Raisa Habersham 0:01

Do you miss going to school?

Ayah Baskins 0:02

Yeah. Yeah, bad.

Raisa Habersham 0:08

What do you miss about it?

Ayah Baskins 0:09

Oh, well, the football team. Yeah.

Raisa Habersham 0:15

Do you missing your friends?

Ayah Baskins 0:17

Yeah.

Raisa Habersham 0:17

Yeah?

Ayah Baskins 0:17

Yeah, bad.

Raisa Habersham 0:27

Welcome to Hidden Voices, I'm your host Raisa Habersham. Join me on my journey to learn more about the experiences of Georgia residents with developmental disabilities guided along the way by my co-host and mentor, Derona King.

Talking to Fred Pinson, and Emily Seabury. On the last episode opened my eyes to how often people with developmental disabilities are doubted or judged. When it comes to making decisions about love and relationships. people with developmental disabilities should be able to make their own life decisions without those decisions being called heroic. They deserve agency and the freedom to choose their friends, a job or a life partner. But that's not always the case, especially when choice is taken off the table early on. When I spoke with Fred, he mentioned that he and his wife, Tony Pinson went to a school that only serves students with cerebral palsy, I had no idea there was was a school specifically for people with cerebral palsy in Georgia. And while the school no longer exists, it reminds me of just how much students with developmental disabilities were separated from the other students when I was in school. It's so easy to assume this is for the students best interest to group a student with others who are then taught by educators specializing in quote, unquote, special needs and talents. But that's not how it felt. I know this now, because I was in a program that was actually built to provide those benefits to its students. It was called talented and gifted, or TAG, and I was placed it in in kindergarten, it was a weekly program designed for students with what the school deemed as intellectual gifts. Being in TAG afforded me quite a bit of opportunity. I met children at other schools who shared my interests, learn from my peers who had different talents, and even met my future husband there, Atlanta is small. At the time, I was the only child in my class who was in the program. So it felt isolating in its own way. But at no point was I permanently removed or hidden from my larger population of peers. This was not the case for my peers with developmental disabilities.

When I was in school, I didn't have a lot of exposure to students with developmental disabilities. The first time was when I was walking down the hallway with my class, and I saw another set of students, and there were maybe 10 of them. And you know, there were murmurs there were whispers. And there was one student say, yeah, there's special needs class. And our teacher tried to kind of hurry us down the hallway very quickly. And she told us back to stare at I was like, okay, so I guess I'm gonna do that.

Derona King 3:41

So if you thought back to the earliest memories of elementary school, how your teacher responded, the kind of hush, hush, look away. What do you think that did in your formation, in your, in your mind as a small child? Thinking about people with disabilities?

Raisa Habersham 4:05

I don't know if it was meant to encourage something or discourage something. I don't know if she was trying to say, Okay, let's move out of their way. Or, you all shouldn't be seen, but then they shouldn't be seen with you. Because that was something that you just did not talk about. You knew you should not speak negatively, but her hurting us along and the why behind it, I will never know.

Derona King 4:32

So if you are a six year old, and you were not permitted to connect with the wider student population, what do you think that would start to do about your forming thoughts about yourself?

Raisa Habersham 4:46

I will feel like nobody wanted me. Yeah, I would feel very alone.

Derona King 4:52

And so then right, you sir, imagine that six year old experience becomes your 13 year old experience. Because your 22 year old experience becomes your 66 year old experience, children with disabilities are already segregated and cut off from the general student population. They're less likely than children who aren't labeled to receive an appropriate education that sets up all kinds of ideas about who gets to be included on the playground, to who's more likely to get harmed in a classroom where no one else's eyeballs are being laid in the classroom. So the pandemic, while it has dramatically impacted the lives of all students, and I would say teachers and parents, so as well, I would be quick to say that a child with a disability, at least in the state of Georgia, is more significantly impacted during this time. The way the educational system fails them, I would think that it affects them in a long term way.

