**Revolutionizing Accessibility through technology with Karen Strauss**

**Debra Ruh:** [00:00:00] Hello everyone.

[00:00:04] This is Debra Ruh and this is 'Human Potential at Work'. I am the CEO of Ruh Global Impact. And today I have somebody that I consider a friend on, but I've known her for many years. I've admired her for many years and it's staggering, what it has done for our community, both in the United States and globally, and she's going to be all, you know, 'Oh, it's no big deal', but I mean, seriously, what she has done has definitely changed the world.

[00:00:33] Just a few things that she's done, um, she was um, implemental she was, uh, she created, um, along with others, the '21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act' of 2010, she was instrumental in that, she also was instrumental in making sure that we had the right kind of legislative language to make sure that with the 'Americans with Disabilities Act' section 255 and 713 of the Communications Act, that companies were actually, you know, following our laws and then she help support the 'National Deaf Blind Equipment Distribution, Program'. So, those right now just sound like words, but we're going to talk about them a little bit more because what she has done has single handedly, single handedly, once again, with a lot of support from others really, really changed the world to make sure communications are fully accessible. And so we're going to talk a lot about that. She's retired from the FCC and she's doing really cool things now, and I want to welcome Karen Peltz Strauss to the program today. I have been nagging for her to be on the show for many years and she finally agreed to do it during the lockdown. So Karen, welcome to the program.

[00:01:49] **Karen Strauss:** [00:01:49] Thank you so much, Debra, it's really a delight to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

[00:01:54] **Debra Ruh:** [00:01:54] Well, I know that you're modest and you don't like bragging about all the amazing things that you've done, but it's, it's just, I mean, it's great that we create laws, but we actually have to make sure that we, you know, we all comply and, and, um, utilize these laws.

[00:02:10] And that is a big thing that you've done. And when, and when we think about communications, and I actually took a little note so I would try to capture them all, we're talking about communications from all these different ways. So hearing aid compatibility, because in the early days before Karen and other leaders stepped up, the cell phones didn't work with the hearing aids and then other things as well.

[00:02:31] Um, having access to emergency services, you know, we put out an emergency message saying, you know, there's a tornado in your area, but we don't caption it. 'Well, I guess it's just too bad if you're deaf or hard of hearing where you can't hear, what's being said'. Um, real time texting, um, access to multimedia, now think about multimedia, that's video and audio, it's zoom, it's everything we're doing during this pandemic. Um, uh, opening, closing options, relay services. She has done so much. She has done so much.

[00:03:06] She's beloved in the community, beloved by the community.

[00:03:09] And she's been very gracious all during her career I know, I'm sorry, Karen, but you deserve all this love and accolades. I was reading a letter about her being a stellar public service, servant by Michael Copps, which was one of the commissioners of the FCC. And it really brought tears to my eyes. It was so beautiful. So she's very understated and she, she won't want to brag about herself.

[00:03:32] So I just had to do that. But Karen, tell us more about how it started. Tell us about, you know, just tell us about your journey because um, you've changed the world and I thank you for that.

[00:03:45] **Karen Strauss:** [00:03:45] Well, you are so sweet and so kind. Thank you very much. That's such an overwhelming, and very inspiring for me, introduction.

[00:03:56] I clearly I want to say from the start that I did not do this on my own, that I had guidance all the way I had support all the way. And so much of this is owing to a movement, a movement that's so much larger than I am, and I just feel lucky, and I've said this many times, to have been in the right place at the right time and fit into a slot that was, um, both, um, both fun in many ways and challenging to fit into.

[00:04:26] I saw a need. I filled it, but it was certainly not done in isolation. Um, I just let me, I'm going to go way back just really quickly. I grew up in a family with very progressive parents who saw social injustices, disability issues were not in my family growing up. I saw things as a child, I saw children, across the street who had deaf parents who were made fun of because of their deaf parents, but it was not in my family.

[00:04:57] Um, when I went to law school, I went for the purpose of actually working on mental health issues. We did have mental health issues, in our family, not immediate, but my extended family. Um, and I was always very sensitive to discrimination against people based on, um, they're differences in their emotional capabilities of dealing with society.

[00:05:24] And so I actually went to law school thinking that I was going to work on the rights of legal rights of people with mental disabilities and emotional disabilities. When I got out of law school, I went to the University of Pennsylvania. I worked for a small entity called the Institute for Public Representation, which was part of Georgetown University's law center.

[00:05:47] It was a clinic and I got involved in physical disabilities. I got involved in issues on making sure that polling places were accessible and actually worked then on a bill called the Voting Rights for the Elderly and Handicapped Act. It shows you how old I am. That that's the wording that we used.

