Transcript: Kate Nash OBE, CEO PurpleSpace in Conversation with Phil Friend – 30 March 2020

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P: Hello everybody, my name is Phil Friend and some of you might know that I’ve been doing some podcasts for Kate Nash, who is the chief executive and founder of PurpleSpace who is sat, well not with me today, and we’re going to find out why that is because nobody is sitting with anybody at the moment, are they? They’re sitting all over the place. It’s lovely to have Kate online with us, and really the purpose of this conversation is for her to bring you up to speed with how things are developing at PurpleSpace, what they’re doing to deal with the incredible sort of impact of the coronavirus and other things which are “business as usual” type things. So Kate, hello!

K: Hello Phil! So lovely to hear your voice! Yeah, I’m good! Difficult times for everybody but we’re bearing up. Thank you

P: Good! Now obviously, we’re doing this on the line, and I think you’re - as I mentioned - what you want to do is bring people up to speed with where things are at because obviously you’re having to change the way you’re delivering your services to your members, aren’t you? So where would you like to start? What’s kind of the immediate impact?

K: Well, we, Phil, like the rest of the world, are responding hard and fast to the challenge of Covid-19. We’re a membership organisation and our members, not just in the UK, but across the world. And the irony of this is it’s one of the things that has brought us together as a community in a way that nothing else has done before. So in terms of the immediacies, Phil, let me share a couple of things. So firstly, we are mostly a virtual team. And the last month or so, we’ve actually been building the capacity of that team. We’ve had Ed Mylles join us as our Development Director, Lauren Pemberton-Nelson who’s our new Comms and Marketing officer and Angie Elrick who is our membership manager. And as a virtual team with myself, Jo and others, we’ve been delivering our services digitally for a good number of years; since the get go. But now, obviously, as a team, we’re fully working from home, no travel for us. What we’ve been doing is putting in plans in place so that we can really respond to our members’ needs. So a couple of things that you’ll see happening this month: The first is a Networkology Foundation workshop, which was going to take place in central London, hosted by Shell, one of our members. So of course that’s now been cancelled and in place, we’re going to run five separate webinars that will deliver the learning that that day was going to deliver. So things like how to manage volunteers, how to work with your disability champion, etcetera. So we’ve already changed that, bookings can take place and Jo is taking bookings of our members who want to come to that webinar, or those five webinars. The second thing-

P: And are they all back to back? This is all happening on the same day, yes?

K: It is. So yes, they’re not back to back, there is a gap in between. We recognise-

P: Thank goodness for you \*laughs\*

K: And of course, we’re recording all of them. Each one, there’ll be speech to text facilities. And all of those collateral, all of those assets will be in the back end of our Member Zone. So those members who can’t come along, will be able to, at their own leisure, read and listen to all of the assets and collateral that we’re making available.

P: Right

K: The second thing that we’re doing is delivering a really quite important webinar on the 8th April. It’s called ‘Staying Positive Whilst Working From Home’. We’re very lucky to have the offer from a woman who I’ve worked with before - Sonia Bate. She is the Chief Executive of an organisation called Edit Development. And they specialise in many things. But one of the things that they’re known for is to deliver really high end, high quality leadership learning for individuals. We are very lucky to have had her services offered to us. So 8th April, 14:00 GMT, we’re looking to raise the cap on that. Zoom at the moment has a cap of 100, but we’re looking to make that freely available. So there’ll be details later this week about where you can access the link etcetera.

P: Will there be more places than 100 then, do you think?

K: We’ve had offers from our members, so if zoom can’t take the capacity for us, we have two of our members who are looking to go and deliver that for us. So come what may, we’re going to have a really big webinar where many, hundreds, if necessary, thousands of people can call in and listen to and watch the most extraordinary know-how about staying positive while working from home.

P: Excellent, so when you’re finished, you could have a choir. You could have a sing-song, couldn’t you?

\*Kate and Phil laugh\*

K: I like it, Phil! Do it.

