

Inclusion Podcast - Transcript

Episode 08: Riyam

Aisha 0:00:00

Welcome to the Universal Inclusion Podcast, where we spotlight the voices shaping a more diverse and inclusive future in space. In each episode, we bring you stories from trailblazers across the industry, from engineers and entrepreneurs to activists and artists, all breaking barriers in their own way. So, if you're ready to get inspired, let's dive in. This week we speak to Riyam Ojaimi. We talk about experiencing racism at a young age, shedding light on the often hidden nature of systemic injustice. We talk about her love of research and making space communication more accessible for the masses. Riyam is an aerospace medicine researcher and pre-medical student at the University of Toronto. Beyond research, she is a recognized science and astronomy influencer with a quickly growing presence across social media, where she bridges the gap between scientific discovery and public engagement. Riyam is also the founder and CEO of SpacePoint, a visionary space communication and education platform.

Aisha 0:01:09

Hello, hello. Hi, Riyam. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Riyam 0:01:14

Thank you so much for having me. I'm super excited.

Aisha 0:01:17

So, I always like to start off by asking, what has drawn you to space?

Riyam 0:01:22

Well, I guess, you know, my story started out just like anyone else's when it comes to their journey to space. I was both in awe of all the opportunities and mysteries that lie out there in space, as well as I guess, you know, when you hear about black holes for the first time, you're a bit scared as a kid, you think the world is coming to an end. But you know, I always like to mention this little story about how I used to draw a civilization on Saturn. I used to sit on my pink desk and just imagine how human beings would live on Saturn. And the idea came to me as a five-year-old when I started hearing about overpopulation and climate change. And I just thought, well, if we move to another planet, a larger planet, then we could have more space per person. And we can also use the rings of Saturn as roads for space cars. So that would save us more space. Wow, I love how young people are like, yeah, solve the world's problems, no big deal. Exactly, yeah, very ambitious. Very ambitious, no boundaries, no concerns, and I love that. Now moving to Mars, moving to Saturn, moving to other countries, inspiration behind that might have come from your moving.

Aisha 0:02:36

So I know that you moved from Canada to Sweden and recently back to Canada. So can you tell us about that transition and how that's been for you?

Riyam 0:02:46

Yeah, well, I'm going to try to be as open as I can with, you know, while still maintaining my comfort here, you know, because I guess it's big changes. And I know that any person who has experienced something similar, whether it be international student or an immigrant or anyone such as that, you know, know exactly how it feels. However, you know, my story and my journey was a bit different.

It was a different type of hardship because I never really wanted to be there from the start. So I never really felt like I had a place there and Sweden to begin with. And as soon as I moved there from a young age, I was faced with a lot of immediate and a lot of strong opinions about who I am and who people, I guess, want me to be. With, and I didn't even know those ideas existed.

So it was sudden, direct and overwhelming. And the way people express themselves ranged everything from, you know, excluding me in grade one all throughout high school to, you know, every year of my life there, leaving alarming notes in my daycare locker. And even one time in second grade, I think it was, you know, someone pulled off my headscarf in class. So I was faced with a lot of racism there, and I didn't even understand where it was coming from. And I guess you can imagine how 12 years of that was like for me. And of course there are people who go through these things for their entire life. Now I was blessed enough to be able to move back here with my family and I guess it was a fresh start. But you know, growing up, my mom always tried to protect me from internalizing what was happening around me and towards me. So I never really felt like I looked or thought different from anyone else. It was just that everyone treated me that way. So it didn't really make sense to me. So I was very confused for majority of my life there. Now, of course, as I was growing up, my mom and my family would tell me, you know, they would try to make me understand the way of the world, but I didn't really get it. I didn't feel it. I didn't feel that I was different. And at one point, you know, I started trying to constantly like fix myself or quote unquote like be perfect, you know, even though perfection isn't really something you can attain like that. But, but, you know, I guess as a teenager, everything around you is already confusing. So add all of that on top of that.

Riyam 0:05:02

And it's so overwhelming. And, you know, given everything that I went through, life sort of forced me to develop very, very strong forms of resilience, very, you know, internal resilience, and I guess even at my like unimaginably lowest of states, you know, I continue to show up and I continue to do things and, and, and be there. And it's very funny because everyone around me at that time, if you'd ask them now, like how I was, they would be like, yeah, Rion's doing this. She won this award. She discovered this star. She did that. And I never really reflected on how I was feeling inside because the way of the world around me versus inside me was completely different.

