

Universal Inclusion Podcast - Transcript

Episode 07: AJ

Aisha 0:00:00

Hello and welcome to the Space for Humanity sponsored Universal Inclusion podcast. In this initial series, we're amplifying voices of diversity in the space industry, listening to the many paths there are to take and learning lessons of how to overcome both professional and personal barriers. Hi, I'm your host Aisha, and I'm the founder and CEO of Universal Inclusion, as well as the director of programs at Space for Humanity. This week, we sit down with AJ Link. We talk about all kinds of ethical and legal issues related to spaceflight, and we even question if we should be going up at all. AJ holds a Juris Doctor from the George Washington University Law School and a Master of Law in Space Law from the University of Mississippi. He was the inaugural director of the Center for Air and Space Law Task Force on DEI and is an adjunct professor of space law at Howard University School of Law. AJ is notably the Human Rights and Policy Lead for the Palestine Space Institute, which he helped co-found, and is a founding president of the National Disabled Law Students Association. AJ is openly autistic and actively involved in local, national, and international social justice movements. He serves on several advisory boards and steering committees that focus on building a better future. Welcome to the podcast AJ. Thank you so much for having me. So tell us what initially got you interested in the space industry.

AJ 0:01:34

So I've always been interested in space growing up looking at the stars being into Star Wars, Star Trek, all the space-themed things. And I actually wanted to be an astrophysicist, but I wasn't great at Chem II in college, so I couldn't be an astrophysicist. And then I went to law school, which is very different, and I found space law. And I was like, well, this is a really cool way to still be part of the space industry and the space community even though I didn't get to do what I originally planned. So finding space law was amazing because I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do as I was nearing the end of law school and I was lucky enough that I found the space law community and I was able to build a career from there, but I've always loved space always been interested in space always been in awe of the infinite vast cosmos Some things like that Excellent.

Aisha

So a lover from an early age

AJ 0:02:42

Yeah, I was really fortunate to grow up in a place that didn't have a ton of light pollution, so I could still see the stars at night, which was really cool. I don't get to do that much anymore now living in a city with lots of light pollution. But yeah, if anyone can go out to a dark sky park or something like that and really look up at the sky, I think it's one of the most amazing things you can look at.

Aisha

Oh, absolutely. Something that really has changed for me moving to Egypt is the light pollution is so low. And I've really lived well in cities a lot of my adult life. And so it kind of like hit me that all of a sudden I could see so much more and it just became so much more, I think, interesting for me to just be able to at any time look up and see the cosmos.

AJ 0:03:31

Yeah, I'm so jealous. I live in Washington, DC and there are lights everywhere. There are a few dark sky parks a couple hours away. But yeah, I would love to plan a trip to like somewhere out in the desert or like the Grand Canyon where there's almost zero light pollution and just be able to look up and yeah, all those cool pictures you see of the center of the Milky Way. I want to be able to see that one day.

Aisha 0:03:59

Yeah, that sounds like fun. So one thing I noticed when I was researching for our episode and digging into your background, I noticed that you are extremely involved and extremely busy on a lot of different projects. Most recently, you've signed up to be part of the Inclusion Council at Space for Humanity, linked to one of our projects doing an audit on accessibility and inclusion in the Citizen Astronaut Program, as well as the organization as a whole. So what drives you to be so active in the industry?

AJ 0:04:35

I think for me, for a long time, the space industry wasn't very reflective of who I was as a person, both the values that I carry but also the identities that I carry and obviously those two things are intermingled. And I think it's really important to make sure that the space industry but you know also just like life in general is reflective of the things that I care about. And I have a lot of trouble saying no to things. It's one of my flaws. But I figure if I have the time and capacity to try to shape the world to be better and more inclusive and more accepting and accessible. Like, why not do it? Right. Why not try to make a better world, better future? One of the phrases that I think about a lot is society becomes great when

people plant trees whose shade they'll never see. And just thinking about creating that foundation and that fertile soil for people who are way more brilliant than me, way more talented than me to be able to build a better world. And I think, you know, the small thing I can do is start to build that foundation, that platform for better people.

