

Episode 2.10 - The Winding Path to a Career in Disabilities with Judy Warth

Laury Scheidler: Hello, welcome to Disability Exchange. My name is Laury Scheidler and I am a social work practicum student at the University Center for Excellence and Developmental Disabilities. I'm also the parent of a 15-year-old son, James, who has Autism.

Disability Exchange is a podcast dedicated to elevating the voice of people with disabilities and their families through meaningful conversation. It is co-produced by the Iowa, UCEDD and our friends at the Midwest Public Health Training Center, university of Iowa College of Public Health. We have another great podcast today. Before we introduce our guest, I'd like to turn it over to my co-host, Mike Hoenig. Mike?

Mike Hoenig: Thanks, Laury. My name is Mike Hoenig. I am a program coordinator at the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, or UCED. Worked there full-time for many years and just retired last August from full-time employment. But I do love to talk as those of you that are on this podcast know. So I was able to stay involved in a couple projects including the Disability Exchange podcast.

So I am really thrilled about today's episode and today's guest. And she really needs no introduction because she was a co-host during season one, but we hope that we have some new listeners. And so for the benefit of those listeners, we'll take some time to introduce her. Her name is Judy Warth, and I've known her for nearly 30 years through our association with the UCED and through many, many other associations along the way. So Judy, welcome to Disability Exchange.

Judy Warth: 30 years, Mike. It's so cool that I started when I was only seven.

Mike Hoenig: I know. Isn't that amazing?

Judy Warth: Thank you guys for having me.

Mike Hoenig: Well, thank you for being here. And we could take this in so many ways. And this is really going to be fun for me and for Laury. But what's going to be fun for me is that I've kind of put a list of topics together. Some of the questions I sort of know the answer to because I've known you for so long, Judy, but some of them I don't. So my first question is one that I don't know the answer to, and that is how did you find yourself in the world of the disability community?

Judy Warth: Wow, that is a loaded question. I think there's really two critical junctures in my life. One was when I was in the fourth grade, my parents got divorced when I was little and I got moved around and everything. And finally my mom remarried and they sent me to school. Fourth grade, Mrs. May was my teacher, and I was in a new school. I was pretty unsettled. No one gives children choice and control.

And I remember it. I wasn't at this new school very long before they sent me to the cottages. That was where the special ed classrooms were. And I helped with the PE classes. And I don't remember anything remarkable about it except for the fact I can remember walking home from school and thinking, "Huh, does this mean that I have a disability or have they just moved me to the talented and gifted program?" And for those thoughts to come on a fourth grader's brain concerns me still to this day.

But I do think it was kind of a pivotal point that rides with me now. The recognition that the individuals who were classified as having disabilities were just as cool and probably cooler than I was and those kids who were in my fourth grade class.

And the second key juncture was I was in college doing the fast track, studying business, getting my degree in accounting, and then I was going to go to law school. And one summer I decided I needed to get a job. So I got a job at Goodwill here in Iowa City. And I was doing client payroll and we had to record information by hand. And I was in charge of what was called client payroll where people were making piece rates.

And there was this woman who was making like \$.32 every two weeks. I'd be writing these down every day, adding it up and writing a check for \$.32. Well, this time in my accounting career, I was taking cost accounting and I knew it cost more for that check than this person made. And I wanted to know who could only make \$.32 in two weeks? So I stormed out of my office and I went out and I watched this young woman work. She was hanging clothes at a rate that I couldn't do. My clothes still hang crooked on the hangers and working hard and doing a good job and only making \$.32.

And that was the end of my accounting career. I began to spend more and more time out on the floor and meeting people. And I found my people. I found my place. I found what made sense. And I think those two things really merged to lead me to where I am.

Mike Hoenig: Wow, those are profound. So do you think Mrs. May, looking back on it, I've got my rose colored glasses on, do you think she saw that aptitude back then in fourth grade that you had a gift for working with people with disabilities?

