



## A conversation with Sandy Ho

### **Voice Over:**

(Hip-Hop music plays)

### **Mary Morder:**

Hello, everybody. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, welcome to “504 at 50.” I'm Mary Morder, responsible for materials development at the Southeast ADA Center.

The “504 at 50” is a special interview series created in recognition of the 50th anniversary of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. In this series, Dr. Peter Blanck, PhD., JD. speaks with leaders of the Disability Rights Movement, who advance the cause of equal rights through their tireless work. Today we welcome our guest, Sandy Ho.

Sandy is a disabled community organizer and director of the Disability Inclusion Fund at Borealis Philanthropy. In 2015, she was recognized as a White House Champion of Change for her work on mentorship for young women with disabilities in Massachusetts. She identifies as a disabled queer Asian American woman. Welcome to the program, Sandy.

### **Sandy Ho:**

Thank you so much and happy to be here.

### **Mary Morder:**

Great, thank you. Our host today is university professor and chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute, Dr. Peter Blanck. We're so pleased to have both of you with us today. And Peter, I turn it over to you.

### **Peter Blanck:**



Thank you, Mary. And Sandy, it really is a pleasure and honor to be with you today. I guess I'll start with a disclaimer and then a question. I'm a Met fan and are the Boston Red Sox going to be a little better next year?

**Sandy Ho:**

Oh, Peter, come on. We could have started on such a better note. Yeah, it's been a more painful than usual season for the Red Sox, and I'm very familiar with the rollercoaster emotional ride that we, Red Sox fans, tend to experience, but I hope so.

And I'm glad to hear that you're a Mets fan and not a Yankees fan, so thank you.

**Peter Blanck:**

We do, in all seriousness, of course, live in a rollercoaster time. A time of terrific hardship for members of the community, particularly vulnerable groups. And at the highest levels, what have been your life experience, both looking outward and inward, over these last couple of years, with the throes of COVID, and war, and economic challenges, and many politicians who don't have much respect for the rule of law and precedent? Where are you at in terms of your thinking? Are you optimistic for a better future?

**Sandy Ho:**

I think that my optimism is one that's cautiously optimistic. I grew up during the time of the ADA, I started kindergarten in 1990. And so my perspective of being a part of the ADA generation, a term that was coined by Rebecca Cokley, is one where we are poised to get lead on the civil rights laws and the movement that came before us.

And that includes making the changes in our present society in some of the most concerning issues, whether it's climate change, whether it's racial and economic justice. And one of the things that I am optimistic about, cautiously, is the increasing awareness of the disability rights movement, as its own civil rights movement, as part of some of those other social justice movements that I just named.

And so we are not as much of silo, I think, as a movement, and as disabled leaders, as we might have been probably 25, 50 years ago. And so that's the optimism that I'm continuing to carry forward with me, that we are being more integrated into the civil rights spaces.



I mean, there's definitely more work to be done and greater awareness, and also policy efforts that really need to have a disability perspective leading it, that doesn't quite currently exist. And some of that is really obviously, the COVID-19 public health federal policies there, but I think that's the hope that I have to cling to a bit to keep ourselves going.

**Peter Blanck:**

Now, you are of a new generation, a much more diverse and inclusive attitudes about disability and breadth of this community. I know you were, and very are, involved in the intersectional nature of the community, both from the lived experience and what you've promoted over the years.

For our listeners, how would you describe what we mean by intersectionality? And why is it now an important dimension to express of the disability experience?

**Sandy Ho:**

Yeah. Whenever I get questions about intersectionality, I think it's really important to return to its origins, which it is a legal theory that was founded and first developed by Kimberle Crenshaw, who is a civil rights thinker and legal expertise. And it is a theory that describes the way we experience power.

And some of us have different ways of accessing power than others. So it is to say that some folks have marginalizations, and experiences of marginalization, such as being somebody who is non-white, maybe somebody who lives with multiple disabilities, somebody who has different immigration status, somebody who might not communicate orally. And all of these experiences, in different settings, in different contexts, mean that our access to privilege, positionality, and power lands differently.

And it is not a competition, it is not about layering of the different identities, so much as somebody who is currently finishing my master's program in public policy, somebody who also is neuro divergent, I identify as being somebody who is ADHD. I have a hearing loss, I'm a wheelchair user; in the classroom setting during this time of COVID, I experience marginalization, in that, I, for my own safety, have to be in a classroom that is remote, for my own safety and health-like accommodations.

But in a different setting, right, in a setting where imagine it is all about disability community members, my privilege of having access to an education, of having access to steady income of a job, employment, housing, that lands me in a different position of privilege and power and access. Because recognizing that most folks



with disabilities in our country do not have access to employment and housing in the ways that I do.