Aisha 0:05:58

Wow, that's beautiful. And so important because we're just at the beginning of the space industry taking shape. One thing I noticed, the through line with all of the work you're doing, a big part of it is about accessibility and inclusion. Can you tell us a little bit about the barriers that you saw in industry along the way?

AJ 0:06:18

Yeah, I think just because of both my educational background, but also my advocacy background, I have really been focused on, you know, come up focused on disability inclusion, which for me turns into this concept of access and accessibility. But as I've grown and learned more and done more, I've come to realize that access is so much more. And that, to your point, there are so many different types of barriers, whether they be physical or metaphorical or social or what have you, that keep people out of industries, keep people out of physical spaces, keep people out of environments where they potentially wanna be. And so for me, the through line is always trying to make sure that whoever wants to be included in a space has access to that space with as few barriers as possible, hopefully no barriers. And I think, you know, when I talk about that, I always say, you know, because you make a space accessible doesn't mean people will come or will want to be there. And that's okay. We don't want to force people to be in places they don't want to be, but we really want to focus on who is not having access to a space that wants to be there and what are the obstacles that are preventing them from accessing that? And what can we do to break those barriers down so that we can have a diversity of people, diversity of ideas, a diversity of thought, a diversity of experiences that are really reflective of humanity because humanity has so many different experiences, perspectives, and things like that. And we want to be able to include those when we're making decisions that will impact the future of humanity, like when we're working in space.

Aisha 0:08:03

Exactly. When I was working in the corporate world doing DEI, I always made it a point to share with leaders in companies that the importance of laying the groundwork, having inclusion inherently in an organization, accessibility already baked and built in and not waiting until someone shows up. Because that does not feel good. That is the absolute opposite. And I think that you know a lot of places are hesitant to do inclusion because they're like, well we don't really need it right now. And you know taking people through the

theoretical, okay let's say XYZ person needs XYZ accessibility, you know, how long would it even take you to be able to do that for them and how would that feel for that professional? How would that play out? And so I always advocate that the work has to be done way before it's even necessarily needed.

AJ 0:09:03

Yeah, I think that's the difference between being accessible and creating an accessible environment that's truly focused on accessibility as a practice, rather than adjustments or accommodations. There are different words in different places where you have to specifically tailor something to an individual which can make them feel elevated, isolated, exposed, different. So thinking about how you can create a space where people are comfortable enough to be themselves without having to, quote unquote, be the one or be exceptional or something like that. I think about, you know, how this conversation can translate to previous work environments where maybe there was only one type of bathroom instead of different types of bathrooms for different types of folks who need different types of things or no nursing area for new parents, right? And how a lot of places have started to build those things in and it makes the experience better for everyone. They don't have to go and ask or to your point they don't have to say why isn't this there and wait for however long it takes to build the necessary infrastructure, create that environment. It's just there for them to use and to feel like they belong in the space and I think you know belonging is one of the buzzwords that's kind of around the industry and, and spaces like that. But you truly want people to feel like they belong and they're accepted and they can bring their whole selves into the space. And I think that's something that, you know, I want to try to work on as best I can in wherever place I am.

Aisha 0:10:38

Mm hmm. Exactly. So let's dig into space law a little bit. I'm really curious to learn more surrounding it. Okay, let's do a hypothetical. Let's say a space company does something unethical off-planet, let's say related to mining, how would they be held accountable?

AJ 0:10:55

The realistic answer is they probably wouldn't be held accountable. Space law is based in international law. As anyone who is familiar with international law knows, sometimes enforcement doesn't do a good job of enforcing the law. Sometimes people do things they aren't supposed to do. Sometimes people violate the law and they aren't held accountable. Ideally, if a space company was in violation of space law, whatever country they launched from or were registered to would take responsibility for those actions and address it, whether that is through the international courts, whether that is through political, I don't want to say retribution, but restoration, political restoration or financial restoration or

something like that. Ideally it is the launching state or the registered state that has taken responsibility for the actions of private states companies. But if that state doesn't want to or doesn't want to enforce international law, there isn't a lot of recourse right now. And I think that's not just a problem in space law, but like I said in international law in general where you see people are able to violate the law and not necessarily be held accountable.

