Adina and JJ: P and A Centers Transcript

Matt: Hey everybody, welcome to the Developmental Disabilities Network Journal Author Insights podcast. I'm Dr. Matthew Wappett, the DDNJ Editor-in-Chief and the director of the Utah State University UCEDD. And it's my privilege to host this podcast. Again, I say it every single time, but I just can't emphasize it enough. I'm hosting this podcast as one of my favorite things that I get to do. I get to meet interesting, smart people who are doing incredible work. And today is no difference. Today we're talking about the protection and advocacy agencies. And if we've been paying attention, our most recent issue of the journal is focused on the impact and importance of the DD Network.

And we've been trying to go through and do interviews with people from the different areas in the DD Network. We've done a couple on DD Councils. We've done a few on UCEDDs. Our last one was on collaboration between the sister agencies in West Virginia. And today we're going to talk specifically about the P&As and what is it that a protection and advocacy agency does and what is their role in the DD Network. So, I'm excited to be joined today by my good friend Adina Zoradnikova, who is the P&A Director here in the state of Utah, and JJ Rico, who is the Director of the P&A down in Arizona.

At the risk of maybe getting a little too personal, Adina is one of my favorite people in the whole world. She's incredibly, yeah, just a great colleague, incredibly bright, and has done remarkable work here. And in fact, this year she's celebrating her 25th anniversary directing the P&A here in Utah. So, she's had just a remarkable impact on our state.

Adina's maybe a little different than other P&A directors. She has a law degree from Romania and then came to the US and got a law degree here. And so she has a very diverse background. Like I said, she's been at the Disability Law Center as the Director for the past 25 years. And again, in my role as the UCEDD Director, I get the opportunity and the privilege to work with her regularly. We're also joined by JJ Rico. JJ has worked for Disability Rights Arizona since 2001 as well, so another 25 years.

And before he became the CEO of Disability Rights Arizona, he was the Litigation Director and a staff attorney. And JJ's legal work has focused on employment and access provisions of the ADA. And as you'll learn, yeah, JJ also has just some remarkable experiences and perspectives on the importance of what P&As do. So without further ado, we're going to jump into our conversation with Adina and JJ.

Welcome Adina and JJ. Thanks for joining me for this conversation today. We're excited to talk a little bit about the Protection and Advocacy System. So, first off, let's learn a little bit

about you. So tell us a little bit about your background and the path that brought you in to the P&A system. And why don't we start with you, Adina?

Adina: Thank you so much for having us, Matt. It's a pleasure to be here today and share a little bit about the P&A system. My path into the P&A system is a little less traditional. After graduating from University of Utah Law School, I joined the Peace Corps and returned to my native country, Romania. And after that experience, I came back to the United States and when an opportunity opened up at the Disability Law Center, which is Utah's Protection and Advocacy Agency, I applied and was invited to join the staff. That was back in 2001. As a matter of fact, yesterday, I celebrated 25 years

Matt: Oh wow.

Adina: at the DLC and it has truly been a privilege to spend half of my life here.

Matt: Yeah, no, that's awesome. Congratulations.

Adina: Thank you.

Matt: Yeah, great. JJ, what about you? What brought you into the P&A system?

JJ: Yeah, similar story, minus the Romania background.

But interesting enough, and you know, again, Adina and I are peers within the P&A network and I'm the CEO in Arizona and I did not know this, but we both started in 2001. So and mine was immediately following law school. I went to law school with kind of this grandiose idea that I could save the world as a lawyer and do some type of civil rights work and applied for the position that we were called the Arizona Center for Disability Law. They asked me that kind of question, what do you know about disability law? And I really just had a lot of personal family connection to disability, I would say discrimination and experiences based on a lot of family members who I was close to.

And I got the job, hopefully that that was one of the questions that sold them on hiring me and I was hired as a staff attorney. And in November, November 5 will be 25 years for me.

Matt: Wow.

JJ: So Adina's got a few months on me. But yeah, I've been with the P&A for 25 years and have not regretted a day. It's a great opportunity to advance disability rights and work with great people like Adina.

Matt: Wow, that's incredible. So are you originally from Arizona, JJ?

JJ: I say I'm a native. Technically, I was born in California, but that was like a short-lived year and a half that I don't recall. So, all my core memories are from Arizona. So, growing up in Phoenix and then now I live in Tucson and I've been in Tucson for the last 30 years.

Matt: Great, great. So, kind of shifting into the reason why we're doing these podcasts, it's to raise just the DD network and why it's important to the US disability service system. In your opinion, JJ, why is the DD network so important?

