

Lauren 00:06

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by The Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA podcast. We're here today with Denise Brodey. She's a senior contributor to Forbes, founder of Rebel Talent, author of *The Elephant in the Playroom* and winner of the 2023 Harrison Sylvester Award. Denise, thank you so much for being here with us.

Denise Brodey 00:38

Oh, thank you so much. And thank you for the award, it's so meaningful to me because I have watched LDA and used your resources for so long as a mom and then became much more of an adult advocate, advocate for adults and young adults. So I've watched your growth, and I am just thrilled.

Lauren 01:01

We're really proud to be able to honor you with that. And thank you so much for all of your work that helps to serve adults with learning disabilities and ADHD. So to expand on that, would you be able to share some of your background with us, who you are and what you do?

Denise Brodey 01:16

Sure. So first of all, I'm a journalist at heart. I grew up running to the mailbox, that's how old I am, to get magazines like *Glamour* and *Self*, and the latest copy of, believe it or not, *Newsweek* or *Time*, and those were discussed at the dinner table. And so I always always wanted to be a magazine editor, and I was for 25 years. So I went to college. And the first thing I did after college was join a national women's magazine. And it was love at first sight, you know, lots and lots and lots of hard work. But I find that storytelling and connecting with people and understanding science, I'm mainly a health, medical and now business reporter. So I write for *Forbes*, and I am an author of a book called *The Elephant in the Playroom*. And that was all about the storytelling of 41 families. And after that experience, I really understood not only from a personal perspective with my son, who was diagnosed with learning differences and childhood depression, as a five to seven year old-ish, I'd say you know, it's hard to to diagnose. I really understood the value of hearing other people's stories. And that's where the words "the elephant in the playroom" came from, because I always wanted to talk about what nobody was talking about. And that's a lot. So, storyteller at heart I would say. I am now working on a second book, which is *The Elephant in the Office*, and that'll come out next year. It's very similar. I watched the growth of my son's generation, and my daughter's generation, millennials and Gen Z, and how incredibly proud and forward-thinking they are of being different. And so this book addresses that directly from their point of view, which I think is really important for businesses to understand.

Lauren 03:37

We'll definitely be looking for that one to come out. So you had mentioned that you like to report on the stories that aren't always told, or on topics that aren't always talked about. So when did you decide to become an advocate for individuals of ADHD or learning disabilities?

Denise Brodey 03:54

I didn't ever think of myself as somebody with learning disabilities, even though I had so many, which is nuts. I grew up in a family of two therapists. Both will tell you, oops, we missed those. We didn't notice Denise as having some issues. I was a girl in the 80s. And like so many women today are finding out, well, if you were quiet, and you got good grades, and you were generally what they would call compliant, and you weren't getting a huge amount of trouble. That was your way of advocating for yourself was to just be quiet, take up not too much space and do the best you could. Right?

Denise Brodey 04:39

And then I had my own family and I watched my son really struggle with noise sensitivity and anxiety. And I started to look at him and think that's me. He's doing all of the things that I do. And I get it. And that's when I became an advocate for younger people and moms, and moms understanding what's going on so that there wasn't this silly conference call over bad behavior or, you know, not handing in homework, it was how do we get to the root of this problem that is not necessarily my son, right? Or my daughter or his classmates, it may be you, the teacher, or it may be me, the parent, and we have to figure out how to be advocates for him, because he's too small to do it for himself. And so those were, those were the early days of saying, I have to take this into my own hands, because I saw how different he was in different atmospheres. When he felt comfortable he was amazing, and articulate and interested and curious and so much fun. And such a sweet person. And when he was anxious or things made him nervous, or things were too loud, just like me as a kid, he clammed up. And nobody got to know him. And that was so similar to me. So, you know, I went along this route of learning about other parents and sort of chasing after them saying, 'excuse me, but what do you do about medication?' or 'Excuse me, would you mind sitting with me at Starbucks?' and that was my, you know, many forays into just like, grabbing people here and there. And as a reporter, I was a good listener to people's advice. And then I would go online and research the heck out of it, right? So my advocacy really comes from my son, but also then recognizing myself in him and saying, hold on a second.

