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HOST: The world we live in today has a lot of room to improve when it comes to accessibility for people with disabilities, simple routines can suck up an incredible amount of time and energy for disabled people. Dianna Hu is a software engineer at Google and she describes this energy as a limited number of spoons you start off your day with and are destined to run out of. However, during the pandemic Hu has begun to reclaim her spoons and find accessibility through working at home with more spoons comes more freedom, a new, more accessible normal.

Welcome to The Conversation Piece.

DIANNA HU: Hi everyone. My name is Dianna Hu - I'm in software engineering at Google. I'm wearing a black t-shirt, but the emblazoned words, 30th anniversary of the ADA 2020 Equity Diversity Inclusion to commemorate 30 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the United States.

I'm sitting on top of my motorised wheelchair, upper immobile. I've been driving a wheelchair since I was two years old. I was born with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA for short). SMA is a neurodegenerative disability that severely weakens the muscles, making it difficult to perform many basic activities of daily.

Living, walking, sitting, even breathing become challenges for someone with SMA. It's been called the top genetic killer of infants. When I was diagnosed at 18 months, the doctors told my parents, they weren't sure whether I'd make it to my next birthday from the start. My life has been a struggle for survival, and that struggle for survival has strengthened me.

It's hurled obstacle after obstacle in my path, and it's unlimited the resiliency to confront them. There's a theory about confronting the challenges of life with a disability it's called spoon theory. The disabled person starts to have each day with a small finite set of spoons, units of energy to spend on tasks. They need to carry out during the day. And once you're out of spoons, you're out of luck. So here's what my day of spoons looks like. I almost always wake up exhausted because I need to be turned multiple times every night to avoid that source. So just getting out of bed and ready for the day, that's a spoon gone. Then I wait for the shuttle to take me to work, and it usually has a ramp, but that ramp is sometimes broken without warning or the buses too crowded for a wheelchair, even though it can somehow fit the five able-bodied people who are sitting next to me, waiting for the next shuttle, realising I'll be late for my meeting.

That's another spoon gone then trying to get to my meeting, navigating a series of elevators with buttons that are too high for someone in a wheelchair to reach



the time, spent grappling with the limits and the irony of an elevator inaccessible to a wheelchair user that costs at least another spoon and on and on and on. It's not even lunchtime yet. And more than half of my spoons are gone. These are the sacrifices that a person with a disability has to make every single day just to get through the day. The physical world is a spoon at sucker, but that state of the world is changing. The pandemic has forced the world at large, under quarantine and work in many areas, including my software engineering job at Google has gone remote work from home and there's no environment, more optimised for my accessibility needs at home.

I love it. Now I have the freedom to wake up each morning, a little bit later, but a little less sleep deprivation and a little more energy to face the day. I still take that spoon back. I also don't have to grapple with the uncertainty and the stresses of transportation. It's another spoon for me and not to mention eating and drinking my favourite cups of tea throughout the whole day. I no longer have to intentionally dehydrate myself to avoid the far too few accessible bathrooms, wherever I'm going. I can drink flying away. When I want to drink. The flexibility of working from home has, let me take back my freedom one spoon at a time. And with more spoons I drew do more. My boosted energy throughout the day, translates to boosted productivity. I can attend more meetings and events without the anxiety of planning, accessible routes and contingency plans for the inevitable failures in the physical world.

I can focus on managing my code more than my sprinkles. I have the physical and mental bandwidth to dedicate myself to accessibility, passion projects, both in and out of work. This kind of freedom and flexibility of working from home has been a long-standing accommodations request from the disability community. And now it's revolutionising the world at large. I am incredibly fortunate to have a manager will support a continued work from home accommodation for me, even after the chaos of the pandemic subsides and the world's returns to normal, she's looking out for my wellbeing and he recognises that optimising for my wellbeing is also optimising for my ability to contribute to my company. This is a satisfying win-win for all parties involved. So, I urge employers event organisers, everyone who has a say in crafting the way the interact with the world around us. Let the "new normal" continue to include this virtual equalising agent of accessibility.

This ultimate Spoon Redeemer. Thank you.

HOST: Dianna Hu spoke at TD presents The Walrus Talks Inclusion in October of 2020. And she's just one of over 800 fantastic Canadians who have wheeled, webcammed, and walked onto a stage at The Walrus Talks.

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Dianna Hu from The Walrus Talks



Care to join us? Coming up next is The Walrus Leadership Forum on Health Care on April 15. Register at the [walrus.ca/events](https://www.walrus.ca/events) for a front-row seat from the comfort of your own home.