Disability Exchange S4 E6

Diversity Within Disability

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(Introduction Music)

**Mike Hoenig:** Well, hey everybody. It's Mike Honig from the Iowa University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, or Iowa UCEDD. I am a program coordinator here at the UCEDD, and I'm delighted to welcome you to another episode of Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is a podcast designed to elevate the voices of people with disabilities, their families, and others who support them. We are grateful for the ongoing support that allows us to share these awesome stories. I am going to turn this over to my illustrious co-host Judy Warth.

**Judy Warth:** Thank you, Mike. We also want to encourage you to share this podcast with your friends, your family, your community. I don't think there's enough information about the voices and the experiences of people with disabilities and the role it plays in our communities. Today we're here to celebrate, learn more, and be educated by our friend, our mentor, and our leader Derrick Willis. Welcome, Derrick.

**Derrick Willis:** Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**Judy Warth:** Derek is in his final days as the UCEDD director. He's decided to move on to the illustrious golf courses of warmer weather and to begin to celebrate and in the words of my mentor ‘You're going to take everything you know about disability and spread it widely on the golf courses and your churches, everywhere you go.’ Derrick, you want to share people with people a little bit about what you do right now and how you got here?

**Derrick Willis:** Sure, I currently serve as I was UCEDD director. I have been in this role since 2019. Before that I was at the University of Missouri Kansas City and was working on an employment project that crossed paths with the former director here, Julie Christensen.

My role now is just to be a servant leader to, close to 70 staff who work for the UCEDD and just support them in any kind of way, stay out of their way, and let them do their magic.

My, my role is to try to forecast what our future is going to be strategically set a direction and a vision for our organization and then try to remove all the barriers that prevent us from doing all the great things for the people in Iowa.

**Mike Hoenig:** I still remember, there was a leadership meeting and we were talking about the diversity of serving people from diverse backgrounds and how we needed somebody that had the program leadership experience who could come in and assume a leadership role and also bring an aspect of diversity. I know that many who you have led, Derek, in your time here are, so grateful that you chose to come to Iowa. Tell us a little bit about your focus on diversity and why you think it's so important, within any type of work that we do in the disability field.

**Derrick Willis**: I consider myself a person from a diverse background and I've always drawn on my experiences and the things that impacted my ability to navigate systems to grow in my career.

I looked at those particular situations, many of them people would consider barriers, I saw them as opportunities. I wanted to make sure that our work supported people who have not traditionally had a seat at many tables, who were often left out of the decision making, who often were not thought of when programs were being developed and considered.

And I wanted to make sure that we heard from just in my work and everything that I did, I wanted to be as inclusive and responsive to the needs of the people that, that I know about the people that I see and the people, most importantly, that I don't see at the seats and the tables that I traditionally sat at.

And so I always came with the idea of how do we make sure that we know and understand what the needs of all people from Iowa are, regardless of disability and non-disability, race, ethnicity, religious preference, sexual orientation, gender. I am so proud of, my, my history and providing opportunities for all people and particularly women in leadership. I have been surrounded by great leaders and a lot of times when people think about diversity, they don't look at these particular factors. A lot of times we go directly to ethnicity. But diversity is broader than just ethnicity. I wanted to create that environment and space that was open to all people.

**Judy Warth:** If you were going to look at your work, can you highlight a couple of things that you think really embody that.

**Derrick Willis:** Oh, man, it's so many. We've had some amazing experiences. Our youth leadership academy just created a space for young people. Youth development has always been a big piece. I think that earlier that we can reach young people and provide opportunities and give them the ability to see and experience and to learn and to grow always helps create a well-rounded individual. Our Youth Leadership Academies, the Summer Transportation Institute, the Ambassadors where we hired individuals with disabilities to just tell their story and to help others see possibilities through their lives, our disability and diversity fellowships. One of the most amazing experience, was where we had a gentleman who was in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa. He wrote a play that talked about a disability experience related to employment. I can just go on and on about all of the things that we have experience here. The opportunity to be a part of our SOAR conference. Mike was a big part of that and creating a partnership with four different states and creating a platform for people with disabilities to have a voice and to share their experiences and projects, and so it was a conference for people by people with disabilities.

And so it's just, it just goes along on. So proud of the work that we were able to accomplish here.

**Mike Hoenig:** Early on, you talked about how you support the people that you work with, as a servant leader, and you said, ‘you get out of the way.’

You capitalize on the strengths of each individual employee that works with you and have trust in us to move forward and carry out the projects. Can you talk a little bit about how you developed that leadership style over the years.

**Derrick Willis:** Yeah, I think some of my greatest lessons came from working for horrible leaders. I was in these positions where I felt like I was not valued. I felt like when I would talk that I was just talking in the air. I would make recommendations and suggestions, and nobody would respond. And then the next thing I know somebody would say the same thing that I said, and then everybody would jump on it. And I was like I said it, but I just said it in a different kind of way.