Yeah, there are some pretty huge gaps in education, particularly in the state of Georgia, for children with disabilities. And again, I guess I use this word a lot. It goes back to what assumptions people have around children who have disabilities what they can or shouldn't. The assumptions are that, well, you're not going to, you know, you're not going to college, you're not going to get a job. And that plays out even in it systemically if that isn't harmful enough. The other issue is that children are frequently who aren't educated even without a disability, or moving from often really poor schools and education systems directly into into jail and into the prison pipeline. And that's a travesty.

Raisa Habersham 6:56

Oh, my God, like I just, it makes me angry just because, you know, from a young age, I've always taught how important education is, and that without it, you won't get far. And so to know that people don't have the full right of an education. I mean, you can't even graduate. It's insulting. It is quite literally, inhumane.

Autumn Baskins is the mother of 18 year old Mays High School student, Aya. Aya have many gifts. Despite being somewhat shy, she loves to dance draw. And like any average teenager, loves to watch TV. Aya lives in southwest Atlanta, a community that like many has been rocked by the pandemic. Despite being home since March 2020. Aya is enjoying digital learning and excelling in her classes. But like many students, she misses her classmates.

Well, Aya wanted to ask you, you know, we're in the middle of the pandemic, I wanted to know how has school changed for you?

Autumn Baskins 8:07

What's different about school now that we're in the pandemic? You used to go to school on a... Do you remember what you rode on to go to school?

Ayah Baskins 8:24

Mmhmm.

Autumn Baskins 8:24

What?

Ayah Baskins 8:25

A bus.

Autumn Baskins 8:25

A bus, right? And now how do you do school? Are you sitting looking at a-?

Ayah Baskins 8:34

A computer.

Autumn Baskins 8:38

A computer?

Ayah Baskins 8:39

Yeah.

Autumn Baskins 8:39

Yeah. Do you like seeing your friends on the computer?

Ayah Baskins 8:43

I do. I do.

Raisa Habersham 8:46

And so what does I guess a typical day look like for you during the school day?

Autumn Baskins 8:52

Well, school starts at 9:00. They have to be logged on to Zoom by 9:00, and basically rolls until about 12:00, 12:30. And uh, her class, actually, there are probably about six students, her teacher, and a para, and they're all on Zoom. And they'll first go over current events, and it's like a CNN news brief about something current going on. And then the rest of the day, it's like, pretty repetitive, like, and that's how these kids learn. And so, they're going over just daily living skills, or math, or science. I think I—yesterday, I heard her teacher talking about Mesopotamia. And I was like whoa.

Raisa Habersham 9:37

And so what was school like, you know, pre pandemic, you know, can you tell me I guess you know what a typical day was then?

Autumn Baskins 9:43

Before she was, yeah, she was um, I guess in a classroom probably of 12, 13 kids and two paras and a teacher. And she spent most of the day in the classroom. I think they ate lunch in their classroom as well.

Raisa Habersham 9:59

Aya, how does it make you feel to know that your classes are segregated away from the other students?

Ayah Baskins 10:09

Mm...

Raisa Habersham 10:10

Do you feel the way about that?

Ayah Baskins 10:11

Yeah. It makes me feel terrible.

Raisa Habersham 10:15

It makes you feel terrible?

Aya's somber tone said it all for me. She doesn't like being separated from her classmates who are allowed the freedom to hang out and develop relationships. I was already isolated. And the pandemic has only made that isolation worse, it made me wonder what her life would be like after she graduates. And if she'd finally get the opportunity to interact more with other people.

So I want to talk to you a little bit about graduation plans or post graduation plans? Have you discussed that?

Autumn Baskins 10:51

Um, it's not really discussion that we've had about what she would do, it's more of a discussion that, you know, this is what people do, you know, um, as far as thinking about the opportunities that are there, for her, there aren't a lot, unfortunately, um, you know, I'm still navigating this as well. And unless, you know, she's the person that could possibly work independently, you know, on her own and navigate transportation and all of that to get to and from a place, that's not a parent yet, then the other option is basically a day program. And that's not that enticing, but it's great if it means socialization, and she'll have a purpose. But I really To be honest, I mean, I have no clue what the future will bring. That's something that keeps me awake. And thankfully, Aya is just very innocent. And and you know, the future. It's not something she worries about.

