

Lifeworks Virtual Self-Advocacy Conference: My Community & My Rights

Monday, July 13, 2020

Coalition-Building & Partnering for Justice

A Conversation with Noah McCourt, of the Minnesota Disability Justice Network

Ashley: Thank you so much for joining us for our first ever Work/Life Self Advocacy Conference. This event was made possible by the co-sponsorship funds of the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities. For more information, email us at worklifemn@lifeworks.org. We hope you enjoy!

Ashley: Noah and team thank you so much for joining us for the Lifeworks self-advocacy conference, it's the first one as many of you have heard, it's the first self-advocacy conference that we've ever had at Lifeworks, so this is a really, really exciting day, and we are so excited to be hosting this and having you all with us. This conference was made possible by the co-sponsorship funds of the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities so we wanted to give a shout out to them as well. And for our last session of the day we have a presenter named Noah McCourt who is joining us and he will be presenting on the session titled Coalition-building and Partnering for Justice. So I want to quickly read through his bio and introduce you all and then Noah will take it away. Noah McCourt ran for City Council in Waconia, Minnesota. His opponents attacked him in the local paper on the basis of his Autism diagnosis. The good news is, it backlashed statewide, and Noah ended up losing by approximately only 200 votes. As a result, Noah now does a lot of work of public policy in Minnesota in regards to mental health and disability rights. Noah spoke at the United Nations in honor of World Autism day and also serves as a Chair of the State Committee on Children's Mental Health and on the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Association of Children's Mental Health. Noah works with public policy organizations that work to improve the lives of people with disabilities. Noah has an Autism diagnosis and has an interest in promoting self-advocacy, public policy, and probate law. So it is my pleasure to introduce our last speaker of the day, Noah McCourt. Let's welcome him as he gets settled in, take it away Noah!

Noah: All right, thank you so much I really just want to thank you guys for inviting me today. I think this is a really important conversation and I want to apologize first off for my tardiness we have been working really hard on addressing issues like police brutality, particularly in response to the George Floyd incident, so we have a lot of really exciting

events and protests and educational opportunities that we've been working with on behalf of my organization, the Minnesota Disability Justice Network to really talk about police brutality. So I apologize for my tardiness and I really look forward to this conversation today.

So this part of what this conversation is about today is clearly coalition building and partnerships and community building, so I just want to take a little bit to talk about how important community coalitions are for the disability community and how important it is for us to really be strong allies and be able to recognize the intersectionality with other movements. And then I'm just going to take a bit and then I'm really big on kind of engagement so I'm not going to bore you with just letting me talk. I really would kind of like to hear your guys's conversations and talk about a little bit of activism and would like to open it up to you to ask any questions or on it any insight that I can offer to you and your guys' work. So the first thing that I really want to talk about is political advocacy. The disability community is very often the community, as I'm sure you guys are aware, that is not often included at the table.

We are very often spoken for and so I felt that it was very important for the disability community to be represented in a lot of these conversations especially in the conversation on police brutality. So I've done a lot of partnerships with Communities United Against Police Brutality, The Racial Justice Network, the Twin Cities Coalition for Justice for Jamar, and really working to give people with disabilities a voice in the conversation on police brutality. And we have really become an essential part of that coalition. 54% of people, 54% of individuals who lose their lives annually to police brutality are people with disabilities, and so we felt it was important for us to have a conversation and so we have been working on really diligently with like I said a variety of different organizations to get a lot of movement forward on police brutality. We have several bills that we've introduced in the upcoming special session in coalition or in coordination with our community and partners including: no-knock warrants and mandating training on Autism and developmental disabilities including fetal alcohol syndrome, and so on.

And so I guess I really was hoping this would be a little bit more of a conversation between you and I about activism in the community and if you if you guys had any questions I guess I would just want to open it up to you guys now to really initiate that conversation. If anybody has any questions that they had on I suppose activism and partnerships in the community.

Question: Hi Noah, my question is about, I know you might be talking more about that later, but your recommendation for people that are interested in getting involved in some of this work, what's a good jumping off point for someone that maybe hasn't been active in this work before?

