00:00:02:15 - 00:00:20:02

Katie

Welcome to From the Ground Up, a podcast by the UK Youth Climate Coalition. This is a podcast by and for young people who are passionate about climate justice and want to make a difference. In each episode, we'll be talking to young activists about a particular issue within the umbrella of climate justice they're passionate about, what it means to be an activist and what you can do to help.

00:00:21:24 - 00:00:38:04

Katie

I'm Katie. I'll be your host today. And our guest is Helen Leonard Williams, who's in the UKYCC Community Working Group. This episode is part two of our two episodes on Disability Justice. I caught up with Kirsten Leggatt, who used to be in UKYCC to talk about this in our previous episode and we had a really good chat.

00:00:38:09 - 00:00:52:16

Katie

So if you haven't listened to it already, please check it out. I'm excited to get a different perspective on this issue today. Helen is very passionate and vocal about the issues facing disabled people in our society. And I'm really looking forward to this conversation.

00:00:57:13 - 00:01:05:17

Katie

So today I'm very excited to welcome to the podcast Helen from UKYCC’s Community Working Group. Helen, please, can you introduce yourself to the listeners?

00:01:06:08 - 00:01:45:06

Helen

Hello, I'm Helen. I am a member of the Community Working Group as Katie said, and I've been at UKYCC about a year and a bit now. I am 22 and disabled and I've had Myalgic Encephalomyelitis for five years now, which will probably inform like a lot of my answers today. I'm very interested in disability justice and climate justice always been like very interested in environmental issues.

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Helen

And then when I got disabled was like, recognised, there was a huge amount of systemic issues as well that needed addressing.

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Helen

Yeah, kind of thrown into the deep end of it. So yeah, become more interested in disability justice since then.

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Katie

Cool. I guess just to start with a very broad question, what does disability justice mean to you?

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Helen

I think I mean, on a very basic level, disability justice is the dismantling of the systems which oppress disabled people and ableist ideas that we have as a society that are very ingrained in our society. I think it's also kind of putting multi marginalized, disabled people to the forefront as leaders in kind of the dismantling of this. It's making sure yeah, making sure that multi marginalized, disabled people are at the forefront and we are not just dismantling systems which oppress, you know, white, cis, straight, middle class, disabled people, but also, you know, people living in poverty and black disabled people, indigenous disabled people, queer disabled people.

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Helen

I think it's a yeah, I think it means building a society that's not based on productivity and you know, capitalism, but based on community care and mutual aid and systems which value people for, you know, just being humans rather than how much we can produce or what we look like or the ways we interact with the world. And I think for me personally, it means a hope for a future where, you know, I can have the care that I need safe and accessible healthcare and where, you know, when my sick queer body mind is loved and valued and respected in society as much as anyone else's, and that all disabled people have that as well.

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Katie

Yeah, that's yeah, that's a really powerful vision. And yeah, there's a long way to go before we get there. But yeah, that’s a really good overview, thank you. So I was hoping to have you on the podcast when we had Kirsten with us last time. And unfortunately, you were ill with COVID, which is particularly difficult for you as someone who's already clinically vulnerable. So do you want to talk a bit about the impact you think the pandemic has had on our understanding of disability and disability rights?

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Helen

Um, yeah, I think it's I am quite skeptical that it's had much of much of a positive impact. I think, you know, 60% of people who’ve died from COVID have been disabled. It's you know, the number of disabled people is rapidly increasing with long COVID. And that's been, you know, as someone who has a disease that is very, very similar to long COVID.

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Helen

That's been quite hard to watch, I think. Yeah, it's it's it's not really had a positive impact. I think if we had disabled people, multi marginalized disabled people leading the response to pandemic from the fore- from the get go. And I think we we would have probably, you know, changed changed a huge amount as a society and saved a huge number of people from COVID.