And so intersectionality is important, because it is a framing to really better understand where power exists, where it can be changed, and who is holding the power. And so I think that when folks, over the years in particular, I think intersectionality has become this kind of buzzword and has lost some of this original intent, I think. But really, I would encourage your listeners to seek out and to learn more about Kimberle Crenshaw's work, and the legal case that really contributed to this theory.

**Peter Blanck:**

So maybe this is kind of an overly simplistic question, but why is the concept good in the evolution of thinking about disability, or race, or gender? How does it move the day-to-day dialogue forward in ways that we grow and change?

**Sandy Ho:**

So I think that in this present moment, for example, it is August 5th, we just finished marking the 32nd anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. And this is a moment that happens every year, right, for our community for our movement, that we remember the disability, the independent living movement, that was led by people with disabilities, primarily folks with physical disabilities; also primarily folks who were white, who communicated in ways that were "more easily accessible to folks in power and in government."

And so what this meant, I think for me, as somebody's been growing up in the ADA generation, is that kind of constant reminder of like, "Okay, so this is what our movement has started from, but our movement today look completely different."

It is about that cross-movement solidarity. It is about saying the folks who are experiencing institutionalization, that is not just folks in long-term care settings and private care settings, but also folks who are in prison, are in detention centers, are also young people in nursing homes.

That kind of broader expansion of our understanding of intersectionality, and how it's still very much necessary to the disability civil rights movement today, I think is really important for us to just continue moving forward.

And so getting back to your question around gender and race, for example, when I look around at the disability movement right now, I'm seeing a lot of disabled women, quite frankly, who are leaders, in particularly disabled women of color. I'm



thinking of Anita Cameron, Alice Wong, thinking of Vilissa Thompson, Leah Lakshmi, and others, who, because of the work, because of their visibility, because of the contributions, and people are listening to what folks are sharing.

And it's grounded in not just lived experiences, which is important, but also in the rigor of critical disability study, the rigor of public policy, the notion that personal is political, I think, is very much present still right now in our movement. And I looked at some of those leaders that I just named as folks who have not just kind of acted on that, but are really modeling how leadership can be a more welcoming place for all of us.

**Peter Blanck:**

Do you consider the concept of intersectionality as applied within conceptions of disability, as well? For example, in the simplest way, physical versus mental, or mobility versus sensory? Is that part of the intersectional concept? Or is it primarily focused on other characteristics; race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, perhaps?

**Sandy Ho:**

No, I absolutely think that intersectionality encompasses disability in the broadest form of that, right? So we know that, for example, poverty is both a contributor to disability, and also a consequence of disability. When folks don't have access to healthy food, when folks don't have access to a primary care physician, when folks are living in poor environments that are contributing to respiratory illnesses and chronic illnesses, these are factors that contribute to disability.

And so I think intersectionality, in the example that you just gave--it is less so about one or the other, but existing the crossroads, and at the intersection of recognizing that somebody who has multiple disabilities is absolutely a part of our disability civil rights movement, in the way that somebody who is experiencing, might have just identifying as one disability, but also brings to that experience different gender, race, ethnicity, political background, religious belief.

And I think all of this is important to incorporate, because it really sort of means the difference between what a policy outcome could be, who gets counted, who doesn't, who gets to be at the table, and who isn't.

So for example, one organization that I often think about in this work, and within our own movement, who I think is a population that does not get enough advocacy space as the rest of us do, are folks who use AAC, augmented communication devices, so folks who are non-verbal.



And the organization that I'm thinking of is Communication First, the only civil rights organization that works to support folks who use AAC; whether it is their access to education, whether it's their access to tech, and being a part of our now very much online, remote world. I mean, this is how you and I are talking today.

And yet, we also see that it is folks who don't have access to AAC, and assistive techs, and other devices that, among students who get penalized, who get segregated into other classrooms, who, at worse, get restrained by police, because of their ways of showing up and communicating are deemed a threat in a public school setting.

And so that would be an example of how it is beyond just kind of a physical versus mental or invisible disability.

**Peter Blanck:**

So very it's important and interesting. By definition, we're all intersectional beings, but it's the unique combination, as associated with oppression, or a lack of power in society, in which the term really comes alive. Is that your thinking?

**Sandy Ho:**

Yes. And so getting back to kind of using this theory and this framework to really identify and hone in on where those positions of power are, and who historically has not had access to power, helps community organizers like myself and others, and I would hope public policy figures, researchers, educators, to not just identify power but then to contribute to change.

Once we figure out and can better see the map, so who has the direct access to power in certain parts of our society, and particularly, for example, in our government system, we can really quickly identify some of the practices that need to be changed to upend those.

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, you smartly anticipated my question, and that was how does this apply to advocacy, both in principle and in specifically with regard to your advocacy?

