Transcript: “Putting humanity into AI: how a voice avatar preserves identity”

Pathways to Zero Barriers Episode 2, Season 3

Introduction

David Betts (00:00)

There are ninety seven million people living worldwide with with speech limiting conditions from a variety of of causes that we think would benefit from assistive technology today, many of whom experience barriers to access. And those barriers are language, their costs, their process. And when I looked at the solutions that are out there, you know, they really enable people to engage in utilitarian communication. You know: "I'm old", "I'm hungry". That's undignified. So it's not about efficiency, it's about dignity.

Judith Hermetter (00:30)

Welcome to Pathways to Zero Barriers. Today, we're talking about how to put humanity into AI with David Betts. David has been on a quest to preserve personal connection through an AI voice avatar, and in this episode, he shares how we can use this technology to break down communication barriers.

Tom Butcher (01:00)

Hello, my name is Tom Butcher with the Zero Project, and it's a delight to be able to welcome you to our third season of Pathways to Zero Barriers podcasts. And this season we'll be focusing on assistive technology innovation around the world. And I am especially happy today to have with me David Betts.

After his diagnosis of ALS, which is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in 2024, David retired from a very successful two-decade career as a principal at Deloitte Consulting and founded Storyflight Labs or PBC, a public benefit corporation. PBC is dedicated to restoring dignity, sparking imagination, and strengthening human connections.

with a focus on people living with speech limiting disabilities and conditions. David, welcome from Pittsburgh. Great to have you with us. I know you're literally just down the road. How are you doing in this heat?

David Betts (02:10)

I'm doing great, Thomas, and it's wonderful to be with you today. It's it's really great to reconnect.

Tom Butcher (02:15)

Whilst I know about you, before we get into the weeds, David, if you want, please could you tell our listeners a little bit more about yourself?

David Betts (02:23)

A little bit about me. So I spent the better part of of two decades as as you mentioned, about almost 22 years at Deloitte Consulting, as a leader in our healthcare practice for much of that time. And, you know, prior to that, I had a career in the theater, actually.

Uh, I have a bit of a checkered past, I suppose. And, uh, I had an experience. I was on the faculty at Carnegie Mellon University here in Pittsburgh in the school of drama. And I had an experience while I was there leading the department through a kind of re-imagination around what we did. And, uh, it was that, that sparked my imagination about what I wanted to do when I grew up, if you will, if is if I ever grow up, I don't hope not to do. And, uh, you know, I didn't know at the time what I was doing, but was really a strategy project and that's what I wanted to do. And so I went back to business school and got my MBA at Carnegie Mellon,

Tom Butcher (03:23)

Yeah

David Betts (02:24)

So I left the faculty and became a student and ultimately joined Deloitte and joined our healthcare practice and had the privilege to lead, um, a number of healthcare enterprises through lots of different strategy work and operations work and other things, but I led our customer experience practice for health. And it really mattered to me that we were helping individuals have a better experience in their healthcare journey. I did a lot of our research around what it really meant to be a consumer of health and how to experience their healthcare journey and what really mattered to people in that journey when we're at our most vulnerable moments. Yeah. And then I had the privilege to build a public health

practice that served, ultimately grew that business to serve 20 states. And at the center of all of this is really, again, like, what does it mean to be a consumer of health in the U.S. in particular? And never did I imagine that at one point it would be, you know, me, at the center of that healthcare journey.

But in 2024, uh, that's what happened. Um, I found myself with a diagnosis of ALS and, um, and, uh, ultimately that's what, uh, led me to, you know, once a consultant, always a consultant, I suppose, begin the exploration of, you know, what are the tools that allow people with this disease and others to be successful, um, living, um, with this disease and other speech limiting conditions in particular.