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Helen

But as it is, we didn't have that because of, you know, ableist systems and beliefs and things. And I think from the very start of COVID, we had a huge amount of rhetoric like, you know, it's only going to be the disabled, disabled people, elderly people and people with pre existing conditions who are going to die.

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Katie

Oh yeah. So that's fine then right?

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Helen

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So it was very kind of it was kind of really it felt very much like, you know, as someone in that category that we were disposable. And I don't think that rhetoric’s kind of died down since the start. I think it's become very ingrained in, you know, how non-disabled people are acting now with kind of treating it as if it's over when it's very much not we’re still in the middle of a pandemic.

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Helen

You know, 400 people died in the last recorded week and yeah, it's been quite hard, I think, for many, many disabled people just to kind of be left behind. You know, we were we put all these things in place like telephone doctor's appointments and working from home and, you know, a lot of people doing more things online, you know, things like art galleries putting their things online, or theatre shows.

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Helen

And these are things that disabled people have been asking for for decades or maybe not decades, because the Internet hasn't been around for that long. But it's been something that we've been asking for, for years. And then it was just kind of put in place at the drop of a hat for non-disabled people. And then it's just kind of been taken away at the drop of a hat when non-disabled people have decided that it's over and yeah.

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Helen

So I think, and I think it's increased the idea that disabled people are an acceptable loss in times of crisis, which is kind of scary going into the climate crisis because it shows us how disabled people may well be treated and are already being treated in response to the climate crisis in that we are kind of being left behind and seen as acceptable losses.

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Helen

You know, saying, yeah, without without disabled people at the forefront of the climate, just like the climate justice movement, we are going to be left behind. And there is this, you know, very ingrained idea that we are acceptable losses in society. And without combating that, we are, yeah, we're not going to see a future where climate justice includes disabled people.

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Helen

Yeah. And includes my life and the lives of many other multi-marginalised disabled people. And that's yeah, quite scary. Yeah. Going forward I think.

00:09:08:14 - 00:09:40:19

Katie

Yeah. And that's something we talked a bit about, me and Kirsten in the previous episode about ways in which disabled people are more vulnerable to climate change impacts. Um, I guess, do you have any thoughts about how we can better support disabled people when there are climate disasters and stuff? Because I know there's a thing I read where it's like they're not they're just not considered in evacuation plans, a lot of the time because it's able bodied people making the decisions and they don't think, Oh, like if I were a wheelchair user, I might not be able to get out of that situation.

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Helen

Yeah, yeah, completely. I think I think going back to kind of the vulnerable thing, we are often made a lot more vulnerable by the systems that we live in. You know, we are kind of, disabled people are forced into poverty a lot of the time and it kind of we need to change those systems as well as kind of have have these systems in place that mean that during, you know, during evacuations, the disabled people are able to evacuate the same as non-disabled people.

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Helen

I think we need to have, when planning evacuation measures, we need to be talking to the disabled people who are going to be affected. We need to be using community care to make sure that disabled voices in those communities are being heard. And what they need is is being listened to and put in place and not ignored. They need to be at the forefront of leading those responses.

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Helen

You know, I, I listened to it wasn't really a podcast, but it was it was an interview with a woman who in early 2020 was escaping the wildfires with her mum who had dementia. And I think she was disabled as well. I can't remember how, what her disability was, but they went to an evacuation centre and it was like really noisy.

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Helen

There wasn't really anywhere to lie down and all these things and they eventually just decided that it was safer for them to go back into that, back to their home, which was in the path of a wildfire. Then to be in an evacuation center. And yeah, so it's kind of talking to those, to the disabled people talking, you know, talking to all people in an evacuation plan, all people living in the communities and saying what would be best for them rather than just assuming, what, what, what would be good.

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Helen

Yeah, I think.

00:11:48:04 - 00:12:10:05

Katie

Yeah, yeah. And in terms of listening to people who are disabled, how do you think we can strengthen links between disability justice groups and climate justice groups? Because there are people campaigning on both issues, but perhaps not in a cohesive way yet. So how do you see that moving forward in the future?

