

## **Donna Kennedy with Colin Montgomery**

>> COLIN MONTGOMERY: Welcome to "Disability, Inc." I'm Colin Montgomery, Senior Family Educator at INCLUDEnyc. Today I have the great privilege of speaking with Donna Kennedy about the history and evolution of private special education schools in New York. Donna has been working in the field of special education for over 30 years, and the past 28 years at the Gillen Brewer school. Since 2003, she's been Head of School at Gillen Brewer, which is a private special education school in Manhattan that serves a diverse student body. Gillen Brewer's comprehensive program balances social/emotional, and academic education. Welcome, Donna.

>> DONNA KENNEDY: Hi, Colin, nice to be with you today.

>> MONTGOMERY: It's absolutely our pleasure. You've been actively involved in the private special education system for decades, and we're so delighted to have you as our expert to help us better understand the history of private special education schools in New York, like Gillen Brewer. There are so many fascinating questions about how these schools differ from public schools in their special education programming; how these schools came to be; and how they're faring today. I can't wait to get into all of this.

But let's first define what these schools are. They are publicly funded, private special education schools that came to be in 1976, when the state granted contracts to private schools in order to educate the small but important handful of public school students whose needs could not be met in the public system. Once under contract, the schools became publicly funded as part of the continuum, or range, of special education programs that the public school

system provides to meet the special education requirements of the IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

We set the stage, Donna. We'd love for you to share how things look on the ground in private special education schools, how they've changed, and what impacts the changes to private special education schools has had on students with disabilities and their families. So to get that conversation started, could you share in more detail why private special education schools are necessary for students? And how they're different from public schools offering special education services.

>> KENNEDY: Sure. I'll speak a lot from -- being that I've had three decades in this field, I'll frame a lot of my answers from my experience of being at Gillen Brewer. And working with families now where the preschoolers that I had when I started in this program are now into adulthood, and so being in touch with those families, and really seeing how the landscape has changed dramatically in terms of what's available for families. And still, what is not, right?

And it continues to be a really challenging landscape for families to navigate. Certainly, you always have a group of parents who are more private school-minded parents, who don't intend their children to be in public school. But then you have a larger number of families who depend on the public school system to educate their children. And when they learn that they have a child who is special needs, they're looking to that public school system to best support their children.

That's where, I think, that they first come on the scene of what it's like to enter into a system to educate their newly diagnosed autistic child at the age of 2.8 coming into a public

bureaucracy. And with recommendations of getting as many services as possible, as early as possible, and that is when they are introduced to this behemoth of a bureaucracy of trying to navigate getting services for their child through a public model.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, so true.

>> KENNEDY: Fortunately, today, there are so many more groups, such as INCLUDEnyc, that can help parents navigate that. But many families don't know what their options are, and so they go into these experiences learning that their child is failing year after year after year. Until someone takes the time to help define why they're failing, or what options there are in public school available to them. And then they start that road down, kind of what are the options for public schools?

So that's where they learn that they could either have some individual support or an aide or a SEIT into the classroom. Now there's collaborative team-teaching models, which didn't exist in 1992, when I was starting out as a teacher. There are Nest programs that didn't exist in 1992 when I started as a teacher.

>> MONTGOMERY: Those are for students with autism.

>> KENNEDY: For students with autism. And a defined group of students with autism, right? So it's not just a model for any child who has autism. And that has to be defined for parents and understanding what that means.

So through the years, I think the public school system has tried to really meet the needs of as many special needs students as they can, but then there is a large group of students for whom those public school models just don't work. It's because you're also trying to meet the

needs of these students in these large schools -- large lunchrooms, large playgrounds -- and sometimes that size, that level of space, the immense kind of space that these public schools exist in, are just not tolerable for a lot of children, and it doesn't create the kind of learning environment that they need.

And so as time has kind of rolled on, the decision where children -- where they are not able to provide a free appropriate public education in the public school system, that led to decision-making that would allow students to be placed in other kinds of schools that would be more defined according to the needs of the student. And that's a long-winded answer to how our schools kind of came to be -- the state-funded schools came to be. That is where it was determined that students would be able to be placed in other settings other than a public school, because the public school couldn't meet the free appropriate public educational standard that was designed when the Individualized Disabilities Education Act came out on the scene.