JJ: I mean, first of all, it's unique in that we really have disability focus covered all around. A lot of folks in a lot of different programming, especially federally mandated or statutorily created programs, sometimes focus on one issue or this is a program for this population, but the DD network is unique where it's kind of this three-legged stool, but in Arizona, we call it a four-legged stool because we have two University Centers on Excellence on Developmental Disabilities and each of them cover a different area.

So Adina and I represent the protection and advocacy system, which are the legal folks, the advocacy folks that are taking those laws that were created to basically enforce them to make sure that people are free from abuse and neglect, free from discrimination. And then we have our UCEDDs, our research arms, the folks that are really researching cutting edge ways that we can advance kind of the disability IDD community. And then we have our governor's council in Arizona, it's called the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, used to be called the governor's council in Arizona, who give out grants and money to organizations that are also advancing, whether that be employment opportunities,

education, training, supported decision-making projects. So, there's really nothing like it. And so when I see that we're under attack, I kind of push back and say, actually, there should be more creation of systems like ours, because we really have a wraparound model that making sure that not only are we advocating, but we're supporting through research-based opportunities and also funding those really cutting edge programs that are going to advance the movement, especially for people with developmental disabilities. So that's my take. And I'm all in, and I think we should be celebrating the DD network.

Matt: Yeah, absolutely. So, JJ has kind of touched on this, but Adina, what makes P&As such a unique and important part of the federal DD network? P&As, at least in my experience, are a little bit different, right? We're associated, as the UCEDD here with the university, the DD council's often a state agency under the Department of Health, but P&As are not.

Adina: No. And what makes P&A systems unique and important is there special legal authority that lets us go places and get information others can't.

Our access authority allows us to visit facilities and be where people with disabilities are in real time. We can be, we have boots on the ground. We are in places where people live and spend their lives. We can see those, we can smell those places. We are where people are. And because of this unique access authority, we can see what is really happening in real time, not just what's reported on paper. We can talk directly with people with disabilities, and sometimes we can address issues in real time. That's what makes us unique, our ability to impact change through legally based advocacy services, but really at the core of this is our unique access authority.

Matt: Right. Well, and one of the other things, and I know this isn't a question that I sent to you ahead of time, but just thinking about it, P&As often address a much broader disability population than a UCEDD or a DD council, right? You're working with people with mental illness and all sorts of things and have many different funding streams that go into that. Could you explain that a little bit to us, JJ, maybe putting you on the spot?

JJ: Sure. Not on the spot at all. Yes, you're right. So obviously we do receive developmental disability funding, which, you know, we talked about the DD network, but we do receive other sources of funding to advocate for other communities. So just as you said, so we live in the world of acronyms, so I'll try to spell these out. So we have a PAIMI program, which is

Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness. So that comes from SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration. So we can serve people with mental illness. We also have a traumatic brain injury grant that allows us to serve people with TBI. And so we have a series of nine federal grants from, not only from the Department of Health and Human Services, or from the Department of Education and Social Security Administration, all with that mission of advancing disability rights, but also ensuring that people are free from abuse and neglect and discrimination. And like Adina said, that access authority stems from, and the root is from the PAD statute or the DD statute. But all those programs allow us to utilize that so we can make sure people are living in environments that are safe and maximize their independence to the fullest extent possible.

And I'll just further explain that access authority. It's, again, like I said, it is unique to our organization. There are no other organizations that have that federally, statutorily requirement and ability to go in. So we literally can knock on a door. So you call us Matt and say, my child, someone I know is being abused at this group home, at this facility, we could show up unannounced and literally gain access to that facility and make sure that person's free from abuse and neglect and go around as Adina described. And there is not another organization or organizations like ours around the country and within the territories that has that ability. So there's a lot of power there. But as Spider-Man, I think, says with great power comes great responsibility. And we most definitely take that opportunity to make sure that we're using our access authority in the best way possible.

Matt: Yeah. And so every state has a P... Well, every state and territory served by a P and A. I don't, I should know this. I don't know if every territory actually has a P and A. I'm assuming they're served by one, but they may not have an independent one. Is that correct?

Adina: They do.

Matt: They do. Okay. Cool. Well, there you go. I learned something right there. Should have known that.

Adina: 57 of us.

Matt: Wow.

JJ: Yeah. So, if you do have Matt, somebody out there saying, well, there's not seven territories. It's because there's also a Native American disability law center as well. So, our math isn't wrong. It's correct. But there was a P and A created for the Native American community, primarily in the Four Corners region, which has offices in Farmington, New Mexico, and also in Flagstaff, Arizona. So there are 57 total P and A's at this point.

Matt: Yeah. Wow. And so does, Adina, does every P and A get all nine streams of funding that JJ mentioned or do some have some and some don't. I mean, how does that look?

