

Episode 12: Follow-Up Interview with Destiny Watkins

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Speakers: Alex Schiwal, Destiny Watkins, Jeff Sheen

Jeff Sheen 00:08

Music Hello and welcome to the Mental Health Crossroads podcast, where we explore the intersection of mental health and developmental disabilities. This week we caught up with Destiny Watkins. Destiny is a self-advocate who lives in Washington State. You might recognize their name from a previous group interview that we did with them. They are part of the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Partnership, also known as the IDD-MH partnership. That episode is linked below. *Music*

Jeff Sheen 00:37

I'm here talking with Destiny Watkins, who was a previous guest on one of our podcasts with Jessica Kramer and Micah Peace and Janet Shouse. We wanted to check in with Destiny since a lot has happened and a lot has changed since the last time we talked. I think the last time was in February or so. Destiny, welcome and thank you for being here.

Destiny Watkins 00:59

Thank you, Jeff. I was just gonna say it's great to be back on here, and to talk to you again, and talk to everybody else that listens.

Jeff Sheen 01:08

I appreciate you making time. We wanted to just check in with some of our previous podcast guests and see how you're doing since we last talked. Obviously, there's a global pandemic, which was not part of our conversation last time. So how are you doing? And what have you been busy doing since we last talked?

Destiny Watkins 01:27

I stay pretty busy with the advocacy groups that I'm involved with. It's a little bit more challenging. I'm just doing a lot of it from home and trying to work with everybody's schedule because of working from home and people with kids and sometimes I babysit. So, it's just like, how are we shoveling this all around? I'm picking it up and dealing with it. It's just taking one step at a time and it's been kind of crazy and I've been making do. I guess I could be doing better I feel, but I'm dealing with the lack of sleep from trying to keep up with all the stuff. It's kind of getting to me. But it's happening, I'm getting there.

Jeff Sheen 02:19

It sounds like you're still connecting with other self-advocates and whatnot.

Destiny Watkins 02:24

Yeah.

Jeff Sheen 02:24

How has your day-to-day world changed with this pandemic? You mentioned a few things, but let's start with how are your friends doing? How are you supporting each other? What's the conversation with your friends?

Destiny Watkins 02:37

It's kind of weird, but we do a lot of video chats and we'll play video games over video like they'll be on their game system and I'll be on mine. We'll play online but we'll keep the line open and we'll support each other that way and just hang out virtually. Sometimes it's so challenging, but we'll try and start a movie and we have to start it at the exact same time and be there by video so we can chat back and forth on video. Sometimes it's challenging because you can't always get it at the exact same time and we're like, okay, gotta restart. Gotta restart each time because you always hit it one second too early. Then the other person hears it before and then it echoes. It's a nightmare but one they can do.

Jeff Sheen 03:34

It's funny, because we used to worry about people spending too much time playing games online and now that's like the way that we connect.

Destiny Watkins 03:41

Yeah, I never used to play this much video games either. I'm more outdoors. I like to be active playing wheelchair basketball or sled hockey. It's all adaptive sports for people in wheelchairs or some sort of physical disability. So not having that has been really hard. Or just going to the park and doing photography stuff. Being isolated has made it very hard for me to stay active on top of everything else. So I'm like, why not? I guess it won't kill me that much to play more

video games or work out in my living room with my weights and stuff. But I mean, you got to do what you got to do to stay active and busy. We all, my friends, we do video a lot. We'll be working out together over video and it's just crazy. It's definitely a challenge, especially when video chat goes down and has an error or an update. It's like, huh? There's more anxiety because it's like we have this plan. We were looking forward to it and that's our only connection. Then we can't even get it to work.

Jeff Sheen 05:02

I think you're up in the Washington State area. It sounds like you have a very active lifestyle being out and around people.

Destiny Watkins 05:14

Yeah.

Jeff Sheen 05:14

What's your current situation as far as like the self-isolation and quarantine stuff? Are you getting out at all? Are you staying pretty close to home? What are your thoughts there?

Destiny Watkins 05:26

I'm actually right next to Washington and then Idaho and a little town, Post Falls and-

Jeff Sheen 05:35

Oh, that's right. I kept thinking you were from Spokane because my friend is from Post Falls. So you're in Post Falls.