Aisha 0:12:10

I think as we venture off into space and things really bulk up, it's so important to take lessons from Earth. And something, a major theme, what has been historically companies burying or getting rid of maybe evidence surrounding incidents. It seems to me like it would be so easy if there wasn't a body to be monitoring a third party in space monitoring companies. Is there talk of creating something like that or is it in its infancy?

AJ 0:12:48

No, so there's currently the United Nations and there's the Office of Outer Space Affairs at the United Nations and there's the United Nations Committee on Peaceful Uses of Outer Space which is kind of the international body where states and other key stakeholders come together and discuss key issues and things like that. But that is not necessarily a watchdog type of organization. That's not necessarily an organization that has the teeth to enforce any rules or laws. There's no, again, There's no true enforcement mechanism. As far as conversation about creating something like that, I don't think that that is where the international community is right now. You're seeing a lot of partnerships like the Artemis Accords or the Russo-Chinese lunar base, and you're seeing these different, I guess, amalgamation of states who are crafting space practices and how they want space to be, but they aren't necessarily talking about independent or outside or third-party watchdog organizations that are going to make sure that these things are enforced. They're very much saying that we will enforce these things ourselves. We will decide what is a violation of the law and what isn't. And if you are one of our allies and you agree with us, then things are okay. And if you're not one of our allies and you disagree, well, there's no real enforcement mechanism.

Aisha 0:14:23

So it seems to me that the work is needed in two camps, in coming up with universal law that everyone agrees on, a way to enforce it, and then possibly, you know, a third party monitoring. Now, if those things aren't in place and companies are saying, oh, don't worry, trust us, we're gonna do great. We'll self monitor. But historically we know self monitoring, not the best. But if we don't have that, and if even we don't have everyone at the table, even just to decide on the laws, to decide on what we're going to be doing off planet, where are

the limits? Where are, you know, what is no go? What is considered ethical, unethical without a clear consensus globally, you know should we even be venturing off planet?

AJ 0:15:22

I think that that's a really interesting and poignant question and a question that more people should be asking. For me and my experience in the space industry in the space community, it's taken as a given that humanity should explore space, should go to the moon, should go to Mars, should find asteroids to mine. It's all taken as yes yes, we should do it, yes, it's within our right. But very rarely are you hearing folks ask, well, should we actually be going? Is it right? Is it ethical? What are we doing in terms of creating systemic imbalances, financial imbalances? The people who have the technological capability and the financial capability to do these things, because they are very expensive, they are very technologically sophisticated, are the people who have historically benefited from the exploitation of the people who don't have the resources to go to space right now. Is it ethical to continue that pattern? I don't think it is. And I think it's really important that we ask ourselves, should we even go at all?

Aisha 0:16:29

Exactly. You know, I think humans, we have this itch to explore and to push, push ourselves to our limits. But again, looking at when we've done this in the past, there's ripple effects and ramifications for a lot of folks outside of those holding the power. And so I really, I really firmly believe that, you know, Earthlings, we can decide together. I know it's, it's hard for us to decide on a lot of things. But you know, I would rather us be deciding together, be thinking about different hypotheticals and what that means and what the consequences would be rather than catching up after the fact, maybe years later.

AJ 0:17:26

I think the incentives for why we go to space are mostly financial. A lot of people may couch it in the exploration you talked about, this urge and drive to go explore and find new things. But the huge motivator right now is financial, and people can say that my motivation is good in terms of driving new technology and innovations and seeing people create all these wonderful new things. But I think financial incentive comes at a cost. I think that we've seen historically that when money, commerce, finances is the main driver and motivator, especially when it comes to exploration, that often leads to exploitation. Exploitation of people, exploitation of the land and natural resources. resources, and I don't think that the economic incentives and motivators for going to space will lead to ethical outcomes, at least as they're currently constituted. I think about resource sharing, technology sharing, and benefit sharing, and historically and currently we see that those things aren't always distributed equitably or even equally. So there's real concern there.

