

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: Welcome to Living Blind. I'm your host, Naomi Hazlett. And this podcast is brought to you by BALANCE for Blind adults. Located in Toronto, Canada. This season of living blind is sponsored by AMI. Here at living blind, we explore the perspectives and lived experiences of people with sight loss and delve into barriers, challenges, and real life strategies for living life to the fullest.

Today, I'm joined by journalist and weekend news editor for the Canadian Press, Michelle McQuigge. Michelle has worked as a journalist for over 15 years and holds degrees in English literature, and journalism from the University of Toronto and Ryerson University, respectively. For the past eight years, Michelle has spent a good deal of her non-working time as a board member with BALANCE for Blind Adults in Toronto. She served as board chair from 2019 to 2021.

We discuss her work as a blind journalist, what tools she uses to complete her work and how the switch to remote working has changed her career. Here she is.

Hi, and welcome to this show, Michelle.

Michelle: Hi Naomi. Thanks so much for having me.

Naomi: How are you?

Michelle: I'm doing okay. Thanks. It's coming off a long weekend working shift as per usual, but otherwise feeling good.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: Yeah. You're uh, I think your job description said -not to just jump in or anything, but you are,

Michelle: Why not? We're already here. Let's do it.

Naomi: Exactly. Well. It does say you're a weekend assistant news editor. So sounds like you, do you work on weekends? How does that work for you or do?

Michelle: Uh, so w what the job entails. I have to explain this, cause it will justify the, the hours that I've put in as well to a degree.

Um, so I I'm in charge of overseeing, the file. The, the, basically the whole national news file for the Canadian Press over the course of the weekend. Um, we can get more into what CP does later if you don't know already, but, uh, on the weekends, I'm the one who has to assign the reporters, determine what stories need to be covered.

Uh, edit those stories as they come in, fill in some other gaps on the wire. Make sure our radio clients have broadcast material to accompany the print content that we generate, uh, keep our online clients happy with whatever they need from us or from the associated press. Uh, so there's a lot going on on those weekend shifts and Saturdays and Sundays, I tend to work quite long hours, so that usually 11 to 12 hours, this is about the norm for a Saturday or Sunday shift.

So that's why I come Monday morning. I'm usually not super energetic. Cause those shifts are pretty tiring. But otherwise for the rest of the week, I helped with special event coverage and other general editing. Um, and in compensation for the very long weekend shift, I have a three-day weekend. So that's always helpful.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: Right. So I might have to take a step back for a second because I am not a journalist or it's not really an area that I'm totally familiar with. So it's um, so the Canadian Press, you're saying that they have a number of different. I think they have articles there's online content. Can you maybe break that down a little bit more for me?

Michelle: That's a good, it's a good question. So for sure. So what the Canadian press is, is we're a Newswire service. So we provide content to a whole bunch of different kinds of clients all across the country. So. Uh, Canadian press started out more than a hundred years ago as a means of getting information back to Canadians about the First World War.

So that's where our origins were. And at that point, of course, the primary clients would have been newspaper and uh, traditional print. Over the years, CP kept evolving and now we have broadcast clients. So you probably hear, I'm not sure how many of listeners will listen to something like 680 news in Toronto, but quite often, if you do, you're going to hear reports is signing off with, you know, blah, blah, blah, the Canadian press Toronto.

That's us. Um, you, if you see Canadian press appearing in various newspapers or websites, like it could be the Toronto Star, the National Post, the Globe and Mail, uh, even much, much smaller publications, further afield, uh. You'll see the Canadian press. If you look there as well, that's also us. So our content has to be produced in multiple different formats for different media, but it goes all across the country.

And the vast majority of the major outlets in Canada are clients of ours. So, uh, CP stories have pretty good reach. I have to say. We were lucky that way.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: So it's a news outlet that collaborates or provides content for a lot of different news outlets.

Michelle: Yeah. We don't collaborate so much. We produce it all in-house and we do it on our own, but what, where we differ because it's a wire service, we just put the content out when it's ready.