Denise Brodey 07:02

There was nobody talking about learning disabilities, and when there was no one talking about ADHD and women and when I say nobody, maybe behind closed doors. There was a lot of conversation about depression and anxiety, and dyslexia, maybe, but the combination of LD and ADHD and sensory issues, those were not on the menu that I had anyway. So I began to advocate for people to just talk openly about their diagnosis. And then, you know, this is sort of long and short, but basically, I got to where I am now, which is, it's everybody's choice as to where they want to be talking about their learning disability and their potential issues, and their anxiety and their mental health. But as long as they can somehow put words to it, and figure out how to advocate for themselves using their own non-medical terms, that's where I am now. That's my sort of very long journey towards you know, be yourself and learn how to advocate whatever way you can.

Lauren 08:25

Right, right. So many people have your same journey of being a personal advocate, either for yourself or their child, and then realizing that they don't want anybody else to have to go through all the research and things that they went through. So it's amazing that there's so many parents out there who, once they're done advocating for their children, they go forward, and, you know, make sure everybody else has these resources.

Denise Brodey 08:49

Yeah, and that's a big change. That's a big change that I'd say in the last five years. That people have said, I can't watch this happen anymore. And I think they had their own journey where they felt too demeaned or not as successful as they possibly could, and they took it upon themselves to get more training. That's new, and it's a really exciting place.

Lauren 09:18

Yeah, definitely. So could you tell us a little bit about Rebel Talent, how you came to found it?

Denise Brodey 09:25

Sure. So one of the things that I did, as a writer was say, how do I write for the business world? And how do I talk to business people because mostly they were talking about compliance or legal issues, the ADA, and I queried Forbes, and I said, I'd like to talk about people with learning disabilities, who are really not recognized and spoken about in the third person in the business world. And I said their talented, but they're also rebellious. And then I said, they're Rebel Talent, of course, and the woman on the other end of the phone, the editor was like, I don't really know if this is gonna work. And I said, Okay, well, why don't we just go with I write about disability and inclusion for the business world, and that I want to speak in a first person voice. And so that's really where I started. I said, let's see what will fly. And I became the first contributor at Forbes to write about disability and inclusion from a very personal point of view, and constantly not using press releases or medical experts necessarily, but do a 180 and talk to the people who were in businesses who were secretly making their way successfully up the ladder, or HR people who secretly knew this is what's going on. And so I felt like all of those people were extremely talented, and rebellious. And I wanted first to write about them. And then I said, it's not enough to write about them. I'm getting letters saying, How can I do this at my company? How can I create connections and conversations? And my first thought was, well, let me research where that's being done. And there were very few places that that was actually being done. And that's when I said, there's a need for rebel talent, there's a need for ERGs, employee resource groups, for affinity groups, for HR groups, for basically any kind of group that was talking on Facebook, to have those conversations in businesses and among leaders. And I was struck by the idea that only 2-3% of people from an EY study revealed, even in leadership circles, revealed their disabilities, physical or non-physical. So that meant that while we all lauded Richard Branson or Charles Schwab, where were the women? There weren't any in leadership circles, where were the people with mental health concerns and learning disabilities? They must have been there, pretty quiet, right? And that's where the idea of let's infiltrate, and probably right around when the pandemic started, I had just started saying, let's have these conversations. And it worked out really, sadly, perfectly timed, because when people start talking about their mental health, they also bring up different ideas, different issues with struggling with focus, and brain fog and menopause. And so it was a natural opening for me to say, I will put together focus groups for you, I will create impact reports for you, I will do the research within your company, to make it a business priority. And that's what Rebel Talent does. But despite all the data out there, what Rebel Talent comes down to is, conversations and connections and interpersonal research shows you learn the most when you meet and talk face to face with someone who is an ally, an advocate, will admit to some of their issues may have even come out and disclosed that they have

dyslexia or ADHD. But they don't necessarily have to, they simply have to enter the conversation with someone who doesn't know anyone like them. And it turns things around. So that's what we do.