Adina: I think all of them have the nine core programs, but in our case, we have 10 federal programs at the moment. It's, we also have a fair housing grant, or the private enforcement entity for the state of Utah for the federal fair housing act. And we've had this grant since 2012. It's a competitive grant. We have to reapply for it every three years, but we've had it, as I said, for over a decade, a decade and a half and have served as in that capacity here in the state.

Matt: Yeah. And so I imagine every P and A, kind of like UCEDDs and DD Council has its own unique flavor. What sort of issues, you mentioned housing, Adina, what sort of issues does your P and A focus on in terms of advocacy and community-based activities?

Adina: You know, Matt, P and A's in general serve as a vector for community integration. So, the DLC is no exception. Everything that we do here is focused on ensuring that individuals with disabilities can live their lives fully in the community. So, our, you know, advocacy ranges from special education advocacy on behalf of students with disabilities in Utah's public school system to investigating abuse and neglect in institutional settings and in community settings, employment, advocacy, fair housing, rights enforcement, and advancement.

You know, just access and rights, I guess, you know, access to places of public accommodations. And that's basically, you know, some of the programs, I don't like how I said that, but I think I got a couple. So.

Matt: So Jay, what about you, JJ? Are specific issues that your P and A focuses on or is it very similar to what Adina does here in Utah?

JJ: Similar. I mean, I think every state's a little different, you know, in terms of what the hot topic might be or what's coming through your intake line. Our number one and number two issue or top three issues routinely are healthcare questions, request for services. That was last year, but it's usually special education calls. So, we handle a lot of special education under our DD grant or primarily under our DD grant. And then we have gained a lot of calls about housing. Ever since post COVID, I think a lot of folks are looking for stable housing in Arizona. We're largely home and community based. So, most folks with disabilities are living in the community, whether that be with family members, in a group home, or in an independent setting. And so I think that access to an accessible inclusive housing, it seems to just have jumped through the roof. And, you know, this year also we're kind of focusing and leading up to big elections on voting. And so as P and A's, we do have voting money to make sure that folks know how to access the polls, how to register to vote, how to ensure that they can show up day of, if they choose to show up day of, get accommodations. So, another big one that's coming up in this year is voting. And so we as P and A's want to make sure that the disability community knows about their right to vote.

Matt: Yeah. And I know that voting is a big one for you, Adina. You have a great team working on that here in Utah.

Adina: It is. And we've already started this year with traveling to remote parts of the state to ensure that polling places are accessible, that individuals with disabilities can cast an independent vote and a confidential vote.

Matt: Yeah. Yeah. So one of the things I think that makes these, you know, we're talking really broad systemic sort of having a broad systemic conversation here, but it sometimes helps to tell a specific story, right, about something that your P and A has done that's made a big impact. Maybe I'll start with you, Adina. Can you describe a specific project that you've worked on over your career at the P and A that's made a measurable impact on the disability community here in Utah?

Adina: Oh, I think it's very hard to choose just one.

Matt: Yeah. Oh, absolutely.

Adina: For me specifically, I think, you know, starting the Protection and Advocacy project for individuals with traumatic brain injury gave me an opportunity to start, you know, first of all, a new program from ground zero and build it. And that experience was, for me, especially impactful because it allowed me to better understand the unique legal needs of this community and to develop creative ways to address those needs through advocacy and support.

So that's something that I did early in my career that I'm really proud of. And I think it's been a successful program here at the DLC. In terms of, you know, the agency as a whole, I think, you know, again, it would be very hard to choose, but I think, you know, our community integration work has gained in complexity and impact over the past 10 years, I would say.

And I think, you know, we have put a lot of resources, a lot of energy into making sure that individuals with disabilities are living in integrated settings. And we've achieved that through, you know, systemic legal work, a big class action lawsuit that we successfully settled and that allowed 400 people to move out of institutional settings into the community. But we've also, you know, used other tools that we have at our disposal, such as, you know, public policy and training and education to help our Utahns with disabilities live independent lives.

Matt: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I would say you have an incredible public policy team. You do an incredible job during the session here and it's a privilege to work with them. You've made a huge impact. And I'll also say, just personally, I'm glad you brought up the TBI thing. As an individual with a TBI, I'm grateful for the work that you do in that area because it is often overlooked and misunderstood so thank you.

So JJ, what about you? What's a specific project that you've worked on there in Arizona over your career that's, again, made a measurable impact on the community there?