So we don't have to work to publication deadlines. We don't have to produce a physical newspaper. We don't even have our own site where we put things out. We just send it out to the clients and then they can do with it, whatever they want to, as long as they give us credit.

Naomi: Hmm.

Michelle: Does that make any sense?

Naomi: No, no, no. That makes sense to me.

Michelle: Perfect. Okay.

Naomi: No, that makes that's interesting. I mean, I think for me, I always thought, you know, you have Toronto Star and its only articles that are only Toronto Star content.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Yeah. A lot of people think that and, and, and people will say to me. Like I've had people assume that I work for a different outlet than I do because they read my article in extra white paper.

Um, so it's a really easy assumption to make. So a lot of people are familiar with Canadian press content without actually really knowing what it is, right. Who we are.

Naomi: So, what is the weekend content? Like? Is it any different from what happens during the week?

Michelle: Well, not, not really, especially not this past year has been kind of bonkers.

My, my, I only started this role about a year ago. Uh, it didn't even really exist prior to that. So, uh, we were all charting some un-navigated territory with this, but this past year, of course has had a lot of huge news events that don't respect things like off hours or geographical boundaries or anything like that.

We're talking of course about COVID. Which has created an immense amount of extra work for a lot of journalists. Uh, we had the federal election recently that, that campaign ran for all 35 days of it, including weekends. We've had lots of action on the truth and reconciliation file, of course. Um, we've had the fall of Afghanistan that took place on a weekend.

So, um, I always knew that I worked and lived in a 24 hour news cycle, but now I really really know it after the past year, because a lot of the weekends have just been remarkably busy. And the challenge there lies in the fact that just by virtue of the fact that it's a weekend, we have a much more sparse staff to tackle all that stuff on weekends. So we have to do the best we can with the resources we have.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: So you're basically saying that life does not stop on the weekends.

Michelle: Not even close. Someday maybe. In fact, this weekend was a great example. We, things were looking fairly calm. We, you know, we had people in all of our bureaus across the country doing their thing, and everything was nicely under control.

And then boom, there was a deadly plane crash in Montreal on Saturday night at like 6:00 PM. In a fairly populist area. So you really truly never know with this job, which is part of why it's fun if we're being honest. But it's also part of way it can, can be quite demanding.

Naomi: So I believe you've been working at the Canadian press for 15 years. Is that right?

Michelle: Yes, it is. Started in May, 2006, right out of journalism school.

Naomi: Oh, wow. So it was that quick. It just, you went straight from university into this job.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Well, I was pretty lucky there too, I spent, as all journalism school graduates do, you spend your final year desperately trying to line up some kind of summer gig.

You start small and kind of go from there. So I was applying to every summer internship possible that I could, but my options, I felt anyway were a little more limited because of my blindness. If we're being honest.

A lot of people are encouraged to, you know, move somewhere random and go work in, small towns, so you can cover all of those small town events and get really familiar with local news coverage. And there is a whole lot of merit in that advice, but that's much, much harder to swing if you have to rely on public transit, or if the jobs that you're applying for basically demand that you have a driver's license.

And that's not that uncommon in these smaller settings where communities are spread a whole lot further apart. So it's not even a super unreasonable demand. It just precludes me applying for positions like that. Uh, there was also at the time I was joining the industry. Um, the focus on multimedia and video content was starting to really emerge.

Now that's sort of a bit more specialized, but there was a bit of a demand at that point for visual skills that I obviously didn't have. So that was a bit of a challenge that I felt at my pool of jobs to apply to was a bit constrained because of it. But I did apply around and did a bunch of interviews and a bunch of them didn't work as well, which is pretty typical for a lot of us in that position.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle But after, uh, some support and help from a very, very supportive teacher at Ryerson, which is where I went to journalism school, I was able to get in for an interview when Canadian press decided to add a couple of extra spots to its internship program for the summer of 2006. So I. Got in there. And I interviewed, and I remember walking out of that thing, that interview went about as well as it possibly can.