Aisha 0:18:51

Exactly. And the space industry, when I found out that it was poised to become a trillion dollar industry and you have only a few players in the game, that's when the alarm bells went off for me in terms of, okay, where are we as a global community in decisions related to this? Because I have a sneaky suspicion that if someone goes off, let's say does some mining, collects some resources, brings it back, I don't think it's going to be a, okay everyone, let's do some direct deposit. Everyone's getting a cut. I just truly, you know, I don't think that's how it's going to play out. And so, you know, I think there's a lot of conversations about equity, about resources that are universal and how as a universal community we want to be approaching all of this.

AJ 0:19:49

Yeah, and I think you've seen attempts to do this if you look at the Moon Agreement which is one of the five main space law treaties. There aren't a lot of countries that have signed on to it and enacted it. But it talks about benefit sharing and resource sharing and this different perspective of what it means to be truly global in terms of how humanity is going into space. But to your point, that's not really how it turns out in practice. That's not what's going to happen. We aren't going to find some magic substance or material or mineral or whatever and equally share that throughout the world. A lot of people like to talk about the shared benefits of space exploration historically and how we have things like cell phones and GPS or satellite positioning or satellite communications, satellite TV, whatever, satellite radio, all these different things, right? But while some of those benefits may be shared globally, the financial impact of those technologies is really centered in just a few places. There are very few places that are benefiting financially from all this technology. And so it's hard for me to believe that that will change magically without us actively saying that we need to have different priorities, different incentives, different infrastructure in place to protect people and make sure that we are equitably distributing these resources and benefits.

Aisha 0:21:23

Exactly. It trickles down, but it is a very slow trickle to underdeveloped parts of the world. I'm in Egypt, and before our interview, I raced to the store to top up my internet, okay? Now, I pay more in internet to be able to have these calls, to connect to all the work that I'm doing. But I pay sometimes so much in internet that you could actually rent an apartment for the equivalent of what I spend on internet in a month. So that is so unfair. The average person cannot access the internet. It is just so far from being globally benefiting everyone. So I really think if we're not able to really share now, I don't know, but you know, let's be optimistic, AJ, okay? Let's say that things shake out. We have a lot of people internationally bringing in smaller players to the table in a perfect world. Okay, what is your vision for the future of space?

AJ 0:22:37

This is a hard question because I think I'm at the point now where I feel it's irresponsible for me and my generation to make decisions about where we should go in space only because we have failed and we continue to fail. I think if you look at the world right now and the direction a lot of places are deciding to go in terms of how they're treating people in their countries and their territories, immigrants to their countries and their territories. It's not great. The trend is not great. I don't think that humanity as a whole is currently equipped to make these decisions.

There's this idea of intergenerational equity, and it's different things in different cultures. But the idea is you make a decision with three or four generations down the line in mind. And as I think about that, again, I don't think that we are currently equipped to make those decisions. We have created a world that is capable of sending humanity into space and not having negative repercussions of that, whether that is a long-term presence in space, whether that is extended commerce with celestial bodies, and the expansion of capitalism beyond just Earth, which sounds frightening and terrifying based on how we've treated our environment and our natural resources. So I guess being too into my work and the things that I've read and researched, I don't think we should be making that decision at all. So I don't know if I have a grand, beautiful vision about what humanity should do in space because I don't view humanity as mature enough to go into space, at least at this moment.

Aisha 0:24:33

The motto for Space for Humanity is to space for Earth. And a lot of organizations are looking at, okay, if we're going to be doing something in space, let's make sure we're doing it on Earth first. So if we're doing sustainable practice off planet, are we doing it on planet? If we are, you know, promoting complete, completely ethical practice off planet, are we doing it on planet? And I agree with you. I think that we have a long, long road to be able to have a firm basis and understanding of how we can be at our best on planet to then mimic and replicate and maybe go even further off planet. But it feels irresponsible to me to just say, oh, we'll do better off planet because it's a very, well, very isolating place. And, you know, I just worry that it'll play out very similarly to how things have played out with exploration here on Earth. And there'll be a lot of folks who might not have a voice who will be exposed to things that we're not even sure of what that will be.

