

Donny Swanson

>> MIZUTANI: Hello, everyone. Welcome to “Disability, Inc.,” INCLUDEnyc's podcast series. My name is Jean Mizutani, Senior Education Specialist here at INCLUDEnyc. And today, I am excited to share the distinctly New York story of how a chance street-corner conversation between two NYPD cops changed one man's professional and personal trajectory. That man is Donny Swanson, a beloved New York City educator, who was born with a disability at a time when disabled children were all but written off.

To set the stage, medical professionals had recently advised his parents to put their young son in an institution, and were warned to avoid getting attached to him. This could not have been far from his father's thoughts, a police officer, as he walked his Brooklyn beat that day. I'm so pleased to introduce Donny Swanson to share the rest of this amazing story.

Welcome, Donny.

>> SWANSON: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

>> MIZUTANI: It's a pleasure to be here with you. Tell us about yourself, Donny.

>> SWANSON: Okay, so I was born in 1980 with a disability known as cerebral palsy. This was approximately ten years before the American Disabilities Act. So the disability itself and supports for the disabled community weren't at the forefront at this time.

My parents -- I am the third child, so having a child with a disability was new to them, and definitely exploring some uncharted territory at this point. So they were not exactly sure what was the best approach to support me. I do recall even my mother telling me that her first thought was to go to her dad, and ask him what his thoughts were. And at the time, he said, “Do what the doctors say. They know best.”

And I'm lucky that my parents did challenge the norm. Because from what I hear, I would have been environmentally disabled at that point, due to some of the -- I'd say some of

the methods that were used to support individuals with disabilities at that time.

>> MIZUTANI: Or to not support, one could say.

>> SWANSON: Yes, yeah. So I recall that my mom was telling me to -- just when I was first dealing with the times of when I was born, to not necessarily stress what I was doing; "just try your best." To that point, it then turned into, "Don't tell anybody about your disability. If anybody asks, you just have a problem with your leg." But it was much more involved than that.

>> MIZUTANI: Those were the norms of the day, and it's truly unimaginable it's just only 40 years has passed. But this type of advice was still common at that time. And to think that two authority figures, both the doctor and your grandfather, had advised your parents to institutionalize you.

I know that they used to refer to it as a home, but we know the reality of what those homes were like now. And we can only imagine how hard it must have been for your parents to process the information, and to even grapple -- even consider such a decision. It's really hard to believe.

But it was during this time that a chance meeting occurred. Tell us about that.

>> SWANSON: So having spoke to my father about my past, he recalled a specific conversation on McDonald Avenue and 18th Avenue in Brooklyn, where he was walking his beat in his uniform. And Matty Ferrigno, Lou Ferrigno's father, at that time a retired lieutenant, came over to say hello. And were talking, and when Mr. Ferrigno introduced himself to my father, and said that he is Lou's father, my father recalled and knew exactly who he was, because he was a well-known celebrity, a great body builder, and just an all-around TV star. I recall he was the Incredible Hulk. That was his character.

But my father told Mr. Ferrigno and he and his son used to work out together in a gym called R & J Health Studio. Actually, they filmed a movie about Lou Ferrigno there called "Pumping Iron."

So through talking, my father had brought up the fact of Lou's past, that he had some challenges around hearing loss as a toddler. And how Mr. Ferrigno helped his son overcome that through the support of hearing aids, and later on in life, through a -- I believe Lou had gotten a cochlear implant to support his hearing loss as well.

But just the thought, or hearing from another family, another support, that they were able to challenge the norm and not necessarily listen to the doctors or to others, when they felt in their heart that their son or their child could do more. And that's exactly what my father needed to hear. Because when I had asked my father, what made you challenge that? He told me, "I just knew you could do it. I just know my son." Something that makes me feel very proud to hear and never want to let him down.

So when doing that, that's something I always have in the back of my head, and it helped me develop my own growth mindset. My father has always taught me and always pushed me to take whatever item I wanted to do, or any challenge that I wanted, and overcome it -- even when the process wasn't as easy as my neurotypical peers.

So for example, when riding on a bike, I had my foot was turned in. So having to utilize the pedal with one leg, it kept falling off, and it was a difficult time. But he never allowed me to give up. That was something I needed in my life to show me that I was able to do things, that people did believe in me, because I could have went in a different trajectory just from that alone, and given up.

