

# DDNJ Author Insights

## EP. 10 Shari Cooper

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

disability, Shari, advocacy, speak, advocate, journal, people, podcast, article, disabilities, developmental disabilities, experience, work, human trafficking, opportunity, Ohio, inclusion, agree, involved, hard

### SPEAKERS

Shari Cooper, Matt Wappett

#### **Matt Wappett** 00:16

Hi there, everybody. Welcome to the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal's author insights Podcast. I'm Dr. Matthew Wappett, the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal Editor in Chief, and I'm the Executive Director of the Utah State University Institute for Disability Research, Policy and Practice. And it's also my privilege to host this podcast. As I've said on past episodes, hosting this podcast is one of my favorite things that I get to do, because it gives me a chance to talk to so many different researchers, professionals and advocates who are out in the field making a difference. And it's actually incredibly inspirational to talk to some of these people who are doing such tremendous work. So anyway, we're glad that you're here. We're glad that you've tuned in. Hopefully, this isn't your first episode. But if it is welcome, for those of you who are coming back, welcome back. We hope you subscribe and continue to listen. It's important to note that this podcast is part of our ongoing commitment to increase the accessibility of the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal for a wider audience. Not everyone has time to sit down and read an entire article these days or scrounge online for a journal, let alone an entire issue. So more and more people get their information through podcasts and audiobooks. I know that I listen to more audiobooks this last year than I read actual physical books. And so we're trying to follow the trends and make sure that the content that we produce in the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal is also available to you in alternative formats. So we're hoping that this is helpful. As with any other podcast, please be sure to subscribe to our podcast feed, you can find us on all the major platforms Apple, Spotify, Stitcher, Overcast Podbean, or wherever you get your podcasts, and leave us a rating and review. Because that helps us rise in the ranking. And it helps us create more visibility for the work that we do and for the work that our authors share. So with that said, we like to acknowledge at the very front here that the authors that we interview on this podcast, are whole people. A lot of times there's a tendency, especially when reading academic things to just have it be a name on the page. And one of the fun parts about this podcast is we get to dig into more about who these researchers and authors are, what is it that drives them? What is it that brought them into the field, and we want to use that opportunity to help you gain a better understanding of the many diverse voices who are working in the developmental disabilities field today. So with that said,

today, we have the opportunity to visit with Shari Cooper. Shari is a self-advocate from Dayton, Ohio, who wrote an article in our past issue on diversity, equity and inclusion. Her article was entitled loving my skin, a self-advocates perspective from Dayton, Ohio. It was a real pleasure to meet Shari, when we put out our call for DEI articles. Shari was one of the first to respond. And although she's not a traditional academic, she really did bring an important perspective and I think some important thoughts to the, to the to that particular issue of the journal. So just by way of introduction for you, I met Shari when she first submitted her article, I called her and asked her, you know, how we could support her and we've had several conversations over the past couple of years. And I've really come to appreciate who she is as a person and it was just a real pleasure for me to sit down with her. So by way of introduction, Shari is a dedicated advocate who has spent most of her life advocating for disability rights and inclusion. Shari graduated from Sinclair Community College in 1995, with a degree in disability intervention services. She's also a columnist for the Dayton Daily News editorial pages. And she's an award-winning speaker. In fact, she gave a TED talk at TEDx Dayton in 2014. Called "Are you okay with yourself?" And Shari's impact as an advocate has been far reaching throughout Ohio and the entire Midwest. She served on the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council. She currently serves on the Disability Foundation Board. In 2019 she was selected as the Women in Business Networking's top 25 Women to Watch. And she currently works as a PR Assistant for Easterseals of Miami Valley as their blogger and chief and we'll make sure that we put up a post to the blog that Shari writes it's really interesting. She does a great job. It should also be noted here and Shari will mention this in her interview, Shari's working on a book. As soon as Shari's book comes out about her experience growing up with a disability, we will be sure to share that with you as well. So this episode is an important conversation that touches on many important topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. And perhaps most importantly, it really highlights the value and importance of honoring lived experience and the importance of including everyone. So, as with other episodes, this episode includes some fun behind the scenes insights, some unique ideas that can be used to improve the work that you do on your respective teams and organizations. So, without further ado, let's jump into this fun and informative conversation with Shari Cooper. We'll go ahead and jump in. So thank you again, taking time to visit with us today., Shari, we're excited to catch up with you again. So kind of like we start all our interviews. Tell us a little bit about your background.