Growing up, I was very polarized and like that. And so it was interesting. So I guess moving back to Canada was something I really needed to change my life. I changed everything around me, the people around me, and I was forced to change myself a lot. And within the first two, three months of being here, I turned my life around 180 degrees. So, so yeah.

Aisha 0:06:02

Thank you so much for sharing all of that. And, you know, I love at the beginning that you framed it with, I'm gonna share to connect and support others, but also keeping some of this for yourself because ultimately facing this level and frequency of racism as a young person, that is really, really hard and fits within the trauma sphere.

Riyam 0:06:28

Yeah.

Aisha 0:06:29

So, so thank you.

Riyam 0:06:31

Yeah, I mean, thank you for asking because genuinely, I don't talk about this on my page, like on my social medias, but I do think it's very important for me to share because it did form that sort of resilience inside of me and the fire that I have inside of me. And it does explain a lot of why I do the things I do. And I know we'll get into Space Point later on. So, yeah, I just, but you know, a lot of it is just the side of my story that I don't wanna share because I don't want it to define me and for it to be the focus point of the media when it comes to my story. You know, I have much more to offer than the way people have treated me.

Aisha 0:07:10

Absolutely. Yeah. I agree 100%. And, you know, I've worked with individuals who are folks that have historically faced barriers and historically faced racism, and they're like, I grew up and I didn't see, feel, hear anything.

And I'm like, that is such a blessing. And I'm really I'm happy for your experience in that.

However, why, you know, I think it's important for you to shed light on this is that there are a lot of folks that do face this very young and the frequency happens very regularly. And so the whole point of this podcast is really to connect folks who have similar experiences and then also shed light.

Now, you know, when you shared that story immediately, I'm like, Oh, I can relate. So I grew up in Canada. First off, grew up, born and raised for the first part of my life in Ottawa, Ontario. Very, very, very multicultural. Very also charged with what box do you fit in? And having young kids put boxes around each other in the schoolyard. And I was very naive growing up. And so I would just state some facts like, oh, my dad is Somali, my mom is European. And that was met with different reactions from different kids. And one time I came home, and I told my mom, you know, oh, these kids called me and I, you know, I repeated the Nword and she just, like, the room just fell silent. And there was this like, and I

didn't get it because I didn't know what that word meant. I just was just sharing it like, oh, I ate my lunch and I found a flower. Like it was nothing bad. I know exactly what you mean. Yeah. There, we don't have constructs of this and forced on us very young. And now being a parent, I think back to that because at the time I was so curious and I was like, mom, why are you upset? I'm going to talk to your teachers. I'm like, why? What does it mean? And I was so intrigued. And of course, kids, we want to know what we can't kind of have or see. And it was this very taboo thing. Now, for me, I think framing it and giving some context, even to a young kid when they're facing that kind of thing, because it is so hard and I don't know all, you know, I was a kid, so I don't know all of the different things that she was thinking about or different experiences and things like that. But it's really hard to help your kids through. How did your parents, you know, if you feel like sharing, but hearing you and seeing you go through this in Sweden, how did they support you?

Riyam 0:10:00

Yeah I mean if you asked me this question a few months ago, I would be completely like in the whole bubble of it. And I would not be able to look at it through an outsider perspective. But now I can. I think I have an answer to that, I guess, for, you know, it depended on on my age and where I was in life and how extreme the racism was and the actions that were taken towards me, Regardless of, you know, of age or anything or the situation, my parents were always supportive of me and they were always, you know, trying to talk to the teachers or do this and that. As a kid, I would just let it happen.

Like, I didn't really understand, like, oh, getting a threat in your locker at, you know, in daycare. Like, I didn't understand how big that was and how it didn't make sense to me. But my parents knew that, and they would always, you know, go to the principal, say that, oh, like, Riam can't have her boundaries disrespected like that. But I didn't really understand. And then as I grew up, it sort of changed.

Riyam 0:10:59

The way they supported me sort of changed because it started reflecting on how I wanted to deal with things. So they never like, they never overly protected me in a way that made me uncomfortable because, you know, as I was growing up, other aspects started to become important. Like, oh, you know, my reputation in school, or are these gonna kids make fun of me if they hear that my parents talk to the teachers, those things. So they started, you know, just listening to me if I wanted them to talk to the teachers about it. But then at some point there for a few years, I just stopped telling anyone anything about those things. I didn't understand. I thought they were normal. I really did. Because everyone around me, every kid of my ethnicity and my religion started facing the same thing. So I thought it was normal.