>> MIZUTANI: You sure could have. I believe that when we first spoke, you mentioned to me that your father had confided in Matty Ferrigno what the doctor had recommended for you.

>> SWANSON: Yes.

>> MIZUTANI: And Matty's response is the response that really changed everything. Do you remember it?

>> SWANSON: Well, my father had told me that that response was to -- if you know in your

heart that your son could do more, then challenge the norms, even when professional advice tells you to do otherwise. And that's all my father needed to hear.

>> MIZUTANI: Yes, that's all he needed to hear. And I'll tell you, if I was in a situation like that, confiding in somebody else, and they said to me, "The doctor told my family that, too," I would flip out. Because I really think, they really understand -- of all the people that I could be talking to right now, this is the one individual that can really understand. And from there, it was challenge it if you believe in your heart. So wow.

You said that that conversation changed the whole trajectory of your life, and you started telling us a little bit about that a moment ago. Please continue.

>> SWANSON: So it started with the bicycle, because I always wanted to be like my neurotypical brothers -- they're five and six years older -- and as well as my peers. I just wanted to be like everybody else. And when growing up, I couldn't understand why me? Why did I have a disability? What did I do wrong?

And my parents always made me realize I didn't do anything wrong. This was given to me, and one day that I would truly understand why this gift was given to me. I didn't think of it as a gift. I saw it as a challenge. But my parents always explained to me that this was a gift, and that you one day will figure out why.

From the bicycle, then went to baseball. My brothers were both all-stars in Little League in Staten Island, and then went on to high school. I recall my brother Keith won the city championship for Tottenville High School in Staten Island, a competition across New York City for baseball. So I always wanted to be just like them. And I wanted to play baseball.

So when it was my turn to do so, my father didn't want to hold me back. There was a pitcher for the USA team, for the baseball team, who then became a professional baseball pitcher for the New York Yankees. His name was Jim Abbott. He had one arm, and was a pitcher

that used to hold his glove on one hand -- or I should say, up against his chest as he threw the ball, and then he would put his glove on that same hand and catch when it was time to field.

My father used that model and taught me how to quickly transfer the glove. And I was able to participate and be able to be part of the Little League. Matter of fact, I do recall, and it was something -- my mother, just make you laugh a little bit. But my mother at one point had a procedure done in the hospital. She found out that I was throwing a no-hitter in Little League. I want to say I was maybe 11 or 12 years old in doing so.

She signed herself out of the hospital, ran down to the baseball field. My brother's coach, his name was Mr. Tierney, he came to see me. And when the game was over, they gave me a Tottenville baseball hat. I still have it. Just to see the sense of community and support. That isn't always the case. And I'm very lucky to have such a great support.

>> MIZUTANI: Wow, well, with each success, you're motivated to do the next thing, so what was next?

>> SWANSON: Well, just in terms of some other items, I wanted to then transfer that into working. I tried to work in a pizzeria, and I wound up burning my hand very bad. My mother did seek supports for me, and I was able to get supports as I was going through school, because the fear was that I wasn't going to be able to work.

I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do for my career because of my disability, and how it would hold me back. Even doing so, and I had mentioned this before, I was always told to not let people know what my disability was, to hold it in. Don't let them know, because they're going to treat me differently. And I did see that happen. When I was in school, and I did alert my gym teacher that I had cerebral palsy, I was told to sit down, because he was afraid that I was going to get hurt.

I gotta thank my parents, because I never took no for an answer. I had to show people. I would constantly try to prove myself, and just to be part of the community. I wouldn't accept

no when I knew I could do more. And that was that sense of community that my parents instilled in me, that if you think you can, you will. And I always keep that with me today.

>> MIZUTANI: Innately, I think you do believe that. I think you were born with that, between you and me, which is pretty amazing.

Did you have surgery? Were there any corrections?

>> SWANSON: I did. I had to wait until I was 16 years old until my growth plate closed in my leg to actually have my tibia and fibula fused. That's my shin and calf, the bone right there. I have it fused to my ankle. I had to take about nine months in bed for it to heal. So that was a very challenging time in my life as well. I had to take my Regents at home, while I had my leg up in the air.

>> MIZUTANI: Oh, my.

