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DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT POLICY
REHABILITATION RESEARCH AND TRAINING CENTER

Let's Get to Work: Reimagining Disability Inclusive Employment Policy

Disability and Employment Policy: A Conversation with Lex Frieden

Jonathan Martinis

Welcome to the inaugural podcast series for Let's Get To Work: Reimagining Disability Employment Policy brought to you by the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, the Disability Employment Policy Rehabilitation, Research and Training Center and the Southeast ADA Center. We're excited that you're joining us today because we have a special guest, Lex Frieden. Mr. Frieden is one of America's preeminent disability activists and the leader of the independent living movement. He is professor of biomedical informatics and rehabilitation at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. He is also professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine. Peter Blanck is our host. Peter is a University Professor and Chairman of the Burton Blatt Institute. Peter is leading a team of researchers in cutting-edge research to rethink and reimagine Disability Employment Policy. And now here's your host, Peter Blanck,

Peter Blanck

It's a great privilege today to have one of the revolutionary leaders of the disability rights movement in the United States and internationally, who has made an immediate

and long, lasting effect on the world in this area. Lex Frieden: who's an advocate, a professor, a teacher, a researcher, and many other things. Lex, it's so nice to welcome you.

Lex Frieden

I'm glad to be here, Peter. Thank you for having me.

Peter Blanck

We are all fortunate as we kick off this new Disability Employment Policy Center, as well as with our folks at the southeast ADA Center. Tell our folks a little bit about yourself as relevant to this area.

Lex Frieden

First of all, I really do appreciate the opportunity to chat with people and to share some of what I remember from back in the day and those things that we experience in our lives that have an impact, that we retain throughout our lives. I graduated from a small town in Oklahoma and went to college. The second or third month I was there, November 20, 1967, I went out on a Saturday night with a group of guys from the dormitory, and we went cruising late at night. We had a head-on collision with another car because the driver was a little anxious to pass the cars in front of us, and everybody jumped out of the car but me. The paramedics dragged me out. They took me to the infirmary on the campus, and the doctor there, after examining every other person, and there were altogether nine people in the accident, finally got to me, because I was the only one that wasn't bleeding or didn't have an obvious fracture, and they determined I had a spinal cord injury. And later on, I went to the hospital in Oklahoma City and had surgery, and then was flown to Houston to TIRR for rehabilitation. And during the course of my rehabilitation, I was told that I would likely not be able to walk again, that I

would use a wheelchair the rest of my life. And you know what? That did not really have an impact on me at the time, because, I mean, we were sending men to the moon while I was in rehab, there were men floating around the moon ready to land, and they took the first step right after I got out of the rehabilitation. So, you know, I thought modern technology is here. These guys are floating around in space. They're not able to be mobile. And what difference does it make if I have to use a wheelchair? But I soon found out there were barriers literally everywhere. There were steps in front of my home I hadn't thought of. There were steps in all the buildings at the university. There were steps everywhere, and no accommodations whatsoever. You couldn't get into the bathroom, not even my home, and certainly not in any public spaces or places like universities. So I am in this situation wanting to go back to school, and I found only two or three schools in the United States that were accessible to wheelchair users. One of them was the University of Illinois, and another one was a mile and a half from my home at a newly built college called Oral Roberts University. And so I applied there, and a few weeks later, I received a letter back from the university saying my application had been denied. When I phoned them, I was told that it had been denied on the basis of the fact I indicated I used a wheelchair for mobility. I really didn't understand that. I mean, I was catatonic for a few days. I couldn't tell my parents that I wasn't admitted to school, and I thought that probably was going to have an impact on me the rest of my life. At that point, I'd forgotten all about the astronauts that sort of motivated me, and I wrote to my senator, Henry Bellman, and said, the What's up with this? This was really frustrating, and why is this not prohibited by law? So we're talking here like right around 1973, the Senator wrote me back and he said, we're considering a piece of legislation right now, and it's called the Rehabilitation Act. And so I followed that. The senator kept sending me information about it. And the Rehabilitation Act was vetoed, then by President Nixon, and they sent it back to him again. It was vetoed the second time. And the rationale was, the bill was a budget buster. It cost too much money. There were

several million dollars allocated there for support for people with disabilities who wanted to go to work and to school. The Senate was about to send the bill back to the President a third time, until Senator Kennedy added a Title Five to the bill, and Title Five included what we now know is and typically referred to as 503 and 504 so that bill passed, it was signed. Nobody knew what that meant, but the Senator encouraged me to think positively. So I went back to the university, and they denied my admission again on the basis of the fact that I used a wheelchair. By this time, however, I had been to the University of Tulsa, where they had accommodated me by moving all of the classes that I would take into the one accessible building on campus. I was, at this point ready to begin advocacy. So Peter, that's basically what motivated me in my life.

