**Down to the Struts**

Season 2, Episode 3: Designing Access for Disabled Students

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Guest: Roger Ideishi

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**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to another episode of down to the struts. Today, we'll listen in on my conversation with Roger Ideishi, Director of occupational therapy and Professor of health, human function and rehabilitation Sciences at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. Roger has dedicated his career to designing educational, social, and cultural experiences that build access for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We'll talk about the role that practitioners, healthcare providers and educators can play in breaking down the barriers that disabled children face in school and beyond. Okay, let's get down to it.

Thank you so much, Roger, for joining me for this interview on down to the struts. I'm really delighted to have you today.

Roger Ideishi

Great, nice to be here.

Qudsiya Naqui

Wonderful. So I was wondering if you could start by telling our listeners a little bit about yourself. What led you to study law and occupational therapy and the journey that kind of brought you to direct the Occupational Therapy Program at GW medical school?

Roger Ideishi

I've been an occupational therapist for 36 years. And my initial education and training, you know, was occupational therapy out of college. And I think I was drawn to occupational therapy, I think I've always had this service orientation in my upbringing. I'm a third generation Japanese American, and my father and his family were held in the American internment camps during World War Two. So growing up with this knowledge, I think it did impact me in some way. And while my family really didn't talk about their days in the internment camps very much, I definitely knew about it. And it always struck me as unjust and unAmerican. So you know, having this knowledge, I think, that really influenced the way I looked at the world. I grew up in the 60s, and I distinctly remember seeing the news about civil rights protests and the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And I think all of those things in combination really formed a particular view of the world for me.

So I think justice was a concept that always fascinated me or what actually injustice was a concept that I think, always fascinated me when I went to college, my initial thoughts would be to maybe be a history or geography teacher. But when I was in college, I started doing some volunteer service activities at schools. And I noticed the Occupational Therapist working with students, and it just drew my attention. And I decided to apply to occupational therapy school, I went to University of Washington in Seattle, after I graduated as an occupational therapist, I started working full time, and I was working in New York at the time, and at the time, many of my clients were really a result of violence. And I started having this feeling that my work as an occupational therapist, you know, helping to rehabilitate people from traumatic wounds from guns or knives or domestic violence. I mean, it was it was a very important needed service. But I had this draw that more needed to be done at the root issues, so that I wasn't seeing all these patients after the fact. And so I started studying public health and became interested in social policy. And that's why I decided to go to law school to really gain a deeper understanding of the legal system and social policy that may be influencing or impacting why a certain group of people were faced with these constant environments that were challenging to to live in. So that was my original intent to go in going to law school coming out of law school, I got involved in insurance and contract work at a hospital, it just wasn't rewarding enough for me. So I, know, I knew I had this skill as an occupational therapist, and I just returned to the clinic and really started to take on more leadership roles in building programs and systems for people with disabilities living in the community. You know, I did that for a number of years. And then a colleague of mine asked me if I wanted to teach, and so I started teaching at a university. And you know, that began my 24 years and going strong career in academia. I was the former director of occupational therapy at Temple University and I developed a research agenda really addressing community accessibility and participation for people with disabilities. And I primarily focused on children and youth with developmental disabilities and their families engaging in the community and while I had a pretty satisfying career at Temple University, The opportunity at George Washington University came up. And you know, at George Washington University an opportunity to build a new occupational therapy program was really enticing to me. And while my time at Temple University was was wonderful, I was working with an existing curriculum and framework. And it was a lot of retrofitting. And, you know, trying to embed some of these, what I felt were emerging issues and needs of the community. But at GW, I had this opportunity to build a new innovative program that really begins to train effective practitioners, and to infuse these new values and roles, particularly in the areas of justice and advocacy, which I think are important roles for any healthcare practitioner. And while these aren't common areas of focus in occupational therapy, really, my hope at George Washington University is to really build a different standard for how we look into the future for health care practitioners.