>> SWANSON: Yeah, it was quite challenging, but we did overcome that as well. Over time, I think I might have given my parents quite a scare, because as I got used to having the cast, and realizing that the walker was getting me places a little slow, I decided to hop across the floor and just continue to do different things, because that was my personality. You know what? I felt comfortable, I got used to it, and I'll overcome it.

>> MIZUTANI: You used the computer when you were in bed recovering from that surgery, didn't you? It was a long recovery.

>> SWANSON: Yeah, so I'll make you laugh with that story as well, if I may. I wound up using the computer. And somebody new to the computer, you always hear that it crashed. It wasn't me. I didn't do it. I don't know how this happened. That happened about three or four times. So my parents were like, "That's it. I'm not bringing the computer back anymore. Either you fix it or it's going in the garbage."

So that actually set me on another path, because I wound up fixing the computer and learning how to do that. And that actually was that inclination of hey, I love computers. I'm

going to go to school for computers. And that's what I did in college. I pursued a degree in networking and programming from St. John's University.

It's very funny, because certain things happen in your life, and you don't realize them until afterwards. So even when working on the computer, and realizing how to fix them and how to connect them to a network and program them in order to work, and connect to other items, I was like, "This is great. I could do this for the rest of my life." And that set me on my path when I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do in high school.

>> MIZUTANI: It was a good initial goal, wonderful. But today, look at now, Donny, you are the principal of Pathways to Graduation in Staten Island, New York, which is within the New York City Department of Education. And we know Pathways is a unique program, because it supports students who were previously unsuccessful in other schools. So it is a pivotal time for them educationally. How did you get there from computer science?

>> SWANSON: So when I went to St. John's University, and I pursued a degree in computer science, I wound up working in the computer field without doing work-based learning. I didn't do any internships or anything along those lines. I just applied for the job.

And I'm going to be upfront with you, even as much as I loved computers, when I got there, I said, "Wait a minute. I can't sit behind a desk for the whole day. This is not for me." So I wound up getting more and more -- actually, if I could step back.

I got involved in my college as much as possible. And making those key connections, I was able to connect with a lot of different professionals in the field for the college, and I wound up becoming a student body president for the freshman year, and again for the sophomore. But by then, I wanted to challenge that, and I wound up becoming the student body president for the university overall in my junior and senior year.

>> MIZUTANI: Wow.

>> SWANSON: So when I got to the job and realized, "Hey, I don't necessarily like this," I called

up my dean at the time from the college, and I said, "You know what? I may want to come back to college." He said, "I have a great opportunity for you. Why don't you become a grad assistant," because I had mentioned I wanted to get into the field of education, because I loved to tutor. And he said, "I'll pay for your Master's degree, and you come work for us."

>> MIZUTANI: Whoa.

>> SWANSON: That was tremendous [laughing]. That was tremendous, because I didn't necessarily have the funds to go on to a Master's degree, when I didn't have a job to pay for my undergrad. So just an important fact about my support and my social well-being as well.

So I did that. When I got my first job, I wound up going into I.S. 075 in Huguenot, Staten Island. It's a middle school, and I wound up teaching academic interventions mathematics for students that were -- excuse the term -- promotion in doubt; that were having difficulty in that subject area.

>> MIZUTANI: That was your first job in education?

>> SWANSON: That was, yes.

>> MIZUTANI: That was your old middle school?

>> SWANSON: That's correct, that's where I went to school as a child as well. That's typical, that most educators will go back to the schools in which they know. At the time, there was a new principal there who just started, and I didn't necessarily know him specifically. His name was Mark Cannizzaro. I'm so glad that I met him, too, and I'll tell you that in a moment.

But my old assistant principal was still there. His name is Mark Herman, and he was one of the references for me as I began to sub there, and I was hired full-time from subbing. From that point, I realized how important it was for students to have a different -- I should say, to provide a different way of learning for all students. That not one way of learning or catering to different learning styles was key.

And from the math program, my principal at the time gave me the opportunity to develop my own program called LEGO Robotics. And I was able to provide math concepts through an inquiry-based learning, where students were hands-on. And it not only did math concepts, but connected the computers -- basic programming. At the time, I want to call it GUI-based, and that's graphic user interface, for those that are unfamiliar with programming. But it was the beginning stages of programming for students.