Peter Blanck

It's fantastic grounding. You know, early in on my career, one of the first clients I represented at the law firm was Henry Bellman in Oklahoma City. Wow, small world. That's another story. So clearly, you were having a lived experience at a transitional time. I know there was a lot going on, but in those days or soon thereafter, did you have a sense of any sort of disability policy that was beginning, or any sense of supports for employment as you were moving forward, or what you were going to do when you left college, and how the government policy might be helpful in that regard?

Lex Frieden

Yeah, that sort of thing kind of unfolded a step at a time. So, the University of Tulsa was a private institution, unlike the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University, where I'd been before, where the tuition was discounted for local residents. Their tuition was comparatively high. My parents, frankly, had spent most of the savings they had covering the cost of my rehabilitation that wasn't paid for by my father's employment-related health insurance. And, you know, it was going to be hard for us to

pay the tuition, but the State offered to help pay for my tuition and cover the cost of my books. And I learned that that was a result of the Rehabilitation Act that I had been communicating with the Senator about. They did, interestingly enough, offer me out of state tuition at Gallaudet University. I wasn't hearing impaired,
and really didn't understand that. But apparently. Gallaudet was an exception to the rule, and states were able to send people who met the requirements to get into Gallaudet, able to use federal dollars to sponsor them, and that was curious to me at the time. Another thing that was interesting is that when I went back to file a complaint against Oral Roberts because I thought they needed to accommodate students going forward, and that would be covered by the new 1973 Rehabilitation Act provisions under Title Five, that university argued that they were a private institution that had no federal dollars and were therefore not responsible for meeting the requirements of the law, which I suppose was technically correct at that time. And this is where I began to unravel the disability policy issues. A lot about it did not make any sense to me, and when things don't make sense to you, you try to figure it out. And so I began to educate myself about the law, and soon discovered that laws are simply enough. You have to have regulations, and those regulations and rules are how the laws actually
work. They don't work without it, and we had no regulations for Title Five and none for the Rehabilitation Act. The employment aspects of that, which related principally to helping people pay for tuition and books, apparently, didn't need a lot of regulation. They were transparent, but the rules that had to do with Title Five in particular were hard to understand because there were none, and further, nobody could really interpret what seemed to be obvious to a lot of us, and that is that the President and the Congress who had passed that and signed it intended for us to have some kind of access which we didn't have, but nobody was acting on that. And Oral Roberts was disregarding it because they said they were outside the boundaries. Regardless, when you begin to see these conflicts and what you expect is should be the case, then I think you're motivated

to try and resolve it. Well, I soon found that there were a cadre of people around the country who were frustrated, like I was. And I met early on, Ed Roberts in California, Judy Heumann. A woman from New York, visually impaired. she was blind, Eunice Fiorito, who was at that time, was the director of the mayor's office in New York City, which was the first such office in the country. So there were a group of us who began to correspond, and we actually had meetings. Fred Fay, a disabled social science researcher at Tufts University managed to get a grant, believe it or not, from the Patient Services Administration. And so the government, through RSA and through their employment provisions, actually provided a grant to Fred to pull together people with disabilities from around the country to talk about this problem with the regulations and other matters pertaining to people with disabilities. So that's where I met Judy and Ed and Fred and Elmer Bartels and a number of historical figures. Another member of the group was Fred Schreiber, who founded the National Association of the Deaf. So we, at the time, did something we didn't realize at the time, and that is, we convened the first group of cross disability advocates that had been working on these issues before that time. All the disability groups were organized according to diagnostic prescription so the blind people met together, the deaf people met together, the Paralyzed Veterans met together, but nobody crossed paths until we started meeting together, leaders of different movements, and that was very significant. It was then as it is now. So Peter, to answer your question more explicitly. You know you we began to unfold this onion, one layer at a time, and we finally got down to the point that nothing was going to move forward until we had regulations to that law.

