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Create an inclusive, accessible co-working space for aspiring entrepreneurs with disabilities, small startups, or groups that serve the disability community.

Proem 00:57

Greetings. The background music is John Lennon’s *Imagine* played by the [InterPLAY Company Band](#) non-profit music organization of 67 adult musicians with and without cognitive and other differences. They rehearse at Strathmore Hall in Rockville Maryland. Readers be sure to have a listen. Brings happy tears to my eyes.

Connection and community stoke my fires – a counterweight to Multiple Sclerosis and fatigue. Producing this podcast episode renewed my awareness of and gratefulness for connection and community in my life: Family connections, music connections; communities of podcasters and patient/caregiver advocates, decision support experts; leadership, storytelling, and marketing mastermind groups; a book club. These connections and communities nurture me, feed me, and draw me in. The networks also need care and feeding by me to sustain them. Contribute and accept energy. I both lead and follow in these connections and communities. I met Emily Zaccardi at one such community, [Akimbo](#). Emily is the CEO and Founder of [hollarhype](#), designing advertising opportunities through authentic voice-based technologies, and Director of Growth for [PlayLocal.com](#), improving Parks and Recreation Departments’ infrastructure for the inclusion of all users. Emily partnered with Adriana Mallozzi to create the non-profit QuirkLaabs. We’ll hear more about QuirkLaabs in a moment. Adriana is Founder and CEO of [Puffin Innovations](#), assistive technology that fits itself to the user and [myXpressions](#), a clothing line for wheelchair users. Adriana is on the Boards of [70/30 Partners](#) and [Easter Seals Massachusetts](#) and the Founder of [My’Empowerment](#), disability services consultation. Let’s hear from this dynamic duo.

The right place at the wrong time 04:11

**Health Hats:** Good morning, ladies. Adriana and Emily. Thank you so much for joining me. I’m excited. I’m mostly excited about the octopus, the QuirkLaabs logo. We’re going to have to make sure we talk

about that. Why don't we start with Adriana? How do you introduce yourself when you're out and about?

**Adriana Mallozzi:** It depends. If I'm at a networking event for founders, then I introduced myself as the founder of Puffin Innovations and describe what Puffin is. Now we're QuirkLaabs as well. I'm a co-founder with a few other startup founders.

**Health Hats:** Emily, how do you introduce yourself?

**Emily Zaccardi:** I'm in a similar position as Adriana. I'm Emily Zaccardi, founder of hollarhype, and why we exist out there for folks. I'm also co-founder of QuirkLaabs. We're passionate about the inclusive technology space.

**Health Hats:** What was your most recent social event now that we're in this quarantine, stay-at-home business. Emily, when was the last time you were out at a group?

**Emily Zaccardi:** In a group? I was thinking out of the house. I had a long conversation with the cashier the other day at a convenience store, the highlight of the week. Before that, it had to have been the [Venture Café](#), one of their Thursday night social events. I try and make it over there in Cambridge about once a month.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** It was at [District Hall](#) in Boston at the Seaport. I saw Emily there.

**Emily Zaccardi:** It feels like so long ago.

**Health Hats:** Like two, three months ago?

**Adriana Mallozzi:** Three months ago, now.

**Health Hats:** So how did you meet?

**Adriana Mallozzi:** It was very random. We were both at this event with a specific idea of what it was going to be about. We thought the focus was on female entrepreneurs, and we quickly learned that it wasn't.

**Emily Zaccardi:** That's what happened. We met at a Wayfair networking event. It was for young female developers looking for internships. But they had another event for female founders, just a day apart. So, both Adrienne and I thought we were going to the female founders' event, and we were at this development event. A mutual friend of ours heard both of us talking about going to the Wayfair event for female entrepreneurs. He mentioned to both of us, 'Hey, you might meet my friend Adriana there.' And to Adriana, 'Hey, you might meet my friend Emily there.' So, we were on the lookout for each other, even though, as Adriana mentioned, we were both at the wrong event.