So I absolutely loved it. And still to this day I have conversations with that principal, with Mark Cannizzaro, and I said, "I don't know how you did that with only two or three years of me being within the system, and you gave me the opportunity to write my own curriculum and start my own course." I cannot thank him enough.

We wound up doing that. And from that program, we developed a robotics team and competed in the FIRST LEGO League. And that stands for "For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology." And it was an international tournament. But we wound up competing against all the middle schools in New York City, as well as freshman-year high school, because it won't from 9 years old to 14 years old. And we wound up winning. And we represented the United States in an international tournament against 110 teams from 35 different countries.

>> MIZUTANI: What an experience.

>> SWANSON: We were able to bring 30 students to Atlanta, Georgia. That in itself was an experience [laughing], but it was an amazing, amazing time to be on the 50-yard line in the Georgia Dome, having everybody compete. And just an experience that I'll always take with me as I move on to my next step in my next career.

But from there, I was asked to -- or actually, I accepted a position to serve as an assistant principal for students with disabilities in District 75. District 75 is a program that supports students with disabilities in a separate environment. It's inclusive to all different types of disabilities. It doesn't necessarily mean that the student has to be alternate assessment,

where they're not graded and receive a diploma, but there is a world of options. I believe that that is actually their motto.

So I was overseeing alternate assessment students ages 14 to 21 who were not necessarily on track for a diploma, but to provide vocational training as well as opportunities to pursue different domains of transition planning. So we went towards career and personal goals for this. They did have some post-secondary programs as well, but they were not on the matriculated level. So we were in preparation to do so. And I absolutely loved this program.

As six years within that role, as an assistant principal, I was asked to then pursue or serve as an instructional specialist for the Central Special Education Office at the New York City Department of Education, under the leadership of Christina Foti. That helped me focus on not just students within District 75, but inclusive to all students within the borough of Staten Island. And I was across all districts that take place here on Staten Island.

So with that said, we did focus on the three domains of transition planning, and I've come to realize that the community plays such an important part in our students' education. I even recall one of my old professors, who is now the Chief Operating Officer at the Staten Island Hilton Garden Inn. Her name is Kristine Garlisi, and I still keep in contact with her, but there was something she said to me that really resonated with me. And that was that your network is your net worth.

I was like, wait a minute, that makes a lot of sense now within that role, because it made me realize that it takes a community to do this work. You can't do it alone. And the importance of bringing in those opportunities, even for like myself, when I didn't necessarily do an internship in my program, and didn't necessarily like the position that I was in for computers. So giving that opportunity and just connecting to support our youth is key in their next steps, in their career, in their life. So that's something that always stayed with me, in order to go there.

And then from there, there was -- I absolutely loved supporting the schools. I worked with transition team leaders who specifically worked on this type of work within each school, as well as the administration teams. But there was one thing as time went on, and that was more interaction with the kids that I was missing.

I wound up doing a presentation with the superintendent from District 79, which you had mentioned before, supports students with alternative learning environments, some of which are over-aged and under-credited at that point. And his name was Superintendent Bob Zweig. And when he was speaking, I absolutely was captivated by all the different options and supports that were available within District 79. And he was talking about the different programs that were taking place -- one specifically being Pathways to Graduation.

And when the opportunity came about, I applied to the position to serve as principal. And here I am today, serving with an amazing team of like-minded people with a growth mindset that won't accept students to hear that I'm not good enough, or I can't do this. This is another alternative pathway. This is not less. And that's something that I'm helping some of our other neighboring schools learn, that a high school equivalency diploma is not less than a regular diploma. It's just an alternative pathway.

At Pathways to Graduation, we're able to take the students' Regents credits and connect them towards the GED exam, which is, again, the high school equivalency that students will use. But they provide flexible schedules so that a student, if there is a barrier between work or family, they have other opportunities in order to succeed.

There are multiple locations, as well as day and evening courses, but it's just so much more than just preparation for the HSE program, because there's college and career services. There is workforce development internships. Even other programs are able to connect with us.

So if one of our students -- and I probably should have mentioned this before, but the students in which we serve are 18 to 21 years old. That if they have a family of their own, there

is a Life program which we can provide day care for their child while they go to school. We are in connection with another program Called Co-op Tech which provides skill sets towards trades as well. So they're able to be dually enrolled. And even for our undocumented students, we have immigrant services and legal support. And there's so much more.