Lauren 14:10

So sort of turning that culture of things that are taboo, or, you know, that can even be harmful to disclose in a workplace into something that's a little more of an everyday conversation and something to embrace.

Denise Brodey 14:24

Right. I even recently have said, let's not talk about mental health. Let's not talk about even the specific labels of dyslexia or dysgraphia, or whatever, or autism, let's talk about people trying to do their best work, reaching the goals that you want them to reach. How do you support them, what are the mechanics of the team and the team dynamics? How does the leader adjust and become more flexible, and how do you meet in the middle? If you notice, none of those things talk about accommodations, right? It's simply goal setting. And that's what managers are supposed to be doing in the first place. And that's what business leaders want, is to reach goals. So it's so obvious that it doesn't happen, right? People think, oh, I've got to deal with this. You know, I've got to have this secret group with this outing, or an icebreaker every morning, how's your mental health? You know, and I think to myself, no, just like, how's it going? Does your phone work? Is there anyone in your house sick? Do you think we're gonna make this goal? Why not? How can I help you? You know, what my favorite pumpkin pie recipe is? And, you know, the stress of my in-laws. You know, those are the classic ice breakers, right? Like, what's everyone making to whatever, during the pandemic, those kinds of things. And I'm thinking to myself, all of that is really the same as talking about mental health. And all that leads us to 'how do I reach my goals?' And how do I maintain my focus, my sleep, my working memory for all that's going on under such stress? How do I talk about my stress? How do I manage people who bother me at work, because I have quirks and they have quirks. How do I manage difficult conversations? Again, all of that is allowing for conversations about being a rebel talent, or being an advocate for yourself. But it doesn't include a lot of terminology. And that's really where I've ended up post pandemic. And I think a lot of people are with me.

Lauren 17:07

It just sounds like a really human approach.

Denise Brodey 17:11

Yeah, I also get to interview so many people who give me examples of things where they said, and I'm sure coaches feel this way too, where they said, so I went into my boss after I talked to you, and I just wrote down the 10 ways I work best. And I said, Could you write down how you work best, and it seemed really awkward, but they did it. And now we're doing great. You know, so I think it can be so obvious to skip over the human part of it. But the other part that I also see is people have a sense of humor. And when you start talking like a person, you can laugh about the things that happen. And your boss isn't so uptight, and has something funny to say, and so I have the benefit of hearing all the positive stories and the human things that people do that actually work, because that's how I write and that's the way I approach my business. And I'm hoping that just rubs off on the world.

Lauren 18:33

Definitely want to touch on that a little bit more, you had said that you were getting some letters from people asking for help in their workspaces. Are there some common challenges that you sort of saw over and over again, that people were facing in the workplace?

Denise Brodey 18:51

Yeah. I also get calls from people who want me to also do big data business analytics, right? Or go through pages and pages of spreadsheets, like I did for the Valuable 500, which is a Fortune 500 group of Fortune 500 companies that have come together to stop exclusion, right? And even with those big data sets, and everything else, what it came down to was, have you said anything? Avoidance is a really big issue. People will avoid saying things, they'll talk around them. And I say, have you straight up said: 'what if I just didn't have meetings before 9am.' So that came out. Or what if I...the other one is lack of collaboration. This came up a lot in the Valuable 500 and other places I work in business. There are people in your business who aren't talking to their competitors or other people who are, let's say, creative directors or line managers. If all those people spoke together and collaborated within a company, even just once a quarter, they will learn so much about each other and problem solving. So again, finding resources wasn't so much about the outside consultant. The answers were there from people working in other departments, but the cross-collaboration that cross-pollination, someone will write me say, 'well, how do you do that?' And again, it's the same. I mean, it sounds so silly. But if you ask you say, would your department like to have an informal lunch with my department as we welcome people back to the office? This is a time of serious change. And that brings me to my final point, there's avoidance, there's lack of collaboration. And also there's lack of flexibility. And people lean a lot on transparency, 'oh we're very transparent here.' And we like to make sure everyone is well, you know, it's understood that they have the resources. Right? But what if you were, again, just sort of, not avoiding things, collaborate, and then give people the ability to talk in any terms that they needed to get the resources they need? That sort of, I should probably do that answer over again, frankly, because my mind just exploded. But it's really like, it's connecting, it's collaborating. And then I'm trying to think of the best word for it...it's just over-communicating. You know, maybe you asked once, but you didn't ask a second or third time. Those are the biggest problems, and they're a very human problem. And they don't revolve around technology or anything else.