[00:06:07] And I got to know a lot of the people in the deaf community and the blind community people like, um, people like Nancy Bloch at, at the National Association of the Deaf, people like Scott Marshall, people like Paul Marshand at the ARC um, I mean, I could just go down down the list of names that, of people that, Reese Robrahn from ACCD I mean, these were really people that were right there in front and center at the beginning.

[00:06:39] I worked closely also with Ralph Neas to make sure that polling places in federal elections were accessible. After that I tried to get a job actually at the Basildon Center, on working on mental health issues, and there were none. And so I went to the government for two years and then did not enjoy that, was then hired by the National Center for Law and the Deaf at Gallaudet University.

[00:07:02] I knew no sign language, not a stitch, but I did know some of the issues because I had worked on them at Georgetown and they hired me. And that was the beginning of my legal career in disability access and Al Sonnenstrahl in the deaf community taught me everything that I needed to know to work on legal issues, addressing deaf and hard of hearing people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

[00:07:26] And what's interesting is that we were a small office. We only had around six attorneys. And everybody else took what they thought were the juicy issues, education and housing and healthcare and employment. And they gave me this thin folder on telecommunications, which in 1988, which is when I started working there, was not very exciting.

[00:07:47] So I kind of got the leftover. I also had worked on some telecom issues at Georgetown non-related to disability. And then things started to snowball. And then as time went on, it's again, 1988, 1989, we started working on the ADA on telecommunications, relay services. 1988 was the Deaf President Now movement, actually, I'm sorry.

[00:08:11] I started working there in 1984, not 1988, in 1988 was the Dead President Now movement, things started moving in Congress. You mentioned hearing aid compatibility, um, relay services, federal relay services, and then again, sort of national nationwide relay services. Um, and then we just, uh, I mean, again, we were there, so it wasn't only I, it was I with other people in our office and we've put together language and it went forward.

[00:08:43] They, Gallaudet closed our law center we were on the campus in Gallaudet University and they closed us in 1996. So I moved over to the National Association of the Deaf was there for a few years. Before I was asked to come into the Federal Communications Commission as the first deputy chief of their new consumer Bureau that would house a division dedicated to disability rights.

[00:09:07] And so I stayed there, I was invited in by the Clinton administration, I stayed there for two years and then I left. When out, wrote another law, the CVAA the '21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act' wrote a book and did consulting. And then when Obama came back, I went back in, this time, stayed for close to nine years and then came out.

[00:09:32] Um, and so as you pointed out, I am officially retired from the FCC, but I'm not officially retired from these issues.

[00:09:40] **Debra Ruh:** [00:09:40] Yes. And you know, it just shows what one person can do. And once again, I agree. We don't ever do it alone, but, writing these laws, these were a really big deal, and really standing beside and, and with these communities and sometimes these communities, they, they don't come, in the past they didn't come together as well. So you had the blind, you know, focusing on helping people that were blind. You had deaf supporting people that are, that are deaf, and then you really helped bring these two, these two groups together. And then of course, there's the deaf blind. So, um, and we've talked about that, that, on the show before, but I remember, I remember talking to people globally about the 21st Century Act and they were saying, 'we need something like that, we don't have', I remember talking about it in Oman and they were saying, 'we don't know how to do that. We can't get our television stations to caption, we', and it's, you know, it's, uh, I have an ICT, uh, internet communications telecom, a telecommunications background.

[00:10:47] Internet Communications and Technology. But I've done communications background and as well.

[00:10:52] And it is so important as we know Karen, because yes, we need to make sure our websites are accessible. Yes, our apps need to be accessible, but if our communications and our connectivity is not accessible, then you can't really use the technology. And of course we've seen the byproduct of this, as we've all gone home sheltering in our places, staying safe from the pandemic. Connectivity.

[00:11:19] And now as a world, we're talking about 5 G and it's fascinating some of the conspiracy theories about 5 G. 'It gave us all the COVID-19'.

[00:11:28] It's a, it's like really interesting, but it seems like every time as we try to move forward with communications, um, there's a lot of controversy and a lot of, um, interesting, you know, uh, theories, uh, and sometimes real rat holes, but it, you were the one, you were the leader that I saw really stepping in to make sure that corporations were actually complying with our laws. And that they understood that, yeah, we have these different laws, but including, as you were mentioning voting, you know, and we're about to, we're coming up on a very important election in the United States in November, and people are afraid to go out to vote.

[00:12:09] They, so, having accessible polling places is, I always say, accessibility is not just for people with disabilities it's for all of us. So tell us more about, I mean, because this is very complicated, there's so many moving parts.