Tom Butcher (05:00)

Great. Thank you so much. And listeners, please remember two things. First, theater as part of David's background. And then he's being incredibly modest when he said he built two practices. If I remember rightly, they were two $250 million practices. So we're not talking about small change. This is this is a really great entrepreneur we're speaking with. So going from that to my first question. Could you tell us about your particular innovation together with the problem it solves and just how it does it, David?

David Betts (05:42)

So when I was first diagnosed, well, what really led to my diagnosis in many respects was that I began having issues with my speech. Now, you thankfully today don't probably notice it. But I do. And I notice it in a couple of ways. I slur my asses more than I used to. And I notice it in the way that it feels to speak to me. I was having this conversation the other day with a colleague of mine who is a speech-language pathologist by background. And trying to explain to people, you know, that I have issues with my speech when they don't notice it is interesting. But it is ultimately what led me to... to my diagnosis because I was insistent that something was going wrong with me. And at the end of the day, when I'm tired, my speech slows down. And as a consultant, what do I do? I talk. I talked all day, right? That was my job. I told stories to clients is what I say I did. Sometimes they even believe those stories.

Tom Butcher (06:47)

Well, obviously many did.

David Betts (06:50)

Many did, yes. And oftentimes they were even true.

Tom Butcher (06:54)

So that's an added bonus.

David Betts (06:58)

Added bonus, right. But so I talked all day and I would find myself at the end of the day with my speech slowing down. And even one of my dear friends and colleagues said to me, you know, it's as if your tongue can't keep up with your brain. And so, you know, I got this diagnosis and as someone who processes the world out loud, I began to wonder, again, once a consultant, always a consultant, what are the tools that people use? When they lose the ability to speak, understanding that with this diagnosis, people will frequently lose the ability to speak. And I was disappointed with what I found. We asked people to settle for far less than what's possible. And we've been doing that for far too long. I think we all remember Stephen Hawking and that robotic voice. And I didn't want to sound like a robot. And so that was kind of problem number one for me was I wanted to sound like me. And I figured it was 2024 and if we could make a deepfake video of Tom Cruise we we could certainly do better than a robotic voice. So that was problem number one. And that felt like it was easy to solve ultimately.

Problem number two, Tom, was we force people today to type everything that they want to say, word for word, letter for letter, with really relatively little assistance from technology. And that is incredibly challenging when you have motor deficits that result from ALS in particular but other you know other diseases as well and it takes a long time to type what you want to say. With an eye gaze device you know people's average typing speed is six words per minute, well that's not conversational speed. So what happens, people disconnect. Um and you know as people we don't have the presence to stay in the moment with someone who's typing what they want to say at six words per minute and so we lose connection with one another's as people and and that was unacceptable to me and in many respects that we we lose so much already to this disease I don't want to lose connection too so that was problem number two.

And then problem number three was you know in the US, but it's not it's not unique to the US, it's consistent around the world, is you know, the the tools, the solutions that people have available to them are oftentimes gated behind barriers, process barriers, access barriers, language barriers, cost barriers that in many respects are artificial in my mind. You know, they're just procedural and they require time and they require complexity to overcome. And as someone who spent, you know, the better part of 22 years navigating the healthcare system in the US, You know, it is not an easy system to navigate.

And so for someone who's been diagnosed with ALS or is living with this disease, and again, that's just one use case, that complexity and time is something we don't have. You know, we can't, ALS doesn't wait is something I've started to say a lot lately. We're making somebody wait weeks and months when this disease average life expectancy is two to five years. That's unacceptable.

So if I can solve those three problems with an innovation, in a solution, then why would I not do that? And so Talk To Me Goose was set out initially to solve those three problems. Can I give someone a voice that connects them to technology that makes them sound like themselves? And the answer was yes, through the voice technology provider. Can I make it, can I integrate artificial intelligence to accelerate the construction of text so that they don't have to type everything they want to say? So type less and say more. And the answer to that was yes. And could we construct a business model, if you will, that allows people to get access to this solution through foundations that they already deal with and organizations that they already deal with and make it available on consumer grade devices that they already have in their homes for free. And the answer to that is yes. So problems solved.

