



Episode 60- Fashion for Every Body: Izzy Camilleri on Style, Function, and Inclusion

February 10, 2026

(Music playing)

Mindy Henderson: Welcome to the Quest Podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association as part of the Quest family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Together we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities and those who love them. We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you, whether you are one of us, love someone who is or are on another journey altogether. Thanks for joining now. Let's get started.

Our guest today is Izzy Camilleri, an internationally recognized fashion designer and a true pioneer in adaptive design. Izzy first made her mark in the world of high-end fashion dressing celebrities, and building a celebrated design house, known for its craftsmanship and style. But her career took a powerful turn when she began to designing clothes for people with disabilities, work that helped spark the modern adaptive fashion movement. Through her designs and her partnership with Silverts, Izzy has helped make clothing more accessible, more functional, and more dignified for people of all abilities, while also challenging the fashion industry to think differently about inclusion. Izzy, thank you so much for being here.

Izzy Camilleri: Thank you for having me.

Mindy Henderson: Absolutely. So I'm going to dive right in. There's so much that I would like to ask you. First of all, let's talk about your career as a high-end fashion designer. Can you tell us about just your journey, your early journey in fashion, and what drew you into the world in the first place?

Izzy Camilleri: Well, we can go way back. When I was a little girl, my mom taught me how to sew when I was a kid, and I really enjoyed it and took it up as a hobby, and then it was a hobby that turned into, I went to college for fashion and graduated and then just started freelancing. And my freelancing just ... Wouldn't say exploded, but I got pretty busy and before I knew it, I was in the Canadian fashion industry at a very young age because it all happened very fast. And so I just started doing that. And it was easier to do higher-end things because I wasn't mass-producing, I couldn't really get things at cheaper prices, for example. So by doing it higher end, I was able to ask a decent price for what I was doing. So that's how it all started a nutshell.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. Well, and your work is beautiful.

Izzy Camilleri: Thank you.

Mindy Henderson: I am excited that in the world of adaptive fashion, you don't always see ... In history, you don't always see the cutest designs, and a lot of it started out as being a little bit clinical and a little bit ... It wasn't really on trend and all of that. I love that someone like you got the bug to move into the adaptive world. How did that happen?

Izzy Camilleri: In around 2005, a woman who's a journalist and worked at our major newspaper here in Toronto asked the fashion editor who she would recommend because she was looking for a shearling cape that could work with her wheelchair. So this woman was quadriplegic and she had a service dog that she would take out for walks. So she wanted something that was going to be easy to put on, keep her super warm, easy to take off as well. So the fashion editor recommended me only because she wanted the cape. She wanted a cape and she wanted it in shearling. And shearling is like a fur leather material, natural material. And at the time, I was doing fur and leather as well as other textiles in my collection. So that's really the only reason why the fashion editor recommended me.

So I met with her and talked about what this cape needed to be, and so we made it, it turned out great, and then I started doing more things for her. And then I just started realizing all the challenges she had with clothes. And I had no idea that these challenges existed because it was never in my world, even on a personal level. I didn't know anybody at the time that used a wheelchair. And if I knew anybody with a disability, I just didn't realize how limited their choices were, how difficult it was to get dressed, et cetera, et cetera. So that was the seed that was planted that got me excited about solving some problems in that area.

Mindy Henderson: I love it. And when you did first begin working in adaptive fashion, what gaps or unmet needs did you see specifically that really convinced you why this work is so important?

Izzy Camilleri: Well, I guess when I was working with this woman initially, I just started realizing if she's got all these problems with clothes, there's got to be a lot of other people there with the same problems. So that was the first step into digging deeper, I guess. And then as I worked with her, I came to understand that she can't dress herself. She can't raise her arms. She clearly needs other people to dress her and take care of most of her needs from a physical perspective. So because she was a wheelchair user, I just started thinking about clothing from a seated perspective and how challenging that could be and how uncomfortable traditional clothing would be because traditional clothing is made for standing, and it's even designed for standing. Things are designed so they have hanger appeal, so they look good on a hanger. So you think of a coat, it looks great on a hanger, but if you sit down on a long coat, it gets all jumbled up. Or for her, she couldn't stand up to tuck a coat underneath her. So these are all the things that started percolating I guess in my mind, just thinking of the challenges that existed that I didn't think anything of it.

Or even where people tend to buy clothing that's a little bit too big for them so that it's easier to get dressed and then that's just going to make you maybe look a bit sloppy or just not ... Let's say you have a job interview to go to, you want to look as polished as everybody else in the room, so that's hard to do when you've got to buy something that's a size or too bigger.

