

# Voices of ABLE2

## Episode 1 – The Ally That Changed Everything

### EMELOU

[00:00:00] Welcome to Voices of ABLE2, where we share real conversations about disability inclusion and community. I am Emelou Porquez and this episode is called The Ally that changed everything.

Today we will be hearing from a match of ABLE2's matching program, Michael and Mike who will be sharing more about how their friendship started and how this connection has made an impact on their lives. ABLE2's matching program connects a person with a disability, with a volunteer on a one-on-one intentional match.

Currently, we have over 140 people with disabilities waiting for their allies, and these individuals are simply seeking to have a friend to spend time with. Someone who is not there [00:01:00] or is not paid to be there to support them. Michael and Mike are only two of the hundreds of people who have seen a significant change in their overall well-being because of the matching program.

Thank you for tuning in to Voices of ABLE2 today. Let's get started.

Michael has lived with Agoraphobia or fear of open and crowded spaces almost all his life. During the pandemic, he tells us that these feelings of loneliness and isolation heightened even more, which shaped his daily reality. Michael shares what life was like before he was matched with his ally Mike.

### MICHAEL

I would say that the greatest impact for me was, uh, I mostly live house bound for the last 12 years. So I was pretty isolated and uh, had very little or little contact with outside world, outside my bedroom. Even in my own house, I was isolated to a [00:02:00] bedroom. So the fact that I'm here today is a great

testimony of my journey. It took 12 years to be able to come outside and HealthLinks had left my name with, uh, ABLE2 and to be a Match.

And I was skeptical that somebody could help someone like me, uh, or find a match that was suitable or compatible with someone like me because I had no interaction with people for many years. And, um, you know, I'm agoraphobic and I suffered from anxiety and I have depression. So, um, the pandemic, uh, hit, COVID hit and I got this call on Zoom saying that, uh, they had found a match for me.

And that, uh, I would be meeting someone and I thought, well, finally a pandemic, uh, everybody could feel the same isolation that I felt.

## EMELOU

Obviously the pandemic was an unfortunate time for everyone, but [00:03:00] you must have felt sort of relieved that you didn't have to go out or talk to anyone because nobody was allowed to. But at the same time, it must have felt more isolating because nobody was socializing, nobody was going out there or expecting you to socialize out there anyways.

## MICHAEL

And I was kind of glad because I didn't have to push myself to become extrovert, to be outside or anything, because finally everybody had to be like me.

So I was kind of glad that my, my recovery would be slowed down, because I don't feel that I could do it.

## EMELOU

Um, so tell me about meeting Mike because you met him during the pandemic. So, from what I understand, you first met through Zoom. Tell me about that experience.

## MICHALE

Yeah, I met Mike on, uh, on Zoom and, uh, because the pandemic restrictions, we weren't allowed to meet in public or anybody could.

And uh, so, uh, I met Mike on Zoom and, uh, we started our friendship there. [00:04:00] And, uh. Eventually, about two years, the pandemic restrictions were lifted and, uh, Mike started coming to my place and he, uh, he took the role on himself to, uh, to make it his mission, to get me outside my, outside my bedroom, outside my home, uh, making sure I got the medical appointments and making sure I remember to take my meds and to eat and just basic, uh, function, showering and dressing and remembering today's Tuesday and supposed it's Wednesday or uh, 'cause things just become a blur once you're isolated. It was jogging pants for two years... thing. You didn't move or dress up, you didn't have to go anywhere. There was little pressing dates and time just became irrelevant, you know?

So, uh, Mike was really my only outside, uh, source to time and in the world really What was going on? So, I was grateful for that.

## EMELOU

Yeah. [00:05:00] And, uh, I guess the pandemic, as unfortunate as it was, I guess, brought out something good like having to meet Mike over Zoom, which must have been, you know, less intimidating than meeting someone out in the public for the first time.

How about for you, Mike? How did you find supporting Michael through the pandemic and how did you do it?

## MIKE

Uh, I'm, I'm very fortunate, grateful for the, the connection with Michael. And honestly in terms of how did I do it, I didn't do any, I, I have a lot of the same problems as Michael, so it was more just kind of like a, a symbiotic relationship, uh, that, that we were both helping one another.

Obviously COVID, like you mentioned, made everything, uh, different for everybody and I was already a pretty introverted person myself. Have depression, so we kind of connect on that and just, you know, help one another. So it, it was great. I wanna, it was very mutually beneficial, so it was [00:06:00] great. I, I see Michael super often, again, not terribly extroverted, so I see Michael more than most people I know.

