

Trudy Smith: Hello and welcome to today's NextSense Institute podcast. My name is Trudy Smith and I'm the manager of Continuing Professional Education at NextSense Institute and your host for today. We're continuing our conversation on lived experience with disability and the possibilities of what happens after school and I'm so delighted to have Jeremy Kwok with us today. Jeremy, could you please introduce yourself to the audience?

Jeremy Kwok: Hi Trudy and thanks so much for having me on the show and good morning, everyone. My name's Jeremy. I'm a tax professional, so I've worked in tax for nearly five years now. I worked in the Big Four. Lately I recently moved to the Tax Institute where I advocate for change for Australian tax, lots of work for our members and all Australians. So it's lovely to be here this morning.

Trudy Smith: We're so delighted to have you with us and who knew that somebody's dream could be working for the tax office? It's so interesting. When you were in high school, Jeremy, when people said, "What do you want to do when you finish school?" Did you have a plan or a dream? What did you tell people?

Jeremy Kwok: Absolutely. Well, tax was definitely not a thing that I told people back then. I had a range of different things that I was interested in growing up. I might've told people I wanted to be a writer. Over time that became a programmer, even a lawyer. So that's evolved over time and it sort of changed with what I was interested in, what I saw other people doing that I thought was really cool. So I changed between this and that, and you can see that some of it is there today, some of it not so much, but it's been a journey where I sort of discover what I'm good at and what I enjoy doing and what I'm passionate about.

Trudy Smith: Sure. Did you ever feel like there were any barriers to what you wanted to do? What were those experiences and how did you overcome them?

Jeremy Kwok: Yeah, so I think high school, especially, the first barrier was just getting marks and doing well at school. Unfortunately, the way that our world works is, it's made for someone with a hundred percent vision and a hundred percent hearing. So that means when you lack those facilities, it does mean that sometimes you try really, really hard, but you know, marks don't turn out the right way and that can really hurt your self esteem and you feel like, 'I can't really get to where I want to go to.' And so often I'll have to find other ways of doing things, but often that turns into my strengths.

So, for example, one of the things that apparently people really didn't like about me is how I can talk and analyze things on the fly. And that's because I really had to learn to develop a really good memory. So I'd be able to pick things up really quickly. And I didn't realize that I was good at that until I was playing chess with someone in high school, and they were a special education teacher. And they realized I was hardly looking at the chess board, that I sort of

knew where everything was, but I wasn't really looking at it. And he explained to me that it's probably because I remembered where everything was because my eye sight's so poor, that I'd have to work off memory. So I'm just moving it for his sake, but it's all in my mind. And I said, "Was that not normal?" He said, "That's not normal at all."

So I sort of realized that I can hone and work on this ability of mine to turn it into a strength that employers and other people would want to see, which plays into my advantage in uni and the rest of life.

Trudy Smith: Absolutely. It sounds like a real superpower. What opportunities did school and university provide to help you achieve those goals? Obviously you had a teacher who could recognize that that was a real skill that you had. Were there other opportunities that were provided to you to help you progress?

Jeremy Kwok: Absolutely. So I had a teacher come every week from, at the time, the Royal Institute, now, NextSense Institute. They came in just to teach me the skills, not just navigating the classroom and learning, but also having kind of conversations with my teachers saying, "Hey, this isn't working. I can't see what's going on. Can you please explain in a different way, use more words rather than gestures and pointing?" And giving me the confidence to advocate for myself. Cause I think that's a really important skill. When you get to the workforce employers, they don't know when you need. They actually are ready and willing to support you to do your best and deliver really good work when you need to have that mind and courage to speak about what you need and not be ashamed to ask for it. And also the new schools and universities are so willing to accommodate me, to give me the best education possible. So being able to have those conversations is really important.

Trudy Smith: Absolutely. I mean, I think that that ability to speak up and, and I really love that point that you just made about employers do want to help, they just don't know how to. And by speaking up and knowing exactly how to articulate what your needs are. I really think that makes you a more attractive employee too, because you can speak up. And I think that plays really nicely into your role now. So can you tell us a little bit about what you're doing now and the support that you're receiving to help you with that role?