Noah: You know there's a lot of organizations I really have been inclusive of people with disabilities in the past but we really haven't had a real good opportunity to really engage

ourselves and so I would one of the organizations I would really recommend getting involved in is Communities United Against Police Brutality as well as Disability Justice Network. We are really seeking to grow our ranks and provide people with disabilities a really robust role in some of these conversations on social justice so I would recommend that. I would also recommend just showing up, and showing up I know that COVID-19 is an issue right now for a lot of people, and so but there's a lot of other ways to get involved. The Disability Justice Network has actually received over probably 2000 signs from public officials and so we have been repainting those signs and offering encouraging messages and providing a lot of the signs that have been used for protests and for community engagement, we have provided a lot of those and we could always use more assistance with those. And what we feel is that really allows for people to A) to appropriately socially distance and meet their own health care needs and B) will also allow kind of a channel for creativity that really can have an impactful meaning for the movement.

Ashley: Thank you, Noah. This is Ashley from Lifeworks. You mentioned the Disability Justice Network – how can people, if everything that you just described sounds interesting to them, how can folks get involved?

Noah: You know folks can really reach out to me personally and we are actually going to start having meetings in person once COVID-19 is over and I'm going to start trying to coordinate to be able to have meetings in various places including in the suburbs. We will make sure they're in accessible locations and we're probably going to meet either in the evenings or on a weekday to really start moving and partnering with other organizations. We're kind of pretty loose right now simply because of COVID but I would really like to have a more foundational meeting where we can really get a Board in place and like adopt bylaws and at that point I would really strongly reach out to many of you who are here today who have an interest in social justice, and social justice I would also say is not necessarily even on police brutality, we have also been part of a coalition seeking to eliminate the sub-minimum wage here in Minnesota and really seeking to provide people with disabilities with more equitable employment opportunities. You know we live in the 21st century, we have a diverse and robust workforce where people are kind of valued for the different sorts of skills that they can offer to the workforce. And I think you guys and me, we all kind of have our different assets and our different skills that we can offer to the workforce and to employers and so when we learn to recognize people by their skillset and what they can bring to an organization rather than by their deficit I think that really will only serve to strengthen Minnesota's economy. So we'll be bringing that back next session so if anybody is really interested in issues or like customized employment we would really encourage you to get involved in that. The other legislation we've been working on is working on a lot of the issues regarding health disparities, so during the legislative session there's a lot of ways to really get involved and whether that's research or direct action or just other sorts of involvement I really would encourage you guys to reach out to me and let me know what issues matter to you and what issues that we can be supportive of.

Ashley: Thank you so much for that Noah, I have the chat pulled up and I was wondering would you prefer that people get in touch with you via email, phone, or a different way?

Noah: I'm actually putting my email in the chat right now, you also can call my direct cell phone. Email is sometimes easier, I'm kind of always sort of around but one of the issues I'm running into is I get a lot of emails and a lot of phone calls and when we are working to really get together a lot of direct actions like we're doing this week, and special session started this week, so we have had just up the wazoo phone calls and we have about like five people on our board right now we're all kind of scrambling, so an email would really work out well.

Ashley: Perfect thank you so much for that, Noah.

Noah: The other thing I would just touch on real quick is that there really are multiple different facets to the social justice and the coalition-building issue. A lot of people see legislative change as the ultimate goal and I think that's where the disability community is really focused for a long time and I really think that the involvement and the direct actions is also important. Because changing a law doesn't necessarily always change culture, and so when we offer people opportunities to become involved with us when we build partnerships, and when we build coalitions, it allows us to see those more intersectional interests. So for example, you know I testified before the state legislature on a package of bills they brought forward on addressing police violence and one of the issues was specifically Autism, but there were, you know, a variety of other issues that were also impactful and would really impact both communities of color and people with disabilities. And I think one of the things that we really need to work on as the community is really that intersectional aspect. You know when we talk about people of color, we also need to recognize that if anybody should have an interest in disability rights it's communities of color. Native Americans and Black Americans have some of the highest prevalence rates of disability in the country and it's not really an either/or situation in a lot of cases. And it shouldn't come down to us versus them, it shouldn't come down to comparative politics. What it should really come down to is that we, the black community and the disability community, we're more than culture, we're very intersectional movements and that we need to recognize the intersectionality again. And that needs to really be in every aspect of the work that we do.

Alli: That's awesome, thank you, Noah. This is Alli from Lifeworks and I think that intersectionality piece is something that that Ashley and I have been working on to train both people at Lifeworks and other maybe service providers too, so I think that's really, really important like you're talking about. I had a question, going back to how you you've been in this work for a while now, and thinking back to maybe the very first couple months that you got started in disability rights work, how did you kind of get into the work of disability rights, and what do you see are those kind of first steps other than reaching out to people, but really just how to how to get connected when there's so much going on?