Tom Butcher (11:19)

Yes.

David Betts (11:20)

And then we could do more and we can talk about what else we can do and are doing. But if I could solve those three problems, then I think we're on a path to a solution that we can sustain over the long run and compete in the market.

Tom Butcher (11:33)

Great. And how are you going to provide that solution? That's the "how".

David Betts (11:42)

Yeah.

Tom Butcher (11:43)

And sorry, I should change that. Not how are you going to, it's how do you, because you are already and it's taking it forward from here. But how do you do it?

David Betts (11:54)

Yeah. So I sat down on January 5th of 2025, you know, less than a month after I was diagnosed and I got to work and I had no coding experience, but I took a class or two and I got bored with the classes apparently just like I did in college. Put myself to work. Um, and in 80 days I had a prototype and it didn't solve all of those problems out of the gate, but it worked. And I had it in my hands and it was purely selfish at the time. I was like, you know, solve something for me. And as soon as I had it in my hand, I realized that it, that it would work for others. And, and then I began, began to find the solution. So Talk to me, Goose! was born, you know, so how, so, so first of all, the voice challenge, the speech challenge.

There's an amazing company out there called ElevenLabs and they are the leading voice technology provider and they make voice clones. And with as little, in some cases, as 45 seconds of audio, you can securely clone your voice and get access to a secure voice clone through technology that they have available today. And we can make voice clones available to people through their impact partner program when we find the right partners to work with. And obviously the more recordings you have of your voice, the better the quality of the voice clone. And we can create, again, through the impact partner program, we can create access to people, to their natural voice. And we're doing that today through the relationships that we're building. And then through the capabilities that we built into the tool, leveraging artificial intelligence, we created an agent called Merlin that with very little input creates text predictions and text suggestions. So, we go beyond just next word prediction, but we go to next phrase prediction. So, as you're typing, it picks up your intention as to what you want to say. And it predicts, in fact, the next iteration of the solution will create three predictions. Based on what you've already typed, it will predict the next block of text for you, not just the next word. Good

Tom Butcher (14:01)

Good gracious.

David Betts (14:03)

And surface suggestions for you that you can accept or you can keep typing, but it's meant to accelerate your typing, accelerate your text generation. And then it also will do text suggestions. So you can give it very little input. Say you're cold and you need a blanket – all you maybe need to type. Or you're hungry, you just type hungry and it will generate in a variety of different tones of voices, suggestions for how you might.

suggests that you're hungry and you might like to get a meal. And so if I type I'm hungry or just hungry, it might suggest, "hey, you know what? I'm getting a little bit hungry. When you have a minute, can we talk about what's for lunch?" Yeah.

Tom Butcher (14:43)

Yeah.

David Betts (14:44)

And so we've gone from something that might sound like a demand in a robotic voice, "hungry". And to my caregiver, that sounds annoying and demanding and robotic and stressful to something that might even sound a little bit sassy and fun and humorous. and puts humanity back into the exchange. And that's what I was intending to solve for. And so we can use AI to do that. And it happens in milliseconds. And so that's the second part of it.

And then the third part of it was we found some great partners to work with and live like Lou. And they're engaged with the ALS community here in North America. And they make the app available through programs with them for free. And so we make it available through them. Again, check, check, check. Problem solved. That's the how. Both the what and the how.

Tom Butcher (15:36)

Great. Thank you very much indeed. I mean, what you've told me, once you actually start looking at something like that and look at kind of predictive text and voice cloning, it sounds so far into the future, but it's actually there already. I think, to use that term, I would be bamboozled if I was even addressing something like that.

David, you mentioned clone securely. What do you mean by the word secure in this context?

David Betts (16:15)

Well, maybe let me share a little bit about the process I went through initially and then talk a little bit about the state of play now.

Tom Butcher (16:23)

Yeah, please.

