

Episode 16 - Change Comes From You with Brady Werger

Mike Hoenig:

Hey everybody. It's Mike Hoenig from the University of Iowa Center for Disabilities and Development, Iowa's UCEDD or University Center for Excellence in Development of Disabilities. We're pleased to have the opportunity to welcome you to Disability Exchange, and also pleased to be partnering with Midwest[ern] Public Health Training Center, part of the University of Iowa College of Public Health to produce this podcast. We have a very special guest today who we'll be introducing shortly, but first I would like to introduce my co-host, who probably needs no introduction at this point, but her name is Judy Warth and I'll turn it over to her to introduce herself.

Judy Warth:

You guys all know me, I'm the funny one and the tall one. Oh, wait, wrong show. No, this is exciting for us because both Mike and I have been friends with Brady for a long time, and we're excited to have Brady join us today to talk a little bit about his experience and his future and where he is going. So Brady, we appreciate you trusting us enough to come in and talk today.

Mike Hoenig:

And maybe you should give yourself an introduction here too, Brady, so everybody else knows who you are, where you live, and why you think advocacy is so important. This podcast is all about elevating the voice of people with disabilities and their families to tell their story through advocacy. So tell us who you are, where you're from, and why advocacy is so important.

Brady Werger:

Hi, my name is Brady Werger. I am 29 years old. I will turn 30 on January 22nd. I'm from Glenwood, Iowa. I recently lived at the Glenwood Resource Center. I moved to the Glenwood Resource Center in the year 2011, and lived in the resource center here in Glenwood from 2011 to 2018. And then I was able to transition in 2018 into an HCBS waiver home here in Glenwood, where I reside now.

Mike Hoenig:

So we may have a few people listening to our podcast here who may not be familiar with what either a resource center is, or what an HCBS waiver home is. So maybe Brady as a part of your story, you could tell us the difference and how it was that you came to be able to move from a more restrictive resource center into the HCBS house.

Judy Warth:

First tell people what the resource center is.

Brady Werger:

Sure. So there are two resource centers here in the state of Iowa, Woodward Resource Center and the Glenwood Resource Center. And they serve clients with intellectual disabilities, clients that may have a behavior disorder that cannot be managed in a community setting. So when they come to Glenwood and at Woodward too, the team of staff really jump in to address what those issues are to help the client live a better life.

Judy Warth:

And then what is the HCBS house that you were talking about?

Brady Werger:

So I'm not exactly for sure what the meaning of HCBS is, but I'll talk a little bit about my home. My home is basically a community independent living home within the community of Glenwood. We had four of us guys in the home, three, including me, and then we have 24-hour staff. So we always have a staff member working with us at all times. We make our own meals. We clean our own house. We do our own laundry, it's on our own. Something that I would like to share is when I moved into the community in 2018, it was a lot different because I've always lived in facilities like Glenwood, or residential care facilities, ICF facilities. And so when I moved in the community, I kept asking my staff, can I go do this? Can I go do that? And they come up to me and they go, Brady, you don't have to ask, this is your home.

And it really took a long time for me to get adjusted to that. Something that I'm trying to get adjusted to right now is my father made a good point, that I have all these mentors and volunteers, okay? When I lived up at Glenwood Resource Center, calling these people work volunteers, my dad said, Brady, you're not at the resource center anymore. He's like, don't call these people volunteers, call them your friends. And so it's been a really tough thing to try to learn that, calling them volunteers all this time.

Judy Warth:

Changing the words. And just for our listeners, HCBS stands for Home and Community-Based Services. And Brady, you mentioned ICF, which is an Intermediate Care Facility. And those are congregate living situations where anywhere from 25 to 100 people may live together in an institutional sort of setting. So when you moved to the community, there were big changes because you had now your own space with a couple of roommates and the ability to do what you wanted in your own home.

Mike Hoenig:

And I assume that means a whole lot more independence for you.

Brady Werger:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I basically have full independence and at first when I moved, it was kind of slow. They wanted to do some trials with me, but as things progressed and I'd shown my staff and my program director and my parents that I've been able to succeed in the community, it really allowed me to do a lot more.

Judy Warth:

That's great.

Mike Hoenig:

Brady, you mentioned when we did a little chit chat before we went on the air, you said to me that you wanted to talk a little bit about where you had been, because that was kind of important or not kind of, that was really important to your story and where you are today. So would you still like to share a little bit about that?

