

## **Explorable | Season Two, Episode 21: Transcript of interview with Alison Brooks**

**Josh Loebner:**

Hey everyone. Welcome to Explorable. I'm Josh.

**Toby Willis:**

And I'm Toby. We're so excited to share with you this series of episodes that we recorded live on the road at the 2021 Travel Ability summit in Tampa, Florida. Next up let's hear from Alison Brooks from Visit Mesa.

Hi Allison. Thanks so much for joining us at TravelAbility, and I'm really excited to learn more about you. So, can you tell me about your job and your title and what you do for Mesa?

**Alison Brooks:**

Well, hello. I am so thrilled to be here. Thank you for having me. I'm Alison Brooks. My title is director of Destination Experience and Advocacy over at Visit Mesa. We're a suburb just outside of Phoenix, Arizona, and love my job because what I get to do is so special. Big part of what I do is really talking about inclusion and accessibility. And if you notice our tagline is called "City Limitless", and that was born out of the physical borders of Mesa, which you can be inside our beautiful city, but just outside of it, there's so many great recreation opportunities. There's Salt River, the Saguaro Lake, Queen Creek. There's so many cool things to do just outside of our border. We called it City Limitless because we want people to come and feel like they can explore the whole area. We've remagined it. And now it's City Limitless, meaning we want people to come

as they are and enjoy our destination, and feel limitless when they're there. It's all about inclusion.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. I love the play on words. How did you get into this? How did you find your way into working in the inclusion and accessibility space?

**Alison Brooks:**

I started with Visit Mesa just about six or nine months ago now. And a big part of my role was just talking about inclusion and expanding what we've already done in this space. Being the first certified autism city in the entire United States a couple of years ago, we thought, this is great, but we want to do so much more.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. And you said in the world, right? The only certified autism-friendly city in the world, that's quite the honor.

**Alison Brooks:**

It is. It was a big initiative. And most places will call themselves maybe autism-friendly, but this is a true certification by IBCCES just in here in Florida actually. Everybody who is certified has to go through a two or three-hour course with questions and answers and the whole bit and be recertified every couple of years. And we have almost 5,000 people in our city that are certified.

**Toby Willis:**

Wow. That's great. Alison, tell us more about what Mesa's doing in this space, in addition to the autism certification, I'm sure there's other things that are happening.

**Alison Brooks:**

We're thinking about the different ways that we can make people feel comfortable as they are to come here and explore our city. We just recently adopted the Hidden Disability Sunflower program, which started in the UK in airports. And it's a lanyard; it's a bright green with sunflowers all over it, and somebody who might have a hidden disability—Which so many people do. About one in four, one in five, or the stats that I've heard. It can be anything from PTSD to severe anxiety, which is a big one post-COVID, someone who might be hard of hearing, all kinds of things—and they can grab one of these lanyards and wear it. And when they're going about their business and the airport's there, people can recognize it, that they have a hidden disability and just, "Hey, I need to be a little more patient, a little extra kind or helpful and to help that person out." And so, I'd recently saw this at a TravelAbility conference, and I saw that they brought this over to the US, and I thought, "You know what? This has our name all over it." We were gutsy enough to go after being the first autism-certified city. We could be gutsy enough to take this on as well. We're the first DMO to adopt this program. The lanyards are available at our lobby, and we have them at hotels and attractions throughout this city. And anybody who's come, and we have residents too, that come in and grab them. And as they're going about the city, people wear them and people know that, "Hey, that person has something going on," and people will be helpful.

**Toby Willis:**

Oh, that's cool. So, locals are participating in this program that was developed for tourists. That's pretty cool.

**Alison Brooks:**

Yeah. And it's really incredible. The mayor has posted on his social media, parks and rec and all kinds of Mesa businesses have adopted this already. And it's only been a few months. It's still new and we're still growing and learning with it, but it just shows that people, when they see something they like, they want to be a part.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah, it makes sense. Right. I mean, it's helpful period, yeah. And listeners, we did an episode on this Sunflower program, and actually, I believe it was discussed in the episode we did with the Sea-Tac airport, the Seattle-Tacoma, which is now SEA branded. Are there other programs that you wanted to highlight in addition to the Sunflower program?

