

## Episode 2.5 – Embracing Autism, Working & Enriching Lives with Michael Vratsinas

Judy Warth: Welcome to Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is a podcast of Iowa's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. We are focused on centering and elevating the voices of people with disabilities through meaningful conversation and connection. I'm Judy Warth. I work at the University Center for Excellence and the Center for Disability and Development.

My co-host today is the illustrious Caitlin Owens, who is our operations director, but most importantly our host extraordinaire. But today we're really lucky, because we're going to talk to one of my favorite people in the whole world, young man who I got to meet, what, two or three years ago, and have just watched him grow into an amazing professional. Mike Vratsinas. Welcome, Mike.

Michael Vratsinas: Oh, thanks for having me.

Judy Warth: I should also let you guys know that the Disability Exchange is a podcast that is presented by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. Iowa's UCEDD, at the Center for Disabilities and Development. Our podcasts are available on Anchor by Spotify, and we are doing this in collaboration with the Midwest Public Health Training Center, University of Iowa College of Public Health to launch this podcast. We thank them for their help. Mike, our goal today is let the whole world see how awesome you are. Welcome.

Michael Vratsinas: Thank you.

Caitlin Owens: Yeah. I don't know you like Judy knows you. Mike, I'm wondering, could you just start off by telling us a little bit about yourself and how you, I don't know, found yourself sort of in Judy's orbit?

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, sure. For those who don't know, I am Mike Vratsinas. I am a former University of Iowa REACH program graduate. I am currently working in the Waukee Community School district as a special education associate. I first met Judy about three years ago, during my second year at the UI REACH program. We were holding one of our UI REACH disability council meetings, our student council meetings. Judy was doing a presentation to our council. I got to touch base with her about the LEND program.

Then, in January of 2020, she spoke to a class that I was attending by the great Dr. Owen Bruno. She presented to our class. I forgot what that presentation was, I'm sorry, Judy. I know she's giving me that face, like, "How can I forget?" But I remember talking to her after class, just more about the LEND program and just... Because no one in near the Iowa REACH program has ever attended the LEND program. I really wanted to be more interested in that. Then, we talked more and one thing leads to another and I ended up working with Judy. You know, my last year of college was amazing.

Judy Warth: You know what, Mike, there may be people out there who don't know what Iowa's LEND program is, but let me tell you a fun little trivial fact. Caitlin Owens is also a former Iowa LEND trainee. Can you tell folks what LEND is?

Caitlin Owens: Can I tell you really quick? I also used to work for REACH, and I bet people might want to hear about what REACH is as well.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, UI REACH is a program at the University of Iowa, where adults ages 18 through 25 can attend this program. They learn about job skills and independent living skills, and they really focused on helping kids find out what they want to do in life. When I went to, UI REACH, I really wanted to go into education and UI REACH really set me up with internships that helped me succeed and learn the necessary skills to become an associate. Eventually, one day my goal is to be a teacher and help one of those goals in the future.

Caitlin Owens: That's awesome.

Judy Warth: For those folks who don't know what Iowa's LEND program is?

Michael Vratsinas: The LEND program is a program at the University of Iowa UCEDD. That program has people anywhere from self-advocates, family advocates, and people who are in the graduate school over there, ranging from nurses to people who want to be doctors, psychiatrists, and they all work together. We all work together to work on disability research, whether from my personal experiences or other research stuff that we had to do there.

When I was in the LEND program, one of my projects I had to do was the Parents' Mentors program. Me and four other LEND trainees got together and we got to visit with this family and we listened and talked with this family about their experiences and struggles that go on in their everyday life. That was one of the greatest experiences I've ever had.

Caitlin Owens: Wow. That is so cool to hear. It was also the highlight of my LEND experience. Can you talk about what made it such a special experience?

Michael Vratsinas: I have a disability, that's what called autism. That disability, the family that I worked with, their children had a disability. This was the first time I've ever experienced going to observe a household and being able to experience what is life like at home? How is your life at school? Getting to go in the insides of a family home with somebody with a disability, just like myself.

I'll be honest, I didn't speak as much as I would like to. That's one thing I regret about it, but in the process of it, I was really learning, because I really wanted to understand what everybody else was saying. I really wanted to listen about what other people are saying, what they're observing too, so that way I can use my knowledge for whatever I choose to do in the future, which is going into education.

Judy Warth: Mike, our paths recently have just joined again in a different place. You also sit with me on the Iowa Governor's DD Council, Developmental Disabilities Council. Do you mind telling people a little bit about that?