Brady Werger:

Sure, sure. So I just really wanted to focus on where I was at prior to moving to Glenwood, because I know Judy has heard some of this before, and Mike, you have too, but the stories of people that go through difficulties in their life, it's moving, it's life changing. And if people like me don't share their stories, then people aren't going to understand, hey, this is what this individual went through, maybe this is what I went through, and they could put their shoes into our shoes. So I just want to talk a little bit about where I was at prior to coming to the resource center. So I came to the resource center in 2011 here in Glenwood. And prior to moving to Glenwood, I lived in Carbondale, Illinois at NeuroRestorative, they are a brain injury facility. I think there's a lot of different locations of NeuroRestorative throughout the United States.

I was at the Carbondale location and they were treating me for what they said was a brain injury at birth. I didn't consider my disability a brain injury. I just consider my diagnosis like bipolar, more of a behavior disorder. And when I was living in Carbondale, I had my ups, I had my downs, but I ended up being arrested twice. And I worked with my lawyer and my judge and my dad, and I said, what's the possibility on trying to get approved for either the Woodward or Glenwood resource centers? And I had advocate from my mom and dad because we've been trying to get me into the resource centers prior to the incidents of me being arrested for a long time. And the resource centers kept saying, you don't qualify, we can't take you. And my dad pushed some strengths.

And so in 2011, I moved from Carbondale NeuroRestorative to the Glenwood Resource Center. When I walked into the resource center, I had a lot of issues, a lot of issues that needed to be addressed. Heavy duty counseling, staff not let me... When I have a behavior just let me get away with stuff, they held me

accountable for my actions, things like that. And as the years progressed, I realized, I said, hey guys, I need to change my life. And I'm not changing my life for my parents. I'm not changing my life for Judy or Mike, I'm changing it because I want to. I want to live a better life.

And so I was able to work with my staff, with my counselors, with my supervisors. And in 2018, I was able to make a big stepping stone in my life, in moving into the community. And I'll tell you, my mom was scared. She was scared to move me. She didn't know if I would succeed, she didn't know if I would fail, but you know what? I kept having faith. I told my mom, I said, we're not going to know how I'm going to do until we try this. And you know what? I've been living in the community ever since.

Judy Warth:

I heard you say two really important things. Is that, one that you don't know until you try it. And two, that the change came from you and then everyone else came around and helped. And those are really two very powerful messages.

Brady Werger:

I agree, Judy. And I guess I just want to say to people that might be listening to this is, if you say you can't do something, that's a lie. Because you shouldn't say that you can't do something until you try it because nobody's going to know if it's going to work until you try and not give up on yourself.

Judy Warth:

For you, Brady, making that change, what was the scariest part about it?

Brady Werger:

Basically walking into a setup or an agency that I've never worked with before telling myself, okay, I need opportunity, but what if it doesn't work out and where do we go?

Mike Hoenig:

You mean when you moved to the Glenwood Resource Center or when you moved into the community?

Brady Werger:

When I moved from the resource center into the community.

Mike Hoenig:

Okay.

Brady Werger:

I was worried that if things didn't work out, that I would have to be sent back to the resource center. And that was one of my major concerns.

Mike Hoenig:

Since I've known you, the good thing is that you've spoken up and tried. I always love to share this story about my first meeting you Brady. And it was for those of you listening that may not know, I'm the manager for a program called the Conner Training Connection. And one of the things we do is work with Money Follows the Person, which is a program that helped Brady to make the move along with lots of other folks from Glenwood Resource Center to the community. But there had been a transition in staffing within Money Follows the Person, and Brady apparently you must have done some online research and came across Conner and my name and called me and basically said, I'm ready to transition, but I haven't heard from my transition specialist for a while, and I would just hope that somebody could help me get this moving.

And I was really impressed and needless to say, I contacted people with Money Follows the Person and I'm sure pretty soon after that you got contacted because within a month or two, I heard that you had moved. So it seems like you've understand the importance of speaking up for yourself.

Brady Werger:

Yeah. Yeah. And another neat that I'm going to jump ahead a little bit, Mike, but I have lived in the community here in Glenwood since 2018. I am currently looking and working with my team and my mom and dad, which my legal guardians moved back to Northeast Iowa, to the Waterloo, Cedar Falls Waverly area.

Mike Hoenig:

What are some of the reasons that you'd like to do that?