Riyam 0:11:41

And then as I grew up, I was like, oh, wait, that's not normal. Now throughout high school, I would say high school really was the most difficult part of it all. And it's very recent. It was only a few months ago when it ended. So my story in high school is completely different. I'm not sure if I'll ever, ever share it, but you know, my parents were really there for me, and I

was oblivious completely throughout all of high school about what people were doing behind the scenes. And yeah, I mean, I guess for the last year of high school, that is when my parents really were like, you know, like, Rhea, we have to do something about this, because I started noticing it a lot more.

Riyam 0:12:20

I became aware of what was happening, because so many people around me were started telling me and you know We'd have talks with the principals about it and it was it was interesting But I guess either way my parents, you know at first they try to protect me from internalizing everything They didn't want me growing up and approaching everyone and with the same perspective of like, oh, you're not gonna like me Regardless of what I do. They wanted me to have those open doors I guess at least that I feel like I have open doors. And that really changed everything about me. I feel like that is something that, you know, a lot of parents sometimes miss because, you know, you want to protect your child and you want to make them aware. But sometimes it can be like they're like the world is automatically closed for them. Like, there's no way to do anything. And I would go to school and I can be like, no, like, you can do this, you can do this. And they're like, Riyam, what are you on? Like, have you seen us? We can look completely different than them. And I'm like, yeah, but unaware of the effect that it had. So that's really like how I grew up when it comes to that.

Aisha 0:13:28

Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. And you just hit the nail on the head so largely with the idea that when it's over and over and over again, and so ingrained in your reality from such a young age, there's this idea of like, why would I even try? I know they're gonna treat me like this. I know this is going to happen. And when I advocate for DEI, and it's like, Ooh, spooky, scary. I'm like, no, this is just having a separate conversation or a separate support or some sort of acknowledgement. That the reality is a lot of the world, a lot of individuals don't try because the trying before didn't get them anywhere. And there's this idea that like, well, I'd rather preserve what I have. I'd rather be in safety because that's what we're talking about. This is trauma. And so when people just who have never lived in this world say, oh, well, there are scholarships. Why are there more people of color in STEM? And I'm like, you got to go back. You got to listen to these stories. You got to understand this is so complicated and so complex. A scholarship is not going to solve the problem. This is systemic injustice.

Riyam 0:14:47

Yeah. Yeah. And even, even when it comes to the scholarships and the opportunities that we're given, it's a constant, there's always a guilt, I feel like that comes along with it, like, you know, you feel guilty for doing well, I guess, because at some point in your life, you're, you know, really struggling and you feel like you have to show up 100% all the time. And that just adds even more to that systemic injustice because you're constantly working a thousand times harder than everyone else because you feel like you're a bit guilty, like you have to prove yourself, even though you have proved yourself, you know, so it's pretty interesting.

Aisha 0:15:23

Yeah, it is. And the proving yourself, I've talked a lot of times about this with individuals because it's kind of a double-edged sword where because of the bias, you kind of do, it's set up to be better than everyone. If you're going to be the only one in the room or a handful, unfortunately, there is this mentality and then it's reinforced to be better. And then there is this built in guilt of like, I've got to show myself. I've got to prove myself. And I've worked at places where I've had managers be like, wow, this individual is working so like always 150%. And I'm like, let them go to 90. And they'd be like, but why? And I would kind of explain like, okay, you know, during hiring, we talked about that they didn't have exact experience. However, they had a lot of indirect, we're going to support them into this role. And now they're over proving themselves and it's been a year. Are we like, can we acknowledge that this person is going to burn themselves out, but you're going to benefit? And people don't break that down.

Riyam 0:16:32

Yeah. I have, you know, growing up, I would, I would constantly hear my mom talk about this because even though she was always the one with extra 20 years of experience in the workplace, she was always the one to have to show up even more and beyond what anyone else would ask her. And yeah, I mean, it's, I just, I hope to do something differently about that, you know, in regards to my life and, you know, my future children. But, but yeah, it's really, it's really embedded in our system. It's, it's the stories we hear every day. So yeah.