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, I serve on the Iowa Developmental Disability Council for the State of Iowa. We meet twice a month and we go over stuff that's going on in the disability community across Iowa. It could be projects that are going on to make our community more accessible. We also talk about events that go on, where we can speak to legislators or if we have, in September we had our Make Your Mark! Conference and I attended that, and I also spoke at that conference, and Judy was also my presenter for that, which was a cool experience.

Caitlin Owens: Awesome. What did you guys present about?

Michael Vratsinas: Our presentation was on... The theme of the conference, was being your own superhero. Me and three other guest panelists, we spoke. Judy, our lovely presenter, asked us questions about what it's like being on a council with someone with a disability. We're the only council in maybe the United States that has a person with a disability as a chair. Being on this council has made me realize, that we need more disability representation among all councils of all advisory boards, because there is one comment I remember from this presentation that someone made in the audience, is that they track data on different backgrounds, different ethnicities, but they don't track disabilities. That made me alarmed, because we need more disability representation in the community, whether that be in advisory boards, councils, or even someday in the legislator. That's very important.

Caitlin Owens: Totally. Representation on boards and councils that aren't just disability focused, because obviously people with disabilities use transportation, and parks, and everything else that non-disabled people use and their voices are really important.

Judy Warth: Mike, I'm going to come back just a smidgen. You told us that you're a special education associate. Tell us a little bit about your job and what it's meant to you so far. I know it was your dream.

Michael Vratsinas: I love my job. I've probably worked my whole life to be in this position. I work at a school called Maple Grove Elementary. It's about two miles away from my place. It's really in a location that's really nice, because I don't have to go as far and I don't have to spend money on gas, but that's the less side of it. The best part about my job is just to interact with kids that were like me growing up. Obviously the autism rates are way higher than what they were 15 years ago, when I was a kid. They did a whole newspaper article. I was on the front page, it's probably over on my wall. I could see it right over there. The autism numbers were one in 150. Now the numbers in some areas are one in 36. It's really cool. I think one thing I've learned, is that we need more people with disabilities working with kids with disabilities. What other way to relate to these kids than have somebody work with? What better way is there? You have someone like me that loves doing what I love to do and I take it very seriously, because this is something I'm very passionate about and I'm maybe the only associate that has a disability. Yeah, I'm okay with it. I don't need to say, "Hey, I have a disability," and I do what's asked and I take it very seriously and I wouldn't want to disappoint anybody. That's just who I am. I want to do the best that I can, every time that I go to work. Even today, even though I didn't work as long today, I just very happy to be there. I love every moment of it, because sometimes life is too short.

Caitlin Owens: I'm just sitting here thinking about how meaningful it must be to the kids that you work with to have somebody who they can look up to who has a disability, whether it's the same disability as them or a different disability. That's incredibly cool. Did you have any experiences like that? Do you feel like you interacted with professionals who had disabilities when you were younger, or what that would've meant to you if you had?

Michael Vratsinas: I think the school I went to, Jordan Creek Elementary when I was younger, they were the only school in the whole West Des Moines area that was really taking special education seriously. If it wasn't for Jess Streit or Alicia Cardwell or Katie Hoover, they kind of paved the way and set a great example for me. Those were my special education teachers. I work with Jess Streit today. Last year I was on her roster team. She's amazing, she's wonderful. She's taught me so many life lessons when I was a kid. Now, working with her is an amazing story. Even my assistant principal, assistant principal at the time, his name is Graham Jones, he's not my boss at Maple Grove Elementary. It's really amazing to see all the people that have made a positive impact as a kid in my life. Now I get to work with them. It's kind of like a full circle, but it just... I'm very proud, but also it makes me happy.

Judy Warth: Wow. I can't imagine what you're teaching them.

Caitlin Owens: How meaningful, how amazing it must be for them to see a student that they worked with who is just living their dream and it's pretty cool.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah. Living the dream. I mean, that's what everybody should be doing.

Judy Warth: Mike, I know that you're more than just disability advocacy and work. Do you mind telling us about some of your passions, some of the things you love to do?

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, sure.

Judy Warth: You're quite a fascinating guy.

Michael Vratsinas: I like birds. I think that is something I really took an interest in probably since March. I was down in with my grandma, down in Tampa area, and she showed me this bird app. Every time I see a bird I'm like, "Oh, what is that bird? Oh, what is that?" I've really gotten into birdie. I used to play video games and all this stuff, but I still do, but I like watching, just going outside my window and just watching the birds go by. I like going to places and just seeing all the kinds of birds, it's just, I don't know. To me it's peaceful. That's why I like it. That's probably my favorite thing to do.