[00:12:23] **Karen Strauss:** [00:12:23] There are.

[00:12:23] **Debra Ruh:** [00:12:23] How in the world did you orchestrate this?

[00:12:27] **Karen Strauss:** [00:12:27] Well, again, I didn't do it by myself. Um, with respect, I guess, um, each law had its own progression. Um, the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, the CVAA is the most recent one. So why don't I take that one? It was very interesting, um, in around 2000, things, that is year 2000, things obviously started to change. The internet was starting to gain momentum.

[00:12:57] And those of us working in the disability field realized how many times in the past people with disabilities were left behind when new technologies were introduced. The telephone, TV, it took literally decades to bring people with disabilities into the fold. And so like I said, decades were lost in terms of access to these technologies.

[00:13:22] And so we went to Congress in 2005, I went to congressman Markey who at that time was in the house and he was our go to for every single one of these bills. And I said, we need an, we need another bill, um, and he, um, said, okay, as he always did. And he got me onto a, there was a hearing that was taking place, but we didn't have a bill, but I got to speak to Congress about the issue.

[00:13:50] And I realized. See, this is where I say I didn't do it myself. I thought I could maybe do it myself just a little bit. No, I, two years went by and I said, you know what? I can't do this myself, I need a coalition. This is too monumental. What we need is a bill to bring all of the laws that we got, have enacted, again, close captioning hearing aid and compatibility relay services communications, where we need all of those to be brought up to date, to wireless, digital, and other evolving technologies, internet based technologies.

[00:14:28] And so we formed a coalition, Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology, nicknamed COAT and, um, what I realized, and this was, we were around 10 organizations that started this, a lot of the main disability organizations, the National Association for the Deaf, Telecommunications for the Deaf, American Council of the Blind American Foundation.

[00:14:53] I'm going to get the 'ofs' and the 'fors' mixed up, but I think American Foundation for the Blind and various others, also American Association of People with Disabilities. We formed this coalition and we sent out, everybody sent out letters, emails, and, to other organizations. And within like weeks, we had 30 organizations.

[00:15:12] Then within a few more weeks, we had 60 organizations. And then all of a sudden, before we knew it, we had 300 local, regional and national organizations. We had hit a nerve and basically our mantra was 'let's not be left behind again'. We, people were already seeing new technologies coming out, leaving them behind.

[00:15:32] And so this is why, again, I say that this was a monumental effort. Um, we had a steering committee of around five, uh, one person became, became the expert on social media. Another one did the web, another one did the lobbying, I was the drafter. It was really a coordinated effort and it took three years.

[00:15:55] The law was passed in 2010. We were very lucky that the 20th anniversary of the ADA was coming up. Nancy Pelosi pushed it through under that guide, under that theory, and it eventually passed with unanimous consent. I also wanted to point out you, you mentioned something earlier that, um, definitely hit home and that is that without these laws, it, it, it terrifies me. It scares me so much to think where people with disabilities would be with respect to COVID right now, because these are the laws that have connected people without these laws, people would not, I mean, we're all watching a lot more TV than we've probably ever watched. This is our evening entertainment.

[00:16:37] Where else are we going to go? They would not have access to that. They would not be able to make telephone calls. They would not be able to access the web. Um, it's just, oh, you know, again, this was a monumental effort by a lot of people who said we will not stand for not having access and the legislators, people like Markey originally, Senator McCain and various others on the Hill that, um, that provided support were, were very instrumental to making this happen.

[00:17:11] **Debra Ruh:** [00:17:11] Yes, and I think..

[00:17:13] **Karen Strauss:** [00:17:13] Pryor too, in Arkensas Senator Pryor.

[00:17:15] **Debra Ruh:** [00:17:15] Right. Right. And I believe Markey's up, seat is up, and so he's fighting for his seat. I, I hope that we remember as a community, what he has done for us because you know, you, we need these leaders. We need these leaders that are supporting us and they've proven that they will support us.

[00:17:33] So I hope that, you know, that he...

[00:17:36] **Karen Strauss:** [00:17:36] He actually wrote an op-ed that has been published in a, in Metro West a newsletter I don't know if that could be shared, a newspaper in Massachusetts.

[00:17:44] **Debra Ruh:** [00:17:44] Yes. Please send me the link and I will, I will make sure that we include that for the audience. So please, send me that link.

[00:17:51] **Karen Strauss:** [00:17:51] Great.

[00:17:52] **Debra Ruh:** [00:17:52] Yeah, because we've got to fight for the ones that fight for us.

