

Finishing Season One: A Conversation with Jeff Sheen

23:50

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Speakers: Alex Schiwal, Jeff Sheen

Jeff Sheen 00:00

Hello! Welcome to the Mental Health Crossroads podcast. I'm your host, Jeff Sheen. Today, I'm joined by our producer, Alex Schiwal. Alex and I are going to talk a little about highlights from season one. We're just wrapping up our first season. We're excited to talk about some of those highlights and what our plan is for the next year.

Alex Schiwal 00:22

Looking back over season one, what were some of your favorite parts?

Jeff Sheen 00:26

I think for me, having a season one is exciting. This was our first attempt at podcasting. We both learned a lot from how to record, minimize background noise, about equipment we were using and editing software. So just figuring that out has been a lot of fun. Beyond that, I think the chance to talk to people. Some of which we knew quite well, ahead of time, members of our team. But it was nice to visit with them in this context.

Jeff Sheen 00:59

I think the best part for me though was, we met a lot of really cool people, a lot of new people, in the course of this year. Just getting to hear from all of the different people, meet them, what they're doing to improve the quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues. It was just really cool. I feel like we both came out of this with a lot of new friends across the country that are doing really great things in this area. I just love to visit with people and hear how they got started and what they're up to. So that's a highlight for me. What about you?

Alex Schiwal 01:39

I just thought it was great to be able to put a platform out there to share other people's stories, because there are so many people involved in this field. You don't always get a chance to listen to all of them. I think having these kind of targeted conversations gives you a really good chance to highlight what other people are doing.

Jeff Sheen 01:57

If you've been listening throughout the season, hopefully you've seen us evolve a little bit. They say in the podcasting world that it takes about 25 episodes to kind of find the voice and flavor of a particular podcast. We're just over halfway to that number of episodes. Hopefully, as we continue to have conversations, maybe we've gotten a little bit better at asking good questions and having conversations. I think our guests have all been fantastic. *Music*

Jeff Sheen 02:30

I think going into season two, there's going to be a couple of changes. One of the things we're excited about is we're going to have a few more co-hosts and some different voices hosting the podcast. So that'll be fun. And-

Alex Schiwal 02:48

But Jeff, I think you have some exciting news you want to tell us about why it's changing so much in season two?

Jeff Sheen 02:54

Well, one of the ways it's changing is I will not be the host, at least not the regular host for next season. I have taken a new position as an associate professor in the Department of Sociology, Social work and Anthropology here at Utah State. So, my role on this project is shifting. I love doing the podcast and it's gonna be hard to step away. I may come back as time permits and do some episodes probably with Justin, since he and I are such good friends. But yeah, I've taken a new opportunity to grow my career and do more of what I love with teaching future social workers.

Alex Schiwal 03:33

So you've been doing this for a long time, Jeff. 20 years.

Jeff Sheen 03:39

In dog years, yes, it's been a long time.

Alex Schiwal 03:41

In people years too. How did you get into this? *laughter*

Jeff Sheen 03:45

How did I get into this field?

Alex Schiwal 03:47

Yeah, tell us a little bit about your experience. What inspired you to get involved in this? And then how did you fall into this thing that you've been doing for 20 years?

Jeff Sheen 03:57

Yeah, well, I mean, it was like a dark and stormy night in 1973. I entered stage right and here I was in the world- just early experiences with my parents, who were both educators. My father was one of the first people in our small town in Idaho to have students with disabilities in his classroom in high school. This is right in the early 70s as special education law was developing and all of those things. As a young person, a lot of times we would go and visit his classroom and meet the students. I was probably six or seven and that made an impression on me. Then both my parents continued to work with students, not directly all the time, but always had students with disabilities in their classrooms. It was part of the experience, so I was always kind of aware of that.

Jeff Sheen 04:53

When I was about ready to leave the house, our family adopted my younger sister who has developmental disabilities. So, that was a pretty impactful experience, obviously, and seeing some of the things that she had experienced in different service systems and in the foster care system. It just lit the fire of social justice in me that I didn't know was there. I had a really strong sense that things could have been so much better for her and if they could be better for her, they could probably be better for a lot more people.