Aisha 0:17:03

And another thing before we move on, a big part of wanting to do this podcast is I connect with individuals like yourself on our stories, on our experience. Doesn't really matter. Like we've got an age difference. I'm an old lady. No, you can go, you know, you live in a bad day at about 21. But it doesn't matter your age difference. It doesn't matter necessarily where in the world you experience this. But we have this connection. And we usually have a conversation. And within these conversations, first off, they're hidden. Okay, these are not public conversations. And they'll come up only once you trust that individual. And if you know, you know. If you're from a minority group or from a group that's historically faced bias, you'll find some other folks and usually very quickly know, is it safe to say like, oh, Amy, avoid Amy, she's going to do X, Y, Z. Oh, this, you know, and kind of share some background knowledge to support one another through this, but also bond. But what I found is that these conversations also help us to, a lot of this is very embedded. It's a lot of, you know, blindsiding and then like, did that really just happen?

Riyam 0:18:24

Yes.

Aisha 0:18:25

Gaslighting ourselves. And it's in our connections, right?

Riyam 0:18:28

Yes. Yes. As you're talking, there are so many flashbacks of those moments coming in my brain.

Aisha 0:18:35

It's just like, yeah, like absolutely.

100%. And it's beautiful that we connect in this way and others kind of don't get it. I almost equate it to people who've gone to space and have the overview effect.

Oh, that's lovely. I love that so much. You know, because I don't get it. I see it and like you can teach me about it and I can kind of like mentally get in that but I don't get it. I'd love to get it but I don't. I guess. Yeah, I guess in our nature we're just otherworldly like that, you know, we're just the aliens, I guess. Yeah, you know, a little bit. And I've seen flyers who have had the overview effect really bond. And sometimes they're even saying like, I love to be with other flyers and I don't even need to explain, they just get it. And I'm like, I get that within this context. But why I bring this up is this podcast is really meant to have some conversations within feeling comfortable, have some conversations so that folks can really hear, hear this community, hear our stories, because we're not gathering data on this.

Riyam 0:19:47

Yeah.

Aisha 0:19:48

I mean, even if we did, would it be defunded? Oh, I don't know. So these realities that we share in our experiences, this is now a qualitative kind of study of what's going on, what we're experiencing, and bringing it to the forefront. So thank you for sharing what you have. I really admire what you're experiencing and bringing it to the forefront. So, thank you for sharing what you have.

Riyam 0:20:06

I really admire what you're creating here because you're not following someone's footsteps, you're creating something. And I just, I love that so much. And I'm really excited to hear about all the other interviews on the podcast and hear their story of it. So, yeah.

Aisha 0:20:22

Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. And you're right. There's no, there's no one doing this, which is exciting, but it's also a little bit like, oh, I hope people listen. They're gonna love it. You know, within this, you shared something. And there was one word that really resonated. And that's resiliency. Yes. So you hung on to that resiliency. And you kept showing up and doing the work. And I think something really, a lot of things probably in your life, beautiful, have shown up because of that. But one is SpacePoint. Can you tell us about that?

Riyam 0:20:55

Yes. So SpacePoint is a platform that, you know, helps promote equality within sciences and

space specifically. So we are a platform that both people who are interested in space feel like they can access it more and be a part of it, as well as, you know, people who are interested in contributing can do that as well, you know, very, very beautifully. So yeah, I mean, it's, it's, you know, SpacePoint really flourished as a result of, of all the hardship and all the, you know, problems that I've had to, had to overcome within the space industry there in Sweden. So I immediately, you know, once I started noticing that, you know, my fellow peers started getting opportunities to them handed on a silver platter while I was still, you know, being asked, you know, what are you doing, Rhea?

Like, what's you doing, Riyam? Like, what's happening? You know, and I'm just like, I've worked with you for years. What do you what are you talking about? And I was I, I have a lot of self-respect, I'd like to say. So you know, having to ask my bosses for awards and recognition really broke something in me. So, you know, I quit after that. And I was like, you know what, I'm going to take it in my own hands. And I'm going to start something where all the inner politics of organizations and everything like that is just, it's just not there. I mean, why do we even have them? Like, it's not, it doesn't have to be there. We can create something so that a lot of other people feel like, you know, they can access SpacePoint. It's not a white man's hobby. It's there for everyone. We're all in space, so duh.

Aisha 0:22:28

Exactly, a platform that you can highlight your ability, your passion, and then have it as a way to support and bring others in. Now, I sometimes am on the internet. I've gotten more and more into social media as a way to discover individuals like yourself. And I came across SpacePoint, I've gotten more and more into social media as a way to discover Individuals like yourself and I came across space point and I was like, oh I'm intrigued. This is yeah This is really I could tell right away There was a lot of effort and a lot of importance put onto it And then I started to look through your profile and I was like, this is someone who I recognize because it's similar to some moves I've made and some moves a lot of people who apply to our citizen astronaut program make, which is I can't necessarily trust I'm going to get that job or I'm going to get even that interview. So I need to stand out in a way that is undeniable.