So state-funded schools kind of came into operation to help meet the needs of these students whose needs couldn't be met in the public school system. So that's where Gillen Brewer came into educating students, is trying to meet the needs and fill the niche where the public schools couldn't. As a state-funded school, you are an independently run school, but you are state-funded in that you are getting funds through the state that are approved for your children to attend your program.

>> MONTGOMERY: That's all super helpful information. Just thinking of some of those key terms you used, just the fact that public school options in New York City truly are a behemoth, that

there's so many options, many of which work well for many students. But there can be challenges with the nature of the programming or the size of the school or the classroom programs. Yeah, it can really pose challenges. It's so good to know that there are these programs available, kind of niche programs for students who truly need them.

Just connecting it to a family who is moving through the process of considering a private special education school, one that's funded through the state, how much advocacy is needed to attain a placement, Donna, for the typical family? Or maybe there isn't a typical family.

>> KENNEDY: I don't think there's a typical family. I think that if you are fortunate to come across a group of educators through the Committee on Special Education, the CSE, or CPSE, the Committee on Preschool Special Education. These are the systems that parents will go through in order to get the services or the placement, a specialized placement, either in a public school or -- at that meeting, it would be determined if there is not a public school option, then they would be sent over to a placement office, which would help them then find a state-funded school.

Sometimes that works for families, where there is a group of people in that CSE meeting who are educated enough to know about a parent's options -- and many times, they are not. And so the parent is just leaving the meeting saying, "We don't have -- we don't exactly have what your child needs, but the closest we have is this particular model." And it's not even what is recommended in their Individualized Education Plan, their IEP, which is a legal document that allows the parent to have their child placed in what would be deemed as an appropriate public school model.

So the parent is also looking -- the Board of Education also looks at that document, not as a placement, but as a set of services. And these services exist in a place. So the public school might be able to offer some parts of those services, but then you might have to go out and get other services, related services, somewhere else. And that's where parents get very, very confused. Because they are offered a placement that is not what is recommended, but it's the only thing in that district that is close enough to what is being offered. And a parent that doesn't know they have options, ends up saying, "Okay, well, if that's all you can offer me, I guess that's what I have to take."

So when a child comes to Gillen Brewer out of a public school, often they have been placed in a setting that was completely inappropriate for them. That it was recommended they be in a class of eight to one -- eight to one to one. And that doesn't exist in that school, and so they put them in a 12 to one to two. Or they put them in an ICT program that has 24 kids in it, but they kind of -- the parent kind of understands that, "But wait a minute, there's going to be a special ed teacher, and there's only ten other special ed kids in the room. So I thought my child would be in a smaller setting." Well, no, they're actually in a room with 24 children, and that special educator is in there. However, not during lunch, not on the playground. They might be pulled for sets, for special ed teaching in other classrooms.

So the parent starts to learn too late that their child is now in an environment, and their child is struggling tremendously, and the public school is kind of saying, "Well, this is the best we can do."

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, yeah. And just hearing you kind of mentioning some of those class settings, the eight to one to one. We're talking about eight students, a teacher, then a paraprofessional assigned to the class. Twelve to one to one, twelve students -- these are potential special education program recommendations that are part of that continuum, that range of programs and services that school districts are required to offer. And that happens to be the range of services in New York City. Sets is along the range of programs as well. It's small group instruction, generally, or it could be a special ed teacher working in a general education class, working with students. So just defining those terms for any listener for whom those may be new terms.

But that all comes back to that idea you mentioned before about free and appropriate public education, right? What is truly necessary for the student to make progress. And they may not be able to find it in a school, as you mentioned. The school could say this is the best that we can offer. Certainly understand how families may not understand that there are these options outside of the public school system. And that families may be coming at this a little bit later, and they realize, "Oh, there's this program that's so much better, meets the needs of my student outside of the smaller class program I was in in my Department of Ed school." It's all very helpful to hear.

And just going back to the nature of those funded, approved, private special education schools --

>> KENNEDY: *Sorry, Colin, hold on. I'm doing a podcast, so -- sorry, I should have put myself on do not disturb. Okay, thanks. [LAUGHTER] Sorry about that.*

>> MONTGOMERY: *No worries, no problem. So I'll just roll it back.*

So I'm pivoting back over to these private schools, Donna. Just thinking about the nature of them, they're funded and approved by the state. So what goes behind a school becoming funded and approved? What kind of dictates that status?