Jeff Sheen 05:29

It was kind of through that lived experience of being a sibling, that I talked to Emma Shouse about both of us as siblings, that really kind of led me into what I could study in college. That first led me into psychology, then sociology, and eventually to social work. Social work is where I really found my niche. Then I started here at the Center for Persons with Disabilities, which is a University Center for Excellence on Developmental Disability, as a practicum student. I had no idea when I walked through those doors that there was actually a disability field. I didn't know there were all of the organizations I'm aware of now and all of the amazing things that happened in this field I had no idea existed- other than the narrow experience with some services at school and things that my sister had interacted with. I was still on the periphery there. My parents did most of that, so I was vaguely aware. So, to jump into this and realize there was a whole field, and a whole bunch of opportunities to work on systems change, develop projects, and work directly with individuals with disabilities and families to make things better was a pretty amazing thing. I remember really feeling like that kid in a candy store. Where do I even start with all of the things that are possible? I was mentored by some amazing people over the years, had tremendous opportunities to meet people from all over the country, and be involved in projects that have hopefully had a lasting impact on improving the quality of life for people with disabilities, like my sister, and families. So yeah, that's kind of the short version.

Alex Schiwal 07:19

What are some of the things that are standout experiences for you? Whether that's a program you were able to work on or a person that you met? What are you going to remember in 20 more years?

Jeff Sheen 07:28

I will remember a lot of the people I've met along the way for sure. A lot of what I've done in the last well, I can go by project. We're a grant funded shop, so I've worked on a lot of different grant projects. I could go through a really long list of projects I've been involved with and name people for the next hour or two that have had an impact. Probably one of the biggest things I've enjoyed the most is, I've done a lot of work with young adults with intellectual disabilities, over the last 10 years in particular. I just made some really cool friends. I got to spend time with people that keep it very real all of the time. That's been probably the highlight, is just the people I've met.

Jeff Sheen 08:14

I had a good friend Gordon Richins, who has since passed, who was a quadriplegic who had an accident on a farm. He used to say that before his accident, he loved cows and hated people. After his accident, he went back to school, got his education, became really involved in the independent living movement. He's like, now I love people and hate cows. He was just this mentor. We would go on a lot of road trips. He needed a driver, so I would be the driver. We'd go to conferences, travel all over the state, and actually the country. What a fantastic human being that taught me a lot about accessibility and inclusion. So Gordon stands out for sure as a big mentor.

Jeff Sheen 08:59

Then, all of the young adults that I've worked with, Justin Olson. I've known Justin since 2005. 15 years now. So we've been associated. We had a Becoming Leaders for Tomorrow project back in 2005, and I'm in touch with 90% of those young adults that are now in their 30s. And I'm now in my late 40s. So, those relationships certainly are been a highlight. Then, just working on this project, meeting new people, working with you, Alex, our other team members. I won't name them all, because I'll leave somebody out and I'll feel sad. *laughter* Working with some really cool folks all over the country, across a number of projects. It's been a really big part of my life. It's been a big part of my life and my professional identity for sure.

Alex Schiwal 09:56

What lessons are you able to walk away from this? And what do you want other people to know based on what you've learned?

Jeff Sheen 10:03

I've learned some painful things along the way, mostly about my own ignorance *laughter* And a need to improve on different parts of my professional work. I think one of the things that really stands out. One of the reasons I got into this work was to challenge the status quo. I think a lesson I have learned from so many amazing advocates in this field is don't give up the fight in challenging the status quo. Don't perpetuate the status quo or protect the system, particularly when the system needs to do more to serve the people it was created to help. There are very beneficial resources and service systems in place to support individuals with disabilities and sometimes they get to a place where they are more about protecting the system than serving the people.