And I called a family member that day, and said if this one doesn't work, I'm not sure any of them are going to. And fortunately it did. So they hired me. So they hired me on for the summer internship program. And then they just kind of kept me around uh, there was a fairly long period of limbo where I wasn't full time, but I was working full-time hours.

Again, not unusual at all for the industry that went on for about three years, working all kinds of different shifts, graveyard shifts to part-time hours to, you name it, just having to be flexible and take what you can get. But eventually I was lucky to have to be made full-time permanent there and I've been there ever since.

Naomi: That's amazing. I'm glad that you had a teacher who is so encouraging. And-

Michelle: I was so lucky to have, I mean, he was incredible. He, uh, he started out as a bit of a skeptic. Actually. He, he ran the student newspaper, which we all had to do a full-time stint on as part of the print stream of the journalism program at Ryerson.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: And I expressed interest when I joined his class and being the news editor for my leg of this journey, um, and, and helping to oversee the newspapers content overall. And he was very openly skeptical and said, okay, we'll give this a shot, but I'm not sure how it's going to work. And I reserve the right to reassign you if it's not working. I said, all right, fine. I'll show you. I get a little defiant, when it comes to professional matters in particular. Um, but it turned out really, really well. And he went from his open skepticism to being super supportive.

And when he was hearing about my rather frustrating job hunt and, and, and the driving issue, stuff like that, he flew into a totally righteous indignant rage.

I had to laugh, remembering how our relationship started, but I really appreciated that he came around so much and was willing to, to help me advocate. So that was. Hugely appreciated. And I definitely personally own my career to him.

Naomi: Wow. So did the Canadian press, I mean, they clearly brought you on, so they couldn't have been too reluctant, but was there a similar process where you kind of had to show them the ropes on your end?

Michelle: I think that's inevitable in any job when you're working as a blind person. Uh, it wasn't quite as overt that- the professor was a particularly, uh, opinionated curmudgeonly guy and made no bones about that. And he would totally agree with everything I just said, if you've heard this podcast, um, so in a professional environment, rather than an academic one, it really can't quite be as plainly stated as I reserve the right to reassign you after a week or two, if it doesn't work, but there are probationary periods. And of course there is an implicit understanding when the internship that it's a short term thing.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: So the whole point is to kind of see how it goes. That said, Canadian press was really, really supportive and made every effort to give me what I needed. So they were really great about inquiring, about the technology aspect of what I would need to do the job. Even in the interview process, they were asking questions about that. Um, one thing that sounds little but mattered a lot and made me feel very supported right out of the gate, the entry system to get into Canadian Press main office, which is, uh, has been on King street for years and will soon be changing.

But that, to get in there, there's an inaccessible keypad system. So everyone has a personalized code that they can use to access the newsroom, the elevators, the washrooms, all kinds of rooms in there. Um, but the key pad scrambles every time.

So while it looks like a normal key pad, the numbers don't really align with how a normal phone pad looks and because they scramble, it's completely inaccessible. When I arrived for day one of my only four month long summer internship, they had gone and installed FOB readers and given me a card at all of the access points.

So to have a company doing that before you've even worked your first day really feels amazing and makes you willing to, do you want to do your part to prove that you've been worth the effort and expense.

Naomi: Yeah, that's a, that's a lot of respect I just got for the Canadian press that they were going to do that before day one of your student internship, It really shows a commitment.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: It really does. And you know, Canadian Press, while, it's a major and very well established media organization, doesn't have the financial resources of, let's say the big banks or, you know, a Rogers or any of the telecoms or any of the real corporate giants in this country.

No media outlet really has comparable resources. So it did mean a lot to me that they were willing to roll the dice and, give me the tools I needed to, it sounds fundamental, you know, being able to physically get into the newsroom or that having to have someone buzz me in or something, but it makes a difference and it makes you feel more welcome right out of the gate. And that sets, sets the relationship off on the right foot. At least in my view.

Naomi: Well, speaking of tools on a practical level, can you walk us through a little bit? What kinds of tools or technologies you use to do your job?