Caitlin Owens: That's so cool. Are you one of those birders who... Do you keep track of all the birds that you've seen kind of thing?

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, I have a bird app. It's called Merlin. Whenever I see a bird, I take a photo of it and then it will tell me, "Hey," it would tell me what kind of bird it is, which is really cool. Then I got to read about it and then I got to add it to what's called my life list. Every time I see a new bird, it's just on my life list.

Judy Warth: How many birds you got on that life list so far? I'm just curious.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, I'll check for you, one sec. I think it's around 139.

Caitlin Owens: Wow.

Judy Warth: Not bad.

Caitlin Owens: Does it tell you if they're rare or not? What's the rarest bird you've seen?

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah. Based on what time of year it is, where you're at, et cetera and stuff like that. But yes, it does it.

Judy Warth: That's cool.

Caitlin Owens: I'm going to check that app out.

Michael Vratsinas: Yes, you should. I also follow this page on Instagram. I think it's called Bird Ability. They're a bird page, but they also focus on disability accessibility in state parks, nature preserves, and national parks, because I think birding is one of those things, it should be for everybody.

Caitlin Owens: Yeah.

Michael Vratsinas: I read this story about some visually impaired person that really loves to go birding and he just likes to listen to the sounds. I think his favorite bird was the Brown Thrasher, which is a little brown bird, probably about yag big. It makes a really unique sound. Those kind of stories just kind of amaze me. Just seeing people happy. I think that's what makes me happy. Yeah.

Judy Warth: Well, and I also know you're a traveler aren't you? Are you looking forward to taking your app Merlin over to your old homeland. Tell folks about where you're from, because you tell quite a story with that.

Michael Vratsinas: Oh yeah. My travel stories. I actually, Judy, I don't remember if I told you this or not. My parents just got a cabin in the Duluth area and I've been up there a few times since we've got it. It's probably one of my favorite places in the world. It's quiet. I'm not a big people person outside of work. I'm very introverted. I love my work, but I also just like to be by myself when I'm not working. I just love being in nature and just listen to the birds and just watch the lake. But I was also just in California, I'm not a big California person. It's too many people, too many crowds. I get kind of claustrophobic. I want to just, I don't know, just California did not hit my vibe at all.

Caitlin Owens: I can relate. I would rather be in Duluth than than California myself.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah. It's like the San Francisco of the Midwest, but not a lot of people know about it, so I wish people knew about it because I want people to come visit us up there. But yeah.

Judy Warth: Hey, Caitlin, I think we've just been invited to go to Duluth.

Caitlin Owens: Yeah, great. Add that. I think we hosted, we did a podcast last week or last year and got invited to Galena, so we'll just have to have a little road trip.

Judy Warth: I think so. You know, Mike, when I think about you and the time I've spent with you, one of the things that I truly value is just how genuinely you care. I know you've mentioned to us that you have autism, and I would say a lot of people might look at you and go, "He doesn't act anything like Rain Man." What kind of help do you need because of your autism? How does it affect you?

Michael Vratsinas: As far as help goes, I think the biggest thing is just how to handle certain situations. I think as I've gotten older, the more thoughts are just blowing through my head, it could be good thoughts, it could be sad thoughts, it could be bad thoughts, could be great thoughts, but I think one thing I've had to work on myself, is how to emotionally handle that. Finding these outlets and what I like with birds and video games and reading and stuff, just finding those kind of outlets, because sometimes my thoughts have become too much to bottle in and so I'm still working on it. But finding ways to just find that joy.

Judy Warth: Man, that's a life lesson for all of us, isn't it?

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah.

Caitlin Owens: Find that joy.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah. I mean, when you're at work, I'm not going to tell somebody at work, "Hey, this is going on and stuff," because other people got stuff to do. Even I got stuff to do. It's not my place to just say, "Hey, blah, blah, blah is going on, and all this kind of stuff is going on." It's not my place. Sometimes emotionally it's draining. You spend all this time caring about other people, making sure that you are doing what you can and then you also are trying to take care of yourself, but sometimes they're not giving you that same energy back and that's difficult. It can be with friends, it could be with work, it could be with anything. I just had to learn how to manage that, because it's the real world. The world's not going to stop for your own personal problems. You do have moments of weakness, but you know, you got to learn to move on and just continue to be great. That's what I try to do, is just be great.

