

Episode 8 - Disability Rights Advocacy with Zach Mecham

Mike Hoenig: Well, hey, it's Mike Hoenig from University of Iowa Center for Disabilities and Development. We are Iowa's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, and together with the Midwest Public Health Training Center, with the College of Public Health are very excited to produce the Disability Exchange podcast series. We're especially excited about today's guest who we'll introduce in just a moment, but I would first like to give our cohost an opportunity to introduce herself. So, Caitlin, take it away.

Caitlin Owens: Hello, my name is Caitlin Owens. I work with Mike at the UCEDD and I'm so happy to be here.

Mike Hoenig: Thanks a lot, Caitlin. We are thrilled to have Zach Mecham as our guest. First of all, Zach, is that the correct pronunciation of your last name?

Zach Mecham: That is correct. You're one of the few to get it right the first time.

Mike Hoenig: You usually hear Mecham and [Micham] and everything but what it's supposed to be?

Zach Mecham: Exactly.

Mike Hoenig: Well, excellent. Well, I have worked with Zach, I think, for just about a year now. I'll go into that story in a little bit, but at this point, I'd like to ask you Zach to go ahead and introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your experience in the disability space.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. My name is Zach Mecham. I started doing disability advocacy when I was in college. I started getting serious about disability advocacy, I should say, when I was in college, when I was invited to speak on a panel hosted by The Harkin Institute. Through that, some of the things that I said got noticed and I got a position at Disability Rights Iowa doing communications. And then, I also got an article written about me in the Des Moines Register. From there, I just started getting tapped in to the disability community and it opened my eyes to a lot of problems that I was previously shielded from. I had a particular skill set and ability to tell stories, and write, and shoot video, and design, and I decided to put those skills to use fighting for disability rights. The rest is kind of a history from there.

Mike Hoenig: What drew you to disability rights advocacy in the first place?

Zach Mecham: That's a good question. I would say, originally, it started when I was confronted with income and ethic limitations and personal care issues, trying to go to college and trying to pay for college and trying to live on my own. When I stopped relying solely on family members to provide my personal care, I was confronted with a lot of systemic issues surrounding disability and Medicaid particularly.

Caitlin Owens: Just to clarify for our audience, you identify as a person with a disability?

Zach Mecham: I do. That's correct.

Caitlin Owens: So, tell us a little bit more about kind of what you had to do to address some of those issues you confronted.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. When I turned 18, I started accessing waiver services. I went to Drake University to get my degree and I wanted to live in the dorm my first year. So, I sought out personal care and tried to get that paid for. I was confronted with issues of caregiver pay. My caregivers weren't paid adequately or on time ever. I was confronted with all kinds of red tape issues. And then, as I started to work to try to pay tuition for college because not all of my tuition was covered, I had to work through college and pay a lot out of pocket, I was confronted with income limitations that made that harder to be able to pay for my schooling.

Mike Hoenig: Yeah. I'm sure if those caregivers didn't get paid right away, you had a hard time hanging onto them too.

Zach Mecham: Oh, yeah. I went through caregivers so fast. I lived in Des Moines and went to college for about a year and a half, and in that year and a half, I went through three separate caregivers because every semester it was like, they would give me the notice and then leave. I couldn't blame them. They weren't getting paid enough. It was a lot of work and they had lives too. So, I was always having to find new people and those people weren't always prepared for the work that was involved, especially with the pay.

Caitlin Owens: Yeah. That's such a challenge. And then, kind of on the other side of things, you're also talking about confronting an issue where suddenly you were making too much money according to certain rules. Can you talk more about that? I know it's a really big catch-22 for a lot of people with disabilities who can and want to work.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. Yeah. I never got to a place where I was making too much money because I learned about those laws early enough to kind of avoid it. But it was one of those times where I was having to work just up to those income limits and then no more, and then kind of living very, very frugally even for a college student, in order to pay for my tuition and pay for my living expenses.

Mike Hoenig: You like ramen noodles?

Zach Mecham: I did in college and now I cannot eat them anymore. That might give you some insight into how cheaply I lived.

Mike Hoenig: I guess you do what you have to do. Well, one of the things that I learned about you, Zach, just as we were coming before we actually started recording, I knew that you had done some PR work or some marketing and some kinds of things for Upgrade Medicaid and some other initiatives, but I had not known that you were active in that organization at one point. We had the opportunity to talk with Jenn Wolff just a couple weeks ago. So, tell us a little bit about what you did with Upgrade Medicaid and why you are not able to be as active anymore.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. With Upgrade Medicaid, I was kind of connected with Jenn when I was working at The Harkin Institute and this was when Upgrade Medicaid was really in its infancy. A lot of people had no idea what Upgrade Medicaid was, what our goals were, what we were trying to do. I had some social media experience working with Disability Rights Iowa. I also, at this point, had free time because I'd just gotten out of college and I was working full time, which actually was less work than going to school and having part-time jobs.