00:12:10:13 - 00:12:51:23

Helen

Sure. I think it's very tricky because, you know, I think there's still a huge amount of ableism within the climate movement. And, you know, as a disabled person, I'm very put off by that. Even the, you know, volunteering at UKYCC, I'm still volunteering at UKYCC but I'm still very put off by, you know, you know cost and more often interview about using the campaign to get rid of plastic straws.

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Helen

You know they they were originally invented as a way to help disabled people that was like their original intention and now they kind of and that is affecting disabled people on a very, very real way. I think it's also kind of I think a lot of disability justice movements are very aware of climate change and are doing their own things to support their communities and provide mutual aid and community care during times of, you know, during disasters that are happening due to climate change.

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Helen

And I think the climate movement needs to be needs to be, you know, we need to educate ourselves on, on ableism and try to dismantle our ableism and not just expect disabled people to tell us, you know, this is ableist, this is ableist, and we need to change this, and we need to change this because, you know, I think it can be very lonely in terms of it feels it feels a bit like… what am I trying to say? It feels a bit like a burden on us to kind of correct, you know, the ableism of the climate movement and know a kind of learning experience for both parties, if that makes sense.

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Katie

Yeah, I think that makes sense as well because like if you're someone who has like a chronic illness, that means you're easily fatigued or whatever. You know, you don't want to be spending all your energy on that when there are other things you might want to be talking about.

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Helen

Exactly. Yeah. You know, completely. Yeah.

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Katie

People can go read a book. Rather than you having to explain.

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Helen

Yeah. There are loads of Yeah there are loads of disabled people that we can you know that are so easily accessible online who are talking about how to make things accessible or how to or whatever, what ableism is even and how we can dismantle ableism and how to call it out within yourselves and around and around other people and I mean, you know, I think it would be really great if if, you know, more people in the climate movement were listening to the disability community and putting those measures in place, because there is a huge wealth of information out there on the Internet that it is really easy to find if you if you look

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Helen

in the right places and if you actually go searching for it. I think we also I think disabled people think what's often stopping disabled people from joining in the climate movement is that we are advocating for ourselves in every section of life. You know, I'm advocating for myself in the so-called benefits system, in my health care system, in social care, you know, among family and friends, too.

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Helen

For them to be able to understand how I feel, what my illness is and all that sort of thing, it's, you know, it very much feels as if, you know, it might not be that that for everyone, but for me, it definitely feels like that is something that I'm doing all the time every day. And so when you don't, if you don't have the capacity to do more than that, then you can't join the climate movement.

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Helen

So I think the climate movement needs to be standing in solidarity with disabled people on a lot of these issues, like how absolutely appalling our benefits, so-called benefits - I don't like benefits, the word benefits - our so-called benefits system is. I, you know, that needs to be dismantled. You know, the ableism and misogyny and racism in health care needs to be dismantled.

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Helen

Obviously we need to fund the NHS, but it still needs to be, there's a lot of changes that need to be made. Yes. So I think I think the climate movement could be much more aware of, you know, disability fights and disability issues and stand more in solidarity with them. So it doesn't feel like it's just disabled people who are fighting for these issues because it is, you know, it’s part of climate, climate, justice, dismantling ableism.

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Helen

You know, ableism is such a huge part of capitalism, such a huge part of, you know, so cis-hetero-normativity and racism and all these sort of things because it's about, you know, ableism is kind of the judgment on people for being different in some way, in a very kind of basic way.

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Katie

Yeah. And as well, just to bring it back to your point about capitalism, you know, you're only worth something to society if you can be productive and do a 9 to 5 job or whatever. And that's just not possible for people who are chronically ill sometimes.

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Helen

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Yeah. And I think yeah. And I think also having kind of an I think we're getting better at it. I mean in the climate movement about having making sure that people are taking breaks and looking after themselves and putting their wellbeing first and not overdoing it. And I think that's quite hard when you feel like there's not enough people doing enough in the climate movement and it's like it feels much, very much like everyone needs to be doing more.