Qudsiya Naqui

That's such a rich and fantastic journey. And I very much identify with parts of it in the sense that, we discovered that we share a law school. So we were both alums of Temple law school, so very proud of that as well. And I called Philadelphia home for a number of years. And I also started out wanting to study law, but my career took some turns that aren't sort of traditional. So I really identify with that story. And I'm really interested later on in the conversation to talk more about how your legal training and notions of advocacy have infused the work that you're now doing as an as an occupational therapist. So a lot of your work from what we've discussed, and what I've learned of you has been focused on making and designing educational and other types of social experiences that are more accessible and inclusive of children with developmental, cognitive and other types of disabilities. And so I was wondering if you could share, from your perspective, what are some of the barriers facing those students in a mainstream school setting?

Roger Ideishi

Yeah, the main barrier, in my perspective is attitude for many of us who, you know, who have health care, training or educational training, you know, and I even include myself in this group of how we were trained as professionals, we were primarily trained in this, what I would call the medical model or a fixing the problem model. And well, I think that medical or remediation model is really important in many, many situations, especially when we're talking about COVID. Today, as well, you know, that model is extremely important, but it's not always the best model in every situation. And while I was primarily trained in this model, I think those who work in community or educational systems, we still bring this model with us. And I think there's a lot of limitations and constraints to using this model in the community or in an educational setting. And so I think a lot of the barriers really are attitudinal and knowledge for those practitioners working in within the community that fixing attitude really focuses on the person having an impairment or having a problem versus acknowledging who that person is, what the strengths of that person are, and creating an environment where the physical and the social environment really creates opportunities and choice for that person to use use their strengths. An example would be the curb cuts that are on sidewalks. And before curb cuts, a person who uses a wheelchair has limited opportunities to navigate the environment. Now with curb cuts, a wheelchair user has more choice and opportunity per cut still aren't everywhere. And there's still a lot of work to be done to really create an accessible environment. But I think your listeners can resonate with that analogy.

You know, I think with particularly in regards to children and youth with developmental disabilities in the classroom, you know, the typical classroom often has pretty standard expectations of how a student should behave. And to a large degree, its students should really behave the same way. Whether it's sitting down for storytime or completing an art project, there really aren't a lot of opportunities for variation or personal expression. And then when we think about the disabled student who may have a different form of expression, or a different way of engaging in the environment, those opportunities just don't exist because of the way we design the classroom where we design activities and lessons.

So if you just take the example of storytime, you know, for some children, the preference is engaging in a very auditory way sitting there intently listening to the storyteller, but for many other students, their preference might be through movement or through voice or through some other means, why not embed movement or voice experiences within the storytelling experience? Why does it have to be unidirectional, or one direction in that storytelling experience and you know, many times I see students who may have this preference for learning through through movement or through voice, trying to really sit during storytime, because that's the expectation. But that student is distracted is fidgety. There's no other opportunities for personal expression or what their preference is for learning. I think if we use the students string, I think it is possible to gain more attention and more engagement from that student. So I think a lot of the barriers really, as I started out, saying, it's really attitude, nobody's practitioners, and their ability to be creative, to be flexible, to be fluid to adapt and create multiple opportunities for the for the student.

I was even one of those practitioners who, like, you have this plan, you gotta stick to it, I was one of those as a young young therapist. But once I really began to change my perspective, changed my attitude about what is possible, and began to explore other ways of engagement, that really derived from the strength of the student, I really started to see much more engaged students in the learning experience. And that's sort of what set me on this, this road to what I do today.

Qudsiya Naqui

That all makes a lot of sense. And I wanted to go back to this idea of the medical model of disability that you mentioned earlier, because I think a lot of both the design of a classroom and also the therapies that are provided, they're so focused on sort of this idea of impairment and cure, it's this kind of dichotomy of there's nothing in between either you're impaired or you're cured, and there's no sort of, Okay, this is your state of being, how can we work with you in within your state of being to create an experience or curate an experience that is going to maximize your strength? So I really like that description of the barrier, because we're so sort of rigid, and what we think of and it's this is all rooted in ableism, this, this idea of students have to learn a certain way, or do things a certain way, or conform in a certain way, because that's the ablest norm. So I really appreciated that description.

So that all being said, What are the sorts of things that you've implemented in your practice? And that you've taught to others to break down these barriers? You know, how do you design and curate an educational experience that is more inclusive, and more accessible?