So, I dedicated a lot of the free time to sharing stories of others who frankly had it worse than me. I was lucky my family was there for me. I was able to get free personal care from them. I had a stable situation. I was making an income. Other people just had it so much worse and I wanted people to be aware of these issues. So, what I did is I went around the state and I interviewed people for podcasts to share these stories. And then, I would take those podcasts and record video and share those videos online. I've kind of managed the entire Upgrade Medicaid social media presence for the first year and was able to really help build its influence. I emphasize the word, help, because it was not just me. Jenn Wolff, Tucker Cassidy, those two probably worked harder than I did in that time and made a lot of connections for me, but my involvement was really on the content end.

Why I can't help now is because after leaving The Harkin Institute, I started to build my own business, and as anybody who's ever built a business knows, it's a lot of work and a lot of time to kind of get your name out there and get people to know what it is you do. I just couldn't dedicate 10, 20 hours a week to giving content for free when my business was making content, which is unfortunate because I really, really liked that work and I thought it's important, but I had to do what I had to do.

Caitlin Owens: Absolutely understandable. We only have so much time. Can you tell us a little bit more about the business that you built?

Zach Mecham: My business is Zach of All Trades Media. I basically do the kind of things that I did for Disability Rights Iowa and Upgrade Medicaid, but for freelance. So, I'll do them for the SOAR Conference that I'm working with Mike on or I'll do them for small businesses, other nonprofits. I'm interviewing for a gig now with a tech startup that I'm really hoping I'd get, because it'd be a cool opportunity. I get paid to write funny tweets for a living. That'd be one of my gigs and I've always said that the pinnacle of my social media career will be when I can get paid to write funny tweets.

Mike Hoenig: Well, maybe you could write some funny tweets for SOAR.

Zach Mecham: There we go. Yeah. That's definitely-

Caitlin Owens: Does SOAR have a Twitter?

Zach Mecham: Not yet. Well, it's kind of something that we're discussing, but we're not sure if it'll be this year or next year. I think anybody in the advocacy community should definitely strongly consider Twitter. I think that's where most of the advocacy discussions and community, gathers and happens. So, yeah, if I could write funny tweets for an advocacy organization, that'd be really cool.

Mike Hoenig: Cool. We probably should inform our listeners about SOAR. Unfortunately, it will have taken place by the time this is aired I believe. We've talked about it a little bit on some previous podcasts, but it is a regional advocacy conference with four states being involved. Although, since it's virtual, we've actually opened it up and we have people registered from all over the country and Zach has played a huge part in that. I first met Zach when he got involved with the ADA, the Johnson County 30th Americans with Disabilities Act celebration. I have to confess Zach, I never shared this with you before, but I heard your name kind of kicked around. Then I heard, "Well, it's Zach Mecham from Des Moines." And I thought, "Why are we getting a guy involved from Des Moines with the Johnson County ADA celebration?" But it turned out he did a wonderful job. We ended up having to take it from being a live event to being virtual.

There was a particular time during the conference when I was using my screen reader and somehow I got bumped out. I just remember emailing Zach and I thought, "Oh my gosh, I'm never going to hear from him because he's doing his thing with the conference." Two minutes later I get this response that says, "We're working on it. Try logging back in." And it worked and I thought when we decided to go virtual with SOAR that we really needed to get Zach involved, and I was thrilled when you said, not only

are you doing it because it's giving you some income but you consider yourself a disability advocate. So, you were sort of serving a dual purpose by getting involved with SOAR.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. A big part of why I wanted to run my own business over a year now... I could probably gotten a corporate communications gig. To be totally frank, if I got a job at corporate, I'd probably be making more money, but I love being able to pick my clients and work with clients that I believe in and do work that I value. That keeps me motivated and that helps me to do my best work. So, clients like the SOAR committee are people that I love to work with because I know that I'm not just doing work to help somebody turn a profit. I'm doing work that's mission-oriented and matters.

Caitlin Owens: One thing that we know about you from communication before this podcast is that you're really passionate about entrepreneurship and employment for people with disabilities, which is not surprising given all that we've talked about so far, but can you talk a little bit more about kind of that interest of yours?