Michelle: Sure. Uh, they're fairly basic in, in many senses and that I have a laptop provided by work that I now use.

I've been using it throughout COVID as we had to go remote. We're still not back in the office. So I have JAWS installed on that laptop, CP purchased, uh, when I first joined and we've kept it updated ever since. So they've had to shell out for some of those upgrades, um, much appreciated when they do that.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Um, so the, the laptops are standard issue there. Those went out to everybody, but obviously JAWS was an accommodation. Uh, at one point they had purchased a braille printer for me years ago. Uh, I haven't had to use that in quite some time as, uh, things went more and more digital, but that was an expenditure that they did make that I appreciate.

And I also use my iPhone constantly for my job. Um, so the, the laptop screen reader and the iPhone are the main tools that I use. A lot of the things I do to actually execute my work, involves some more internal systems like our internal content management system. Uh, I use a program called gold wave that I'm sure a lot of our listeners are familiar with when I record audio content, whether it's stuff I voice up myself for cutting clips of use events.

Um, so that's software that more people are probably familiar with. We also use zoom all the time for virtual meetings. So a lot of more industry standard stuff mixed in with specialized tools. Sorry. If I got a bit rambly.

Naomi: No, no, no, not at all. I mean, I'm about to get a little bit, take a little bit of a deep dive here, cause-

Michelle: Go nuts-

Naomi: I also noticed that you are a copy editor and I am wondering, how that works in terms of, uh, the technology that you use in terms of picking up on, you know, grammar and spelling. I know that can be a little bit difficult depending on what screen reader you're using. So can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Sure. Yeah, you're right. It can, um, our content management system is online and it's either it or JAWS or the combination of the two is pretty good sometimes about flagging words that are misspelled. Um, sometimes that's incredibly obvious just through JAWS, quite often I'm sure a lot of listeners will know you're hearing something and you hear it really grossly mispronounced and you go, what was that?

And then you look and you see that there was a drop letter and you're like, oh, okay, cool. So you fix that and then you move on. Um, so JAWS actually can provide a bit of an inherent advantage in copyediting. To the point where you're like this. Uh, at one point I was working with another one of our senior editors years ago on a newsletter that was just focusing on copy oriented content and writing tips and all kinds of things.

Michelle: And I had a section in the newsletter all about various copy issues I had spotted on the wire over the past week. And he called it with my blessing blind spot. If she could see it, so should you. So that the screen reader offered a lot of advantages in that respect, but there are gaps that it can't close as well.

So, uh, if someone decides to write British Columbia and spell Colombia, like the South American country, JAWS won't pick up on that. And that's one that I would much, be much more likely to miss because it wouldn't be flagged as a spelling error and it probably wouldn't even occur to me to manually check it.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work-One Journalist's Story”

Audio Transcript

Michelle: Um, over the years you get some familiarity with things that you need to manually check, uh, whether it's working with specific people or just, you know, due diligence, you know, checking for apostrophe placements and stuff like that. But as an extra safeguard, what I quite often do is just have someone else take another look, especially if I've done a substantial edit on something.

I'll just hand it over to someone else and say, Hey, can you just give this a second pair of eyes, uh, fix any spacing or formatting issues that are screen reader proof. Just make sure I haven't really missed anything. So it's a combination of, of some blindness oriented adaptations and just some good old fashioned safeguards as well.

Naomi: Well, that makes sense. So the million dollar question: how has the pandemic affected your work?

Michelle: Well, um, I'm one of the really lucky ones. The pandemic, I think actually really helped my career. It's probably sounds really weird. Newsrooms are natural fits for going remote. So we like everyone else had to pivot really quickly in like 24 hours.

