

Voices of ABLE2 Episode 6 - Behind the Match: Building Meaningful Connections with People with Disabilities featuring Thony Jean-Baptiste and Azra Alibhai

[00:00:00] **Emelou:** Welcome to Voices of ABLE2, where we share real conversations about disability inclusion and community. I'm Emelou Porquez, and today's episode is called Behind the Match, Building Meaningful Connections with People with Disabilities.

In this episode, we're taking a closer look at ABLE2's matching program, not just what it does, but why and how it works. We're going behind the scenes with two of ABLE2's social workers who have each played a central role in creating and supporting matches over many years, having a hand in these relationships that often grow into meaningful, long-lasting friendships.

Today you'll hear from Thony Jean-Baptiste, ABLE2's, director of programs, who first joined the organization as a social worker with the matching program back in 2005, and Azra Alibhai, who is currently a [00:01:00] social worker with the matching program, who brings a deeply relational person-centered perspective to her work.

Together, they'll share their insights on how matches are thoughtfully created and what they look for when pairing a friend and an ally, And why these intentional one-to-one relationships are so important, especially in addressing loneliness, isolation and barriers to community connection faced by many people with disabilities. Let's get into it.

Emelou: All right. Thank you so much, Thony and Azra for joining us on the podcast today.

Thony: You for having me, Emelou.

Azra: Thank you Emelou.

Emelou: So, let's dive in. Can you share about how you got started with ABLE2 and your involvement with the matching program and what drew you to social work? [00:02:00]

Thony: So, what I would say, from a young age, I have always been drawn to the idea of helping and supporting vulnerable individual in achieving their goals.

And before coming to Canada, I had the opportunity to study social work. And to work also with some of the most disadvantaged community in World Vision International. After arriving in Ottawa, I joined ABLE2 in 2005 as a social worker in the matching program. A few years later, so I advanced to the role of manager, and I now serve as the Director of Program.

So, I would say that all the time I've been through ABLE2, and then to look at also the matching program, how we impact this program impacted people's lives. So that's always been kind of very, very inspiring for me.

Emelou: Yeah. And how about you Azra?

Azra: [00:03:00] Well, what drew me to social work is my deep booted passion for working with and advocating alongside diverse populations.

Particularly individuals with diverse abilities. I've always been interested in overall health and wellbeing and how we can support people through holistic person-centered approaches. I'm especially drawn to approaches that foster dignity, inclusion, and belonging, and that help people feel seen, valued, and empowered.

And this is what inspired me to apply for my social work practicum at able to. So, I completed my practicum ABLE2 over eight years ago, uh, during my Master of social work program.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: And I still remember my very first no-commitment match meeting. Interestingly, it was Thony who supervised that meeting. Very nerve wracking back then. Before joining ABLE2, [00:04:00] I had already been involved in community-based social work, um, including mentorship programs for first year universities, university students and newcomers. But what truly stood out to me about ABLE2 was that the work went far beyond delivering services.

It was about creating intentional relationships that foster belonging, inclusion, and connection. And I was struck by how much care and thought went into every match. So, you know what may appear as a simple, very simple match from the outside, just two people meeting for the first time. It's actually learning

about each person's interests, communication styles, goals, and what would make that connection, uh, meaningful.

I also had the opportunity to work alongside the communication, engagement and fundraising team. Yeah. Which gave me broader understanding of social work beyond direct practice and support.

Emelou: Hmm.

Azra: And this experience deepened my awareness of the [00:05:00] essential work happening behind the scenes, including grant writing, program development, organizing fundraising events, and raising awareness to sustain and grow ABLE2's impact.

And through this I became even more connected to the organization mission and the difference we are able to make in the community. And so, after graduating with my MFW, I moved into my current role as social worker with the matching program.

Emelou: That's, that's amazing to hear. And seeing how you have both worked closely with the program from different vantage points. Like Thony being initially a social worker to manager, to now director and Azra as part of the. Communications, engagement and fundraising team.

So, from your perspectives, how would you describe the matching program to someone hearing about it for the first time?

Thony: So, from my perspective, the simple way that I will say that is, the matching program pairs individual living [00:06:00] with disability, with volunteer, who are motivated to give back to their community, creating meaningful one-on-one connections.

This initiative has significant positive impact on people living with disability by reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation, lowering vulnerability, boosting self-confidence, and enhancing both mental and physical wellbeing at the same time. Volunteer benefit by gaining new perspective on life, developing a deeper appreciation for what truly matters in life.

