


# Forward movement

The Heinz Endowments and the FISA Foundation have teamed up to create an initiative to expand opportunities for people with disabilities and change the narratives about them. By Elwin Green | Photos by Joshua Franzos



FISA Foundation Program Officer Shani Lasin, left, holds a microphone for Alisha Grishman, community activist and founder of Access Mob, during an audience discussion at the November summit "Disability Inclusion & Access: Moving Forward," sponsored by FISA and The Heinz Endowments.



# Darren Walker didn't come to play. >

During the “Disability Inclusion & Access: Moving Forward” summit, organized last November by The Heinz Endowments and FISA Foundation, the Ford Foundation president recited an incisive quote by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

“Philanthropy is commendable, but it should not allow the philanthropist to overlook the very injustice that makes philanthropy necessary.”

Mr. Walker, author of “From Generosity to Justice: A New Gospel of Wealth,” a book about philanthropy, spoke about the need for a more inclusive society as part of a featured interview with Endowments President Grant Oliphant. Their conversation kicked off a series of presentations at the Senator John Heinz History Center before nearly 250 representatives of grantmaking organizations, grantees and members of the disability community.

And Dr. King’s words resonated as the day progressed as speakers challenged invalid assumptions—such as that people with disabilities are to be pitied.

“You know what pity is?” Joyce Bender, of Bender Consulting, asked. “It’s arrogance. That’s what it really is... People with disabilities don’t want pity, they want paychecks.”

Josie Badger, of J Badger Consulting, and Chaz Kellem, director of the University of Pittsburgh’s student service program, PittServes, both local leaders in the disability rights movement and individuals with disabilities themselves, served as hosts of the event. Each described how foundations and nonprofits need to recognize that people with disabilities are integral to society.

Noting that one in four Americans lives with some form of disability, Ms. Badger said, “Whether you know it or not, you are serving people with disabilities.”

Mr. Kellem added that people with disabilities should not be viewed only as clients. “People with disabilities are assets, folks,” he said. “We have a lot to give.”

The “Disability Inclusion & Access” summit launched an initiative of the same name that was a result of discussions between Endowments Chief Equity Officer Carmen

Anderson and FISA Foundation Executive Director Kristy Trautmann.

“They have worked extensively in the area of disability inclusion for a long time,” Ms. Anderson said of the FISA Foundation. “When we wanted to expand our equity work to be inclusive of this area of focus, they were a natural partner for us.”

The collaboration between the two foundations moved quickly beyond that first gathering.

“From the beginning of those conversations, we knew that a one-time event would never accomplish what needed to happen,” Ms. Trautmann said.

The summit was followed by a series of five webinars in February and March, which were archived online after they were completed. The webinars, which drew 150 to 200 attendees when conducted live, focused on the nuts and bolts of accessibility, such as how to create accessible documents or make events truly welcoming for people with disabilities.

In a third phase, the Endowments and FISA awarded grants to organizations that



Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, challenged nonprofit and civic leaders during the "Disability Inclusion & Access" summit at the Senator John Heinz History Center to be more inclusive of people with disabilities.

are tackling some aspect of disability inclusion and access, particularly those efforts that involve having organizations assess their current operations, and then develop and implement plans to remove barriers to people with disabilities.

But the grants, and the initiative in general, are not intended to spur the creation of new programs for people with disabilities.

"In every sector, we are serving people with all types of disabilities—oftentimes without consideration," Ms. Anderson said. "The challenge isn't a new separate area of work. The challenge is: What does it mean to be truly inclusive in the work that we are already doing? This is why the initiative started with the idea that it would be helpful as a starting point to increase awareness around basic steps we all can take in our work to be more accessible to everyone."

Regarding people with disabilities not as a separate demographic but as part of every demographic leads to the recognition that sometimes those other parts of their identities make them subject to additional marginalization.

As Thena Robinson Mock, program officer for the Communities for Just Schools

Fund, pointed out in her presentation at the summit, there's a word for that: intersectionality.

"People with disabilities are part of every other demographic group, and living with those intersecting identities results in specific experiences," Ms. Trautmann noted. "For instance, people of color with disabilities—especially invisible disabilities like autism, mental health diagnoses, intellectual disabilities, deafness—can experience increased risks when interacting with police."

C. Denise Johnson has lived her entire life at the intersection of others' biases. A 61-year-old Black woman, Ms. Johnson has been diagnosed with major depressive disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. She also has a hearing loss that resulted from untreated bronchitis and sinusitis during a period of homelessness in 2012.

Her mental health issues were undiagnosed until she attended a health fair in 2002. But it was only after her disability cost Ms. Johnson her job and her home that she received the level of help that she needed.

"I consider myself blessed to have a therapist who is a Black woman," she said.

"If your therapist shares your cultural/racial background and gender, you won't have to explain spontaneous answers to someone who may interpret something out of context."

Ms. Johnson, who now receives disability benefits and maintains a regimen of medication and therapy, speaks freely about her disability in part because she wants to see "an increased emphasis on mental health as a public health issue."

