



Podcast Name: Article 19

Episode Name: We Can't Go Back on Section 504

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Theo Braddy:

It means we go back to a point where we're going to be locked into rooms, hidden in the rooms, hidden into institutions.

Kristen Witucki:

Section 504 is under attack, but we can't go back. (door slam sfx) Welcome everyone to another conversation on Article 19. I am Kristen Witucki, content creator and accessibility specialist at Tamman. And I'm joined by a guest host who is Tamman's/Chax's research department of one. He's a phenomenal market research analyst. He is a really powerful social networker as you'll find out in a second. And, he's just an extraordinary ally. Please welcome Steve Levine to the podcast.

Steve Levine:

Thank you Kristen! That was very flattering and it's a pleasure to be here with you.

00:01:01

Kristen Witucki:

Speaking of social networking, can you tell us a little bit about the conversation and how it got started?

Steve Levine:

Theo Braddy is somebody that I heard on a webinar discussing his life experience and relating it to Section 504. Frankly, I was just blown away. I reached out to him. We discussed various things, learning about each other. We discovered that we were both graduates of Temple University and here we are today.

Kristen:



So, Our listeners will remember our last episode welcomed lawyer and professor Alison Barkoff who unpacked the protection of 504 from a legal standpoint. So, to understand what's really going on there please go back and check out that conversation if you haven't. already .

Steve Levine:

Kristen, I say we do a Marvin Gaye and "Let's Get it On!"

00:01:48

Kristen Witucki :

Let's welcome Theo Braddy, Executive Director for The Centers For Independant Living National Council on Independent Living. Theo, it's so wonderful to have you on the podcast today, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Theo Braddy:

Yeah, again, thank you for inviting me to participate here. Just to give you a little background of where I came from, something I talk about a lot, and so I'll just go through my little bullet points here. I became a person with a disability at age 15 playing high school football. I broke my neck, became a C4 quadriplegic. I'm originally from Georgia, a little place called Wadley, Georgia, so it's a small town. I didn't have any options after I got out of rehab and I came back to, I was very poor. And so my only option back then, this was in 1975, I was institutionalized. My mom put me into a nursing home and I spent a year in the nursing home. And we'll talk about that a little bit later. No place for a 15-year-old kid. So after I left there and I came up to Pennsylvania here, first real taste of not having choice was when these two big oldies put me in bed when I wanted to stay up a little longer and I was around age 17. Later on, I got a feel for not listening to folks. I told my counselor I wanted to go to college and he told me I wasn't college material. But unfortunately, I didn't listen to that. So I went on and I graduated the top of my class and I got my Master of Social Work at Temple University in North Philadelphia. And right after that in 1988, I believe, I became the CEO of the Center for Independent Living of Central Pennsylvania here in Pennsylvania. And did that for 31 years. After that, I was adjunct professor at Trumpet University, Middlesville University, and I retired early and I started my own consulting agency called Theo Braddy Consulting. I have been appointed by multiple governors to be on various commissions in the state of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, Vocational Rehabilitation. I was appointed by the great Senator Casey. I call him great because he



is a great champion for people with disabilities. He appointed me and nominated me for a presidential position and President Biden appointed me to the National Council on Disability. I am currently working as Executive Director of the National Council on Independent Living, as well as serving on the National Council on Disabilities.

00:04:11

Kristen Witucki:

I so appreciate that idea of not listening to what people think that people with disabilities can do. That's so profound. And sadly, our society needs to catch up with what we are doing.

Theo Braddy:

Yes, yes, yes. They have views of us living lives locked in rooms and oppressive and have very oppressive views of how we should live our lives. So yes.

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Steve Levine:

What led you into advocacy?

Theo Braddy:

Well, I sort of touched upon it a little bit when those two big orderlies forced me and put me in bed against my will. I really realized that a person with disabilities really didn't have any control over their lives. And that had such a devastating effect on me. I didn't want to see people go through that. So that's really when I started fighting back. And then at a younger age, I kept encountering these situations where people was just taking my rights from me, and I realized that there's power through knowledge. And I just started learning and learning the laws that protects people with disabilities and using that information to change things. And again, when you empower yourself through understanding your rights and so forth, You then want to change things. And I realized early on in my life that if I'm going through something, that's an indication that other people with disabilities are going through the same thing. So not only do I fight for myself, I fight for others too when I try to fight back based on what is happening to me.



00:06:06

Kristen Witucki:

So Theo, you've experienced firsthand the way medical bias nearly cost you your life. Could you share that story with us?