JJ: Yeah, like Adina said, I mean, there's so much, right? I mean, both of us have been with the agencies for 25 years. So to pick one or I'm gonna pick two. Yeah. One personally for myself, back when I used to be much more of a practitioner, I was involved in litigation

against a local movie theater chain to ensure that captioning systems were provided and also audio description systems were provided both for the deaf and also the folks who were blind and it went all the way to the Ninth Circuit. So as a young attorney getting to go to the Ninth Circuit to argue such an important case was really impressive, scary, a lot of emotions and to prevail and have a Ninth Circuit ruling to say that captioning and audio description are both auxiliary aids and services that movie theaters need to provide, which was the first circuit courts of decision is still kind of one of the things that I'm most proud of. We felt that it was a great case to take. We didn't think ultimately that we were gonna be challenged so much by the movie theater industry, but ultimately prevailing and now knowing at least for sure in Arizona and should be across the country at this point, captioning systems are to be provided along with audio description when available. Again, I try to point that out to my kids as much as possible that hey, your dad did that sometimes when they don't think dad's cool, I try to point those things out.

For our agency, I think a recent success, especially in Arizona, our dynamics here are sometimes a little bit behind the times in things like guardianship. And so guardianship in Arizona is kind of the default. Having a 19 year old child, I know that we heard about guardianship almost from the time our younger son got a diagnosis. And so working with our governor's council, funding and support from our governor's council on getting supported decision making, which is an alternative to guardianship, passed in Arizona was a huge accomplishment. And now we're working with our Sonoran UCEDD in Southern Arizona on a legal options manual that describes not only supported decision making, but all the alternatives to guardianship.

And I think that was a great victory, something that I think we in Arizona should be very proud of. And now we were providing, you know, alternatives that maybe previously weren't discussed. And we're trying to get that out to schools to support coordinators to everyone who's usually default, as I said, was guardianship so that they understand there are options and children with disabilities don't automatically have to only think about guardianship or those parents will be given options to explore for their children so that they can maintain as much independence as they can.

So that's a recent success that I'm really proud of, not only for our agency's involvement, but for the collaboration with our with our DD network, and then also for the ability to know that that's going to have a lasting impact on Arizonans with disabilities.

Matt: Yeah, absolutely. And yeah, supported decision making is so incredibly important. I know that Adina, you guys were involved with that here in the state of Utah just recently. So

Adina: Yeah and similarly to what JJ has just said, you know, we're very grateful to, you know, our collaboration with the DD network here in the state that made supported decision making possible. It's taken us a few years, but we were successful in passing that legislation and now supported decision making is available to our community.

Matt: Yeah, absolutely. So let's catastrophize for a minute here.

So I mean, I'm imagining most people listening to this understand this, but I think it's good to reiterate it. I mean, given the current state of the United States, what do you see is the greatest existential threat to the DD network? And what happens if it goes away? And who could fill in the gaps for the P&As? I mean, you provide such a valuable service for a population that often doesn't have the resources right to hire their own private lawyers and things like that. I mean, what are those threats? And what does that look like if it goes away? Or would it just leave a huge gap?

I don't know, Adina, do you want to take that one first? I know that's a big question.

Adina: I think, you know, if we disappeared, the impact would not be subtle, you know, I think it would leave a major gap on in how people with developmental disabilities are supported and protected. And as I said, you know, with P&As going away, I think that there would be far less oversight, a protection and advocacy agency like ours would no longer have the authority to enter facilities and review records, talk to people with disabilities, investigate their concerns. That basically means fewer eyes on places where people may be at risk, and a much harder time uncovering potential abuse, neglect or rights violations. Something that P&As routinely do.

Matt: Yeah, well, and that's that's such a huge issue, especially here in the state of Utah, I actually just gave a lecture last night on the history of institutionalization. And people don't understand that behind those closed doors that, yeah, there's a lot of stuff that can happen and P&As really provide that safeguard, I think, to ensure that people are safe within those institutional settings. I mean, I don't know, do you have a large ICF system in Arizona, JJ, or is it mainly HCBS down there?

JJ: It's mainly H, you know, Home and Community Based Services. And so we're, we're lucky in that way. But I would also say that the momentum to increase beds at our state hospital is currently at the legislature this year.

Matt: Yeah

JJ: there there is a movement to go back to that. And it's scary to me as you know, the director at the P&A, I mean, the out of sight, out of mind, mentality, we're not that far removed from those days. And it is scary to think that there is still a movement for that model when we show and we have statistics and you're doing presentations that show that was not the solution. And with proper investment in the home and community based services, wraparound services, people with various disabilities can be successful in the community with proper supports. So, the one part of the question that Adina, I, Adina answered part of it. And then she left the one about who's the largest threat or what might be the largest threat out there.

Matt: Yeah, Yeah.

JJ: I guess I'll take that because I'm from Arizona. I mean, the reality is, and I say this, we're a nonpartisan organization. But the reality right now is the president's current budget has the UCEDDs zeroed out.