Caitlin Owens: That balance can be so hard, especially in the helping profession. Like you said, you're kind of there dealing with all these kids and the challenges and joys that they're experiencing and also our coworkers are, they also bring stuff to the table. It's so complicated when you're working with people.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah.

Caitlin Owens: But also when you're such a person who chooses a helping profession, I think often you're the kind of person who just wants everybody to be good and thrive. That can be so exhausting.

Michael Vratsinas: That's all I want from people. All I want is for people to succeed. I mean, that's the whole point of working as a team, but also I'm not going to spend my time talking about whatever I have going on. People got stuff going on these days. It's not my purpose. I don't want to talk about something that's not related to work. I understand that we're all human and we have all these things, but at the same time, I have a job to do.

Also, it sucks sometimes knowing that you have to suppress the feelings in, but also you don't want other people worrying about you, because negative energy is more easy to get than positive energy. You could say seven positive things, but then when you say something negative, that negative thing is going to stick longer around than the seven positive things that you say. It's very important in the profession that we work in to say positive, because you don't want to upset a friend saying something negative. You could spend the whole day being positive, you say one thing, negative, they're going to be negative the rest of the day, because of the energy that you release. You got to talk positive and do positive. You can't just... I don't know if that makes sense, but we just try to do positive and stay positive, so that we can all be positive lights in our minds and then our kids' minds, so that we are preaching what we do and preaching what we teach.

Judy Warth: Mike, you were right on. Stephen Covey writes about it. It's called the Emotional Bank Account and that when we do positive things, say positive things, we make deposits and when we say no or we do something that doesn't feel as good to people, it always makes a much bigger withdrawal than the positive thing. You're exactly right. You're exactly right. What's the most positive thing that's going on in your world right now, that you feel best about?

Michael Vratsinas: Well, I just celebrated my mom's birthday. That was pretty positive. I think my mom has meant so much to me. I probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her. If it wasn't her hours at the

West Des Moines school boards when I was younger speaking and advocating for my rights and other kids' rights. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have the courage to be here.

I wouldn't have the courage to be in the REACH program. I wouldn't have the courage to be in LEND. I wouldn't have the courage to be an associate and all these things that I aspire. It's very important that I always, even if my mom is the only woman I ever end up loving, because family is so important, I just don't want to ever forget about my mom.

Caitlin Owens: She sounds lovely.

Michael Vratsinas: She is. Her food is amazing.

Caitlin Owens: What's the best thing she makes?

Michael Vratsinas: The best thing she makes is probably... Her fries are really good. Her pancakes are really good. If I could eat her pancakes for the rest of my life, I would. I mean, they're [inaudible 00:22:48].

Caitlin Owens: Nice.

Judy Warth: Caitlin, when we go to Duluth, we'll ask for a pancake.

Caitlin Owens: And French fries. Yeah.

Judy Warth: Why not?

Caitlin Owens: Yeah, just shoot for the moon. That's what I say.

Michael Vratsinas: You're always welcome there.

Caitlin Owens: Mike, before we wrap up, can you tell us a little bit about what your experience was growing up?

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, so I've said this story a couple times in the places I present, and I always share this and then I don't want people to forget what it was like. I've mentioned earlier in this podcast that 15 years ago, the disability rates per autism rates for someone like me was one at one in 150. Now, that number is not that big, but it's because autism wasn't really fully researched yet. It wasn't probably until I was sixth or seventh grade that it was fully researched and they started doing more accommodations, something like that. But when I was younger, I was always in special education. They were very picky about what times I was in the classroom, what times I wasn't in the classroom. At times I felt like even though the special education for someone like me was probably needed and there's kids I work with that need it, and I love working with these kids, emotionally for me, that was very rough because there were times where I was like, "Why am I being separated from the general public when everybody is eating donuts or watching a movie and I'm going to the special education room?" "That I'm going at a very inconvenient time and I'm always with an associate. I'm an associate now, so I got to be on the associate side of it, but when I was younger it was like, why is an associate with me? All these things stuff. I didn't really understand that until I was maybe in high school, because I've always had one. I got bullied for it. I got teased. I had one friend that didn't really care about any of that, and up until I left, he was my best friend. His name was Mitchell. Actually, I've known Mitchell since I was probably five or six.

He and I don't speak much anymore, but if it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't have made any friends and it would just been worse.

But it felt so emotionally draining, that I was not with my friends, it set me back socially and it kind of just messed me up. Sometimes I was doing stuff for attention, just I don't know, boy stuff or being silly or whatever. Then as I got older, it just didn't click with me. It didn't feel right. I tried doing less of that and just trying to figure out who I wanted to be.

