

Ep #77: Power For All with OT Alex Thompson



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Heather Branscombe

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Welcome to *Clinicians Creating Impact*, a show for physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists looking to take the next step in their careers and make a real difference in the lives of their clients. If you're looking to improve the lives of neurodiverse children and families with neurological-based challenges, grow your own business, or simply show up to help clients, this is the show for you.

I'm Heather Branscombe, Therapist, Certified Coach, Clinical Director, and Owner of Abilities Neurological Rehabilitation. I have over 25 years of experience in both the public and private sectors, and I'm here to help you become the therapist you want to be, supporting people to work towards their dreams and live their best lives. You ready to dive in? Let's go.

Hello there, friend. How are you doing? I'm so glad that you came to listen today. I'm really excited for you to hear my interview with Alex Thompson. Alex Thompson is the executive director and founder of Power For All. She has a background in education, outdoor recreation, adventure therapy, and occupational therapy. She has specialized in working with a holistic lens with children, youth, and families in the last 15 years, offering nature-based occupational therapy.

Alex shares her passion and knowledge as a sessional instructor and universal design consultant at the University of the Fraser Valley, as a speaker and presenter at conferences and trainings in North America and abroad. She's worked with Indigenous communities, governments, local school districts, parks and recreation departments in the different local municipalities. I have been so fortunate to have her in my sphere of influence. It's always great to chat with her. And so with that, I give you my interview with Alex Thompson.

Heather: All right. Welcome. Thank you so much, Alex, for coming on to the podcast today. I very much appreciate it.

Alex: I'm so excited to meet you, Heather.

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Heather: We get to dive a little bit deeper. We have met each other anecdotally a few times. We've been at events, but this is just a special way for us to get to know you better. And as I was mentioning before, before we turned on the recording, you were definitely one of the people that I really wanted to interview because I think you provide such an amazing example of someone who is using their lived experience from a long time ago to really inform your practice.

And it was evident before I read your bio that you provided to me. So thank you so much for doing that. But it really was plain to see that where you are today and what you're doing has really been in the works. Like, I could see the journey. And I'd really love to kind of start to tell that story from your perspective. So if you could tell us a little bit about your background, especially about how you ended up choosing to become an OT in the first place.

Alex: Sounds good. Yes, my name is Alex Thompson and I am now the executive director and founder of Power For All. And Power For All is a charity. And I couldn't believe that we have been serving people for the last 15 years. 10 of those years I have been an occupational therapist. So I started as a teacher. I taught kindergarten, grade one and two. And I love challenging kids.

And so from there I was trying to find another vocation that would allow me to work more with "challenging" kids. And I went into outdoor education. I worked at camps. And, you know, we all have our glory days. So working at camps were my glory days. Yeah, and then just through different people and different communities that I was in, I ended up being in outreach and working on the east side in Toronto and here on Hastings in Vancouver.

And of course, that's where you get to work with families and you get to explore their context, right? Which is challenging. And I think that was happening professionally. But then on the side, just like Alex, like my accent is because I'm from Guatemala and I was there for the first few years of my life. And my father struggled with substance use and so because of that, as a family, we went through abuse and poverty. There was a lot of trauma.

And it ended up being that my mom chose a job as a diplomat so we could leave our country because that was the best scenario for us to be safe. And so as a

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child growing up abroad, it was such a great experience. Of course, you don't see it as that because you're always meeting and leaving friends. But now looking back I feel like it was such a wealth of experience.

So having experienced poverty and trauma, and then going to the other side where you flourish, you have a lot around you, a lot of people and a lot of resources. That always stuck with me. And I may get teary because I feel like it's been a privilege. And so I always want to give back. And I always want to enable those that may not have as much. I feel like that's part of my calling in life.

Heather: Yeah, that's so beautiful.

Alex: Yeah, that's part of what started this work. And the latter part of becoming an occupational therapist is because I was challenging as a teenager. I was overcoming my trauma and processing it. And I think I was classified as being defiant. And my mom registered me for an outward bound course over a summer when I was in grade 11. And that was the first time that someone saw my defiance as having the courage and the power to be a leader.

And that just changed my whole life and my perspective and I thrived in the outdoors. I feel like I found myself in nature and nature became this healing for me. It also became like a community where I could find others and heal with them too as a collective. And so I pursued the outdoors since grade 11 and one of the things that I pursued the most was paddling.

I volunteered for Power To Be and just got several certifications and pursued anything and everything you could in paddling to the point that when I was a young adult I ended up working as a coach for a local club. And then, yeah, just out of the blue one morning I'm planning a session for my youth and I just realized, oh, you know, what if I had a disability? Like, could I do this job? Could I paddle?