Zero, that means no funding whatsoever. The Developmental Disability programs and network doesn't exist without that third leg of the stool right. And so you think about you take one leg out, it doesn't have the support. Sure, the P&A funding for the PAD program is there. But again, we can only operate so well, we need our partners. And so that's the real threat right now. So this is two years in a row. And again, both Adina and I have shared, we've been here for 25 years. I don't recall a time and maybe I purposely forgot, but Adina, correct me if I'm wrong. I don't recall a time where we were seeing zeros in a president's budget for any of our programs. And so as you mentioned, or asked earlier, we have other programs beyond the DD program that have zeros next to them, you know.

Matt: Yeah.

JJ: So, and then we also have 70% cut in another program being proposed. So just the truth is, is that that is our largest threat at this point. You know, we were lucky, not lucky, but we worked really hard. And I think it's through education and efforts like this to get the word out to the community about what we do, the importance of our partnerships, the importance of all of this disability services that exist in both of our states, to make sure that the appropriation staff both in the House and Senate level funded us for fiscal year ‘26.

Again, in ‘27, we're seeing a budget that is, is the same. It looks like it looks like a cut in pace. So the reality is the threat on our funding exists again. And so we need listeners, we need the community to mobilize and say, these are, these are the things we lose if they don't exist. And, you know, I will repeat everything that Adina said, but she said it excellent. What goes away if we don't exist, and we go backwards, not just a year, you know, if you lose funding for a year, it's not a year where it kind of slows down a whole movement. And the oversight, the ability to make sure people are safe and in the community where they belongcould go away for not for a lot more than one year. And that's what's concerning to me.

Adina: I couldn't agree with with JJ more. I think, you know, without the DD network, we would be just going backward toward more isolation, fewer protections, and fewer opportunities for people with disabilities to live in the community.

Matt: Yeah. So kind of building on that. And again, I know this isn't one of the questions, but I think it's, it's relevant. Where is this push for greater isolation and institutionalization coming from? And no, I think from the UCEDD perspective, where I work, we see it a certain way, but I'm curious from sort of a P&A perspective. Yeah. Where is that? Have people just forgotten? I mean, why are we seeing movement towards more isolation again?

I know I'm putting you on the spot for that.

JJ: Most definitely there are movements by various groups, family groups, institutes that have this as their agenda, but I'm trying to get to the, like, I don't know what the root is, right? Like, to me, but again, I've worked in this space for 25 years. And so I've seen the horrific living conditions, the, what folks, the abuse that's gone on, we still see it, right?

Matt: Yeah.

JJ: And so I'm not sure if the folks pushing this, and again, I don't know who is aware of how bad that is, right? I think they, it is just scary to think that that's, we want to go backwards after years of really uncovering what was going on in institutions, showing that there are models for success. And that we should keep that momentum going.

Matt: Yeah.

JJ: I know it as a, as a parent of a 19 year old who's been largely educated in an inclusion model. The success that's come from my son being educated as peers, as opposed to pull out or a segregated or a special classroom. He's learned social norms. He's gained friendships that otherwise wouldn't have been gained. I mean, there's so much advantage that he's gained through a new education system that didn't exist years ago. And his opportunities, not only for employment, for housing, et cetera, are ones that even family members of mine maybe didn't have when they were growing up. And so I don't know why we want to go backwards when there are so many advances we've made, you know, now, but all I can think is that we have to do better. We really have to do better for our communities.

Matt: Yeah

Adina: And I think we can educate our communities better and do a better job at, you know, just presenting the results of our advocacy and the outcomes of our investigations and the horrible, you know, conditions that people still live in. And sometimes people, you know, when, when they think of abuse and neglect, they think back, you know, Willowbrook, you know, that happened 60 years ago. That's no longer a reality. But I can tell you that there are many facilities here in Utah that are not far from those conditions.

Matt: Yep. Yep. Well, and, and yeah, it's just so confusing because we know from an economic perspective, it doesn't make sense. It's more expensive. It's more risky. I mean, it's just, yeah, anyway, it's puzzling. It really is puzzling. So, so getting on back, back on

track with the questions that I had. So how can, how can folks listening get more involved in advocating for P&A's and other disability related programs?

Adina, do you want to take that one?

Adina: Just join our mailing list, you know, get on our website for updates, follow us on social media, you know, write to us, come to our events and, and be in touch with us.

Matt: I would say, and your national organization, NDRN, the National Disability Rights Network, has done an incredible job at getting information out and mobilizing advocacy, I think. It really has.