>> KENNEDY: So when Gillen Brewer decided to open, the founders at the time, Laura Bilicic and Laurie Dubos, they had to apply to the state. So you apply to the state in identifying who you're going to serve. And at that time, there were different kinds of categories that children were placed into by these Committee on Special Education.

So preschool right now, in the committee on Preschool Special Education, it's "preschooler with a disability." Back in 1992, it wasn't just an umbrella term. You had kids divided into different categories. That's where you had pervasive developmental delay, and you had lots of different categories. So the DSM -- what was the DSM-III, I think, at the time, which is the diagnostic manual that kind of categorizes kids into their diagnostic places, they kind of used those diagnoses as a way to kind of identify what category will those kids be defined in when they go into the public school system.

So I think now there's 11 of them, that a child is either speech impaired, or they have a learning disability, so they have those different categories. But at the time, in 1992, they didn't have, and they didn't have the same categories. So as a school, you had to try to define who are the kids that you're going to serve. So when you apply to the state, you say, okay, we're going to be this big of a school. We're going to serve this many children. And we're going to serve children in these particular categories. And you put that application in. You have to define what

curriculum you're going to use. Back then, there wasn't the special ed itinerant teachers. Just coming on the scene in 1992 was --

>> MONTGOMERY: These are those SEITs you spoke about?

>> KENNEDY: That's right, the SEITs I talked about. Applied behavior analysis, ABA, BCBA people, that really wasn't something going on in New York City. So we had to define ourselves as a preschool and a school-aged program that was going to serve kids with learning disabilities, speech impair -- no, not even learning disabilities at that time. We were just speech impaired, and I think PDD, pervasive developmental delay, which now is under the umbrella of autism. But they don't now diagnose kids with PDD anymore. It's diagnosed under the umbrella of autism.

So you kind of had to decide which niche were you going to fill that the public schools couldn't fill. And then you wait for the state to come back and approve you. And at that time, they're going to give you a rate per student that you're going to serve that is based on what is called the regional weighted average. As you can imagine, running a city in the school and the expense of running a city school is very different than running a school in a very small town in upstate New York.

>> MONTGOMERY: Sure, sure, I can only imagine.

>> KENNEDY: Right, but the rate is regional weighted. So you're kind of grouped in with a lot of other schools, and they kind of give you an average, and you have to just take what that assigned rate is -- which from the beginning, did not cover the cost of what it really costs to educate the kids that you were serving. So just straight out of the gate, you're operating at a

deficit. But you're serving the kids that the public schools can't serve, and they have agreed that they can't serve them, to allow them to come to your school.

>> MONTGOMERY: Exactly, okay. That's really helpful to hear, just that kind of -- the case study of Gillen Brewer, and how you went through that process of approval, when it comes to deciding disability classifications or categories, to create that kind of niche model that's responsive to provide that appropriate education for students. And those curriculum decisions and funding decisions, we're certainly going to keep exploring.

It's a nice segue to start thinking about the fact that the private special education schools in New York City and across the state are a mix of these funded schools that we've been talking about up until now largely, but also non-funded schools. And the schools that don't accept funding in New York are known as non-approved private schools. So I'd love to discuss those for a few moments. How are these non-approved private special education schools different from the funded and approved schools in status, and in their history, Donna?

>> KENNEDY: Sure. So we largely -- historically, we have been a state-funded school, up until just a couple years ago, where we changed our status, and we discontinued our contract with the city. And we turned fully private, which means that we no longer receive any kind of funding, public funding at all; that our students all pay -- our families all pay tuition, or we have a reduced kind of way of helping families get here.

But we discontinued the acceptance of these public funds, because we were having to raise so much money to operate our school, and we had -- there's a tremendous amount of work and reporting that you have to do when you are a state-funded school. You have to abide

by all of the city and state requirements, and the city and the state require different things. So even your database can't be one database, because the way you need to report things is very different. And every couple years, they decide they're going to try something new to have their finger more on the pulse of what's happening out there with the state-funded schools and the schools that are not under the public school umbrella.