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Helen

Yeah, but, but we need to have, hold space for people who can't do a huge amount but want to do a little bit and for people to kind of yeah, I think yeah, it's there’s a huge amount to talk about here. But I think that yeah, I mean better community support, check ins and and I think changing the public perception that claim activism is is just about protesting.

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Helen

I think you touched on that with Kirsten. You know, it's very much not I mean, protesting physically like XR or whatever. Yeah.

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Katie

Yeah. It's not all throwing a tin of soup in a museum.

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Helen

Yeah, yeah. It's not not just that I think, you know, there is a huge amount of wealth and knowledge that disabled people have about how we can change things. And doing campaigns online that really effective that I think are often kind of overlooked or treated like it's not real activism and not really achieving anything. Yeah. And I think also also bringing it back to COVID in terms of, you know, it's still a very huge public health matter and disabled people are still very vulnerable to COVID.

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Helen

And I think, you know, sharing solidarity by wearing masks at protests, wearing masks at in-person meetings or just going about daily life, I think it's it shows that we are still you know, I think masks kind of symbolize public health emergency. But they also show, you know, air pollution is a huge climate climate crisis and climate justice issue.

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Helen

And I think it would it would kind of be a really great way to show solidarity with disabled people. So a really good way of showing, look, we are in the middle of this public health crisis, not just the pandemic, but also COVID, because it is a public health crisis. And it would also mean that disabled people will feel safe to go to protests if they can, you know, if they can physically go to protests but are being stopped because so many say so many non-disabled people are just, you know, treating COVID like it's over and treating it like they can't spread it without, you know.

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Katie

Yeah, I can't believe the number of people on the bus just not wearing a mask and coughing everywhere.

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Helen

Exactly. And I mean, that's another thing. I'm not going to go into that. But yeah, public public transport would be another place that really, you know, it should be mandatory.

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Katie

Yeah. I'm not wearing a mask all the time, but I've gone back to wearing on it the bus again because I'm just like, we're going to winter. Yeah. I'm like, I'm the only one.

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Helen

Yeah, it really does. Yeah. And when it’s, you know, that was the only way of me getting into an appointment the other week was it was to go on the bus in town that I had to go to. And it, it was like me, mum and maybe a couple of other people on the bus wearing, wearing a mask.

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Helen

And that was the only way I could do it, but it felt really unsafe. And so it's very much kind of it's not just about disabled people being able to access, you know, their friends or the things that bring them joy. It's also about essential health care you know, the number of people in hospital there isn't that aren't wearing mask is just like yeah so I think that would be an amazing thing for the climate justice movement to do and show solidarity that I think is so simple but really effective.

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Helen

And, yeah. Really easy. So yeah that would be that would be another thing. Yeah.

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Katie

And to bring it back to kind of like wide concepts, what, what do we need to do to make sure that climate justice is disability justice rather than it being like, Oh, we're going to do a protest and also we care about disabled people.

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Helen

Yeah, sure. I think I mean, again, kind of listening to disabled people, dismantling ableism, making spaces that more disabled people feel comfortable to join. But also, again, kind of, you know, as I said earlier, so many disabled people literally do not have the capacity to do more than advocate for themselves on a daily basis, like for things that they need immediately.

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Helen

So things like helping the disability justice community to dismantle the systems that mean that we are just like constantly burnt out from advocating because then we can't join the climate justice movement. We can't be leaders on the forefront of the climate justice movement. And that's what we need, really. We need we need multi marginalized disabled people, you know, disabled people on the forefront, you know, who are on the front lines of the climate crisis to be leading leading the response, who they are the most affected.

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Helen

But we cannot have that without without, you know, dismantling these systems that mean that we are constantly burnt out from just trying to survive. And obviously, again, this is from my own personal experience, this is not how, not necessarily all disabled people feel like this. But yeah, I think a lot of people that I've encountered and come across feel feel very much like that.