JJ: And I'll just add, and you know, for those who are more politically involved, is, is talk to your, your Congress, your Congress people, your representatives about the positive impact that you've had, or that, you know, the Utah P&A or the Arizona P&A has had in your life, in your child's life. That storytelling is really impactful. Because I think for years, you know, we've worked here for, and we always, oh gosh, we just identified a couple success stories, but there are literally hundreds and thousands of success stories that come out our offices, you know, on a yearly basis that need to be celebrated.

And so I would just say, yeah, get involved in any way that you feel you can. But story sharing with your elected officials is important. Because as I said earlier, they're the ones that are going to approve a budget that has funding in there for the UCEDDs, for the P&A's. And so to say, hey, if this went away, my child wouldn't have access to that OCCOM device. Or if this went away, I would not be employed by, you know, this employer. So share, share your stories. I mean, I think we really need to get out and mobilize in that way, because if we don't, these programs could go away. So that's the only other thing I'd add, I think Adina's answer was excellent. But I would just say if folks are motivated to and want to, getting involved in that process is really impactful. And now more than ever.

Matt: Yeah, it's so important to put a human face on these issues. Oftentimes, again, even in our conversation here, right, we're talking large systems and things like that. But policymakers, I believe, really respond to that personal connection and somebody going in

and telling their story about how it made a difference in their lives. That is just that there's nothing to replace that, in my opinion.

So I like to end the podcast by asking two questions of all of our guests. And part of it is to get to know you a little bit better. And part of it is just to, I think, maybe inspire some of the folks who are listening. So Adina, I'm going to start with you. What motivates you to do this work? Why do you do what you do? It's not easy. It's hard. I mean, why do you get up every day and show up and do this work?

Adina: That's why I love it because it's hard.

There are several factors that motivate me to do this work. And I think first and the most important is that I get to work with an extraordinary group of people. And I'm not just here in Utah, but nationally, I get to work with JJ and my counterparts in the entire country. People who are deeply committed to making the lives of people with disabilities better. And then, you know, second, knowing that we are the only agency in the state of Utah serving as a watchdog for the rights of people with disabilities, it carries a strong sense of responsibility.

So that combination for me makes this work feel really important and meaningful. And truly capable of creating lasting impact.

Matt: Yeah. So when I'm going to ask a follow up to that and you can say I don't want to answer this or not. When you were in law school, did you study disability law? Was this an area you thought you would go into?

Adina: I did not.

Matt: Okay. So what pulled you into the disability arena, Adina?

Adina: It was just an opportunity that I embraced from the beginning. You know, as JJ said, I have had some personal connection to disability. I thought I'd be practicing environmental law for the rest of my life. But when I joined the DLC, I knew this would be more than a job. It would be a life calling, a place where I would come every day with a desire to give my best to my work and my community.

Matt: Yeah. Well, and it's a place where you can see a measurable difference. Not always the case in environmental law. Having a daughter who's an environmental lawyer now. But...

Adina: I also wanted to save the world.

Matt: Yeah. Well, you're doing that. You're still doing that. So JJ, what about you? What motivates you to do this work? Why do you get up and show up, show up and do what you do?

JJ: Yeah. Well, the easier answer is just to say ditto to what Adina said, but I'm sure that doesn't make for good airtime. So I'll go a little bit different. I mean, you know, I did share earlier that I have a 19 year old son with a disability. So at this point, it's not only a personal, but it's also professional passion of mine to see my son living the work of our agency. Right. So I talked about his path. He went through Early Intervention programs to special education now going into Vocational Rehabilitation programs, seeing the opportunities that he's gained have largely been created by P&A's, you know, the thought that he'll never be in an institution because of the advocacy and work that the P&A system has done really motivates me just not only as a father, but as a leader in this organization.

Adina's amazing. I mean, you know, to work with and I think that's the power of the network as well. This job can be really hard and tough and it has been harder than usual the last couple of years. But when you look at your peers around and Adina can still put a smile on her face, then why can't I and why can't we lean on each other during these difficult times? So, I'm motivated to keep going because I know others are with me and that's the power of the network. And I think I would speak for the UCEDDs as well when you can call someone by name on their personal cell phone to get a, even sometimes just to commiserate is this going on in your state or can you believe that I face this? That helps us keep going. And so that's another indirect power of the DD network.

And why do I do what I do? You know, I did have that grandiose idea as Adina said that I'd saved the world, but I know I can still assist people and there's not many jobs where you can literally make a difference every day. You know, I always tell this story about my older son. He asked me when I think he was seven or eight, is your job fun? And I said, son you have a lot to learn, jobs aren't fun. But what I did tell him is, I love my job. And he's he's 20

going on 22 now. And so I guess for, for my entire career of 25 years, I've always loved my job. And I've never gone to bed thinking what I do is is wrong. And I don't think a lot of folks have that opportunity to feel that their job is making a difference, that they can go to bed without, sure there's a lot of stress, but I've never felt guilty about what I do, because I know what I'm doing is helping. And that's how I was raised. I mean, my family raised me that we have to advance, make things better for the next generation. And that's what I'm hoping we're doing out here in Arizona.