So that's more bureaucracy put on you, right? There's more oversight that they're trying to put in, and they're not quite sure how to do it. So you're constantly in this state of being responsible to report out whatever they tell you you have to report out -- but they're not quite sure what they're going to ask you to report out.

>> MONTGOMERY: And Donna, just thinking about "they," is that the state education department?

>> KENNEDY: It's both. So as a state-funded school, you have to sign a contract with the city, but you have to be approved by the state.

>> MONTGOMERY: Oh, okay, so the kind of two levels there.

>> KENNEDY: Right, so your contract is with the city. So if the public schools close, you close. If the public schools stay open, you stay open. If the public schools close, but you want to stay open, buses aren't running. Everything resolves around kind of how the public schools are operating, their calendar, what you're required. But you have a little more flexibility in how you want to run your program, based on the curriculum that the state has approved.

This is where kind of substantial equivalency, that a lot of schools are talking about right now. The idea was that you can be separate, but you have to be equivalent, substantially

equivalent, to what the public schools offer. So that's where the state is kind of saying, "Okay, we approve your curriculum. We approve that you're a viable institution." But the city is saying, "Okay, that may be, but you have to follow all of our rules." And as a very small school, with a very small administration, with a very small budget, with parents who can't do fundraising, it makes it really, really challenging to operate and support the families the way you need to on a shoestring budget with a rate that is not growing -- or we saw six years of freezes in our rate, when it was determined that they just didn't have the money.

>> MONTGOMERY: So goes back to that regional weighted average for the approved schools. You're talking about the case of the approved schools.

>> KENNEDY: I'm talking about the case of the approved schools. So we had made a decision when we were up to having to raise over \$2 million a year to operate a very small school of 86 children, that we just could not sustain this anymore. And we did not see any movement in the state that was telling us -- after repeatedly going back to them to ask them to increase our rate, there was no response to the many schools who were struggling to help us. And in fact, preschool was the worst. We had freezes of up to six years. No cost of living increases, nothing.

And so we were averaging \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year per child deficit that we were not getting from the state -- that we were having to fundraise for. And that really finally made the decision that we were not going to be able to sustain it. And we are an outlier in that we have been so fortunate to do that kind of fundraising, to be able to sustain our model. Many, many, many schools have closed, not being able to do that.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, and that's a big part of why we wanted to speak with you. You have this deep wealth of experience working in the system. And there's been this marked shift among the private special education schools in terms of their status. There's fewer approved schools that have kept their contracts with the state and the city to fund those schools' tuition. And many other schools have closed, just as you noted.

So I imagine some of what you shared with Gillen Brewer in terms of the funding challenges, the challenges of getting the reimbursements through that regional weighted average, extends to those other schools as well. Were there other challenges that schools have faced that have accounted for this shift?

>> KENNEDY: I think it's -- that's mainly it. It's the money. I think that -- also, you start to -- we have strong missions in our schools. We got into this to serve families who couldn't be served in public school. We really don't go into it as an independent school to serve families who would otherwise always have been in independent schools.

And so in looking at how unsupported these schools have been along the way, both from a city perspective of kind of taking a position that we serve wealthy families, and a state position of saying we can't afford to give you more money, the parents are kind of caught in the crossfire. And we know our families. We know that we're not serving -- 50% of my families qualify for tuition assistance. And we don't have a scholarship model, but if we did, they would all fall into that category.

And so there's a kind of myth that all of those of us who are independent special education schools, that when we left our state-funded status, that we desire to serve only the

wealthiest sector of New York City. That is very much not the case. We're very fortunate that we're able to have a very diverse socioeconomic community, so that those who can give, do. And that helps support those who can't. And it allows us to serve a good number of students who otherwise wouldn't have access to a private special education, if we didn't have that kind of support.

So it just -- when you're not properly supported financially, institutions have to do what they can to try to keep alive. And so you veer off from your mission, not that you want to do it, but you want to continue to serve your population and serve them well, and serve a diverse group of students. When you don't have the resources to do that, then schools are forced to do fundraising at a level that we were never designed to do. It's really -- we've tried very, very hard, and I think that we have successfully stayed true to our mission. But that's because I have a stellar board who has made fundraising their priority, and they're largely not families in the school.

