



Transcript – El Gibbs says boards need to include people with lived expertise ASAP

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with El Gibbs about the importance of lived experience on boards and the Disability Royal Commission findings for Disability Services. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record. For me, that's the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and I pay respects to elder's past and present and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be listening. I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters and culture, and that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same. Now, let me introduce El. El is on the board of Australian Progress and was previously on the boards of Electronic Frontiers Australia, Blue Mountain City Council and Radio Blue Mountains. Al is an award-winning writer with a focus on disability and social issues. She works as a consultant for a wide range of disability and community organisations big and small, providing expertise in strategy, policy, communications, and change making advocacy. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast El.

El Gibbs 1:11

Thanks so much for having me.

Helga Svendsen 1:13

It is a pleasure to have you. And before we delve into the topic, as always, I just want to dig a little bit deeper about you tell me what was young El like? And when did you get your first inkling that you might end up as well as a consultant and or as a board director?

El Gibbs 1:32

Look, I was always someone who cared about fairness, I was one of those kids who protested at school about things not being fair. I was often that kid who was questioning and pushing back, I'm

entirely sure that I was a total pain in the arse. I asked a lot of questions about how things were. And I didn't always take things at face value. I was a pretty driven kid. But I wasn't always an easy kid to get along with. So particularly as a young person. And to be honest, as a middle-aged person, I'm not actually that much different. I've always been a bit surprised by leadership opportunities. I've had quite a few. But they've happened to me rather than me seeking them out in a kind of five-year plan, or particularly deliberately. I see leadership very much as a service to my community. So being on boards fits with that. And if I think about it as how I can use my skills and expertise to deliver for the people that I'm honoured to represent. So I certainly had no great ambitions to be on boards, or even to be a consultant, I have ended up as a consultant. A lot of the time over the years, I've had a consultancy for a long time. Because I am a disabled person. And because this kind of work suits me a great deal. But also because I have a very particular niche expertise that is of great usefulness to organisations in small chunks. So it suits a consultancy very well. And it's something that I enjoy a great deal.

Helga Svendsen 3:13

I just want to return to the school stuff because you said in my head, you said troublemaker, but I don't think that was the words that you use.

El Gibbs 3:19

Pretty much what it was.

Helga Svendsen 3:22

So I'm wondering, were you involved in the SRC and or the school council at school?

El Gibbs 3:26

No, no, that was always far too organised. For me, I was not involved in those kind of formal structures at school, I was pretty shy. And I found school pretty overwhelming. I was very young, a lot younger than then most people my age went through. So I'm very glad they don't do that to kids anymore. It was something that I really struggled with. I was 16 when I did my HSC. So it's a very challenging thing to be a lot younger than peers and as I got a bit older, and particularly as I've moved into the community sector, it fitted me very much I found my people, I found my community of people who were dedicated to making change, it was a very diverse industry and sector filled with the kind of people who'd grown up like I had and had the kind of life experiences that I had had, and also lots of others as well. And so I really value the community sector to this day, and I've worked in it for 30 years.

Helga Svendsen 3:28

Thank you. Well, thank you giving us a bit of a flavour of young EI which also just so happens to be a little bit of a flavour of not so young EI or more experienced EI. So let's turn to the importance of lived experience on boards, actually to start with what is lived experience talk us through actually what lived experience is and how that might be a value to boardrooms?

EI Gibbs 4:51

Yeah, it's a really good question. And I think some of us might, you know, I've started to refer to lived experiences lived expertise because a lot of the time in the disability community, we talked about lived experiences, not even necessarily being about the person themselves, or that they just know a disabled person or are related to a disabled person. And I don't think that's lived experience at all. For me, in a disability world, I've been disabled since I was 19. And so I have a great deal of experience of living in poverty, the income support system, using Disability Support Services at home, having housing insecurity, having discrimination at work, discrimination everywhere, as lots of other disabled people have. And so I think that brings a sharpness to my understanding about those issues. But I'm also a white settler person. So there are lots of things that I don't have lived experience of. And I think it is really important to be clear about what we do and don't have that experience of, I've also developed a degree of expertise around disability issues. As a professional person, for example, I have a significant expertise around the NDIS. And around very nerdy parts of disability policy at a federal level. And that is deeply connected to my lived experience. But it also builds upon that and deepens it in a way that gives me authenticity. When I talk about it, I'm often in consultations, where about disability, where I'm still often the only disabled person in the room. And I find for disability specific consultation, and I still find we're in 2023. And I'm still shocked that these things happen. But I can talk both about my professional expertise and my lived experience at the same time. So for example, I in a previous role, I was a spokesperson for a national disability organisation during the first year of COVID. And I could talk both about policy asks that we needed and what needed to change for the community. But I could also talk about being surviving the pandemic as an immunocompromised person who couldn't get their disability supports anymore. So I could talk about both things at the same time. And I think that's brings a huge amount of value. It's not abstract. For me, it's an abstract for the community that I belong to. And when I go into a consultation, or into a conversation about disability, I bring not only my own expertise, but the expertise of my whole community with me.