#### **Shari Cooper 06:31**

Well, I'm fifty years old. I have had Cerebral Palsy since birth. I'm the youngest of six children. We call ourselves the Super Coopers. It was four boys and two girls. We lost a brother, but I carry him in my heart every day. I worked for Goodwill Easter Seals of the Miami Valley in Dayton Ohio and I'm a public relations specialist and I do a lot of advocacy work, local and statewide. I stay with my favorite guy named Darrell. Me and him bought a house six years ago. We got a fur baby. Her name is tiny, even though she not tiny. She weighs 160 lbs. She's a rottweiler but she thinks she is a lap dog.

#### **Matt Wappett 07:44**

That is a very big dog. Well, that is awesome. Well, I mean, the next question I think is, is obvious. But because you've kind of referred to it, but how did you first get involved with disability advocacy?

#### **Shari Cooper 08:06**

As a person, wouldn't you just do it? You probably always were involved with advocacy. Whether you know it or not. When I was younger in grade school I would tell my mom what I wanted to wear or how I wanted my hair. I consider that a part of advocacy. As I've gotten older, I seen things weren't good for people with disability. I wanted to do more to make it better. I wanted to increase my voice to my rights as a citizen. So I don't know if you're familiar but our state got a I call it an IL system down in Dayton they call it opportunity for hire with disability. It used to be we have counsel and they doing that as a CHD member a consumer advisory council. For me I really got the bug and I didn't want to stop so I just started doing other advocacy work by submitting my application.

**Matt Wappett** 09:44

That's amazing. Well, you would have gotten into that advocacy work very early on. I mean, this is going to tell you more about me than you probably need to know you and I are the same age. Yeah, I would have never guessed you were as old as me. You look so much younger. But really, I mean, thinking back to 1973, the 70s and the 80s, when disability was still largely looked down upon, you enable to speak up and get that involved that early on it's pretty incredible.

**Shari Cooper** 10:20

When you've been able to speak, I think the younger you start, the better. I think I was speaking, again because I was the youngest of six kids in the game, you speak you speak you're going to get what you want, and everybody else. is speaking and I'm like hey, hey, hey, I'm here too! That I used to I get ticked off and started speaking. I think that's due to my brother and sister. I got great family support. I credit them for helping me strengthen my advocacy.

**Matt Wappett** 11:01

So this isn't a question that I sent you. But I'm curious and you can say I'm not ready to answer that or not. What was your experience like in school? Did you find in high school and in middle school and even elementary school that you had opportunities to advocate for yourself?

**Shari Cooper** 11:18

That's a great question Matthew. So from I going to say kindergarten through sixth grade I went to school that was only for children with disabilities. And we got along great because everybody would be on the same accord. We all had disabilities. It wasn't until the seventh grade, where I was mainstreamed into a public school. That was a whole different ballgame. There I wasn't a majority, I was a minority. That was very hard to really deal with kids being different. Back in grade school everybody had a disability. Now you had to deal with people staring, people making fun. So that was the hardest.

**Matt Wappett** 12:27

One of the other things that you've been involved with and I think when you originally reached out to write your article, you mentioned your involvement with the Developmental Disabilities Council there in Ohio. How long have you been involved with the Developmental Disabilities Council and what's that experience been like for you?

**Shari Cooper** 12:44

I think since 2004. I'm no longer a member, but I'm still being involved with writing reviews or anything else they need else need me to do because it was very good experience . I think I got involved with them in 2023.

**Matt Wappett** 13:13

So relatively recently? You are a little bit different you know, the Developmental Disabilities Network journal is an academic journal. It's pretty rare that we have self-advocates reach out and say I would like to write something for you. Why did you want to write about your experience for the Developmental Disabilities Network journal and how did hear about it actually?

**Shari Cooper** 13:41

Again, my amazing Ohio Developmental Disability Council. I gotta give a shout out to Kelly Knight who is the Executive Director reach out to me and say, the disability journal was doing an inclusion edition and she said, I think you should write something. I was saying to myself I don't think they would pick me. Then I thought about and I thought well I have nothing to lose so I am just going to send it in and see where it goes. And just like magic here you and me are Matthew so it must have worked.

**Matt Wappett** 14:37

It did work.

**Shari Cooper** 14:38

Well, I was right then. I wanted to do it in plain language so people would know exactly what I was speaking about and in my perspective.

**Matt Wappett** 14:54

And you did and you did a remarkable job. You know, one of the things that we've really tried to do with the journal is highlight self-advocate voices where we can. And so we were really excited to get your article and to have the opportunity to work with you to really share your experience. So thank you for taking that risk it definitely, I think it's really enhanced, and we received a lot of great feedback on your article in the journal. And those of you who haven't read Shari's article, I would encourage you, we'll link to it in the show notes and everything else, but I would encourage you to go read it. But this particular issue of the journal was focused on diversity, equity and inclusion, which, unfortunately, has become a relatively controversial subject in recent years. But, you know, you come from that background. Tell us a little bit about some of the challenges that you faced as a disabled black woman?