Roger Ideishi

I think it begins with knowledge and attitude. You know, I think it does come out of this, what you refer to as ableism, that those non disabled individuals see the disabled person as not capable of in so many ways, and I think it just permeates their whole view of that person. And so people who may hold these, these attitudes really don't even give themselves the opportunity to see the potential in other people. So that's one of the first things is really to break down that knowledge and attitude. I try to infuse a lot of cognitive dissonance and how people are thinking and reflecting, you know, I think that's the first step, if the person isn't even willing to, to view the world in a different way, then I think it's really hard to then move on to other things. So there's so that's number one, the approach that I really take is what I call an environmental approach, where we're trying to create opportunities and choice within the environment, how do you begin to create and curate an environment like that?

And I think, you know, it goes back to what you said earlier, is that there isn't just one way to learn, there could be multiple ways to learn, and how do you then create that type of environment, going back to just that simple example of storytime that you actually build into that storytime, you build a movement, you build an voice, you build in other things, that somebody can enter that experience. So there is a lot of intentionality and how you create that environment. That's sort of the approach that I've used when I'm in the classroom or when I talk with other students in, you know, what are they creating? Are they only creating one opportunity? Are they are they creating multiple opportunities in that experience, I think that's a that's another way to do that. But that takes a lot of training and flexibility and adaptability, you know, to create those treat those moments. The other thing that I think often throws a lot of practitioners and students off balance is that sometimes you have to actually change in that moment, and being able to quickly modify that experience in that moment. It's very challenging to do but really trying to support practitioners and support students in having that really adaptive thinking and not getting stressed out when you might have to change things midstream. That's at least in a foundational way how I I've worked with students and practitioners and and how to support and facilitate this more adaptive way of learning.

Qudsiya Naqui

Could you give an example of of where that could play out in like a classroom scenario?

Roger Ideishi

Yeah. So something even as simple as you know, sometimes I walk into a classroom. And I think sometimes people have this idea that rich environment means more, you know, I talk about opportunities and you know, giving lots of choice. I think sometimes people will often think that, well, let's just put more in the environment that gives more choice. And it also makes it more enriching. For some students, that actually might be very disorienting, because they have too many choices they have, there may be too many opportunities, and to make a choice is really stressful. And so something as simple as just covering things up, you know, that changes the environment very quickly. And that helps to focus and direct visual attention, or tactile attention in some way. And something as simple as that I've seen that actually work pretty effectively, it doesn't mean you cover something up all the time. But in those moments where you need that, it's sometimes really just doing really, really simple, simple, simple things actually helps, you know, even sometimes I seen where you're trying to help structure and experience. And so you either use little plastic baskets, to organize things, sometimes that structure is actually too much structure where even visually, they have to then change their attention from plastic basket to plastic baskets. So just taking a few things out of that basket, and then laying them out on the table, and allowing the person to explore on his own or her own, and then starting to make choices about how they're going to use that rather than having to visually focus on one basket and visually focus on another, you know, sometimes just making that little change will actually change the entire perception that that student has. So they don't have to be big and major, you know, changes or strategies, they can be really, really simple strategies. And I think many times people just aren't thinking quickly on their feet. So you know, when I work with students or practitioners in training, I'm really trying to get them to notice those small little changes. And that how easy it is to to do those without, you know, feeling like you're really you know, disrupting something, or disrupting the process. And it sounds really simple. And real easy, are, you know, the strategy just pointed out sounds really easy to employ. But when you're in that moment, and you're like trying to focus on the student, you're trying to focus on the activity, you're trying to focus on the other environmental pieces, it's just really hard, we're just not in the frame of mind to really think in those simple ways, just pointing those out, oftentimes, really help someone, you know, understand the value of doing simple things like that.

Qudsiya Naqui

And I imagine that can be a learned skill, right? As you work with, you know, an experienced practitioner, like yourself. And if someone's in training, and you continually point those moments out, eventually, they would start to spot them themselves and be able to make those pivots quickly with time.