Peter Blanck

At that early time, did you have a sense of equity for persons with disabilities in terms of employment? I mean, there had long been programs, since the Civil War, as you know, to support people with disabilities in certain types of jobs, but there was never really a

push in the private sector. Did that start to have a glimmer in your eye at that time that there was much more to do here?

Lex Frieden

No, no, no. And at that time, we weren't even concerned about the private sector. We were mostly concerned about the government, because it was easy for us to say, look, those of us who are working are paying taxes. Our families are paying taxes, the public is paying taxes, and to leave a portion of the public out of the benefits of those public dollars seem to us to be irrational. And so we were more concerned about the kind of public access issues. Access to the sidewalks seems pretty obvious, but we did not have access to the sidewalks, much less the private facilities that lie beyond the sidewalks. You know, we started from the very beginning. There was a one of our group who happened to be employed by the Senator from Alaska, and he was in a wheelchair, and the Senator told him to go and do some research on a particular object. And he couldn't get into the Library of Congress to do research. You know, it becomes pretty obvious where you have to start. And that law clearly, was directed toward public facilities, and nobody really appreciated at that point in time the impact on the private sector. So we were mainly concerned to begin with, about the public facilities and trying to figure out where the pressure point was. And again, we came right back to the regulations. Nobody was going to do anything without these rules. That was pretty clear.

Peter Blanck

So clearly you couldn't work, obviously, if you can't get to the workplace.

Lex Frieden

We soon discovered, Peter, that this issue of equality, so to speak, and I can't think of another word. We had all lived through the 1964 Civil Rights Act. We had experienced that we had lived through most of the Vietnam conflict. And the two things came together there, there was a lot of social activism in the community in the early 1970s and it related to all of these issues that we were then awakened to. So women were concerned about the so-called glass ceiling. Men would do the same job got paid more. That didn't make sense. We were concerned about people who were Americans and not allowed to use certain public facilities. We didn't even identify with that until we started to talk about it. But it all fell in the milieu that was surrounding us from the standpoint of public activism. So, you know, we began putting things together. Now, interestingly enough, when the amendments to the Civil Rights Act came forward in the late 1960s one Senator proposed an amendment that would include people with disabilities. And that never got out of committee. The reality is that we were really naive, and we were discovering things one day at a time, one page at a time, one experience at a time. None of us knew exactly what to do about it. We felt like there was an opportunity here, because all of us wanted to work, and most of us, by the way, were eligible to receive some public benefit under the Social Security Act, which had preceded this by a decade or two. So, and add into that all the disabled veterans that were returning from the Vietnam conflict, people were coming back from Vietnam who were disabled. That was a result of the fact that they discovered penicillin, and with healing, people who would otherwise die were able to survive, but with many disabilities. So there was a kind of a milieu there that inspired all of this and helped us awaken. At the same time, the larger public was awakening in terms of the law. They weren't even sure what it meant.

Peter Blanck

Of course, you were also experiencing, I imagine, a whole generation of individuals who were growing up, who had polio, who were now coming into the mainstream as well and seeking access.

Lex Frieden

It's true. Although most of the people who had polio had already been treated and they were, you know, I hate to say it, but almost disregarded by those of us who were younger advocates. And I, you know, you can say the same thing about today. I hope the younger advocates will be inspired by those of us who lived through hard times back then. I'm not sure that, from a perceptual standpoint, times are easier for young people who face overwhelming barriers now, but we did not have anybody to look at. I mean, take a look at this. We should have been inspired by the President of the United States. But Roosevelt kept the fact that he had a disability and polio secret from everybody, because he and his advisors were concerned that if the public knew he had a disability, he would not be elected.

Peter Blanck

Would you say that once the 504 regulations were implemented, there was a different perspective of disability, civil rights and the rights to engage in society?