Zach Mecham: Yeah, absolutely. A big interest in entrepreneurship and employment for people with disabilities have to do with technology. My first job out of high school is I got a job at an IT office when I was 19, and I worked IT for five years. So, I got really heavily involved in technology. I developed an interest. In my opinion, digital communication is also a tech job. There's a creative aspect, but there's also a technical aspect. So, I really appreciate and value technology. I think that in 2021, with the availability of technology, assistive or otherwise, and the availability of remote work, I think disabled people all around the world have a real opportunity to do work that is meaningful to them and that contribute to society. I just want to see that happen. I want to see more disabled people, people with disabilities working because I think they can and part of that is going to be addressing the barriers related to work.

Caitlin Owens: Absolutely. A big conversation that I've seen with disability advocacy spaces and elsewhere throughout the pandemic is how if a bright side, I guess you could say, which it's been a long hard pandemic, but is that suddenly, our spaces are actually more inclusive, and things are being offered online, and remote work went from something that people were kind of skeptical about, to being something that a lot of companies and other employers are embracing, which is great for a lot of people. I think there's also a fear too that, after the pandemic, how will we kind of balance both the desire for some people to be back in person but also hold onto some of those really value-add aspects like an event that could previously not be attended by people because maybe they have transportation barriers or other reasons for not attending something?

Zach Mecham: Absolutely. I've been saying for years and years and years and years that remote work is the future. I think it just makes sense, right? You look at large companies. I did some work at Gravitare Coworking. I'm a member at Gravitare Coworking space in Des Moines and you look at a company like

Integer, one of the largest international marketing companies, and they've gotten smart, right? They don't have home offices very often anymore. They're doing remote work because that reduces their overhead. If you're doing business online with clients all around the country, why don't you tap in to the best talent online, all around the country? This also opens up so many opportunities for disabled people that have a hard time getting out. Maybe they can't drive. Maybe they have chronic pain and they need flexibility. There are all kinds of reasons why it's easier for a lot of people with disabilities to work from home. That's a job market or employees that you can tap into, potentially, really talented people that couldn't otherwise work that you now have access to.

Mike Hoenig: You know what would be interesting, Zach? I don't know how much if any involvement you had with voc rehab, but that's actually many, many years ago. My master's was in counselor ed and at one time I worked as a rehab teacher for the state of Iowa. I never actually served as a counselor, but one of the things that I'm really hoping for and I think you're really helping us or helping me anyway think outside the box a little bit here is that I hope that those people who were involved in supporting people with disabilities and facilitating them to get jobs are... I hope we get an audience of people in that category that are listening to this podcast because I think perhaps the rehab entities are kind of moving in that direction. But if not, I think that certainly goes, not only from the standpoint of an employer, but people who are supporting people to get jobs, need to really get creative and think about the many ways to bring people into online work.

Zach Mecham: Yeah, exactly. I think there are so many different types of online work that needs to be done that you can tap into whatever people's aptitudes are, and because you have access to this global network, you can work for companies globally. That's huge. This is kind of an aside, but I think the fact that disability, anything has not become more widely accessible yet is kind of sad. I look at Tommy Hilfiger Adaptive, right? Having adaptive clothing right in a storefront maybe isn't the most practical thing in the world because distributing adaptive clothing, which is such a narrow niche market, that way isn't very profitable. But marketing online, where you can access a global network of people that need those things, just makes sense. So, just like disabled consumers should be served by the online market, disabled employees should also absolutely be served by this online market. It just makes sense.

Caitlin Owens: That's such a good point. That's really interesting.

Mike Hoenig: It is. I'm just curious because I don't know the answer to this question, Zach, but is that how you got connected with the ADA celebration last year? I know that there's a young woman here in Iowa City named Erin Noon, who's also created a space, Claiming Disability Inc, and I know was involved in coordinating the conference here in Iowa City last year. Did the two of you connect online that way?

Zach Mecham: Yeah. Well, ironically enough, the first time Erin and I met was in person at an Upgrade Medicaid event, but we've only met in person twice. And then, the vast majority of our communication

and networking has been online. I've subcontracted her for work. She subcontracted me. We talk about business a lot. We talk about online work a lot because we both really value the way the internet can empower people with disabilities all over the country and world. So, she was the one who connected me with the Johnson County ADA celebration, and that's how I got connected with you all and how I ended up getting the SOAR Conference. So, I actually owe her a lot of credit for a lot of the cool work that I've gotten through the University of Iowa and Johnson County.