Raisa Habersham 11:56

How has the school been helpful, in Ayah transitioning to that next step for her. I know you mentioned a program, but have there been other options presented?

Autumn Baskins 12:09

Actually, her school has a program for 11th and 12th graders where, depending on their aptitude, they take them weekly to like the Marriott and they'll do jobs like work in housekeeping or do laundry, things like that for the Marriott. And based on how well they do a lot of times their pathways open for them when they graduate.

Raisa Habersham 12:33

When I was in high school, I had a say in the trajectory of my future, whereas the school districts seem to cherry pick the few choices Ayah is given. For instance, Ayah has an IEP, an Individualized Education Program. That's a written document that outlines the development plan for a student who is in special education. From what I've read, the IEP is created through a team effort that includes school staff, and the child's parent, and is reviewed at least once a year. Autumn has used the plant to help track Ayah's development. But lately, she's started questioning some things.

Autumn Baskins 13:08

She is on an IEP. I don't know, I can't say it's superficial, I guess it does provide a basis. But a lot of the goals like I've learned to think more critically about it, I always go to the meetings and I see what the teachers offer up on the IEP because, you know, I have no clue. You know, I'm looking at them as professionals. But then I got to a point where I'm just like, wait on her IEP, there's like, for two years in a row they've had working on the letter B, you know, so that she pronounces it correctly and not like an M, but it took a while for me to like see that to like, become woke, you know, and just say that doesn't matter.

Raisa Habersham 13:50

I wanted to ask, I know, you said that you all will be going over an IEP plan for next year. How long do you anticipate I will be in school?

Autumn Baskins 13:59

Well, I think she's going to be in school until 21, 22. For as long as she can be in school. That's what I was told is the best thing. I was advised that there aren't a lot of programs for the kids once they graduate. And so it's best to keep them in school for as long as possible. And unless they have immediate plans.

Raisa Habersham 14:23

How do you feel about that? How do you feel being told that here are the options for your child beyond high school?

Autumn Baskins 14:29

Well, it is what it is like what's out there is you know, and that's really unfortunate. They're not really telling me that Ayah can't do anything because she's just not worth, you know, they're not giving me that message. They're saying Unfortunately, this is the world we live in. I mean, I know my child unless you know if they can get a job doing something, these are the options that are available for them. It's really disappointing and it's heartbreaking.

Raisa Habersham 14:58

Do you feel like you have the support system in place so that Ayah is also adequately getting education in this pandemic?

Autumn Baskins 15:07

Well, um, I mean. Do women ever have like the appropriate support systems in place? We are the support system. Um, yeah, I have a fiance and but it's me, you know, everyday like, we both work full time and Ayah is doing school half a day. But you know, I'm the one that logs her on. And I'm the one that's doing the homework with her. And I'm trying to juggle that with my job as well. Like, I'm thankful that we're all together, like we're working. We all have a purpose. Ayah is in school right now, the beginning of the pandemic, like in the spring, it was totally opposite. We're all working, but Ayah wasn't in school, you know, terrible.

Raisa Habersham 15:53

Can you talk to me a little bit about what that was like? You know, because when the pandemic first hit, I think about, you know, my siblings and what they immediately had to do to transition to virtual learning what was available to if anything, what was her learning experience, like when the pandemic first hit and APS had to completely shut down?