David Betts (16:25)

So, cloning my voice. I went to what was at the time sort of described as the leading provider of voice cloning technology for people living with speech limiting conditions and and I cloned my voice I was very hopeful I went through that process and the result was in my opinion terrible um and it sounded like me but it sounded like me spitting one word out after another with no rhythm, no prosody, no cadence, nothing, no emotion. And I was super disappointed and and then I came across uh the ElevenLabs voice cloning technology that I mentioned and um and the quality was amazing even with just a few 15 second clips and getting to an instant clone the quality was um was quite good.

And what I was pleased to see was that I was unable to get a replicable voice clone without actually going through a security process. And by actually validating that the voice clone that I wanted to connect using an API was actually mine by speaking myself, speaking into... a a few random sentences that they provided for me in the moment to to validate that that voice model was my own. And so now for and then at that point and now for people living with a speech something condition they have to actually have documentation to support that they are unable to go through that secure process but that secure cross security process gave me confidence. That security posture means that um. We're not talking about a company that would enable a deepfake voice clone. And they were obviously of the highest quality voice cloning technology available at the time in December of 24. If you wind the clock forward today, I see there are a number of other companies out there that have competitive products or competing products. I wouldn't even necessarily say they're competitive, where the security posture is much lower. and that worries me and I think it worries the industry a bit as well um yeah.

And so ElevenLabs has a lot of relationships with uh foundation partners they've stood up this impact partner program they have uh verified security protocols uh as I've described they they're getting better all the time they have uh secure API protocols they are adhering to GDPR they're adhering to all of the right um frameworks that are necessary from my perspective to be the right partner to work with.

And so that's who we're going to be kind of hitching our wagon to, knowing that we have the right protocols in place, that they have the right protocols in place, and that we can confidently provide our users with the right mechanisms to know that that their voice is secure with us and that it's secure with them as well. There are a number of that we'll see regulation coming down the line in the U.S. at some point and probably around the world as well.

Tom Butcher (19:53)

Great. Thank you so much. You talked about setting up businesses. Looking out there, what's the market and the landscape like for this type of innovation. Because from what you say, it's not relevant only to persons with ALS. It can have relevance across a spectrum of disabilities or conditions. Am I correct?

David Betts (20:26)

It does. And so I'm going to expand a little bit. So there are 97, we believe, 97 million people living worldwide with speech limiting conditions from a variety of causes that we think would benefit from assistive technology today, many of whom experience barriers to access. And those barriers are language, their cost, their process, as we've discussed. And so... Again, we tackled some of those in design. The app works in 31 different languages with the AI engines underneath it. It's available on iOS, Android, and Windows, so platform isn't an issue. Now the challenge becomes finding the right partners to make it available globally. In the same model that we want to stamp out or that we have stamped out with Live Like Lou, we want to stamp out around the world. Now, the business aspect, how does one make that a sustainable business becomes the next big question. And I wrestled with this for a long time.

Now, interestingly enough, in the solution itself, so in the tablet version of the solution, I was working with a family here in the U.S. that has young kids. I don't have any children, but I've had children in my lives. And I made a comment earlier today that I told stories to clients. So my entire career was built on storytelling. We come back to theater And, you know, all the world's a stage, right? So they sent me a picture early on of Darren using the solution with his children on his lap. And I realized, and it hit me very strongly, that he had two young kids, one of whom was three years old and had never heard her father tell her a bedtime story in his own voice. And so I was struck by that, Thomas, because we have a godson who lived with us for many years and we just used to sit around the dining room table and all we did was tell stories. We'd make them up and tell stories. And that's how we entertained ourselves every night. It was just story making and storytelling. And the caption of that, by the way, was Merlin is making him a smooth talker. So I love that because that was exactly the purpose. But I couldn't get out of my mind the idea that here's a father who couldn't tell a bedtime story to his children. And so into the app went a feature called the Story Builder. So using AI, again, a problem that I didn't set out to solve, but emerged from user feedback. In this case, sort of implicit user feedback, was the ability to became, you know, compelling for a lot of. reasons and it's also one of the