Destiny Watkins 05:40

Mhmm. I was actually born in Spokane, Washington. We're just now opening up in different phases. It's the trial but staying isolated because of my health issues has been the best for me. I mean, not mentally but physically. Being healthy is my biggest concern. With all these people that are out still, I see a lot of cars even though it's like we're supposed to stay at home. I know there was one or two times I went to the store for groceries and that was a whole nightmare and a half. Some stores were open for disability people like early in the morning, like seven o'clock or six o'clock in the morning, and so then I had to find a ride. You know, it's really hard with not having a caregiver or transportation that I usually use every day for wheelchair accessibility or help. It's been just me solo. And so I'm struggling, but I'm just taking it one step at a time. If I can get these accomplished, great. If not, I try to just let it go. It is what it is. When I went to the store, and I was just like, I don't want to go all the way to the next aisle just to loop around. Because they have these little stickers on the floor and it says, 'enter' 'exit' and I'm like, I'm in a chair. I am not going all the way over there just to loop around to grab this one

item. If you've got an issue, stay six feet apart and just be patient. I was not wanting to go all the way around, trying to push your grocery cart in a manual wheelchair, because my power chair doesn't fit in any vehicles.

Jeff Sheen 07:38

Yeah, wow. That's another level that a lot of people don't have to think about as they go get their groceries.

Destiny Watkins 07:46

No.

Jeff Sheen 07:46

I'm wondering, do you use paratransit regularly or were you using paratransit regularly before this? Or do you drive yourself with your manual chair places? How did you get around most of the time before the pandemic?

Destiny Watkins 08:02

I relied on a personal care assistant and I don't drive. I've never had a license. I just made it work and I use our city transport. And everything has been shut down. And because of the schools my caregiver, she's a single mom, had to quit because she has to homeschool her daughter now. I've lost all my help, all my support, and I'm like, 'Okay, I have my cat.' She's motivational. My cat is not normal. She acts like she is a drill sergeant and the queen of the house. She's very demanding. Usually if it's a routine every day, and I'm tired and I don't want to get out of bed and just want to play video games or watch TV or something, I just want to stay in bed but my cat is like, 'no, you're getting up, getting in a chair and you're coming out into the living room at least.' She'll sit me out and she'll paw at you when she wants attention. I guess I need to get my wheelchair and go out in the living room at least. It's been kind of nice to have a pet that's on a routine schedule with me. And we're a really good bond for each other. She's helped me a lot. I'm really thankful I have a pet that's supporting me through COVID-19 because of the isolation and struggling to socialize with somebody. They're happy animals. They're just thankful every day.

Jeff Sheen 09:52

Yeah, that's really great. I know pets are such a big part of supporting a lot of our well-being. I'm glad that you have your cat there. What's your cat's name?

Destiny Watkins 10:03

Her name is Miss Kitty. That's what I call her, but her name was Gladys when I adopted her from a homeless shelter.

Jeff Sheen 10:14

How long have you two been together that way?

Destiny Watkins 10:16

I've had her for a good two years now. I got her when she was about one year old.

Jeff Sheen 10:26

That's great. So she's about three, four years old.

Destiny Watkins 10:29

About three, yeah.

Jeff Sheen 10:32

You said a couple of things I wanted to follow up on. You made this comment, and I'm in a similar situation, I have some underlying health condition so trying to stay physically healthy has kind of been the top priority. I've certainly been very conservative and really haven't left to go any place with any other people. I'm home with my family. I've got some other human beings to interact with, but I'm not going out and doing things that I would typically do. It's an interesting trade off, right? Between trying to stay physically healthy, and the impact that can have on your mental health when it isolates you, and to stay physically healthy you have to avoid a lot of things that keep you mentally healthy.

Destiny Watkins 11:18

Yeah, that's the challenge.

Jeff Sheen 11:19

Yeah, absolutely. I know you're connecting with some friends online and whatnot, do you have folks that are checking in with you or are there folks that you regularly check in on and see how they're doing if they're in a similar situation?

Destiny Watkins 11:32

Yeah, we use a lot of like social media, but my acquaintances and friends already share everything on social media. So it's like we can check on each other that way. When we do our videos, we'll talk and make sure we're all doing better. You know, how can we help each other out? Obviously, it's really challenging to cook a meal for somebody and deliver it. But there have been times where they've helped me out, because I have struggled and I'm like, 'I don't want to cook tonight.' But then there are other times where it's just like they need help with paperwork or organization and they're just getting frustrated. So we'll do a video and they'll be

like a robot, and I'll help them organize so they don't have to be in their mind. It kind of helps us balance each other out, because our minds are so tunnel vision just looking at the walls and stuff like that. It's been really hard, but we're making do by checking in with each other seeing what we can do to help each other out.