Autumn Baskins 16:12

Well, I remember March 12, was the day because we got told to go home and then Ayah got sent home with a packet of like photocopied sheets, tracing and numbers, whatever that was supposed to last for, like three weeks. But at that point, we hadn't heard from anyone. And, and I understand no one really understood what was happening or how long it would happen for and but then March passed and April. And about April, you know, I started hearing about workmates of mine who lived in other parts of Atlanta, their kids weren't APS as well, but they are going to school via google classroom and zoom. And I'm just like, Whoa, I haven't even heard from the teachers at Iowa school. Haven't heard from anyone you know. And then like, over a month went by, and then it turned to just like indignation, you know. And I knew that, basically, if I call the lead teacher, she's just going to tell her teacher to call me and that's what she did. And he called. And, you know, he said, I apologize. But you know, we we don't know what to do. We're not set up for Google Classroom. You know, they just told us to go home and gave us a laptop. And so we didn't know what to do. But nobody told me that, you know, nobody even checked just to see how is Ayah doing, you know?

Raisa Habersham 17:39

It sounds to me, like there was just levels have forgotten this, if that makes sense. And it seems like you had to do a lot of the heavy lifting. In those moments, how did that make you feel?

Autumn Baskins 17:54

Oh, I was very angry, and I was very hurt. I cried a lot for Ayah, for all of the kids, you know, because it did feel like they were forgotten. They were the kids that that they could count as a loss, you know, and that wouldn't speak up. And I think it was basically the region we live in.

Raisa Habersham 18:12

I am all too familiar with this region, Southwest Atlanta. It's where I grew up. And the place I still call home. I remember what it felt like living in such a neglected area. I can only imagine that the pandemic has heightened is an autumns issues. What is it like to be the parent of a child with a developmental disability, particularly during a pandemic?

Autumn Baskins 18:39

It's, I think it's a bit easier, and a bit more difficult. I know what she's missing. And there have been months where she had not really seen or been around anyone outside of our house. And I felt really bad about that, you know, that was really difficult. That was the most difficult part, I think, just not being able to talk to anyone or see anyone.

Raisa Habersham 19:06

And you know, if all things were equal. And if you could dream up just a future for Ayah, what would it be?

Autumn Baskins 19:13

I would think that, um, maybe her having some sort of yoga class, you know, where she could instruct your asanas. I think that that would be really cool. Dance Studio, anything that you know, just gets moving and fit because that's what she's fell into on her own. Not really with me, pushing her to do it like, and those are the things that make great careers, right, fulfilling careers, the things that you love to do.

Raisa Habersham 19:46

Advocacy is key to ensuring a student like Ayah excels and a parent like Autumn has the tools she needs to adequately support her child. Thankfully, there are organizations that parents raising students with developmental disabilities can turn to one of those organizations, his lips and advocacy, led by our attorney, and self proclaimed inclusion-ista, Leslie Lipson. Leslie has dedicated her career to advocacy work for people with developmental disabilities. For nearly 20 years, Lipson worked for the Georgia advocacy office, where she investigated special education segregation in Georgia. Now, at her organization, Lipson consults with not just parents, but also different organizations, agencies and companies who want to support and advocate for families of children with developmental disabilities.

So what would that advocacy, I guess, look like?

Leslie Lipson 20:46

The lowest level intervention. So if you're standing besides a family, who wants you to open them advocacy, and you can help by helping them go straight, and email, they just don't quite have the language, they don't know who to send the email to, or what to ask for. That's it, nobody has to know you're involved, you can just kind of stand in the background and help somebody, if you're going to a school meeting, help prepare families to advocate for their kid and not take over not to be the savior of a situation, not try to insert yourself. And then you know, there are places for adversarial processes around civil rights, complaints and litigation. And I'm also really connected into that work also. So I think the first kind of rule is, you know, do not muck in other people's lives, and to stand beside people because advocating for kids with disabilities in the system is just immensely challenging.

Raisa Habersham 21:34

That was going to be my next question. You know, how does advocacy play out for students with developmental disabilities in the school system?

Leslie Lipson 21:43

You know, sometimes that can play out really well. You know, for some parents, I think that have really great communication skills they can take off for every single meeting for their kids. I think for some people advocacy can play out really beautifully. And to be clear, there are some advocacy situations that are easier. So I think it depends a lot upon how the school views the parent, and a lot about how the school administration views the kids disability. And I think also generally, like how people view the experience of disability. Some people deeply believe that people with disabilities belong apart and away doing special things with special people and special places in special ways. That is a deeply held belief. You come up against that in an administration, that can be some really hard advocacy work, and we lose. I've lost.

