

Episode 19 - Everyone Gets a Chance with Binh Nguyen

Mike Hoenig:

Well, hey everybody. It's Mike Hoenig from the University of Iowa Center for Excellence and Developmental Disabilities or UCEDD coming to you with another episode of Disability Exchange, our podcast designed to center and elevate the voices of people with disabilities and their families. As I mentioned, I am with the UCEDD and we partner with a great group called the Midwest[ern] Public Health Training Center to produce these podcasts. We've just learned that we're going to be having the opportunity to continue those into next year, so we're super excited about that. We have a special guest who we will introduce shortly, but before we do that, I'd like to turn it over to my co-host and friend and colleague, Caitlin, to introduce herself.

Caitlin Owens:

Hello, nice to be here with you all. My name is Caitlin Owens and I work at the UCEDD with Mike and I'm so excited for today's episode. I'll let Mike go ahead and introduce our guest.

Mike Hoenig:

All right. Well, I've gotten to know Binh over the last, gosh, well about seven months, I guess, through her participation as an ILEND trainee. We've talked about ILEND a lot. It stands for Iowa Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities. Binh is one of our self-advocacy trainees and I've really come to know and appreciate and respect all that she does. So, Binh, go ahead and introduce yourself. Tell us where you're from and we'll go from there.

Binh Nguyen:

Hi, my name's Binh Nguyen. I'm adopted from Vietnam and I'm also in the ILEND program and UI REACH program.

Caitlin Owens:

Wonderful. Thanks so much for being here. Can you start off by telling us a little bit about the UI REACH program?

Binh Nguyen:

The UI REACH program is a program on 18 to 25 years of age. It's a program for people with cognitive disabilities and intellectual disabilities that might need help with extra time on test and maybe a one-on-one person to help you take those tests and read them. And then, you also get internships during your two or four years in the program and you better your skills with those internships.

Caitlin Owens:

Awesome. Thank you. So, can you talk to us a little bit more about kind of your personal experience with disability and sort of how that plays into your identity and that kind of thing?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. I have a cognitive learning disability, so I need extra time on test and maybe a reader to help me interpret words on the test. And then, also sometimes class notes before the class really helps me a lot.

Mike Hoenig:

Well, great. So, how many years have you been in UI REACH now Binh?

Binh Nguyen:

I'm a third-year student at REACH this year and I'm going for another year, so four years the next year.

Mike Hoenig:

Excellent because I think for a while, we didn't know for sure or you didn't know for sure whether you were going to do that, right?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Mike Hoenig:

Okay.

Caitlin Owens:

Can you tell us about some that you mentioned that internships are a kind of a big focus of REACH? I actually used to work for REACH, so I'm excited to hear you talk more about it, but can you talk more about your interests and what your internships have been focused on while at REACH?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. I really like creativity and arts and stuff, so sometimes we do art and craft nights, but my internships are data entry. I work in the UI REACH office on one semester, and then the VA business office out near the Iowa City Municipal Airport and the car dealerships. And then, this year I'm actually interning at NAMI Johnson County for people who have mental illnesses or eating disorders and other stuff.

Mike Hoenig:

That's quite a variety.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Mike Hoenig:

You've talked a lot about arts and crafts. Are you thinking that your artistic side, at some point, that could be a career for you or is that more a fun hobby kind of thing?

Binh Nguyen:

I guess it could be both if my job allows it? Mm-hmm.

Mike Hoenig:

Well, we talked about LEND at the beginning and I saved you the hassle of having to say what the letters mean and the acronym, but tell us a little bit about your experiences in LEND so far, what you've gained from them. And if you'd like you certainly can talk about any challenges that have been a little difficult for you.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. I've gained knowledge more into depths of people with disabilities with the youth mental first aid training, and also talking to legislators in Des Moines via Zoom, and also going to Des Moines for the Harkin Institute, as well as this upcoming DC trip for the policy seminars.

Caitlin Owens:

That's great. So, are you going to Washington, DC?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Caitlin Owens:

Oh, that's really exciting. Binh, before your involvement in LEND, did you have much experience in disability advocacy work?

Binh Nguyen:

No, not really, except UI REACH kind of teaches us about advocacy and then advocating for yourself, but not as more into depths of advocating for yourself and others.