Judy Warth: No. think I was a pain in their butt, and so they sent me down there to get me out of the classroom. Mike, as you know, much of my time, I tend to be drawn towards people who create challenges, like you. And I think it's because I've done most of the behaviors that any person I've encountered does. So I'm pretty sure it was like, "Can we get her out?" But I really don't know. I have no idea.

Laury Scheidler: I was just curious how you ended out from that decision and those experiences into directly working with people with disabilities?

Judy Warth: Oh, that was easy. I kept leaving the office and they so finally said, "Get out of here. We don't need you in here." No. I kept leaving the office and I reached a juncture where I was taking an accounting class, the Advanced Financial Accounting Standards class here at the University of Iowa. And they handed me this book and it sits probably four inches thick.

And the instructor said, "Okay, welcome to this class. You're almost an accountant, so you're going to need to memorize this book." And I looked at him and said, "I worked for an accountant. He doesn't have this book memorized." And he looked at me very sternly and he said, "Young lady, if you want to be an accountant, you're going to memorize this book." And I said, "I don't want to be an accountant." I dropped the school.

And I went into Goodwill and I applied for a position as their food service instructor, supervisor, where I trained people how to work in a kitchen. We had a working food service where we did everything from grill cooking, fry cooking to slicing meat and all the fun stuff.

And because my parents were so happy with me, I then decided I'd probably get a second job. So I was a house parent for Systems Unlimited, where I actually lived in the house with four women with disabilities. So I did both. I did both of them, and that was the end of it.

The best part about the dropping out of school is it was eight and a half years later, I decided if I want to progress in my career, I probably should have a degree of some sort. I went back. I went back and I said, "What is it going to take for me to get a degree? What's the quickest way between here and a bachelor's degree?" And somebody shook their head and I said, "You realize you dropped out and you had two classes left."

I said, "I dropped out for all the right reasons." And the moral of the story sometimes .the decisions that look like the worst in the moment are the very best for anybody who knows me knows that I have a mild case of number dyslexia, which really screws up accounting. And two, if I had to sit behind a desk and push numbers or argue cases all day, it would kill me. I was blessed by that decision and by the woman who led me out of the office and let me see the capacity that people bring to the table.

Mike Hoenig: So her \$.32 every two weeks has been multiplied million fold then.

Judy Warth: I certainly have made a buck off of it.

Mike Hoenig: So I know that somewhere along the way you spent some time out in Western Iowa in Carroll at a facility. Was that before you went back to school or was that while you were getting your bachelor's? Or where does that fit into the picture?

Judy Warth: Oh Mike, that would be too simple. I decided probably two and a half, three years into my career at working for Systems Unlimited as a group home manager and working at Goodwill that the mountains looked really cool and I wanted to go to Colorado and I went to Colorado. And while I was in Colorado, I got to do a few different things.

I worked at the state institution for exactly one week. During that time, I learned, how do you abuse people? And the answer is by not providing staff training they need. I didn't like warehousing people and treating people like they were dishes in my dishwasher from our food service. And so I left there and I went to work in an adult activity center as a teacher, which was fine. We were building capacity and building skills amongst people, but it just still didn't feel right to me.

And I was really fortunate. I applied for a job in Boulder working for an agency called Boulder County Enterprises. One of the first sheltered workshops in the nation that closed moving all people to community employment. And that was under the direction of a visionary leader who I didn't think we could do it, but he did. We did it.

And then I came back to Iowa and got a job as a behavioral specialist at a large ICFID. At that juncture, I did not have a degree in anything. I had 10, 12 years of experience working in the field, but no degree. Moral of the story, apply for any job that interests you. If they hire you, it's not your fault. Because technically I was not qualified on paper for that job, but it was one of the funnest jobs I've ever had. Where I was a behavior specialist, which meant I could do the behaviors better than all of them. That was wrong. My job was to help empower people and grow new skills that could replace the problematic behaviors. And after doing that for a couple years, I decided probably now time to get the degree. So I commuted between Carol and Iowa City to finish my bachelor's degree.