Mike Hoenig: Yeah. We need to bring her on to the show too. We have not done that yet. Well, that'll be a fun ride.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. She definitely will have a lot to say.

Mike Hoenig: Yes, she will. It'll be a lot of fun. But I think the point is that just the social networking and I'm hoping personally, for you, that SOAR will end up getting you some other gigs because we have people from all four states and we have a marketing manager that's doing... Not a marketing manager, rather, but an internet platform manager that's we're involved with as well. But people, I think, are really recognizing the great work that you're doing behind the scenes. So, anyway, hopefully that will lead to some more networking or some more job opportunities.

Zach Mecham: For sure. If nothing else, I've been really grateful to kind of get connected to that Midwest network of disability advocates. That's been really cool in and of itself. If it leads to more work, that'd be thrilling especially because I always did more work, but I just am really glad that I've been connected with all those great disability advocates and movers and shakers, so to speak.

Mike Hoenig: Let's take a quick step back here. You mentioned a couple times that you worked not only for Disability Rights Iowa. You said you did some marketing work there. They're one of our sister agencies actually with the UCEDD in terms of our funding, but you also worked with Senator Harkin. Tell us a little bit about that job. That had to be really interesting, I mean, just being in that sphere, and knowing you as I do through the work with SOAR, that you developed quite a relationship with Senator Harkin.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. Working for The Harkin Institute is probably one of the jobs that I will always be most proud of. My job through them was actually through the AmeriCorps VISTA program, and my specific role was twofold. One is that I was recruiting people for their Washington, DC scholarships. So, one of the major things that Tom Harkin wanted to do with The Harkin Institute was empower students from lower-income backgrounds to intern in Washington, DC, because as anybody knows, DC is an incredibly expensive place to live and work, and up until very recently, most interns in DC we're not paid anything. [crosstalk] So, one of the things the institute offered was scholarships for these students with

low-income backgrounds. So, a major part of my job was making sure that Drake students were aware of this opportunity, felt supported in taking advantage of this opportunity, and were able to intern in DC if they wanted to.

And then, the other part was making sure that the student worker population at The Harkin Institute was inclusive, that we were including students from all backgrounds, and they felt welcomed, and comfortable. That's really what I did is outreach on campus. So, it was a communications position, but it was more of a boots on the ground communication position that involved a lot of talking to students and helping them to know everything that The Harkin Institute had to offer for them.

Caitlin Owens: Very cool. I'm also a former AmeriCorps Vista, so always interesting to hear from folks who did that as well.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. It was an awesome opportunity. I'll always be grateful for that.

Mike Hoenig: Among everything else that you've been doing, Zach, I know that you recently entered the realm of being a homeowner. So, talk us through a little bit about that process. Knowing now that you have some accessibility needs, how did you go about selecting a home and how accessible is it right now and how accessible do you think it'll be when you're done?

Zach Mecham: Yeah. This has been quite an adventure already. I bought a house in my hometown. I'm really excited about the purchase, the whole idea because as you all probably know, there are very limited opportunities for disabled people to kind of invest and to kind of take those major steps towards financial independence and I'm a big believer in fiscal responsibility. I want to be able to live a life free of a lot of major financial worries. So, one of those big steps is that I bought this house and I am renting the top floor out to my little brother who is a general contractor by trade. So, what we're doing with this house is we're buying it. We're going to live in it for a year or two, flip it, and hopefully make some income on it. It's a really old house, over a hundred years old. It's a little bit quirky and it is not at all handicap accessible.

So, right now temporarily, we're using a motorcycle ramp to get me up on the deck, so I can go it through the side entrance and we've nailed down some two-by-fours to kind of get over the threshold into the house. So, not at all accessible. The way that we're accessing it right now is by no means ADA compliant, but by the time we're done, our front deck will have a ramp on it. It'll have an accessible door. The bathroom is going to be opened up with a walk-in shower. It's going to be a beautiful home. I'm really excited and it'll get there probably right about the time that we have to sell it, but what's nice is this is... Because I have the advantage of that labor from my little brother, we're going to be able to make a good profit, and then split it, and it's really going to help us both to kind of set ourselves up for our future success. That's kind of the goal with this house.

Caitlin Owens: Well, one thing I really love about that too, in addition to the income it will generate is that a lot of people really like historic houses, but so few of them are accessible. So, it's also really a public service to be taking a historic house and making it accessible, and then selling it to the future homeowner.