Theo Braddy:

Yeah, yeah, again, very traumatic, right? And again, I don't talk about it a lot, oddly enough. And I recall, funny, when I was sharing this story, a friend of mine who's had this happen to be on that webinar called me up and said, hey, you said around 12 years, do you know that was really 20-something years ago? And it hit me, right? It's so fresh in my mind that I thought it was just about 12 years ago, but she was right because she was one of the person I confided into, It was Vicky Casino, and I confided in her what I was going through at that time, and so I had to talk it out with somebody. I was struggling. But what happened was, I noticed a lump in my inner thigh, and I got it examined, and it wasn't cancerous at that time, so they removed it, but about two years later on, it came back. And it was cancer, and it was an aggressive cancer. And so my wife and I was called in. And you know, when you get called in to a specialist, you get very nervous, because you think about everything going on. And so I was already nervous when I was sitting in that office. And then he told me, he told me that it was a very cancerous tumor. In order to deal with it, they would have to amputate my leg. And that hit me. Hit me like a ton of bricks, right? And so in order to really get rid of it, he also told me they had to remove my hip from the socket, my leg from the hip socket. And that didn't sit well with me. So I was really panicking there a little bit. The doctor saw it. And so he basically, in his effort to try to solve me over, said, you know, it shouldn't be a big deal because you're paralyzed and you don't use it anyway. And that hit me again. It just completely took my mind off the cancer. And I left in anger. Right? I just left the room. And I struggled with that for quite a while, about a week or so. But finally I spoke to my wife and my pastor, and they convinced me to go ahead with it. So I went through with the surgery and they took my leg. And as I was recovering, laying in bed, the doctor came in and told me, we got it just in the nick of time because it was wrapped around a cluster of veins and it was getting ready to spread. And that's how it really could have cost my life, because I had took my mind off of it, and I was an advocate, and I was going to fight that. And in dealing with that, my life was in jeopardy. Now I say this, I want to be say that, was that specialist trying to harm me intentionally? No, he wasn't. And based on him not really



being educated, he could have cost me my life by saying what he said to me and it distracted me for that period of time. That's what I mean by when we have all this unconscious bias about folks with disabilities. And these are educated professionals and we have to do something about that.

00:09:12

Steve Levine:

Was there something that the pastor or your wife said to you that changed your mind?

Theo Braddy:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I still think about it. And one of the thoughts they talked to me about when Christ was in the Garden of Gethsemane and basically said to it, not my will be done, but your will be done. And I don't even know if you could take this from me, take it. But if you can't, I'm gonna trust you and I'm gonna go through with it. Once I wrap my mind around that, knowing that it was something I had to go through. I don't wanna go through it. Didn't wanna, oh my God, you got me cracking over Louis here. Time to talk about this stuff, but it takes me back a little bit. I didn't, oh, excuse me.

Steve Levine:

Take your time. It's okay.

Theo Braddy:

I didn't want to go through that. Yeah, it's such a powerful story. Right. But I realized that was what I had to go through. And so I got enough faith and courage that I did, but I didn't want to go through it.

00:10:05

Steve Levine:

It's such a powerful story.

Theo Braddy:



Yeah. But I realize, that is what I had to go through. And so I got enough faith and courage that I did, but I didn't want to go through it.

00:10:17

Steve Levine:

Yeah. And, you know, it obviously affects us physically and emotionally. Looking back on your experience, how does it highlight why Section 504 is so important?

Theo Braddy:

Even to this day, I don't think people really get it, right? Section 504 really addresses other stuff. I say this a lot. In my lifetime, I'm probably going to be able to see where physical barriers are removed. But I doubt in my lifetime where I will see attitudinal barriers removed. That is much harder to change. People's harmful world views of people are harder to change. And so Section 504, the final rules hit on that. Yeah, it talks about medical equipment and so forth, but it also talks about addressing and eliminating barriers or stereotypes about individual disabilities, such as, you know, make sure people can benefit from including organ transplantation, or life-sustaining treatment, that anyone else would receive and not based on bias. That people's life is not as valuable as people without disabilities. And so 504 final rule talks about that. It prohibits the use, for example, of value assessment methods. And all that is, is how the healthcare field will put more value on the lives of people without disabilities versus people with disability. And then they get treated unfairly, right? And the decisions to treat people with disabilities versus someone without disabilities will be coming into play. We saw that with COVID-19, when you had all this life-sustaining equipment like ventilators, going to be without disabilities and they said if it came between a person with a disability and a person without a disability that that treatment goes to the person without a disability because they have more value than a person with a disability and they can contribute more. So that's what makes Section 504 so important. It deals with those things, right? And when we enter into a pandemic and so forth and other crisis, it's not about if it's going to happen, it's about when it's going to happen again. Alright? And so we lost a lot of people with disabilities unnecessarily because of these biases and unconscious opinions about the value of one's life when it comes to living with disabilities in America. That's why Section 504 is so important. It gets to the heart of how we treat folks with disabilities in America and challenge them and give us remedies and enforcement to ensure that that not is happening when we get treated fairly and justly.