Mindy Henderson: Right. Yeah. Everybody wants to look polished. When we have to use the hacks that you're talking about buying bigger clothes ... And I buy bigger shoes so that they're ... But I'm five feet tall, and so by buying bigger shoes, they look a little bit disproportionate with my size and all of that, and it's just not always the most flattering end results. So your designs and adaptive design, I feel like we've made progress in recent years in the world of adaptive fashion, and I think that people are realizing that it's not just about fashion, but it's about style and it's about expression and it's about a person's dignity. How did you approach balancing function, comfort, and aesthetics in designing your clothing?

Izzy Camilleri: Well, when I first decided to do a line, my point of reference was a couple of women that I was working with. So the first one was the journalist. She was a professional, she was middle-aged. And then the second one I started working with was younger. She was in her 20s and she had a sports injury. And so when I decided to do a line, I just Googled wheelchair clothes because that seemed to be my focus at the time. And everything that came up was mostly clothing for the elderly, people living in long-term care and it was more about function than it was about style or fashion.

And so when I looked at these two women that I was working with at the time, none of that would be appropriate for them. And so I just decided that, okay, I'm going to do a line that's functional, but also stylish to offer a sense of self,

dignity as you mentioned inclusion, safety, freedom to express yourself. And initially and even to this day IZ Adaptive is really built on wardrobe basics. So what I decided to do at the time was just start building a person's wardrobe.

And so I just thought, what are all the things that the average person has in their closet? Most of us wear jeans or chinos, we wear sweatpants. We all need a good dress pant or a suit. Just basic tops and t-shirts and things like that. And even a good coat for spring, for the wintertime rain here. So I just started thinking about what are all the things that we all have in our wardrobe and what are the things that are also timeless because it's a drag when you buy something and it works really well for you, but then next season it's gone. So what's something that I can create that's timeless, that a person can also style on their own? If you're a real, let's say a real goth girl, I've got black jeans for you. I even got a leather jacket for you that also has the functionality and ease of dress and things like that. Or if you're fairly conservative and simple, I've got that too. And it's really just the way you dress it up and you style it to work for you. So that's how I blended the two.

Mindy Henderson:

I love your clothes so much. The basics that you're talking about ... I think that the first time I went and looked at your clothes, it made me emotional because they were so good-looking and they looked like something that anyone else would wear. People my age, people younger. And I have to say you either had or have ... I'm not sure if it's still available. But the first item in your line that I got obsessed with was your trench coat. It's so cute. I freeze in the winters because I can't get coats on and off, and I've never found one that looks really, really nice and tailored and buttoned up, so to speak, that gives me the warmth that I ... And so I just do without in the winter. And you probably have never seen someone move so fast from a car into a building or a house. That's how I've gotten through winters. And knowing that there are these coats available that will keep me warm and allow me to look good, I absolutely love.

I also just want to mention that we've got a little surprise that I'm going to spill at the end of the podcast to share with our listeners. But let me ask you this. When it comes to disability, there's a lot of variability to consider. People are ambulatory, they're wheelchair users, there are sensory challenges. There are things like feeding tubes and catheters that people have to dress around just to name a few. How do you approach designing clothing and prioritizing such a complicated set of needs when you're designing something new?

Izzy Camilleri:

Well, initially I was focusing on wheelchair users, but there are many reasons why people use a wheelchair. So it's not only paralysis, it could be a number of other conditions and diseases or paralysis as well if someone has an accident or becomes paralyzed from an operation or something like that. So initially I just started rejigging patterns so that they worked with a seated frame. So whether you are paralyzed, you have CP, MS whatever your body is in that position. So regardless of what your condition is, if you are a full-time wheelchair user, your body is just always in that position. And then the next level goes to people that can either dress themselves or they can't. So then just thinking about how can

we create clothes that are easier to get on and work for a body that's in a wheelchair? And sometimes there's things that can happen to a body when it's seated all the time, especially with paralysis. Our stomach muscles actually don't work the same. And often there's something called organ settling where organs will settle throughout the day and you end up with a thicker waistline. A common slang for it is paraprot or quad belly. I can tell you something you never knew.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah, I had no idea. And I'm sitting here thinking to myself, it's my organs settling. That's why my waist is bigger. That's the explanation

Izzy Camilleri: Right. And that'll happen throughout the day. So just thinking about pants that need some flexibility in the waist or even fabrics that have a stretch to them. Initially for me too, I started this from the ground up and my means were always limited and always a challenge. So I couldn't really get into the weeds with all these different conditions as you mentioned, but how can I find this common thread that's going to link a lot of people together?