Raisa Habersham 22:33

You mentioned you work with Georgia advocacy, the Georgia advocacy office, and I know that you were part of the legal team that was involved in the Georgia lawsuit. Can you talk to me a little bit about that case?

Leslie Lipson 22:45

Absolutely. So the state of Georgia is unusual, and that we have a statewide segregated school system funded by the Georgia legislature, so not funded locally, about 3000 students with disabilities are kept in a separate and segregated statewide school system. And the state of Georgia is how do I say it? It's deeply loyal to this system.

Raisa Habersham 23:10

Leslie has spent the past few years of her career fighting the segregation and putting effective families in contact with the Department of Justice who filed a lawsuit against Georgia segregated school system, known as GNETS, or the Georgia network for educational and therapeutic supports. The system has been the subject of the court case, US versus the State of Georgia. The state funded system formerly called Georgia psycho educational system consists of about two dozen regions in Georgia that only includes kids with behavioral disabilities. In 2015, the Justice Department issued a letter to Georgia, telling them that segregated system violated the Americans with Disabilities Act, despite that, the system remains in place. So if I'm understanding you correctly, the Georgia State Legislature is funding a completely separate educational system for those with developmental disabilities.

Leslie Lipson 24:14

So it used to be that you could only go there if you were diagnosed with something called an emotional behavior disorder, which is many kids with developmental disabilities and are diagnosed with an emotional behavior disorder by school systems. And then I think an effort to clean up you know, they've been trying to clean up since 2015. And the investigation started. They said, Hey, any kid with a disability can go to these programs, but they need to have a need for these services. Our argument the people involved in the advocacy says the services shouldn't only be available in these segregated systems. The services should be available in neighborhood schools, where kids go to school, where kids live. The only way you end up in a GNETS program is that you have a disability and people have decided that your behavior is exceedingly difficult.

Raisa Habersham 25:07

Oh, that's insulting.

Leslie Lipson 25:10

Well, the criteria doesn't say your behavior's seemingly difficult. The criteria has like other things with it. But it's basically means that. In Georgia, teachers and paraprofessional administrators are taught if kids have disabilities, and they have difficult behaviors relating to those disabilities in the minds of the teachers or administrators, they belong in a GNET, and there's funding for it. And you don't have to pay for it. It's a very incentivized system.

Raisa Habersham 25:37

Leslie, for people listening, why is GNETS problematic? Because it's a system that is funded in segregated? What's the problem with that?

Leslie Lipson 25:47

 That's very good question. Because if you think that people with disabilities belong separate and apart from other people, then you're probably really puzzled about why the system's a problem. And so I'm going to take it on a couple levels. Let's first go with why is it bad for students? So first, there's no research that exists in the world, that kids who are struggling with appropriate behavior, learn good behavior from other adults in segregated settings. The research is very clear that kids learn from other kids. They learn from their peers. The segregation holds back and constrains the idea that kids with disabilities are going to make good social progress. Additionally, we have great data, that the academic instruction that happens in local neighborhood schools, for kids with disabilities and kids without disabilities does not happen in Gina's. It's very much about compliance very much about behavior, and not about curriculum and transition and having a good full life, and what are the jobs or future status available for you. So it's really a problem for kids, for families. Many kids spend an hour an hour, 20 minutes in a bus each way to be cnet's programs, they're not located either houses, families have very little opportunity to be engaged in any way in the school, they don't have PTA. Also, the schools don't have extracurricular activities, which is another way that many kids learn pro social behavior. for teachers, it's a huge problem. And that you can imagine, if you had 10 kids without disabilities, or 10, kids with maybe one had a disability that didn't have very difficult behavior, and one kid who was really struggling, you can handle that. A classroom of 10 kids all who have very difficult behavior could be very challenging to all of us, because segregation makes it really overwhelming. Also, for teachers, who want to go to the teacher lounge and ask another teacher, what should I do about this, the most experienced teachers and supporting kids with behavior related difficulties are all at these GNETS. It's like a brain drain. They're not in the neighborhood schools. And so these neighborhood schools have not developed supports and services. They've concentrated them all within a segregated places. So we could continue that on until you the problem that creates for society, the problem that creates for our community, and there's really no limit to it. So that really is the problem with genius. We want to spread out the wealth.