So we've been able to find a lot of strong resources to support our families, and not put the burden of that on our parent body. But again, that's very unique. And I recognize that. Many schools don't have the ability to do that, so we're fortunate in that way.

>> MONTGOMERY: I'm hearing just there's more kind of operating flexibility now that you're in this non-approved status at Gillen Brewer. That's helped you do the work, carry out the mission better, to the benefit of student and the families.

>> KENNEDY: Absolutely. I get to design the class sizes that meet the needs of the students. If I think a student fits better in this particular class size, then we can make that recommendation and put that child in that class size.

>> MONTGOMERY: Oh, interesting.

>> KENNEDY: The needs of the student drive the program, not the other way around. So that's the design of an independent model, is we independently can do what we feel is in the best interest of our community and our students, and it's not driven by a bureaucracy of saying, "Well, this is the best we can do." No, we're not going to accept children who this would not be the right model for them.

And it's also true that we're a school that we would not accept a child as much because we think that they could do well in a public school, and that would be a recommendation for us to not take a child at Gillen Brewer. As much as a child who needs more support than what we could offer. We're not just going to take a family because they can pay the tuition, if it's not the right placement.

We feel very strongly that, true to our mission, that we are here to provide an education for those students who otherwise could not find an appropriate placement in public school. And we continue to do that. And we will continue to send parents into the public schools if we feel their child can do that, and their child can handle that, and we think they're in a school district that they do have a model that their child could do well in.

So that's a little bit different than some of maybe other special ed schools might have. But we serve a population of students that are more involved than having, maybe, mild learning disabilities. Our students really have more significant needs than that.

>> MONTGOMERY: Okay, yeah, that's all very, very interesting. There's so much to consider there, with this shift in status, and the challenges you've faced at Gillen Brewer. To me, as a former special education teacher and during my time at INCLUDE, this is all a history that's kind of new to me. It very much seems like an under-the-radar history of special education in New York that's really helpful to know -- to really understand the full sense of programs and services that are necessary for students with IEPs throughout the state, and certainly in the city.

Kind of connecting back to Gillen Brewer and you being at the center of these major shifts over the past 30 years, Donna, I was just wondering, any reflections you have in working in special ed over the past three decades? How has your work evolved over time?

>> KENNEDY: I think that we've been able to refine what we do with kids. There's a lot more data on what's effective and what's best practice for students. We don't prescribe to one model of learning. I'm fortunate to have three decades of experience under my belt, so I can draw from a lot of different experiences and educational models. I don't believe in throwing the baby out with the bath water, as they say.

I went through the whole genre of whole learning, whole reading. And I don't prescribe to any one particular thing. But I love big books, and I think big books have a place in literature, and that is a genre of education that brought a lot of different ways of thinking about learning

with children and literacy, that I think can live very well today. But we tend to kind of not learn from history, and we try to reinvent education.

And I think that -- I tell the staff all the time, I feel like the grandmother who's saying, "In my day, when I taught --"

[LAUGHTER]

But it's to illustrate that everything old is new again for a reason. Good practice is good practice. Early childhood education remains to be centered around relationships, trust, social/emotional learning, hands-on learning. Not rushing development too fast. Whether your child is in a neurotypical kind of environment, or they're in a special needs kind of environment, that's all good for all children. And so, I like to try to bring in what's normal, because I think in special education, we tend to over-pathologize things –

>> MONTGOMERY: Very true.

>> KENNEDY: -- and so parents getting very confused as to what's just a typical toddler, preschool kind of behavior, or what's a part of their disability. And I have the experience both as an educator for such a long time, a preschool educator, and a parent, to say, "No, that's just a child throwing a temper tantrum. That's not a behavioral issue under the diagnosis."

And that, to me, is helpful for parents, because it normalizes being a parent of a child, as opposed to always be a parent of a special needs child. And that's the part that I think over time, I have seen -- I don't know. I feel that parents are so inundated with so much information, and it's very, very confusing. And they come into schools more read than the educators themselves, because they have this wealth of information in front of them.