**Sandy Ho:**

So a few years ago, back in 2016, I and a bunch of friends, who are also disabled activists and community organizers, original group, most of whom are also identified as disabled people of color; we started noticing the rise of a lot of TED



talks, or thought pieces, or YouTube pieces from people with disabilities speaking to their lived experiences, but in a way that just did not resonate with us.

It was often somebody who came from middle to upper class income, had wealth, had privilege, and we could identify this, because it would often be somebody who would be talking about a fancy robotic arm, or a wheelchair that can climb up stairs. And all of this equipment that folks like myself, who were on Medicaid, insurance is never going to cover that. And the experiences that were being spoken to, that we saw, were really about this overcoming narrative, or adapting to narrative.

And I want to be very clear here and say that it's not that those experiences are not just as important, just as validated, just as necessary in the breadth of the diversity of our community, but is not the only one. And I would also hypothesize to say that it is likely not the majority.

And so as we began to think about this, we were like, well, what is our space and what is our place in the community--particularly folks who are disabled people of color, who, at the time, I was living on SSI, working at a mentoring program, and really was just trying to figure it out.

I did not have a ton of disability role models as a kid. I am the only person in my family with a disability. And so we just started asking questions about is there a conference that exists that is organized by disabled people for disabled people? Drawing from that mantra of "Nothing about us without us," does that place exist? Does something like that exist?

And the more we asked, the more we learned that it really doesn't. And there are conferences in academia, conferences for paraprofessionals, but really not a community-generated place. And so we created what is called the Disability and Intersectionality Summit, DIS, started in 2016. We had a shoestring budget. We barely had enough to rent out a small conference space in the Boston area, in a building that had one elevator.

And I remember that Saturday, I mean, our team really under-counted the number of people who showed up, because that elevator really got put to use that day. And the room began, it was filled, so much so that the building manager came to up to me at one point and said, "You're pushing up against the maximum. We don't want to break the fire code."

And so it was a space that not just centered and lifted up disabled people of color who don't have these platforms, but it was also a space that really incorporated disability justice principles, I know that we'll get into a little bit later.



But as part of our organizing practices, so this meant we paid every presenter. We ensured that it would be live streamed over YouTube and Facebook. This meant that we included ASL and CART, whether or not there was somebody in the audience who “asked for it.”

And we really tried to model what we believed our movement was about in our organizing practices. And so the first one was in 2016, and the most recent one happened, maybe, online in 2020. The most recent one happened in 2022. Yeah.

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, once again, you anticipated my question. And I wanted to ask you, what your conception of disability justice is, and is it a unique concept to disability, as opposed to racial justice, gender justice? Is that concept mean something different? Obviously, they are different experiences, but is it used in a way that connotes the unique experience of disability?

**Sandy Ho:**

So disability justice is a framework that has 10 principles, and it was created in around 2005 by Patty Berne, Leroy Moore, Stacey Milburn, Mia Mingus, and led by disabled women, femmes, trans, and non-binary folks.

And I would encourage your listeners to also check out Sins Invalid, and that is S-I-N-S-I-N-V-A-L-I-D.org. And this is a group that recognize disability civil rights, and laws, and policy are not the only way, and maybe not even the most effective way perhaps, to drive change. Because when we look at who has, like I was speaking to earlier, who has power in those traditional pathways of democracy, who gets heard and counted and is represented most often, are not necessarily the folks who fall between the cracks, who are existing at the margins of our society.

And so these 10 principles really highlight why not only is it important for our movement spaces to be led by disabled people of color, but also how we can collectively drive change beyond laws and policy, beyond this notion of equal rights, right?

Because equal rights, as we've learned from other movements, including racial justice, including Black lives movement, including the LGBTQ movement, does not actually beget equity. And so among some of these 10 principles, the first one is actually intersectionality, right?

So it's recognizing that the disability experiences of folks who are marginalized, folks who are non-white, who do not come from generational wealth, experience



intersectionality of oppression that is intertwined, not just racial, homophobia, sexism, but also through classism, through ageism, through our geographical location.

And it is usually one with disability oppression, which is ableism. This kind of idea that there are some bodyminds that are more privileged and are more able to produce in a capitalist system than others. And so this idea that intersectionality is part of disability justice, I think answering your question about how this is a part of the disability experience. It is a place that many folks who don't feel represented by our disability rights and more traditional forms of advocacy, don't feel necessarily reflected or represented.

And so another principle that gets to this point is leadership of those most impacted, which is to say that folks who are closest to experiences of injustice are likely with folks who have the solution. When we think about just even the history of the disability movement, our leaders in the fifties and sixties, folks were breaking out of state institutions. I'm thinking about ADAPT in the '70s, tying themselves to Greyhound buses in Colorado.