Raisa Habersham 28:11

GNETS that sounds very militarized, almost, when you mentioned how it's about compliance, you know, is that the underlying philosophy behind them and how are they enforcing this compliance?

Unknown Speaker 28:27

So many kids have what's called these behavioral plans in GNETS. Almost every kid I've ever known in GNETS has a behavioral plan. And their behavior plans look like this, you know, I will not interrupt my teacher, you know, I will stay in my seat until I'm called to move. Very explicit, not always age appropriate plans that actually would not even be able to be implemented by kids without disabilities in the local school system. So these behavioral expectations, though, are written in such a way it's very difficult for kids to reach those levels. And if kids can't kind of enact their behavioral plan, that's the excuse huge to not move them back to their local school. You know, if you can't sit in your seat for an hour without moving, then you can't go back to your local school. Once you're caught in that system. It's super circular. You really can't get out. It's very sticky.

Raisa Habersham 29:25

Threatening to keep a student with developmental disabilities from returning to school is just one form of punishment used by GNETS. Physical and chemical restraints are also used. While traditional schools notify parents of behavioral problems, Leslie tells us GNETS practices something else entirely.

Unknown Speaker 29:48

GNETS will say when they come to these meetings listen, if you send your kids to a GNETS, we won't call you. We understand that kids have behavioral disabilities and and You know, we understand we can support your student, we're special, we have all the special things. But I've represented kids and no kids and no families where kids have had juvenile court charges of battery placed upon them. For something that happened with a teacher or parapro, or another student. There are a couple juvenile court charges in Georgia, one called disruption of public school, anything can be disruption of a public school. That's a catch all provision. And so we've seen many kids criminalized for the very behavior that GNETS say they're going to work hand in hand with the students and the parents to correct.

Raisa Habersham 30:36

Has there been any use of restraints in GNETS? And what's the philosophy behind that?

Unknown Speaker 30:45

Many, many years ago, there was a young man named Jonathan King, who had a dress code violation and a GNETS called Alpine in North Georgia. And he spent many many days in seclusion room by the way, this kid cute, scrawny kid, 13 years old. Picture of him is still up on CNN.com if you want to go Google Jonathan King Georgia seclusion. He came home every night and told his parents, I got put in timeout today. I got put in timeout today. 13 year old kid with ADHD, and I don't know what you would think if you're kid came home, but I would think he was in the corner, dunce cap in timeout, but they did not know he was being put a locked seclusion room. On this day, he had a dress code violation, his pants were too baggy. And the teachers gave him twine to put around his belt loops, and he's in seclusion room unmonitored. He hung himself.

Raisa Habersham 31:31

Oh, my goodness, that's horrible.

Leslie Lipson 31:33

And that was a direct result of being in seclusion. And at that point in Georgia, you could restrain or seclude any child for any reason at any time by any person, and you did not have to tell their parents. And we worked really hard with so many families, including Jonathan King's parents, to prohibit the use of seclusion and restraint in Georgia. And right now, the use of seclusion is outlawed in Georgia. Because what we know is that restraints happen on the way to the seclusion room.

Raisa Habersham 32:03

The lawsuit against Georgia segregated special education system is ongoing. And while Leslie has her work cut out for her, there's still world of reform left to tackle beyond the lawsuit.

Leslie Lipson 32:17

You know, if you asked me my top actions, you know, my goal is to make the GNETS obsolete. For kids who are in crisis, professional should be going to those particular schools and those particular kids and helping them in crisis. So definitely more supports in our local communities. Training and teaching, having these teachers that teach and GNETS that really do many of them, deeply understand students who are struggling in this way I have them and local schools and working with teachers like your husband, who want to welcome students and don't necessarily have had the training or the specific expertise, but they want to learn, we need master teachers and mentor teachers in places. We also need flexibility around what our classrooms look like Georgia fund teachers in a certain way that makes class sizes very, very large. We also have to support parents, and the Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, healthcare systems also have to be involved.