Riyam 0:23:26

Yeah, thank you. Thank you. Okay, yeah. Mm hmm. Yeah, I mean, Space Point really was born out of like an internal revolution that I had. So I guess, you know, it's, you know, this is maybe me glamorizing it too much, but I really do feel like, you know, I mean, we just started it a few months ago. And so far, it's only been me. And like, you know, I mean, we just started it a few months ago and so far it's only been me. And now, you know, I have this whole team and, you know, I've recruited so many people, so many fantastic people. And I really hope that it continues to be this sort of revolution within the space industry.

We're launching so many exciting opportunities for people. So it takes one, but then it takes a whole team to make it accessible for the entire world. So yeah, thank you.

Aisha 0:24:07

And you know, it might be just a few months old in its infancy, if you will, but you can just tell that it has been made out of passion and that self spark. And it's not just me that is taking note. I mean, last we talked, you had hundreds of volunteers apply. Can you tell us when you gave the call asking, Hey, does anyone feel like supporting as a volunteer? Hundreds of people put their hands up.

Riyam 0:24:35

Yes, it was amazing. I mean, from the start, I kept trying to make people see the vision of Space Point. I mean, I didn't really see a fully formed vision, and that's also something I think a lot of people are scared and hold them back, because if you want to start something, they feel like they have to know everything about everything, but you really don't.

You just have to have that little spark and that little idea to write it down on a notebook, create a vision board, do whatever you want to do, and make it happen. And, you know, at first I was really, you know, struggling with like trying to make SpacePoint stand out and differentiate it from every other platform in the field, you know. But, you know, I guess SpacePoint at its core was, you know, really internal and very special to me.

So it wasn't that difficult to put so much heart and energy into it. And then, you know, I started getting a bunch of messages from people being like, Hey, I'd love to collaborate with you on this or this and that. And I was like, wait, let me let me look into this. So I thought maybe I should, you know, branch out SpacePoint and allow other people to contribute to it. Now, SpacePoint is my baby to, to be like, okay, I'm going to trust other people with this. Right.

Because it's still, you know, forming, it's still, you know, growing. So these are like the early and very important stages of setting your brand and your identity. However, you know, I was, I thought that I had so many ideas and, you know, I don't have all the time on my hands, so I wanted to hire volunteers and I wasn't expecting like these many volunteers, you know, hundreds of volunteers to apply and even, even after the application, like they closed and people were still applying.

Riyam 0:26:14

So it was interesting, but yeah, I've, I looked through hundreds of applications and I filtered out my team and we've been working for the past few days, actually only three, four days now. And what they've done and what they've contributed to SpacePoint already has been, you know, monumental and I'm eternally grateful for that. Oh, that's beautiful. You hit on an important point, which is it doesn't have to be fully baked.

Aisha 0:26:38

And you don't have to know everything. You don't have to be down the degree. You just have to go for it. Now I, when I worked in the corporate world, I worked mainly for startups. That was because startups are very open to, well, first off, they don't have time to read your whole resume. Okay. They're kind of like, oh, you want to show up and do this? Okay. And so it's great if you're doing a career change, it's great if you're having some problems getting

your foot in the door, things like that. There are a lot of downsides.

Okay. Don't get into it a lot, but it's great to get the hands-on experience. And when I worked for startups, it was baffling for the first little bit. Like you guys don't, you haven't, you haven't figured out how to do XYZ or, or that whole like wing, that whole important thing of your business is just kind of like, we'll figure it out. And that like, just trust and, and confidence. I was baffled that that could be done.

Riyam 0:27:38

Yeah. I mean, if I, if it weren't, I don't know, this is probably me being overly optimistic here, but if it weren't for everything that I'd gone through before and the resiliency that I'd built and the confidence I guess in myself and what I can bring to the table, I don't think I would have been able to make it this far with SpacePoint because we have a lot of things that we haven't figured out yet. Now of course I've already set up a structure, like an internal structure for the teams and the communication and, and, you know, how things go, but, you know, there's, there's a whole lot that I don't know. And even while hiring people, I met people with incredible resumes who had like a very niche intersection of, of experience and I was like, okay, I do not know where to put you, I just want to have you on the team, you know? And I was like, I was like, I recognize that your skills are so important for SpacePoint. I just don't know what to do with it yet, but I want to have you on the team, you know? And I was like, yeah, I think I did that for a few people, like two, three people, but it's amazing. And they've, they're taking initiative, they're sending me reports and I'm just like, whoa, whoa, you're so cool, thank you. So yeah, that's amazing.