Lauren 22:21

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So, in addition to your work with Rebel Talent, you're also a senior contributor to Forbes. So you touched on that a little bit, you write about diversity, equity and inclusion. So could you speak on why it's so important to have neurodiverse voices in media?

Denise Brodey 22:39

Yeah, the amount of difference in people and how little it shows up in media is astounding. And my number one job is to say, okay, I need people of all ages, I need people of different colors. I need people with different levels of experience, I need people from different fields, because the media is so much more trustworthy when we're not spouting something that comes from a government statistic or a big press release. When the real voices come out, and there's a nuanced report, it may take four or five stories to get people to buy into what you're saying, or to understand that this is a complex issue. But in a clickbaity world, the more...even if you have, you know, 10 ways to talk about your neurodiversity,

right? If you're only looking at that world, after that headline, from the point of view of one voice, someone who may not even understand neurodiversity, and they're calling an expert, that's not going to get you very far. It's just, you're spinning your wheels. For the American public to hear real stories and to have the depth of knowledge to call out someone in an interview to go 'hold on a second, really?' or to take all the knowledge that they have accumulated and match it up with the research, that's a depth of understanding that neurodiverse people bring to the world that is so valuable. We're making so much more progress every single time people tap into different kinds of minds, all kinds of minds. And the great thing is that it's out there, you know, the good and the bad is that it's out there forever, so anyone can find it. And even though some of the lines maybe, made for businesses and big websites, I think I've seen that the good stories get passed around. And they make their way into the universe in a different way when they're different voices in them.

Lauren 25:29

Because it reaches a wider audience, the audience is there.

Denise Brodey 25:32

Yeah, and the audience trusts people. And not to toot my own horn, but I've had people call me and say, I want you to write this story. Because you got it. You got it when you wrote about BestBuy or you got it when you wrote about Microsoft. And you said, Well, they're gonna they have a 7% rule, which is basically 7% of their company has a disability, right? And they basically said but that's not good enough, right? And I was the reporter, among many others who said, that the mainstream media might have just said people try for 7% disability inclusion. But what we said was, they know that's not good enough. And here's all the cool ways they're doing more. So that's a very specific example of getting trust, because people who follow the news know that neurodivergent people are underemployed. And even when you say, Wow, employment has risen so much for neurodivergent people, it's still really, really bad. There's way too many people who are not employed. And that's why it's so important to put that context to build that trust. So that's just how we move forward in this country.

Lauren 27:15

Well, moving forward in this country kind of leads into my next question, you had written a 70 page report on progress in Global Business Disability Inclusion. So I was just curious, from your perspective, do you believe that there'll be more of an effort in disability inclusion in the workplace in the next few years? And if so, what does this mean for adults with ADHD and LD?

Denise Brodey 27:35

I think there's an openness right now. And we need to take advantage of that openness, it doesn't come with a guarantee that things are going to change, because honestly, the people in charge are still the same people. So if you don't have diverse people at the top, you have to really be forward thinking about how are we going to take this moment when everything is in flux and take advantage of it. And I feel really positive about the opportunity. But I caution that we can't squander it. And I caution that everyone not think that leadership starts the ball rolling, that it seems to me change starts in the middle, and change starts at the bottom, and protests and unions and efforts to say, I don't like this hiring process. The growth of gig workers and entrepreneurship, all those things will play a role in changing rules. So will generations who won't put up with sacrificing their entire lives for their jobs. So it's going to

be a group effort, and it's not going to come from the top. I'm weary of that description. I really am. I encourage anyone to take part in any way that they can and change. And know that whether they're advocating, or passing on LDA resources, or simply opting out of the workforce because they're too stressed because they're neurodivergent and they're raising neurodivergent children to say, well, whatever I do, my small part, in the middle or at the bottom, is really setting an example that I need to take care of myself first. That it's not all about leadership and what leadership goals are. It's, again, back to the human thing.