**Health Hats:** That's pretty random.

**Emily Zaccardi:** Yeah. We found each other, and we had, we had so much to talk about mainly because everybody else was there for a different reason. We're both founders, technology companies. But not necessarily the technologists. So, we got to talking about our mission and folks that we both knew in the space. At one point, there was an investor in the community who Adriana knew pretty well and who I

had met once before as well. We started this conversation. We didn't think it was going to be called QuirkLaabs, but that's the first time Adriana's started talking about it with me because this is my first time meeting her. She said, 'I have this idea of a non-profit.' We had so many things to talk about. I wanted to learn more about her business. She wants to learn more about mine. Then there's this common interest in the non-profit idea that she had. I don't know how long we talked.

Technology that fits itself to the user 09:51

**Health Hats:** Let's walk through a couple of those ideas. So, Adriana, Puffin Innovations, assistive *technology that fits itself to the user*. Music to my ears. How did you come to set up Puffin Innovations?

**Adriana Mallozzi:** It started back in 2015. I submitted this idea at an MIT technology hackathon. My idea was one of 15 that were chosen to participate. At the hackathon, we had ten hours to create a working version of our idea, and we did in ten hours. It worked for the judges. We ended up winning first place. That was the birth of Puffin. We got a lot of press at the time. They were students. Students run the hackathon. The hackers are students. It was a little difficult to continue. They continued randomly at times. We were asked to present at different events. But of course, just like any other student, they moved on. Fast forward to 2016, 2017. I partnered up with a longtime friend, and we began applying to grants and programs like MassChallenge. By the spring of 2017, we received an award from the VA and got into MassChallenge at the same time. That allowed us to get to the point where we are today.

**Health Hats:** What was the winning project?

**Adriana Mallozzi:** It was a puffing, sip-and-puff wireless mouse-operated joystick that connected Bluetooth to my cell phone and my computer. That was something I wanted for a long time because when I not in my powerchair - my power chair is my command center because I can control everything that I need to control or would like to typically when I'm in this chair. If I'm not in this chair, I'm screwed. I rely on someone else for everything. I had this idea because when I travel, I typically travel overseas, I bring my manual chair, which means then I have access to nothing. I can't control anything. We're all tied to our mobile devices. I don't only use it for entertainment, but I use it to keep in touch or to read books. I guess that's considered entertainment, too, but you know what I mean. It's not just for watching little cat videos or something like that. It's more practical.

**Health Hats:** You don't look like a cat video kind of gal.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** I'm not. If I'm traveling, I would like to have the option of taking pictures as well, just like everyone else.

Get hyped by the voices that matter most 14:36

**Health Hats:** You can do all that with that technology? So, how about hollarhype? How did that get going?

**Emily Zaccardi:** So, hollarhype is a real-time voice-based connection platform. These days I'm often describing it as the right voice, right time. If you want to support somebody who's pursuing a challenge and you don't know how to connect with them at the right time. During that moment, hollarhype would be the solution for you or for the person that's active in their challenge. My background is I ran track at the University of Rhode Island. It was an amazing experience, a great, supportive team. Everybody's

parents were involved. They went to all the meets. I have great memories going to races, supporting my teammates, but I spent probably more time being injured than I did racing. I know that that is true, which lent itself to some great life lessons. But what I realized going through this roller coaster of being injured is that it's not just about the time, it's about getting back out there. My dad is a superhero dad that would come to every single race. And sometimes I was embarrassed because I was just getting back on my feet. You drove all the way here. This is going to be terrible. And he always had that mantra of this is when you need me the most. So, I don't want to make this too long of a story, but I didn't know what the solution was. What I did understand was support needs to be more accessible because what happens when people can't be there for the moments that really matter. Then fast forward, now eight years after is when the seeds were planted. Support matters, motivation matters, context matters. Going back to what I mentioned about it's not about a time, it's about a moment where you and someone that supports you understands your goal. And now hollarhype is an emotional support utility where we started out in the running vertical. We're focused more now on charity running, charity walking. So, we're currently working with different types of partners to help make their 5Ks or 10Ks, and their marathon teams feel like they can connect. Because now, if somebody goes live on hollarhype, everybody in their network is notified, 'Hey, Adrienne is live right now or hey, Danny's live right now, kind of a hype. I send you a message, and it comes through your headphones right away.