Jeff Sheen 12:54

Yeah, I think even some of those online check-ins on a regular basis can be a big deal for everybody involved. I was talking to my friend, Justin, who lives in a group home situation about his situation with staffing. They've definitely had less staff available to assist him and the staff that do come in kind of assist when they absolutely have to, and the rest of the time keep their distance. It's to protect his health, his physical health as well as their physical health, but that's taken an emotional toll on him. He talked about the lack of physical contact that he's used to having with people, even fist bumps and hugs and things like that, and how he's feeling fairly isolated right now. I think Micah was talking about how people that haven't had to experience that are suddenly getting a small taste of what people with different disabilities have dealt with for their whole lives as far as challenges with accessing things and other stuff. I'm curious, with your caregiver situation, are you just making do? Are you thinking about trying to find somebody else you could hire in the meantime? Or are you just gonna ride this out? What's kind of the plan there?

Destiny Watkins 14:18

I have ads out and I've been looking, but at this point I'm not sure where we're going to go with this because of this whole virus. Our area is doing phases to open up the city, so I'm just staying back and trying to assess how this is gonna happen. If more people get sick, then I'm just going to have to try and ride it out the best I can. I have been staying in really good connection with my doctor over the phone or video and going from there. Trying to be positive through this whole thing's been really hard. The only positive thing so far that I've thought about was when I went to the store, people don't force their help on you and treat you like you're an invalid when you're in a wheelchair. So that's what I say in my mind when I'm going grocery shopping because that's always been my biggest challenge. When I'm by myself in a wheelchair, people want to force their help or try and come up behind you and push you. It's like, sweet, they're not forcing their help on me even though I don't need it. If I do, there's workers that are safe and they're using protection and I'm using it. I try to avoid it if possible and think 'is it a necessity that I can go without?' It's definitely been challenging to be positive through this whole thing. That's for sure.

Jeff Sheen 16:00

Absolutely, and it sounds like it's been quite a significant challenge. I mean, to lose a personal care attendant that you're used to working with and to grocery shop... That's a really interesting perspective, that before this all happened people would get into your personal space and force

their help on you unwanted. Now, because everybody's trying to keep their space you actually have a little bit more, ironically, freedom to move around without people forcing themselves to help. But at the same time, the trade-off is this whole quarantine thing.

Destiny Watkins 16:39

Yeah. I just thought it was funny to think about it. When I go to the store, I'm not struggling more with communicating with others to respect my boundaries. I got this like, 'I'm okay, thank you' and they'll still force their help on me. And it's like, 'thanks you just put it in my grocery cart where I physically can't reach it now. That's brilliant.' I said, 'No, now I gotta ask a worker to grab that for me.' Now, I don't have to fight with anybody. It's just like, whoa, I got more freedom. Now I can actually take my time and I'm not being rushed and it's not going to hurt me physically by trying to rush anymore. I can take my time and think about things. It gives me time to sit there in my wheelchair and breathe if I need to, to calm myself down, having patience and not being forced to get through things and people cutting you off. That's the only positive thing out of this whole thing, when I go out and about, like to the grocery store when necessary.

Jeff Sheen 17:52

Yeah, and that skill of looking for a silver lining if one can be found... I think it's fantastic that you found this kind of silver lining that makes you laugh like, 'Oh my gosh, this is so bizarre that in this situation, I actually have more freedom.' But everything else is more complicated. How are you getting groceries and stuff these days? Are you able to get them delivered or is somebody bringing them in or what's going on there?

Destiny Watkins 18:22

Sometimes I can get them delivered online, but there are some websites that says in-store only so we have to go to the store. That's been a challenge, but usually I just put them in my bags and either I'll set them in my lap or I'll put them in my backpack on the back of my wheelchair. Just doing what I can and it's a challenge for sure. But I'm making do with what I can.

Jeff Sheen 18:58

Yeah. Do you have family that's closer by that's interacting with you a little bit more than they would if you had your personal attendant?

Destiny Watkins 19:06

No, I don't have family. It's just me and my cat.

Jeff Sheen 19:11

Yeah, so you're really-

Destiny Watkins 19:13

Being independent.

Jeff Sheen 19:15

You're navigating this. Wow, that's a lot to deal with, though. For sure.