Noah: I guess I would say that I've always been involved. My parents really strove for me to be a really strong self-advocate and to never really be ashamed of my needs and to learn to speak up when I had a problem. And there was a whole lot of people who would probably tell you that I have at times spoken up too much, but I guess I would say my first real foray into really getting involved in the policy work and a lot and being I'm very integral in some of other work that's being done around Disability Rights was when I first ran for City Council and that I got a lot of pushback for deciding to run for City Council as an individual on the Autism spectrum. People don't necessarily always understand disability, people don't necessarily see disability as an identity. They see it as you know, kind of a "nice thing to do" and I would say that's something I found on both sides of the aisle, that working to protect the rights and preserve the dignity of people with disabilities here in Minnesota and across the nation is really, you know, it's more than just "a nice thing to do." And it's really imperative that we start seeing people with disabilities as a community and I guess I would say that when I kind of landed my face in the paper, you know, and found myself in a little bit of a controversial place, that was where I first started really fighting for the rights of people with disabilities. Before it had always been, you know, kind of those fuzzy conversations, where advocacy orgs that put it together, and they were leading it. And what I really found is that people with disabilities really needed to be allowed to take a stand and lead on some of these conversations, particularly in the sub minimum wage issue. What I found was really impactful is that when advocacy organizations came and said "Hey we need to address this and we need to increase opportunities for competitive integrated and customized employment," it was not necessarily well-received because you know nonprofits have their own self-interests, nonprofits have different views on how things should be, and so on, but when people with disabilities themselves came and said: "This is how it impacts us," I found that to be very impactful. And so I guess I would say another thing besides just showing up is to tell your story and advocate. Whether you're doing it as a single individual, whether you're doing in the Disability Justice Network, it is very impactful. Legislators always like hearing those personal stories. It's one thing for, you know, for a non-profit or an organization to come up and say "Hey this is a great idea" but for them (legislators) to hear how this great idea actually applies and actually impact people's lives, although that may seem like a small thing to do, but really does improve the situation and the lives of so many people when people are willing to speak up. And I would also encourage people that even if it's something that a lot of advocacy organizations are pushing for, if it doesn't help you, you need to speak up for that, too. And so it's like sometimes I think that nonprofits lose sight of what the actual goal is and so I think that it is it is really like our role as people with disabilities to remind them that this is a movement that really ought to be led by us and that our stories matter and that the way that this impacts us matters and it's not just about organizational observations and agendas. This is really about people's lives and so whether you agree with something or disagree with something you should always speak up.

Ashley: Thank you, Noah, this is Ashley from Lifeworks, I wanted to ask a question about

the future. What are some things that are kind of like coming down the pipeline for things that you are seeing as really important issues for disability advocates in the future?

Noah: So I guess I would say in the conversation on police brutality you know and police relations with the community. After this phone call is up if you've ever had an issue with law enforcement I would really encourage you to write to your state legislator. One of the things we've seen that that there's a lot of stuff coming down the pipeline right now on police, law enforcement, courts, access, if you've ever had an issue with accessing justice or accessing the courts, or communicating with law enforcement, I would really encourage you to write a letter to your legislator right after this. And if there's anybody that would want help with doing that or help figuring out who that is I'd be happy to assist in doing that, just shoot me an email or a text or a phone call. But there's a lot of stuff coming down the pipeline with the death of George Floyd and I think that's something that's impacted a lot of people. But one of the frustrations that a lot of people have is that people don't necessarily see it as a disability rights issue, but it really is. And so I would encourage people to get involved in that way. I know that a lot of organizations are also really taking a look at labor laws so if you're interested in helping people with disabilities find access to jobs that are competitive if you're interested in unions or in Economic Opportunity, there's a lot of great stuff coming down on that side too, and whether that's for more funding for customized employment opportunities, or ultimately eliminating or phasing out the sub-minimum wage, those are fights that we could really use you guys on as well. The other thing that we're really working on right now with health disparities. People with disabilities have so many barriers to staying healthy, whether you live at the intersection of race and disability, whether or not you have a mobility impairment, whether or not you're an individual with a mental illness, or an individual who identifies as a person with Autism, we have a lot of health disparities, and there was a study that came out by the World Health Organization not all that long ago outlining that our life expectancies are significantly lower than that of the average populations in many of these areas, simply because the access to health care is not there and so if you're looking to increase access to care that is another great way to really be involved. With transportation there's a lot of great work being done on Metro Mobility, which I know is an issue for a lot of people, public infrastructure, the ADA, if you're interested in the civil rights of people with disabilities, there's been efforts on multiple levels to really gut some of the laws on accessibility because people don't see it again as a priority and they don't see this community as a community that is based on identity rather than just "Oh it's a nice thing to do." And so those are a lot of ways to get involved, those are a lot of things are coming down the pipeline. I would say that this particular legislative session that police brutality is really going to be front and foremost. If anybody has any concerns with special education, next legislative session I'm really going to start moving on some stuff on seclusion and restraint, that people should not be restrained in schools and people should feel safe at schools. We need inclusive classrooms and so a lot of that stuff we're preparing to move on, too.