Again, now in this role, I just get to brag on everybody because everybody else is doing the hard work. I just get to come on podcasts like this and say, how great, great my staff are. But again, I couldn't ask for a better career to this point. And I really appreciate the opportunity to share that and to, you know, be with my peers as frequently as I can.

Matt: Yeah, absolutely. So asking you a similar question, just out of curiosity, did you study disability law in law school?

JJ: I did not. So gosh we're striking out here, Adina, I took employment law, I took civil rights law. I took things that, where I knew I was going to do that specific area. But like I said earlier, it was a question that was posed to me. And I thought I'd probably failed the interview when I said I did not take disability law. But I had a grandfather in a wheelchair who had lost his ability to speak. And I experienced kind of firsthand discrimination in trying to negotiate a car deal for him because they weren't listening to him because his speech wasn't clear. Or I had an uncle with schizophrenia that, you know, again, needed access to services, whether it be employment or housing. So when I reflected on it, you know, I hadn't taken disability law, but it was more street law before I was even in law school. Yeah. And so I knew there was a lot there in that space. And so I've never regretted kind of focusing my entire, you know, legal career on disability law. And as I've said it, I get to touch every area of law. Health care, housing, employment, education, you think about your life, disability law touches that. And so when I recruit folks or talk to interns, etc, I say there's no better field to come into if you want to really make a difference, and you want to have exposure to all different sections of law.

And so I don't regret it. I wish maybe I did take it because I'd had a better start. But I had a great, great first supervisor who trained me up really well, real quick. So she gave me a quick coursework outside of law school.

Matt: Yeah. So I'm just anyway, I'm learning so much from you. And this is incredible. I'm curious, just and again, this isn't a question that I put in here, but it's something that's come up just as you've both been talking. I mean, how many of the lawyers that you bring on actually have a background in disability law? Or is it something that you bring in folks who are talented and skilled and they learn it as they go? And you know, I guess my primary motivation for asking it is to really maybe educate folks who are interested in this area. Do you have to have that background? Or is this something that you can learn on the job kind of like both of you did? It sounds like.

Adina: For us, I think it's both. I think, what's more important than anything is having a passion for individuals with disabilities rights to live in the community and have a desire to make the world a better place for people with disabilities. So I think that comes first and foremost for our own.

Matt: Yeah. Yeah.

JJ: I would agree. I mean, I think we're also looking for folks who understand what mission driven means.

Matt: Yeah.

JJ: A lot of times you go to law school, you incur a lot of debt, a lot more than even I did. I don't know how much the Adina, that Adina came out with any, but the size of this school loans that law students are coming out with is huge. And it's hard to recruit when you're coming out with that much, but we really sell them on this mission driven organization, agency, agents for change, et cetera. The willingness to learn is huge and there's transferable skills too. So even if you didn't take disability law, like I said, if you had employment law, civil procedures, a must, if you have administrative procedure and some others that translate well to the areas, that's what we look for. We, some of our most successful attorneys have not come in with disability laws or background, but they have those skills and they also have that desire to learn and that combination and also understanding they're coming here for a reason.

They're not going to get rich in a year, but rich in experience. And then also they'll be able to live a good life, just a little bit different than their law firm peers, but they'll still most definitely be a lawyer and practicing every day. So, it's not a requirement, but most definitely we're looking for the transferable skills and the commitment to our mission.

Matt: Yeah. Well, thanks for humoring me. Adina, do you want to add something there?

Adina: Yeah, I would just wanted to add that most of our attorneys have a personal connection to disability. They have a family member or they've experienced disability themselves. And I think that personal connection really makes a difference in their desire to advocate for people with disabilities. And as I said, make our community a more welcoming place for them.

Matt: Yeah. Yeah. And I would agree. I mean, it's the same in the work we do at the UCEDDs. I would say 85, 90% of the people we have have some personal connection to it. And that really, I think is so important to understanding the issues. So yeah. So last question here.

And we asked this question because one of the reasons we started the journal was to create an accessible journal that includes people with disabilities and the review process and trying to just be more inclusive in how we get research and everything out. And so I like to ask all of our guests, what's one thing you've been doing to make your work more inclusive and accessible? And why don't we start with you, JJ?