Mike Hoenig: Oh my, really?

Judy Warth: Yeah. Yeah. And then I lucked into the opportunity to create a supported employment agency with an organization in southeast Iowa. And when I wanted to hire the person who could do so much better than I could, I came to the university and applied multiple times. And finally Dr. David Wacker said, "You're not qualified to do behavior. But I listened to you talk, you need to meet my friend, Dr. John Netsuke."

For our listeners out there, Dr. John Netsuke was one of the most amazing professionals and mentors I could have ever worked with. He had a belief that all people with disabilities can and should work, and he knew how to build partnerships. And so I was able to get in with him. And that was 29 years ago now. So it's been a jagged path, but certainly one that I feel blessed to have been on.

Laury Scheidler: It sounds like a path that you've continually followed your heart and aligned what you do with what you believe in.

Mike Hoenig: Well, I remember an early on process of working with you and John Netsuke on a grant that we had with the Illinois DD Council. And there was a self-advocacy component for people with disabilities, and then there was a training component for family members. Can't remember if they were employers. But at any rate, one of the things that I remember, Judy, I mean we'd worked together a little bit before. But that was where we really had a chance to, I was part of the team and that was pretty exciting and just feeling like I was a part of something.

I was hired at the UCED said to do self advocacy training. And that was the first time I'd really had the opportunity to get involved in doing something a little more involved. But at any rate, we were in Chicago and we had all gone out for dinner, and I said, "Why don't you just drop me off and I'll get a cab back to the hotel?" And there were three or four moms in the car, I think of some of the participants with intellectual disabilities that I imagine gave you grief for the rest of that night and end of the next morning.

But I remember you said, "Sure, I'll do that." Dropped me off and kind of gave me some directions and I was like, "Okay, this person gets it." She's not just talking about self-advocacy. You were really living it. So I guess two things about that incident. One, it's just kind of a fun thing to laugh about now, and I don't know if you have any other memories that I left out of the story. But then after that, tell us a little bit about how do you think you really got to the point where you got it? I mean, there aren't too many people that would've walked the talk like that.

Judy Warth: Mike, they abused me for hours. "You can't just drop him off. How is he going to get home?" I swear there was a cosmic sigh of relief when Mike showed up the left morning. Oh my goodness. We went to Navy Pier, one of the coolest places in the world, and they're "Ra, ra," the whole time it ruined it for me.

Mike, I don't know that I arrived. I mean, I think that every now and then I find myself having to think about how I treat people. But I think when we treat one person the same, we treat everyone the same. And when we see everyone's unique capacity, that's where it doesn't matter. We're all more alike than we are different. And I don't know. I don't when I got it, and I don't know that I still have got it.

Mike Hoenig: Oh, you got it.

Judy Warth: But I had to get your butt out of that car. But then I wanted it back as soon as we're half the block away. It's like, "Mike, come back. Hurry. They're going to hurt me, save me."

Mike and I talked about it at length later on about how cool it was that they actually got to see that and they got to see him show up the next day. But I'm going, "This guy goes on cruises. He lives in his own place. Come on." So no, that was a fun moment on a thousand levels.

Mike Hoenig: Well, it certainly was an educational moment. My thought has always been that that's one of the reasons that you connect so well with the people that you work with now, the people with disabilities is because you're with us. So anyway, that's an incident that I'll never forget.

Judy Warth: Along those lines, I can remember transporting a friend of mine who had a partner who was in the Mental Health Institute. And so we drove two and a half hours. I spent a few minute visiting with the person who was there, inpatient, and then they wanted to spend some time together so I went and sat in the lobby. And I just started conversing with people.

The person said, "It's time to go." And this man reaches over and he touches my knee and he goes, "You can't leave. You're one of us." I went, "I got to go now." But I think Robin Williams said it. Well, we all have a little spark of madness. We got to hold onto it. It's the magic. The magic that creates joy in our hearts and joy in the world around us. And why not?