**Alison Brooks:**

Yes. We just started working with Threshold 360 doing virtual tours, but we're doing it from the light of accessibility. So, when we are having them capture all of our attractions and hotels and restaurants and all of that, of course, they're doing the standard shots, but then we also are having them go inside restrooms or just outside in the parking and things like that. And the hotels are making sure they're getting ADA rooms and anything that has to do, that might help people really know before they go. Because let's face it, it's all about the planning, right? When someone can be more comfortable knowing what they're going to get before they get there, they're going to have a better experience.

We're making sure that all of the places that our tours are done, that they're being done with that in mind. And in the future, we hope to also include any kind of media inside the video. If we can get a virtual popup of a little tour that they can be doing with more information or a popup with a sensory guide, for example, we'll be doing that as well. So, Threshold is working with us. We're kind of their guinea pig in this space but really excited to start working on that.

**Toby Willis:**

That sounds great because I've heard it said information sharing is half the battle. And if those images of various spaces and pathways and amenities are featured in the photo galleries, then travelers can make an informed decision before they decide to book or decide what they're going to book.

**Alison Brooks:**

Absolutely. And so, it will be living on our landing page for accessibility and inclusion. It'll just be another part that we can help people plan their trip.

**Toby Willis:**

That's great. So, with the Sunflower program, with tourists and locals, both participating, it makes me think that, is that something for me as a blind person who uses a guide dog, and could I wear a lanyard?

**Alison Brooks:**

Absolutely. I think that anybody that wants to say to the world, "Hey, give me a second, be a little patient with me." It's obviously their choice if they want to wear one or not. It's

not for everybody, but if they want to have it signify that they have a disability, then I think that they should wear that. And it would be great. I have one in my purse. Should I get it out?

**Toby Willis:**

I might want it because I was just coming out of the hotel this morning to walk over to the convention center, and the bellhop says, "Is this your car?" As if he was annoyed. And I said, "I'm blind. I don't think you want me driving that car." But to his credit, maybe he thought I was getting in it, not driving. And I get this a lot, "You don't look blind," because I can see a little bit. I make eye contact with people, and they think that my 85-pound German shepherd dog is a beautiful pet, which she is, but she's also a working dog.

**Alison Brooks:**

I bet, I bet. I mean, I just hope that the entire US adopts this, every DMO out there. It just makes sense. It reminds me of those yellow bracelets that we all wore for cancer awareness. Everybody knew what that meant at one point or another. The hardest point of this thing is just getting the word out about it and making sure people know what to do when they see somebody wearing one and know that it's available, that they can wear one if they want. That's the education piece is probably the most challenging part, but I think organically, it's going to take off. It's just going to take time.

**Toby Willis:**

And you said you've been in this position for around nine months. Was that the beginning of the Inclusion Initiative or had it started before it was handed over to you? What's the history? How did Mesa get started on inclusive travel and accessibility?

**Alison Brooks:**

It started a couple of years ago when our CEO was vacationing, as he always does in a city not too far from us—him and his family. His son is autistic. He was probably, I guess, about six or seven years old at that time. And they had always gone to this vacation spot every single year by the beach and said, "You know what, this year we're going to shake it up a little bit. We're going to stay in the downtown area." And for whatever reason, that week was just a tough week for their son. They were used to having an autistic son. I'm sure people are used to getting the stares and the comments and things like that a little bit. But he found that what was happening is that in hotels, in restaurants, in the one place where you are supposed to be surrounded by hospitality professionals, they were getting those stares and those comments, and it just made things really awkward. And he says, "You know what, this should not be happening." Fast forward, he came home, and he says, "You know what? I can't do anything about this in the city where we were, but I definitely can do something about this in Mesa." That's where he got on the mission of how can we make this a better situation for people like me, for families? Because so many families don't travel when they have autistic children or they themselves, the parents are autistic. He says, "How can we make it better? How can we be more inclusive?" And long story short, found IBCCES and went through the whole process of our city becoming certified. But originally it was going to be just Visit Mesa getting certified, and then asking hotels and attractions to get