Caitlin Owens:

Yeah. So, are you saying REACH kind of gave the foundation of advocating for yourself, and that could be in settings like education or at work or in the doctor's office, but then LEND has kind of expanded that to advocating for yourself and others? Is that correct?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah, and minority groups as well.

Caitlin Owens:

Mm-hmm. Do you see yourself kind of continuing that work after LEND or have you-

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm.

Caitlin Owens:

What parts of it have you particularly enjoyed?

Binh Nguyen:

Just the learning about different disciplines. Like today, we had a health administration training presentation, which was interesting because one had internships with health administration, and then one had actual living experience with the sibling. She's a sibling of someone who has a disability. And then, what's interesting is I also applied to be on the youth advisory council. I got in and my first meeting is on April.

Caitlin Owens:

Is that with the Child Health Specialty Clinics?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah, mm-hmm. I think so, yeah.

Caitlin Owens:

That's really cool. So, you're already kind of expanding your role as kind of more like of an advocate for others and kind of a system. That's really cool.

Mike Hoenic:

I also remember you telling us, Binh, not too long ago that you are now on the UI REACH Student Council. Is that new or have you been on it for a while?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. That was a few weeks ago.

Mike Hoenic:

Okay. So, you're really getting involved. So, what's really cool is that you are our second, I guess, UI REACH trainee. Mike last year did an awesome job. So, it's really great to see you doing some of those same kinds of things, but kind of finding your own way and finding out what works, what kinds of interests you have as an advocate.

Caitlin Owens:

You talked about this presentation that you attended with the health administration trainees, and how one of them had the professional experience, and one of them had the experience of having a sibling with a disability. Can you talk more about the importance or what the impact of having sort of the voices of people with lived experience either in LEND seminars or just kind of present in conversations with professionals?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. I feel like it's a good step in the right direction of acknowledging people with lived experiences and their relatives, and then talking to the relatives about that person's disability, and then getting the relative to maybe talk about their experience with their other sibling that might have a disability.

Mike Hoenig:

I think that's so important and I thought what's really been cool this year in LEND, I think more than any other year that I can remember is how many people that are trainees are talking about lived experiences, either as identifying as having a disability or being a family member. And I think you're doing a really good job, Binh, of talking about your own experiences, and I think that probably helps other people feel a lot more comfortable being a little bit more open about that.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm.

Mike Hoenig:

You mentioned also at the beginning that you were adopted from Vietnam. Were you adopted as an infant?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, I was barely one. Yeah.

Mike Hoenig:

Barely one.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm.

Mike Hoenig:

So, do you still identify in some ways with your Vietnamese culture and heritage?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I can't practice the language because I don't know it, but I went to a New Year celebration for the Chinese New Year a couple of weeks ago and I went there and made some new friends consequently, who also lives on my floor in Mayflower.

Mike Hoenig:

Wow. Do you hope someday to be able to go there to Vietnam?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. My adopted family has been talking about it, but it just seems like my adoptive mom and me would go because my adoptive dad and my other sister who is adopted doesn't want to really want to go.

Caitlin Owens:

Can you talk a little more about... You said you live in Mayflower. Can you talk a little bit more about the more residential experience of LEND and what it's like living in a dorm? Do the first and second year students still live in-

Binh Nguyen:

Stanley and Burge. And then, third and fourth year, we have more independence with no curfew until midnight for the first and second years. And then, third and fourth-year students have cooking classes, and then grocery shopping for the cooking supplies. And then, we do that every Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Mike Hoenig:

So, do you cook some of your own meals then?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, at least 2 to 3 recipes.

Caitlin Owens:

Nice.

Mike Hoenig:

What's your expertise? If you were going to bring everybody over for dinner, what would you cook?

Binh Nguyen:

I made a really good linguine pasta. Mm-hmm.

Mike Hoenig:

One thing I wanted to ask you about, Binh, a little bit is where did you grow up?

Binh Nguyen:

I lived here all my life, I guess, after I was adopted. Yeah. We lived here-

Caitlin Owens:

Here being Iowa City?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, Iowa City.

Caitlin Owens:

Nice.

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah.