Denise Brodey 29:51

I have a friend who I haven't spoken to in a million years as a good example and she wrote that she took three months off from her job on LinkedIn, she wrote this and, she would be going looking for a new job, once her son was back, or I think was her son or daughter was back, you know really feeling better, and that she'd really struggled with leaving her job. And she was putting it out there, full disclosure, that soon she would need a new job. And this is why she left. And it was just brilliant. And it got passed around everywhere. And I see those every day on LinkedIn. And that's not...she was somewhere in the middle. I mean, I wouldn't say she's the top of the pile, but I wouldn't say she's an entry level person whatsoever. And so for her as a manager, and as someone who had to manage to write that all on LinkedIn, that's a beautiful example of one person, it makes a huge difference. And she was sitting right in the middle of a very messy middle. Right? So I mean, you can throw as much data as you want at the world. You can try and change legislation. And there are great people doing that. But that's also a bit of a privilege to be able to do that. And so if you don't have the privilege to opt out of a job, or you don't have the privilege of having someone else to help you find the best therapist, or whatever it is. At least sharing that knowledge with your peers, and peer advocacy is a whole other discussion. I think that will be changing the world a lot.

Lauren 31:54

I like how you know, it's not set in stone, it's something that we have to work for. So I really liked that message.

Denise Brodey 32:01

Yeah, I mean, you just can't take it for granted. I don't take anything for granted. I think mostly I've learned that through the pandemic, but also by watching my kids and knowing that they lived through, you know, they went to college, they worked their butts off. And they came out the other side and everything had changed. So they're 24 and 26. So they're living it, and I watched that generation. I would just add one last thing, the way we really can create change in the future with these terrible unemployment numbers and the lack of understanding for accommodations, those kinds of things, is to listen to younger generations is to make this an intergenerational issue.

Lauren 33:12

Yeah, definitely. Well, and is there anything else that you wanted to touch on that maybe I didn't ask?

33:18

Not really. I mean, I hope I didn't sound too negative. I think I'm trying to come from a place of learned helpfulness, you know?

Lauren 33:29

No, I think that's a really good perspective. And I mean, obviously a lot of learned experience has helped to shape that.

Denise Brodey 33:37

Right. Yeah. I mean, I call it learned helpfulness. Because obviously Martin Seligman was you know, learned helplessness. That's what ruled, right? Like, everyone learned, oh, I'm too codependent, I'm this. It's like, okay, let's just change the conversation to learned helpfulness. If we could all do that we'd be better off. And people who are ADHD, they love helping people. It's one of their traits, it's what they can do. They love researching things. They love helping people. They're very empathic and they know a workaround like nobody's business. So yeah, learned helpfulness.

Lauren 34:24

Definitely, I like that. So Denise, where can people find your work and connect with you or follow you?

Denise Brodey 34:30

Sure. I'm reluctantly on Twitter @dbrodey. I am definitely at elephants-everywhere.com. And that's where you can sign up to get a newsletter and you can read my blog. You can find my Forbes stories and my other stories that I write. If you're a business, you can find some of the business case studies and the people that I work with and in the future you'll be able to find a lot of downloads and one-sheets that help other people at that mid level who are sort of really focused on managers and managers talking about the elephant in the room or the elephant in the office.

Lauren 35:21

That sounds great.

Denise Brodey 35:22

Oh, sorry. And I've said this since I wrote my first book, but if you put "elephant" in the subject line of your email to me on LinkedIn or anywhere, I know that you've heard this podcast or you've heard me talk about elephants, and that you have an issue that you really just don't know where else to turn it. I'm happy to find you a resource.

Lauren 35:43

That's fantastic. Well, Denise, thank you so much for being on this podcast. And again, congratulations on the 2023 Harrison Sylvester award. It's definitely well-deserved.

Denise Brodey 35:55

Thank you. Thank you so much. It was great talking to you and I can't wait to meet you.

Lauren 36:05

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