Mike Hoenig: Absolutely.

Judy Warth: Unless they're going to keep you long term, just saying. I'm afraid if I ever got in there, I'd never get out. Kind of like being here.

Mike Hoenig: We're glad you're back out. Yeah.

Judy Warth: One of my favorite Hoenig stories.

Mike Hoenig: Uh oh, here we go.

Judy Warth: Since we're going to tell Hoenig stories, Mr. Hoenig stories. Was, for those of you who don't know, Mike, Mike is blind. And he and I co-taught. And oftentimes when we're having fun with folks, we'll reward people who answer questions with candy. Mike always passed out the candy. He'd heave it across the room and people be like, but they always got it. They always got it. And that was another one of those kind of subtle empowerment things. I don't think it was done to empower, it was more just because that was fun.

Mike Hoenig: It was kind of novel. And one of the funny things though, I got an evaluation for, I don't remember what kind of a training it was. But anyway, one of the persons writing the evaluation said, "This presenter should not throw candy." I thought that was good.

So Judy, I know one thing that you've talked about with getting you into the whole, this field, this madness was the \$.32 person. So I get a little bit now even more about your passion for employment. But one of the things that having worked with you at the UCED and now still getting to hear about things that are going on, is just you're being able to help people fit into their niche. And I think for instance, of

one of our coworkers that you brought in several years ago to the UCED, and who's now I believe full-time.

You have a way of believing in people that is a very unique gift, I believe. And I just first of all, want to compliment you on that. And I'd like to ask you to just talk about what drives you. I mean, there could have been any number of times along the way, and I just know the one situation, one person that I've worked with closely enough to have followed him down an amazing path. But you could have probably said, "Okay, well we're going to stop here. We're going to stop. Maybe just, it's great that he can work 10 hours a week here or something." But you get a vision and then you just work with it and don't let go and are persistent. And I'm sure there are hundreds of cases where you've had that situation where other people have just said, "No, probably not." So what drives you to get the very most out of somebody and in the process convince so many others to give them a chance?

Judy Warth: Well, thank you for that compliment, but I think it's probably overstated. I think giving people a sense of hope and believing in them is what most people need to let what is inside them emerge. And if I can put somebody in the right place at the right time, I didn't do anything other than help them be in the right place at the right time. The individual you're talking about managed to win the hearts of a number of people in power who could make those things happen. I just happen to be the cheerleader. I didn't do the magic. I wish I could, but that that's not my magic to perform, my magic to perform is simply to be there and tell people, "I think you can do this."

And maybe have some ability to say, if we tweak this, it might work better if we do this. But really, I think the magic comes in being open and letting them do what's theirs to do and cheerleading it along the way. And like I said, I wish I could own it, but I can't. It really has been individuals do what they do when they're given a chance and someone who believes in them, and they'll make their own magic happen. And if we're fortunate, we're able to watch it unfold. And that's a gift to me, and I hope to all of us.

Mike Hoenig: Oh, it is a gift. And I can relate to it because for those that I haven't shared this with on that or maybe haven't tune into the podcast last year when I had the chance to be on it as a guest, I was ready to retire five or six years ago. And Derek Willis, who as our, you said director put me in charge of two projects. They were both bigger than I had ever done before. And one was a youth leadership academy and one was actually organizing a four state self-advocacy conference. And I was like, "Oh my God, he really thinks I can do that?"

And when you are given those opportunities, you thrive and you want to succeed. And I really appreciate your explanation of that, Judy, because you are a great connector and get people in the places they need to be. But you're so right that we, I say that as a person with a disability, we have to follow through and we have to make those opportunities work.

But I will say that even though you haven't, well yes, you actually sort of were my job coach when I started working in LYN. You are there to be that support person and to affirm that we're doing what we need to do and if not to help with some corrective action. And I think that honesty that you bring to the table and that support that you bring to the table, make it possible for people to plod on when things do get tough.