Helga Svendsen 7:41

It's so interesting, isn't it? How I do, obviously I deal in the women's space. And in conversations about women, you would never be doing a consultation about women, not with women having a room full of men, for example, can you imagine, it just can't probably many years ago, that is what happened. Like we've all seen pictures of us the room full of blokes determining abortion policy/reform or whatever it may be. But it doesn't happen now. Yet, with people with a disability, it's like, oh, well, you know, I know somebody. So therefore, I let me tell you what I think and I'm

sure carers have an insight, but it's an insight as a carer, not as a person with a disability, or family or whatever, you know.

El Gibbs 8:29

Look definitely, but also, lots of carers are also disabled people. And I think that this idea that we are separate groups of people isn't always the case. And I think a lot of the dialogue goes around those lines. Anyway, I think also with lived experience, there's an accountability, like when I am in a representative role, I'm also accountable to the community that I'm representing. And I don't always get things right, God only knows. And so I get called out or called in, I get people asking me to raise particular things, to bring things up. I'm connected into a community of disabled people around this continent who want change. I feel very honoured to be accountable to a community like that. But I think it's a really important part about that experience that people are not there in isolation.

Helga Svendsen 9:21

When he is a person with a disability - and this might be the wrong wording - so please pick me off if it is, when it's a person with a disability, "just a person on a board" who happens to have a disability versus when are they the representative as you are like her, or is it quite possible you just have a number of hats like other board members that sometimes you change at various times?

El Gibbs 9:45

It depends, I think is the answer. Like when I was at Council, for example, I wasn't elected as a disabled person, but always progress. I am on the board as a disabled person. So I think that for particular industries, such as the disability services sector or the disability employment sector, there is a strong incentive for them to bring expertise in, who not only are talking about and have expertise in talking about people with disability, but are people with a disability anyway, you know, like accountants with a disability, fundraisers with disability lawyers with a disability, you know, I have a great deal of professional expertise in a range of areas that I bring to a board role, but because I'm a person with a disability with links into the community, that is also an asset to bring in for particular boards, who have particular focuses for the disability community.

Helga Svendsen 10:46

And you've got an additional hat that others may not have. But it's in addition to those other ones, which, you know, I often say on this podcast, that I'm an advocate for diversity, equity and inclusion in the boardroom. But I would also love a time where I can have a conversation with a person with a disability who is in the boardroom, not about their disability in the boardroom, but about, they might just be a risk expert. And it's balancing those things up. And I feel like it shouldn't always just be the disability hat as well. They could just be an expert in their field.

El Gibbs 11:18

Yeah. And as we'll talk about with progress, as it turned out, having a disabled person on the board, turned out to be I had a whole bunch of skills and knowledge that they needed, that they didn't actually know, there was needed at the time. So yeah.

Helga Svendsen 11:33

Okay, talk us through how you ended up in a board room of Australian Progress.