Brady Werger:

My mom and dad live in Waverly, Iowa, and right now I'm four and a half hours away from mom and dad. And so I just want to get closer to family. We're looking at places in Waverly, Waterloo, Cedar Falls, and I think that's great. I have a friend he's a community ambassador with the community ambassador program and he lives in a REM house in Cedar Falls. And so he's program director for that area, has really been advocating for me to move to REM. Like I said, I don't know if that's the route we're going to go, me going to REM, but it's a possibility, just depends on what agency my mom and dad want to go with since they're my legal guardians.

Judy Warth:

Brady, I have a question about... You've talked about staff and programs. What kind of help do you benefit from having... How do staff help you?

Brady Werger:

Good question, Judy. Right now, staff help a lot. They help me do cooking. They help me do cleaning. They help me with my finances. They help get me to and from community functions, like church or relay through life or just different activities in the community. So I'm glad you brought that up, those are supports that when I move, I'm going to have to build those new supports. Here in Glenwood, I already have those supports, but when I move, that's definitely a support that I'm going to have to find out and reach out to people to find supports.

Mike Hoenig:

How do you feel about that?

Brady Werger:

It's a little bit scary, but I have faith, I've done it before, I can do it again.

Mike Hoenig:

Well, the good news is you have family that can help you. I think that's good news. As a person who also lives with the disability, I know that sometimes, you need to create that space so that you're doing your own advocating and so forth. And it sounds like your parents are pretty good about... They recognize your talents and abilities to advocate for yourself.

Brady Werger:

Sure.

Judy Warth:

Brady, as you described the kind of help you get, I want to make sure that we let our audience know about some of the amazing things that you are doing in addition to. You've done a great job of talking about all the support you need and the challenges you've faced, but my relationship began with you

because we both sit on the Iowa developmental disabilities, governor's planning council together. Do you want to talk a little bit about that with folks? What that is, and what your role is, and what it will be?

Brady Werger:

Yes, yes. And I'm glad you brought that up, Judy. So I currently serve as the vice chair for the Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council. We advocate for people with disabilities across the state of Iowa to help them find funding, to help them find services. We advocate for all that. If somebody needs... We have a council member that needed a handicapped door accessible for the post office. If they end up running into issues like that, they come to council and say, okay, what can the council do to advocate for this? Well, we try to pass bills through the legislator in Iowa to make lives for people of disabilities in Iowa, a better place for them to live. So a little bit about me and how I got involved with the Iowa DD Council, I actually was asked by Brooke Lovelace to join the council.

And this is back when she was the director for Money Follows the Person, and we were at a Money Follows the Person banquet in Johnston. She came up to me after my speech for community ambassador speech and said Brady, she's like we have an opening on the Iowa DD Council and we would... Because she was just transitioning from Money Follows the Person to the Iowa DD Council as being the board of director. And she gave me her card and she's like, I want you to think about this, but we have an opening on the Iowa DD Council and we would love to have you a part of it. So I did some research on what the Iowa DD Council is. I talked to my staff, I talked to my dad, which is my guardian and he said, let's go for it.

So I turned in my application, a couple months later I was approved. I started as just a regular council member in that I was able to join the executive committee and help make decisions for the council. And after serving on the executive committee for little bit, I was able to become vice chair of the council, which really is a neat experience. And then starting here in July, I will be taking over from the Iowa DD Council as the chair. And I wanted to thank you Judy, because Judy has stepped up on the council to help me with the chair position, since there will be some assistance that I would need with that. And Judy, without all your support with this, I don't think I could have done the chair without the support from you, so kudos to you.

Judy Warth:

That is kind of you Brady, but you did it without me. I'm just here to be your cheerleader. DD Council's mission is really just like Brady said, is to help people with developmental disability so they can live, work, learn, and play in the community of their choosing.

Mike Hoenig:

Brady, one of the things that I am really, really impressed about you is that, you're still plotting out your own path to more and more independence and the strides that you've made, which you've shared earlier with us on the podcast, and yet a big focus for you is to help other people. And I know that one of

the ways of doing that is through being on Iowa DD Council, because you have a chance to really make life better as you mentioned through the legislature and through other kinds of trainings and everything. So I know another way that you are working to help people become more independent and to really encourage people is through the Community Ambassador program, so I was remiss. So first of all, congratulations on your being selected as chair of the council, that's quite an honor. And now that I've said that, could you tell us a little bit about this community ambassador program?