And so we had to take the whole operation out of the physical newsroom and take it online. But that really leveled the playing field for me, all of a sudden. At that point, when that shift happened, I was still a reporter rather than the weekend news editor than I am now. So I was working with the Ontario news team and all of a sudden events that used to have to send reporters with a video camera to go and staff and film were happening virtually, and anyone could go, they could just hop on WebEx or zoom or whatever virtual platform was in play at that moment, and do your thing.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: So all of a sudden I had a whole bunch more assignments that I could do. I was already one of the writers who was being leaned on a lot for most of the major stories on the team, but all of a sudden I could help with things like covering Queen's park, uh, which is our provincial legislature for those who don't know, um, That kind of thing opened a lot of doors and really leveled the playing field.

And it was cool to be able to engage on the same level as my coworkers. I, uh, you know, I, and my bosses all knew that I was just as capable of, you know, asking questions and pressing politicians as the next guy, but I just didn't have the opportunity based on the demands of the job. With that removed and with the shift towards virtual life, that really leveled the playing field.

I'll never really know for sure, but I'm pretty confident that some of the work I did over the first six, seven months of the pandemic directly contributed to the promotion I got last October.

Naomi: Oh, congratulations.

Michelle: Thank you. If that wasn't clear. So I work there. The reporting gig is what I did for the longest time. And then the weekend news ed, my current role was the step-up and that only came about a year ago.

Naomi: Oh, okay. I understand.

Michelle: If that clarifies matters at all.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: Well, yeah, it does. So you were working as a journalist for a long time and then you are now, um, can you remind me your position title manager?

Michelle: Yeah, of course Weekend News Editor is, is the, is the, is the role Weekend news editor.

Naomi: Yeah. Well, there you go. I think it was interesting when you were talking a little bit about the challenges you faced getting an internship. And in the back of my mind, I was thinking. Oh, you mean it was a barrier traveling everywhere to get stories. I bet that's not so much of a barrier anymore in a strange way. So it sounds like I was right on that.

Michelle: You were totally right. Yeah. A hundred percent. And it's that travel aspect was an issue. I think I mentioned that it came up a couple of times in the interview process with people wanting someone with a driver's license. There was obvious skepticism too, about being able to send- Yeah, they want reporter that they can send to the scene of let's say a crime or any kind of breaking news story and be able to look around and assess the situation and determine who you need to speak to. So I wouldn't usually get those kinds of assignments and I get that, but I could do the work other ways. I could make lots of phone calls I could track down witnesses. I can dig through documents. I can call and keep bugging authorities and I could write. So I had to work on those other tools to sort of make myself a little bit more valuable in that sense, but it was really amazing when we made that virtual shift to be able to operate in a more comparable way to the rest of my colleagues.
It felt, it felt really good. I have to say.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: Can I ask you, do you have a favorite topic that you'd like to cover?

Michelle: Sure. Well, I actually, over the course of the last few years of my reporting stage of my career, uh, developed a little bit of a beat writing about disability issues. Um, that was something that I felt was being underserved and under reported.

And I kind of resisted it for a while on the grounds that I don't want to be that guy who only writes about the demographic they can best identify with, but my perspective on that shifted over time and I realized that actually, probably I was best equipped to, to cover some of these stories and obtain trust from my interview subjects.

Michelle: And that I did have some unique perspectives on this that I could bring to bear and hopefully bring some value to the file. So I started writing about these kinds of stories. And as often happens, when a reporter tries to create their own beat, it kind of snowballs. It eventually takes on a bit of a life of its own.

So one story begets more. People will reach out to you and say, oh, I read your piece on X or Y, I have this related issue that I want to talk about. You start getting press releases on these matters as these stories kind of buildup. And then of course your network of sources and contacts grows, and you're a better position to keep your ear to the ground and keep wind of, of news that's breaking in, in the field that you've chosen or the area that you've chosen to document. My timing was also really good in that it coincided with the federal government deciding to bring on Canada's first ever piece of accessibility legislation. So that was a really major development.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: And no one else was covering it. I was the only national reporter with a national news outlet to document that bill from its tabling in the House of Commons to receiving Royal assent. Uh, disability does not get a whole lot of attention in Canada's media landscape. And for a while, I felt like I was filling that gap, but I really, really enjoyed that work. Obviously it has personal resonance as well, but it was also very professionally satisfying and, and informative. Even as someone with lived experience with disability.

