

Episode 11: Follow-up Interview with Justin Olson

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Speakers: Justin Olson, Alex Schiwal, Jeff Sheen

Alex Schiwal 00:09

Music Hi, and welcome to the MHDD Crossroads podcast, where we explore the intersection of mental health and developmental disabilities. This week we caught up with Justin Olson, a longtime friend of Jeff Sheen. We wanted to see how he's doing coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and how that's impacted him. We hope you enjoy listening to this conversation we had with Justin. *Music*

Jeff Sheen 00:32

Since we last talked, we want to kind of touch base and see what's been happening with you.

Justin Olson 00:37

Yeah, we have some good breaking news this morning. I guess not good, but not bad. There's still a nonprofit organization, still working out there to do things with people with disabilities. I was able to go on to a radio show and do a podcast for them as well about a program that I belong to. If you remember last time, we talked a little bit about Best Buddies, and a little bit about their Friendship Walk and how they were going to do that. That was supposed to take place back in May. Since the pandemic, we've had to turn it into a virtual walk. But with that being said, I'm still working on that and doing a lot of things. There's a lot of things going on virtually, not a lot of distancing. I've had a lot of experience with what we're going to talk about today. We'll start off with the questions and go back to Jeff.

Jeff Sheen 01:44

Great, thanks, Justin. I know that the walk is one of the biggest fundraisers for Best Buddies every year. How is that going to look virtually? What are you gonna do for that?

Justin Olson 01:57

I wasn't expecting that question, but I can shoot from the hip I guess. Best Buddies has decided to do a national walk day for Anthony Kennedy Shriver and myself. Anthony is the founder of Best Buddies. We're going to do a Facebook Live video with all the states at once. All hundred. It'll be about 110 countries total and 50 states total, all being on Facebook Live. Even you guys from Logan can join, you Aggie Blue fans. I guess we'll accept you.

Jeff Sheen 02:33

That'd be fantastic. Do you have a date for that? Justin, we'll make sure we put this in our show notes.

Justin Olson 02:38

June 20th.

Jeff Sheen 02:40

Okay, we'll get the word out here on our end as well to invite as many people as possible to attend. I appreciate the University of Utah blankets you have in the background and your red rimmed glasses.

Justin Olson 02:52

Hey, you know, that's the right team Jeff. So, thank you.

Jeff Sheen 02:58

Justin, what else have you been busy doing since we last talked to you?

Justin Olson 03:02

Since the pandemic, I've been working from home and not leaving much. Although this is not my office that we're in right now. My office consists of a card table and a home telephone. And that's about it.

Jeff Sheen 03:22

You're still doing the work that you were doing when we last talked to you?

Justin Olson 03:26

Friends of MS Charities. Yes, a lot of things are opening back up. But as I go out and about, Jeff, I've noticed that people are not social distancing, and they're not wearing their masks. One thing I would like to stress, especially for those high-risk individuals, is don't go out. If you don't need to use delivery a lot, use Uber Eats. I know it's expensive, but the delivery fee is free. Let's keep everyone safe.

Jeff Sheen 04:04

Well, that leads into my question, Justin, more about your specific situation. How has the COVID-19 situation, the social distancing, how's that changed your day-to-day life? *Music*

Alex Schiwal 04:19

We want to take a pause right here, because there's some sensitive content coming up. Justin talks about the very real and disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the disability community. We're happy we have a platform to give Justin the space to discuss this. However, if you want to do something, there are many resources on the MHDD social media and our website about what you can do and how the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the disability community.
Music

Justin Olson 04:47

It ruined Best Buddies altogether. I'm sorry to tie Best Buddies into this, but that is my life. I am a Buddy Director and the state ambassador for Best Buddies. In that position, I've had to still go out a lot because I've attended 16 funerals since the pandemic and-

Jeff Sheen 05:19

You've attended 16 funerals since the pandemic?

Justin Olson 05:22

Yes, since the pandemic started. I still have to help with the Facebook Live in the virtuality of that aspect. I get to go out but not on a happy note. It's not just like going to a football game or going to an RSL game. That's all ended though, for right now, and that's kind of ruined the social aspect of things. I was planning on coming up to Logan, and surprising Jeff and taking him to Black Angus, and that didn't happen either. I mean a nice steak dinner with your buddy would be nice but that didn't happen.