00:13:09

Steve Levine:

So for our listeners that may not know the answer to this, if this is a really dark question I'm about to ask, but if Section 504 was weakened or overturned, who would be at risk and what would that mean to our society?

Theo Braddy:

Good question. What's Section 504? We have Section 504 now. We have the ADA. We have Olmstead. We have money follow the person. And we still have an institutional bias in America and not a community living bias. Even when it costs a lot less to keep people in the community versus institutionalized. Almost three times the cost. We still want to institutionalize people with disabilities. Young people like myself, when I told you back in 1975 my only option was to go into a nursing home, right? And I'm telling you right now, a young person should not be in a nursing home. But we're seeing right now that the fastest growing number of people that is institutionalized in nursing homes is under the age of 30. That was in a report produced by the National Council on Disability. And so, this bias that we have of institutionalized people, it speaks to how we believe and think about people with disabilities, right? It was not that long ago. Y'all might be familiar with this, but the public might not, so I'm gonna talk about it. We had what we called The Ugly laws. And the ugly laws was an ordinance that was enacted in various cities across the country in the 20th century that prohibited people with disabilities from being visible in the community. Anybody with a disability or disfigurement was not supposed to be appearing in public spaces. It was illegal for a person who was diseased and maimed or mutilated or deformed in any way, right, to expose themselves to public view, right? The last time it was enacted was in 197. 1974, when it was last used. That was not that long ago. That it was unlawful for a person with a disability to be seen in public. And so it don't take but a simple, slippery slope to put us back into that mindset. And these 17 states trying to put us back into that mindset by making Section 504 unconstitutional. So what do that mean? It means we go back to a point where we're going to be locked into rooms, hidden in the rooms, hidden into institutions. We are removed from public view, going right back to the ugly laws.

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Steve Levine:

So we know that these real life stories must have the last word. I'm an ally and we have many allies who are listening. What can we do to further this conversation and to facilitate change?

Theo Braddy:

Yeah, again, another good question. I say this a lot too, right? It's one thing for me to say as a person living with a disability, to say I'm oppressed and being treated wrongly and unjustly. I don't have any value. I don't have any power or influence. It's a whole other thing for a person without disabilities, like the many allies that I'm calling to do this, to say that those people are being oppressed and discriminated against. People without disabilities have more power. They are viewed to have more power to influence. So your voice carries more weight than my voice. Right? That's just the way we are perceived. So take advantage of that. Share our stories. One of the things, and you're here for the first time, one of the things I'm going to do at Nickel is we're going to put out a challenge For people to sit in the 504 sit-ins, one of the things that kicked off our empowerment of people with disabilities and created the Rehabilitation Act, Section 504, the Rehabilitation Act, and if we want to use, find those pictures, your favorite pictures, because a picture, you know, represent a thousand words, right? We're going to have our allies, and people with disabilities, is send in those 504 pictures to the AGs, these 17 states' AGs and to Congress. And we just gonna load them up, overwhelm them with, you know, pictures of those 504 sit-ins. with the hashtag, you know, we will fight again and we won't go backwards. And so how you can help? You can select and we can find these pictures all over the internet in regard to the 504 sit-ins. And the 504 sit-ins was the first time people with disabilities came together and said, we matter, we will be heard. And from that, the 504 regulations was created. So we just gonna remind Congress, we're gonna remind the 17 states by sending in all of these pictures. Right? We're gonna launch that campaign, a picture is worth a thousand words. So that's how you can help.

00:18:15

Steve Levine:

Thank you. I'm glad you mentioned pictures because as a tribute to my father who lost the use of his leg as a war veteran, I've got plenty of pictures of us together with my



sister and my mom. And those are the happiest days of my life to be frank. And I think that bringing that to the people in power would not only be effective, but it would also be doing him a service. Yeah. Yeah. Since he lost his life for this country basically.

Theo Braddy:

And just like a lot of people, where they sit in. They stayed in that building for over 28 days. The longest protest in the history of America, anybody. And so yeah, it's a tribute to not only those individuals, just like you said, to those people who have struggled over the years just to be seen and heard. And so we're going to remind Congress. And so that's how you all can help. Remind Congress by sending in those pictures, any picture that demonstrate our struggle, that we will not go back again.

00:19:28

Kristen Witucki:

Probably some of us are going to need to go in person and, you know, sit in before this is all over. So...

Theo Braddy:

Maybe, maybe, maybe, right? But we're not going back.

00:19:40

Kristen Witucki:

Theo, Thank you. I really appreciate your vulnerability. It's powerful. And, it's not something that we witness often in leadership. And yet, in the disability community during a time like this. It almost feels necessary. So how can people in positions of power really learn from this moment?