Caitlin Owens:

Can you talk more about kind of your decision to go to the UI REACH program and kind of what you are hoping you would get out of the program?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Well, in 2018, I graduated from high school from City High, and then I went over to Kirkwood for a few classes. I was lucky in Kirkwood, but it was beginning to get harder courses, and then they didn't have good accommodations, so that's when my parents looked into UI REACH. Plus we had a family friend whose daughter has a lot of disabilities and there was another friend's daughter who actually went to the UI REACH because it was founded earlier. And then, we just signed up for a tour, and then that's it, I guess.

Caitlin Owens:

Awesome. What do you think REACH will help you to be able to do in the future? Are there specific things you feel like you're getting out of the program?

Binh Nguyen:

Just cooking recipes when I graduate, and then cleaning because that's basically what first and second year is more about.

Caitlin Owens:

So, kind of some of those general life skills and that kind of thing. Yeah. That's cool. Before your internships, was working with data something that you kind of knew you wanted to do or did you have to do a little bit of exploring to kind of figure out that that was something that you are good at and enjoy doing?

Binh Nguyen:

That was kind of an exploring options I guess. Mm-hmm. I haven't really thought about careers, except before coming, I was actually really into animals, but then I looked into it and I didn't really like the side of operations of animals. I didn't like really looking at blood or seeing blood.

Caitlin Owens:

Yeah. That's an important thing to discover before you pursue a career path, I feel.

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah.

Mike Hoenig:

So, with all this experience that you've had like with UI REACH and LEND, do you think that there could be a chance that you could end up having some kind of a career in disability advocacy or education?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Mike Hoenig:

I could see you doing that. One thing I know because I've had a chance to get to work with you is knowing that you have gone out. You went out to Colorado last summer at a camp, and if my understanding is correct, you're going to go back again if COVID allows that to happen. Could you tell us a little bit about that experience and what you did last year and what you hope to do this year?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Well, the camp was for people with disabilities. Also, there were three separate camps with disabilities for someone who has lost a family member. So, it kind of helped them to have a break from their family and focus on happy stuff. When I was in Colorado, it was a cooking experience, kind of leading me up to living in Mayflower and cooking meals, but this year, it's up in the air because the program director started another program called the Cook Inclusive Company, which is basically the same program that was last year, but it's a first-year runoff from that program. So, I don't really have any summer plans now.

Mike Hoenig:

Oh, shoot. I did not know that.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm.

Caitlin Owens:

You've mentioned cooking several times. Is that a career path you've ever considered or is that again, kind of something you just enjoy doing?

Binh Nguyen:

I guess, I just enjoy hobby doing. Yeah. I'm also on the board of directors for the Cook Inclusive... Mm-hmm.

Mike Hoenig:

People obviously see you as a leader.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm.

Caitlin Owens:

Yeah.

Mike Hoenig:

Yeah.

Caitlin Owens:

Have you always seen yourself as a leader or is that something-

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Caitlin Owens:

That's awesome. I wanted to ask about kind of the experience. You've talked both about REACH and being part of this camp program and I'm curious about your experience being in these settings, where you're kind of surrounded by other people who have disabilities, whereas that might not have always been the case in high school or in previous settings, and what that's been like if that's something you like, if you find that... I'm just curious about your thoughts on that.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Well, there were two other students that went to the program with me here in Colorado. That program director missed the close-knit family of REACH, so we pleaded with some instructors from REACH to get us to Colorado, and then helped us with rooming and stuff.

Caitlin Owens:

That was something that I always... When I worked with REACH and I've also been very involved in camps and other programs was this social aspect of it. Especially at REACH, it just seemed so vibrant. You kind of described it as a close-knit family, and it was my observation that a lot of the students at REACH hadn't really experienced something where they were just around people who maybe understood them on just a different level from other peers and even family members. I always just thought that was a really cool part of the residential experience of REACH.

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Mike Hoenig:

Yeah. It's good that you were able to make that connection. Having some of these experience, I want to kind of loop back a little bit to, when you talked about going to DC for Disability Policy Seminar next month for LEND. Do you think some of those REACH... Traveling to Colorado and having that time to really kind of be away from home and everything like that, do you think that's helping you to be... I mean, you seemed so comfortable and ready to make that trip to DC. Do you think some of those experiences with UI REACH helped you to feel more comfortable with that?

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Caitlin Owens:

Actually, that made me think. Is it the case that there are a few UI REACH students who are also going to DC?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. We are kind of partnering and collaborating with UI REACH and LEND now, this year.