Mindy Henderson: Nice.

Izzy Camilleri: So it's like I've taken the close to a certain point, and then you as the customer might have to take it one step further. Let's say you have one leg longer than the other and you're a wheelchair user. You can take my pant because it's going to be better for you already. And I've already made those adjustments. Now you just need to take it to a tailor or a family member or whatever and have that one leg shortened. And people that aren't buying adaptive clothing right now, they are making due with what is available. And so as I grow and as the line grows, and also now that I'm a part of Silverts, we can start working together to create more and more and be more specific on clothing that will help certain needs, which Silverts already does. There's opportunity to continue to grow the line and expand it and make it more accessible to different conditions.

Mindy Henderson: That's so interesting. I'm glad you mentioned Silverts. That's a perfect transition. It's an adaptive clothing line that many of our listeners may be familiar with. How did that partnership come about and what has it allowed you to accomplish hasn't been possible up until now?

Izzy Camilleri: I met Josh, who's the current owner of Silverts several years ago. I actually did a consulting job with them around 2017, and it was just for six months, and Josh was working there at the time and he and I just hit it off. We became friends and stayed in touch. And I know that at the time, too, Silverts, the reason they brought me in is they wanted me to help with their website or with other just things that they had going on at the time. And then time went by COVID, blah, blah, blah. Things were happening on their end.

And then Josh ended up acquiring the business. And last June, he reached out to me to let me know that, and we hadn't talked in so long, and he just said, "Hey,

it'd be great if we get together and catch up." And so we did do that, and then he asked me if I would consider partnering with them. I know I've been trying to find partners and investors, and I've just been doing it on my own, and it's been a lot, and it's also very limiting. And so I just thought, oh my God, you would be the perfect partner. I don't have to convince you of anything because so many investors I spoke to, they just didn't get it. They didn't see the size of the market, even though I told them what it was and what the potential is.

Mindy Henderson: It's huge.

Izzy Camilleri: Yeah. They just didn't see it. So when Josh asked me, it was just like, "You would be the perfect partner because you have so much experience in this field." They've just done so much and are so established and that it would be almost a match made in heaven. So that's how that came about.

Mindy Henderson: That's amazing. That's incredible. And I can definitely see how partnering with them, just like you were saying earlier, is going to open up the possibilities to expand and create more designs that will accommodate an even greater number of people. That's so exciting. In recent years, like I said earlier, adaptive fashion has begun receiving more attention from mainstream brands and designers. From your perspective, what real progress do you feel like we've made in the world of adaptive fashion?

Izzy Camilleri: Well, I think there's been a lot. It does take time, especially for bigger companies, let's say, to move into this arena. I do get asked about this a lot. And one thing about adaptive clothing is you really need to know what you're doing. Can't just not designing a little mini collection or there's a lot of things you have to consider, and there's a lot of things you have to educate yourself on so that you don't hurt someone. That you don't create clothing that's going to be difficult, or even closures that are going to be easier for someone to put on that has dexterity issues. So they have to understand that it's not wise to use a tiny little button or things like that. So they really need to take the time to do their research. And depending on what kind of line they want to do, whether it's a sportswear line or a bathing suit line, they need to go to people that would be their potential customers and understand what the challenges are. So unlike a regular fashion line, you don't really need to do that, but in this case, you need to do that so that A, you don't hurt someone, or B, all the things that you add into your collection are going to be a positive experience for the end user and something that they can get on easily. It's comfortable, so on and so forth.

Mindy Henderson: And what do you think are the deterrents to ... Is it just the complicated nature of it and the unknown, the step outside of mainstream design and the fact that they already know how to do it? Do you think that that's what really keeps people from getting into that business, or is there more to it?

Izzy Camilleri: I think there's what you said, and there's more to it as well. I think A, like when I was talking about potential investors, they just didn't see the market. They didn't see the potential for the investment. And so I think there's that. I think

the average person doesn't realize that this need exists because when you see someone with a disability, they're dressed and you just figure that they're buying like every other person out there, but they're not realizing what it took to get dressed or how limited the options were. Even for me, before I started doing this, I had no idea. And often when I do talk with ... Sometimes people would come into my studio saying, "What do you guys do here?" And then I'll say what we do, and they're like, "Oh, I had no idea." So there's a big education piece around this as well, because people do have no idea.