Jeff Sheen 06:06

I want to follow up with you. Tell me a little bit more about these funerals? Are these Best Buddy folks or is this related to the pandemic? Are these because poor health or what?

Justin Olson 06:15

Most of them are related to the pandemic and most related to Best Buddies. Just last night somebody passed away that has kidney failure and died, because she couldn't get dialysis during the pandemic. She didn't have corona virus but because they wouldn't give her dialysis right now because the pandemic, she had no choice. But the rest we're talking about they're Best Buddies, and they're just

friends. But they're friends that want to do virtual funerals and virtual grave sites. And so we're kind of helping mortuaries here locally with that process.

Jeff Sheen 07:03

When you're attending these screeners, are these virtual online funerals or graveside services that you're...?

Justin Olson 07:10

Correct. I'm using my cell phone and my cool nifty cell phone holder, how me and you get to talk sometimes, and turn it around so they can see the funeral service and the graveside service.

Jeff Sheen 07:25

So, are you going in person as one of the few people that are allowed to be at these funerals and are podcasting them?

Justin Olson 07:31

Yes, I am helping podcast with the mortuary. Because the mortuary's website can only take so much so we're kind of teaming up.

Jeff Sheen 07:42

I gotta tell you, my friend, that sounds like really intense emotional experiences. How are you doing with all of that?

Justin Olson 07:52

The ones that aren't real close are just fine, but the ones that get real close to home those are real hard. It's not been easy. It's been very emotional. One thing I'd like to touch on is people in a group home for a minute, Jeff. Then we'll go back to this. But you've got a lot of staff, got a lot of group homes closed down. I don't know if you heard the news a few weeks ago, but there was a disabled young man, a man probably my age that was in Utah County. That he had to go home and live with his mother, because the group home decided to close down. Now, I'm one of the lucky ones that has that leftover group open, the staff decided they would work through it. But it's really been hard and challenging to do the daily needs and everything. To get up every day and depression and anxiety is a real thing right now. How you're going to pay the next paycheck, that's a real thing. I mean even though I'm disabled and on disability, I have to say that's not enough right now. The stimulus check definitely wasn't enough. I think we need another stimulus, but that's my opinion. I'm not a politician.

Jeff Sheen 09:33

Yeah, but you're living this day-to-day. What's the situation with your staff in the group home setting that you have right now?

Justin Olson 09:40

Right now, my mom comes over a lot and takes care of me. She does all my food and she does all the shopping or whatever. They want to have their space. I've got one gal that comes in, she sits all the way down the hall and when it's time to put me to bed it's sure difficult.

Jeff Sheen 10:09

Yeah.

Justin Olson 10:10

The staff have a job to do. A lot of my staff do their jobs still, but there's just a couple that don't want to do it.

Jeff Sheen 10:22

When they are there with you, are they wearing masks and all of that kind of thing?

Justin Olson 10:26

Only when they have to get close. We've only got one that's wanting to wear a mask. Of course, it's not required inside the group home, so we're okay. Washing their hands and disinfecting as always. I disinfect everything I use even my own cell phone as I don't want to get this.

Jeff Sheen 10:52

Yeah. That's what I was gonna ask you. How are you feeling about your own personal safety? Do you feel safe in your current situation?

Justin Olson 10:58

I do and because of that I've been able to do some webinars, some video doctor visits, and make sure that I'm not having any symptoms. I've downloaded the Utah app for the symptoms. I don't have any. I'm excited to try the new app. A phone can do a test right there. It'll be rolling out in the next three months. That's kind of cool to watch and see. I don't think that I think we're gonna end up having a football season just to let all my football fans know out there. Get ready to be beat by the Utes, because it's coming. I know that practices have opened up. Maybe we won't be able to go to as many games this year, but we'll still beat you. We'll still beat you. And we'll still continue to win our Pac 12 championships, even if I played on Utah State Aggies.