Emelou: Mm-hmm.

Thony: And building rewarding friendship that enrich their lives. So, I will say like, uh, this is a program that just pair those two individual, and then by having an impact on both volunteer and the person living with disabilities.

Emelou: Wow, that's, that's a wonderful way to [00:07:00] put it. I would say that our program is, is quite unique.

Azra: It's relationship based, not necessarily service based. And while professional supports are important, there's something deeply meaningful about having someone in your life who chooses to be there, which is really an important part to emphasize about our program. That Volunteer Ally chooses to be there, which starts that process from a position of deep equality between the friend and the ally.

Emelou: Mm-hmm.

Azra: And these relationships are, are reciprocal. Both the friend and ally bring something valuable. Something that looks like social connection. And sometimes it can be practical support, and often it can be both.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: But Emelou, like people with disabilities often face barriers to full participation in society. They experience stigma, discrimination, poverty, ables of racism, inequities in education, healthcare, and employment. And those barriers can lead to [00:08:00] isolation and that's where the matching program comes in and why it's such a unique program.

Emelou: Mm-hmm. That's, that's really something that I also really am drawn to the matching program is that because these people, um, the volunteers are actually people who want to spend time with the friends, and it's different from the people who are paid to be there to support them. So, it's really, um, a wonderful experience for both parties, definitely.

Um, so the pairing of friends and allies, you know, can sound simple from the outside or for someone who does not know much about the matching program, but we all know there's a lot more to it. So, what are some of the key things that you would consider when deciding whether two people, uh, might be a good fit?

Thony: I would say that when pairing friends and allies, there are several factors we should consider, including shared interest, geographic proximity and what both [00:09:00] individuals are seeking in a match.

Thony: It is important to ensure that the volunteer understand their role and responsibility, recognizing that they are not there to save the person with a disability, but to build a mutually beneficial relationship.

Additionally, the friend should also gain value from the match, the volunteer allies' level of comfort, and familiarity also with disability should also be taken into account when we have to pair a friend with a volunteer Ally.

Emelou: Mm-hmm. Yeah. That's, that's a great, uh, consideration. Azra?

Azra: No, I don't have anything to add. That was, that was perfect.

Emelou: Yeah. That, that's actually really great. And it's really clear, you know, that it's important that both parties, both friend and ally understand that it's a mutually beneficial relationship. [00:10:00]

Um, so from both your experiences, what motivates people with disabilities to sign up for the program and what do they hope to gain by being matched?

Thony: Based on my experience with the program, I would say that people with disability join for a number of reason.

Emelou: Mm-hmm.

Thony: Some of them are looking for a companionship, someone to spend time with, enjoy a coffee, eat out in a restaurant, catch a movie, or watch a game. Other people need more practical assistance, such as help with groceries, managing paperwork, having someone they can rely on for support if challenges arise.

For many of them, the program offer a chance to reduce feeling of isolation and loneliness and bring a sense of warmth and connection into their life, to the presence of someone that they know [00:11:00] who really cares about them.

Azra: Well, I echo, um, what Thony said, and I'll bring it back to what I said at the beginning, that, you know, many people with disabilities face barriers to social participation, whether that's a mobility challenge, a transportation issues, communication barriers, a lack of accessible opportunities.

And over time these barriers can lead to isolation and loneliness, and which we know have serious impact on both physical, social, mental health. Um, I'm always brought back to this, uh, statistic or, or the research about, um, what

chronic loneliness can do and it's, it's so harmful to people's health. Um, actually it was Thony who had brought this research to me eight years ago about, um, how harmful, uh, chronic loneliness is. It can be just as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Emelou: Oh, wow. Wow.

Azra: Okay.

Emelou: Yeah, it's insane.

Azra: It increases [00:12:00] of heart disease, stroke, people don't even realize that that is the impact of loneliness and social mobilization, uh, strokes, depression, and it can even, uh, shorten life expectancy.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: There was another study that I had found that people with strong social connections have a 50% greater chance of living longer than those who are isolated.

And this is where our matching program helped to address these issues by creating these intentional, as you said, reciprocal relationships. So, both the friend and ally bring something meaningful to the table.

Emelou: Yeah. And I guess that segues to my next question, which, you know, you've already sort of answered. Um, is that why, why the matching program is essential for people with disabilities in our community? It's because it reduces the barriers for people with disabilities.

