways?

Tommy: That's why we wrote the history course—context helps everything make sense. And businesses often fear the disability community. They worry if they get it wrong, someone will come after them. But almost no situation jumps straight to legal action. Usually it's repeated refusal to provide accessibility.

If you're trying, communicating, asking for feedback, and being transparent—you'll get support. If you claim to be accessible and aren't, and put in no effort, then you'll be held accountable.

Narelle: Spot on. How can people contact you?

Tommy: I'm on LinkedIn—just search for Tommy Trout. Or contact either of my businesses through social media and DM me.

Narelle: Thanks, Tommy. If you like what we do, please like, subscribe, and review. I always enjoy talking with Tommy—I always learn something. What does inclusivity mean to you? See you next time.