Naomi: I know you mentioned that you were covering as the bill was going through legislation. Is there any particular piece that you're really proud of when it comes to covering the disability beat?

Michelle: Yes. Um, a few, actually I wrote some during COVID about the various ways that disability was, was being overlooked in all the COVID discourse and the unique barriers that people with disabilities were experiencing during COVID. Um, during the 2019 federal election, I know we just finished one now, but during the 2019 federal election, I did a story about how no one was raising disability issues.

More than halfway through the campaign. And once that article came out and I pressed all the various parties on it, then other media outlets started asking a few more questions around disability. And one of the parties even made a disability related addition to its campaign platform. So that was pretty exciting as well.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Um, I took a lot of satisfaction out of that work. Um, also just wrote a lot about individual cases that were very interesting. Uh, one where I also got a lot of satisfaction was the case of a couple who were pushing for amendments to VIA Rail's policies. This was a couple, they both used wheelchairs and they couldn't actually travel together because via rail didn't allow for more than one wheelchair at a time on its trains to be tied down. There were all- they could go if they were willing to have their chairs, you know, disassembled or stowed in storage and greatly exposed to very serious damage, which obviously is a huge problem. And they were pushing via rail to expand its policies and become more inclusive for wheelchair users allow more tie-downs for wheelchair users and ultimately that push succeeded.

And actually that decision came through my inbox and I was the one who got to call the couple and tell them that the decision hadn't been went- had come through and I'll never, ever forget the emotional reaction that I got to hear that day. It was amazing.

Naomi: Oh, that's wonderful.

Michelle: Yeah, it was really special. Uh, so stuff like that, it's so easy to talk about issues in abstract terms and, you know, talk about beats and files and whatnot.

But at the end of the day, these are always, always a about people every single time. And that's the aspect of the job that I love the most. Definitely as a reporter, even as an editor,

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: And I think one thing that you also really spoke to was the idea that, you know, when it comes to the media or it comes to the news, you're not just, well, you're trying to report on the facts, but reporting on the facts does or can make social change too by bringing issues to light.

Absolutely. Canadian press by virtue of the fact that we're wire service definitely has more of a, just the facts kind of approach to reporting. This is an aspect I'm really proud of given a lot of how a lot of other industry activities have played out, but we don't, you know, we don't have an editorial board.

You'll never hear about Canadian press endorsing, such and such political candidate, the way a lot of newspapers do because they have editorial boards. We don't take those kinds of positions. So it really is interesting. And I feel like all of us who work at a wire service, are uniquely positioned to see the ways in which pretty straight reporting with a stronger focus on objectivity as humanly possible can change conversations and pave the way for change. It's really gratifying.

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I know that we've talked a lot about your career. So outside of work, is there anything that you enjoy doing, whether it's in your leisure time or anything else that's going on, if you have leisure time,

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: That's so cute that you think I have leisure time. Oh my God. Um, I, I do keep fairly busy. Um, but I, yeah, I, of course I do have some leisure time. I volunteer quite a bit.

So I've been on the board of BALANCE for Blind Adults for oh gosh, several years now I'm losing track. Uh, I was the most recent board chair, I stepped down from that role after doing two years of it in June, the new job made it a little bit difficult to continue with that degree of time commitment. And we also had a wonderful successor lined up.

So that was great, but I'm still on the board and still acting as past chair. Um, and that's been really gratifying to watch BALANCE evolved over the years and see a lot of really, really exciting changes taking place at this organization. I also, I'm a member of the board for the Canadian arm of the Seeing Eye, which is the guide dog school that a lot of listeners will be familiar with based in Morristown, New Jersey.

Michelle: And I'm on that board because I'm Seeing Eye graduate. So, uh, If I reach out my right foot, I can pet my black lab, Lucy, who's lying under my desk as we chat. Yeah, she's a good girl. Um, so that's the bulk of my volunteer work otherwise. Um, I.