AJ 0:25:55

Yeah, that's actually something that I used to think and truly believe is that space allows us the opportunity to create new systems, new ways to be human that are better than the ones that we currently have. And to your point, we can take those values, those ideas, and bring them to Earth. But it's gotten to the point where I don't necessarily think that's true. I think a

lot of the major decision-makers and people with influence and power in the space industry are trying to replicate the current systems, or even worse, remove some of the guardrails, saying space is an opportunity where we don't have to necessarily care about human rights, where we don't necessarily have to care about ethical environmental consequences. Something that I'm sure you've heard, being someone who's in the space industry, is people talking about these beautiful, majestic celestial bodies like They are just rocks on the ground that are lifeless, that are soulless, that have no meaning to anyone. I get this a lot when talking to not just people in the industry, but people who are outside of the space industry or space community and don't think about space often, where they say, who cares about the moon? It's just a rock. And to me, it's like, the Moon is one of the oldest cultural resources that humanity has ever had. The Moon is our oldest friend. The Moon has guided our ancestors for millennia. The Moon was there to comfort us at night before we knew how to build shelters and fires and things like that. And yet, people are acting like we shouldn't respect that. We should have no respect, or it's like mysticism or something derogatory in terms of spirituality or religion. It's like, no, this is collective human culture. I know we're into February now, but the Lunar New Year just happened a few weeks ago. That is something that is cherished by millions and millions of people. And there are people who are like, it's just a rock, right? Who cares? Who cares what we do? Who cares how we impact that? Who cares about the desecration of that space? And to me, that's really heartbreaking.

Aisha 0:28:18

It is. And it's the majority of people around the world that have a connection to the elements and the environment in a way that, you know, the Western world has pushed aside and potentially forgotten. So I was raised in Northern Alberta, Canada, and in a predominantly Indigenous community. And we were taught that everything has a spirit to it, like absolutely everything and how you respect it, picking flowers or just absolutely everything has to be respected. And so growing up in that environment, I think, you know, it wasn't a question, it wasn't an option. It was, of course, yeah, of course, that makes sense. I need to respect, just as much as I respect the kid in my class, and I'll punch them in the face, I'm not gonna go out and chop down a tree or kill an animal without use and purpose, and most importantly, respect and ceremony surrounding that. And so when I think about going off planet and how quickly we're looking at it, you know, I take a pause because if a lot of different cultures from around the world, there's energy and sacredness in, let's say, the food that nourishes you. We start to grow that off planet in a very sterile environment.

What's that? What does that mean? What does that look like? Is that ethical? I mean, I'm thinking about these things, having perspectives and viewpoints that are quite different from others, but I really worry that in the space industry, we've just got a ton of engineers with a very similar background, with a very similar history, just forging forward. And I really want folks with different perspectives, different historical perspectives, and cultural perspectives in the room to just add in like, hey, what about this? What about that? Have you thought about this? What about this practice that we've done for a millennia?

AJ 0:30:36

Yeah, I can't speak for the rest of the world, but here in the US, there's been for a couple of decades now, this extreme STEM focus, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, which I don't know, mathematics and engineering is like engineering's type of mathematics, whatever. But you can't STEM your way to a soul. I know here in the US, the humanities, the liberal arts, all those kinds of really human things have been disparaged and disrespected and really looked down upon. I think that's been a detriment to us as a society and as a culture. I think that's reflected to your point in the way that we do space and who is in the space industry. It's frustrating as someone who comes to the space community from a humanities background or an arts background, whichever you want to call the law, whatever that is. I think it's so important for us to have more people who aren't just saying, is it technologically feasible? If it is technologically feasible, how do we do it? How do we solve for it? But is it right? It's a famous line from Jurassic Park, you thought about whether or not you could, but not whether or not you should or whatever the line is. I just think we don't have that caution and that respect for the implications of decisions. And I wish that the space industry was able to take more of a pause when we're making decisions to think about the long-term ethical and societal implications rather than just as a technologically possible.