most used features of the app in its instantiation today and it's become kind of the inspiration because I found myself playing with it as I wrestled with this business problem because I don't want to make Talk to me, Goose! a product that tries to sustain a business because it then begins to violate the problem I tried to solve around how do we make it accessible for people who need it for free right so when I started playing with this, I was playing with the story features, I was pondering the question and I found the answer was staring me in the face was that it was so much fun why couldn't I just create a second app that everybody would have fun creating stories and that became its own product.

And it's called Fables Adventures. And we created a second product and we put it out on the market for consumers to play with. And anyone can play with it and they pay for the privilege to do so. And they get to make stories and share them with the world and their own feed. And it stands on its own as a consumer product. And there's a whole community of storytellers out there for a cause and it generates revenue to support my habit of giving things away. And that became the business.

Tom Butcher (25:17)

Yes.

David Betts (25:18)

And the underlying engine for story making. And story sharing actually has many, many use cases because the act of creating a story and sharing it with one another has a lot of power. And the engine that we created for story making and storytelling actually is really a powerful engine that we found has applicability in a lot of different use cases that can generate revenue and margin to support the business outside of all of this. And we can make and sell that in lots of different contexts. And that gives us the power to make Talk to Me, Goose! available to those 97 million people who need it. With the right foundation relationships, we can get small enough contract sizes that it makes it a win-win-win for everybody. And so that's the sustainable business model that we're trying to create at StoryFlight Labs to make this work globally for everybody.

Tom Butcher (26:16)

You said you were going to mention it, but you haven't yet. I'm sorry. Everybody asks it. The name. Talk to Me, Goose. Why?

David Betts (26:29)

Yeah. Well, I was a junior in high school when the very first Top Gun film came out. And if you're familiar with the movie,

Tom Butcher (26:37)

Yes, indeed.

David Betts (26:39)

Maverick. You know, Maverick's radio information officer is named Goose and it's his best friend right and and Goose, the very first line, in the very first film is "talk to me, Goose" and and and and Goose of course dies in the in the accident in the first film but whenever Maverick needs help, whenever he needs a dose of courage, it's the line that he says he says it throughout the first film he says it throughout the second film and um it's whenever he needs some help whenever he needs a little dose of courage when he's uncertain And I think when I started building this, I realized I'm going to need some help and a little bit of dose of courage, probably more than a dose on this journey that I'm on. And that name just literally came to me in those first 80 days when I was sitting there trying to think about how to solve these problems. And it really resonated with me. And, you know, honestly, the film almost made me go down the path of becoming a naval aviator. And the world is a better place that I did not. For many reasons. But that's the name and it stuck. And I love it. I love the films. And the underlying concept of just needing a little help, needing a wingman kind of is in there.

Tom Butcher (27:56)

Great. I think maybe there should be another book, listening to how long you did your coding for, which should be "Around the Code in 80 Days". The story of building an app in 80 days. I think that would be really cool and use the app to create the story. We won't go there either. But what we will look at now is you've been doing this for a period. You're probably seeing trends, developments and indeed. further challenges for this type of solution. Can you speak to any one or all of those for a bit, i.e. the current trends that you see, good developments, bad developments, and challenges, surmountable, insurmountable, or ones that just arise the more work you do, the more you try to improve, the more you... make your app accessible to people?

David Betts (29:02)

Well, I did the thing initially that I always told my clients to never do.

Tom Butcher (29:08)

Which is?

David Betts (29:09)

I built it with user research of n equals one, meaning I built it for me.

Tom Butcher (29:20)

Yeah, yes.

David Betts (29:23)

And because that's the only research user I knew of at the time that needed it. Um, and I didn't have the time, uh, nor access to, to, to be able to do more research and, and I built it in 80 days and I got the prototype out there.