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Helen

Yeah, I think yeah. More solidarity, leadership of multi marginalized disabled people. Yeah. Creating spaces where there isn't, you know, where we are not ableist and you know, there are so many small things that non-disabled people don't realise are ableist, but feel very alienating to lots of disabled people. And so trying to, trying to change our behaviour and change how we think about the world and each other.

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Helen

Yeah. It’s quite, it’s quite a lot to do, but I think we can do it.

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Katie

Yeah, that's good. I love your optimism.

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Helen

Yeah, exactly.

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Katie

So maybe just to move away a bit from some of the more high level topics, you have a project that I want to hear about. Please tell me about Nature in Bed. What is Nature in Bed?

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Helen

Sure. Nature in Bed is a hashtag that I created a year ago because I was feeling very much like when I was lying in bed and it was really cloudy, like my bed’s by the window. So when it's nice and like when the clouds are looking really nice, it's really nice to look up the clouds. But it was feeling very much like I was not able to access nature in the same ways that I used to before I got ill.

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Helen

You know, we used to go on really long walks as a family, you know, climb mountains, at I used to, you know, I did loads of canoeing the year, the year I got ill and all these sort of things. And it felt very much like my life had become kind of very concrete, like concrete as in the literal substance. Because, you know, I live I live, you know, it's very kind of you can't you can't access nature from from your bed if you're very ill.

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Helen

And I was like, okay, I'll create a hashtag where everyone can post their videos of nature, videos… Yeah, videos and pictures of nature that they've taken and they can share them with this hashtag, with alt text and image descriptions and video descriptions. And then I would retweet them to the account Nature in Bed on Twitter, and you could just scroll through and access nature, those nature photos and I think is very communal thing.

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Helen

You know, people kind of say, you know, it’s they’re personal photos they’re not just photos that you can scroll through Google images. They're very connected to the lives, the lives of the people who are posting them. And also, you know, I think there's a huge amount of again, spaces like I know it's like gardening, Twitter and all these sorts of spaces that we could be looking at.

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Helen

But again, it's kind of very, you know that on this space that there are a lot of other chronically ill people who can't go outside into nature. It's very, it's very accepting. And there is no ableism and there is no politics. I've said, can we not not have any politics or any mention of climate change? All that because it's supposed to be a space where people, disabled people can escape and just be in nature without yeah.

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Helen

Without having all that kind of, you know, the world is ending, when you're really ill you don't want to be thinking about the climate crisis. You just want to be kind of spending some nice time. And I think that's also I'd really love to see more nature documentaries, which don't have mentions of the climate crisis or how humans are affecting -

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Helen

I know it sounds weird. I mean, I'd love it would be, I think they need to talk about it more, but it would be also great to have nature documentaries, which didn't. And it was just kind of a space.

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Katie

Yeah, just like.

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Helen

Just.

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Katie

Look at this. Look at this beautiful animal.

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Helen

Yeah, exactly. Because, yeah, it it is very much a form of escapism and really kind of very calming for me personally. Very calming. Just scrolling through that Twitter, the space. Yeah, it's yeah, I really enjoy it and it seems like other people are enjoying it as well, which is a great bonus.

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Katie

Yeah, that's really nice. And it's really nice that you've been able to kind of create that space because I think probably a lot of able bodied people take it for granted that like if you've had a stressful week, you can just go for a walk.

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Helen

Yeah.

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Katie

And yeah, not everyone has that. So yeah, I think it's a really nice thing that you've created for people.

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Helen

Yeah. Thank you.

00:29:35:05 - 00:29:45:12

Katie

And so my final question that I like to ask everyone, and you seem full of optimism, so I hope you've got a good answer, is what gives you hope?

00:29:45:12 - 00:30:16:05

Helen

Again, the just I mean, the disability community, I think there was a someone who had long COVID. I think she's now better, but she had it for about 15 months. Who tweeted, this is Dr. Raven, the science maven. I don't know what her real like her full name is, but she's done is on Twitter. She tweeted the other week that she learned the most about love within six months of experiencing, chronic illness.