**Shari Cooper** 16:01

Well, yeah, people usually don't want to talk about race and disability, and gender, but that is the only way we are going to learn is by talking about. So as an African American woman with a disability, I have, not all the time, but sometime felt like, maybe I didn't belong. So you roll into a room where everybody is either white male or female and you sit there. When I first got to the disabilities council, I think it was me and another African American woman. But I really didn't talk that much because I felt like what if I say anything I will be voted down quickly because I'm the only one besides my other colleague in the room that was like me and that very scary. So we deal with a whole different ball game but when it comes to race, and gender, and disability, it's a hard pill to swallow, if you're not strong

enough, you won't stay in the room. But we need more people in my intersectionality to be in the room to share awareness so you can help other people that look like me.

**Matt Wappett 17:54**

I absolutely agree. And it is hard. And you know, as you talked about a little bit, the more parts of you that are different, right? That intersectionality makes it harder and harder, instead of just, you know, have having a disability and then coming from a different race and potentially speaking a different language, each one of those adds a layer of complexity that makes it harder and harder sometimes to get involved and to advocate and to have your voice heard.

**Shari Cooper 18:26**

I just want to add Matthew about me having a speech impairment. That doesn't help the problem because usually, when people hear a speech impairment they think your brain is weird. People think that if she can't speak well she must not be able to think well either. Which is major which is not true. It's not true at all but people believe that. I still get that. I'll go somewhere like a restaurant and they hear my voice and automatically ask my husband what I want instead of asking me because they think if I have a speech impairment I must have cognitive disability as well.

**Matt Wappett 19:29**

Yeah, and I think that's really indicative of just how little people understand the nature of disability. Right. And that, you know, just because you speak differently doesn't necessarily mean that you have a cognitive impairment. And you can have a cognitive impairment and speak perfectly, right. There's just a whole wide variety of what falls under this category of disability and any additional elements make it increasingly complex to interact with society.

**Shari Cooper 20:04**

You won't go out in community you won't do anything you'll be fearful of what other people think. But like again I have to go back to Super Coopers with my 16-year-old brother because we have to have tough skin and that is the reason I have succeeded because they didn't let me pity myself. They wanted me to be tough and I am one tough cookie!

**Matt Wappett 20:48**

I would agree. It has been delightful to actually get to know you and I would agree you are one tough cookie Shari. So you've kind of started talking about this, but what is some advice you would give to other advocates who come from diverse backgrounds?

**Shari Cooper 21:10**

Sometimes you may not get the information that others may get. Sometimes I wouldn't get information my friends were so I would suggest you sought out advocate. Sought out your independent living because they really are working for you, they just may not have reached you yet. So you got to sought out opportunities through advocacy organizations.

**Matt Wappett 21:54**

So be proactive, kind of find opportunities to get involved.

**Shari Cooper** 22:01

The Independent Living Center is a great start to get your advocacy.

**Matt Wappett** 22:13

Are you involved with the Independent Living Center there in Ohio?

**Shari Cooper** 22:16

Of course. They are some of my go to group. Anything that I need to know or know some body that works on. We got a great big Dayton, Ohio, Independent Center. So shout out to my independent living center. They are great.

**Matt Wappett** 22:42

I would agree. I think independent living centers are often overlooked and overlooked resource in our community. And they do. And yes, they help you figure out what you need to kind of live on your own. But also, I think people don't recognize they do a lot around teaching advocacy and how to how to speak up for yourself and how to get involved in they provide opportunities for that.

**Shari Cooper** 23:07

Not only that, if you looking for a career that's a great way to start connecting. Because some of my best friends come from the ILC. You need that comradery even when you are not working. You might just want to go out and have a drink with friend. Everybody needs friend so the ILC Center is a great way to start.

**Matt Wappett** 23:39

I would totally agree. And I appreciate you bringing up the importance of social support. You know, especially in post COVID. You know, we've learned that social support and talking to people and being with people is so important for our mental health and, you know, finding organizations that can help you get connected can be so important to not just right, your independence and your advocacy, but also your mental health and how well you feel about how connected you are to your community.

**Shari Cooper** 24:09

And plus they are people that already understand. They already understand what a speech impediment is like. They are easy people to talk to.