Nobody asked for permission, and yet they were the folks who are closest to injustice, who experienced discrimination, who experienced the inability to access things like public transit, and land on it and just did it. And so I think this principle of leadership of those most impacted is really important, because there is a sense of one power is held by groups of people, understandably so, there are reluctant to share that power, to release that power to then pass it on.

But if we are to truly be a movement centered in collective liberation, collective care, to get ourselves on the other side of ableism, we need to be listening to the folks who are experiencing, not just injustice, but are already doing the work.

And so I mean, other principles of the disability justice movement that I've already kind of spoken to are cross movement solidarity, and just this kind of fundamental idea that we as a disabled civil rights movement can say, "No, our people are yours and your people are ours."

This idea that folks who are in the LGBTQ movement, who are experiencing conversion therapy, those are also people who are being disabled, through the trauma, through the mental health, through emotional disabilities. And we should be more present in other movements, and other movements should also be more present in ours.

Disability justice, what it really is saying is ableism is something that is experienced by everybody. And you don't need to be a person with a disability to experience



this. You don't need to necessarily "call yourself an ally," but the experience of disability is going to ultimately be held by everybody. We know this for a fact.

So ableism in that sense, the ways that we have already seen it in the past few years, be a part of our just kind of embedded so deeply in our healthcare system, in our long-term care system, for example, has caused massive deaths, has caused incredible amounts of consequences for, not just our community, but for the long term of our broader society, as well.

And so I really do draw from this disability justice framing, because it does feel like home to me in a political and community organizer sense, more so than the disability rights kind of advocacy through the political channels. And I think part of that, just speaking for myself, is because I come from a family where my parents are immigrants and refugees.

My mom is from Northern Vietnam, my dad is from Hong Kong. They came to the country and did not know the language. I am their only child with a disability, which meant that I observed them, as a child, trying to navigate so much newness, but had to community organize.

That meant my mom had to do the research with other parents of color that she trusted before she showed up at an IEP meeting for me. That meant that my dad had to do the research around, like, OK, what are the accessible community swim and camps and recreation classes that I could do?

That meant that folks at school needed to be a little bit more aware, I think, of when they talk to my parents about independent living goals, somebody from an Asian American family, independent for them means like, you're taking me out of my home and away from my parents, and away from my family, when that's just not how our family and our culture really operates and shows up for each other.

And so kind of seeing the ways that disability justice, as the principles have been described, it kind of really reflects my own community organizing background, history, and advocacy experiences.

**Peter Blanck:**

What are your aspirations for the immediate future for yourself, in terms of things you want to develop, or experience, or further grow? Do you have any more immediate plans related to advocacy, or education, or policy making?

**Sandy Ho:**



Yeah. Well, I mean, personally, I'm really looking forward to finishing my master's in public policy the end of next spring. And I don't say that lightly knowing how many barriers, both financially, both to access and accommodation, higher ed is for many disabled folks.

But in terms of aspirations for our movement, and for more broadly, I am really hoping that the generation that came of age during the ADA, the ADA generation, many of whom, like myself, are now holding positions of leadership and power across many sectors of our society, can come together just figure out some of the most urgent things that our movement hasn't figured out yet.

And I'm thinking about long-term care, I'm thinking about what are the alternatives to nursing homes? I'm also thinking about climate change, and the ways that, repeatedly, whenever a hurricane, or a natural disaster happens, we always hear about how it's the folks who are older, and people with disabilities, who get left behind.

And I'm thinking about also just the constant stigma of disability that, somehow, is still carried through; that it is so deeply rooted into, not just our country, because I don't think it's unique to the US, but just this idea that people with disabilities are somehow needing to be cured still, for lack of a better word.

That we are still somehow so uncomfortable with the idea of disability, when it is in fact just another natural part of human diversity, of the human experience. I think that is going to be a constant part of our movement's legacy to continue to push on, because although it's great and it's incredible that we are seeing movies, and Netflix, and all these social media and media representations of people with disabilities; and yet I think when something like COVID-19 happens, people don't actually care. People don't respond to it in the same kind of excitement, or urgency, that the moment was really calling for. It's just kind of like acceptable consequence for the rest of our society, and for too many of our public policy leaders.

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, Sandy, it's really been a pleasure and an honor to speak with you. I guess I'll end where I began, and that is, better year next year for the Boston Red Sox. And I guess, do you go to the games at all? Do you still, of course, cheer on the Red Sox?

**Sandy Ho:**



Yes, of course, of course. I mean, baseball and Fenway are always going to be a part of some of my favorite things, in some ways, one of my favorite places in the Boston area. But yeah, hopefully next year we can really get it together.

**Peter Blanck:**

Well, you definitely have it together, and so will the Red Sox, I'm sure. And once again, I know I speak on behalf of our listeners, this has been a fantastic and interesting interview, and very important to understand the movement going forward. So thank you very much.

**Sandy Ho:**

Thank you, Peter.

**Mary Morder:**

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