Brady Werger:

Sure. So the community ambassador program is the program that was established a couple years ago through the University of Iowa Center for Disabilities and Excellence. And what the ambassador program is, is it's a group of clients that have ever lived in an ICF facility and been able to move from an ICF facility into the community or a parent guardian of a loved one that has lived in an ICF facility and moved into the community. So what we as community ambassadors do is we share our story with agencies. We go out, we talk to agencies like Glenwood Resource Center, Woodward, Mosaic, agencies like that. We share our story from living in an ICF facility and being able to move in the community. And my mom attended the Make Your Mark conference back in September and watched me share my speech. A speech that she's heard that I given that speech before, but she's never heard it in person. And I'll tell you, Mike and Judy, she was in tears. She was in good tears because she was able to realize how far her son has come.

Mike Hoenig:

I was there and that was fun because I got to be there when she... But then I thought, I didn't realize, that's one of the things about not seeing is that sometimes you miss out on some verbal or non-verbal cues. And I was coming up to introduce myself to her and then I realized, hey, she was just so moved from what had just happened with you sharing that story. One of the things that I loved about being there Brady, was you called up another guy that was a friend of yours from, I think Glenwood. And you invited him to come up and share the stage with you.

And I think that must have given him a tremendous amount of confidence and I get to work with him now and help him get settled in. And maybe he'll be on a future episode for all of you out there listening to hear. But I thought that was really unselfish of you, Brady, because it could have been your time to shine and yet you called him up to recognize the progress that he's made too. And that was really cool.

Judy Warth:

And Brady, I mean, we could talk to you for hours, and we know that you're a man who has a job, a community job. We know that you're engaged in your church. We know that you're taking leadership at state level and even national level to help change things for people with disabilities. And one of the questions that we ask everyone who comes on the show is that, when all is said and done, what do you want your legacy to be? What do you want people to remember when they hear the name Brady Werger?

Brady Werger:

Wow, that's a moving question. Easily, just because you have a disability, doesn't give people the right to treat you better. Doesn't give it the right for people to treat you any different than anybody else. Just because you have a disability, you are the same as each and every one of us. And just because you had a rough pass, don't focus on how rough of a pass you have, look at where you're at now, take steps forward and tell yourself that you can do it. If you tell yourself that you can't do it, that's a lie. Because if you tell yourself you can do it, you can do it, and have faith in yourself.

Mike Hoenig:

I can't think of a better way to bring this to a close because as you said, Judy, we could ask Brady a lot of questions about other things and maybe we'll bring him back and maybe bring him back with our other friend that I just mentioned. But that is such a powerful message that-

Brady Werger:

Yeah. There is something I did want to share too, that we forgot. Back in September when I was attending the Make Your Mark conference in Des Moines, this past year, we lost a great advocate here in Iowa, her name was Mia Peterson. Mia Peterson was a great self-client advocate for those people in Iowa that struggle with disabilities. Mia passed away. And so her parents came up with Mia Peterson Advocacy Award. And this year I was able to receive that award for the advocacy work that I have done. And I want to thank you, Mike, for nominating me for that award.

Mike Hoenig:

Oh, well you're-

Judy Warth:

You won the first one, congratulations.

Mike Hoenig:

Yes. Well, you definitely were deserving of that. And I knew Mia and one of the things I wrote in the nomination was that I wish that Mia could have been there when you got that award because you two would have so much to talk about. But she's with us in spirit and it was an honor to be able to be there. First is by zoom, when the council chose to select you from a lot of really good nominations, by the way, and then also to be at Make Your Mark when you received it. So that was very exciting and it was I'm sure one of many honors that you'll be getting along the way. But I think I can tell that the thing that's

most important to you is you becoming more independent while supporting others to do the same. And that's what we need here in Iowa and across the country.

Brady Werger:

Agreed.

Mike Hoenig:

Judy, do you have any other fine words of wisdom before we bring this episode to a close?

Judy Warth:

I just hope we all grow up to be as passionate as Brady.

Mike Hoenig:

Very well said. And I would just like to thank you Brady, for joining us. I also like to thank all of you who tuned in, I hope you'll share this podcast with others and I hope you'll join us for our next episode of Disability Exchange. Thanks for listening.

Brady Werger:

Thank you guys.

Caitlin Owens:

Thank you for joining us today on Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is produced by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, which is housed at the Center for Disabilities and Development at the University of Iowa. Special thanks to Kyle Delveau for the music contribution.