Um, but also if you could also talk about, you know, how people with disabilities don't have the same or similar opportunities to finding [00:13:00] these connections, um, finding new friends in the community. Like, could you talk about maybe why that is for people with disabilities?

Thony: Like Azra already mentioned, I remember like the research that was done, and they brought out the fact that, you know, for someone who doesn't have a disability, they may have between average like 150 people in their life.

For someone who has a disability, in average, they have two people in their life and most of the time those people, they are family members or people who are getting paid to be with them. Yeah. We are not saying it's not important for

people, for those people to do, to be in their life, but it's just to understand how poor their network is.

Emelou: Yeah.

Thony: That's why now the matching program is very important for them because that's a way for them to meet people that they will never meet in their life, to have other connection in their [00:14:00] life. When I look at some situation where you see a volunteer ally will present, introduce his match friend to his family member or to his personal friend, that's really great.

That's exactly what we are looking for. And at that point we don't even have to be there at all as ABLE2. Because it's like the match is working by itself. Now, who have reached our goal, which was to help develop connection for those people with disability, and then now to make sure that now they have more people in their life, people who voluntarily choose to be with them, not because they are getting paid, not because they are family member.

As I said, it's not that, it doesn't mean that it's that those people are not important, but, it makes a big difference when they know someone choose to be with them because they just want to be there as your friend to have like a personal relationship with them.

Emelou: Yeah. [00:15:00] I've had the privilege of talking to so many of these matches and a lot of them have shared with me that they would have never, you know, met each other if it weren't for the matching program because these people are so like, different, like they belong to so, so different circles that they would have never met each other on their own.

But through the matching program, they've discovered that there are other individuals out there who share their same interests, have the same activities or hobbies. And so that's, that's something that I find is also amazing about the matching program.

Azra: They don't even have to have similar interests.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: we've had people sign up just for practical support, uh, grocery shopping. Yeah. And through that bond emerging, and, you know, they, they become fast friends.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: Nothing, you have to be similar interests and it's just. It's amazing, right? Just to see how a connection can build

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: Yeah. And spend time with somebody.

Thony: [00:16:00] So I was just going to add also the fact that some people, the way, like this program also impact their life because just knowing the fact that you know, somebody choose to be with them, that really help them also in their self-esteem. They know, oh, now I'm also somebody who is important because that person choose to be with me.

For that person I'm important. And then that can really help them also to work on themselves and then also to learn sometime even about social skills, doing things that they will never do alone because it's difficult to do it alone.

Thony: And then I'm also thinking about some people, like in the past there was one guy, so who have never been able to be outside because you know, he had to deal with so many mental health issue, like anxiety and depression.

Thony: And then by being mad with someone now he was able to go out and sometime to go to hockey game with like in a stadium full of people.

Emelou: Mm-hmm.

Thony: This is something that he will never be [00:17:00] able to do by himself. So that's why like we are thinking that the matching program, it's important, is very important for people with disabilities.

Emelou: Yeah, absolutely. It's incredible to see the kind of impact that it has had for over 50 years, 'cause this was the very like sort of first program that ABLE2 or citizen advocacy of Ottawa, as we were formally known as, um, this is how the organization started matching volunteers with people with disabilities in the community.

Um, so let's shift the conversation to allies. Let's talk about the volunteers. What, to you, makes a great ally?

Azra: I think a great ally. Someone who's open-minded. Empathic, someone who's genuinely invested in building a respectful, meaningful relationship.

Thony: I agree with Azra. Empathy is very important.

Azra: Yep.

Thony: Somebody also has a great sense of understanding. Also somebody who is able [00:18:00] to listen without judgment and try to understand the other person, experience, challenges and goals. Reliability and commitment is very important also. Mm-hmm. It's, you say that you are going to be there, people have to be able to depend on you.

I know sometimes things happen, you have to change your schedule, that's fine. Yeah. But at least with respect for that person, you know, it's a 50/50 relationship. It's a kind of a mutual relationship if you have respect for that person, and then, okay, you know that you are not going to be there, and then you let them know, okay, I'm not going to be there.

And then you have to change your schedule. So, commitment is very important. Reliability is also very important. Having also strong communication skills.

Emelou: Mm-hmm.

Thony: When I say strong communication skills, it doesn't mean you have to use big word, but the ally has to be able to communicate with efficacy with the person.

Emelou: Yeah.

Thony: [00:19:00] Everybody has different abilities. For some people they are not going to remember if you just go to say, Hey, what are we doing for the weekend? So can we go to see a movie? They are going to forget that. So you need to understand exactly the ability of that person. And then, once you understand that you communicate with them in a way that they can understand.