Destiny Watkins 19:25

Yeah, it is. It's overwhelming, that's for sure. I am thankful for the crisis lines that are available that can help you if you need to call and talk to somebody when you're feeling overwhelmed about COVID-19. I will say, I did call once. When this first started and I found out I was losing my whole support, I panicked, and I was like, 'I don't think I can do this.' But, it just took that one phone call and they talked me through everything and we figured it out. I've been doing it now. I got past that first lump of anxiety and here I am today. It feels like it's halfway over.

Jeff Sheen 20:14

Yeah, here you are talking to us. I'm so grateful to just hear this part of your story. We, Alex and I, were thinking of all the folks that we interviewed recently and wanted to check-in both on a on a personal level to say, 'Hey, how are you doing?' And also if there's a way we can record some of this and it could benefit other people, maybe we could do that. Just you talking about this crisis line is something that we're going to want to make sure people know about. I'm curious if you know if that's an Idaho specific number. I'm assuming there are probably some things available in every state. How did you find out about this crisis line? Because that'd be important for other people to know.

Destiny Watkins 21:00

I actually Googled it. I love Google. Anytime I don't know anything or can't figure something out, I ask Google. I know a lot of people say, 'Don't go to Google. Internet is just bad for information.' Actually, I see it from a different perspective. Growing up with a disability, I struggled with reading and writing. I asked Google how to spell a word. It tells me. If I don't know a word, I will spell the word to Google and Google will tell me how to pronounce it. That helped me so much growing up. So I asked Google who I could talk to about COVID-19 when having a panic attack and it actually pulled up a bunch of numbers. I just called and if they couldn't help me I asked if they could help me find a number that I could call and talk to. Eventually, I got a number and I talked to somebody and that's how I did it.

Jeff Sheen 22:03

I'm so glad that you were persistent until you found somebody that could help you with that. Not to get too personal but was that a long phone call? Was it a short phone call? What were some of the things that they said that helped you that others might need to hear?

Destiny Watkins 22:20

It was a pretty decent phone call. It was at least an hour, maybe an hour and a half. I just talked a little bit about everything that was going on, how overwhelmed I was with losing all of my support. They actually gave me some resources I didn't even think about for after the whole COVID-19 calms down that I could reach out to. Because on top of everything else, my power chair broke down on me. So, I went without my power chair for a little while until my tech person could come out and fix it. But that was a big obstacle. The limit of contact and stuff like that, it was really concerning. But we used protection, hand sanitizer, face masks, and stayed at a distance when talking. I was transferred out of my chair, so when they came in I had it ready for him. They could stay at a distance to look at it and figure it out. They changed my batteries and that was that. But for a couple days I went without it. That was the icing on the cake for me, I was just like, 'okay, I can't do this.' I have a shoulder injury that I've had for a couple years now. So with no personal care attendant, I lost all my support. I was really overwhelmed with life in general at this point. I got some information that I didn't even think about using, it was the United Way. I had no idea they existed and that they helped all over the state with donations. I was like, great, maybe they can help me with a wheelchair or a manual because my manual chair's kind of old anyway and has fallen apart. But I was thankful I had it for when my power chair broke down, because I have no support. Now I can prioritize and plan things a little bit better knowing that there's actually alternatives out there in this world that can help you still.

Jeff Sheen 24:42

Yeah, I'm really glad that you found some resources that have been helpful to you and connecting to other people. I'm glad that you have the online connections through social media and playing video games online, watching movies online. I'm glad you have that contact. I'm really glad that you have Miss Kitty there with you. As far as emotional connection, I'm wondering if there's anything that we might be able to help put you in contact with? Any resources or anything else you think that you might need that we could help with? Or if you think you're doing alright for now?

Destiny Watkins 25:17

I think I'm doing alright. I'm just taking one day at a time, that's the best that I can do. I think anybody is just looking at what they can do right now for this day. Meals and keeping my house clean has kept me busy so I've had some stuff to do physically. Yeah, it's a challenge, but I don't have anywhere else I need to be, no appointments. I can do this now. I can catch up on this or it's time for spring cleaning! I can go through and get rid of all this old stuff that doesn't fit.

Then after COVID-19, now I can upgrade and get new stuff or whatever I need to put back in my house and plan for the next crisis moment that could occur, but this time I will plan for an emergency kit. *Music*

Alex Schiwal 26:26

Music Thanks for listening to this episode of the MHDD Crossroads podcast. We hope you enjoyed this episode. If you did, make sure to like, subscribe and share our podcast wherever you download your episodes. Also, make sure to follow us on social media at MHDD center, and visit our website mhddcenter.org for more resources and trainings. Until next time, thanks.

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