Theo Braddy:

Awesome question, great, great, great question. And I thought about this, and this is something that I try to do. I don't always do it, but I try to do. We sometimes make our leaders and people we look up to into something they really are not. We tend to believe that they don't go through what everyone go through. We all have issues, right? Reality,



you know, we go through stuff. All of our great leaders were just trying to figure things out, but they were put in a position to lead. I even think about Martin Luther King and him and fighting for something that should be freely given and what that did, you know, that weight of that. It is weight. Why couldn't he just go ahead on and be a lawyer? Why couldn't he just go ahead on and be an airline pilot? But based on the fact that rights was taken, he had to become something else because of that. He couldn't just pursue what he wanted to do. So we carry that weight and in doing that, we recognize that we are human beings. We don't have to be always extraordinary, right? And that's what makes us so extraordinary in life, that if we can see people who they really are, human beings, trying to make it, And so I try to let people know that, that over my lifetime, just like everybody else, I made a bunch of mistakes and made some bad decisions and went through some stuff. We can't elevate people so high that we fail to see that, right? And so I've learned to let people know that, that I struggle with stuff. I'm vulnerable, but through all of that, I'm made stronger. And I have learned not to hold back and I just learned to reveal my struggles and my vulnerability. But through that, again getting back to my religious belief, through my weakness I am made stronger. And so those moments where I have shown weakness, I have overcome it. And if I can communicate that to other people. I don't want to be a leader. I don't want to be looked up to. But if I can communicate that, that even through the things that I have gone through, even through my weakness, I have learned from those and I have overcome those. And you can to. Right? And so that's why I won't hide my vulnerability, because I think people need to see it.

00:22:34

Steve Levine:

Thank you Theo. I think many of us can draw value and integrity from what you just shared. And, I'd like to also share with our audience, the honor that you have coming up at our alma mater, Temple University. Where you've been selected as a 2025 honoree for it's Gallery Of Success where you're going to be recognized for outstanding professional achievement. Would you please elaborate?

Theo Braddy:

I usually don't really talk about stuff like that. Sometimes you, I would just share it with somebody. You know, I often forget that I have a master's degree in social work. I really do. And so when it came up and they called me and asked me, would I be willing to be



honored in that way? I had completely forgot. I was social worker. So I get a chance to go back in North Philadelphia and visit and participate in that. And so I'm sort of looking forward to it, right? I forget the date it is going to be. I believe it's in April, Temple University at Midden Hall. I'm going to go back and again, I think one of the reasons they do it is they want to elevate and let their students know that there are people who went through Temple University and exceeded in a major way. And if that can help younger students, then I go through it. But I don't tend to like to do stuff like that. But again, I'm at an age right now that I really want to help younger folks, and so I'm going to do that. So yeah, it's a nice honor to go through it and be that kind of a role model, I guess.

00:23:58

Steve Levine:

As one whose entire family has graduated from Temple U, our students will benefit from that. So I thank you for making that decision, because I think it'll be a wonderful day for the students.

Theo Braddy:

Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah, I do have a date. It's Friday, April 4th. Anybody that's in town at Temple University, Mitten Hall, try to come out.

Steve Levine:

You might have a surprise guest there.

Theo Braddy:

Thank you. I appreciate you all taking the time to do this. And hopefully, I shared some things that would be helpful.

00:24:28

Steve Levine:

Thank you, Theo, for your voice, your fight, and your story. You've made it clear—ableism isn't just discrimination, it's deadly. And Section 504 isn't just a regulation, it's a lifeline.



The fight to protect it is happening right now. By 2030, the aging population will make these protections more relevant than ever. If we don't defend them today, millions will face discrimination in healthcare, employment, and daily life tomorrow."

Kristen Witucki:

This isn't just about laws. It's about people—real lives, real consequences. Your voice matters; your words matter. As Theo said, your pictures matter. Share this episode. Tell your story. Contact your representatives. Because if we don't speak up, others will decide our future for us.

Steve Levine:

And let's remember, this fight isn't just about disability—it's about all of us. This is about whether we protect rights that you or someone you love may rely on one day.

00:25:34

Kristen Witucki:

Our guest today is Theo Braddy. I am your Co-host Kristen Witucki and guest host Steve Levine interviewed Theo for this episode. Markus Goldman is our executive producer. Support for this episode also came from Katie Samson, Sydney Bromfield, and Lena Marchese. For more 504 content please visit tammaninc.com. That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C dot com. Article 19 is a call for others to join us in a conversation around the ADA, digital technology, and access to information. At Tamman, we're working to build the inclusive web every day. And to do that, we all need to work together and to learn together. Until next time, thank you so much for being a part of this journey. Take care.