For some people, you have to write down when you are going to meet with them. For some other people also, they have other people in their life that the ally have to communicate with and then to schedule anything that they are doing together. And then also an ally has to be somebody else who is there to encourage the person with a disability.

Always make sure that you know, okay, it doesn't mean that everything that the person is going to do, you are going to say, oh, that's good, that's good. But sometime also people, they need to have some kind of encouragement, especially depending on where they are coming from. And as I said, also a good ally also is somebody who also [00:20:00] understand the importance of respect and boundary.

Also, you know, you have to be able to set the boundary. Sometime in the beginning it might be difficult to do that because for some people with disability, it doesn't mean that they are mean or they want to take a lot of room in your life, but they may not understand. Some people may feel they can call you anytime or every day at any time.

You have to be able to set the boundary for them, so to let them understand, okay, this is when I'm available to talk to you, and then I'm not available at certain time. Things like that. And then also, as Azra had already mentioned, somebody has to be, the ally has to be very open-minded. As I said, you know, the ally is not responsible for the match, but he has to understand the friend also has a role in the match. And then work with respect with that person.

To be an ally, it doesn't mean that the person has to have like some [00:21:00] specific skills. It's not something that you have to get the school to learn to have a specific degree for that. No, anybody can be an ally.

The only thing you know, just to make sure that you treat the person the way you would like people to treat you.

Emelou: Wow. That's, that's an incredible way to put it, Thony. And, yeah, I, I've heard the term thrown around in a couple of our meetings that, you know, our volunteers are really exceptional. They're, they're sort of like the cream of the crop of all the volunteer population.

They're really committed and loyal to their friends, the matching program and, you know, really just truly exceptional people who want to spend time with our friends.

Thony: We are very lucky, that for the fact that we have in Ottawa so many people who generally we want to help the community and they have, they, they have patient, they understand, okay, once they start the relationship with the person with a disability and then [00:22:00] they are there for them and then they are very supportive and then they are helping also to make sure that that person also can enjoy their lives.

So we are lucky in Ottawa to have that.

Azra: Yeah, I agree. Like, um, our volunteers, they don't have to be experts or have special skills, like Thony said. What matters most is their willingness to connect, to learn, to be present. Um, and what's really important is by becoming Ally, you're, you're not just supporting that one person, you're contributing to a stronger, more inclusive community.

And we've seen these relationships truly change lives. Both the ally, the person that you're matched with, we've seen it, um, support with caregivers and families.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: As we keep saying, what really stands out is the impact that goes both ways. Allies often share how meaningful these relationships are for them as well, and how it changes their perspective and deepens their sense of community.

And I always [00:23:00] say it truly is a two-way connection.

Emelou: And it's incredible to see that the impact goes both ways, not just for the person with disability, but also the volunteer. Um, so from your perspective, what does a successful match look like?

Azra: So for me, I hear it all the time. Like our allies, they're always aiming for perfection or what the stories they hear and see. But, you know, a successful match, again, I'll say, is less about perfection, and it's more about just a genuine, meaningful connection that that grows over time.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: You know? Yeah. The successful match looks like a relationship where both people feel comfortable, respected, and valued, and that there is this, uh, sense of ease when they spend time together.

And at first there's this uncertainty at the beginning, but over time, that initial introduction turns into something just more natural. Their connection just flows easily. That that really is what a success match [00:24:00] entails, right? Yeah. Just taking your time, getting to know each other, letting a relationship just slowly develop.

Emelou: Yeah. And, and really there's no formula to what a truly successful match looks like. And I appreciate that you said, uh, about getting people to like just figure it out and let it fall into place in whatever way that is meaningful and works for both of them.

Azra: We often say it's not a race. Right. It's not a race, it's, it's just like any relationship. Right. It takes time to develop.

Emelou: Yeah.

Thony: As Azra was saying exactly, a successful match is one where both individuals feel comfortable, respected, and valued. From my perspective, it means the relationship is built on trust, clear communication, and mutual understanding. The volunteer ally takes the time to learn the person preference, goals and needs, while also recognizing their [00:25:00] independence and strengths rather than focusing on their disability.

In the strong match interaction, feel natural and supportive rather than forced or one sided. The person with a disability feels heard, included and empowered to participate in activities or decision that matter to both of them. And at the same time, the volunteer ally feel confident in their role, understand how to provide appropriate support and gain a sense of purpose from the relationship.