Lex Frieden

There's no question that the people at the local level communicating with public officials, communicating more with the public in general, and having expectations. Now the Rehabilitation Act was enabling us to go to school and prepare to have a job. So once you get to that point, then what do you do? Well, if the private sector doesn't provide opportunities for you, then you've spent whatever amount of time and whatever amount of the taxpayer dollars help to support you,

and you're nowhere. When I worked for President Reagan, and we wanted to talk about employment for people with disabilities, there was not a lot of support for that in the administration to begin with. It was a secondary issue. And, frankly, the administration thought all of those things were behind us. But two things happened there. Number one, I met with the director of public policy in the White House, and the guy said, you know, why are you so interested in this? And I said, because right now, there are about 30 million people with disabilities who are educated and they're sitting at home watching black and white TV. Now, does that make any sense that we use resources to help educate people and then we don't provide them with an opportunity to take the next step. And that was, quite honestly, a breakthrough conversation, because he turned around and went to the President, and in the meeting, George Bush said, Hey, we ought to take that on. So, you know, these things sort of unfolded step by step.

Peter Blanck

You're well into the 80s now. And George Bush, of course, as vice president, heard all this. He had a personal connection to disability as well through family members. What was the environment looking like in this regard? And towards the end of the 1980s what sort of optimism or lack of. Was there with regard to further integration in the workplace?

Lex Frieden

When we got engaged, when people began to organize and talk to one another and shared our own experiences, we discovered things were happening at the state level and the local level in California. Ed Roberts and Judy Heumann and the other advocates, Michael Winter, I want to name him in particular. These guys in California were pretty clever and pretty successful, and they managed to get state laws amended, Justin Dart and I and a woman named Pat Pound, who is still an activist, others went to the state

legislature, and we got actual barrier- free legislation 10 years before we had that provision in federal law. So we were beginning to have some impact, state and locally in California. It was interesting, because the rules and laws that were passed and made in California affected these large companies that had franchises all over the United States, because many of them were organized in California. After California got more advanced legislation, all these restaurants around the country were affected by that one state law in California, once they figured out how to make their facilities accessible and to practice what you might call non-discrimination at that time, then they just applied those rules and that lesson to all of their franchise facilities anywhere in the Country. So that California law had a lot of impact, and you can see then that we were working and having an impact differentially at different levels, well before we had federal legislation.

Peter Blanck

So I take it in the latter part of the 80s, maybe middle part the light bulb went off that there could be a federal law which would become the Americans with Disabilities Act, which would cover private entities. And one of the main aspects of that law is employment. Do you remember how those discussions began?

Lex Frieden

Absolutely. Well, they started before that, because 503 covers employment, and it did back then. We weren't concerned about it until 1975 or so after this discussion about rules and regulations came up, and the Department of Labor had to make rules for 503 and that's where we really had the breakthrough concept of reasonable accommodation. You know, one of the biggest barriers at that time that was raised is the cost of making accommodation. And the advocates were arguing that it doesn't cost that much. And, you know, we were having an uphill battle with that. Until somebody said, wait a minute, you don't have to move heaven and earth in one fell

swoop. Let's just start with a little bit. And if you have some offices in a high rise building and some offices on the first floor that a person with a disability could get into, that would be a reasonable accommodation at the time, given the ability of the business owner to comply. So that was very important. That happened in 1975. Also the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act came about in the same period of time. And that was significant because it was a statement by the nation that everybody needed to be educated, and those rules actually went through a little more deeply. So all of this came together right when Reagan and Bush were elected. Reagan wanted to make the rules and regulations more readable and understandable. So he wanted to cut loose all of the legal jargon, and he told Bush to do that. And when Vice President Bush started messing around with the rules for the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act, Mom and Pop got excited. Bush overnight heard from hundreds of family members of people with disabilities, and he went back to the President said, Hey, this is a losing proposition to try and mess with these rules, because people are understanding them. They're using them. They're functional. So let's not do that. And Reagan agreed. Bush understood early on the power of the people.

Peter Blanck

Yeah, of course, as a parent himself of a child with a disability,

Lex Frieden

Interestingly enough, we did not know that at the time. Nobody was generally aware of that.

Peter Blanck

What were your early dealings with President Bush? Do you remember them and on this topic?