Zach Mecham: Right. Exactly. What we're kind of thinking is by the time this is done, this would be a great home for retirees and it will have that upstairs area for grandkids' bedrooms or whatever. It's going to be a beautiful little house that's going to have that really accessible bottom floor. And then, it's going to have just a little upstairs area for whoever wants it. Right now, that upstairs area is my brother, his daughter, and his wife's space. And then, I kind of got the lower level here. And then, obviously, we share the living room.

Caitlin Owens: What I even just think about... People just scrolling through Zillow or looking around at houses and even if they don't end up purchasing that house, they'll see it and they'll think, "Oh, huh, historic houses can be accessible," or, "Oh, wow, I've never really thought about putting a ramp on an old porch or something like that," which is cool and will also have just kind of impacts on the way people see and think about spaces and universal design and things like that.

Zach Mecham: Well, if you look at wheelchair-accessible homes, a lot of them take accessibility as an afterthought. So, you get those kind of bolted on metal ramps that don't look that pretty or anything like that. Because my brother is skilled at what he does and I trust him, we're going to be able to make an accessible house that's also a beautiful house, and I think that that in itself is kind of a proof of concept.

Mike Hoenig: Yeah. The two don't have to be mutually exclusive for sure.

Caitlin Owens: Right. Absolutely.

Zach Mecham: Exactly.

Caitlin Owens: Well, Zach, I'm wondering, as we're kind of approaching the end of our time here, if there's anything we haven't asked you about that you want to touch on. Mike, if there's any other questions you have aside from our big golden question?

Mike Hoenig: The golden question. No. I think I've covered my questions. Zach, what about anything you want to share? You could do [crosstalk] a shameless plug for your business if you want to.

Zach Mecham: Yeah. Hire me. I do all kinds of stuff. They don't call me Zack of All Trades for nothing. I-

Caitlin Owens: Great business name by the way. I won't forget it.

Zach Mecham: Thank you very much. I appreciate that. I'm a big believer in branding. The benefit of kind of working a various range of nonprofit communications is that I had to wear a ton of hats. I was the photographer, the designer, the writer, the editor, the webmaster, you name it. I had to do it. So, that gave me a wide range of skills, but it also gave me an aptitude. So, if I don't know how to do something yet, I can learn.

Mike Hoenig: [crosstalk]. Oh, go ahead. Sorry.

Zach Mecham: And I just love being able to help organizations that... Because everybody in 2021 needs to be able to communicate with their audience online, no matter who that is, and I love being able to kind of bring people into that space and help them. Yeah, it's really exciting.

Mike Hoenig: One of the latest things that Zach is... Well, I think you've had some experience already, but he refined his skills as we were told that we needed to do a plain language version of our SOAR program. So, Zach got on that and he and another planning committee member really spent a lot of time and we've got what we think is a pretty exciting product now. So, he certainly is a man of many trades, of all trades. Yeah. Are you going to ask the golden question or am I?

Caitlin Owens: Sure. I'll do it. Zach, a question that we like to close the podcast off with is asking guests to tell us what they would like their legacy to be.

Zach Mecham: Hmm. My legacy, that's interesting. I don't know if we covered this yet in terms of my dream is to make movies full time. Right? I think my greatest skill is video and I've made some short films. So, I guess my legacy would be kind of tied to that and tied to storytelling, I think. At its core, what I do best is tell stories and I just want my legacy to be inspiring people and motivating people through stories. I think that a really impactful story has the power to change the world. That may sound corny, but I believe that wholeheartedly. I think that if you can really touch somebody through a great story, you can motivate them to create change. Or in the marketing world, you can motivate them to buy something, which is part of my job. But storytelling is really how people come to understand the world and are moved to take action. So, I would say that my legacy would be to really move people and empower them through storytelling.

Caitlin Owens: I absolutely love that.

Mike Hoenig: Me too.

Caitlin Owens: That is so true.

Mike Hoenig: And people I think are really recognizing the power of stories in so many different spaces. That's one of the things in our LEND Training Program, we talk a lot about are the personal stories, and I know that we actually have some training within the program on personal stories. So, it's very, very time I think, and lots of people want to share theirs.

Caitlin Owens: How we connect with others, how we humanize our experiences, and how we take something that could be just presented through data and statistics and kind of make it real and impactful. So, that's great. Well, best wishes to you, Zach. It was so nice meeting you. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to chat with us.

Zach Mecham: Nice meeting you as well and thank you so much for having me. This was fun.

Mike Hoenig: It was very fun and thanks for joining us. We'll be in touch on SOAR and hopefully some other things very soon.

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.