Roger Ideishi

Right. Yeah, that's even, you know, those little physical actions, I even see this play out, even in how they're communicating and interacting with the student. So oftentimes, when I'm working with a graduate student, or if I'm working with a practitioner, they have to gather certain amount of information, and they have assembles checklist of information that they have to run through. And they're just like running through this checklist. And they're like, missing all these opportunities where the student or the youth, they're diverting their attention to something else, the practitioner, I gotta finish this, I got to get down this too. And they're not really allowing that fluidity is like, we'll pick it up tomorrow. Don't have to finish it today. Or, you know, Yes, I understand you have to get this report in by the end of the day. But there's ways to document some of that fluidity. And it's okay. And I think that's, again, another sort of attitudinal experience that I see with many younger therapists where they have these tasks to do and they're so focused on these tasks, rather than focusing on the needs and the preferences, and the fluidity of that student that they're not moving with the students. And that's really hard to let go. And that I think, does come from the medical model training. So part of it is just like, relax, it's okay. If you don't get to everything, it's fine. That's a tough one for many people to get over.

Qudsiya Naqui

And I think the root causes of that are, you know, the way that you are trained in say, for example, in a school setting, in a medical or occupational therapy school, you're trained to hew to that checklist you're trained to, I have to do X, Y, and Z. And so if you were unencumbered from those requirements, and you were you were judged as a practitioner on a different basis, like so I'm gonna go off in a little bit of a tangent here, but I'm curious about this as someone who is, you know, does research and policy work now that you're building this program at GW, have you thought about restructuring, even how you evaluate your practitioners and training like in terms of what are their metrics of success? Is that something that you've been rethinking as you build this program?

Roger Ideishi

Yeah, I have. I mean, there's two things that I've been thinking about, lately a lot. How to infuse this into the curriculum is really a reflective practice and how to have this reflective almost reflective reflective practice so that, you know, they're in this moment, and they may be stuck or they feel they have to make this decision. And they just make this decision very reflexively rather than being reflectively reflexive like, Okay, in this moment, let me just sit back. And let me reflect on him first before I actually just tap on it. And so I've been thinking about how we infuse more reflective practice all the way throughout and have this graduate student feel more comfortable that reflective experience and that that's okay, so that's one thing I've been thinking about a lot.

The other thing I've been thinking about, at least, and I think we might get to this later on, when we talk about advocacy is really understanding the whole continuum of the social systems we we function, and you know, from the personal level, and the immediate personal level, all the way through these larger macroscopic social levels that include policy and how society is structured. Just if I can go back to law school, I think that's one thing that I actually gained from law school, even though I don't practice law, my understanding of that continuum is much greater and much deeper than if I didn't go to law school. And I know in many health care professions, and particularly outpatient therapy, we don't teach that you know, how these different systems interrelate and how they're connected over a continuum of time over a continue on someone's life. And that's something I want to build in much more into the curriculum. So the gstudent raduate really understands this whole continuum of experiences and in systems that we function in.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah, and this also extends to, okay, what is required to get an occupational therapy license? What are the standards of the profession even. Because if you feel that you adhere to these certain standards that don't really comport with what you actually need to do to be successful in interacting with students, then you're kind of in this weird conflict with yourself because you want to do what's right for the student, but you have these broader standards you have to adhere to that are not always consistent with what is needed in those moments.

Roger Ideishi

Right, right. Absolutely. And I think that's, I don't want to call it a dilemma. But that's the thing. That's my challenge. And how do I situate all of this? And I do think it's possible, you know, when we are teaching very specific strategies on how you evaluate someone's motor skill, I think there's a way to really contextualize that and talk about why are you evaluated and for what purpose? And then what is the ultimate outcome that you are, you know, that you're trying to achieve? Is it just a motor function? Or is it to participate in Little League? Or is the purpose really to, you know, to do something that's really engaged in your role in society, if the practitioner can see that entire thread, it's more than just the motor skill.