certified. So, it started internally, but then all of a sudden, our board was certified, the whole city of Mesa, like the mayor and their office became certified. Parks and rec, police and fire, big companies like Boeing and SRP that are there, also became certified. It just organically grew. So, out of something that was so just, I want to make a difference, became this whole mission to be like, "Okay, well now we've done this. What else can we do? How can we be even more inclusive?" So, it's evolved over the past couple of years. And when I came on board, I said, "This is amazing. I'm going to definitely want to grow this program. And how can we get more people certified?" Because I mean, it's just the tip of the iceberg, but then, of course, these other programs, how can we be more inclusive to not just people who might have autism, but how can we be more inclusive for people who might be blind or deaf or even older folks now. They're coming to Mesa, and they want to get out and explore, but maybe their mobility is challenged a little bit. So, we're on a mission to just be more welcoming, no matter how you come.

**Toby Willis:**

Let me just back up for a second. What was the acronym or the abbreviation that you used? Was it, IBCCS?

**Alison Brooks:**

IBCCES. So yes, we became certified through the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards. It's a mouthful, IBCCES, but they are out of Florida. And what I like best about them is that if somebody wants to become autism-certified, they tailor it to your vertical, so tourism and travel people might get a different



program because it's more specialized to what they do, versus someone who's in parks and rec or police and fire, for example.

**Toby Willis:**

Tell me more about how this grew so quickly. It feels like it has grown. It's just taken off; you've gotten buy-in from leaders and from the community. What's your secret? How did you do that? So many of us have struggled for years to get momentum and without resources and human capital, financial resources, and human capital working on it, it's really hard to get that momentum, that it feels like you have achieved.

**Alison Brooks:**

Well, thank you. I would have to say, regardless of whatever program, whatever initiative that anybody would want to roll out, any DMO would want to roll out, it has to come from the place of being authentic. Mark had a story to tell and people...

**Toby Willis:**

And Mark is your CEO with the child with autism.

**Alison Brooks:**

Mark is the CEO with the son. Yeah. And he had a story to tell, so people connected with it, and almost everyone knows somebody, right, that has been affected by either autism or a disability of some sort. And I think now people are starting to recognize it. This is something that people want to feel included. And just because they have a disability doesn't mean they don't want to travel. I think it was truly just being authentic. And when that happened, people organically bought into what we wanted to do and

help. And they knew it wasn't just the right thing to do—which of course we presented it that way; This is the right thing to do, to be inclusive—But it's also great business. I mean, at the end of the day, we're in the market of marketing our city. And it makes us really special and unique in that we can welcome these families, who might have an autistic child or whatever, are they themselves, the parents might be autistic, and they know they can be comfortable and that they will have a great experience when they come to Mesa. So, it's a big differentiator. And we are about to welcome a convention that's all from IBCCES, it's coming in next year. So, it's definitely a great business choice as well.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. I kind of chuckled to myself when you said so cavalierly, "Just because they have a disability doesn't mean they don't want to travel."

**Alison Brooks:**

Yeah. I mean, it's like crazy.

**Toby Willis:**

Hello, world. There's like 20 percent of us who want to travel, and you said it so well, it's just, it's the right thing to do and it's a great business opportunity. So, do you want to talk more about the business opportunity? Like why should we do this? Okay, it's the right thing to do. We all have a moral compass, but what's the business case. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Alison Brooks:**

Sure. Well, let's put it this way. One in four people have a disability, so you're going to leave 25 percent of your money just sitting there on the table. Right. I mean, at the end of the day, that's it. I mean, so think about that. Just because somebody has a disability doesn't mean that they don't want to come and explore your city, your attractions.