When your child is diagnosed with a disability, you can just go down the rabbit hole of Google, and just come out just more confused than ever. I think that's where we as special educators, our job is to help sort out some of those things, and get parents on a track of saying let's work together and really kind of be in the moment -- and not get way too ahead of ourselves in terms of worrying about the future. Because I can tell you with certainty, the future of special education is going to change. So what you think is there now, that is going to change. But you can help shape it.

And that's where I think a central part of the Gillen Brewer mission is working with parents as partners. And even we're in the pandemic, and when we had to switch to remote, the first thing we did was start surveying parents every week about what's working, what's not working. What can we do differently? What's your schedule at home? What kind of technology do you have at home? How many siblings are in the home? Where is your child going to learn?

We know that the environment, what I call is the fourth teacher, because we have three teachers in the classroom, and then you have the environment. And I think the environment is huge. So you can't just lift the school model and just set it in the home, and think that if a parent is just there to listen to you, that it's going to all work out. No, the home environment is a completely different environment. And the parent is not a special ed teacher. The parent is the parent, right?

So our model of working with parents in a partnership, we've just taken this pandemic and we've taken the circumstance and said, okay, don't reinvent -- you know what works. You know how to work with families. You have different circumstances, different environment. So

you have to study that first before you launch something out that no one is going to be able to maintain and sustain. And you've never been remote teachers before. So we have to acknowledge all of these things in front of us that are not known.

And parents who are living with uncertainty every day about having a special needs child, they live in uncertainty. They depend on us to give some structure to the day, and I think this situation has thrown everything up in the air that we as special educators that have known, know what works, know what works with children when they're with us, now we have to go into the home. And we have to try to guide these parents in an environment that's unknown to us.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah.

>> KENNEDY: So it's put us in a very different kind of position, and actually, really good one, I think, for educators. Because we lose sight of what the realities are for our families in living with the students that we serve in school. Understanding when the parent says, "They won't do that for me at home," we now know what that looks like. And just being on a screen in front of that child doesn't mean that they're now going to do what they would do in school, right? That's not happening.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah.

>> KENNEDY: There's been a window into each other's worlds that I think has been really, really important.

>> MONTGOMERY: Deepen the partnership.

>> KENNEDY: Well, completely. And I think that that's what we as educators need to look at and learn, and I think that's the opportunity in front of us when we get into these situations, is

rather than focusing on what's not working, focusing on how bad it is. When we get into that place, it's not productive.

But when we get into the place to say let's study this, let's learn about it, let's work together, let's figure it out together, let's problem-solve -- which, again, is another part of our program at Gillen Brewer. We have a very strong emphasis on problem-solving. When you get to that place, that partnership lends itself to doing really incredible things for the child. Because it's not adults looking at each other saying, "You could do more, you could do more, you could do more, you could do more." We're saying how do we work together to have an impact on this human being that we're responsible for?

It's bigger than ourselves. It's more important than what the adults are dealing with. It's a little human being that we're here to help shape through a pandemic. They don't have a history of what it was like before. They haven't had 40 years of never wearing a mask. All of my kids are wearing masks. The staff never thought they'd be able to do it. I always say, if you set that, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we think kids can't do it, they absolutely will do that every time.

But if you kind of leave yourself open to say, maybe -- so if they were to do it, how would we get them to do it? And it's interesting, because I look at a lot of skills that kids learn, and mask-wearing not being ever one of them on an IEP, you say, okay, but for them to be safe in school, they have to be able to wear it. Why is it that every single kid can wear it? Sensory kids. Kids that have real issues around these things, that I think sometimes if we looked at that skill,

there would be a host of special educators that would say, well, that's not an appropriate skill for that child to learn, because they have sensory issues.

I'm not saying that there aren't kids that don't have significant issues where mask-wearing is problematic. I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying that we went into this with this idea that a lot of our kids would not be able to do it. And they have proved every single person wrong, which is thrilling. I love that. I love when kids prove us wrong and supersede the expectations. I think that's exactly what we need to learn from that.

>> MONTGOMERY: Donna, that's so helpful to just hear that kind of narrative of progress at Gillen Brewer in collaboration. I know COVID is the elephant in the room for any conversation with anyone at this point, and any podcast you're listening to. So I really appreciate you kind of detailing how it's been playing out, and playing out well, overall.