Lex Frieden

Oh, absolutely. I mean the first time I met President Bush was in 1976. So we testified before Congress on the Rehabilitation Act Amendments in 1983 and in those testimonies, many of us observed that the government was funding rehabilitation, but not providing a pathway to work for people with disabilities. Members of Congress heard that, and Lowell Weicker in the Senate and Steve Bartlett in the House responded by creating amendments to the Rehabilitation Act. At first they were going to just mandate employment. Then they figured out they couldn't do that, that it was a no win situation. So they then agreed to have a study, and they were going to use the results of the study to behave according to the wishes of a expert panel. And that created the National Council on Disability. The President had to appoint 15 members at that time, and he appointed people that he thought were friends of his. They were, I mean, he had been an actor, right? And so he appointed Nanette Fabray, who was famous actress, who happened to have a hearing impairment. And he appointed a woman from California who was the first female president of a bank, and she had children of short stature. You know, the President had loaded up this panel with people who were friends of his, who had some relationship to disability, including one named Justin Dart. Justin Dart's father had been a supporter of Reagan. And so Reagan appointed Dart, the son who happened to have a disability. And Justin and I had worked together then for about eight years. So Justin advocated for my appointment by the President as the director of the National Council on Disability. The appointment was made, and we were obliged then to produce a report to the Congress and the President about the policy needs of people with disabilities. So we went about doing that. And in early 1986, according to the schedule the Congress had included in the bill, we produced this report called Toward Independence. At that point we were going to take the report to the President, the space shuttle Challenger blew up. The meeting was canceled, and we were shuffled

off to the Vice President. When we went there the next day, a tall lawyer, named Boyden Gray, stopped me before we went in to meet the Vice President, and said,
Lex, you're from Texas. Be sure to tell the Vice President you're from Texas. He will like that, since he too is a Texan. Well, little did I know that, obviously the Vice President had been briefed about the people whom he was meeting, so he recognized me before I had a chance to say that. And you know, it's one of those things where you meet somebody you can relate to. And we could relate to one another on those grounds. And we were told we had three minutes on his very busy agenda for photographs and a short conversation. And he turned it into a 45 minute meeting. You could tell by his questions he read the report. He even said that he had shared it with his wife, with Barbara. He shared with us the fact that he did have two children with disabilities, one who had died, Robin, and he said he'd like to help us, but he was just the Vice President. So George Bush, when you know from the very beginning, as you pointed out, was an advocate.

Peter Blanck

I know it was evolutionary, but when did the concept of an ADA really become real, and particularly with regard to the employment provisions and the private sector?

Lex Frieden

Well, as soon as the Congress and the President acted as though they might even consider such a thing, and that was when the 73 Act Amendments came forward. As soon as there was some notice and some interest on the frustrating fact that we now have people who were being educated without an opportunity for them to take that education anywhere. That's where those serious discussions and the awakening occurred, at least among the leadership, if not among more people in the country. You know that was about 1983 84

Peter Blanck

Was there any buy-in at that time, or awareness from the business community about these ideas developing based on your grassroots efforts or state legislation?

Lex Frieden

Not really at that point in time. The business community did not really get involved until they decided the rules of the law were going to have an impact on them. And their biggest concern to begin with was the prospective cost. Some business leaders referred to what we were discussing as the flat earth, and they did not want to be obliged to accommodate people on the flat earth. Businesses were helping us, because at that time, there was no internet, there was no way for us to communicate and organize around the country. Mail took too long. It took a week to mail from California to New York. The communications was really difficult. We had telephone, but the long distance charges were prohibitive. And we would go to big businesses and tell them we were advocates trying to promote opportunity for people with disabilities, and could we use their telephones after work hour. So these large interstate businesses had lines that they leased and paid for to communicate with people and with their other business facilities around the country. And they would let us go into their offices at night and use the phones to communicate east to west, north to south. So they were collaborating with us from the very beginning, although I don't think many of them realized there was or would be an impact on their own business.

Peter Blanck

So you're sitting on the South Lawn in 1990 when President Bush signed the ADA into law. What were you thinking at that moment?