The real piece that really captivated me around Pathways to Graduation is the care for the students beyond the walls of the school building. And that's really what -- it just spoke to every core value I have as an educator. And I said, "I have to be part of this. This is such an amazing program," and I'm lucky enough that I did get the opportunity to do so.

>> MIZUTANI: Amazing. Every time you talk about it, the joy just radiates off you.

[LAUGHTER]

It's always fun, and it occurs to me that your life and what you're doing at Pathways, there's like a parallel track there. Because you sought to find alternative ways to participate. You found them. You're a full participant. In fact, I venture to say you participate more fully than many people that I know. But it's the same with the kids, correct? There are issues that are interfering with their education, and here comes Pathways with all these alternatives.

>> SWANSON: Yes, that's really the premise around it, that it's not less, it's just another alternative. There are barriers within life that sometimes we cannot change, but that doesn't mean that we can't adapt, and we can't be flexible to still meet our goals.

One thing that I always had in mind specifically around having a disability is there's no one right way to do something. You can find an alternative pathway to completing a certain task, or doing a certain job. So the same holds true for our students. We'll be able to meet them halfway.

>> MIZUTANI: Yes, well, the word ableism refers to attitudes in society that devalue and limit the potential of people with disabilities. I think society is a little more aware of the concept of ableism now, but we still have a long way to go. What advice would you give to professionals,

young people with disabilities, and their families?

>> SWANSON: If I could start with the professionals, whether those that are working with individuals with disabilities, just to say don't judge a book by its cover. A disability in itself has different variations. We're not just a character. We're not just a specific category within a certain disability. And we are so much more. So be open.

Be willing to hear more, because we may be able to simplify a task, because I do feel that individuals with a disability are some of our most creative minds, because they're constantly thinking on how to find an alternative way to complete a task that would be different to their neurotypical peers.

Let's just take Temple Grandin, for an example. She completely revolutionized the slaughterhouse approach with our cows and things along those lines. That now has become a norm, when before it wasn't specifically like that. Just being open and willing to hear, or not be so quick to judge someone because of their physical or cognitive delay. Our disabled community has so much to offer.

For our disabled community, I do want to just explain to you to challenge the norms. What lies here in your core, your self-determination, you know what you can do. Don't let anyone hold you back. If you're not able to complete a certain task as somebody else, that doesn't mean you can't complete it. You know or you will find a way to do so, and that may turn out to be something that you can share with others, just as I'm doing today.

And somebody can grow from your story or from your certain process, and continue to be more, to take it from there. The sky's the limit. With technology here today, we have so many opportunities now to participate where we didn't before. So don't let anybody hold you back.

>> MIZUTANI: I think that's exciting. I think the future is actually pretty exciting. I'm just wondering, just in case Lou Ferrigno is listening in now, is there anything that you'd like to say

to him?

>> SWANSON: I mean, on a personal level, it has always been my dream to meet him, to say thank you. I've tried to contact him on Facebook. I've tried to connect with him for quite some time now. I get it, don't get me wrong. I'm a 41-year-old adult with two children. I'm not going to be a priority.

But just to say thank you, because he has changed my life, whether he realizes it or not. And that's the reason that I agreed to do this interview, because you never realize what could or who's going to listen in, and who's going to then change their story. So just to say thank you for what you did for me, because I wouldn't be here without you. That one conversation that your father had with my father, based on your story, has changed my entire life, and I'm so thankful.

>> MIZUTANI: It's a beautiful thing, and it's extra beautiful that you're giving back in the same way. You've been a lucky guy, Donny, but I see that you're making a lot of our kids lucky guys and gals, so I thank you for that. Thank you very much for joining us. It's been such a treat, a thrill.

>> SWANSON: It's been my pleasure, and anything I could ever do. INCLUDEnyc is the epitome of what my father needed, just if I may. Because having the opportunity to connect with other parents and have the resources for families with disabilities is key, as you've seen from my story.

>> MIZUTANI: Thank you, again.

>> SWANSON: Have a great day.

>> MIZUTANI: See everybody soon, next time, on "Disability, Inc."