[00:17:56] We have to, and if you don't include us, we are also going to notice that, and we're going to make sure we fight for your competitor. So it's very important. And, and I, and I see more politicians really starting to take this more seriously. Um, Karen, I recently wrote an article about voice technologies and how our community, the community of people with disabilities and people that are aging into disabilities, how critical these voice technologies are.

[00:18:21] And now, there's legislation popping up that could actually stop these technologies from learning and I know we all worry as do I, about privacy issues and using our data in properly, which by the way, we've seen over and over and over again. I mean, you know, it was actually being discussed before congress yesterday.

[00:18:41] So these are real issues, but at the same time, if we don't allow these technologies to learn, then they are not as powerful. And if you actually take away their ability to learn you actually are going to hurt our community. So this is right in your wheelhouse. I mean, this is once again, technology and communications coming together, they must work together.

[00:19:03] So I was wondering if you wouldn't mind, you know, exploring that topic a little bit.

[00:19:07] **Karen Strauss:** [00:19:07] Sure. I'm not familiar. I have to read your articles, so I think it's going to educate me more about this particular issue, but, um, the one very, uh, the one point that resonates the most is the need for redundancy and technology.

[00:19:21] Um, whenever something is provided in an audio format, it should be provided in a visual format and vice versa. And that is to make sure that, to ensure the full inclusion of everybody who, um, needs access to that technology. So, uh, voice technologies have enabled people who are blind and visually impaired to interact with their TVs.

[00:19:44] I mean, there was a whole period where. Um, people who could not see, could simply could not do simple things, like change a channel, find a program, tape or record a program, um, turn the volume up and down. I mean, any interface with the television was through flat screens and that did not talk back to you and did not tell you what you were doing.

[00:20:09] Cell phones, obviously. Um, when they first came out, when the, when the iPhone and other flat screen phones came out, they were completely inaccessible. So, um, that kind of voice technology also automated speech recognition technologies are bringing about huge changes for people with disabilities. We have to be careful not to rely on them too much as a substitute for captioning just yet.

[00:20:34] They're getting a lot more accurate, but they're not quite there. But everything contributes to providing accessibility. Nothing should be excluded. Everything should be an option to make sure the formats are accessible for the various types of disability, people with disabilities that need to use them.

[00:20:54] **Debra Ruh:** [00:20:54] I agree.

[00:20:55] And that's once again, your work and your leadership and pulling people together has been so critical. And I know now, you know, more and more we're using artificial intelligence. And as you said, it can't be a replacement for captioning because captioning supports all of us. We, we know this, we know studies from Verizon and Facebook have told us that 80 to 85% of users watch your videos with the sound turned off.

[00:21:20] So I hope your video is telling us everything we need if you have chosen not to caption because you're going to lose your audience. And I see, you know, I have investors call me sometimes and ask my opinion of, you know, what they should be investing in.

[00:21:35] And they, I recently had two different investor calls, where they were talking about, they wanted to solve this captioning problem all with AI, artificial intelligence. And, um, I said, you know, we're just not there yet. So what we can't do is as we're getting there, um, take away what we already have, because it's, it hurts way too many people way too many people need things to be fully accessible.

[00:22:01] But at the time when we were all focused on the section 508 my old past when I had my company tech access. Um, we weren't really talking about the communications aspect of it, even though it was so critical. So Karen, why did you know that this had to be addressed? I mean, because a lot of people weren't paying attention to it and certainly once you started talking about it, cause I remember I started getting really engaged in the conversations when you started talking about it, but, you know, how, why did you even know to, to take these steps and to start protecting our community?

[00:22:39]**Karen Strauss:** [00:22:39] So I've always been, again, I haven't done things in a vacuum. It's not like I sat in my house and thought, 'Hmm, there's a problem out there' I've been in communication with people, constantly. And so I'm, everything that's in the CVAA and in every other law, I may have drafted it, but I didn't necessarily think it up.

[00:22:59] Some of the things I did, but most often it was, it, there were, there were concepts and approaches that were provided to me. So I would talk to the community. I would, I, first of all, I had been involved in this for years and years. I saw the technology changing and I mean, it's kind of obvious that if the technology is changing, you need to address the new technologies it's happening again with artificial intelligence and virtual reality and augmented reality.

[00:23:32] Um, we're in the so-called fourth industrial revolution, that's going to be dramatically changing our lives on a daily basis. So. You can see it coming. If you've been involved in this, in this era, you can say it's just obvious that if protections aren't in place, there will be problems. We have seen it so many times before.

[00:23:55] Again, the television, not accessible for the first 50 years, the telephone not accessible for the first 100 years, digital wireless phones not accessible for the first 10 years, analog phones were, not, not hearing compatible that is, and I watched my friends, my colleagues not being able to use digital phones.