Ashley: Thank you so much for that, Noah. It makes a lot of sense, what you shared, but

that's really exciting to kind of hear where you're coming from and the work that you've been doing some of the things that are going on, so that's really great. I appreciate you answering that question so thoroughly. I want to pause for a moment and check and see if anyone else has any questions for our awesome high caliber, high impact speaker for the day.

Noah: I apologize that I didn't have a whole presentation ready but just like I said I'm more of an interactional kind of speaker, so if anybody else has any questions feel free to send them my way.

Ashley: We'll give folks a minute to think about it... But I do have one last question while folks are thinking, Noah. Oh yeah please go ahead, Kris.

Question: How long have you been on this Board/organization?

Noah: Which board?

Question: The police brutality organization, how long have you been on that? How long have you been doing this?

Noah: Oh, so I actually had an altercation with law enforcement about six, maybe five years ago, and I was overstimulated because of Autism and police didn't really understand what was going on with me and so it went pretty adversely, and so as a result of that experience I started looking into a lot of the research and a lot of the issues surrounding on police brutality. And the fact that this is an issue that really impacts people with disabilities so much that we don't necessarily look at – so often we're focused on health care or human services – so I really started building relationships within the community and also within the within the state legislature on the permanent committees, both on Corrections and in public safety. Our public safety system and the way that we police, and we have a justice system that so often failed to live up to its name for black and brown people but also for people with disabilities. And so I guess I would say I've worked with Communities United Against Police Brutality and the Racial Justice Network and really tried to get them to realize the importance and the value of having people with disabilities at the table on this conversation. So I would say for about five years I've been doing that. And then I was actually encouraged because a lot of the work that we had been doing was going out and recruiting other people with disabilities and really building a coalition within our own community to really move forward on a lot of those issues. I guess I would say I'd probably been around for about a year and then as I was trying to build, you know the incident with George Floyd happened which clearly impacted our society, our communities, our state and so I've really been involved in that aspect too and as we've been seeking really transformative change and the way that we police, the way that we view our justice system, I guess I would say that we really have picked up, we've probably gained about 20 members. So I would really like to invite all of you to join and all of you to come to the table and really join this robust conversation on

policing. Please do reach out to me with any concerns or any kind of ideas that you guys have, in that area.

Ashley: I have one last question for you, Noah. So I was diagnosed with ADHD at age 21, I believe, and I know in the bio that you shared with us, you mentioned that you have Autism Spectrum Disorder as well. I was curious, from one neurodivergent to the next, I would be interested in hearing from you how you think that being Autistic has improved or strengthened your advocacy or your work, or you know, deepened your perspective, or that type thing, if you could share about that? Noah: Well I would really say that part of the real strength that I have with the way my mind works is that I'm very strategic, and so one of the things I think I've really been able to offer in a coalition is the fact that so often you know and then I'm just not a fan of showing up in protesting for protesting. And that when we protest, we want to get an outcome, when we do a direct action we want to be able to bring up a result that is actually impactful for a lot of people. And so I would say that part of the value that I can really offer is that I can pinpoint where these stress points are, whether it's in the Republican caucus and/or the DFL, I can tell you who to protest, why to protest, and then kind of what the end result is going to look like. We have been able to really push a lot of people to the table as a result of more strategic planning, and I would say that is something I've had to offer. Sometimes you know one of the things about people with Autism that sometimes gets us in trouble is just kind of a brutal honesty. I think that's something that is very common to people on the Autism spectrum, is we just kind of have a way of looking at the world that may be a little more black-and-white than others. And so I would say that my ability to be assertive, not mean, but assertive, and saying "this is what we need, here's why we need it" or "this is problematic and here's why," has really been able to impact the movement as well in a more positive way. But I would really just say that the overall way is that when I think, I think in pictures, and I just kind of see a map of where I'm going and... it's hard to describe I guess. I just kind of like, my mind just works in a very strategic sort of more calculating way where I have an end result and I have a beginning and I'm like this is how we're gonna get there. I think that is something that is really impactful, just the uniqueness of the way that we have neurodivergent people operate. We just kind of think outside the box if you catch my drift.