El Gibbs 11:40

Of course. So Australian Progress is a national organisation that works across civil society to it does a huge amount of things does training, it does investment it does, focusing and supporting new campaigns are doing an amazing amount of work at the moment about the voice and with the passing the message stick work and Common Threads, which is coming up. So if you've got any First Nations listeners, I strongly urge you to get along to Common Threads. So I've known about Progress for a while, and they do a big conference every couple of years called Progress. And so I went to the 2019 conference. And as it turned out, there were a range of really difficult issues for a range of disabled people at the conference. And I was asked by a number of people to basically take it up to progress and to talk to them about that. And for Progress's is credit that then Deputy CEO, who's now the CEO, engaged with me in really good faith. And we spent about three months meeting and talking about what had happened and how to fix it, and what Progress could actually do around addressing not just the concerns that disabled people had raised about the conference, but the fact that they've been raising them for some time, and nothing had changed. And so there was a degree of like, really come on, you meant to be, you know, the leading civil society organisation, you know, what are you doing? And at the end of all of that process, they approached me and said, Would you like to be on the board, and I do have a role of one not-for-profit board at a time. And I had recently stepped off from the radio station, and it was like, what is the much bigger role rather than the radio station. And I hadn't done a big national kind of thing for a long time. So I thought it would be a good opportunity. So with the sort of beginning of 2020, I stepped onto the board. And as everybody knows, very soon after that, we were in the middle of a global pandemic. And I've worked from home for a really long time. So I am really used to remote work and doing things online. The disability community has pioneered a lot of online activities, because we have to, I'm not very mobile. So it's much easier for me to do things from home for both most of us who have people who live in regional areas, and to be connected across the country. So we have a lot of skills and expertise in running things online. But organisation that mainly ran events in person, everything had to go online. And so there were a lot of things that I knew about that were helpful. And I think having me with that experience was useful. And I had that experience because I'm a disabled person, and I'm part of the disability community. So bringing that to the organisation in that way. It wasn't meant to be but it turned out to be the way things are and, you know, they were able to pivot the staff did an

incredible job to an all online organisation and things are very different now three years down the track, and they've just absolutely kicking goals, amazing bunch of people.

Helga Svendsen 14:52

So with that there was you know, I was at the 2019 conference and I remember there being controversy about the inclusion of people with a disability there. And then awesome, that Progress then reached out to you and had these really constructive conversations. In addition to that, what difference did it make? I guess, and I mean, that kind of in a constructive way, it sounds almost accusatory. And it's absolutely not meant to. But what additional benefit, I guess is the question was it for you, once you then join also joined the board? So you've had these conversations, you've made some progress with progress around inclusion? And then they say, join the board? And then there was the pandemic, which meant that you had a layer of expertise that they also didn't have. But,

El Gibbs 15:42

Yeah, I think it's a really good question. Because I've been at some times, board appointments can be tokenistic. And they can be a way of saying to someone, we're going to do this, but we don't want you to actually change, we don't actually want the organisation to move, we're not actually going to do anything. And I've certainly seen that happen before. But being on the board gave me an opportunity to input into the strategic direction of the organisation to engage with other board members to for disability to stop being a fringe activity and to become mainstream progress business, because we should be in disabled people are part of civil society, we're really good at things like campaigning, you know, we have a lot of expertise and skills in the very things that progress does really well. So we've done quite a lot. So Progress runs the economic Media Centre, and which is a fully philanthropy funded free media centre that aims to profile people with lived expertise, particularly on issues around poverty. And we've got a significant strand in there about disability. We've run free media training for disability organisations, and disabled people. And they are working on some media training with inclusion Australia and dancing around Australia for people with an intellectual disability, which is amazing. So that's happened, they've had their first Auslan Interpreted Fellowship, which is their flagship five-month training program. And that's had leaders from the deaf community in Australia, being able to access a fellowship for the first time, they have developed a very significant amount of expertise in accessible online events. And they're now leaders in actually doing that really, really well and leading across the civil society sector. And so I think having me on the board has meant that this has continued throughout the last three years and more disabled people, they had a seminar, a governance and advocacy workshop just after the election, and I had a couple of text messages from people going, there's about 25 disabled people and disability organisations here, I'm not sure what you've done, but like everyone's here. And it was really nice to hear that after three years, disabled people feel that Progress is for them. And the community feels that progress, offerings and programs are as much for them as they are for anyone else. And I feel really proud of the small role that I played in it. But I think that having a disabled person who is a prominent disabled person on the board, has been a signal by progress as well, that they're taking this seriously. Yes. The other board directors have been fantastic. They're here, right?

This has been something that the whole organisation has been on board with. And I'd pay enormous credit to Kirstie I'll be in particularly the CEO, who has driven a lot of this with a great deal of goodwill. And seeing the benefits. They've opened up an entire new customer base in the disability community. I mean, if you just want to be mercenary about it, yeah. You're missing out. If you don't include yes, there's an awful lot of us, you know,

Helga Svendsen 19:02

You said, 25%, or a third or something like that, if people have it? Yeah.