But just connecting back to Gillen Brewer, just so our listeners have a better sense of your mission and model and the students who attend your school. Do you mind spending a couple minutes talking about Gillen Brewer's history? Because you mentioned that you've had pre-K programs, and also, the model and the students you serve.

>> KENNEDY: Sure. So when we started in 1992, we had one preschool child in a rented church space on 93rd and Park Avenue. Our two founders were special education teachers. A group of us, they asked a couple associate teachers to come over with them to kind of see their vision of starting a school with no building, no money, no nothing. You want to come? Sure, yeah, let's go.

So the idea that they really wanted to create a model of a program that really had working with the parents in a partnership at the heart of the program. The family being the heart of the program. Which is why they named the school after their grandmothers, Mattie Gillen and Virginia Brewer, which is how we get our name, Gillen Brewer. So family has been the heart of what we've done since day one, a central focus.

We started with one preschool child. Preschool was the first level that we started with, and we added one preschool class, and then the next year, we added another preschool class. The following year, a kindergarten. So we kind of built as the kids aged up, we added another grade. At that time, we were approved to serve kids preschool through age 8. So we just went to second grade. So that was -- we topped out at 48 kids, and we had classroom sizes of 10 and 12 at that time, with two teachers in each class.

As the school grew, we decided we wanted to expand the program. We wanted to extend the ages. So we got approval to add kids up to age 10. We then added another classroom, and then the building was way too small, and they were going to triple our rent. So the board made the decision to expand the program and move into a different space. At that time, a year prior to that, I was asked to lead the school and become the head of the school. The founders were stepping out. And so that's when I came on the scene in 2003.

So I took the school into its first transition. We moved into -- we doubled in size over one summer, both staff, student body; and tripled the size of our building.

>> MONTGOMERY: Wow.

>> KENNEDY: We're a 12-month program, so you can imagine that we had a couple weeks in between where we literally were moving the whole school.

>> MONTGOMERY: I can only imagine. That's another podcast.

>> KENNEDY: Yeah, that a whole other podcast. So when we moved over here at 410 92nd, on the upper east side, we moved into having 90 students. So 10 classrooms and 90 students, and that's when we started to really design more of the program that we are today, having a preschool class; having classes of ten-one-two students. And now we have classes of six-one-two. So six students, one head teacher, two associate teachers.

We don't have any what is kind of categorized and what we used to have in 93rd when we were a state-funded program, is we had aides. So these were kind of assistants that worked in the classroom to help support the students. We moved from that model into having associate teachers. So all of our associate teachers are in their Master's program. Desire to be special education teachers. Have background in education. Or have a strong background or experience in working in schools. And so it's a higher level of teaching support that we can offer in our program.

And so we've constantly evolved over time. I recently just got approval again to move into middle school.

>> MONTGOMERY: Wow, congrats.

>> KENNEDY: Thank you. So next year, those students, because we're in COVID and because this is such a difficult time for families, we've agreed to allow our students to stay another year after

they would have aged out of our program, so that they can stay with us instead of trying to find another program at a time where you can't even go to an open house.

Because, as I said, environment is important. Our families know that. And so we want to make sure that they're not forced into making decisions that wouldn't be in the best interest of their students.

>> MONTGOMERY: Thank you so much for that overview, Donna. It's so helpful to really -- I really feel like even though I couldn't physically go into Gillen Brewer right now, it's very helpful to get this picture of what the program is like, and all the work you guys have done over the years, over the decades, let alone with COVID. And just in general, based on what you've talked about with Gillen Brewer's, the challenges you've faced over the years as an approved school, and your shift to becoming non-approved, it's very instructive about what challenges private special education schools face around New York, and what the reasons are for the evolution of private schools.

I want to begin wrapping up, and close by asking a couple big-picture questions about private special education schools in New York. In your mind, what overall impact has the shift in status of private special education schools, from approved to non-approved, and the rise of school closures had on students and families?

>> KENNEDY: Access. I mean, everything comes down to money. And I think that as we have had to move to a private model, and have a tuition that actually covers the cost of educating our students, that is a huge tuition. Our tuition ranges from \$90,000 to \$130,000 a year. And families who can afford to pay that are a select group of families who can afford to pay that,

right? So just by the nature of being a private school that sets a tuition at a level that is in the stratosphere, what we call it. It's not lost on us that that is a very high tuition, but that's what it costs. All of our services are embedded in the program. So we know that that is not attainable for all families.