Raisa Habersham 33:16

You know, you mentioned offering parents support. And I spoke with a parent recently, who noted that she's learning to advocate for her daughter who has a developmental disability. And to me, she sounded a bit frustrated with just the system altogether, you know, what do you say to a parent who feels alone in this process of having to advocate for their child?

Leslie Lipson 33:44

So, I mean, typically, I want to cry with them. Like it is so lonely. And the system is very much stacked against parents, I would definitely tell her to seek out parents maybe had kids a couple years older than her kid in those systems. There are agencies that get federal funding to support parents through that process in Georgia Parent to Parent has been a great partner with me and work for many years, I would say that parents really need to be able to take care of themselves in the long term, because it's a long road to hell. And they really are going to have to be deeply centered and in a good place to continue the advocacy. But what I would really like to say is it is a massively screwed up system with the civil rights of students with disabilities are dependent entirely upon the efforts of their parents. And the burden on parents is not the burden of parenting a child with disabilities. That's a blessing, but the burden that parents are the only advocacy arm for students and they have to pull every single lever and trigger throughout the entire education system. It is, it is burdensome for parents that advocacy process, and I really, I validate her feelings.

Raisa Habersham 34:58

That brings me to my final question. You know, what would your ideal education system look like for students with disabilities?

Leslie Lipson 35:06

Well, I think if we offered services based on what kids need, versus based on the labels of the kids with disabilities. So for instance, you know, some kids need behavioral supports, and you might be able to support us if you have an attention issue, you might need them if you have a develop a certain type of developmental disability issue. And you might need them if you experienced incredible trauma, when you're 23 years old, but maybe we could provide funding for those types of services, and not for the eligibility level of the kid. I think that schools should have a lot more power over their curriculum and over their finances. I think what we're looking for an education system is much more flexibility, and a much greater understanding of who kids are. And I think part of it is that teachers are really given a raw deal. They don't set teachers up for success. And then we run around going, Oh, my gosh, we have a teacher retention problem. And we're surprised, but it's not surprising. Does that speak to you?

Raisa Habersham 36:09

It does, it really does.

The conversation about the education system was very emotional for me. I’ve mentioned before that my husband is a teacher. I hear the stories about how his students are struggling through the pandemic. And many don’t have the support they need at home to grapple with the changes brought on by virtual learning. I hadn’t realized how incredibly difficult that has to be for a parent like Autumn or a student like Ayah. I needed to tell Derona what I was processing.

I felt from Autumn, you know, just this tone of almost defeat. And I hate it hearing it because I cannot imagine being in a school system that just kind of shuffles you through. And I think about the disadvantages that almost intentionally set up for someone like Ayah. you know, she's not really around her peer group. She has no experience with them. She has no interaction with them. She's very much segregated. And it never dawned on me that segregation also occurs based on intellectual and physical disability. And it was difficult to wrap my mind around the fact that I will have to be in high school until she's 22. And even then she won't graduate, she won't be afforded the opportunities that I have been afforded. For me, I'd really saw how privileged I was. I felt very powerless. You know, I think about my profession and how, why I got into it, you know, I got into it to make a difference. And what I'm learning what I'm realizing is, it's difficult to be that difference, when there's so many things just wrong, what's your systematically, people with developmental disabilities are categorically ignored? And while I'm cognizant of what is their wheelchair ramp here, or, you know, is this ADA compliant, there are deeper levels to it.

Derona King 38:39

Let me tell you, you just, I think made in a huge leap, that many people don't get the opportunity to press into to stretch into just the notion of exclusion. It is not just about physical accessibility. You know, it's been emotional. And I think it's been emotional because I get one viewpoint at home.