And, and so we've just completed in May, um, actually some very detailed user research with a project that I sponsored at Carnegie Mellon with their human computer interaction Institute. And, and I learned it a lot about experience and user interface design from that team. They were phenomenal team of senior undergraduates finishing their degree in human-computer interaction. And so we are about to launch a revision to the solution that incorporates much of what I learned.

There's still more to do. Onboard users is something that I think I have underappreciated how hard that is, Thomas, to bring people into the app and help them understand how it works and make them feel comfortable with using the various features and components. Um, and how hard that is to, to do, um, both in both of the apps that we've launched it, I continue to, it's, you know, simplify, simplify, simplify seems to be the mantra for how we do it. How hard... Simplification is, you know, it sounds easy, but it is incredibly difficult to simplify the user experience. So I'm on this mission right now to do that and just make it easier for people to use all the time. And hopefully this next version will make it easier for everybody to use, including those that are using an eye gaze device in particular. That's the next round. I've done this all myself, with no coding experience. So I'm greatly looking forward to continuing to build our team. Uh, we've hired a business development person. Uh, I'll be bringing on a technology leader. Um, I have anxiety about all of that.

Tom Butcher (31:31)

Yeah. I can imagine.

David Betts (31:34)

But, um, you know, I'm also very excited about all of that because I think it will um, about where this goes from here.

Tom Butcher (31:47)

Equally, probably.

David Betts (31:48)

Equally, yeah.

Tom Butcher (31:49)

That's great. Thank you so much. And I want to talk about AI.

David Betts (31:56)

Sure.

Tom Butcher (31:57)

Sure. Your solution would, if I'm not wrong... be possible without AI. I'd like to come back to talk about AI, not only in the context of product development, but market dynamics, but also to ask you a question based on what you've just said, which is this whole issue of simplification. Making things simpler, shorter is really difficult. And it takes time. How does, or maybe it doesn't, how does AI provide a tool to simplification?

David Betts (32:43)

Yes. Well...

Tom Butcher (32:44)

Well, maybe it doesn't.

David Betts (32:45)

It is interesting because I would say I have gone through an evolution over the last, or revolution perhaps, over the last year and a half. And I've been very careful, but I've probably been very, I say careful, but both risk averse and risk loving at the same time, maybe a balance of each. I will not put things into the solution unless I understand them. I think there's been a lot of development and I even get challenged on it online all the time that our solution is just this vibe coding. Kind of... AI enabled piece of work. Yeah, it's AI enabled yeah and I've certainly used AI to assist in the coding and the development but I would say assist um not not AI developed um in that I didn't go out and ask Claude code

to develop me an app that does x. I developed the framework and I developed the you know, the feature set. And when I ran into a problem, I would go and ask a variety of different AI assistants to help me solve the problem that I was facing. And when I didn't understand the solutions that were being proposed, I would ask said agent or assistant to explain to me how the proposed solution would work, just like I would ask any of my team members at Deloitte to explain their work to me.

Tom Butcher (34:21)

Absolutely.

David Betts (34:22)

Because if I didn't understand what it was proposing, I didn't know, I wasn't confident enough to put it into the solution. And so I got better solutions that way because oftentimes when I would ask for an explanation, it couldn't explain it. Again, just like an analyst on my team, like, you know, help me understand how what you're telling me to do is going to work. And then I'd like, you know, help me understand how what you're telling me to do is going to work. And then I'd be like, no, you're right. That's not going to work.

Tom Butcher (34:42)

Yeah.

David Betts (34:43)

And so, I would say that in the latest versions, I've become more comfortable asking the agents to do more discrete things without, you know, to be able to say, you know, change these things in the solution and allow it to do that directly. But that's only of late when I feel more comfortable knowing what it's going to do as opposed to just like, I'm not asking it to build the app. I'm asking it to correct something that I know is wrong. And that's an evolution, I would say, over the last few years. Or a few years. It feels like a few years. 18 months.