Aisha 0:28:50

That's really great that you came across that. And you never know how your background kinda plays forward, but I think folks that have faced adversity young are really open to seeing people without context of like, where am I gonna to fit you and put you? And they can recognize this kind of fight and real, like, I'm going to show up, trust me. And you're like, I know. I don't know where you're going to be. I don't know what you're going to necessarily do, but I know it's going to, it's probably going to blow away any expectations that I have.

Riyam 0:29:23

I'd wish I'd had that for me, I guess. So, you know, I recognize that in other people.

Aisha 0:29:29

Yeah, that's beautiful. And you'll pay it forward. That's the thing. You'll continue. And they'll pay it forward. And and this is a beautiful, beautiful cycle. And as we get into positions of power, if we create them ourselves or we are advanced into the workforce in whatever way, we do pay it forward. And that's why I always really advocate for having individuals with diversity who have then reflected upon that diversity and gotten to a place of like some understanding because more often than not, you're just going to be, you're going to be looking at different things. And you might not, you might, but nine times out of 10, I found that people do, and they are giving those chances and they are opening those doors and they

are advocating and they're doing it hard. So one thing I really liked about what you're doing, and it's something that I similarly do with volunteers is I say, okay, X amount of months and then it's a paid position if we both agree. Yes.

Because I don't want to be, we need opportunities, but we don't want to be in this volunteer trap and so I really like that. Can you tell us a little bit of your thought process behind setting it up that way?

Riyam 0:30:41

Yeah, I mean, I guess the main point why I wanted to have a few months of them being volunteers is just because, you know, it's the first time me hiring people and first time people ever work for SpacePoint. So I wanted to test it out without any, like, you know, strings attached, basically. But yeah, I think it's important to have a bit of a volunteer rotation. Some positions in SpacePoint will continue to be volunteer positions because I want to continue giving other people their chances and opportunities as well. We don't have infinite opportunities to volunteer. But some people, of course, some positions will be offered as a pay position as well. So yeah, I mean, it's I guess just finding the balance between having a solid and very strong internal community within SpacePoint that we work within, as well as, you know, having new fresh voices, opportunities that we give and that we also give ourselves. Because when you give someone an opportunity, you get, you know, you get the benefit of their experience. So I want to keep having that as well within SpacePoint. So yeah.

Aisha 0:31:45

I love it, I love it. And for myself, what I, you know, what we've talked about is really this opportunity. Opportunities are so rare and folks will work for a very long time in volunteer positions. So I don't like to see that. I like to see it monetized after a while. But I also like this, as you said, no strings attached, because I found people who are like, they can't get the internships, you know, or the volunteer experience, and then they go down the track of the degree. And they're like, but this isn't for me. And I think, well, wouldn't it have been great if you had this three month internship and you're like, actually, let me go down this other road. And that's what it's denying folks as well as this no, no strings attached ability to try something on, see if it fits, because that's a lot of years of dedication without having actually done something to go all in.

Riyam 0:32:39

And a beautiful thing about SpacePoint, I mean, what we offer for our volunteers, so many other resources and opportunities. We recognize that, you know, as volunteers, this isn't something you'll be doing for the rest of your life. And we hope it isn't, because we hope that there's something bigger for you out there. Now, if SpacePoint would have a headquarters and we'd have, you know, like, if it would be something more legitimate in the future, to have you there, of course. But, you know, for now, we recognize that there is much more to life than contributing to SpacePoint. And so we do offer a lot of resources.

For example, my assistant, she's amazing, and she has affiliations with the European Space

Agency. And so she has created this whole channel for SpacePoint where our volunteers can, you know, discover new opportunities. And also through SpacePoint's own partnerships and collaborations, we offer you know benefits and goods for our volunteers.

So you know it's just that extra addition, extra you know cherry on top when it comes to that and you know a lot of people like to try out new things. So SpacePoint isn't only for the scientists, it's for the designers, for the writers, for the you know developers, for the contributors of any sorts, lawyers even, financial advisors, you know, we have it all. So either way, we love to welcome anyone. And if this is a turning point in your life, we're glad to be a part of it.

