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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Hi, everybody. My name is Shane Rogers. I am the communication director at Food Solutions New England. I am here with Heather Nelson, the FSNE intern for the past few years at Food Solutions New England, and we are here to talk about website accessibility and general online accessibility today. So, Heather, we're so excited to have you here with us so we know you're wrapping up your school year.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Quickly as April approaches and is going to be quickly out the door. So why don't we just start off with you telling us a little bit about yourself, who you are, what you're studying, and what you've been doing with FSNE over the past couple of years.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

But yeah, of course, like you mentioned, I've been interning with FSNE for the past couple of years, and right now I am wrapping up my senior year at the University of New Hampshire. I'm studying zoology and anthropology, and I've always put a lot of emphasis on service work and working with non-governmental organizations. I did a semester in Boston working with a nonprofit that focused on teaching kids in low income communities how to read and write.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

And so naturally, once I was back on campus, I was looking at the Sustainability Institute and learning about FSNE, and I wanted to go into that and see how it is. So as an intern here, I've pretty much been doing everything that needs to be done. Whatever people need help with, I'm there. I'm definitely a jack of all trades master of none.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

But eventually I did end up focusing on our website and working with Lisa Fernandez, who was there before you and saying, Hey, this website is really leaving a lot to be desired. It's beautiful and I like the design. It is beautiful from a person of normal abilities who's able to see well, who's able to hear well and all of that.

00;02;04;26 - 00;02;24;01

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

But if you are someone who needs to use maybe an e-reader or something like that, it is not accessible. So what can we do for that? So that's when I really started jumping into website accessibility and how I could take our website and make it more accessible for a broader audience.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Yeah, the website definitely has some work to do. Like you said, I know Heather, you spent a lot of good time really diving deep on how FSNE's website was being presented out to the world and not just for folks who are traditionally catered to by websites, right, but for everybody. So what did you find during your work?

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Like, how would you define website accessibility and why do you find it to be so important for building a food movement as our facility purports to want to do?

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, I think when you're defining website accessibility, you have to step back from, for those of us who interact with the web via just a normal computer with maybe a mouse and a keyboard, we always assume that that's the default. That's what everyone is doing. But website accessibility recognizes that that is not always the case. Some people have to use verbal commands, some people have a special keyboard or are navigating it with only a keyboard and no trackpad, no mouse.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So there are a ton of different ways that people access the web depending on their different abilities in terms of hearing and seeing and so many other things. And website accessibility provides a set of guidelines that allows websites to be accessible and to be reachable for someone, no matter how they're using the web.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

And why do you think that is such an important part of this work that we're trying to do here in New England? And, you know, through the Sustainability Institute and really through any of the work that you've gone out to do and your colleagues and your friends are going to be going out to do as well.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, well, for those of us who are working in the social sector, we put a huge emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion and a big part of that equity and inclusion is making sure that you can actually have all of that information be reachable to different people of different abilities. So you can't just have all of this information. It doesn't matter how good that information is.

00;04;38;23 - 00;05;02;26

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

If it can't be reached by someone who is blind, by someone who is deaf. So in order to actually have our work be useful to everyone as we want it to be, we have to also make sure that it's accessible and website accessibility is a big part of that, since the web is pretty much the center of all of our information nowadays.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Yeah, definitely. And it's really about that. Like you said, building that equitable movement, right? Making sure all folks feel like not only that they have a seat at the table, but they're actively being invited into that conversation. And that starts at every point of entry that we are putting information out on and that we are trying to advocate for change.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

So when you started this work on the city's website, tell me a little bit about what you found. Right? You said the website looked nice, but there was definitely something to be desired. What was your quick analysis of how FSNE's website was functioning and where maybe what gaps did you see in it that needed to be addressed?

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, I think one of the big things that I started learning, there are some really basic principles of website accessibility that you start with, and one of them is adding captions for different photos. So we have all these beautiful photos on our website, but none of them actually had captions that a screen reader could read. And sometimes when you do add a little caption below a photo in a website, a screen reader won't actually recognize that as the photo's caption.

00;06;20;12 - 00;06;42;06

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So it'll say, Oh, there's a photo here, and then it will continue reading as if there isn't a caption there. So we had to start by putting a lot of work into adding all of these captions and they can only be about 250 characters, which means that if you have these big beautiful graphics and all these words in there that's lost on someone who's using a screen reader.