Raisa Habersham 39:05

I get it from the perspective of a teacher. And I think what's changing for me, and what I've come to learn just as a reporter is we don't amplify people with developmental disabilities enough, how can you make space for this person in a way that makes them feel included, and I is drastically excluded. And a pandemic just further heightens that. So I think for me what I'm learning is pass the mic. And I think that amplifying is voice it's a start, and I think repositioning it to say how can I be how can I help you? How can I be more inclusive to you is what will honestly make a true difference? What that looks like long term in my eyes. I'm not sure yet. I think what gives me optimism is the lawsuit that the DOJ filed against Georgia. But it should not be an uphill battle.

Derona King 40:14

It's honest for us to say, there's still great harm and stigma and segregation of people with disabilities in our nation. But we do need to acknowledge that the, the large institutions, the wholesale warehousing of people behind campuses, and institutions does not exist anymore, in, in the way that it did seventy years ago. There are some things that have moved forward. But the education system, particularly as one example of how we've gone from the large warehousing of people, to the small warehousing of people, and you know, it's kind of Shakespearean, you know, a rose by any other name. However, in this case, an institution or segregation by any other name, is still an institution. It's just, it's just smaller.

Raisa Habersham 41:14

You know, what I think about Autumn, you know, I said that she felt defeated. You know, I asked her, we know, what would an ideal world look like for her daughter, it took a lot for me to reconcile the fact that she, for me, wasn't angrier, at the educational system.

Derona King 41:35

It's been my experience of meeting families and parents with children with disabilities that most often, parents are doing the very best they can with the tools that they have. The biggest struggle is that the tool chest is fairly empty. I think parents go through that gamut of shock, hurt, anger, frustration, and probably then the next level of numbness where, or auto sits now that she's done everything she possibly can to try to have her daughter included, that even now her expectations are low. She's been told so often, and so frequently what her daughter can or won't do by the people who are the experts. I'm using air quotes here. That there's some subtle expectation now even in the back of her mind as with many parents of, I better not dream too much. Because everybody has let me down thus far.

Raisa Habersham 42:41

Oh, my, I never thought of it that way. About I better not dream too much. Derona, it seems like the school system is supposed to be this place for inclusivity. But they're falling short in that, you know, in their space. You know, in some cases, people lean into their faith. And for others, faith can feel divisive. You know, have there been conversations about inclusivity and faith in the disability community.

Derona King 43:11

Brace as you asked that question, I think both about Dr. Wolfe, wolfensberger, who's the father of citizen advocacy, and also the large communities, which were by and large, centered around faith, and including people with disabilities. There's long been discussion around faith and disability. And part of that discussion is that of all the places institutional Lee that we can think about where people are purported to be included, and welcome. It may very well be that faith institutions have singularly set a tone of exclusion for people with disabilities, the perceptions of who gets to sit on the Pew and who does not. I am a Christian and even I know historically, from a church perspective that people with disabilities have been perceived as those who needed to be healed. There are all kinds of perversions that have surfaced throughout faith communities that keep people with disabilities separate from the wider faith community.

Raisa Habersham 44:33

Join us for the next episode of hidden voices, where we'll talk about how people with developmental disabilities have faith navigate their religious communities.

This podcast is a collaboration between the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities, Resurgens Impact Consulting, Citizen Advocacy of Atlanta and Dekalb and L’arche Atlanta made in partnership with FRQNCY Media. I’m your host, Raisa Habersham and Derona King is my co-host. Our Executive Producers are Irene Turner from The Storytelling Project and Michelle Khouri from FRQNCY Media. Enna Garkusha is our Producer. Matthew Filler is our Editor. Hidden Voices is sponsored by the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities. This vision is a state in which all persons are included in all facets of community life, have choices while exercising control over their lives and are encouraged to achieve their full potential. GCDD advances social and policy changes that further and integrated community life for persons with developmental disabilities, their families, friends, neighbors and all who support them. This podcast grew out of their larger GCDD Storytelling Project. You can find out more about them and their great advocacy work for and about people with developmental disabilities at GCDD.org.

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