Aisha 0:33:57

Something else I really liked when I stumbled across SpacePoint is that it is an open source publication, totally free for individuals as well to submit work. And that's not the norm. There's a lot of pay to play in the industry right now.

Riyam 0:34:14

Yes. So regarding that, I think that that is an extremely important part of SpacePoint, you know, at our core, we are something that is trying to change the way the system works, I guess, or not really change it, but add like a, like an outlet, you know, somewhere, you know, people can go to. So, so yeah, I mean, we are a platform both for the people who want to learn about space for free, a lot of our resources are for free. That is, you know, our goal. And also, if you want to contribute, you can do that for free as well. You know, we'll be opening up an ambassador program where everyone around the world with unlimited opportunities can contribute to SpacePoint and can help expand SpacePoint. We have also hopefully a designated section on our issues where people can publish their work. And now it's not peer reviewed, but we have a whole team of researchers, you know, consisting of PhD candidates, master's graduates.

So we have real scientists on our team, real cool people who are reading and checking your work when it is published for SpacePoint. So I think that's an amazing feature that we have.

Aisha 0:35:24

Mm-hmm. Yeah, and there's a time and a place for the peer review journals.

Riyam 0:35:27

Of course. We love them. Sometimes you just wanna get your voice out there. Sometimes you just wanna be heard and that is all that matters.

Aisha 0:35:34

Exactly, and also as you're coming to the idea of a thesis, sometimes it is in this flooring and writing and a little bit of not the intensity of academia that I think a lot of aha moments are gonna come about. So that's why I really like what you're giving to the people. Thank you. So I know that research is a really big part of your academic career so far. Let's dig into that and if you could tell us your main research interests.

Riyam 0:36:06

Yeah, I mean, research has been a huge part of my journey. So my research journey began back in high school. It's mandatory for us Swedish high school students to write a research project and conduct a research project in order to graduate high school. So yeah, I had affiliations within the space industry there in Sweden, because, you know, I worked there for years. And I came across this amazing opportunity of virtual observations that you can do, you know, from your computer, you connect it to a telescope down in southern Sweden, and you get to get to explore the stars in the universe. And, you know, I was collaborating with my friend friend and, you know, who was also my classmate at the time. And she and we started this project as a way to sort of detect like exoplanets through transit observations. It did end up with us discovering and characterizing a distant and rare star. So that took a turn, which was amazing, but also very, very stressful. You know, when we weren't getting the data, we were looking after it, we were like, what is happening? You know, we were crashing out every two seconds. So it was interesting. And the whole rollercoaster of that, you know, and seeing how amazing it turned out at the end. And we weren't even ready for that.

Riyam 0:37:20

You know, we weren't equipped, we weren't like educated enough for that, but you know, we learned as we went. And that is like really what started my love for research. Now I do, you know, research for, you know, space medicine. So I, you know, do research on how space flight affects brain energy metabolism. And I think that is extremely interesting. So when I first came to Canada, I was like, I'm a bit bored. I wanna do something. So I kind of started this whole research project and yeah, I mean, it's been going slow, but it's all right because I have school and I have other things. And also, I guess, research, what people sort of think that it is, it's just like new discoveries every day. But trust me, sometimes you go weeks and months still being stuck on the same protocol that you cannot understand how to work through. So, so, yeah, I mean, that is the reality of it. But it's amazing because all of a sudden at the end, it just sort of like poofs into place and it becomes something you never even thought of, you know? So, yeah.

Aisha 0:38:16

Beautiful. And going back to resiliency, you have to be resilient if you're going to be a researcher.

Riyam 0:38:21

Absolutely. Yeah, there is, there is one thing I always sort of say or mention to people when it comes to research. Now I know I'm only 19 years old. I'm a first year undergraduate student. So I'm not like the most experienced person when it comes to academia. I just got out of high school, but I will say that something that I've noticed when it comes to research and my research experiences is definitely that, you know, research is at its core, like learn as you go, sort of route. I mean, you can be as prepared as you wanna be prepared. You know, you can read all the articles, do all the preparation, but you're contributing

something entirely new. I mean, unless you're copying someone else's work, you're creating something of your own. And you never know how that can work out. So either way, you have to be very resilient, I guess is the word, as well as, you know, land on your feet. That is that is what I always say.

You have to land on your feet. Your whole research can can, you know, go in the trash like in the next 24 hours. have to be willing to contribute and do something about it because you have to land on your feet because you're sort of navigating your way through science and the hypothesis and the theories. And, you know, sometimes it doesn't always reflect on reality as well as it does on paper. So you have to be willing to give it your all despite it knowing that, you know, it can it can all, you know, just disappear in the next few days, I guess.