Mindy Henderson: It's such a complicated topic once you really get into it. Even me, as a wheelchair user who knows every single day the challenges that I have, I think so many of us don't realize how complicated a problem it is to solve. It's a fascinating topic. If you could challenge the fashion industry though, to embrace one idea or mindset about disability and design, what would it be?

Izzy Camilleri: I think the simplest thing would just be to tell them to think of more like universally designed clothing. So it doesn't necessarily have to be adaptive clothing that's very specific to the disabled community. But if something is universally designed, then it's good for everybody and anybody. So it could be just considering different closures on garments. I use magnets, for example, on our coats, and they just actually look really modern. They don't take away from the garment at all. They look actually very chic and modern. So thinking of ways to make a garment easier to get dressed in ways that still look stylish and awesome.

Mindy Henderson: I love that. Yeah, I love that. Anytime someone says universal design to me, I get so excited because I think that it's such a smart way to look at things. Like, for example, my husband and I built the house that we live in, and when I built it, I wanted every nook and cranny of the house to be accessible, but I didn't want it to look like it was designed to be accessible and that's exactly what ... I know architecture is a lot different than fashion design, but I think it's the same principle that you're talking about. So looking ahead, what trends or innovation do you think are coming next in adaptive design, whether it's the materials, the technology, or the way that designers collaborate even with the disability community?

Izzy Camilleri: Well, I think it's everything that you just said. It does take time. There are different technologies out there that can measure a person's body virtually, but it's the next frontier to be able to do that with someone who's sitting, for example, because you need to include the wheelchair in there, or not include it, but take it away. So stuff like that. And then the ability to customize a little bit more. So those things I think are on the horizon. And then with fabrics, I guess that's another one too. There's fabrics that with technology within it that can change temperature.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, interesting.

Izzy Camilleri: Things like that.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Izzy Camilleri: So yeah. There's lots of things. Sometimes I'm in a little bubble. I'm in my own little world, so I don't know a lot, but those are some of the things that I've come across.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. I've always wished for a company ... And I'm sure that this is complicated 16 ways from Sunday. But I've always wished for a company that would take your measurements or one step better would be like what you're talking about. If somebody could take a picture of you and get your measurements and things that way and then custom build a dress for you or something like that. I can only imagine how hard a business model that would be.

Izzy Camilleri: Well, I think companies like that do exist.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, really? Interesting.

Izzy Camilleri: Yeah. Yeah. I'm just not sure how perfect or accurate it can be because doing fittings, especially when you're doing custom all our bodies are different whether you have a disability or not. I'm also very short. I'm under five feet, so my proportions are very different than the average person. So it's hard for me to get stuff off the rack as well just because of my proportions. And then sometimes even if you measure someone or even virtually measure someone, like taking a picture and getting measurements off of that, some people carry their weight in their back. They might have a small chest and a bigger back or vice versa. So just understanding where ... You might have a bust measurement of 36, but what's the proportion of that 36 in the front versus the back?

Mindy Henderson: Oh, wow.

Izzy Camilleri: And things like that. So doing fittings is important. And so I just wonder with clothing that's done that way, how perfect is it? There might need to be some just fine tuning or tweaking.

Mindy Henderson: Interesting. I would love to live inside your head for a couple of hours and know what you know about fashion. We've got a lot of people from the neuromuscular community who are probably listening and maybe advocating for accessibility in their own communities or professions. What have you learned about overcoming the fact that a particular industry or product was not built for someone with a disability?

Izzy Camilleri: Well, I guess there needs to be a will first. And then yeah. Just well, understanding the needs and how it can be accommodated. There's an organization in Canada called StopGap. I don't know if you've ever heard of it before.

Mindy Henderson: I haven't.

Izzy Camilleri: So it started with this young guy who became quadriplegic from a mountain biking accident, and he had just graduated engineering in university. And so when he got out of the hospital and he was out and about in his power chair, he found that there was so many places he couldn't get into because there was a step that his power chair could not get over independently. So he started something called Stopgap, which are these wooden ramps that he started to make. Home Depot, I think was one of his sponsors.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, wow.

Izzy Camilleri: So he started going in different communities and asking retailers if they would put this outside their stores so that-

Mindy Henderson: I love that.