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Helen

Than she did in the last 15 years. And I don't know exactly what she was refering to in that, but I think there is so much radical love and care and knowledge within the disability community that I've been lucky enough to witness. Like obviously we're not a monolith and there are parts that are not as nice, but I think it it's been so, you know, the amount of yeah, you know, the amount of love and care that we are giving each other in the disability community, even though we are all ill and all dealing with our own issues, well not all ill but dealing with our own ableism, the ableism and the the societal issues that

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Helen

all disabled people have to deal with, there's a huge amount of love and care and sharing of care and knowledge. Even though you don't necessarily know these people, it's it's just really loving space. And I think it makes me really hopeful that, you know, I think yeah, it makes me hopeful that in the future, you know, hopefully the whole of society will be more like that and a bit more loving towards each other.

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Helen

And I think, yeah, it's an amazing community and yeah, yeah, I think that's what gives me hope.

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Katie

That is a lovely answer. And you're right, the whole world needs a bit more of that love and care because I feel like so many of the problems we have in society come from a lack of care and compassion for each other. So.

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Helen

Yeah, yeah..

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Katie

More of that, please. Yeah. Thank you so much for taking the time to be on the podcast.

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Helen

And thank you for having me.

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Katie

Just while I’ve got you have you got anything else you want to plug? Obviously, everybody follow hashtag nature in bed.

00:32:04:05 - 00:32:29:18

Helen

Yeah would be great, post. Yeah, it doesn't. If you're not disabled or chronically ill, you can still post the photos. You can still share, you know, amazing photos of where you've been and all those things. And we can enjoy them, too. It's it's great. So please do. I don't think I've got anything else to plug, but yeah, thank you for having me Katie.

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Katie

That's okay. Thanks so much.

I've really enjoyed Helen's perspective today, and I hope you have, too. This has really highlighted to me that the climate movement has a lot to learn from disability campaigners so that we can make the movement more accessible and build solutions that work for everyone. Helen has given me some reading recommendations, so I'm going to put those and a list of activists that you can follow in the show notes for this episode.

00:33:10:19 - 00:33:33:08

Katie

As we discussed in this episode, it shouldn't just be on disabled people to educate you when they're already having to expend a lot of energy to advocate for themselves at work or at the doctors or with their families. And I also wanted to mention that in the previous episode, Kirsten and I were talking about who's working on the links between disability and climate justice, and we couldn't think of anyone.

00:33:33:15 - 00:33:53:07

Katie

But Helen has actually recommended us some, which are also going to be in the show notes. So please check out the work of Sins Invalid and the Disability Inclusive Climate Action Research Program. This conversation is also a really important reminder that the pandemic isn't over. Winter is coming, and it's always a season of flu and cold. And COVID is likely to get worse over this period.

00:33:53:07 - 00:34:13:06

Katie

And there are plenty of people who are still really vulnerable to COVID. So make sure you're looking after yourself and those around you by getting your flu jab, getting a COVID booster jab, wearing a mask, and taking COVID tests if you can. The conversation about disability justice is one that we really want to continue, and we're starting to think more and more about this in UKYCC.

00:34:13:06 - 00:34:25:23

Katie

So please let us know what you think about this issue on social media.

00:34:31:20 - 00:34:50:03

Katie

Thanks for listening to From the Ground Up, a podcast by the UK Youth Climate Coalition. Our guest today was Helen Leonard Williams, your host was Katie, our music is by Nick Battle. To learn more about our work, follow us on social media or go to ukycc.com. To get involved with Helen's Nature and Bed Project you can follow @natureinbed on Twitter.

00:34:50:14 - 00:35:06:11

Katie

Get involved and share your post with the hashtag Nature in Bed. If you want to learn more about disability justice, we have a list of activists you can follow and books you can read in the show notes.