JJ: Sure. Gosh, a lot of different things. One of the plain language, I guess, is important. You know, you've asked a lot of law or lawyer questions. Sometimes we get caught up in talking and legalese and sort of really trying to deliver material in plain language and then alternate formats, one of which could be videos. It seems like everybody's learning something from YouTube and same with the law. So we try to produce a number of videos on disability discrimination or disability rights, but in a video format that's a lot shorter and more accessible, you know, those videos, including audio description, captions, built-in sign language. So all the communities can access it. So they want to learn their rights in the special education meeting. They can watch a video about it. Again, I've been here 25 years. We used to pump out a 50-page special education guide. And now you can watch a number of videos depending on what your topic is. So I think we've really tried to emphasize there.

And the last thing that might not seem super accessible, but we're trying to make it accessible, because we also know people are consuming information here, is being on various social media platforms. I was convinced Instagram is the way to go and seen a lot of traffic on our Instagram page with short reels, again, trying to make sure they're still inclusive, but drawing people in to not only the organization, but events or trainings, etc., through different ways besides, you know, just emailers or, you know, signing up for listserv. So trying to be accessible in a space where the community is receiving their information and then actually going out. That's the other thing that I would say is you can do it from your computer. Sure. We're joining you via Zoom today, but you still have to go out. And especially with some of our more remote rural and underrepresented communities, you still have to show your face and establish a strong representation. So accessibility also comes with making sure they know who you are. So those are a few things we're doing out here in Arizona.

Matt: Well, and that in-person piece is so incredibly important, especially out here in the rural West, where, you know, trust is hard to build sometimes with some of those rural communities. So, and we'll be sure to add your social media links on our show notes and everything so folks can find you. And yeah, that's incredible. So Adina, what about you? What's one thing you've been doing at the DLC to make your work more inclusive and accessible?

Adina: I think JJ has covered that so beautifully. I think we've done, you know, many of those things. But one thing that I would like to highlight is our, we've tried to create a workplace that's more inclusive and accessible by building a work culture that values both professionalism and flexibility. And at the DLC professionalism and accountability are core values of, you know, how we operate. But we've also intentionally built in a flexibility piece that allows individuals with different needs and abilities to come to work, care for their families, and yet, you know, have that opportunity to contribute to this work. So I think that balance has helped create a more inclusive environment, especially for staff who might otherwise face barriers to full participation in the workplace.

Matt: Yeah. Yeah, no, and I could not agree more on that. I think that a lot of people with disability struggle in the workplace because of a lack of accessibility, of flexibility, and how the workday set up. And it's oftentimes just, I like to call it a crisis of creativity on the part of the employer, but it is so important to have that flexibility built in to meet everybody's

needs. So, thank you. Thank you for sharing that. So, any last thoughts before we wrap up here?

Adina: If you know you want just a final thought, I just want to thank the community, especially the legal community here in Utah for being so supportive of our work. They've shown up in so many incredible ways, and then they have supported our work. And especially during this, you know, year, this couple, past couple of years that have been so incredibly difficult for our staff.

Matt: Yeah, well, and I mean, I have the privilege of serving on the Board of Trustees for the Disability Law Center here and just your work with all your legal, And Justice For All and ACLU and everybody else has just been incredible to see how the communities come together. So yeah, I would totally agree with that. Yeah.

Adina: I'm just very grateful to our community who, you know, by showing up, by donating time and money, are sending a very clear message, you know, they're not supporting just another nonprofit, they are supporting access to justice for people with disabilities in our community.

Matt: Yup, yup, absolutely. Absolutely. You have both just been so gracious with your time and we appreciate having you on. So, thank you very much. I want to thank JJ and Adina for joining me today. I hope that you learned as much as I did through that conversation. And again, it's just remarkable to meet and to visit with these people who are truly making a difference in each of their respective states. So anyway, I hope that you found that enjoyable. So today I want to thank our managing editor and our podcast producer, Alex Shewal, for her hard work in getting the podcast out and getting the journal out.

So we also want to thank the USU UCEDD for their financial and in-kind support for the podcast and the journal. And the journal also receives support from the USU libraries and digital commons and we're grateful for their ongoing efforts to get our work out there. So, as I mentioned earlier, actually, I don't think I did, but that's okay. But please subscribe to our podcast feed wherever you get your podcasts, please leave us a rating and review, please share these podcasts with your colleagues, your friends, your family. The more that we share and get this out, the more people are aware of the importance of the work that we do in the DD network. So, I'd encourage you to go check out the DDNJ website, read the latest

issue that's up there on the importance and impact of the DD network. And thanks so much for tuning in. Keep up the good work. You're making a difference. And we want you to know that what you do matters. Stay tuned for our next episode and we'll see you next time.