Lex Frieden

Well, at that moment, I mean, we were thinking that it's really, really hot. The sun's really, really bright, and we've been waiting a long, long time to see this happen. There were 3000, something more than that, people on the on the lot. It was the largest signing ceremony, and at that date in history, and everybody was, you know, jubilant, and nobody felt like we made unnecessary sacrifices, compromises. It was one big, happy family. And people had a lot of expectations, many of which were met very, very quickly, Peter. But as soon as the private sector understood that this was probably going to happen, they started moving before the law was ever signed. It was a fait accompli well before the law was signed, and so a lot of things appeared to happen overnight. Public transit, for example, on the day before the ADA was signed, there were only three transit companies in the country that were buying accessible public busses. And the day after the law was signed, every transit agency in the country had orders in for accessible busses. That was like night and day, one to the next. Most of the other things occurred gradually and had been starting either by businesses, that thought when they heard this discussion it was reasonable and began to comply before there was any rule requiring them to. And for those who were reticent, but yet understood that, there was kind of a wheels in motion. So they were prepared.

Peter Blanck

When you look back on the 1990s and those early years, do you wish there were things you would have done that you didn't do, or did you think there were opportunities you should have taken or been a little more assertive as a community?

Lex Frieden

Now I've tried to rethink that and think it again. We were just kind of guided by a light that I don't know where it came from. But there are, in my estimation, very few steps

that we missed in that process. We couldn't predict that there would be an internet and a worldwide web, and so there were provisions made in the ADA amendments act that ensured we could cover that. But other than that, and any other things that we weren't able to predict, I think we pretty well covered it. Now, the regulations clearly did not foresee some of the questions that were raised later on by courts. But I will say that some of the decisions that were handed down by courts, some of them were more restrained than we had hoped. Others opened the doors to accommodations that we really hadn't even thought about. The fact that that the bill had so much study in the process. I mean, think about this, that bill, because it covered such a broad swath of life, had to pass through virtually every committee in the Congress before it was passed by the Congress. So there were hearings over and over and over again in every committee from every sector of life. Ordinarily, a bill that is passed falls under one category or another, and there are just a couple of committees that review it before it gets to the floor. But in the case of the ADA, unusually, virtually every committee in the House and the Senate had to hear and approve that bill. And in the process, it got refined, and I don't mean watered down. It just got clarified. It was hard at the time, but it produced a better outcome than you might have had otherwise.

Peter Blanck

Well, your vision from the start, of course, was that you can't look at employment in isolation. You have to look at transportation, health care and community in other areas.

Lex Frieden

if you don't resolve those other issues, you'll never wind up with employment. I mean, how can you say a person who uses a wheelchair should have the opportunity to work if they don't have a way to get there, right? And how can you say that a hearing impaired person should be able to work if they don't have an interpreter, you know. On and on

and on, you just go through every disability you can think of, and there will always be a need for an accommodation and one that can be provided. And we did not want to go through group by group and have to defend it. So we simply said, you know, this is an, it was not, and still is not, a non-discrimination bill that we started out to build an equal opportunity law. Just like every other employment law at the time, it was an equal opportunity law and intended to have an impact on employment. Although at the time and even now, there were no really strict rules that resulted in quotas or anything of that nature. And I think that's important for people to stop and think about that. You know, ADA has no quotas. We looked at other countries. France had quotas. Germany had quotas. Netherlands had quotas. They were all based on a quota aspect of inclusion. We did not want quotas in the law. We wanted opportunity, and that was a principle that we stuck with. You know, we started with it. We stuck with it. One of the last groups to support us was the civil rights community. That community, and I'm talking about groups like the NAACP, was not originally in favor of what we were trying to do, because they thought we were conflating issues. And we ignored that because that our intent was not even to get into that discussion, but instead focus on opportunity for people with disabilities to have an education, to have jobs that they had access to and could do, and our belief was that we would well pay for any cost associated with it. And I can, from my own experience, tell you that without that law, I would not now be working. And in fact, I have worked for 50 some years of my life. Think about that. I've been paying tax every year. Had a good amount of it in total, and well, more than the government ever paid to support me.

Peter Blanck

We of course, have a mature generation now. 35 year olds and less, who have grown up in the United States never knowing an America without the Americans with Disabilities Act, without the Individuals with Disabilities, Education Act and so forth. What's your

sense of this generation today? Where are they going in this regard? How are they going to carry the torch forward?