Jeremy Kwok: Yeah, absolutely. I think I did not share, they call me a tax content creator. So basically, I have to keep up to date with all the new developments of the tax world, whether they're in Australia or overseas, all the budget measures and think long and hard about "do these things really benefit our society? How can we design it in a way to really benefit tax professionals and the tax community so it really works seamlessly?" And I also write blogs and help contribute to podcasts as well, just to make sure that members and professionals, they really know what's going on about the tax profession. And let me tell you that this is sort of the role I've always wanted to do. I love writing and sharing ideas with

people and I couldn't find quite the right role for that until now. So honestly, it's been a work in progress over many years.

Trudy Smith: It's wonderful that you found the job of your dreams. Is it particular access, support mechanisms or, or technology that you're using to support that journey?

Jeremy Kwok: Yeah, absolutely. And they sound the moment I use some magnifiers and the screen readers just to make the screen more accessible to me. Because of my eyesight, even though I can read it's really tiring on the eyes. So I prefer using a screen reader just to read things that are on the screen. And given that I've read a lot of legislation and case law, these can be pages and pages long. It's a lot more productive for the computer to read it out to me.

On top of that, actually funny, my colleagues didn't realize that I have a vision impairment until I told them. It was because I haven't met them because of the Covid situation. So all that they knew, I was just your average employee until I actually raised it with them, which I think is actually really awesome, because I think often as someone with disability, you can assume that everyone's going to pick on me or not want to hire me. But really, it's not an issue for the employers, if we can demonstrate, ensure them that you can do the job, you have what it takes. And you bring that secret sauce that is uniquely you, that's all they really want.

Trudy Smith: Absolutely. I love that, Jeremy, the secret sauce. I'm carrying that into the rest of my day. I love it. Jeremy, I'm really curious about when you talk about how great your memory is and then you do a lot of you're reading through screen readers. Does that affect how well you can remember information, whether you are either reading it with your eyes or whether you're hearing it, does that affect your ability to remember?

Jeremy Kwok: Yeah, so I think it came out of necessity. So I think I realized when I think back where it might have come from. Actually playing a few instruments, I play piano, drums, guitar, and bass. And reading music is really difficult just because it's really small. And even if you make it large, having to play and read it at the same time is just not feasible. So for me, I had to memorize pieces from beginning to end, so I could play like an eight page piece from memory. And that just took a lot of time learning. But that's the only way I could get through. That's the only way I could play music, but having learned that skill, I could then subconsciously apply it to everything else. For example, in law, a lot of our exams are open book and there's no way I can go through and flip through all the material to find what I'm looking for and then turn into an answer. It's not possible.

So often I just have to memorize. I just learn anything when learning really well to the point where I'm been doing an open book exam hardly looking at the

book because that's what I had to do to get through it. And I think for me, it's my memory, but I'm sure everyone out there with a visual impairment, they've got some way of doing things that they probably think I'm just dealing with life. But it's absolutely unique to them and it's innovative and they don't realize that it's a secret talent or skill, that secret sauce that they've got. And it's really tapping into that and realizing I can do this and using that to contribute to the world around them. I think that's really where I starts.

Trudy Smith: Absolutely. Well, my final question was going to be, what advice would you give to a student who's blind or low vision considering a profession like yours? And I think you've told us it's that find your secret sauce. Find the thing that you're great at. And, or do you have additional advice that you would give?

Jeremy Kwok: Absolutely, I would answer that by saying that I think when we grow up and we often feel like we need to be normal, but I think a lot of it is flipping the script and going, "what do I uniquely bring to the table that's different from everyone else?" Let me give you an analogy. If I dropped you right into a room with 99 other people, your gut is to go, "man, I'm so different," and feel like that difference is a bad thing. You might go, "how am I similar to the 99? How can I blend in?" Whereas you miss workforce in this world that we live in, it's all about the value in the skills that you bring to the table. What can you, as that special hundredth person share to the 99 that can really benefit them and bring a smile to their face? What can you really deliver? And I think that's really what it is.

The dialogue shouldn't be about what you are able, what you're restricted to doing. But what do you bring to the table that you've developed over your experience as someone with disability over the years, because you have that experience and the fact that you are trying, that already shows a depth and strength of character that a lot of other people wouldn't experience.

Trudy Smith: I love that. Jeremy, this has been such an interesting conversation and I think that is such great advice, but for all teenagers, not just students with disabilities, but all teenagers and you know, what is it that you bring? And thank you so much for highlighting that for us today. I really enjoyed this conversation. Thanks so much for being with us.

Jeremy Kwok: Thanks so much for having me, Trudy.