And then you start, I think, you begin to make different decisions based on that. And then the types of therapeutic strategies and therapeutic activities that you embed in that, you begin to make different decisions that that's my personal belief.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah. And I think, again, like that is something that's really rooted in ableism, this idea of, you have to know how to move your hands in a certain way. And that's your metric of success. As opposed to I'm a child, I really want to play Little League and be able to grip the bat, that's my metric of success. I remember experiencing this as a blind person, you know, receiving various types of therapies and rehabilitation services. And for a long time, because I did have a considerable amount of usable vision for much of my childhood, the focus was always on, we want you to use your eyes to do things as opposed to, okay, what are the things that you need to accomplish? What are the tools that we should use to help you do that easily and efficiently? And then so because that was that the latter was not really the question at hand, I found myself because the imperative was to make me use my eyes, I often would be really weary at doing something because it was just too hard with my eyes. Whereas if we had focused on okay, what is the thing that needs to get done? Maybe a sighted mechanism for doing that is not the best approach, maybe we need to use some other mechanism, you know.

Roger Ideishi

Totally agree with you on that. And there's plenty of literature in the learning literature, educational literature that really demonstrates the efficacy of approaching situations that way that really result in more meaningful outcomes for that user. That outcome isn't derived from me as the so called expert practitioner, that outcome is really derived from the actual user and what they want to do and how they want to do it and how they perceive their own efficacy and engaging in those those experiences. And I think that is a very different way of thinking about the outcomes that we engage with, with the people that we serve.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah. And so that leads me to another question, which is, you know, we've talked a lot about the practitioner perspective and kind of how broadly speaking as a profession to design experiences in the classroom, but I'm curious about, you know, there's the practitioner, and there's what you learn in school as an occupational therapist. But what are other important areas of input other vantage points or other perspectives or points of view that you think are important when trying to identify what's the best path forward and working with a particular student? I mean, all students are unique and different in their needs. And oftentimes, cognitive behavioral Developmental Disabilities manifest so uniquely in people, and so what sources should practitioners look to outside of their own training to get to the right answer in terms of or the best answer in terms of how to achieve those goals we just talked about?

Roger Ideishi

Well, definitely starting first and foremost with the student, what do you like? What do you want to do? How do you want to do it? what's comfortable for you, you know, just really starting first and foremost with with that student, and then who are in who's in that immediate environment that really provide that social network, sometimes it's support, sometimes it's not support, you know, the person, the person is just in that environment that engages with that student, oftentimes, that's the parent or caregiver, you know, seeking that input from the parent and caregiver. And then it's really a whole team experience with the teacher, the special instructors, speech therapists, occupational therapists, other people.

The other thing that I think is often overlooked, is the students peers and gathering input, it is not, I think there's a lot of input and knowledge to be gained from the students, peers, disabled and non disabled peers. And I think that's really important. You know, I've always sort of thought we need to take the special at a special education, really creating these environments, so that disabled and non disabled students really learn to engage in diverse ways, and realize that you can engage with people in different ways and that you respect those qualities and the strength and other people. That's not special education. That's, that's just education, that's just human development, and creating an environment where disabled and non disabled peers are really engaging with each other, making friends, showing respect, learning how to communicate in different ways, those are important places to gather information. And I think we often overlook the student peer in this whole process that's really interesting.

Qudsiya Naqui

And touching directly from that, you know, you've done a lot of work with creating opportunities for disabled children outside of the school context, in recognition of the fact that you don't just live your life at school, and you have other sort of social and cultural outlets. And I'd love for you to talk a little bit about that work, and what partnerships you've developed to create those experiences.

Roger Ideishi

So that actually, that work really came out of the classroom. You know, I like to think I'm a relatively effective practitioner, and collaborator with students and parents and teachers and other practitioners, and creating successful experiences in the classroom that built on the strengths of the student was really important, you know, at the time working with other practitioners, that's what we were doing, and it was successful, but parents would still return to us and say, Well, you know, the strategies that you're using while they're working in the classroom, and that's great when we try to use those same strategies outside of the classroom, in our home or in the community, those strategies don't exactly work the same way, or the outcome isn't exactly the same. So what other strategies do you have for us? You know, that meant that the classroom strategies that were working, we had to change them.