P: Let’s keep thinking positively. That’s the biggie - that’s the big event. And we’ll make sure, that what, Kate, you’re talking about today, will be in the email we send out so people can click on the links and get this information, can’t they?

K: Absolutely, yep.

P: Now something else that I know has been going on and is a great concern, both to you, your members and all of us, is the impact that this is all having on disabled colleagues. Particularly disabled staff. So your management group, the people that come to your webinars and attend your sessions, that are managing others. What kind of things have been coming across your desk that you’d like to refer to here?

K: A number of things, Phil. I think, firstly, naturally, our members work and operate in a number of jurisdictions across the world. Therefore, some of the operating rules in terms of movement and self-isolation, they vary from country to country. But one of the things that is coming through for us is how many disabled employees, even if they don’t fit the government criterion around what we often call vulnerable - and yes it’s not a brilliant language but right now, it’s the best that’s out there. And so a lot of our members are dealing with individuals who may not technically fit the bill or the definition of what constitutes vulnerability. But nonetheless they do have a health condition or have experienced challenges with their immune system in the past. And therefore having to make the choice to self-isolate. Either in the absence of government definitions, and/or when their employers don’t have as much experience with how to quickly support people when working from home. And that’s hard. That is really hard for our members to be able to get good quality information. Are you picking that up too, Phil? The narrative out there?

P: Yeah. I think in my own case, I - like you - we’re both disabled people ourselves. I’ve been taking this very seriously actually and staying in and doing all the things we’re being advised to do. But unlike most of your members and your colleagues, I’m not working now. I’m sort of semi retired. So I don’t have the dreadful anxieties that would go with the fact that I’m not working and I might not get paid and all the stuff that everybody has. But on top of that, what happens to my health conditions if I can’t get to a doctor because they’re snowed under with all this other stuff. Is that something you’re hearing too?

K: Yeah, absolutely. It’s understandable. If you look at the collective mindset, with all of us facing such anxiety. It was vast last week. And I think now we’re moving into a phase where, some of the resilience that is built up by having a disability or health condition and many of our members are saying “Where have I seen some of this before?” Not in terms of like for like, we’ve never faced anything like this before as a global community. But you have to dig deep and you have to be able to tap into your personal toolkit to navigate these difficult moments of adversity.

P: I think there’s much in that, and I think one thing that maybe your colleagues and members could think about is that I think disabled people are often, in this situation, seen to be the victims. We’re the vulnerable one, you mentioned that earlier. I know Simon Minty, is using the word susceptible, rather than vulnerable. Quite interesting. And you as somebody who loves the language thing - Secrets and Big Lies and all that stuff. But this idea that we’re victims is interesting given that we have such expertise at managing the crises that our lives throw. So actually, we might be experts, not victims. We could be volunteers, couldn’t we? We could offer ideas. Do you think PurpleSpace has that role, to some degree, to help its members and disabled colleagues to mobilise the skills we’ve got and see what we can do with that?

K: 100% Phil. Our community - there’s a spirit of positivity, of hope, of resilience, of community, wanting to support each other. That’s what PurpleSpace is all about. It’s a community of individuals who are choosing to lean in, to head up employee networks and resource groups and to support people to be our best selves at work. Although, of course, it’s going to be difficult. Not just in the UK but across the world, we’re going to have some very difficult weeks to come. It’s likely to be the case that all of us will have this impact on our personal lives at some stage in some way. It’s very hard for any of us to brace ourselves. But also, we will come through this. We will come through this as a people and the PurpleSpace community, I’m just bowled over by the spirit, the optimism, the sense of hope and the generosity of spirit. We are very fortunate at PurpleSpace to work with amazing people. It’s wonderful.

P: Well maybe that’s a really good place to draw this very brief conversation to a close, on a really positive note. Obviously you created PurpleSpace for a reason - it wasn’t quite this reason but it’s going to make a massive difference to a lot of people. So good luck, Kate. We’ll stay in touch and I hope this podcast gives people a bit of a lift or something. Lovely to see you.

K: Thank you Phil, thank you very much. We’re really poised to support our members through this period and it’s lovely to talk to you again.

P: Excellent.