[00:24:16] I had this nice sleek, flat phone while, my friend with a hearing aid was using a massive, massive thing. I should probably get rid of that, one second I'm just going to turn this off in that way that won't happen again. He was using one of those massive analog phones that cost a lot, and wasn't bundled with any other services and it just was obviously wrong to me, but again, the actual language, like, it wasn't my idea for example to necessarily address, um, all of the things that we've addressed in the video programming section of the CVAA, all of the flat-screen issues. Um, those came from ACB and AFB and other colleagues that said, 'this is what we need here, this is what we need there'. And then I took that and drafted it. So I didn't do it out of thin air. So some of the issues I was familiar with just having been involved in these issues, but I worked with the communities every step of the way. And it's interesting because, um, you know, some people have said, you know, 'I know I don't have a disability, so, um, how am I involved in this?'.

[00:25:33] Well, I don't have a disability yet, but there's a couple of things. First of all, um, I use captioning just as much as everybody else. Um, I find that it helps me with processing. I also have a mild hearing loss that it helps me hear. Um, and I now have children or, and grandchildren that have disabilities. So they're different levels of disabilities, um, in terms of how they affect their daily affairs.

[00:26:08] But if you wait long enough, there will be somebody in your life, either in your immediate family or otherwise that needs these various accommodations. So I joked with people, but I've said I did it for myself.

[00:26:25] **Debra Ruh:** [00:26:25] Right, right. And, you know, somebody has benefitted from it, because my daughter born with down syndrome benefited from these efforts, but so did my husband who is aged into dementia.

[00:26:38] And I was thinking about the, even things that people didn't even, they don't think about the, um, you know, interacting with the television, you know, the remote controls and stuff. And I remember when my mother who didn't have dementia, but she had a very, very serious diabetes uh, it was called it's brittle diabetes it's very, very difficult. And she passed away from it. But I remember when she moved into Richmond, Virginia, and she got comcast and the, the guy that came in to install it, he was so proud, he's like, 'oh, look what we did for people that are blind', my mom wasn't blind, but she was elderly and he was showing her everything it could do.

[00:27:18] You could talk to the remote. And it just was so valuable to my mother. And, and then my husband, he, he got to the point where he just could not, like you said, he couldn't change the channels and things like that. And so I was like, yeah, but it's really cool because you can just speak to the remote control now and just ask the remote control.

[00:27:39] Now his communications has gotten more.., so he can't do that anymore, but that's okay. So, I just think it's, so it is embedded in, so many things and people don't realize it, but I do want to just talk for a second, karen and we were really blessed, um, some people might not think so right now, looking outside, looking in the US it seems really terrifying over here, but we are blessed to live in the United States and with our laws and our litigation and us holding each other accountable. And you know, one thing I love about Americans is we will fight for each other. You know, we sometimes do it very messy, but we really, as a whole, I think most Americans really care about these issues.

[00:28:22] And I know our corporations have stepped on that, really stepped up on these things. But I look at other countries, that don't have laws like this. And once again, again, I have heard from countries saying, 'we wish we had a Karen, we wish we had Karen here', but you know, and it's always, it's always so beautiful that other countries use our legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act, you know, it was very, very catalytic when it came to the, um, the convention of the rights of persons with disabilities, they, you know, a lot of the language, you know, was used. And so how do we help globally? Um, when other countries don't have laws like us?

[00:29:05] **Karen Strauss:** [00:29:05] So I have done, a fair amount of sharing information with other countries.

[00:29:13] We're lucky to have Axel Leblois and G3ict: and his annual M-Enabling conference, I'm not sure what's happening to it this year, but that conference as you know, has brought together

[00:29:26] **Debra Ruh:** [00:29:26] Yes.

[00:29:27] **Karen Strauss:** [00:29:27] Hundreds of people, thousands over the years, tens of thousands, probably, um, to learn from, to exchange ideas not only learn for us, we've learned from some other countries. We're, we're pretty far ahead, but a couple of countries could beat us, especially in the audio description category.

[00:29:45] Um, and it's been very helpful to have that inter exchange and he actually brought M-Enabling over to other countries. Um, and we did events in Russia, Milan, Australia and he's done many others in addition to that, those are the only ones that I participated, but I've given presentations to Mexico and, um, to ITU and Geneva and various other locations.

[00:30:14] So the there's also something called the Accessible Americas series of conferences. I dunno if you're familiar with those. Um, and we participated in those for about four years, Brazil, um, I'm forgetting, I think Ecuador, but I'm not sure, Colombia definitely, Mexico. And so what we try to do as much as we can is just give information, provide information about how we've done it.