And in some ways, I started thinking, Well, why aren't they working, and myself and the other practitioners I was working with, we actually realized that in the classroom, we created such a supportive, successful environment that the students were experiencing the success, but we created that environment, we actually control that environment for success. Like I said, just covering something up, we created this environment that created success. But we can’t control all these factors when a student's at home or when, when that same student is out in the community. There's no controlling of factors. And so the student's ability to transfer those strategies and skills that were being reinforced in the classroom, they just didn't necessarily transfer over into the community in the same way.

And I think that's what struck us that we needed to come up with other strategies, we needed to create other opportunities that really challenged the student to engage in these unpredictable, uncontrolled situations. And so we started to look out into the community and who wanted to partner with us at the school to create these opportunities, recognizing that you're not just going to throw the students out in the community that if we build these experiences and scaffold these experience are the students started to engage with this unpredictability and develop their own strategies on how they're going to manage those that that's what we wanted to do.

So we reached out into the community. And we really just started asking anyone in the community, the grocery store, their little league in the neighborhood, the museum, the zoo, things that families wanted to do when they were out in the community or just not in a school environment. And we started reaching out to these various community groups, and many of them were helping us. We partnered with the grocery store, we partnered with other organizations. What started to happen over time, over a couple years that we were doing this, the arts and culture sector, they were the ones who partnered with the most enthusiasm, museums and theaters and other arts organizations, Community Arts centers, they were just the most enthusiastic in supporting this effort. And that just continued to grow. I would say the majority of our partners were arts based organizations, we started to write these small little grants to really bring more arts into the classroom so that students can experience this more unpredictable, creative expression within the classroom. So they were experiencing that in class. We were controlling everything all the time, and then moving that out into the community.

And we started writing the small grants. We started partnering here in Philadelphia, we started partnering with organizations like the Pennsylvania ballet, there's a community of arts organization, [Taller Puertorriqueno](https://tallerpr.org/), it's a community organization, but they had different arts programs, as well, you know, dance studios, teaching salsa, and other dance forms, we just started partnering with anybody who was really interested in this work. And we just sort of built this repertoire where artists would come into the school, and then students would then go out into the community. And they had this connection with this art form, there was some familiarity for the student until there was this focus and connection to the art form. But then students had to then begin to learn how to engage with these unpredictable environments. You know, I remember one student were in the classroom, a dancer from Pennsylvania ballet was coming into the classroom and just teaching creative movement and getting the students to move in different ways.

And we had a student who really just had difficulty initiating movement, you know, creating sequence movements, and we physically had to sort of help this student figure out some of these movement patterns. And eventually, he would kind of get it. But you know, he really had a hard time this was in the classroom. And then we went over to Pennsylvania ballet, at the Academy of Music to see his teacher dance on stage. And he saw his teacher on stage, he stood up from his seat, and he just started dancing. And the teachers, the therapist, we were just amazed that this other context, and these other factors just really facilitated his own self initiated movement that we struggled with in the classroom or at back at the school. And so again, that just taught us that these community experiences were really important for the students learning and development.

So it was really arts organizations that were the most enthusiastic at the time we were doing this, the Smithsonian Institution was also interested in exploring these educational strategies, as well as community strategies. And we hooked up with the Smithsonian because they were interested in what we were doing. And we were interested in what they were doing. And this was, you know, over a decade ago, and I've continued to partner with the Smithsonian Institution ever since. And then through that partnership, the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC was also interested in sort of exploring this, particularly with people with developmental disabilities. And so I began partnering with the Kennedy Center.

And you know, I don't know if your listeners realize but Smithsonian Institution and the Kennedy Center, they have a national and a global network that they engage with all year round, the partnership that I had with Smithsonian and the Kennedy Center really allowed us collectively, to really provide training, education, development to other arts organizations across the country and across the globe. And our focus was really on developmental disabilities and creating art spaces for people with autism, people with intellectual disabilities.