And I Googled and there wasn't a whole lot around. And I actually cried because I was like, oh, if I had a disability, it would mean that I couldn't paddle. And that created the idea of asking the club, like, we should run a program. Like, we should see if there's people with disabilities out there who want to paddle. And

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sure enough, the first year we got nine clients. The second year we doubled. And we got a lot of volunteers too, wanting to help.

And I called up Tim from Power To Be because I was just like graduating from high school. So, yeah, I said to him I want to open this program, but I have no idea how. And he was super supportive. I got a semi full of equipment and kayaks sent from the island. And he was like, just call us when you need something. So they helped me to learn how to do the training for volunteers and all of that.

And we started and two years later, there's too many people. And the club was like, you should probably become your own not-for-profit.

Heather: You're getting bigger. Amazing.

Alex: Well, and we needed grants because we realized a lot of our clients didn't have a lot of money left over after covering their basics. And if we wanted to help financially, it was through grants. So I was scared, but a lot of people, this is in the township of Langley, there were some key leaders who came forward and they said, we'll mentor you. We'll show you how to run a not-for-profit.

And I had a, you know, his name is Stan Duckworth, he runs Brae Island Park and he mentored me for years until we were able to stand on our own. And we became a registered charity. And that's how we started.

So doing Power For All, I could see clients. I wasn't an OT yet. I just had a background in outdoor adventure and I had ideas of devices and things you could do to support different conditions or disabilities. So then I asked, I'm like what do you need to be to create these devices and to create therapy like this? And so someone said, oh, like, maybe you should be an OT or a physio.

So I went back to school with my partner's support. I quit my job and went back and did kinesiology and specialized in child, youth and families at the University of the Fraser Valley. And after I graduated, I applied to UBC to become an OT. And I got admitted. And yeah, even through my program in OT, I started to meet other people and we created the first paddling device. And we still use that in

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our program. And I guess the rest is kind of history. But that's how I bump into OT.

Heather: Yeah, thank you for sharing that story. There are some amazing themes that I'd love to explore. One of the things that first just hit me was, one, just the power of that reframing of seeing your behavior as defiant and how that reframing happened in nature. It makes total sense then why nature became so important to you and why you've had this connection to nature. You see it and then you see that in your life.

Can you speak a little bit more of your connection to the land and how that informs your practice today?

Alex: I think that the land is complex and there's so many parts to our planet, you know, where we live. And I feel like as human beings, we are the same. And in the land you also see a diversity of ecosystems, the more diverse they are, the more they can survive and the more resilient they can be. And I see nature as being this super diverse playground that I get to bring clients into and connect them to.

And because there's such a big variety, they're going to find something in there that speaks to them. I don't have to set it up. I don't have to plan it. All I have to do is be this facilitator that connects the client to the land. And then the land just kind of takes over and the client takes over.

And we've done two studies, one with UFB and one with UBC, just studying the experiences of people with disabilities in the outdoors. And it's fascinating because, for example, with paddling many clients say when they get in a kayak or when they're in a paddleboard, there's no disabled person. They feel like the water is a neutralizer and everybody looks the same. And because of devices and adaptations, they feel just as able.

So that's always spoken to me, that nature can be such a facilitator and a neutralizer. And also you can survive on your own. The more people you have with you, for example, when you go in the back country or when you go paddling, the more you're able to do, the longer you may be able to stay on a

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trip, for example. And that's the other part for our clients, I think we emphasize a lot that healing is individual and that healing is private, but I don't think that's the truth.

The truth is that healing is also done in the community. Healing is collective. And just like our non-neurodiverse advocates are saying, having a disability, being neurodivergent, it's not a pathology. It's not a disease. They're different and the more diversity we can have, the better we can be.

And again, nature talks about that and we experience it on trips. Like I said, the more diverse ecosystems are, the more beautiful they are, but the more resilient. And so there's all these opportunities to be able to draw analogies and those are very conducive to help people to discover themselves and to go along in that journey of healing.

Heather: Yeah. I love that you're just mentioning drawing the analogies because as you were so eloquently speaking there, one of the analogies that was coming up for me was your analogy of just the beauty of the diversity of nature. And that is the beauty of the diversity of us as collective people and that we aren't separate and that healing in the collective, but I see you growing.

Like one of the things that I think many of us would notice as we listen to you speak is your willingness to reach out to the collective and ask for help. Like whether that was the mentor at Power To Be or the mentorship for Power To All. So I'm interested in what, because we talk about that as therapists, about mentorship being important and our networks and that. And yet sometimes when I'm talking to individual clinicians or even just in general, sometimes there's these thoughts that we have or feelings that stops us from connecting.