**Matt Wappett** 24:29

Yep, absolutely. So at the end here of our conversation, there's a couple of questions that we like to ask all of our all of our guests on the podcast and the first one is what is one thing that you would like our listeners to remember from our conversation today?

**Shari Cooper** 24:50

I want the listeners to remember advocate. Advocate comes in all shapes and colors. In order to have a good conversation, you need to involve more than one certain type of person. You need to get out

and look around and see how you can have array of people around the table. Because you cannot have a meeting without it especially if you are supporting people with disabilities of all colors.

**Matt Wappett 25:45**

Yep, I totally agree. And we're especially I think prone to this in the disability community, we have not always been good about reaching out to diverse populations. And a lot of the leadership in the disability rights movement has been right white, middle class people, and yet, everybody suffers from disability or experiences disability, right? Whether you're black, Hispanic, Asian, whatever disability affects everyone. And yet, we haven't seen that representation always in all these disability groups.

**Shari Cooper 26:23**

Then you Google people in the movement of disability and it is hard to find and African American. I have found maybe one or two, but I really had to search for it.

**Matt Wappett 26:40**

Yep. But I think that's just an indication that we need to do better, right, we need to do better and make sure that our groups our DD Councils are UCEDDS are independt living centers represent the diversity in our communities. So the other question that we ask all our guests at the end is, and this is because a big part of this journal is trying to be more inclusive. But what's one thing that you've been working on to make your world more inclusive?

**Shari Cooper 27:12**

That's another good question because I just don't think you can work on one thing. I just don't think you can work on one, One I have been working on . I know I'm a consultant with the adult advocacy center and now we are working on forensic process. Like people forget that we are vulnerable population, and crimes do be committed against us, but we may be scared to speak up if somebody's hurting you physically or mentally, you need to speak up so something can be done about it. Another thing is, human trafficking. It's easy to fall into human trafficking when you have a disability. Another thing is how many people are on the board. Are you they of different races are you all of table will tell you right? You need to look into you board room and change. So I could go on and on, but I won't. These are a few of things that I have been working on.

**Matt Wappett 28:43**

Well, I think we need to have a follow up conversation about some of those some of the work that we're doing. Well, Alex, who's on here is our producer and I are working on some stuff around abuse and neglect and everything else, which is a whole other topic, but so important. And that's where that advocacy, those skills and that ability to speak up and say, this is happening to me and I don't like. It is so important. I appreciate you bringing that up, Shari and I appreciate you bringing up the human trafficking thing too. I think a lot of people overlook the fact that a lot of people who do experience human trafficking have disabilities, whether it's cognitive, physical, intellectual, mental illness, a lot of people are exploited and taken advantage of. And yeah, being aware of that, I think is really, really important. Well, any last thoughts before we wrap up here?

**Shari Cooper 29:38**

No. Well, I do appreciate the journal for picking me to write an article. I am hoping for more. But be on the lookout because I'm writing a book. And we'll be done by next year and I want everybody to run out and make an investment so that I can be on Oprah Winfrey and be on her book of month club and be on tv.

**Matt Wappett** 30:38

That's awesome. Well, we will be happy to promote your book when it comes out. Maybe we need to do a follow up interview once your book comes out . Yeah, that would be awesome. And we're, we just wish you the best of luck. And we really appreciate you taking the time to visit with us today. So thanks, Shari.

**Shari Cooper** 30:59

Thank you, Matthew, and thank you world. Hope to hear from you soon.

**Matt Wappett** 31:05

Absolutely. So that's it for our conversation with Shari. today. I'd like to thank DDNJ managing editor and author insight Podcast Producer, Alex, Schiwal for her hard work to get this podcast out. Alex is who most of you if you're authors or folks who interact what you see on the website, the person that you correspond with, the person who makes sure that we are getting content out is Alex and Alex does a great job. So we're really glad that she's involved and she's the one who's making this podcast interview sound better than it probably really is. We'd also like to thank the Utah State University Institute for Disability Research, Policy and Practice for their financial and in-kind support for the podcast in journal and also the Utah State University Libraries and Digital Commons, who helps support the work that we do. So as I mentioned earlier, please be sure to subscribe to our podcast feed on Apple podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, Overcast wherever you get your podcasts, leave us a rating and review. You can learn more about the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal at our website, which you can find in the show notes. It's also [digitalcommons.usu.edu/DDNJ](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/DDNJ) That will take you right there. And you can download podcast transcripts for this episode in English and Spanish at our podcasts page, which we will also link in the show notes. So with that said, thanks so much keep up the great work. You're making a difference and we want you to know that what you do matters. Have a great rest of your day.