[00:30:39] We work, we met with the Canadian minister on accessibility issues when they were drafting their law, we have done a lot. So we think it's helpful to have them start from where we provided guidance. And then instead of completely right reinventing the wheel, maybe build off of that. Um, I know that now Gallaudet has a project with Nigeria and I've talked to them about possibly getting involved in that.

[00:31:08] Um, it's endless, the opportunities to share our information with others in other countries. We've been, I do feel like we've been very lucky here in being able to make the progress that we I have had and am interested in the coming years and sharing this more and more with other countries. It's a little bit more challenging now that travel is, is a challenge, but, um, we can still do a lot.

[00:31:34] **Debra Ruh:** [00:31:34] Right.

[00:31:35] **Karen Strauss:** [00:31:35] Over venues like this.

[00:31:37] **Debra Ruh:** [00:31:37] Yes. And I know that the M-Enabling it's going to go virtual this year because it has no choice. It's usually in June, but this year it will be in September. And then, you know, they're always, they're, they're trying to be very careful obviously.

[00:31:49] And are gonna make sure everybody's safe.

[00:31:51] So, um, they're going to go virtual and it's in mid, middle of September, but I agree with you, I always learn so much from that conference. We're always there. We're always supporting, um, what they do. I, G3ICT: actually was one of the publishers of my book.

[00:32:05] I'm a big fan of what they do and how they do what you're doing, Karen. They collaborate, they bring everybody together and I loved how it, you know, G3ICT: at the M-Enabling would always bring in the FCC. To have these, that's, I learned so much from those efforts.

[00:32:23] **Karen Strauss:** [00:32:23] I started with the FCC.

[00:32:26] We were there for a sponsor. They came to us and said they had the, Axel did, he had this idea and Pam Gregory, who was at the FCC at the time, welcomed him and introduced me. And it, it came and went on from that. Um, but yeah, we were, the FCC was a cosponsor of that event for many, many years, and it was a pleasure to do it.

[00:32:47] And, um, the Chairman's, they FCC's awards, Chairman's awards in accessibility are hosted every year, or at least have been in the past. Um, at M-Enabling, which was really fun to be able to, I dunno, for those of you who don't know about those awards, they are, they, um, recognize, uh, innovations in accessible technology and while it may sometimes recognize larger companies, a lot of times they recognize startups or smaller companies that have been very innovative in how to provide accessibility.

[00:33:23] **Debra Ruh:** [00:33:23] Yeah. It's, I always enjoyed that part of it because I always learned so much and I always like you, I always love learning. So.

[00:33:32] You know, what are you, you know, what are you worried about with the future? I mean, what are you seeing with the gaps? I mean, we've mentioned, we both mentioned artificial intelligence and the new, you know, the wearables and all the new technologies, IOT, and things like that, but, you know, what, what do you, and you mentioned a little bit, but I was wondering if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit more about the gaps in the future.

[00:33:55] **Karen Strauss:** [00:33:55] Yeah, and there's, there's just so much going on. It's hard to get one's head around it. Um, last year I attended CES the Consumer Electronics Show and, um, it was, uh, well, if you've ever gone there, it's overwhelming just to even be there. Um, but the breadth of technologies is just endless everything, um, from being able to monitor um, people with disabilities them from remote locations, monitoring senior citizens who live alone or older people who live alone, um, to make sure that they're taking the right medicine and able to, uh, travel around independently, um, all kinds of, uh, life activities, being able to monitor those remotely. Um, the one thing that I, that I tell you did concern me was the use of AI as a predictor. Um, there's been a lot of discussion about this and the algorithms that are used and whether or not those algorithms are going to be discriminatory against people with disabilities, especially if they're used to determine who is qualified for employment and education and other purposes like that.

[00:35:07] Another concern is privacy. Uh, there was one session that I went to, um, basically, there was a monitor in your home that basically is monitoring everything that you're doing. Um, and it was couched in terms of helping like, with like daily activity, like starting the stove while you're still driving home, which the oven rather while you're still driving home, which I wasn't quite sure why they were, but, but, um, to, um, again, predictive analysis of what you should be doing and, um, I'm not sure that I feel comfortable having them level of invasiveness in my life.

[00:35:46] **Debra Ruh:** [00:35:46] I agree.

[00:35:46] **Karen Strauss:** [00:35:46] So, and then there's just general concerns about conductivity and, um, and being able to access the new types of technologies. One of the kiosks we saw was a standalone, uh, basically market out on the street and you could select products from it, except that it was completely inaccessible. And. So I asked, well, is this is their voice output, audio output.