Tom Butcher (35:23)

18 months only.

David Betts (35:26)

So... And it's come a long way. I think the solutions have gotten better as well. I don't know if that's a direct answer to your question, but it's kind of my experience over the last 18 months. So it's been helpful. And it's been how I use the tools. My big pivot... last

year was recognizing that it wasn't a search engine, that it was actually a tool that I could use and then start treating it like a teammate and not just a search engine, if you will, go find me an answer, but do this piece of work for me and start asking it questions and giving it feedback just like I would someone on my team. That really changed the dynamic for me and gave me better outcomes. And I think a better product as a result. And that's really been powerful.

Tom Butcher (36:14)

Yeah. So you work with it.

David Betts (36:18)

Correct.

Tom Butcher (36:20)

I I I can imagine that that's a realization and quite a major realization that you have to work with something. It's not going to do it necessarily for you, but it'll do it with you.

David Betts (36:43)

That is correct. And there's a big aha there too in that I had a number of conversations recently with others where I also look at my costs. And they're relative to what I have been talking to other people about. My costs are very low.

Tom Butcher (36:52)

Right. Yeah.

David Betts (36:56)

Because I'm not asking it to go do big things. I'm asking it to go solve discrete problems. And sometimes I think, am I not asking it to do enough? But I also look at my invoices and I know that it's a manageable cost. And I've heard some horror stories about people paying, you know, thousands of dollars and not really getting workable product or getting something that is that they don't really understand what it's doing. And I think, well, you know. I paid $35 last month and I have a workable solution. So I'm comfortable with that.

Tom Butcher (37:30)

Yeah. Oh, I can imagine. I was talking with someone when I was up at Microsoft and was saying one of the difficulties is if you don't know the language, you tell someone to build something, they build it, they give it to you and they say, well, here you are. And you say,

well, this is not what I wanted. Yes, but it's what you asked for. There lies, if we're going to quote Shakespeare, aye, there's the rub. I mean, it really is a case of that.

And I'm just going to ask about the aha moment, which is that for it to work best, your app, you work with your app. Your app doesn't work for you. It works with you. How do you address that when you are testing?

David Betts (38:27)

Testing is is something I need to do more and better testing with um I you know it's funny when you said that I never felt like my teams worked for me either which maybe is why I get good outcomes. I always work with my teams and so when I say I work with these agents it's probably why I get good outcomes too, because I never felt like my teams worked for me. It's just something that struck me when you said that. In testing, because I'm kind of a one-man show, it's still at this stage, I do all my own testing. So I spend an awful lot of time just using the app and trying to find all of the edge cases myself. I'm really looking forward to having a team and someone with a lot more experience in technical development than I have, to know actually how to automate some of our testing, because that would take a load off.

Tom Butcher (39:20)

Great. Thank you. I'm looking at time and I'm cognizant that we've just got not very long. So what I'd like to do, David, is I'd like to try to sum up briefly how through your experience, you've actually provided us some very very useful and practical takeaways some which are general takeaways and some which are specific looking at first the solution that you're providing in your field what it appears to me is that you have proven and you are proving that with creativity, the triple barrier or the triple barriers of cost, process, and access can be overcome. So that's the first thing specific to your solution.

Second also, which is when people are given back their voice, which is what you're doing. They're given it back quite literally, but they're given back so much more because it helps reconnect people. It helps build or rebuild communities, both large and small. And I think what's so important is that it demonstrates just how technology can be used to give people agency, how they can build self-efficacy, trust, and so important, specifically in this area, a sense of belonging as opposed to a sense of isolation.

And then thirdly, I think, which is just so, so important, going from the particular to the general, I think it's just incredibly, or you've proved and demonstrated how incredibly important it is to remember that communication is about so much more than just day-to-

day, back-and-forth dialogue. And that's dialogue in its simplest form, because it's not. I don't know whether that sums up what you've been able to tell us and share with us or whether there's anything particularly you should like to add to that.