El Gibbs 19:08

So we're about 17 to 18% of people, and of working age people, it's about 12%. So we are a significant percentage of people and I reckon in the community sector, like in a social space where even more because for many of us, it's where we can get a job. So there are lots of disabled people in the community sector. And the NDIS has brought huge amounts of money into disability. And so for Disability Services and the Disability Employment Services, they also need to engage around this as well. But the customer base is large.

Helga Svendsen 19:45

Actually interesting then, so for disability service providers, employment providers, and so on. Do you know what proportion or roughly what proportion of those organisations have people with lived experience in their boardrooms?

El Gibbs 19:59

Well, As you ask, there has been some recent research from the University of Sydney that found that about a quarter have a person with disability on their board. And even fewer head employed about 20% person with disability in their management senior management quarter don't employ any disabled people at all.

Helga Svendsen 20:20

Really? Oh, yeah. God. Okay.

El Gibbs 20:24

Yeah. So, I mean, one of the things I've been banging on about this for a little while is that I think that disability service providers and disability employment services should have to both employ disabled people, particularly at senior level, and have disabled people on their boards, and not just one, but at least 15%. So the challenge is that there are a few disability service providers who are taking this on Life Without Barriers, which is the biggest disability service provider in Australia, they have people with disability on their boards and have some time. And they have recently announced a 15% employment target, which is about the roughly the percentage of us. The Disability Royal Commission has heard in their most recent hearing from a range of service providers that hold them all back up in front of them, particularly the ones who had had significant abuse and violence against people with disability, particularly in group homes. And so many of them said, No, we haven't changed anything, we haven't changed our board, there's been no consequences for anyone, everything's fine. We haven't changed the theme. So it was extremely frustrating to hear that in the last week, one of them in particular had basically said, got rid of three board directors and said, they're going to bring on people with lived expertise, which is good. So I think if you are making the amount of money that people are making out of the NDIS, and you should not have disabled people on your boards, and in your senior management, you are not getting the expertise that you need. And you are not in it, to serve the community. And that's something that we're seeing predatory providers, particularly for profit providers, moving into the NDIS, who have no people with disability, none of them have been called before the royal commission. So I worry a great deal that we are being particularly silenced in the development of good and decent Disability Services. And particularly for people with intellectual disability, who live in group homes, who will use Disability Services for the rest of their lives. They have so little say, over what happens, and that is the recipe for abuse and violence. As we have seen, the NDIS quality and safeguards commission came out with their own motion report recently that found 7,000 cases of violence and abuse in the last four years, it just seven of the service providers. I mean, it is shocking, it is just absolutely shocking. And yet these guys can have the front to get up at the Royal Commission and go, no, no consequences. We're not going to change anything, everything's fine. Everything's not fine.

Helga Svendsen 23:17

It sounds like in the disability sector, progress is being made, albeit slowly and slower than perhaps it should. I'm wondering about other sectors that you might have seen that are making better progress. If they exist, maybe they don't like are the refugee organisations or the organisations that work with people of colour or the organisations that working with youth? Or like where are you seeing this lived expertise in the boardroom or lived expertise voice in decision making? Forums being done? Well, if anywhere?

El Gibbs 23:58

Oh, look, I think in a lot of community sector, it isn't done well. I think there are a lot of people who are experts in other people, if that makes sense. Experts in poor people expert in timeless as people,

but not actually a lot of voices given to the communities that are affected. I really have a great deal of respect for the First Nations communities who have fought so hard for community controlled organisations and are still fighting. The work that's being done under the national agreement on closing the gap is extraordinary. And in our space, First Peoples Disability Network are leading a real revolution in how disability services are delivered for Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people with disability. And I think we all have a lot to learn from the way that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are working and insisting on community control. I will let them speak for themselves and tell you all about that. But I think in our sector in the community and social sector, we have a lot of work to do, to really genuinely include the people who our services are meant to be about. And I mean that across the board, and it is a difficult conversation, because it means giving up power. And it means letting go of being the expert. And I do some work with the anti poverty centre. And they are grounded Absolutely. In the expertise of people who currently live in poverty. And again, I admire a huge amount of their commitment to never wavering from that belief that people who live in poverty are the experts on living in poverty. It shouldn't be controversial, but that is still a radical idea. So I think the community and social sector could do more, I think in terms of the corporate arena, I'm a little more sceptical about how effective one person representing lived experience can be on a board. And maybe that's just my own inadequacies speaking. But I think that there is certainly a commitment in larger organisations to starting to think about it, I think for large disability service providers, that would be a really good place to start to, people are doing some of the board observership programs, which I think are really useful and starting to do that. But I think the next step about bridging from the board observer ship to actual dedicated seats on the board. And for people not to be alone on the board, I think it's really important. I mean, I would like to see NDIS funding only going to organisations that have 50% of disabled people on their boards, like I'm, I'm dead set about change, like I'm not mucking around here, in terms of, of wanting a bit of stuff at the edges. Like, I think we need wholesale change. And there are enormous amounts of incredibly impressive disabled people that I know, who would make great additions to boards, but also boards that then have to make change at a cultural level, because that's how we're going to stop this abuse and violence against so many disabled people.