**Health Hats:** So, so how did that collaboration end up with QuirkLaabs, *leveraging abilities to access better solutions*? What was the evolution of that?

**Emily Zaccardi:** Right after that happy accident at Wayfair Adriana and I met a week later. We still had so much to chitchat about. I'll Adriana speak more about the passion behind these roots in QuirkLaabs. I can certainly contribute that when Adriana my story about hollarhype, her first reaction was, 'Oh, so you built accessible technology. That's pretty cool because I've never had that inclusive opportunity to support someone running the Boston marathon. I can send them something before they've run. I can send them congratulations after, but I've never had the opportunity to participate as equally as somebody that feels comfortable in the crowd on Boylston Street. This will be my first time hyping up somebody in that setting. We'll be on hollarhype.' That was so eye-opening to me, and ever since, Adriana helped inspire that perspective in hollarhype's mission. I don't think I'll go through a conversation without mentioning the importance of voice communication being accessible and inclusive. That's where hollarhype and my founding mission fit into Adriana's vision for QuirkLaabs. But again, she thought of this. It comes from a different pain point. We essentially use them together.

Checking off boxes 19:26

**Adriana Mallozzi:** So, another founder of assistive tech, and I met a year before I met Emily. He and I had gone through applying to programs such as MassChallenge. I think he's done all those other accelerator programs. We never had this; we never fit in a checkbox. You have to check off what industry you're in, things like that. And there's never this box that we fit into. Yes, we're social impact. That's what we always fell into: social impact. There are so many things related to social impact, and nothing described anything related to disability. Also, I'm a female founder with a disability. I could never check that off. I can check off a female founder but not a founder with a disability. And if you're a male with a disability, you can't check off anything. So, we know people who have great ideas, and especially now with technology, people with disabilities have a more significant opportunity to forge

their own paths through entrepreneurship, but there is nothing out there to support us. We need to create this. We need to create something that provides support for the challenges of people with disabilities.

**Health Hats:** When we met, we talked about the sandbox for testing of products and services for people with disabilities. Is that what QuirkLaabs is, or is that part?

**Adriana Mallozzi:** Part of it. Emily really thought of that part of it in mind at the time; I don't remember. But Emily was the one that really added that aspect to it. Organizations like Wayfair or HubSpot are developing a new platform or whatever, can have real-life situations with real-life disabilities. They're in a vacuum where they have these preconceived ideas of what specific disabilities or what challenges people face.

**Health Hats:** I'm still interested in QuirkLaabs, and a later part of that was the sandbox, but what was the early,

**Adriana Mallozzi:** The initial idea was creating an inclusive, accessible co-working space for aspiring entrepreneurs with disabilities and small startups or organizations that serve the disability community. I met a couple of founders at MassChallenge who were creating products related to disabilities, like adaptive clothing. They don't have disabilities, but they're still in that circle. They too didn't fit in the typical consumer clothing line because it's such a niche market. That was the original idea.

Now a word about our sponsor, ABRIDGE.

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Adapting to uncertainty 25:03

**Health Hats:** This week's episode ([May 17th](#)) was with a young lady, Sara Lorraine Snyder, and who's a junior in high school. And one of the things that she said when we chatted was that she feels like right now with this pandemic going on, she feels like now these are my words that people with disabilities have a 15-minute advantage on more able-bodied people because they're more accustomed to dealing with uncertainty. They're more comfortable with uncertainty and rolling with it. When you think about your work like that each of you have done and now with QuirkLaabs, if we're thinking about here, we are now in a next wave, starting a next wave of COVID response. The first wave to me is we got to live through this; we don't want to die. But then life has changed and how we approach life and how we adapt to life is changing for everybody. Going back to what Sara said, 'People with disabilities, that's their life, and that's normal life.' This work that you're doing together with QuirkLaabs, how do those fit together?