So, uh, yeah, very fortunate for the time we have.

## EMELOU

And so Michael, from what I understand, Mike has helped you slowly make those steps to go outside once again. Can you tell us more about that?

## MICHAEL

Yeah, I mean, I, I, I've often had a med to, uh, experience ratio, you know, depending on how much stress or anxiety I was gonna feel, 'cause I would have panic attacks about panicking in public so, so crippling that I can no longer go. So I would make excuses and. Rather, uh, push all the contact people away that way. Force me to, to be outsider and communicate with them. And many times I've told Mike not to bother, stay home and don't come.

But yet he still has the ability to show up. And, uh, it started out small. He would [00:07:00] come to my house and it took me two years to get out of my bedroom, taking me out 15 minutes a day. And I figured if I could tolerate 15 minutes in my living room. 15 minutes in my dining room, which I've never eaten in, and then eventually 15 minutes on my balcony that if I could spend 15 minutes, I may be able to spend 20 or 30 or even longer.

So as diversion techniques, the longer and the less I realized I could do it, the less panic attacks I would have. And Mike showed up around that time that I was just, uh, starting to do that. So medical appointments were always a blur to me. I forget to ask questions, and if I did ask the questions, I'd forget the answers 'cause I was so, uh, confused and, and obviously panicking to being in unknown and unfamiliar places.

So, uh, Mike took me to these, these events and, uh, he thought maybe I could do his, his, his goals were greater than mine, like, you know, I think he could go to a coffee [00:08:00] shop and he wants, again, I don't know, I can make it out of the house today, but. I try, you know, so we'd go to Timmie's or wherever, and my greatest fears were hospitals, malls, anywhere where there's masses and why, and, uh, Costco.

## EMELOU

But that strategy that Mike had done with you seemed to have worked really well because from what I heard, in summer of 2023, you and Mike went to an Ottawa Senator's game at the Canadian Tire Center. What was that like for you?

## MICHAEL

Well, we heard that we had tickets to go to the Sens game. The, I heard there could be upwards of 10,000 people, which I've never could, could, uh, imagine or fathom in my mind.

He said, well, let's do a test run. Are you ready for Costco? And I said, I don't think so. I don't think I could do that. So, we, we worked our way up. We started walking [00:09:00] in the mall and, uh. When I realized I could do that, and we went to Costco and I mean, sure it wasn't the greatest success in my mind, I still panic and everything else.

But, uh, the fact was that I actually went, I remained for an amount of time and, and got home and I was okay. And, uh, to me that was a success. So we went to the Sens game and of course I panic just getting in the car. We weren't even there yet. And when we got to the parking lot, it was, it was starting to get real when you saw that many cars and when you got inside the building.

And when I saw that, just how it was funneled and stacked to the ceiling with, with all those faces and all those people, and, uh, it was so dazed and confused and distracted and sure, I didn't actually know who won the game, but the fact was that I went in. I stayed the whole time and I managed to get home was a major, uh, [00:10:00] success for me.

And if you could put me in a room with 17,000 or more. I think I'm, I'm ready to do almost anything.

**EMELOU**

Wow. And and that's just such a breakthrough from the place that you were in months earlier. Right?

Um, so how about for you, Mike? How was that whole experience for you?

**MIKE**

Mike killed it. It was country night too, so that helped. And I had some, uh. Not halftime show, period show. That was great. And yeah. Yeah. As you mentioned, he didn't know the score, so, but, but, but he was just happy. He was looking around everywhere. It was great.

**EMELOU**

And, and Michael, this was your very first time in a room with over 17,000 people, right? What made you feel confident that you could actually, you know, go and experience this?

**MICHAEL**

Yeah, as a child, I never got into sports or games or anything. I was always a little different and centered myself to my bedroom. [00:11:00] So I never really got to experience, uh, friendship or contact one-on-one than mine with masses. So, um, I've always avoided those situations and found them very, uh, distressful and, uh, to be able to, to see myself actually attending something like that was just, uh, it was hard to comprehend or even get that vision in my head.

I've even tried to watch it on TV sometimes, and just the fact there, I'm picturing myself there would, would cause great panic attacks. So to actually go and, and be successful and put my trust in Mike, that I know that if anything happened that uh, he would get me out of that situation and that I felt safe.

And, and be able to trust Mike to do the right thing.

## EMELOU

Wow, that's, that's such a heartwarming thing to know that just having someone you can trust and can rely on makes all the difference. Uh, so Michael, [00:12:00] I wanna hear about why you got involved with ABLE2, in the first place, you know, being from a place of anxiety and meeting people outside, what made you decide to find a match through the matching program?