I will say at the end, success look like a balanced connection where both people benefit, there is a genuine companionship, increased confidence and independence for the person being supported and a positive, meaningful experience also for the volunteer.

Emelou: Yeah, that's, that's really true. And I've seen how much these matches impact the community as well. Not just the two people, [00:26:00] but how, how they expand their social connections and just, you know, uh, impacting the community as well.

So, we're coming towards the end of our episode today, but I want to get your insights for listeners who feel inspired or are considering volunteering as an ally, what would you say to them? What would you say to them to kind of encourage them to sign up and volunteer with the matching program?

Azra: Well, to me it's just go for it.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: Check out our website. Um, sign up for an information session. Give us a call. Right. And again, you don't have to be an expert. You don't have to have special skills. What matters most is just your willingness to connect and be present and wanna find a friend.

Thony: Yes. For me, I would say the same thing. Also, just go for it. Trust your instinct, you know. You don't have really to be an expert, [00:27:00] you just need to be there for someone and then contribute also to your community.

You don't need also to have all the answer to your question because sometime also, if you are trying to understand okay, too, to ask us too many questions, at the end, it might be really too much difficult for you. Just come to us, go to our website. Call ABLE2, and then say, okay, I'm interested. Mm-hmm. I just want to learn about that.

And then once you do that on our side at ABLE2, we'll give you more information so you can understand whether or not this is something for you. What you need to understand that, it's not just the volunteer who is going to give to the person with a disability, but the person with a disability also is going to help you also to have a positive experience, to have, you know, a perspective in life, to understand sometime what is more important also in life. So just go for it. [00:28:00]

Emelou: Yeah. Yeah, that's, that's amazing. And I want to commend the social workers who have worked with the matching program over the years. Because a lot of the volunteers that I've spoken with, they've said that the process, you know, although very thorough, the social workers have made the process so easy, so seamless, and so, um, comfortable for them because they have felt that they were prepared and ultimately, you know, ready to, to dive into this process.

So really kudos to you, Thony, to Azra, to the matching program team over the years for, for really bringing the matching program to where it is today. Um, it's, it's truly a collaborative effort between all the social workers and so I appreciate all the work that you do for our community.

Thony: Thank you very much Emelou. And um, we are hoping that, you know, people after listening to the podcast, they will [00:29:00] understand it is really important, this is something simple that anyone can do. Mm-hmm. As long as they just want to give back to their community.

Azra: And it's important to note that the support from, um, the team from ABLE2, it doesn't just stop once you're matched. We are there for you

throughout the whole process, whether it's check-ins or our events. We support you throughout the process.

Emelou: Yeah.

Azra: Even from a one-year match or one month or to five years. Yeah. 10 years.

Emelou: I can attest to that 'cause you have supported a match that's been around for 45 years, so absolutely.

Emelou: Awesome. Well thank you again, Thony and Azra, for joining us on Voices of ABLE2. I really appreciate the chat and, uh, for sharing your insights on this very essential matching program.

Thony: Thank you.

Azra: Thank you, Emelou.

Emelou: As we wrap [00:30:00] up today's episode, I'm really struck by how much care, intention, and humanity go into every match. What might look simple from the outside, you know, to people spending time together is actually rooted in respect, trust, and ongoing support. We heard today that the matching program is not about fixing or saving anyone.

It's about people choosing one another, choosing to spend time with each other, building relationships based on equality and creating space for genuine connection. Something that is essential for all of us, but too often out of reach for people with disabilities.

In celebrating National Volunteer Week, this episode is also a reminder of the remarkable commitment of ABLE2's volunteers, as we've heard from Azra and Thony, Allies, don't need any special training or expertise. Just empathy, openness, reliability, and a [00:31:00] willingness to show up. The impact of these relationships goes both ways, as we've learned today, enriching not only the lives of friends, but also volunteers, their families, and the wider community.

To Thony and Azra, thank you so much for your insight, your leadership, and the care you bring to this work, and to every past and present ally who has been part of the matching program. Thank you for empowering lives of meaning and joy.

Emelou: 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 ABLE2's mission, connecting with communities and sharing stories that matter.

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Thank you for listening to Voices of ABLE2. If this conversation resonated with you and you'd like to learn more about becoming an ally or to support ABLE2's work, you can visit us at ABLE2.org.

Until next time, thank you for being part of a more inclusive community where every person is seen as able, important, and valued.