Caitlin Owens: I'm so sorry. First off, for the way that must have felt to be pulled out and separated. I can only imagine as a kid, all you really want in so many cases is just to fit in and not be noticed and not be kind of attention called to you and stuff. I imagine that was really hard. I bet those experiences that you had make you such an empathetic associate.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah. When you're young, it's like you don't know why you're getting pulled, you don't know why you're doing this and you don't know why you're not with the class. Then you start to realize, "Oh, I'm not smart." You're struggling with those negative thoughts. I mentioned earlier that negative is more easier to attract them positive. When I was younger, there were more negative thoughts because, "Hey, I'm not in the classroom. Hey, I'm not smart," and all of this kind stuff. But, no, as I got older, I didn't really care whether I was smart or not. But when you're young, it's easier to attract those negative thoughts, because kids are just quick on to pick up stuff, like the first thing they hear and the person that they see. It was really difficult and I've had to learn how to just become a better person and just not really care about what other people think.

Caitlin Owens: Well, and I think these systems that are designed by adults, sometimes their goal is one thing, but maybe sometimes the way it feels and the way to explain it to a child is the secondary thought or is kind of forgotten.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah, I see that. That's one of the things I love about being an associate, is that I get to learn more from the kids than I do from anybody. It's like I get to learn about what these kids are feeling. I don't think I got asked much as a kid, "How am I feeling? What am I doing," when I was being told by associate is more directive, directive, directive. Most of the time directive was negative and so that's why we did negative. I think I've really got to just... You have a professional boundary, but you also care about other people. That's because at the end of the day, we're all human. If someone's sad, I'm obviously going to ask, "Hey, are you okay? Are you okay?" Just know that as a teacher that I care for them, because at the end of the day, we don't know what's going on in their heads. I wish I was teaching myself when I was younger, because I probably would've done better if I was teaching myself. But hey. I can't.

Judy Warth: Don't we all, Mike? Don't we all? But you know what?

Caitlin Owens: I'd watch that science fiction movie.

Judy Warth: Yeah. Mike, you said something that I think is really important and I have to say at least what I think after what you spurred in my brain is I think that as teachers, whether we're an associate or whatever, when we're working with young people or with any people, the most important thing we teach is how to have a relationship. When we asked you about the important people, you talked about those teachers. You didn't say, "Oh, they taught me math." You didn't say, "My principal did this." You told me how they made you feel. I hope that as you continue in your professional work here, you



remember, don't ever lose sight of you're teaching young people how to get along with the world and that's going to be... They're going to use that a whole lot more than they're going to use algebra.

Caitlin Owens: Yeah.

Judy Warth: I think the work you're doing is so important, which leads us to the question we ask everyone. Put on your cape, what's your superpower?

Michael Vratsinas: I think my superpower is just empathy. I think as an associate, I think I'm really empathetic whether people like it or not. If I see something, I'm going to ask, "Why, what's wrong?" If it's probably wrong for me to ask, I'm going to be like, "Hey, are you okay?" I think just like I mentioned earlier, I think just being empathetic. I can't speak for everybody, but a lot of it seriously, still like when I was a kid, you directive, directive, directive. Sometimes some people care and some people don't. I just feel like for me, I'm really caring and I take this so seriously that if I didn't care about working with kids, I wouldn't work with them. I'm not going to just go to a job and just say, "I want to work. Give me money." That's not who I am. If I want a job like I am right now, and I'm probably stay in the education people for the rest of my life, I want to take it seriously. Part of the things I want to be serious about is being empathetic. That's probably my superpower, is just being empathetic, taking it seriously.

Caitlin Owens: Well, your empathy came across very clearly in this episode. Mike, it was so nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you. Yeah, it was wonderful to learn more about you and get to know you and thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah.

Caitlin Owens: Thank you Judy for being here.

Michael Vratsinas: Yeah.

Judy Warth: Always my pleasure. Mike, certainly your empathy oozes from you and we're all touched by it and enriched by it.

Michael Vratsinas: Thank you, Judy.

Judy Warth: Well, thank you. Thank you, Caitlin, for letting me sit in with you today and share this experience. Thank you for joining us today on Disability Exchange. Again, we're a podcast from Iowa's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. This is a project that we work in collaboration with staff from the Midwest Public Health Training Center, at the University of Iowa College of Public Health. Join us for our next episode, which will take you down more paths to hear about the exciting lives, experiences, and lessons from the world of disability.

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.