[00:36:15] And it was clear that the manufacturer or his represent, its representative, um, had not thought about that, but actually was interested in thinking about it. And so they were going to take it back. It's that kind of repeated push that we've had to do for years and years and years. Just think ahead and don't move ahead with design and development until you have incorporated the needs of people with accessibility.

[00:36:43] And that is, um, I mean needs of people with disabilities. Um, that's what worries me the most. So that's what keeps me awake at night, so to speak. Whether or not as these new technologies come into play, there will be people at the front end, making sure that they are accessible. Everything from gaming to, uh, again, our, our house appliances to our cars, autonomous cars.

[00:37:11] Okay. That will revolutionize society. And it will bring so many benefits. All of these technologies can bring so many benefits to people with disabilities, but not if those cars are not accessible. And a lot of issues with those cars, potentially not being accessible. You have to be able to, if you're a blind person and you want to be able to use that car, you have to have full accessibility to be able to use that car.

[00:37:35] **Debra Ruh:** [00:37:35] Right. It has, and it's been interesting some of the studies I've seen where, um, the, the, cars get a little confused by wheelchair users and the crosswalk, and, uh, it's, there's a lot of work to do. Karen, this might put you on a little on the spot and hopefully it won't, but so you've retired for the FCC.

[00:37:58] I would like to hope, and I don't know this, but they hopefully replaced you with somebody that is going to carry out this work, because I mean, the FCC has been so committed for so long, but I just don't know that, I probably should've asked you that off air. Uh, so if you're comfortable, uh, addressing it?

[00:38:17] **Karen Strauss:** [00:38:17] I would say that, um, I think that, um, things, I think I stayed at the FCC after the last election, um, I don't want to get too political, but I, I, even though I was brought in by the democratic administration, I stayed, um, chairman Pai, um, had, and this is, he's mentioned this publically he had a deaf aunt, um, and he was very willing to continue the movement, so to speak or to continue addressing these issues. During the last two years that I was there, both of which were after the 2016 election, um, two very major regulations were adopted one requiring volume control on wireless phones, a specific, a volume control standard, and the other, expanding the requirements for video description and they extent, since been expanded or they're being opposed to be expanded again.

[00:39:21] Um, disability does not have to be a partisan issue. It ,it never was.

[00:39:27] **Debra Ruh:** [00:39:27] I agree.

[00:39:28] **Karen Strauss:** [00:39:28] I mean, I, I think that frankly, we did make more gains a few more gains in democratic administrations, but it doesn't have to be that way. And we, I worked very closely, as I mentioned earlier on, um, with Senator McCain when he was alive.

[00:39:43] Um, he was our champion on the Senate when Markey was our champion in the house. Um, and of course there were many other senators, Dole and Hatch and various others who worked very hard on the ADA as well as on the 1996 Amendments to the Communications Act, which brought us close captioning and section 255, which is access to telecommunications products and equipment and services rather.

[00:40:11] Um, so. Um, I, I personally think that the Biden administration will be able to bring us more, um, in terms of, um, progressive change. Um, it has the, these administrations have always been very willing to, um, address the needs of people with disabilities without as much concern about the cost burden, understanding that it is a right, not a privilege. And it's not a burden, um, it's actually a benefit because you pointed out that when you design for accessibility, you're, even if you're designing for a particular disability, chances are many other people are going to be able to benefit from that. And the quintessential curve cut that is used for not only wheelchairs but strollers and carts and bicycles, close captioning, which isn't only used for people who are deaf, but rather people who are in bars and restaurants as well as have cognitive disabilities and need the extra processing.

[00:41:21] Um, even things like, um, uh, talking, um, um, what is it called when, uh, you're..

[00:41:31] The avatars?

[00:41:32] Not avatars but when you're, I'm trying to remember what it's called when it, when a telephone calls in, Talking Caller ID, um, which alerts, hearing people, if they're sitting in a different room that a call is coming in, there's just so many ways that providing accessibility benefits everybody.

[00:41:50] And I think that, um, I'm, I, I I'm hopeful that there are people at the FCC that will still carry this on. I do believe that there are, and I also remember that the head of the Disability Rights Office is a deaf woman named Suzy Rosen Singleton. She is certainly a very staunch supporter..

[00:42:10] **Debra Ruh:** [00:42:10] Yes, she's amazing!

[00:42:11] **Karen Strauss:** [00:42:11] ..of the issues and all of the people in the Disability Rights Office are dedicated to these issues, as I think is the leadership of the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau. So I had no trouble when I was there the last two years. Um, Again, I personally think that the Biden administration is the way to go. That's just my personal preference, but I, I do think that these issues don't have to be bipartisan issues.

[00:42:39] **Debra Ruh:** [00:42:39] I agree.