Jeff Sheen 12:15

Yeah, I admire your athletic competitive spirit, my friend. You've mentioned a little bit about depression and anxiety right now. What are you doing to stay as mentally healthy as you can in difficult circumstances?

Justin Olson 12:30

You know what, it's real difficult without the girlfriend I gotta tell you. I had a doc tell me it's better to have a girlfriend, and I have one at this point, because they can still come over and they can help you out because they've been close to you already. And it's very difficult because you have no one to talk to. In my situation, I maybe have one or two staff that can speak English, versus four or five that cannot at all. That's what's kind of hard is they don't want to have a conversation. They can't have a conversation. It's a lot of times sitting on your computer doing nothing. Just typing letters to yourself.

Jeff Sheen 13:18

Are you interacting with people like we are right now on Zoom? Are you doing any kind of virtual visits with friends?

Justin Olson 13:24

A lot of Facetime visits. They closed Best Buddies, but they told me that my position was necessary. I said, 'Well, okay, I'll do FaceTime then'. That's what I've been doing. And that's okay. I'm good with that, but sometimes FaceTime isn't enough. I looked at some stats yesterday, Jeff, and again this morning to prepare for a call. They say that a lot of disabled people need that physical touch, whether it's a handshake, hug, whatever it might be, a fist bump. They need that, they use that as a security. So right now, you've got a lot of people that, doctors are saying, 'we can't do anything for you.' 'We're not willing to up your meds, because we can't really see you face to face.' What I'm saying is, wait a second, we're right here on the webcam. Isn't that good enough? Or do I need to be having a panic attack or an episode when I call you because you never know. I mean. I've got two families, one that's got kidney failure going on that just got worse kidney function. Then I got one that's dying from leukemia that's been put on hospice. I mean, I'm still dealing with all that. It just feels like every time you turn around and get ahead 10 feet you're just pushed back with something negative.

Jeff Sheen 15:08

Yeah, that's a lot going on for you, my friend. I know that just because there's a pandemic the rest of these life situations, like leukemia and kidney failure, they don't stop because of this other situation. Everything's on top of everything else.

Justin Olson 15:24

No, and it's kind of interesting as we go through this, and I think, okay, when's our *inaudible* gonna start? When's the Utes gonna say, okay, we're good to go? They've got some soft deadlines. Well, we've already passed a couple soft deadlines, and now they put new ones out. But can you really count on those? That's what you got to ask yourself.

Jeff Sheen 15:51

I think the uncertainty, that's just in every corner of our life. Nobody knows what's going to happen with pretty much anything. But I wanted to reach out and talk to you. I've been thinking a lot about you and wondering who do you have that you're able to talk to about some of this? This grief and things that are happening?

Justin Olson 16:10

It's called Facebook, posting on Facebook, messaging on Facebook. And it's just a random friend that maybe can understand what I'm going through. Because there are not any doctors.

Jeff Sheen 16:30

Kind of hard to get in to talk to? Do you have a counselor that you've been talking to at all or has that been difficult?

Justin Olson 16:34

Medicaid doesn't pay for counseling anymore. They paid for the medications and that's it. They cut that a year ago. Kind of sad. I definitely don't have the money to pay for anything like that right now.

Jeff Sheen 16:54

Yeah. Are you still getting a paycheck from your job?

Justin Olson 16:58

Oh, yeah. I mean, that's still coming in, but the thing is it isn't enough. I could work 40 hours a week, and that's kind of what I'm doing six to eight hours a day right now, and that's still not enough to cover everything. I mean, it's scraping bottom. As we go through this, it just seems that it's not getting easier. I've actually reached out to my own representative and Congressman and voiced my opinion but then again you wonder if they're actually going to read it? Or what's going on or if they actually get them. Because their mailbox is full. You know?

Jeff Sheen 17:51

Yeah.

Justin Olson 17:51

It's hard for everybody. I don't think you even have to have a disability at this point, Jeff. I mean, you look at somebody that was looking to go do study abroad over the summer. That's all been canceled. You look at people, people like Dr. Al Romeo that we both know, and look at where you're working. Whoever thought you'd be working in white walls condition. with nothing on them. I mean that's gotta be depressing in itself.