Helga Svendsen 27:26

Yes, yes, yes. I'm just gonna go yes, yes, yes, to all of that, I think it would make a real difference. And people with disability, as we started with, I think, have a range of skills, one of which is bringing that lived experience, or that lived expertise to the boardroom, and often have skills and a whole range of things that they can bring to the boardroom as well. So, you know, it doesn't have to be Ha, we need an extra person, or we're going to miss out on this particular skill, or whatever it may be. It's an and not an or.

El Gibbs 27:57

Yeah, just said that the second round of the scholarships for the company, directors training of people. So that's now 200 People who've gone through that, and they've just gone through about to announce a third. So, you know, it's like, Well, okay, if you want this training, we're all now done

that as well. Like, I don't know what else we can do to show people how skilled that we are. But yes, there's a great deal of skill and talent out there, among disabled people across an enormous range of things. One of the things that doesn't get talked about as much as it should, and you probably should talk to Simon Darcy, who's an academic at UTS, Dr. Simon Darcy. And he's done a fantastic amount of research around entrepreneurship and disability, and found that disabled people are absolutely way out ahead, in terms of the number of us who run our own business, like me, who are entrepreneurs who are starting things, who are inventing stuff, who are doing amazing things. I mean, I can, I know, half a dozen just thinking off the top of my head. And this is across the board. And part of it is because we get shut out of other opportunities. But part of it is also because we are really good problem solvers, we are really innovative, the world doesn't work terribly well for us. So we're pretty good at figuring stuff out and finding innovative solutions. And that's exactly who you want on your board.

Helga Svendsen 29:22

Absolutely. One of the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

El Gibbs 29:28

That you're missing out if you don't have disabled people on your board. And if you're not connected in with the disability community, again, you're missing out. I think, if you only think of lived expertise as a deficit, it's not quite right. I'm trying to be diplomatic, which as you know, it's not my strong suit.

Helga Svendsen 29:51

I was just thinking that was so delicately put when in fact, you're thinking quite the opposite, but yes, not quite right. Yes. Is there a resource you would like? To share with the Take on Board community,

El Gibbs 30:02

All look, this resource isn't going to be new to all of you. But I for disabled people, I strongly cannot recommend the Disability Leadership Institute from Christina Ryan, highly enough. I've been a member for a really long time almost since the beginning. And I'm one of the experience leaders, we have had a kind of monthly get together for several years now. And we are busy, folks, but we all join no matter where we are. And being part of the DOI has been a really important part for me, of finding community, among other disabled people who are doing amazing, interesting, astonishing things all over the place. So I think for any disabled people who are listening, I can strongly recommend the DOI for membership. But for all, there's so much more there, including the business directory and board opportunities. And for the PA leadership group that you get, it's invaluable.

Helga Svendsen 30:58

And indeed, for those that are listening, that are reflecting right now that in their boardroom, they don't have any people with a disability. And you're reflected on what I has said and gone. We're really missing out it's not quite right, we probably need to I spoke to Christina a few weeks ago on the podcast, and you can go to the Disability Leadership and they will advertise the board roles and you will get access to these hundreds of incredible people with a disability who can make a huge contribution to your boardroom in so many ways, including as people with lived experience or lived expertise, and all of the other skills that they bring. Our I Thank you. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to share with us here at the Take on Board podcast. I really appreciate you sharing your wisdom. And you know, like I said at the start of the show about I support the Uluru Statement for the Heart. I also support diversity, equity and inclusion in boardrooms. And this is yet another way that we can take that up, I guess and advance it. So thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with the Take on Board community today.

El Gibbs 32:04

Thank you so much for having me.

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