And it really was about curating the environment. It wasn't about fixing the student or that we're creating these therapeutic art experiences. It wasn't anything like that. It was about really creating an environment that these individuals had choice, had opportunities for self determined choices and reading that environment in an arts education experience, or art class in a theater class, or going to a concert, and how do you create these opportunities, and that's somehow that's resonated with the arts industry. And I'd say in the last decade, arts organizations across the globe actually have really been exploring this and you know, I started doing this work with Kennedy and Smithsonian Institution well over a decade ago, and it's really changed. And we've learned so much in the last decade versus what we were what we were doing a decade ago with some of these other I would say, simpler strategies that we've learned so much more in the past decade, and really learning from people with autism, from adults with autism on, you know, what they thought was effective or not effective, you know, even having them sort of guide the experience, and really teach us what was really needed. And that's where a lot of my work has been for the last number of years is really helping organizations change their attitude. And having them really understand that if they can make these social and physical, environmental changes, you're creating so many more opportunities for so many more people to engage in the services that they provide, there's still a lot of work to be done. But that's a lot of what I focus on now.

Qudsiya Naqui

That's such a powerful story. And I imagine you've experienced this, but you know, young people, particularly students, you know, emerging from these experiences becoming artists in their own right. And pursuing that kind of work. So that's really spectacular. And it contributes to this space of arts and culture, and also provides well curated sort of accessible environments. So I could see that kind of going in both directions.

Roger Ideishi

Yeah, I've been collecting some data from multiple stakeholders, you know, within these experiences, whether it's artists, whether it's the user themselves, or parents, and one thing that I've heard a lot over and over again, particularly from the disabled user, is when the environment provides opportunity and choices that they feel like they get to be who they are. And so I've heard this over and over again, where like an interviewing or I'm talking with someone, and they say, I just get to be who I am. And every time it just like, oh, my goodness, like, that's so powerful that they feel like they can't be who they are in other spaces. And just, you know, in some ways, just how constraining from a personal perspective, not feeling like you get to be who you are. I don't know that just I think that's just so powerful. And I've heard it so many times, like, almost verbatim where the person says, I get to be who I am.

Qudsiya Naqui

And I think it's that's something that I think a lot of non disabled people you just don't even think about. It is a thing that is taken for granted that disabled people often don't get to experience. Yeah, so turning to sort of, you know, something we were talking about earlier, and we were going to come back to, you know, I understand that you supported and provided some advice to the Biden administration about disability and education. And I'm curious about your thoughts on going back to your kind of law training. And you've referenced that a few times what role has advocacy played in your work? And because on the one hand, you're engaging in these really detailed experiences with training these practitioners about the very specific skill set of navigating helping students to navigate a classroom and making a classroom accessible or making a cultural experience accessible? What role does advocacy play in that work for you?

Roger Ideishi

Yeah, so and this is where, you know, I was referring to earlier that, at least with the students that I trained, I think sometimes they don't see that larger continuum of how a momentary experience really has an impact in so many levels, you know, we're so trained to really look at the immediate situation, and not realizing that a lot of what we do as practitioners are regulated by what we can do and how we can do it, or when we can do it, or how often we can do it, and where do those decisions come from? They come from many times they come from state or federal legislation, and I don't think many practitioners truly make that connection. You know, sometimes they either hear them just complain about things, you know,

Qudsiya Naqui

As we all do.

Roger Ideishi

Not really knowing why they have these constraints, or not understanding the opportunities that the legislation gives us as well, because they may have these ideas that they can't do something because someone told them something. And I'm like, well, where did you hear that from? And I go, Well, you know, the IDEA, you know, the disability education. federal legislation doesn't really say that there is actually language in there that really supports you in developing community experiences. Did you know that they're like, I didn't really know that I was like, so this legislation actually arms you to do these things. You know, when I describe my school experience, that sort of thing. We took that and said, Well, we can do this, the legislation actually allows us to do that. But I think therapists were self limiting, thinking that they couldn't, because they didn't have that knowledge. So, you know, understanding that whole continuum of the systems that we work in, and then when policies don't work, right, or that policies are constraining in some way that limits you as a practitioner, or limits the family or limits the student, I'm a direct stakeholder in this, and that I need to advocate not only for my profession, but I need to advocate for the students that I serve, in order to get the best outcome that student can create. And that's my clinical and ethical responsibility to do as a practitioner is to really encourage the best outcome that the student can produce for him or herself.