Clearly, for us, we get a lot of business from the Special Olympics. We have the Legacy Sports Complex which is just about to open in Mesa here next year. They already have a five-year deal with Special Olympics. Our city, I mean, I have to say we've always been welcoming in the sports vertical, really welcoming with all kinds of disabled sports. Arizona Disabled Sports is right out of Mesa. So, I mean, it's always been a market for us, but it's really the smart thing to do to be welcoming to all these people and these families.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. It seems like it should be really clear to those of us who work in the travel industry, that this is a huge opportunity for us to welcome more people of diverse backgrounds. And I think even for those of us who don't need an accessible hotel room, for example, I'll use my experience, but I appreciate having like Braille signage and things labeled. But I guess what I'm trying to say is it's welcoming the whole community. And we can't make everything accessible for every user all the time. There's going to be gaps and opportunities as products evolve and as trends take shape. But I think having the marketing in place that welcomes the entire community. And you mentioned earlier, Alison, about people aging into disability. I think a lot of those folks don't necessarily identify with the disability community, but they benefit greatly from the accessibility and inclusion work that we're doing. So, tell me more about the nuts and bolts of your

program. How did you implement or how do you decide what to go after sort of what's your priorities in this space?

**Alison Brooks:**

Right now, it's more about the planning stage for us. Right now, we're working on our landing page and that's a process. I think a lot of DMOs are probably a little bit in a weary spot right now. Right. They know it's the right thing they do. They want to do things in this space, diversity, equity, inclusion, it's all you hear DEI, DEI everywhere. And accessibility naturally falls under that umbrella.

**Toby Willis:**

Right. Accessibility is a function of inclusion. Yes.

**Alison Brooks:**

Absolutely. Like, can we shout that from the rooftops, please? You just got to start small and work your way toward it. And so, for us, right now working in the planning stages and the landing page, and just getting the information to the people as they plan that, right now is where we're at. Especially with Threshold 360, making sure that we get those videos up on our inclusion page, all of the links out to the services that are offered, of course, whether it be attractions or hotels or whatever, that there's information regarding whatever it might be, parking or restrooms or whatever. Anything above and beyond those meeting just the standard ADA criteria or ways that we can help people in their planning stage, of course, the marketing piece behind it. Right? So, putting videos and showing with people that have disabilities, that's been a priority for us and just getting this word out, and then the programs kind of come, I want to say they

fall into our lap, but when we actively work in this space, you hear more about it. Of course, I'm here at TravelAbility. And I want to hear more about what's the next thing, what's the next technology that we can implement to be able to help people as they come to Mesa and experience our city. It seems to evolve naturally and organically. First of all, if I ever had any kind of advice for any kind of DMO to get started, it's start with just getting the information out there and getting that landing page up.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. That's my next question is like, what can our listeners do right now to get started? Because I think it can be daunting all the opportunity for our listeners who are maybe earlier in their inclusion journey. What's the one thing, I think you said it, it's information sharing, right?

**Alison Brooks:**

Yeah. I would say get a landing page. And right now, a lot of people, the DMOs might have this information buried on their website. And that would be the first step is to put it up not, I want to say up front and center, but if your DEI, which a lot of people are putting this stuff up front and center, this should be up front and center as well. And so, we have our own landing pages, all about accessibility and inclusion. We put as much information as possible. So, the first steps are just gathering the information, asking your hotel partners, asking the attractions, asking the restaurants, what are you doing that is special above and beyond just the ADA requirements. And it's difficult. I'm not going to lie. A lot of them won't respond. You have to pick up the phone, you have to email, you have to say, "What are you doing?" And you'll find, but a lot of them are just

doing the ADA requirements, but hopefully, that starts to inspire. And that's the role of the DMO is how can we work with our partners to make them better so that the experience is better for our visitors? How can we help them get things like the Sunflower program started and other initiatives that get them more in that accessibility space? But I would say to the DMOs though, just one foot in front of the other, it starts small. It evolves, our landing page was nothing crazy and wonderful at the start. It still isn't, we're adding to it as we speak. It's a process it's never going to be perfect. There's always going to be somebody that you didn't cover. That's okay. As long as your intention is to help and do your best. And if there's something that you can fix that you fix it, that's what matters, that your intention is there and that you're doing the best you can and just let it evolve. Don't think it needs to be done tomorrow, it's a journey for sure.

**Toby Willis:**

I love that. Intention. It reminds me that the ADA is a floor, not a ceiling. It's often not enough. For example, the ADA doesn't cover furniture, which is a huge barrier for a lot of people with mobility and other disability types. So, intention is really the crux of, it's the heart of the matter. And I think a lot of our friends in the travel industry think that, "Oh, I'm doing the ADA I'm compliant. That's enough." And that intent is born of avoiding litigation. If we shift our paradigm to inclusion and have our intention to be, to make a positive outcome for as many people as possible, then that opens up the door for us to do more, to go above and beyond what compliance legislation exists in whichever country you're operating in.

