

# Disability Exchange Season 5, Episode 2

## Jim Speed's Story with Dr. Travis Vogan

**Judy Warth:** Welcome to Disability Exchange. We are a podcast from the University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the University of Iowa. Our purpose is to center and elevate the voices of people with disabilities and those who support them. My name is Judy Warth and I'm one of the hosts. I'm here today with Mike Hoenig. You want to say hello, Mike?

**Mike Hoenig:** Sure. My name is Mike Hoenig, I retired from the university a little over three years ago but there are a number of initiatives that still are really passion programs and one of them is this podcast. Our guest today is Travis Vogan.

**Judy Warth:** Dr. Travis Vogan, professor of journalism and mass communication here at the University of Iowa.

**Mike Hoenig:** He is going to talk with us about disability, sports, and probably more importantly the disparities that happen in this country and how we choose to address them. Travis, welcome to Disability Exchange.

**Travis Vogan:** Nice to be here. Thanks, Mike.

I'm not disabled, but both of my grandparents on my mother's side are blind. They actually met at a blind school. Neither one was born blind. My grandmother had a degenerative disease, and my grandfather was in an explosion on a farm.

I grew up a lot with them, and we would go to the blind center. We would ride on the Dial-a-ride, which is how they got around. I would walk with them and their guide dog. They would read me books that they would get through the mail. Because I spent so much time with my grandparents, I saw how they navigated the world, how they were able to do so many things that, to me seemed pretty impossible.

When I was a kid, it was normal because I was just around them. So, I was like, 'oh, of course they can do this' but now thinking back on it, they're pretty amazing. It's just something that's always been important to me.

**Mike Hoenig:** You sure brought up a lot of memories with the Dial-a-ride and those books, which I think were called Twin Vision.

**Travis Vogan:** Is that what they were called? They were children's books, and they had the images so I could see them. And I think they were designed for blind people who had kids with sight.

**Mike Hoenig:** Yep.

**Travis Vogan:** I think of blind community, at least from my experience, it seems like they have a relatively good lobby. Or at least did because there were services available that I think other communities didn't have quite as much of, the deaf community, for instance.

**Judy Warth:** In your professional life, you do a lot in sports. I see everything from, from television sports to NFL.

**Travis Vogan:** I study media, that's what I do professionally, and I mostly study the relationship between sport and media, so how media kind of shape cultural understandings of sport. So, my research up until very recently hasn't really engaged with disability at all. But I will say that my grandfather, wrestled as a kid and through high school, and he wouldn't just wrestle other blind kids. He grew up wrestling and that was important to him. That was something that, that he really benefited a lot from. So, there was a kind of interest in sports and disability.

**Judy Warth:** But you had these two worlds collide. You want to share it with our listeners?

**Travis Vogan:** A friend introduced me to a local attorney here in Iowa City named Jim Hayes and he said, 'Travis, have you ever heard of James Speed?'

And I hadn't. So, Jim sat me down and told me this tale of Jim Speed, who was a basketball player at the University of Iowa, who wound up going blind after suffering, a sinus infection that turned into meningitis.

It was a really fascinating tale to me. Sports, the Iowa connection, James Speed was African American and that had something to do with the medical treatment he received, and then also disability. I think the best topics for researcher, journalist, or storyteller are the ones that have the ability to bring together multiple things. And so, I wound up doing some research interviews and wrote an article on him.

**Mike Hoenig:** If I remember correctly, he was highly recruited. We'd just come through the civil rights movement.

Also, that Iowa was at the precipice of really having a quality basketball team. They land a recruit from Louisiana, and he comes to Iowa. Tell us a little bit about, that and then treatment that he did or didn't receive at Iowa.

**Travis Vogan:** Yeah. So, James Speed was from Shreveport, Louisiana. African American, grew up in a, a pretty poor family, single mom. He is just a great basketball player. To put it in more contemporary terms, he would've been like a five-star type recruit, the kind of person that, that we would be really excited to have come. He would be playing with this guy named Freddie Brown, who was on Iowa's team, who wound up being an NBA player.

Ken Grebinski, who roomed with James Speed. He was a white player from, I want to say Clear Lake. They were good friends, and it seemed like he had a really good community here. He liked the coach, and he was just ready to roll.

Around Thanksgiving he started feeling poorly. He had a cold. Initially he chalked that up to the difference in weather, because he'd never really been in a cold place like this. But then it got worse. He was at a Thanksgiving dinner with a number of the players. He had this really terrible toothache and a headache, to the point where he wasn't really able to participate in the dinner, he was withdrawn.

The next day he went to the student health center, saw a dentist they said, 'okay, yeah your tooth is in trouble.' They pulled the tooth, gave him some pain meds, sent him home. The headache kept getting worse. He went back to the doctor the following day and the doctor was like, 'yeah, those give it some time. It's probably just healing or whatever.' He wasn't able to practice.

And then it just kept getting worse. The doctor, it was a resident, suspected that maybe this guy was just like looking for drugs and so he wound up giving him placebos. Didn't order tests. They were just like, 'oh, this guy's, faking it.' Meanwhile he has the beginnings of what was called cavernous sinus thrombosis, which is basically like a massive sinus infection. He was vomiting. He couldn't walk. The coach and the trainer insisted that he was admitted to the student health center.

His eyes started bulging out. He was vomiting and eventually they took him to the hospital. The infection had cut off the oxygen to his optic nerve, so he had

this emergency surgery. He could have very well died from this illness. They saved his life, but he was permanently blind.