Aisha 0:32:29

I also come to the space industry from an arts background. And I mean, even taking my degrees, thinking back on it, I mean, the arts buildings had asbestos like for years and they would just like slowly cut it out, slowly but surely. And then, you know, the business buildings and engineering buildings, gorgeous, you know, chef's kiss marble, looking good. And so, you know, the funding and, and even going into the arts, there's this ho-hum of, ooh, is that gonna sustain? And, you know, we've got a lot of bias towards the arts, but we need a balance in thinking. And along the way, you know, I came to see that there's so much importance in diversity in STEAM and STEM, absolutely, but also in the disciplines and who is invited to the table but also able to speak and have respect at the table. And so I think that that's really why I feel it's important to be opening doors and shedding light on this at this time before we're truly off planet.

AJ

Yeah, and I just think about talking about who's in the room, who's invited. Are you inviting people to a space where they can't access to their barriers? Are you inviting them to the important conference but they have to pay their own way and they don't have funding? And even with all the technological advancements, not even off Earth, but on Earth, you think about artificial intelligence and kind of the big foopla around that in every space and how that's infecting the arts and the humanities in a really harmful way, in a really exploitative

way. But you also think about who's being harmed by this technology, who's having their art stolen, who is losing jobs to automation, who is all this beautiful technology actually for, who is it benefiting, who is asking for it? And if you think about extending that out to space, who's gonna benefit from all this stuff? Who is truly going to benefit from mining asteroids and mining the moon? Who are the workers gonna be? Oh, there's a lot of talk of, oh, it'll be robots and they'll have the technology. But you still need humans to do the repairs, right? A mechanic is a job that is really hard to replace with automation. There are just some jobs that require human beings and human expertise. And when you think about really hard jobs, really difficult jobs, and really terrible, horrible environments like space is, it's oftentimes the most marginalized that are exploited to do those jobs. It's people who are maybe not necessarily paid a living or respectable wage to do their job. So maybe people who are considered, you know, quote unquote, illegal wherever they're working that are doing really important vital jobs that are sustaining society. And like, who's going to volunteer for those jobs in space? Are they going to be paid well? Are they going to be compensated well? Are they going to have good life insurance because space is a really dangerous and deadly environment? What are their families going to do? I think about all those things, and I don't think there are good answers for them right now. And if there aren't good good answers I don't necessarily know if we should be barreling towards Having those things be reality.

Aisha 0:36:12

You know when it's oftentimes I find in the space industry folks from backgrounds That are marginalized communities that have faced barriers because there's this, like, I know what that means. Like, I know what that means to have family that have had these jobs that are exploitative. I know what it means when we go down all of these different paths. And as you stated earlier, we're recording in February. So we're hot on our heels. Fairly soon after the US inauguration of President Trump. And there's been a lot of uncertainty about protections and human rights and DEI has become a really hot topic and stripped from a lot of different companies and government bodies, including NASA. But I just really want to stress that we're talking about humans. How are humans going to be treated? That is, if we put the exclamation point there and break it down to, this is going to affect people, most likely marginalized folks, most likely, you know, if we don't stand up to do something pretty close to what's happening right now But it's this is a human a human issue

AJ 0:37:29

Yeah, and I think you know going back to your point there's a lot of emphasis on the technology and the science and the stem of it all but not necessarily the Humanity of it all and what that means for us. What does it mean for humanity to become an interplanetary species and how does that impact our values? How does that impact our culture? I don't have the answer. That's a very deep, serious question that I don't have the answer to. But it goes back to what I said and what you said. I don't know that we should be doing these things without having more extended and robust conversation about how they will impact

not just us, but the future of humanity and future generations. And I don't wanna be part of the creation of new systems of marginalization and new systems of oppression. I don't want to be part of that. I feel that I am already part of it slightly in terms of just being involved in the space industry as it's currently constructed. But I guess going full circle, part of why I do so much is because I don't want to be part of that. I don't want the space industry to be what it is and continue to be what it has been over the past couple of decades. I think that's really dangerous and harmful, not just for me on a personal level, but for humanity. I know that sounds big and grandiose, but we are quite literally shaping how humanity is going to interact with the cosmos today. I don't know that a lot of people grapple with that or want to grapple with that. And I certainly don't think that the people who are thinking about that have the dominant voice or perspective in the space industry. And I think that needs to change.