"I believe there is a direct correlation of antisocial behavior and violence with the lack of access to culturally competent diagnoses and therapeutic treatment," she added.

What does it look like when an agency or institution has moved well along in its inclusion of people with disabilities? It might look like the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, which by its very nature, attracts a wide demographic.

"You'll have a 2-year-old and you'll have an 80-year-old sitting side by side wanting to do the same thing," said Anne Fullenkamp, the museum's senior director of design. That leads to a question that underlies all of the design decisions: "How can families come to the museum, and everyone can participate side by side, regardless of their ability?"



## ➤ The summit

**The “Disability Inclusion & Access: Moving Forward” summit, sponsored by The Heinz Endowments and the FISA Foundation, brought together community leaders, nonprofits and funders in November to explore ways their organizations could be more inclusive of people with disabilities. The event included in-person and video-recorded interviews, lectures, group discussions and networking opportunities. It also launched a new initiative of the same name jointly supported by FISA and the Endowments.**

Clockwise from top right: Nearly 250 people attended the summit at the Senator John Heinz History Center. Chaz Kellem, director of the University of Pittsburgh student services program PittServes and a program co-host, conversed with Jeanine Schultz, director of training for the PEAL Center, which works with families, youth and young adults with disabilities and special health care needs. Support animals like the dog, bottom left, were welcome at the summit. Paul O’Hanlon, chairman of the City of Pittsburgh/Allegheny County Task Force on Disability, was among the event speakers. Award-winning journalist Erin Gannon, left center, who also works for the disability services group Achieva, and Tiffany Merriman-Preston, director of development at Emmaus Community of Pittsburgh, engaged in lunch conversation during the summit. Amber Farr, top left, of the Buhl Foundation warmly hugged another event participant.



# “What it comes down to is that the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust believes that the arts are for all.”

**Vanessa Braun**, manager of employee engagement and director of accessibility, Pittsburgh Cultural Trust

Answering that question goes far beyond making sure that the museum complies with the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990. The act, Ms. Fullenkamp explained, doesn't really address the needs of people using spaces in terms of how programs and services should be delivered to them.

Designing for people with disabilities means more than ramps for wheelchairs. It means considering people with sensitivities to light and sound or people for whom touch is their primary mode of learning.

The Children's Museum uses “universal design,” a design philosophy that champions accessibility. For the creation of its MuseumLab in a former branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, the museum partnered with the University of Buffalo's Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access to create a space that demonstrates universal design to such a degree that it became the first museum to receive the center's isUD (innovative solutions for Universal Design) certification.

Design elements that accommodate people with disabilities range from the macro—a floor plan that has the galleries open onto each other, with wide pathways and no fixed furniture—to the micro, such as signage rendered in a simple, clear black and white color scheme that makes it easier for the visually impaired to read.

The museum is also part of a peer access group, led by the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council and the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, whose members share resources for disability inclusion and access.

Examples of universal design in practice as part of these collaborations include when Pittsburgh hosted performances of “The Lion King” in 2013 and “Wicked” in 2018 that were sensory-friendly. The productions were modified to accommodate people who are sensitive to such sensory inputs as loud sounds and bright lights, and the Children's Museum was able to lend equipment for those performances.

The “Lion King” production was that show's third sensory-friendly performance in the country. Meanwhile, both the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre and the Pittsburgh Symphony

Orchestra became the first in their categories nationally to offer sensory-friendly performances. In addition, the Trust's Children's Theater Festival, held each May, has included a sensory-friendly performance each year since 2015.

The pandemic spread of the novel coronavirus, and the resulting shutdown of non-essential businesses prevented such a performance this May, but the Trust looks forward to resuming the new tradition next year.

“What it comes down to is that the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust believes that the arts are for all,” said Vanessa Braun, the Trust's manager of employee engagement and director of accessibility.

However, for people with disabilities, the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown has exacerbated existing challenges and created new ones.

Those who rely on paid outside help to come into their home to assist with daily living tasks “are in a horrible Catch-22,” said Paul O'Hanlon, of the City-County Task Force on Disabilities.

“If they can't get the help they need, they may not be able to survive alone. Their only option would be to go into a nursing home, which is a terrible place to be in during a pandemic.”

But even in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Mr. O'Hanlon said, people with

disabilities have shown their resilience, organizing to support those among them who have been infected and those hospitalized. They also joined the rest of the community in accepting the challenge of learning to live much of life virtually, which hints at long-term change.

“People with disabilities who are stuck at home even when there isn't a pandemic are having a ball participating in things which they've never or haven't been able to participate in years,” he said.

In fact, on a single day—April 15—Mr. O'Hanlon received two emails about opportunities for participation by individuals with disabilities that might not have occurred pre-COVID-19. The first described how transit activists in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia had joined forces to conduct a statewide online conference call that drew 102 attendees. The second offered a menu of concerts by a variety of artists, including Twenty One Pilots and The Black Keys, all being live streamed.

“I think when we're past the social isolation phase,” Mr. O'Hanlon said, “people with disabilities will be demanding that virtual participation be kept going forward.” [h](#)