Ashley: I absolutely do, thank you so much for sharing that lived experience, Noah. It's kind of funny because though I'm neurodivergent, my brain is probably the opposite. So people have described my brain as like tentacles of an octopus when it's working, so I always loved especially talking to people that have a brain that works more like yours because it's just so cool, you know, such a different perspective and I think that's really important, especially in the work of advocacy. Noah: And I will say that I think that one of the things that we also need to do as a community is we really need to educate better on ADD or or ADHD, and a lot of these things, because you always hear these people say "oh I'm ADD, oh I'm ADHD" because I'm hyper, and people don't really recognize like the entirety of what that means and so they just say these things and they're kind of harmful.

Ashley: Absolutely.

Noah: And so I've really been working to educate people that it's not okay to sit there and say "I'm bipolar because I'm moody" or "she's so bipolar" or "she seems Autistic" or "I have ADD." I mean it's like unless you have that lived experience it's not really okay to like use it as a slur and so I'm really working on, you know, that the way we talk about people and the way we interact with people matters, and so that's something that I think that we really have a role to play in, too.

Ashley: Thank you so much for that I could not agree with you more. I want to pause for a moment, we do have a peer mentor on the line. I know some of you that were on previous sessions have heard his name, but AJ I wanted to pause for a moment and see if you have anything you want to add to the conversation as we're wrapping up for the day, and a reminder that if you are talking right now you're still muted!

AJ: I'm just trying to get more people with disabilities jobs at big corporations. That's my big goal.

Noah: I'd love to talk with you more about kind of what you're doing on that, I think that maybe that's something that we can talk about, as we do have a coalition called the Four Cents an Hour campaign that really is inclusive of the Disability Justice Network, the Autism Society of Minnesota, and several of the unions including the Teamsters, SEIU and a few others that we are really kind of pushing for increasing the numbers of people with disabilities who are employed – gainfully employed – not being paid four cents an hour in a sheltered workshop but actually really on being able to offer a benefit to an organization. I know that a couple years ago, I think it was Savers had a really big drive to get people with disabilities and it was sort of problematic because, you know, once they opened up the doors it was like "Well all the people with disabilities to go work at Savers," which is not realistic. And I'm partnering with a lot of these organizations, partnering with the unions particularly, I think really strengthens our position, and if we can get on some of these organizations like Target Corporation or some of these other larger businesses to come out and support, that is always helpful, too. And if we can even provide educational opportunities as to what sort of innovation and what sort of benefits of hiring people disabilities really has, because it does. You know, we live in a society that was not built for us, and so we really do end up becoming more innovative, and so I think that that work you're doing is very important and I would certainly love to talk to you more about that.

AJ: Sure, I'll give you a call.

Ashley: I love the natural networking and community building that we've seen today that makes me so excited to see yet another connection being made today, that's so great. I just want to ask one last time if there are any other questions of our awesome speaker for the day? Noah, you had a tricky time slot we were building up to your presentation because of all of the incredible work that you do, but of course at the end of the day, as

we've had lots of screen time we are listening with open ears and probably tired eyes, so thank you, thank you so very much for attending our session for the day. We could not have ended with a higher caliber and more exciting speaker, so thank you very, very much for joining us today, Noah. We really, really appreciate your time.

Noah: Yeah thank you so much and if I could just offer, in conclusion, that I really think that social activism is a place with people with disabilities really do belong and again there's a lot of really exciting conversations that are happening on in the activism world, and that we really do need people with disabilities at the table on things like policing and union reform and labor laws and there's so many exciting things happening. So I really do encourage you to come out and join us, whether it's via Zoom, whether it's through some alternative format, whether it's at the Capitol, or whether or not it's in the street or some direct action we really I mean I really do appreciate the insight and the questions of every single one of y'all, and please do not hesitate to reach out if there's anything that we can support you with.

Ashley: All right everyone you know the drill, let's give our speaker, Noah, a virtual round applause. Thank you so very much! One last reminder as we conclude the day, Alli will drop the link to the survey into the chat and so if you haven't yet, if you'd like to take the survey, just to give us a little perspective as well. We would really appreciate just hearing from every single person who participated today. It's really really important to us that this experience is made in a way that makes sense to you all and so if there's anything that you'd like to see happen again or anything that you see happen differently please feel free to let us know. Thank you so very much for joining us for an awesome, awesome day at the Lifeworks Self-Advocacy Conference and I just wanted to say have a great rest of your week. Bye everybody!