**Adriana Mallozzi:** That's an awesome statement for such a young person. I would love to have a conversation with her.

**Health Hats:** I'll send you a link to the episode, and then I will send you both an email introduction.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** I love what she said. It's true. What was the question? How we all fit into this?

**Health Hats:** So, thinking about adapting now to this uncertainty. To me, that's the biggest thing about COVID right now - just how uncertain everything is. When you're thinking about leveraging abilities to access better solutions, that sounds pretty damn mainstream to me.

Leveraging abilities to access better solutions 27:59

**Emily Zaccardi:** Adriana and I just had a conversation that flirts with this topic yesterday. This time last year we met. Then when we started working more on QuirkLaabs over the summer, a lot of people asked us, 'can't you just do this virtually?' It seems like an easy answer. It seems like easy street. No, we're planting a flag somewhere in the city to say there needs to be a space. We need to have a space that says this is where people can go if they are experiencing a disability. They're living with a disability, and they're an aspiring entrepreneur, they don't know where to start. This is where you start. You already have something in the works. You have a minimum viable product. You have a team that's passionate but hasn't put pen to paper yet or development. This is a place for you, too. You're a mentor that wants to give back to people with disabilities who are working on accessible technology. This is where you come instead of trying to find an avenue in another program. It's really important to us that we found physical space to show that this, as Adriana mentioned, not just about technology. It's about other areas of self-grown work, as well. Whether it's in the retail space, so that was important. However, now, of course, we're talking about how a hybrid solution of a virtual group or virtual network where we could run programs, like many others, are doing on Zoom or other platforms. I think the future of QuirkLaabs is assuming our success will be this physical space to have events, or we'll have cohorts, but it's not limited to people that can only get there physically. We'll always have a webcam up that's streaming what's going on. We'll be inviting questions that come in so that they're in an immersive part of that conversation. And then, as Adriana mentioned, the second half of QuirkLaabs relates to COVID and the need to accelerate all things forward. If there's a company out there working on a better solution right now, it needs to include accessibility. So, come to QuirkLaabs to have that solution tested out, whether it's in the actual location or whether it's through a virtual Zoom meeting.

We're thinking about the importance of the space, but also the essence of the brand. Start to establish some credibility there, like get QuirkLaabs certified. You can also get other types of certifications but proving that you're investing in this idea of end-users that understand the problem that you're trying to solve can get involved. Then close the loop, and of course, I'm interested in your follow-up thoughts. Adriane. I'm probably missing things from our conversation, but what about people that are unemployed right now, or can't find work? It's fulfilling to provide feedback. It gives a sense of purpose to be a part of that project like Danny, you and I went through an [Akimbo workshop](#), like a linchpin. We give people opportunities to be linchpins of greater solutions. And I think anyways, they are the vision for QuirkLaabs is stronger now than ever before, but I'm missing some things, Adriana.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** No, you pretty much covered everything. Something else that I saw when I was at [MassChallenge](#) is that people got part-time work from other startups if they had skills that other startups were looking for. We found people through that as well. People with disabilities can come and find employment opportunities. If they're freelancers come, maybe they're good at blogging, whatever

it is that they're good at. Here they'll have many opportunities to pitch their skills - Hey, this is what I can offer. It would be a great pool of freelance workers.

**Health Hats:** I have two more things, so I'm just going to say them, so I don't forget them. So, the first one is how people can get involved with QuirkLaabs, and the other is where did your logo comes from? I don't want to forget that one. Take that in either order.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** They can email us at [team@quirklaabs.com](mailto:team@quirklaabs.com). Reach out to us. We'd love to hear from people who are either interested in becoming or if they're already entrepreneurs. We want to grow our network.