Izzy Camilleri: Yeah. So not only wheelchair users, but also strollers or delivery men with a dolly could easily get in and out of their store. So he came up with a solution to a problem that you wouldn't think of it unless you were in it. And it was a way that opened his mind as well as everybody else's mind around access. I know this guy very well, and he would say, some retailers would say, "Well, you know what? People with wheelchairs don't usually come in here." And he's saying, "Well, it's because they can't. It's not that they don't want to. And just imagine how many more people you can welcome into your store."

Mindy Henderson: Interesting.

Izzy Camilleri: Yeah. And I think there is so much opportunity that people with disabilities can offer and should have access to. So hopefully answered your question.

Mindy Henderson: You absolutely did. And I think just personally elaborate on one of the things that you said about strollers and all of the different use cases for these little ramps. You hear it described in the disability community as the curb cut effect. It's because when curb cuts were introduced, there were all of these additional uses for them besides wheelchairs that people didn't even necessarily think about. But all of a sudden it solved a lot of different kinds of people's problems. And so I love that you brought that piece of things up too, because one of the things that I know that I'm guilty of is having tunnel vision about a particular problem I'm trying to solve and not looking at the bigger picture and who else could benefit from a solution here. And I think that that also maybe opens up the world of solutions that you begin to see when you look at it that way. Interesting. So clothing is, like we've said, it's so deeply connected to identity, confidence, self-expression. When you think about the people who wear your designs, what does it mean to you to help someone feel not just comfortable, but truly seen and empowered, which is exactly what you do?

Izzy Camilleri: Well, I feel great. When I first started doing this, I was like, "Why hasn't anybody started wrapping their head around this?" There was some mom and pop little

companies that were doing it. I just happen to have the right recipe of being a designer, but also being a pattern drafter, being able to think of it from a technical perspective. And then because my background is fashion, I can make something functional, but I can also make it look really good. So I'll tell you a little story. There was one woman who called me after she had received ... One time, I was doing this long denim skirt, and she ordered one, and she called me about a week after receiving it. And she said, "I just have to let you know that I've worn this skirt every day since I got it." And she said, "I was in an accident about 20 years ago and became paralyzed and I haven't been able to wear a skirt until now." So she just wanted to thank me. And she said that it made her feel human again. And I think that's probably the biggest compliment I have ever received.

I have seen people start to cry because they never thought they could wear a trench coat again. There was one girl, she was actually born with her disability, and her dream was always to wear a trench coat so she was able to do that. Or even some guy got teary when he put on one of our leather jackets. And just again, thinking he could never be that. He just couldn't get into a leather jacket. It is really huge, and it just makes me feel like I'm putting my talents to some really good and important work. And when I was doing high fashion and all that stuff, it was great, but there's just so much out there in that arena. So doing this is just so much more personally satisfying as well.

Mindy Henderson:

Well, I'm glad that you've had those moments to see the impact that you're having because it's not a small thing to be a fashion designer, but it's about more in this case than a trench coat. It's the impact that you're having on people and their ability to feel like themselves and feel like everybody else for once. And you take these limitations and you work with them and you melt them away with the trench coat that you designed for us, and all of a sudden you're just a cute person wearing a smashing trench coat. You're not a wheelchair user who had to make this jacket work as best they could.

And so I hope that you know the level of impact that you're having on this community, and it's important work. And not just impact that you're having, but you're also incredibly generous. And our friends at Silverts are incredibly generous, and I teased a little while ago a little treat that we were going to have at the end of this podcast here. And I want to share with everyone that Silverts and IZ Adaptive is giving 15% off of their purchases. For the next little while for anyone listening to this podcast. We're going to put special URLs in the show notes that you'll be able to click and take advantage of this discount that Silverts and Izzy have so generously offered us. So go check out those show notes and find something fabulous to wear.

Izzy Camilleri:

Awesome.

Mindy Henderson:

Great. Well, thank you so much Izzy, for being here. I really appreciate it and looking forward to continuing to watch your journey and watch you and Silverts work together.

Izzy Camilleri:

Thank you. Thank you for the lovely conversation and having me on your program.

Mindy Henderson:

Absolutely.

Thank you for listening. For more information about the guests you heard from today, go check them out at mda.org/podcast and to learn more about the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the services we provide, how you can get involved, and to subscribe to Quest Magazine or to Quest Newsletter, please go to mda.org/quest. If you enjoyed this episode, we'd be grateful if you'd leave a review, go ahead and hit that subscribe button so we can keep bringing you great content and maybe share it with a friend or two. Thanks everyone. Until next time, go be the light we all need in this world.