Jeff Sheen 11:06

I think that's why I like systems change work. We can challenge our own systems within the disability field, we can challenge the systems outside, and tangential and connected to it. I think I have learned to reflect on why I do what I do and adjust my path as I need, to be guided by values. I think folks need to reflect on why they do the work that they do, and always be open to learning. I think that's what I loved about being around young adults is... I learned so much, just from being invited into their world and being able to become their friends. I've learned far more than I've ever taught anybody for sure. I think that's been a nice thing to recognize, that as much as I've tried to help, I have been assisted and helped along the way.

Alex Schiwal 11:06

Right.

Jeff Sheen 12:21

I've acquired my own disability experience, personally, over the last 20 years. So, I now identify someone that has a disability and having the background in the field has been really helpful to navigate my own experiences. I think sometimes in this field, we can make a really nice living for ourselves doing different things and we need to keep in mind at the end of the day, is the work that we're doing really getting to the people that we all were passionate about helping in the first place? I don't want that to sound patronizing, because it's not like this benevolent coming in to help people. But we do have a role. There are roles across the disability movement and one of our roles from the UCEDD is to do systems change work, is to write grants, create projects, and work with stakeholders to improve things. That's kind of what I mean when I say help. I think we're doing our part, and everybody else has a part to play as well.

Jeff Sheen 13:14

I think I've learned very clearly that this is a human rights movement. And if you're a human, you can help the movement. That's probably what I would like to leave. But we have to make sure that the work we're doing is really getting to the point. The point is not running a successful grant. The point is using the grant opportunity to improve the day-to-day experience of individuals with disabilities and their family members in whatever way that grant is designed to do that. That's the point. The point in all of this is not to get all of these grants or do all of these projects, so that you have a nice career. It's to use your opportunities to use your privilege of being educated and being in a position to do this work to really make sure it translates to the people that it's designed to support.

Jeff Sheen 14:13

I think that's actually one of the things I've loved about being at the CPD in this network, is I am in awe of the potential that we all have to really move things forward and improve everyone's quality of life. As we work together as stakeholders, the potential that this collective disability field, meaning everybody and anybody that's associated with it, to make the world a better place is still untapped. To me, it's awe

inspiring. As much work as needs to be done and as much work that has been done, there's so much work that's been done by so many amazing people that we do stand on the foundation that they built. I see the new generation of advocates and individuals with lived experience that are getting involved in the disability rights movement. And you know, in 2020, it's a little hard to be optimistic here so far. *laughter* But I am optimistic that the the generation of self-advocates and others that are coming forward into this movement are going to continue to do amazing things. That's really encouraging. I think that's one of the highlights. When we interviewed some of the young adults that are involved in this work now, whether it was our friends in Boston or it was our friends Micah, Destiny and Justin and others. That's really encouraging to me that things are going to continue to get better.

Alex Schiwal 15:49

How are you going to stay involved in this work in your new position? Not necessarily with the projects that you're currently working on, but what new work will you be doing in this area to kind of continue what you've been working on?

Jeff Sheen 16:02

That's a good question. I think disability issues in policy will always be a part of my research agenda. I have a teaching emphasis in my new position, and I'm going to be working with graduate students in an MSW program. I'll get to bring all of this experience from the disability field into our conversations and hopefully help them understand that this the largest minority group that anyone can join at anytime. It's one of the larger marginalized groups, it's at the intersection of a lot of other pressing social issues of our time. There's a disparity in how individuals from different racial backgrounds are treated within the disability system. There's over representation in our special education system of people of color, students of color. That just goes in every social issue you can bring up, there an intersection with disability. We named this podcast the Mental Health Crossroads, exploring the intersection of disability and mental health. Well, there's intersections with disability in everything, in addition to mental health.

Alex Schiwal 17:13

Right.

Jeff Sheen 17:15

I've joked about this on earlier podcasts with Elaine and other people with a social work background, disability in a lot of social work programs is like one chapter, "Chapter 16", in the textbook, and sometimes you have a 15 week semester. So what chapter gets left out? Well, chapter 16.

Alex Schiwal 17:33

Right.