**Health Hats:** Me. I'm one of them. It's a selfish question. I'm a selfish guy.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** This is the time that we want to begin growing this network and establish the network. We need to establish it and grow it.

**Health Hats:** Team@QuirkLaabs.com and say I'm interested. Yes. You're getting an email from somebody.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** Okay.

A hug from eight arms (Now!??) 34:01

**Health Hats:** Where did the logo come from? Is that an octopus or a squid? It's only got six legs.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** Oh yeah, I didn't realize that. The other two are hiding behind somewhere. We did some Googling about animals. Initially, we picked a name that was a misnomer. What people thought about that animal was utterly untrue. We thought, oh, we can't use that. I'll have Emily continue on.

**Emily Zaccardi:** I might be missing a piece of the story, but I believe we ultimately settled on the octopus since it's arms can go in different directions. Not to overemphasize access, but just to show that there's diverse range. We really liked that about the octopus, and we liked the idea of a sea creature. Since we decided to call it QuirkLaabs, we just thought that kind of brought to mind, Danny, you called it the sandbox and were sand meets water that would certainly make sense to us. Another thing that was important for the branding of the logo was friendliness. This is welcoming. I don't know if this is a stretch. Imagine getting a hug from all eight arms.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** The octopus has multiple brains. There are multiple founders. How innovative an octopus can be, it can learn it can adapt. And that just embodies everything in our mission.

**Health Hats:** That's great.

**Adriana Mallozzi:** It kind of fit.

**Health Hats:** What should I have asked you guys that I haven't?

**Emily Zaccardi:** Maybe what's next for QuirkLaabs. About a year ago, we decided we were going to move forward. We did a lot of grassroots style events to try and validate the idea just by talking with a lot of folks. It's been a whole got a whole lot of that. I think we're both energized to keep things moving forward. We plan to incorporate soon establish yourselves as a non-profit, getting that official and

moving. Adriana mentioned the importance of building a community right now. That is a huge goal in terms of what's next. When you asked the question, what was the last social event that we had both gone to? I don't think that we knew each other's answers, but we both ended up mentioning something connected to Venture Café with District Hall an extension of that. There's something about those spaces that are inviting, inclusive for the most part, although there are some physical limitations. But inclusive of all folks congregating there about the magic of ideas. If we can build up the community, once we do take the sheet off QuirkLaabs, it's less about the space and more about the community of people. In tandem, we're working on building community and trying to find a strategic partner who wants to help us launch by donating space before we raise money to actually call a space our own.

**Health Hats:** That makes sense.

**Emily Zaccardi:** So, that's something that maybe if you are listening to this podcast, and you know a company that has an interest in accessibility, inclusivity could be a great partner. Those are our three main goals for QuirkLaabs.

**Health Hats:** That's great. Well, ladies, thank you so much. This has been wonderful. I appreciate you spending time with me. I look forward to following and even participating in your excellent work. This is inspiring. Lord knows we need inspiration these days

**Emily Zaccardi:** Thank you, Danny.

#### Reflection 39:17

I worked for many years as a nurse in homes, communities, physical rehabilitation, and behavioral health. I have lived experience as a person with disabilities. I'm primed to appreciate entrepreneurs in these spaces. It's a massive market. According to the [National Inclusion Project](#) an estimated 49 million people, or 19% of non-institutionalized civilians, have a disability. An estimated 34 million people, or 18%, have a functional limitation. 82% of the general population are employed. Among all people with disabilities of working age (29 million), more than half are employed. Adriana and Emily alone touch on technology, clothing, accessibility, and mobility. All you freelance entrepreneurs out there, check out their co-working space – QuirkLaabs. Reach out to them at [team@quirklaabs.com](mailto:team@quirklaabs.com). Once again the background music is John Lennon's *Imagine* played by the [InterPLAY Company Band](#) a non-profit music organization of 67 adult musicians with and without cognitive and other differences.