Aisha 0:39:15

I think challenging leadership to bring in folks who are going to be depressing you with the reality. So my first degree is in international development studies and all we would do would be talk about the world and different countries and the history, the politics, the economics, and huge crises and famine and disease. And I remember one time a professor stopped and she said, looking around this room, I can tell everyone is completely depressed. And one kid said like, yeah, this is the state of the world is horrible and how are we gonna help and what are we gonna do? And she said, you know what? That'll take a long time and years and years, but I know I've done my job if the look on all of your faces is this depressed and sad, because that is the reality. And now you understand the reality. And after you're done this degree and after years of work, you will start then to be able to slowly support, unravel and help change the world. I bring that up because, you know, for those listening, this is a depressing topic, and that's okay. Let's not shy away from it. But we need to go there to understand it much more deeply than just this episode. I mean, it takes a long time to really get to the bottom of all of the ethics surrounding space exploration, but I'm really glad that we started to chat about it. Now, AJ, if someone is wanting to get into space law, what advice do you have for them?

AJ 0:41:00

I think just jump in. If you actually want to practice law, at least in the US, you have to go to law school. Other places you can get your LLB or your BA in law and practice. But I think space law is a growing field. There are so many niche areas and areas that are growing that will need space lawyers. So even if you're currently doing special area of law, it's almost certain that that area of law will have space interactions or intersections or components in the not too distant future. And yeah, if you want a degree in space law, there are a few programs that you can get a space law degree if you want one. I have a space law degree. I don't think it's especially helpful except to say I have a space law degree. I don't think it's especially helpful, except to say I have a space law degree. But yeah, I think to your point, it's

not just space law, right? It's space ethics. It's caring about it. You don't have to be a professional. You don't have to have certificates, degrees, or whatever other kind of symbolic marker of accomplishment. You can just be involved, you can care about space, you can care about the ethics of space without being a space professional. I actually think we need more of that, quite honestly. And I know we're nearing time and you said it was a depressing topic. I think I want to make the distinction that the way that humanity is currently interacting with space is not how humanity has always interacted with space. And while the current iteration of our relationship to space may not be what we want it to be and what we hope for, it's important to realize that our history and our connection to space is long and beautiful, and that space itself, the idea of the cosmos, the idea of nature extending beyond what humanity currently understands into all the things that we don't know, the beauty of space. I know we've talked bad about some, but the beauty of space science and being able to understand the cosmos, that is so wonderful and so exciting and exhilarating and what drew me to outer space. And I don't want that to be lost and overshadowed just because of a couple of decades of a couple of bad actors of a couple of bad countries or powerful countries or however you want to qualify them have kind of warped humanity's long-running relationship with space. I think space is so beautiful. To me, it represents all the infinite possibilities of what humanity could be. Sometimes that is very bad and very dark and very depressing, but that also represents the best of humanity, the beauty and the wonder and the art. The awe, the ability for a human being to look up and be in awe of just existing in the universe is a feeling that I wish I could give to every single person because it's one of the most beautiful things that I can feel. So I don't want us to end on it's all dark and gloom. There's still a lot of beauty and hope even though we've spent the episode talking about how it's not great right now. Exactly.

Aisha 0:44:05

There is so much beauty that can come from this. And I just think we need to do the hard work of creating community to talk about it. And I think that this is one of the first building blocks is just having these conversations. So thank you so much, AJ, for joining us, for sharing your perspective. I look forward to you continuing to be driving accessibility, inclusion, and space law in the future. Yeah, thank you all so much for having me.

AJ 0:44:36

I'm super, super excited and super fortunate and super honored to be a part of this. Appreciate all the work that you do and all the different hats that you wear. And yeah, thank you for being you.

Aisha 0:44:51

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