So our board committed, when we went into this model, that we would serve at least 30% of our parent body who couldn't afford that kind of tuition, that we would fundraise and we would put aside funds to support the number of families. That's about the highest percentage that I think any independent private special education school does in terms of offering that level of support. It's very important for us to have a socioeconomic diverse student body, and our board is committed to doing that.

But accessibility. I think that over the years, and I think this plays itself out in what we talked about before, is that the more privatized, the more specialized, the more unattainable it is --

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah.

>> KENNEDY: -- for families who don't have the resources, who don't have access to even know what's available to them. Just last night, we were scrambling to figure out if our kids were going to get bussing, because the public schools closed yesterday. So this podcast will also be a time stamp in history.

>> MONTGOMERY: We're recording this on November 19th, after the Department of Education had that first school closure.

>> KENNEDY: Right. So parents were scrambling, and we quick put out a survey to say who of you could not get here if bussing doesn't happen? Because we had to decide, we want to stay open, but if 25% of our population can't get to school, that's inequitable. So for that reason, we would go fully remote, because we don't want those families who don't have the resources to not have access to their education, and we can't provide a robust model for them if we're also in person.

So that has always driven our decision-making, which makes it really hard. But I see that -- I mean, we see inequity all across the board, no matter what category we can talk about on the public political landscape. And in special education, I think that we're not exempt from that. And our job as special educators and private special educators, it's not only our -- not only should it not be a priority for us, it's an obligation that we have, that we make sure that families can find us; that we can support those families who need support.

I am so grateful to have a group of colleagues within the special education independent school sector. We rely on each other. It is not a competitive group. It's not about stealing students from one school to the other. You can often find that in the independent school sector. We all know each other's schools. We all refer students to each other's schools. We all are trying to help build each other up to be successful, because we know, if we don't exist, our families are not going to be served. And so we're in it together, and I think that is different and exciting.

But it's really super hard, Colin. It's really super hard to exist and sustain schools in this kind of a climate.

>> MONTGOMERY: I can only imagine. I really appreciate all your sharing there. Those are such important considerations and challenges. Equity and access, we know in New York City, around the state, and around the country, these are fundamental issues in general education, let alone in special education.

And just looking ahead, Donna, do you see those kind of issues of equity and access, are those kind of the long-term challenges as well? Do you have any other thoughts about the long-term outlook for private special education schools in New York?

>> KENNEDY: Look, I think that those of us who have the support to get to the other side of this, we'll pick up and then keep running. I think some of those schools, especially those state-funded schools that rely on heavy-duty fundraising to stay afloat, I think those are the schools most at risk right now. And I think it's really important that families who are in those schools recognize that, because they are really going to need a lot of your support. They need your financial support.

There's a place for those schools, and they're trying to hang on with their state funding status. I applaud them. I think they are true heroes in this landscape. But it's going to be really hard for them to come out on the other side of this if people don't really see the value. And those families who are not paying a tuition, who otherwise would be paying a tuition, you need to give it to them. You really need -- this is a time where those who can, absolutely need to. Everybody is depending on it, because it's going to allow those who don't have access to get that access. It's really important, really important.

>> MONTGOMERY: Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you so much for sharing this wealth of knowledge and experience with us, Donna. We're so, so grateful. Private special education schools, they embody the commitment to meaningfully educating students who can't receive a free and appropriate public education in the public schools. How well we honor this commitment to these students is a key indicator of how we're working to provide equitable education for all students with disabilities across all types of school programs and settings.

I hope everyone listening has had a deeper understanding of private special education schools, and the important function that they play, as well as a deeper sense of the stakes that these schools are facing, and how that carries over to students and families.

So thank you so much, Donna. We really appreciated having you, and giving us the overview, history of what it is to be working as an independent private special education school during this time of COVID. It's all so fascinating. So thank you so much, and thanks, everyone, for long. And please tune in next time for another great conversation on "Disability, Inc." Take care, everybody.

>> KENNEDY: Thanks, Colin.

>> MONTGOMERY: Thank you.