## MICHAEL

So the people that did come into my life would come and go as a blur and not sure what their intentions were, were they gonna help me, uh, was confusing a lot of the times, you know? So it's a journey and you know, I said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. But I thought if I could find the courage just to take, just to take the one step, how can I help myself?

So I, I agreed to meet the match at ABLE2 and to try something to break out? Because definition of an idiot's doing the same thing over and over again, hoping for a different result. And it hadn't worked in my 61 years that it's never worked for me. So I figured obviously something needed to change in me to be able to [00:13:00] reach out.

And when you're dealing with healthcare professionals are on a time limit. They know different goals of agenda than you so. And even at ABLE2, I was skeptical that they would find a match like me and thank God they didn't. You know, it's because of our differences that we are cemented together, not you, magnets attract each other, opposites attract.

And not just a, like when me, if Mike and I were exactly the same, he would be in his bedroom when I would be in mine hoping to share ideas on Zoom about going out somewhere. So I'm glad that he is, you know. Somewhat of a better

relationship with the outside world than I do. So, and yet he has an understanding of where I'm coming from.

So it's, yeah, it's a, it's a great, uh, marry the two things together helps me a lot.

## EMELOU

And how about for you, Mike? How did you learn about ABLE2's matching program and why did you decide to sign up as a volunteer?

## MIKE

I think [00:14:00] that I'd first heard about ABLE2 'cause I wanted to. Find some kind of way to connect with the community, to volunteer.

Um, my partner recommended, uh, I think she recommended one or two things and, and ABLE2's kind of mission really struck a chord. It was good. It was not something I, as somebody's kind of averse to, uh, extroversion, that somebody who wants to connect more one-on-one. It was great. Uh, there wasn't any huge expectations, so there's not too much pressure.

It's very, it's very doable. There's not, there's not a lot of strings attached. There's not a lot of being asked of you. There's, most of the time we were just two people hanging out. We would hang out one of our places or just coffee shop or, I mean, now that he goes to malls, we go to mall, the, and just walk around.

So it's great. Uh, and yeah, so I found about [00:15:00] ABLE2 through, I think it was, it might've been a website, but, um, the, the, I owe it all to my partner and, uh, yeah, and, and also to Michael 'cause it was just, it was a good connection. It was a great connection and very similar in a lot of ways. Uh, so just very thankful for it.

## EMELOU

This has been such a great chat and it's so heartwarming to listen to your experiences and learn about how your friendship has made a difference in your lives. Thanks again so much, Michael and Mike for sharing your story. Uh, any final words you would like to share to our listeners before we end?

## MICHAEL

I wanna thank ABLE2 for, uh, helping me along my journey recovery and I want to thank Mike for being my match and, uh, just want as all to be successful and hope up many more find their matches as well.

Yeah, and anybody who's thinking about it, I would say join ABLE2 is great. You could meet someone [00:16:00] like Michael, so thanks ABLE2.

## EMELOU

Michael and Mike's story is one that we are often fond of telling. Their journey together shows how one connection can make all the difference. This is what we see so often in the matching program.

On the surface, it may look like volunteers and people with disabilities simply paired together. But what happens is more profound. We see improved mental health. We see growing self-confidence and self-esteem. We see friendships that become chosen families, and we see life-changing milestones like the one Michael just experienced.

These are only two people supported by ABLE2, but their story reminds us that the impact of connection cannot be measured by numbers. It's measured in lives transformed. Since recording this conversation, Michael has moved to Toronto to begin a new chapter in his life. But despite the distance, his connection with Mike [00:17:00] remains strong.

Through ABLE2's Connect matching program, which offers virtual support and friendship, the two continue to stay in touch proving that relationships built on mutual trust and support can thrive no matter the miles between them.

Thank you so much to Michael and Mike for sharing your story.

We would like to thank our presenting sponsor, Sequence Marketing.

As one of ABLE2's most trusted partners, Sequence Marketing has played a vital role in amplifying able two's mission, connecting with communities, and sharing stories that matter known for their creative and people-focused approach. They bring a commitment to storytelling and brand excellence that makes a real impact. Their generous support has made this podcast possible.

Thank you, Sequence Marketing for helping us make inclusion heard.

If you'd like to learn more about the matching program or how you can get involved with [00:18:00] ABLE2 visit [able two dot org](https://abletwo.org).

Thank you for listening to Voices of ABLE2. If this episode moved you, please share it with someone who needs to hear it.

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