00;06;42;17 - 00;07;08;14

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So you have to figure out how to essentially rework the entire website so that information that is in a visual format can also be in a written format as well on the same page. And another thing that I hadn't considered at all, and the people I've talked to are also surprised at is how difficult it is to navigate a website when you're using just a keyboard.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So it's essentially just using the tab keys to go back and you have to tab through every single link on a website. So if you have this nice hamburger menu or this nice menu across the top of your website, you end up having to tab through every single link. And depending on how the menu is set up in the code, you actually might not be able to open that menu with your keyboard.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So you end up having to do a lot of work in the coding and that is stuff that I'm still learning and that I've had to pass up to people who know way more about code than I do. But I now recognize that and when I'm looking at websites, I do tend to notice that and I always end up trying to use my keyboard to go through it and see if I can.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

And it's something I never thought about before.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Yeah. And I feel like so many websites get built, especially for organizations who maybe do not have a big budget, they're working on some shoestring grants and really trying to get their programs out, stuff like this often falls on the backburner of what folks are thinking about. And in turn it creates a lot more work for all of us on the back end, not only for folks that are trying to access this information and who can't, but also as we try to adapt and make things more accessible.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

So like, how much time did it take you to go through and do an audit of the FSNE website?

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, the audit is definitely not finished. I've done everything I can and like I said, coding is not really my strong point. So a lot of the stuff that ends up being a coding issue I've passed off. But that being said, everything I've done, I was working 10 hours a week for a good six months or so just going through and breaking down because there is a set of guidelines that are brilliant and they're really detailed, but they're made for someone who has a lot of computer knowledge.

00;09;06;08 - 00;09;28;06

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So I was having to look at those guidelines and then do research on what the guideline meant and then figure out how I could actually do it for the website. So there aren't really a lot of resources out there. A lot of it is you having to put in your own work to get your understanding built up and then trying to figure out and trial and error on your own.

00;09;28;21 - 00;09;44;26

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So it's a lot of extra work that is added that I hope will be rectified in the future by people putting out more resources, hopefully like this one. But for now, it is definitely a lot of work and I understand why people don't do this.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Yeah, and tell me a little bit more about those resources that you did end up accessing and what was it that you were looking at that was the super technical manuals and it sounded like you did a lot of Googling or search engine name as well as you were reading through it.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, I think a lot of it honestly ends up being blog posts and different stuff that is made by people who need these websites. So like if you're someone who uses a screen reader and you realize how few websites cater to a screen reader, you end up trying to list, Hey, this is what you need, and you type it all out because people would get so frustrated that they can't do it.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So it ended up being a lot of just people taking it upon themselves to make these resources and there are a few from higher level companies that are like, Hey, website accessibility is important. But usually those articles would be like, These are the top five things that you want to know for website accessibility. And they would have this really high level kind of overview of it with things that are important, but then they wouldn't dive into the details.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

They would just leave it at that as if doing these big five things is enough. And if I wanted to find that detail, it really is going to people that actually need that accessibility and finding these like really old blog posts from, say, 2015 of one person who wrote this out and then trying to figure it out based on code from now.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

So many hurdles to jump over. And we're probably going to be one of those folks, right, that are saying these are the things to look at and to be diving in, but we'll be putting all of the resources and those links that you found out there. As much as we can add to this blog post for others to dive into.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

But what would you say that people should know when they start? Like, is there any lingo that really jumps out to you right now that is something that you wish you had known when you were starting, or is that again just kind of searching and making sure that you're keeping up on what's being referenced and trying to cross reference it to what is happening on the back end of websites nowadays?

00;12;05;05 - 00;12;49;16

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, I think the main thing when you start looking for it is you find the website content accessibility guidelines, which are abbreviated to WCAG, and right now they are in the version 2.1, although I do believe they will be updated. So you might get a version 2.2. And beyond that, there isn't a lot of lingo. There's a lot of technical terms that are used in the actual guidelines, but most of it is pretty understandable once you've done some research, like adding captions to photos like you can, you read like closed captioning on a video or something like that and you can kind of figure out what it means.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So luckily there aren't too many really jargon filled terms. There's just a lot of technical terms and the actual guidelines themselves.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

And it's the WCAG that has tiers of accessibility and that as well, right? Can you talk a little bit about those tiers and maybe how that is a good way for folks to start along the path of correcting how their web presence is showing up as an organization or individual or business or whoever?

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, the guidelines have three tiers that they've been broken down into, and they do generally get harder to do with each tier. But the first tier is essentially the bare minimum, which is not to say that websites usually meet this, it's what websites should be meeting. So I did have to put in a lot of work to get us up to level one essentially.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

But the actual standard is level two and level two is a bit above the bare minimum. It adds a lot of accessibility that is honestly really needed. It's as if level two should be the bare minimum, but we are so far behind in accessibility that we have to have level one beneath that. So you start with level one, you get level one down really good, and then you can work up to level two and level three.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

There's a lot less out there about level three because it's kind of the gold standard for very specific companies and very specific large websites, and it's a lot more technical and a lot more specific. So it's not necessarily that you need to work all the way up to three. It depends on what you're doing and what your website looks like.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So usually aiming for getting level two right is a good place to start and you can go to level one first and then after that work your way up to level two. Slowly.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

And these are the types of standards that as communicators, as folks who are really trying to again put things out, we can ask and expect of our web developers, right. Heather, you were able to put in a lot of work. We're very lucky to have you and your time available to do that. And I know that's not possible for everybody.