Probably boring sending domestic creature. I love to cook. I love to read. Music has always been a real, uh, love of mine. I haven't had the time to do the hard-core piano, uh, that I used to do. I trained a lot on piano and got fairly advanced in that area, but haven't had the chance to sort of maintain that to the degree that they want to.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: I also used to sing a ton, uh, work schedules have been a lot more sporadic with the line of work that I'm in. So it's been harder to commit to, you know, regular choir rehearsal schedules are the kind of thing that I would, that I used to do a lot of. Um, but I still love it. And it's the kind of thing that I'm hoping to take up again.

I'm sure like everyone else. I did a lot of self-reflecting over the course of the pandemic and identified some things I want to get more involved in and take up some more. And, uh, those are definitely some of them.

Naomi: It's interesting because I think, well, I mean, the pandemic changed how people people's activity landscapes.

I don't know if that's a good word for it, but I feel like for some of us, like as to your point, it's almost as if, because it was harder to do some of those activities or leisure. I don't know if this is what happened to you, but just speaking for myself, kind of threw myself into my work, but I'm personally feeling like, oh, maybe I should make a little more time for fun. So is that kind of where you're at?

Michelle: Are we sharing a brain right now? Yeah, that is exactly. That is exactly how I feel like it's throwing myself into work. It was a big coping mechanism for me, and I was really lucky that A) I had a job to throw myself into and B) that that job actually got really, really demanding when the pandemic kicked up, that created an amazing amount of work for us reporters, especially in the early days when there was just so much information coming at you fast and furious.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: I'm sure you guys, I'm sure you remember. You know, you, you log on to any website or open your Facebook profile. And like every 10 minutes there'd be some new, huge development about some major institutions shutting down or crazy numbers or some other wild development on the COVID front. And that went on for months and it was just really, really exhausting.

So I did throw myself into. Out of necessity, but it also really was a health, a helpful coping mechanism at that point, but it's not sustainable. And like you said, uh, you wind up doing some thinking and getting ready to sort of maybe make a few adjustments to your work-life balance as life hopefully returns to normal. Whatever normal is.

Naomi: Well, we'll find out, I guess, as, as time goes on.

Michelle: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, exactly.

Naomi: So you may have mentioned you have a furry friend nearby.

Michelle: Sure do. I'm petting her with both my feet. Now I'm hoping she'll start flapping her tail so you can hear. Oh, Nope. She's too busy sleeping. Um, yeah, Lucy, the black lab.

She's four years old. Uh, she's a tiny little thing for a lab. She's not even 50 pounds. So she's a really little girl for her breed, but she's a total affection ball and she loves work and she's the best cutest chick ever. I love her.

Naomi: So you've had guide dogs for quite some time. Is that right?

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Yeah, I have, since I was about 20.

Naomi: So I know some people prefer the cane. Some people prefer having a guide dog. Can you share a little bit about why having a dog was the right choice for you?

Michelle: Absolutely. Yeah, so I. I never really thought about it that much, but I did grow up hearing that guide dogs were sort of the superior mobility choice.

It's not a view that I've come to share, but I have decided that it is the best one for me. Um, in high school, I traveled with a cane like everybody else, and I was fairly comfortable with cane travel, but I attended a Seeing Eye promotional event in Canada, as a teenager with my family. And at that point I was given an opportunity to walk briefly with a guide dog, just to, you know, just a quick stroll down the hall or, you know, down the street or if I don't even remember the context anymore. But I took the dog's harness handle and we started to walk and I could not believe the pace we were going at.

Michelle: And it came back and I said to my father who was there at the time, I said, I can't believe how fast we were just walking. And he said, honey, that's how fast most people walk. Most of the time. And I went, "what, wow". I have no idea cause I didn't, I really had no sense of that at all. So that made me realize that there was a different way to travel and it was quite freeing not to have to sort of be poking around and have a little more freedom to listen to my surroundings, which I love doing and feel safer doing as well.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Um, so the more I thought about it, the more I thought the dog was probably the best way for me. I also love puppies. It wasn't a hard sell either. So, um, so I went in my, after my first year of university, I got gotten the residents experience behind me. I went and then I got matched with a big goofy golden, and never really looked back.