Judy Warth: Well, thank you. Those are kind words. And for clarity's sake, I did not coach Mike. I helped develop natural supports that Mike knew what he was doing. He just needed somebody to say, "Oh, this person learns a little differently, let me help you." The same way that we work with businesses and other people who support workers who are perhaps different than their typical workforce.

And Mike, I chose employment for one reason. I've done residential, I've done behavioral, I've done training kind of in a segregated setting, but employment is the answer. It really is. When people work, they have money. When you have money, you have economic freedom, you have status.

Two, they have something to do with their day. And a lot of us drive by you out of what we do and what we accomplish. And finally, as I look at the people who I'm talking to today, one of the real benefits of working is this is where you establish friendships and connections to the world around you.

Mike Hoenig: Absolutely.

Judy Warth: And it's where we as adults tend to make that happen. And so when I think about people who experience disability, the one most important thing I believe we can do in their lives is help connect them to community integrated employment where they have their unique and valued role and their way to make their unique contribution, whichever it may be. And we may have to define work. We may have to define things, redefine to make it work for people, but that's where we're limiting versus they're limited.

Laury Scheidler: When I hear you say that, it also goes back to what you were saying earlier, Judy, that it gives people hope as well.

Mike Hoenig: And purpose and those connections. That's one of the things that was so hard about COVID when we were sequestered at home and couldn't be out and get those daily reinforcements. And it's why even though my job is pretty much virtual, that I every so often haunt people at CDD because I've got to have that fix.

Judy Warth: And we need your fix.

Mike Hoenig: Oh, thanks.

Judy Warth: I mean, I think when we realized we are all interconnected and there's synergy and wholeness in our individual brokenness. That we all are able and uniquely able in different ways. And when we come together, that's where the universal hole is. And that's been my blessing. I've been blessed by working with some of the most amazing people who challenge the system, challenge the people around them and challenge the status quo. And those are people with lived experience and those without. Those people who've not had that opportunity to experience that.

And for our listeners, I have a core belief that we are all literally a millimeter from disability always. We can fall down and all of a sudden not be able to walk. We can get in a car accident and our brain doesn't work right. We can age and our bodies don't work right. We will all experience disability in our life. And one of my goals is I want to set the standard by which I'll be treated. Because if not, I just want to remind you I was a behavior specialist and I can be bad, bad, bad to the bone. I will be if I don't get to do what I want to do.

Mike Hoenig: And it just might work.

Judy Warth: It will, it will work. That is the conspiracy of hope.

Mike Hoenig: I love it. Well, as we get ready to kind of wrap up, we're going to throw something back at you that you always throw at us. And we created this question in honor of you after you were our co-host for season one. And that is, you've got lots of them, but if you had to pick one superpower, what would that be?

Judy Warth: One of my associates, Ed and I staff a transition to adulthood clinic, and that's one of the questions that we ask everyone who comes in. And they often ask that question back, so that's an easy answer. I think my superpower is the ability to see your superpower.

Mike Hoenig: Oh, I love it. Well, Laury, do you have anything else before we wrap up here?

Laury Scheidler: I would say that I'm thankful for someone like you, Judy, that does empower others, especially being a mom with someone who has a disability, to watch the way you work with people. I see the way that you brighten people's demeanor just by the words that you offer them and how you empower them. And it's amazing to see that, and it's much appreciated.

Judy Warth: Thank you, Laury.

Mike Hoenig: Well, Judy, we'd just like to thank you again for joining us on Disability Exchange. It's so refreshing to have you back and just hear more words of wisdom from you. And so we just also want to thank our audience at this time for joining us. We have many more exciting podcasts coming up. We want to thank our friends at Midwest Public Health Training Center for their support. With that, I just want to thank everybody again and tell you to stay tuned for our next exciting Disability Exchange podcast. Thanks all.

Caitlin Owens: Thank you for joining us today on Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is produced by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, which is housed at the Center for Disabilities and Development at the University of Iowa. Special thanks to Kyle Delveau for the music contribution.