And they can be thoughts such as, I am the therapist, I should know better or I should know more. But what I'm hearing from you is that that's not the thought process that's happening. So are you willing to share about what is the thought process or the feelings that allows you to be able to connect in that way for help as you're expanding your impact as an OT?

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Alex: I think, you know, hearing you talk about, because of growing up abroad and moving around so much, I feel like it was just the norm that we would get to a place and we would really know nothing about it. My mom, for example, would be posted in France and we had two weeks to move. And whether that was in July or August, we were going to start school in September.

And so, and you go to a school, you may have never spoken French in your life, but here you are at a French school, you know? And so I feel like that feeling of not knowing, of uncertainty was kind of a norm for us in my family growing up. And because of that, it became also so normal to be like, I don't really know, let's just ask. And that's the part.

But I also feel when I went through my own healing, I really appreciated the teachers, the outdoor leaders that I had that referred to me as an expert in my life, in my experience, as a leader. Those people, I feel like they got my trust and I felt safe with them very easily compared to others that would refer to me as a problem that needed to be fixed or someone that doesn't know, so we got to teach her.

And I think that carries with me and that's what I've tried. Even as a teacher, I always remember approaching my students, my kids and referring to them as experts and more like, I need your help to do X, Y, and Z. How can we do it together? And that opened doors to establish relationships with tough kids.

When I worked in California in the Sierra Nevada hills we used to get kids that came from Oakland and they were part of gangs. And so the first day of camp you were taking away knives, you were taking away bandanas, any symbolism related to gangs. But again, when we would go backcountry, here we are on a trail, there's going to be cougars, there's going to be bears. And the only way for us to stay safe is to stick together and to follow the plan that we have for food, for water, right?

And that context right there, I feel like it strips away hierarchies, power differentials, and it puts you together as a collective. And we're going to, the most successful way to get through this is if we stick together. Like that's the message, right? And so I feel like that's why this works in the way that it does.

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Heather: Yeah. And I'm hearing just from your experience, it gave you the opportunity to feel comfort in the discomfort or comfort in the uncertainty. And then your brain was able to learn, as I reach out to others, I'm able to figure out all of these new experiences. So you were able to learn. So it makes sense that you've been able to leverage that as you've progressed in your career.

Alex: Yeah. And even with kids I've found, like some of my youth right now, you know, neurodiverse, I accept saying to them, like, I made a mistake. Or, oh, this happened because I didn't really know. It's amazing to me. It just strips away that mask or that front. I feel like it's such a great model of vulnerability.

Heather: Right. And it's a model of connection at the end of the day.

Alex: Yeah, exactly. Because it's almost like saying that and being in that space, it's like you release a platform so that you can walk across to be on the other side with the person.

Heather: Yeah, it's amazing. And so it leads me to think about you offered me, in some of our preparations, some amazing resources for using the land as a point of connection, using others as a point of connection. If there are clinicians that are interested in exploring either connection to land, using that as a facilitator as you've spoken about, or just connection in that vulnerability to others, where would you suggest that they start?

Alex: So I should also preface something because I think in this time and age where a lot of us are working towards truth and reconciliation, there is a little bit of tension between our Indigenous communities and, for example, the movement of prescribing nature. Because for Indigenous communities, they're saying that nature is not something that we prescribe.

Heather: Right, it's not a pill.

Alex: No, exactly. And also nature is not something new that we have discovered as part of healing the human soul. So I just kind of want to clarify that because I know I've heard a lot of academics, Indigenous academics and therapists speak of that and almost feeling offended that this is being used in that way.

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So when I mean about using nature or using the land as part of your practice, I think it's recognizing that the land has always been there and the land is this collection of systems and living organisms, right? And our Indigenous communities have been stewarding the land for years. And so I would suggest the first thing, if you are going to use nature in your practice, connect with your Indigenous communities and learn about how they view the land.

For example, like in Fort Langley, we have the Kwantlen Nation and they have their ways of learning and being with the land. So trying to honor that expertise and humble yourself to ask for that help, you know?

So what we mean is using nature, yes, not as a prescription, but as an environment to be in. So I would recommend that. And then there is, in the field of adventure education, there is lots of wisdom that has come from after World War II. There's principles. So for example, how we need to provide choice, we need to plan for risk. So there's these underpinnings that are part of the philosophy of using the outdoors and adventure as a facilitator.

So there's a book called Adventure Education Theory and Applications. And there are lots of writings from Project Adventure, they're in Boston. I've gone there and gotten a lot of training. That's a great place to start. There's also an OT who wrote a book. If you just want a quick read and just kind of get ideas to freshen up your practice, it's called Balance and Barefoot. I recommended that to a lot of my friends and it's still in their bookshelves, they love that book.