And now of course, in the very rare occasions, when I do have to use cane it drives me completely mad. I can't wait to get the hardest back in my hand.

Naomi: Well, I can't argue with that. I'm a big fan of dogs, myself. And so, you know, I think it's the travel, the companionship, they're kind of a, the whole package, you know?

Michelle: Oh yeah. Honestly, I don't know. Lucy has been the best pandemic companion ever. It would have been harder without her. It sounds, it might sound goofy to those who don't have a dog, but it's true.

Naomi: So, you know, thinking about people who are listening to this podcast and thinking to themselves, you know, journalism, that sounds really interesting.

Or, you know, maybe I should get into singing or any other things that we've talked about, I guess. So I'm trying to ask is, do you have any advice or anything that you want to say to the listeners who are maybe interested in learning more about some of the things that we talked about today?

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Michelle: Um, I would say, while there are challenges, I feel like attitudes are starting to shift a little bit. So if you have questions about a field that you feel might not be inherently well suited to you or your, your life experience, don't just assume that. Make some other inquiries. See what people say. Sometimes you'd be surprised the degree to which people are willing to work with you.

And the degree to which attitudes can be a little more inclusive. Uh, we are starting to observe some incremental change there and it's very heartening to see. So never assume that something is out of reach is all I can really say. Um, also take the time to connect with people who are, who are in the field, whether they share your circumstances or not, they still might have good insight to offer. They can probably direct you to talking to the right people. So don't be afraid to, to have those conversations, even if they can be a bit difficult at times. Um, or if you're not sure where to go to, to start those conversations, do the research.

Michelle: You're not guaranteed of success if you ask the right questions, but you're certainly guaranteed if not having success, if you don't. So the best way is just to sort of test the waters and be prepared and ready to advocate for yourself and make your case. Be honest about the things you aren't able to do or don't feel comfortable doing.

But also don't be shy about talking up your strengths because we've all got them.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: One thing that I like to say. I think which you've probably said better than me, but it reminds me of something I tell my clients or the people I work with is basically like there is there enough barriers in this world, don't be another one to yourself, right?

Michelle: Yeah. Beautifully put. Totally. Yeah. Yep.

Naomi: So any last thoughts before we wrap up anything that you want to say that we didn't get a chance to talk about today?

Michelle: I don't think so, but thank you so much for having me on the podcast. It's been fun chatting with you. And if anyone wants to, if any of the listeners want to reach out, if you have questions, I just kept advising everyone to ask questions if they have them. And if I'm in a position to answer any of them, I'm happy to do so.

Naomi: And where can people do that.

Michelle: They can't get a hold of me a few different ways. I- I'm on Twitter. I'm not tweeting a ton these days since I'm not writing much anymore, but I do still check and respond to messages. My DMS are open. Um, my Twitter handle is @mich_mcq, so that's M I C H underscore MCQ. I'm on LinkedIn as well uh under my normal name. And if you want to send me an email, one way you can do that is to reach me on my work email on nice, easy email address. There is mmq@cp.org.

Living Blind: Season 2, Episode 3 “When Workplace Supports Work- One Journalist's Story” Audio Transcript

Naomi: All right. Great. Well, thank you so much. It was such a pleasure talking with you. Michelle,

Michelle: Same with you Naomi, thank you so much for having me.

Troy: That's it for this episode. Thanks for tuning in. We hope that you enjoyed it as much as we enjoy doing the show. Special thanks to today's guest, our host Naomi, Executive Director Deborah Gold, and the entire team at BALANCE for Blind Adults. If you like what you heard today, feel free to subscribe, like, or follow us on whatever platform you're listening on. We're on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter at BALANCE for blind adults. For more information about BALANCE for Blind Adults and our programs and services, and to access the show notes, please visit us at www.Balancefba.org. I'm producer Troy Taylor, and this has been Living Blind. Thanks for listening.