Part of the reason that he lost his sight is because, the hospital made certain assumptions about him based on, who he was, not on his complaints. There's a lot of research on how African American people are sometimes treated differently by doctors because of certain assumptions they make about those people and the reasons that they're seeking care. Whether it's this assumption that they might be looking for drugs or this assumption that they can handle more pain than other folks, and that it's medical racism essentially. And it's something that, there's been a lot written about and Speed story kind of maps right onto that, right? You have this guy who comes in, he has apparently a toothache and he had something else too. And rather than test for it, tests that would have allowed them to treat his situation and probably have him back on the basketball court within a week or two they gave him placebos and he wound up going blind. As he recovered, he realized that he had been treated in a negligent way, and he wound up filing a lawsuit against the university.

**Judy Warth:** And Travis, I hear a couple of different implicit biases. One, based on his race, the other, his poverty and those two factors combined probably really fed this.

**Travis Vogan:** Yeah, absolutely. He had poor dental care. And at the time, especially for poor, poorer folks, the treatment was typically just to pull teeth, right? You weren't going to fill cavities as often because it was cheaper. And again, there were these assumptions that 'these folks aren't going to take care of their teeth anyway.' 'Oh, this guy's got a toothache look, he's already missing, several teeth. We'll just pull this one and things will be okay.'

But again, if I would've gone in there. With, teeth that are pretty well taken care of, it's likely that they probably would've ordered the kinds of tests that would've identified the underlying issue. Sadly, there's, there are a lot of examples of that kind of thing happening.

The story that the public got is that this guy got this terrible illness and now he's blind. And the community really did rally around him. And I think the community really was devastated that this person suffered this tragic turn of events.

There were fundraisers, not just at Iowa but all over the place. There was a fundraiser where members of the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears

played like a basketball game against each other, and they donated the proceeds to, to Speed.

There was community support. But there wasn't really a critical eye given to the medical care until a little bit later.

Hayes and James Speed were buddies. James Speed told him what happened. Hayes was an attorney, and he started looking into it and they realized, medical care he received could have been and should have been a lot different.

So, I think even for the first, while James Speed himself was probably feeling like he was very fortunate just to be alive. It wasn't until later when people started digging around that he realized 'yeah, you shouldn't have lost your sight.'

The Iowa City community raised \$20,000, \$25,000. University of Iowa kept his scholarship. He could go back to school if he wanted to. He maintained a relationship with the team and the coach. He tried to go back to school but he wound up dropping out just because it was too frustrating. He didn't have the kinds of supports that we probably do now for blind folks.

He also spent some time shortly after he went blind at the School for the Blind in Des Moines. This state at the time had really exceptional services for the blind. Speed got pretty good care there.

**Judy Warth:** Travis, I had read that, that he did eventually go back to college and earned his degree and later a master's degree in counseling.

**Travis Vogan:** Yeah, he did. This was a bit; this was later on.

He was a, a business person. He did briefly coach basketball. Somebody else would do the equivalent of a radio play-by-play and then he would, make suggestions about, substitutions or plays or whatever.

Eventually after the lawsuit against the university, he became the owner of a semi-professional basketball team in Las Vegas, he ran the team. He wound up doing some pretty amazing things. I, to me, like the idea of coaching basketball without being able to see seems impossible. And I, I don't think he was the greatest coach in the world, but he was able to do some really important things, after losing his sight and also still maintain some connection to basketball.

**Judy Warth:** Travis, I think you highlight what happens with acquired disability. We are all one street crossing away.

**Travis Vogan:** Yes.

**Judy Warth:** One heartbeat, from having a disability ourselves.

**Travis Vogan:** Exactly.

**Judy Warth:** Those of us who are able-bodied and that process of adjusting your life is huge. I think James Speed embodies the strength of character to navigate it all and then go on and still hold onto what he loved, which is pretty impressive.

**Travis Vogan:** I couldn't help but be really inspired by seeing somebody do that and also having the guts, to stand up for himself and to go against, the University Hospital, which is a really powerful entity.

He was an outcast after filing suit against the university. Jim Hayes told me some stories about some pretty prominent people who turned their backs on Speed and were, actively trying to discredit him and his lawsuit.

He had a lot going against him, not just his disability, but also his racial identity, his socioeconomic background so on and so forth.

**Judy Warth:** His case helped change a standard ruling back in the seventies there was a, it was called the locality rule that required in medical malpractice cases at the time, you had to get a local doctor to testify. So that'd be somebody here in our community going against the University of Iowa Hospitals and that's tough to do. it was a trendsetter that changed so that people's voices could really be heard and not have to deal with the biases of, you couldn't afford to be a doctor in Iowa City and testify against the University of Iowa Hospital.

**Travis Vogan:** Of course, most people got their degrees here. They have buddies here, former teachers and it, it'd be tough to get somebody to testify. it resulted in legal precedent as well, important ones that I think have made, the process of trying to hold people accountable, a little bit more reliable.

There are just a ton of layers to this tale that I think make it significant and also make me curious as to why so few people have heard this story.

**Mike Hoenig:** Travis, I think we could discuss this case and the many layers of it for a long time. Given all of your ties with the disability community and journalism and just your interest in so many topics, what would you like how would you like people to remember you 50 years from now?

**Travis Vogan:** It's a tough one. I basically, I think maybe like nice guy, and everything else would be gravy.

**Judy Warth:** Certainly, his story is one of resilience and willingness to stand up for what's right and to go forward and do good things.

**Travis Vogan:** I think it's important, to remember that not everybody is going to be, a James Speed and that regardless, we need to make sure that there are opportunities for people who suffer from these kinds of accidents or illnesses or disabilities to, to get those kinds of services and to have those kinds of resources. Everybody deserves to, to have some help and some, respect.

**Judy Warth:** Thank you Travis, for sharing Jim Speed's story and yours as well. And, for our listeners, just a little bit of a footnote here in September of 2011 James Speed died of liver and pancreatic cancer.

**Speaker 3:** 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 Delve for the music contribution.