But if the policies are constrained, in some way, the policy needs to change. And I think a lot of people think policies are static. And again, you know, as you know, from our law school training, we know nothing is really stalking, you know, anything, you can find another perspective, you can interpret something in multiple ways. And that's really the skill of the lawyer. But I think my training actually helped me to think of things in that way, when I think there needs to be other interpretations or other ways to advocate or to interpret a policy or to generate a policy, I think we have a responsibility to inform, to educate, to enlighten, to bring other facts to the table that maybe weren't brought there before, because those policymakers may only have a few perspectives. And I think the more input and the more perspectives, I think are really helpful for the policymaker, you know, if the policymakers only getting information from the same people all the time, and then they create policies and regulations based on that, you know, I think that's a little bit of navel gazing, they think they did a really good job. And then, but they haven't really considered all these other multiple inputs or these other lived experiences on you know, what the impacts potentially are.

And so that's why I think advocacy is really important. I see advocacy, really as education, and information dissemination, and not that they're always going to take my input or think that I have a valid point of view. And you know, and that's fine, I don't get offended by that. I think a lot of people feel like when elected officials or policymakers don't take their input, they then feel disempowered by that, and that's something that I when I work with people that in understanding that whole system and how systems work that you can't get offended. These are really long term commitments, and oftentimes without having short term gratification. And once you understand that as part of the advocacy process, then I think you build more stamina.

And so I think that's just really important, because I, I want to serve, you know, the clients that I serve, and the students that I serve, I want to serve them in the best way I can. And if there are things that are really limiting my ability to do that, I want to see if there's a way to influence that in some way. So I get involved in different political and other civic engaged activities in order to just provide more input.

Qudsiya Naqui

Yeah. And to that end, I understand you recently gave testimony to the incoming, the new Secretary of the Department of Education. I'm curious, if you have thoughts to share about that conversation and what you imparted.

Roger Ideishi

it was just, you know, again, I'll just give an input, you know, whether they take my input or not, is that's really up to them. But what I tried to paint a picture. And granted, like, you're only given a few minutes to do this, right. So I was trying to pack as many critical things in those few minutes, the picture that I was trying to paint is really a reimagining of educational experiences, really, through pre K, all the way through higher education, and really with a focus on accessibility, inclusion and universal design, and then it gets to everybody, then again, it's sort of this idea of taking special out of special education, if we really had a different perspective of accessibility, inclusion and universal design, you know, from pre k all the way through higher ed.

And so I was trying to paint that picture and why it's important the value of it and you know, some of those anecdotal stories that even I gave today, so that we begin to reimagine education. You know, I think, particularly in this time of COVID, I think we've all learned so much that we are much more adaptable than maybe we thought we were, or that we are more creative in creating distance learning or, you know, sometimes it's successful, sometimes it's not, but we find ourselves constantly trying to adapt and find what works. And one of the things I'm concerned about is post COVID that everybody thinks, okay, COVID’s over. Let's just go back to do what we used to do. And I tried to paint this picture of, we have an opportunity here because we've taught ourselves how adaptable we are, that we need to reimagine the future and reimagine Education post COVID. And I hope we don't go back to what we did pre COVID. So that was sort of my message. And I hope it resonated in some way.

Qudsiya Naqui

That's great. And I'm personally, you know, grateful to know that someone with your perspective has the ear of people who make those policies. And you rightly point out that policymakers will often take it or leave it but having more voices, more stories that reaffirm and obviously evidence and data that reaffirms what you're describing, is the way to change the hearts and minds. And I think that's really the key. So I'm really grateful that you were able to do that this has been such a fantastic conversation. I'm so grateful for you. I know you're very busy standing up an entirely new program and a medical school and you took the time out of your very busy schedule to come join me. So thank you so much Roger, I'm so I'm so grateful to have you.

Roger Ideishi

Thank you. This was enjoyable.

Qudsiya Naqui

Thank you for listening to this episode of down to the struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of Adrianne Kong, Avery Anapol, and Ilana Nevins. If you want to learn more about the project and access resources about this and past episodes, visit our website, www.downtothestruts.com. If you like what you hear, subscribe, rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you love to listen. You can also follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter at down to the struts. Thanks again for listening and looking forward to our next episode so we can get back down to it.