David Betts (42:06)

No, I think you summed it up really well. Just, I think, two things I might say on the sense of belonging and building communities.

I think one question that I've pondered, especially as we think about the storytelling app and the further applications of the... storytelling engine that we've built you know the question that I keep thinking about, Thomas is you know, wouldn't it be really cool if the technology that that we're that we're building you know the artificial intelligence enabled storytelling you know could really help us rebuild community right through storytelling the same technology that's kind of pushed us apart socially you know Like the fact that we've been using our phones to absorb and has really effectively disconnected us. What if we used our phones to create and reconnect in different ways through storytelling? I'm kind of intrigued by that question. And so I think that's where community building through storytelling kind of comes in. I've been thinking a lot about that. So that's one thing.

And then the last thing, I'll just close on this. The idea of giving someone their voice back and this ability to reconnect is just super important to me. When I looked at the solutions that are out there, they really enable people to engage in utilitarian communication. "I'm cold." "I'm hungry." "Cover me up." That is just... That's undignified. And this is not about, so it's not about efficiency, it's about dignity. And if I can give somebody... And this is not about, so it's not about efficiency, it's about dignity. And if I can give somebody the opportunity to get some dignity and autonomy and agency back, it's just a privilege. And that's what's keeping me moving right now when moving gets harder.

Tom Butcher (44:02)

Yeah, I can absolutely understand. And I'd just like to kind of add a wee bit of a riff on your first point. I think that so many people forget that our history, cultural history and history as humans started off orally, sitting around a fire, well, maybe not a fire, when there was fire, and talking, telling stories, myths, legends, before anything got written down. There's something to it, and I'll just leave it at that.

David Betts (44:39)

Yuval Noah Bariri says that storytelling is what separates us from the other species.

Tom Butcher (44:46)

Yeah, that's true. I can't imagine the loathsome chipmunks doing that in our back garden. I'm not going to let you off the hook, David. I always finish an interview or a podcast by asking my guest to provide listeners with a single call to action. to take away with them what would your yours be to our listeners today?

David Betts (45:19)

I'm gonna go a little off script and um you know we haven't talked at all about you know it's something we haven't talked at all about but you know something I think I've contemplated a lot since December of 24 and I think was always implicit in what I lived throughout my career but you know like we have very little time if you think about it. And I would just encourage everyone to take a pause and be super intentional about how you use the time that you do have. And that's what's really been, I think, a privilege for me over the last 18 months or so is, you know, I get the opportunity every day to wake up and I stand at the top of the stairs. I get to take inventory about, you know, am I going to be able to go down the stairs today or not? And how I use that time from... the moment when I stand at the top of the stairs until the moment when I go back up, I get to make a choice as to what I do with that time.

And I would encourage everyone to make a choice and be intentional about how you use every one of those moments, you know, from the top of the stairs at the beginning of the day to the top of the stairs at the end of the day, because it's really a privilege to get to do what I get to do. And it's really a privilege to get to do what you get to do. So use it wisely.

Tom Butcher (46:40)

And I totally agree with you. David, thank you very much. Thank you for joining us. It's a joy to be able to do this podcast. We talked about it for a number of months and even back in February. So actually to be able to sit down in front of you has been absolutely great. And thanks so much for... sharing not only your experiences, but also your wisdom with us. And David, thank you once again.

Stay cool, listeners. It's going to be about 95 degrees Fahrenheit here in Cleveland Heights and down in Pittsburgh where David is, I'm afraid. I am so antediluvian that I can't translate that into Celsius, but I think it's, you know, around about 36 or something like that. Anyway, so we'll try and stay cool and we'll just ask you listeners to please look out for the next episode.

Goodbye and thank you for tuning in.

Judith Hermetter (47:42)

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