I think it was through those experiences that I had over the course of my career that I said, ‘if I ever get into a position where I can lead. I want to lead in a way that is inclusive, that is respectful, and I want to lead where I show the people who have dedicated their lives to our organizations who say that I want to work for this organization and I want and I wanted our organization to be the best place and Judy worked with me on a committee called The Best People.

What we wanted to do was to create this environment, create a culture where you matter. Each individual matters. Where if you have an idea, if you have a passion and a direction that you wanted to explore, I felt like it was my responsibility to, to create that opportunity and create that space and allow you to grow.

We've been truly blessed that our organization has grown. We have reached a lot of people throughout the state of Iowa in many different areas, health and wellness, education, mental health. And I just feel like for me, it was just really. Finding, tapping into the creativity and what people had an interest in doing, and we create this space to allow them to grow and to build what they wanted to build. That was always my vision.

**Judy Warth:** I also know that you've touched some things on the national level. You want to share a little bit with folks who aren't familiar with UCEDDs and the Association for University Centers on Disability.

**Derrick Willis:** Yeah we are part of a network a network of 67 centers just like ours. There's 60 programs called LENDs Leadership, Education, Neurodevelopment and other related Disabilities, And then there's 16 intellectual IDDRCs and developmental disability research centers. through this network, I would say that there's probably 8, 000 researchers and the area is related to disabilities of all types. We have an association called AUCD, the Association of University Centers for Disabilities, which is like a parent agency that kind of supports us and provides technical assistance in Washington, D. C.

**Judy Warth:** And did you just finish serving as president of that?

**Derrick Willis:** I did. I started out as a chairperson for multicultural competency committee, and then I became a at large board member, I was president elect, which is a 1 year term and then I just served as president for the past year. Yeah, 7 years of leadership in our national network, was important for us, as I wanted to make sure that Iowa was on the map and recognized as one of the most powerful research centers in our network and that the work that we were doing in the state of Iowa was elevated at the national level.

**Mike Hoenig:** At the national level, in Iowa, and within the UCEDD, I noticed a significant uptick in participation by self-advocates or people with disabilities and family members that were playing lead roles. I'd just be interested to hear you talk a little bit about the kind of the paradigm shift.

**Derrick Willis:** Serving on the board that's 1 of the things that I'm most proud of was this change that took place. We voted to allow the chairpersons of the councils to be a board member and to have the votes and all of the rights that any other board member had. We have created what we call a representational seat. We can look at our board, and if we ever see that there is a voice that is missing, we have the ability to create a nomination process to bring on the representation. So, we have self-advocates on our board. We have family members on the board. We have individuals from diverse backgrounds on the board.

It used to be a good old boys network and we have totally transformed and evolved into something that I am really proud of.

I wanted to model that at our UCEDD here in Iowa. And one of my first hires was Ed Esbeck and remember going to HR and saying, this is what I want to do, let's figure out how to make this happen and we did. Since then, hired a number of individuals that probably would not, from a historical perspective, had that opportunity within our organization.

**Judy Warth:** And certainly, I think that's something that, that we should be proud of here at Iowa’s UCEDD and at the Center for Disabilities and Development, that we model what we hope to see in our community and tap into the expertise that the people with disabilities and diverse backgrounds bring to the table.

Derek, if you're getting ready to close this chapter. What does the future hold for you?

**Derrick Willis:** Yeah, I'm using the term retirement, but I don't think that I'm ever gonna retire, I just feel like God is moving me in a different way. When I go back to Kansas City and I look around and I see so many families in need I think my experiences here have opened my eyes to so many different things and I'm excited about what the next chapter is going to be. I know it's going to be community based. It's going to be something that provides hope, provides a pathway, that provides knowledge, information, access and something that's inclusive of all people particularly people who, who struggle and be that navigator to help people seek not only economic prosperity, but just to live a good life.

**Mike Hoenig:** That's awesome. We like to wind down the podcast with a question: 50 years from now, people will no doubt remember you. What would be a legacy that you would like to leave behind?

**Derrick Willis:** I would say the environment and the culture that we created. When people were around me, or in my presence that I made them feel important. That I made them feel valued. That I listened. And that I created this environment that was responsive to what folks wanted and needed. And I hope they never forget how I made them feel when they were in my presence.

 **Judy Warth:** That's truly a calling more than a job. Derek, on behalf of those of us who work with you; Thank you for your service here at Iowa’s UCEDD; helping us grow, building bridges within the hospital, within our communities and nationally. Those are foundations that will continue to grow and prosper over the years.

**Derrick Willis:** And thank you all your work. We had a good ride. The people of Iowa and people that we work with, and all the individuals who lived experiences, I'll never, ever forget what we were able to accomplish together.

**Judy Warth:** What a wonderful way to bring this to a close. We thank Joanna Sabha for producing this in a way that you can actually listen to all of our bad humor. On behalf of all of us at Disability Exchange thank you for joining us.

**Narrator with background music:** 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 Delvaux for the music contribution.