00;15;09;25 - 00;15;48;04

Shane Rogers | FSNE

As we juggle competing for grants and we juggle just trying to keep programs up and floating. But we also know that there are times when we're talking with web developers, we run into some money to be able to do things. So making sure that you're holding on to these as a priority, asking people to make this a priority when they're working on your website, you could start chipping away at some of those levels and getting from level one to level two in fits and starts, because we don't want perfect be the enemy of good here because we need more accessibility.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

You want more people brought into this movement. So just making sure folks that you're listening to that put this in your back pocket. Right. And for you, Heather, why do you think this is not always prioritized like what happens when we're doing our work that we end up seeing websites that aren't reaching level one? And what gaps do you really see this leaving in the work of building a movement for food or whether that's for climate or anything else?

00;16;21;00 - 00;16;24;10

Shane Rogers | FSNE

Like what gaps does this leave in our community?

00;16;25;06 - 00;16;57;08

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, I think, well, it's always easiest to do nothing and it's easiest to leave things the way they are. We don't really get any training on website assessability. Even if you are someone who

specializes in building websites and designing them, website accessibility usually is never part of that learning curve. So some people don't even know about it. But even if you do know about it, it is a lot of extra work that can feel like it has very little payoff because it's like, Oh well, most people navigate without them.

00;16;57;08 - 00;17;23;07

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Most people can see, most people can do this and this and this. But we're trying to do work here that is catering to everybody, not just most people. We already know from the work that we're doing, that society is used to catering to the majority, to the most people. And it's really important to bring that minority up to speed, to give them the resources they need.

00;17;23;13 - 00;17;51;00

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

And that's the same thing when you're working with people who are blind or people who need to navigate with a keyboard because they can't move their arms properly and they deserve to see these websites. They deserve to access all of this information. So even though it is a lot of work, that work means everything to them. They literally cannot access a website at all and they're never going to see anything you put out unless you make it accessible to them.

00;17;51;14 - 00;18;00;27

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So without that website, this accessibility, you are losing all of these people and you're cutting them off from society just like the rest of society already does for them.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Definitely. And we need to be meeting folks where they're at, right. Not expecting them to come to us. And I think that's a really big thing because we're building community. It's about being in solidarity, not about asking people to adapt to the dominant ways of thinking or acting. And, you know, I think just a kind of wrap this up.

00;18;27;06 - 00;18;49;24

Shane Rogers | FSNE

What would you say to folks who, again, maybe don't think that they have the time, but don't think that this is worth it, which I hope they don't if they're listening to this. Yeah, but what would you say to kind of wrap this up for folks who may be listening and thinking, oh, God, I really want to do this, but I just don't know if I can.

00;18;51;08 - 00;19;13;02

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Yeah, I think you said earlier, don't make perfect the enemy of good. And I would bring that back again. This doesn't mean give yourself a one month deadline to redo your entire website. That's



unrealistic. And you're just going to end up disappointing yourself. It is okay to start with those big articles that are like, These are the five best things to do.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

It's okay to start with the easiest things and slowly work your way up. I know if you have WordPress like that's what our website is built on, it's really easy to go in and just click Add captions to photos. It is pretty easy to do that and then just write a really little caption. There are actually a ton of resources for writing all kinds of alternate text, which are captions for photos.

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Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So that is a really easy place to start. So you can say, okay, I have 5 minutes at the end of my Tuesday and I'm going to go and I'm going to add captions to three photos on my website. And then so every week you're adding a little bit more and you're making really small progress, but you are making it more accessible as you go.

00;19;56;22 - 00;20;08;00

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

So it is okay to break this down into really little chunks because everything you're doing is counting and is making it better for people that need this.

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Shane Rogers | FSNE

Yeah, Thank you so much, Heather. And again, this has been a conversation with Heather Nelson, who is the Food Solutions New England intern, and she is wrapping up her senior year at University of New Hampshire. And we are very grateful and excited to have had the chance to work with you and to see what you are going to be pursuing and accomplishing as you embark out of your undergraduate world.

00;20;37;28 - 00;21;08;01

Shane Rogers | FSNE

And again, folks who are interested in this topic who want to learn more, we encourage you to look into website accessibility, start taking those small steps, and also to join the Northeast Food System Communicators Community of Practice. This is a place for folks who are either in communications or working adjacent to it to come together, to talk, to share resources and just start to get to that point.

00;21;08;01 - 00;21;27;24

Shane Rogers | FSNE

Of building a community of communicators around this type of social justice work. So again, we thank you for tuning in. Heather, thank you again for all of your time and efforts and we are so glad to have you on today. Do you have any parting words?

00;21;27;24 - 00;21;37;27

Heather Nelson | FSNE Intern

Just thank you to everyone who is willing to put in the work to do all of this. I'm really grateful for all of you and thank you, Shane, for having me. It's been wonderful to be here.