Jeff Sheen 18:28

I've got better light this time than last time.

Justin Olson 18:30

You do but there's no color on the wall, man.

Jeff Sheen 18:36

The wife doesn't let me put color on the wall. I gotta honor her choice.

Justin Olson 18:40

You let her know that causes depression. So she needs to kind of rethink her mental process there, buddy.

Jeff Sheen 18:48

I got some bright, colorful things on the walls that you just can't see right now.

Justin Olson 18:52

Oh, well, that's okay. But what I'm saying is people are saying to repaint your apartments. You really can't do that 'cause that's based on the apartment complex. It's hard.

Jeff Sheen 19:09

You're wearing a bright yellow shirt and bright red glasses. That's kind of cheerful. Do you like bright colors?

Justin Olson 19:17

Yeah, but this is kind of a work shirt. You never know when you're gonna get called into a meeting or have to go on camera. I'll telling you that's happened more than once today, so even when you're off

work you still get called in. I get calls at eight o'clock at night, Jeff, so I'm burning the midnight oil here, buddy.

Jeff Sheen 19:45

You have a lot of good advice that you've given, the last couple times we've talked. I'm just wondering as challenging as everything is right now, what advice or tips do you have to other people that are in a similar situation? That they can do to take care of themselves the best they can.

Justin Olson 20:02

In regards to that, I would encourage everyone, and maybe Jeff can put this back up on our podcast site, but go over to the Medical Home Portal. It's still active. We have a nice video there. I think the Adults With Disabilities, even though it's geared towards youth right now, I think it's a good video to listen to. I've done it a couple times to refresh my memory. And you can hear Jeff's beautiful voice and a lot of my other friends that are far away on Utah State territory and everywhere else. But you know, FaceTime and get a webcam. If you can, Xbox is right now offering that free online membership and they got a nice adaptive controller that they came up with for people with disabilities. I'm trying to get my own Xbox right now, as we speak, because they got adaptive devices that no other system has. So get online and interact with your friends just like me and Jeff and Alex here. I mean, she might be muted, but she's still part of the circle. It's a rough pandemic and all I can say is when we talk again, I hope that we're talking about how we reach the end goal and what can we do to make sure we're still protected?

Jeff Sheen 21:40

Yeah, I look forward to talking to you again soon. In the meantime, I certainly wish you all the best and thinking about you and hope it all goes well and you stay safe and healthy like the rest of us. Hoping to talk to you again soon.

Justin Olson 21:55

You bet Jeff and maybe not so much professional level. You can always call me at midnight, one in the morning because I'm up.

Jeff Sheen 22:04

Yeah, well, I know you tried to call me the other night at like 10:30, I was in bed man.

Justin Olson 22:09

Yeah, well, life doesn't end buddy. When I see a Marco Polo that I missed two days ago-

Jeff Sheen 22:14

Yeah, I won't do Marco Polos. I'll just give you a call straight out.

Justin Olson 22:17

Yeah, just straight out call me man.

Jeff Sheen 22:22

We'll do some FaceTime.

Justin Olson 22:24

Or maybe Facebook. Maybe you need to get a Facebook and a Twitter now, man.

Jeff Sheen 22:28

You know, I don't trust Facebook.

Justin Olson 22:33

That's part of you Aggie fans.

Jeff Sheen 22:35

Yeah, we're a suspicious bunch.

Justin Olson 22:38

Yeah, well, we won't go there will we?

Jeff Sheen 22:41

No, Alex has.

Justin Olson 22:43

Well, I'd like to thank Jeff and Alex for having me on their podcast today. And ladies and gentlemen, it's been great to be with you. Once again, if you have any questions, Jeff can post my phone number and I will be more than happy to talk to anybody that's having a rough time.

Jeff Sheen 23:03

Hey, I appreciate you friend. I am glad you're doing alright. I know this is a real tough time and I'm hoping the best for you.

Justin Olson 23:13

Yeah and then once you're done recording there Jeff, we have some questions for you that's off the recording. *Music*

Alex Schiwal 23:31

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