[00:42:40] And Bush senior signed the Americans with Disabilities Act and a law. So it is not bipartisan, but what we, what we do know, and this is sort of sad to say, but we have to continue to pay attention to this at a legislative level, because, corporations, and it's not just corporations, but technology developers, they keep forgetting this stuff.

[00:43:02] And like you mentioned, the unconscious bias and you know, there's, there's a, we can't take our hands off the wheel. You still have, we still all have to come together, which is why we have these conversations. But I know I could talk to you all day and certainly once again, if, you know, sometimes I think society doesn't realize how much all of these things are connected. Like the, you know, accessible voting, which we all need.

[00:43:27] **Karen Strauss:** [00:43:27] Right.

[00:43:27] **Debra Ruh:** [00:43:27] So it's, they're very complex topics and.. Yes, go ahead.

[00:43:32] **Karen Strauss:** [00:43:32] I did want to say one other thing, um, I wanted to give kudos to those companies and there are many of them now that have, as I like to say, reached a tipping point. Um, years ago, it was a matter of retrofitting, a big box, black box hardware phone.

[00:43:51] And now it's not, you can, two people could have the same device and personalize it customize it, to make it address their individual accessibility needs. And I think because of the changes in technology, coupled with more of a willingness to address the needs of people with disabilities, we have seen a sea-change.

[00:44:15] Um, in how much is accessible and companies, I hesitate to name some of them because I'm going to leave some of them out. But some of the big companies, the big IT companies, have been remarkable in providing accessibility. And these are telecom companies as well, many of them have gone far beyond what the law requires and it's very, um, encouraging and inspiring to see the leaders of these efforts, many of whom have it happened to be women actually, um, move forward with their agendas, their disability agendas have an, they have huge accessibility teams that examine their products and design with accessibility features incorporated into their products and services.

[00:45:05] So I do think that it's, we do need policies, but I'm very encouraged by the fact that so many of these companies have stepped forward to make these changes often on their own, even without the policies behind them.

[00:45:21] **Debra Ruh:** [00:45:21] I agree. And also they're hiring very, very talented technologist and telecommunication experts that have disabilities.

[00:45:30] I mean, they have taken the best talent off of the streets because right now, if you're a person with a disability that knows how to do this stuff, you are real sought after. So that's exciting too. It benefits our community. So I know we're out of time, Karen, but tell us how people can get in touch with you and sort of what are your hopes for them, the future.

[00:45:53] **Karen Strauss:** [00:45:53] So I am on LinkedIn and feel free to reach out me there. Um, My immediate hope for the future is that, our november elections bring a little bit more sanity to our country. Um, but I also hope again, that, uh, that as we move forward, we have a place at the table at the technological table. So that, and again, I do think that we have one right now, and so I hope that we continue to have one, especially, as new entrance come onto the scene that are not familiar with what we've done. Just like when the IT entrance came on, they were not familiar with what we had done in telecom. So I'm not sure what they're going to call it in the future, but whoever is coming on board, and I hope that we have an opportunity to be part of the part of the process that we have a voice in what's happening. And one other thing, some of us are older. My hope for the future is that we can pass the baton to the younger generation. I'm not ready to give up yet. I'm only retired from the FCC. I'm not retired from this, but I do hope that we see more and more younger people taking on this mantle.

[00:47:10] **Debra Ruh:** [00:47:10] Well said, well said. Karen, thank you so much for your years and years of leadership, your ongoing leadership, um, I think you should be very proud of what you've accomplished. Once again, no, you didn't do it in a vacuum. So many amazing other people, um, you know, joined you in these efforts, but, um, you really have shown major leadership and we're so grateful for you.

[00:47:32] **Karen Strauss:** [00:47:32] I really appreciate your kind words, but right back at you Debra, you've been extraordinary. And, um, I wish that I could have the opportunity to do to you what you just did to me. Because you're, you are an amazing innovation and um, your, your amazing advocacy has made a world of a difference to this community and continues to do so.

[00:47:57] **Debra Ruh:** [00:47:57] Thank you so much. It's such a labor of love the work that we get to do so well, thank you to the audience, and we will make sure that we get a copy of her op-ed piece.

[00:48:08] And, um, we'll make sure that you have a link for that. And you can find, you'll be able to find this video on YouTube, Facebook, all over social media. And of course it will be fully captioned because we want to walk the walk. So thank you to the audience. And Karen, thank you for all you're doing. And I look forward to seeing you in person someday soon.

[00:48:27] **Karen Strauss:** [00:48:27] Same here.

[00:48:28] **Debra Ruh:** [00:48:28] Bye everyone.

[00:48:30] **Karen Strauss:** [00:48:30] Bye, bye