Jeff Sheen 17:33

I'm hopeful that I'll be able to bring in the disability issues across the things that I'm involved with. I think that's what I'm planning to do.

Alex Schiwal 17:44

So this wasn't on our agenda, but I want to ask about how you think a lot of the things happening at the present moment, whether that's the covid 19 pandemic or this sort of global recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement... How does that impact what you're going to be doing? Or how do you think it impacts the disability field in general? I think it's a really interesting topic, especially right now because a lot of people are going to be newly acquiring disabilities because of the coronavirus. And people with this existing disabilities can't necessarily readily access medical care that they need or the support they need.

Jeff Sheen 18:36

That's all that's been on most of our minds for the last several months. I don't know that I can articulately wade into that with a response that's going to be coherent. I have a lot of strongly held opinions that I'm holding up closely and examining. As a white male in this profession, I am taking very seriously the council of my colleagues, who have the lived experience, to closely examine the privilege that I do have and how I can be the best ally. I've been reading a lot. I've been listening a lot. I'm in that teach-me-mode. Please teach me to do more and to do better at the part that I play in this. I think it's just so intense right now. Everything is intense. Life is intense and these are issues that obviously have been around for generation after generation. Then you layer like a global pandemic on top of it. All of our systems have struggled for longer than I've been in my career to meet the needs of people sufficiently. Special Education is not where we'd like it to be in this country. The Social Security system, health care, Medicaid, Medicare, disability waivers, accessibility, inclusion... What's that?

Alex Schiwal 20:21

Oh, I threw in mental health care.

Jeff Sheen 20:24

Yeah. On this project, we're focusing on mental health. So our systems haven't been operating optimally. It's not like we had this utopia and then this pandemic showed up. We were in the midst of all these struggles as a society and as global citizens. Then to just throw in a pandemic on top of it has only complicated that in a lot of ways. Certainly it's complicated the day-to-day lives of so many of our friends and colleagues. So I don't know how to really coherently get into that. I think you make a good point. There's going to be more folks that acquire disability that are going to find themselves in need of services. How prepared are we to deal with that? And how prepared are we to deal with the mental health aspects that come with acquiring a disability?

Alex Schiwal 21:22

Thank you for sharing all of your thoughts there, Jeff. Is there one thing you want to tell our listeners as a takeaway? We've done this in quite a few other episodes, and I'm curious what you want to tell people right now?

Jeff Sheen 21:34

I think there are two things I would say. One is, take a moment and figure out how you can be kinder in something that you do today or tomorrow. I told somebody the other day, if we could all be even 1% kinder to other human beings and other animals and the planet. A 1% difference from us collectively would have a huge impact. The idea of being 1% kinder doesn't feel as daunting as, "hey, you should be kind." I think a really practical piece of that in the current environment is just wear a mask. Just wear a mask out of kindness for others, whatever your thoughts or ideas about the pandemic or politics or anything else. Just be kind. Just take the opportunity to be kind by a simple gestures like wearing a mask.

Alex Schiwal 22:37

I think that's a great key takeaway. Thank you, Jeff.

Jeff Sheen 22:40

I'll just say it's been a lot of fun. I've really enjoyed it. I never knew that I was going to be involved with a podcast until I was told that we should do a podcast and why don't you be the host. I've enjoyed it. I've had to listen to myself for hours at a time in editing. I'm well aware, more than any of the listeners, about how much I say "um". I appreciate everyone's patience with that as I've learned how to do this. It's been a lot of fun. I've really enjoyed it. And I'm excited. I'm excited as a listener going forward to see where season two takes us. *Music*

Alex Schiwal 23:19

Thanks for listening to this episode of The MHDD Crossroads Podcast, where we explore the intersection of mental health and developmental disabilities. Make sure to watch and listen for our October episode with our new host, Tatiana Perilla. Also, visit our website at mhddcenter.org or follow us on social media at MHDD Center for more resources, trainings, and other materials. Thanks for listening to season one of our podcast, and we'll see you back here for season two. *Music*