**Alison Brooks:**

Yeah, I would say the opportunity lies in what I call two buckets for this, for DMOs. The first bucket is to do things like you just set above and beyond what the ADA requirements are. How can the physical spaces, how can we help make the experience better for our visitors above and beyond what the ADA has? Just like you said about a guest room, for example, the furniture being placed in good spaces and making sure that things are more comfortable for the guest. That's physical stuff. So that's one bucket. What can we do to make their physical experience better? And the other bucket is how can we educate all of the people that our visitors will come into contact, in other words, our partners, right? And so that's another thing that we're looking to do in the near future is educating, creating a video library would be one thing that we're going to do, is short five to 10-minute trainings on what's the etiquette, right? What words am I supposed to use? So many people are afraid to even have these conversations or how even personally, I come from the hospitality background, I worked for a couple of very large companies, and never once did I get the training about how to speak with somebody who has a disability, which is crazy. So, even just an etiquette training or whatever, what do you do when you run into someone who is blind? How do you proceed? Can you lead them by the arm? How do you do that? Those kinds of things, right? And so, make it something that they don't feel uncomfortable anymore, take that uncomfortability out of it. Because obviously a competent person, a confident person is better when they're trained right. That's how you get confident is training.

**Toby Willis:**

That's right, in practice.

**Alison Brooks:**

Yes. So, the education piece is something we're going to be concentrating a lot on, having trainings and interactive type of seminars and all kinds of things that we want to do.

**Toby Willis:**

So, Alison, tell me what is on the horizon for Visit Mesa.

**Alison Brooks:**

We're looking to get good maps in our city. So, that's literally the coolest technology ever for anybody who might have some kind of vision impairment. They can use their cell phone to help them guide them step by step. I mean within like 10 feet away is a drinking fountain, turn right. I mean, it's pretty remarkable, this technology. So, we're looking to get that. We're also looking to adopt some Alinkers. If you've seen those around, they are kind of a cross between a bicycle and a wheelchair, if you will. So, it's like a standing bike.

**Toby Willis:**

Oh, I've seen those. I saw those at the Pitch Fest. I believe it's like a standing bike kind of elliptical.

**Alison Brooks:**

Yes. It's kind of hard to describe, but it's the coolest thing ever. So, we'd like to get those available for people to use as they go around downtown or some of our attractions because especially, I'm thinking of the somewhat older folks. It would make it



much easier for them to get around. And it's so cool because it helps people with their family and friends at eye level that's the neatest part of it. And then we are going to be putting either Google assistance or Alexas into the ADA hotel rooms, loaded with all the information that we can put in them for those people that need it. And we think that's a really great, easy way to implement information, which again, it's all about the education piece and information for the travelers. So be at the touch of their fingers in their hotel room.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah, or their voice, right.

**Alison Brooks:**

Or their voice.

**Toby Willis:**

Yeah. So, if you don't have fingers, you can use your voice.

**Alison Brooks:**

Either way. Like I said, it's not about perfection, right?

**Toby Willis:**

Yes. That's right. As long as Alexa can tell me the difference between decaf and regular. I will be happy. Or help me with that touchscreen TV.

**Alison Brooks:**

Yeah. So, lots of stuff on the horizon. And again, we're always looking for more. That's why I'm here at Travel Ability because we just want to keep learning. You got to keep learning, got to keep expanding, got to keep moving forward.

**Toby Willis:**

So, for our listeners who want to learn more about what Mesa, Arizona is doing to welcome disabled travelers and anyone with an accessibility need, where can they go?

**Alison Brooks:**

Well, they can go to our website, [visitmesa.com](http://visitmesa.com), and follow us on social. It's all at Visit Mesa. We even have Instagrams for Autism AZ. So, there's so many cool things that, so many easy ways to find us.

**Toby Willis:**

[Visitmesa.com](http://Visitmesa.com) and on social at Visit Mesa on Instagram.