Aisha 0:39:42

Really good advice for new researchers. And you know, framing it around, I'm only 19, like no, because so much of academia and the work world is quite ageist and saying you've got to reach a certain threshold of years to know where we can have individuals who've learned lessons very young in life and able to articulate it and able to reflect and able to to guide individuals. And so yeah, I think that 19 that's a that's a fun fact. Do you know what I'm saying? But I think I think your knowledge surrounding these areas speaks for itself. And and also I I really want to advocate for it doesn't matter what age, young or middle, old. If you've got something, if you've got a gem, you've got to come and share it with us.

Riyam 0:40:35

Yeah, no, absolutely. I mean, this is something I've dealt also with, you know, ageism, because, you know, I started out very young, you know, at only 14, 15 within the space industry. So I would go to conferences and I thought that like it was the normal age there. And they, and you know, I'd walk around and they'd read my label, you know, and you have like your name tag and your label and everything. And they'd be like, student. And I was like, yeah. And they were like, oh, so which in high school, like I'm in grade eight, you know, and they're like, what do you mean? I was like, I was like, what? Isn't it normal? They're like, no, what are you talking about? You know, everyone here is like an experienced professional or, you know, like a few students from university who are just about to graduate. And I was there, like before even high school. So, yeah, it was interesting. And I guess a lot of those, you know, experiences that I had early on helped me be a few steps ahead, I guess, without, you know, intending to do so. I was just, you know, going my own route, doing my own thing. But yeah, I mean, still to this day, I get a lot of people asking me, like, how are you doing research, you know, at such a young age, you know, at like a research university, you know, top 10 research university in the world. And I'm just like, yeah, I mean, I guess I sort of broke the barrier and broke the definition of research and age and experience and all those things. So yeah, it's pretty amazing.

Aisha 0:41:53

Yeah, and we need diversity of thought. And let's not, I think, you know, industry, let's not really have some PhD people tell us what diversity of thought is. Let's just have a lot of

people from a lot of different backgrounds and experiences including age, right? Be there to support because I think that there is something so so special also about about being young. I think that I remember when I was taking my degree in international development studies, a professor once said, if you're gonna do something, do it while you're young, because studies have shown that you're more likely to actually be activated and do the work. Where the older you get, you have a lot of excuses. Maybe it's evidence, evidence-based of being like, okay, I've gotta do X, Y, Z, adult thing that takes a lot of time. But advocacy is something that is really the youth, they show up and they're so wholehearted with that. And so I think that there is something beautiful about being involved, about having the ability to support in these larger disciplines at a young age.

Riyam 0:43:03

I completely agree. I mean, it's truly, you know, I've worked in a lot of organizations where we also do like mentoring, mentorship programs as well. And I just I love to see when when, you know, a lot of the fields within space, you know, the space industry may be not available or accessible as like real education, you know, like university based courses. So, you know, when you have that sort of like mentorship programs that are available here and there, you create opportunities and you create a future generation where they could actually implement those things. So, yeah, I mean, it's the bond between the older generations who are, you know, helping us through their experiences and creating a curriculum for us, I guess, and the younger generation who are so willing to dive in and jump in, you know, even though there isn't a clear, you know, maybe like path in the industry for it, but, you know, they're willing to be the ones who create that path.

Aisha 0:43:57

Exactly. Oh, well, it's been wonderful talking to you today, Riyam. Thank you so much for sharing, for telling us about what you're doing at Space Point and the inspiration behind everything that you're doing.

Riyam 0:44:10

Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. And yeah, I mean, I'm very, very fortunate to be here and to talk about everything because there is a time where I wish someone had told me this story, I guess. So I hope that, you know, somewhere out there as a young kid or or maybe someone in their 50s, 60s, who are still navigating through the industry and can take some sort of inspiration from what I said. Yeah.

Aisha 0:44:34

I can guarantee there will be people that resonate with your story. And I'm so excited to be supporting, creating community in this. So thank you.

0:44:44

Absolutely. Thank you so much.

Aisha 0:44:51

Thank you for listening to the Universal Inclusion podcast. If you're interested in learning more about how to get involved in the space industry, follow us on Instagram and TikTok at universal underscore inclusion. Our passion is amplifying voices in Seam, STEM and the space industry. If you'd like to be a guest, shoot us a DM. And until next time, Ad Astra. And until next time, Ad Astra.