And then Richard Louv, he is considered to be the father of the nature movement in the States. Many people have heard of the book, The Last Child in the Woods. I don't know if you have. So he's the writer of that. He's got a lot of amazing, quick little webinars and books to read.

And in our context here in BC, one of the people that I have looked up to and learned lots from, especially about the land and Indigenous knowledge, is Monique Gray Smith. She has a course called Blankets of Resilience that I would recommend for any practitioner to take.

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Heather: That's awesome. You mentioned in some of the preparation that we did before this that you have some other professional crushes. Any other professional crushes that you'd like to share with us? It's always good to follow.

Alex: Yeah, yeah. So, I mean, you guys heard about, you know, Richard Louv, but of course like Stephen Porges and the Polyvagal Theory. I've been using a lot of the vagus nerve. And of course, when you use it in your neurodiverse population, it's just one more tool. It doesn't mean that it's going to work for everyone. And it also doesn't mean that just because they're activated, their ventral vagus nerve, that now they're going to show up as neurotypicals and socialize as that. But it's another tool, you know?

And of course, I really like Gabor Mate and a lot of his writing. Peter Levine is one that I have followed for a long time. And there's Lynn Stroller, she's the founder of the Sensory-Enhanced Yoga Institute and she uses a lot of movement and then just lots of understanding about trauma. And again, how can you use movement in the world to help your body, your mind heal?

And then there's, her name is Svetlana Masgutova. And she's Russian, but she developed a lot of her profession in Poland. And she talks a lot about the nervous system and reflexes and how those are foundational for movement in life. And understanding how all of that works has also helped me to figure out what programs to do in nature so that my clients can integrate those reflexes and their nervous systems can be better supported, I guess, through whatever they go through in life.

Heather: Yeah, thank you for that list. And I'm going to provide, for those that are interested in spelling and that, we'll put that in the show notes for that. So that's easily Googleable from there.

And I was reading, you're working on a special project right now with equipment. Do you want to share with us? What's your big project you're working on right now?

Alex: Yeah, so this project is a dream that started in 2014, but it's coming to life now. And so we're hoping that we can launch the first outdoor adaptive

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equipment program for the Lower Mainland. And from the research that we've seen, it seems like it's also going to be the first one in Canada.

But we're partnering with a couple of municipalities, like Surrey and Abbotsford, the University of the Fraser Valley, UBC, Tourism Abbotsford and Tourism Langley. And what we're hoping to do is to be able to roll out this program where you can go and if you live with paraplegia and you want to go paddling on Sunday, you can call us on Friday, you can be assessed to what you need. And Saturday, you could pick up the equipment with your buddies and put it in your car and go paddling and then return the equipment on Monday.

So that's kind of what we're working on. And it's amazing because in a lot of the studies for outdoor adventure for people with disabilities, one of the things that people want the most is independence. They love that there are programs, but of course they're offered on a certain day at a certain time. They want to be able, just like you and I, to pick up and go whenever you want, however you want to go, right? So that's what this program is for.

So we're launching that, we're hoping in the next year or two. There's quite a few things that we got to figure out as well, but that's the next thing.

And then this summer in July, we roll out our adaptive paddling camps for all abilities and all ages. So that's just kind of around the corner because July is just coming very soon.

Heather: It sure is.

Alex: Yeah, so those are the two big projects.

Heather: And if anyone is listening and they might be interested in helping, how can we connect with you, Alex? How can we help you with this mission?

Alex: So you can go on our website, which I'm sure you can include on the notes. And yeah, we're always looking for people who want to be adventure buddies, we call it, to our clients. We use a lot of adventure buddies in the summer and in the winter in our aquatic programs. We have a board of directors that has a variety of ages, so we're always looking to expand our board.

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And if anyone has ideas for these adaptive equipment loan programs, of course, we would love to have more people in the task force. There's quite a few things that need to be done before we launch it. So yeah, just on the website, you can find me and my email and you can reach out. And I'm sure you're going to put down Instagram and LinkedIn and all of those.

Heather: Yeah, we'll give all the contact information. Awesome.

Well, again, thank you so much, Alex. It is so inspiring to hear what you're doing and just the way that you're doing it. And one of the biggest takeaways for me is just thinking about being a facilitator. And if I think about that and facilitating through connection, whether it is with our environments, with people, and ultimately what I'm hearing is with yourself and how you've been able to access that. I think that that will help us all individually and collectively as we work on our practice. So thank you.

Alex: Well, thanks for this time, Heather. And it's always a privilege to be part of what you're doing too, so thank you.

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