Caitlin Owens:

Maybe our audience would be curious to hear a little bit more about what you're going to be doing in DC. Can you talk a little bit more about it?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah. We are going to the Hill, I guess, on Washington DC and talking to representatives and legislators about interdisciplinary projects, and then other bills that we've been researching.

Caitlin Owens:

Cool. Mainly focused on kind of disability and that kind of thing?

Binh Nguyen:

Yeah, disability rights and awareness.

Caitlin Owens:

Also, there's kind of a conference that you'll all be attending, a disability policy seminar where... I was a LEND trainee as well and it was really a cool experience to learn about advocacy strategies, and disability history, and all these things with this huge group of people who are all interested in the same thing. It was a really cool experience.

Mike Hoenig:

Yeah. I was going to say the same thing, except not as eloquently as you did there, Caitlin because-

Caitlin Owens:

Oh, I bet you were going to say it very eloquently.

Mike Hoenig:

No. But I just think it's awesome, and I think, Binh, you're going to get to meet a lot of really interesting, cool people while you're out there.

Caitlin Owens:

Yeah. I'm so happy that you all get to go in person. I know it was up in the air and I just had such a positive experience when I went as a student. Yeah. I'm really excited to hear about it when you all come back.

Mike Hoenig:

Binh, on a kind of a fun note, again, because I get the pleasure working with you, I know that you're quite a sports fan. So, how did you get so interested in sports?

Binh Nguyen:

I kind of grew up as a Hawkeye fan. And then in high school, well, I ran cross country, so that was a big part of exercising stuff. And then, when I went to college, I became more of a Hawkeye fan. And then, when I met my boyfriend of two years and a few months, Michael, he got me into more of NBA, basketball, and also baseball. My favorite NBA and MLB teams are the Milwaukee Bucks, which I recently went to see them in Milwaukee, and the Minnesota Vikings. And then, MLB is the... I went to Braves, which they run their championship from 50 years, I think.

Mike Hoenig:

That was cool to see. Well, UI REACH got a little bit of publicity from one of your colleague, one of your fellow students making that three-point shot the other night. Yeah. That was impressive, a half-court swish.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Caitlin Owens:

Well, Binh, is there anything that you wanted to talk about that we haven't gotten to yet or...

Binh Nguyen:

Hmm, no.

Mike Hoenig:

Well, we always kind of like to end with one question, Binh. We didn't prepare you for this, so if you need a little time to think, that is totally fine. I know you're young, but what's something that you would like people to think about and remember and know about you, as kind of either a legacy or just where are you making your mark or how would you like to be thought of moving forward?

Binh Nguyen:

Hmm. I'm kind of an emotional person, so I guess I feel people's emotions.

Mike Hoenig:

That's a very important thing.

Caitlin Owens:

Yeah, empathy and connecting with others.

Mike Hoenig:

Especially, in all the leadership positions you're in, Binh, already because I think that that's one of the things that you... I mean, I haven't known you very long, but I can tell how much you care about others and how other people think.

Caitlin Owens:

And just when you were talking earlier about moving from advocating for yourself to moving to advocating for yourself and others, that ability to really connect with other people's stories and experiences will help you elevate the voices of people who maybe don't feel as comfortable sitting on boards or engaging in advocacy the way you do. So, that's really great.

Mike Hoenig:

You're coming in as a youth advisory counselor. Are you going as a member or an adult ally?

Binh Nguyen:

An adult ally.

Mike Hoenig:

Yeah. You're going to be in a perfect position to do that.

Binh Nguyen:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Caitlin Owens:

Yeah. They are lucky to have you. That's really exciting to hear.

Mike Hoenig:

Do you have anything else, Caitlin?

Caitlin Owens:

I don't think so, but gosh, Binh, it's been really lovely talking with you. I've seen you at LEND seminars, but it's nice to hear more about your story and get to know you better. I just wish you the very best on your journey and I hope you have a great time in Washington DC in that short term.

Binh Nguyen:

Thank you.

Mike Hoenig:

Well, I want to second that. I want to thank you for your time and taking time out. I know your schedule is just super busy these days and I want to thank you for taking time out to talk to us, and also thank our listening audience for tuning in today to hear Binh's story, and just encourage you to keep a lookout for our future podcast because we have many more coming up. So, thanks everybody and wishing you well until next time.

Caitlin Owens:

Yes. Thanks.

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.