Lex Frieden

Well, I think they have to be motivated first. There are people who are motivated simply because they understand history. But I think the younger generation is finding that there are still barriers to employment, there are still barriers to full inclusion and opportunity. To the extent that they recognize there's a paradigm for addressing those issues, I think they will pick up the torch and move on, as I'm seeing happen, and particularly as it relates to people who have learning disabilities. I'm really proud and excited and happy to see the new advocates of the 21st Century.

Peter Blanck

Well, you are great American who has changed the course of our history. And your remarks today, I consider historical and those that need to be documented. So our community thanks you for that. Would you say any closing remarks?

Lex Frieden

Well I, you know, I think it's important for people to realize that education is imperative. None of us should expect to be accommodated if we don't take advantage of the accommodations and employment. I think most people with disabilities try to exceed expectations, and to the extent that we're able to do that, it justifies the effort, the cost, everything else that's been involved. And I would encourage anybody who takes for granted their access, takes for granted their job, takes for granted the opportunities that they have to look back to history and to learn some of what was done to ensure opportunity for them today. But I also believe and pay it forward, and I'm sure

that it doesn't take a wide view lens to realize that there are still issues that need to be addressed, and a lot of us are at the end of our stream, so to speak. And then we need new people to come on and grab that string and hold on and not just let the kite fly us, but to fly the kite.

Peter Blanck

Well, Lex, it's been an extraordinary honor, I know I speak on behalf of our community, to talk with you today. Your legacy is apparent, and we all wish you well and look forward to speaking with you again soon.

Lex Frieden

Thank you, Peter, and this is a great opportunity to say congratulations. Thank you, and your colleagues will do an awesome job helping to educate and promote opportunity and employment for people with disabilities.

Peter Blanck

Thank you, Lex. I'd like to give Jonathan a brief chance to jump in. He is the knowledge director of this big thing we're undertaking. You're a part of it, and maybe Jonathan, you have some reflections or questions that I didn't ask or you want to ask of Lex.

Jonathan Martinis

For my part, sir, thank you. Hearing your story really brings to light the importance of what we're doing, because no matter how far we advance, we have further to go. And I was just thinking while you were speaking about the most recent Kessler Foundation statistics showing that participation in the workforce by people with disabilities is at an all time high, but still close to 30 points less than people without disabilities. We need leaders like you to show the next generation where they came from and how far

we still have to go. When we began, I said I was going to ask you for a favor, and if I may, I'd like to ask who else should we be talking to, who can help us reach the people and the policymakers that we need to reach to, to amplify the message that you gave us.

Lex Frieden

I believe more employers need to be engaged in the process of helping us all as a community move forward. I think employers have a lot to offer to the extent that you can reach out to leaders of business and industry and engage them in this discussion, they will appreciate it, because in order for business to move forward, you got to have people that are willing to pay for products. In order to pay for products, you have to have income that's typically generated through work. And it's kind of a circular aspect there: if we're not working, then we're not contributing to the public good. We're not paying taxes, we are not in engaging in the economy to the extent that we can if we are working. So, by working, we are contributing to the product in the workforce, and we're generating income that we can circulate back through the economy that will benefit the employers. So, I think having employers engaged, and many companies are, as you know, promoting opportunity for people with disabilities. The folks who are doing that need to be engaged in the commentary.

Jonathan Martinis

Thank you so much for that, sir. You know, it's interesting. As I was putting together our first informational publication, I've found really strong research supporting what you said, much of it done by our partners in this project. So I think engaging employers to find out their experiences, what their best practices are, allows us to partner with policymakers to strengthen what works and weed out what doesn't. So thank you once again for speaking with us, and I would encourage anyone listening to us to check out

our publications, our fact sheets on our research and the work that we're doing and that our partners have done to strengthen public and private partnerships like Lex talked about. Thanks, sir.

Thank you, Peter and Lex, for your insights, your perspectives and your values. It's a tremendous opportunity for all of us with you leading this new center, which will look at so many different facets of Disability Employment Policy and help us all rethink and reimagine a world with more opportunities for economic gain for people with disabilities. Thank you so much for sharing your viewpoints today. Listeners, thank you for joining us for this episode. You can access all Let's Get to Work podcasts with archived audio, accessible transcripts and resources on our website at www.bbi-dep-rrtc.org. Let's Get to Work: Reimagining Disability Employment Policy is a program of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, the Disability Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training Center and a collaboration with the Southeast ADA Center.