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Description automatically generated**Participants:**

Holly Carmichael

Michael Murray

Julie Kenerson

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**Introduction:**

A garrison is a safe place where an army gathers. In the same way, the *Disability Garrison Podcast* is a place for the army of disability rights advocates to gather and discuss complex issues. We are unafraid to identify problems in our world and have difficult conversations about them. But we are not just here to complain. We spend our time brainstorming solutions with generals in the disability rights movement. Together, we take action to make positive change and lead the fight for justice and equality.

**Holly Carmichael:**

My name is Holly Carmichael.

**Michael Murray:**

My name is Michael Murray. This is the Disability Garrison.

Everyone deserves the right to be able to play with their peers. We know that play is so important, especially for young people and their development and getting to go out on the playground brings so much joy and happiness to everyone. Unfortunately, most playgrounds in the United States are not inclusive. If you're a parent with a disability or child with a disability, it is very hard to find a playground where you can go and play with your peers or play with your parents. And that's something that we really want to address and we want to talk about today. In 2010, the Department of Justice did release ADA standards around inclusive or accessible playgrounds, and those standards are a good start. Unfortunately, there are so many things that they don't take into consideration. So today we're going to have a really interesting conversation about how can we ensure that everyone, everyone has the right to play in an inclusive way and how can we as the Disability Garrison join together to fight for the right to everyone to have the access to play.

And this is also going to be kind of a cool interview because I get to interview my co-host Holly Carmichael as our special guest, and we're also going to have another parent who's done a lot around inclusive playgrounds. So I'm glad that you're joining us. Disability Garrison, this is going to be a lot of fun.

**Holly Carmichael:**

All right. Hello, Michael.

**Michael Murray:**

Hey, Holly. I'm so excited. We're about to talk about accessible playgrounds.

**Holly Carmichael:**

I know, I know.

**Michael Murray:**

Inclusive playgrounds, not accessible. Inclusive playgrounds.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes, yes. Beyond accessibility. We have some pretty amazing guests if I do say so myself today. We are joined by Julie Kenerson. She's an advocate and has been doing a lot of good works in honor of her son Jake who I'm sure she'll touch on and tell you about. She's been doing a lot of good, good, good works, and she is here to talk with us today about her latest endeavor in these good works of expanding inclusive playgrounds so that really everyone can play. And as you know, it's a topic near and dear to my heart that I'm very passionate about myself and work towards. So I'm excited to also share a little bit on that with our listeners.

**Michael Murray:**

Absolutely. And today is going to be a little bit different. So Julie, we're so glad that you've joined us, and I'm going to be primarily asking some questions of these amazing folks, of Holly and of Julie to learn a little bit more about their stories, why we're so passionate about this, and what we can do to make a difference on it. And so listeners, this will be a slightly different podcast. We have one interviewer becoming interviewee. And so we have two guests today, and I'll do my best to guide us through this. So Julie, so excited to have you on here. Let's start. Tell us why inclusive playgrounds, why the fight for this. What started you on this journey?

**Julie Kenerson:**

Great. So first of all, thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited that you reached out, and I'm so excited to have the opportunity to sit here and talk about this issue that I am very passionate about. Let's see. Inclusive playgrounds has been an issue ever since we had our oldest son. His name was Jake, and he was born in 2008. And he was born with a very rare metabolic disorder called CDG. And due to the disorder, it meant that he was not ambulatory and non-verbal. He had a seizure disorder, and he was legally blind. So he had a whole host of things that made life a little more challenging, given accessibility issues and inclusion issues. And also, he was a kid with a great personality, a beaming smile, he loved to laugh, and he loved to play. And so as his mom, we and dad—my husband was always a part of it, teaming up—we just wanted to do whatever we could to help him find the joy in life and to help us find the joy in life. And because he liked play, finding playgrounds that worked for him was always a part of it. We ended up having a second son whose name is Lukas who was four years younger than Jake. And so it became part of our family activity to try to find playgrounds that could work with both kids.

So I come to this conversation with the lens of a parent who had a child who was in a wheelchair and an able-bodied typical child. And I can tell you the playgrounds near us that where both kids could run off and play, and I could tell you the playgrounds where we had Jake sitting next to us and I was reading books or playing iPad or singing songs while Lukas could go off and play on all of the equipment. So that's my background. And then very recently, it's become a passion project of mine because the town that I live in had to overnight close, last summer overnight, close many of the playgrounds due to safety issues. And so they now have in front of them a long list of playgrounds that need to either be rehabbed or completely renovated.

**Michael Murray:**

Yes.

**Julie Kenerson:**

So I can tell you more about that as we have this conversation, sort of what sparked my advocacy right now in the present tense.

**Michael Murray:**

Yes, yes. Julie, I love that, and I think Holly has a similar story. And I don't know that all of our listeners know your passion and fight for inclusive playgrounds.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah, no. Somewhat very similar to Julie in terms of trying to find a playground that both my child who is typically developing and has full physical abilities and my daughter also who has CDG, which is how I met Julie in the CDG community, find a spot where they could both play together. And really I think what kind of sparked it for me was when Maggie started going to preschool, and there just wasn't anything she could play on at recess. They would take her out of her chair and set her down in the woodchips, and she would just be covered in these woodchips.

**Michael Murray:**

Wood chips are terrible. Can I just get like—woodchips are so bad.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Nobody likes woodchips.

**Michael Murray:**

Nobody likes woodchips.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah, yeah. And I mean I know for us, I'm curious for you Julie, but when I started digging in and researching, the closest playground I could find that was accessible and inclusive was over 50 miles away. So there wasn't one in our entire county that kind of met some basic even ADA things that should be met. But unless they're enforced or somebody's kind of pushing a city commission or a school board on it, it just doesn't happen. It just goes unnoticed.

**Michael Murray:**

Well, and we're going to jump into what both of you guys have done to make a huge impact on this. But before we do, I want to make sure that we lay the groundwork. Yes, this is about two beautiful children having an opportunity, but I think it's bigger than that. And I wonder if you guys could talk a little bit about the importance of unstructured play and also, talk about the importance of inclusion as it relates to play. Because what we're dealing with, yes, it is about the individual and yes, it is the right thing to do and hey, we're even going to talk about it is the legal thing to do. You have to do this, right? Like it's illegal to have an inaccessible playground. But if you could talk about the impact of unstructured play and also the positive impact to everyone else for building inclusive environments.

**Julie Kenerson:**

I'd love to talk about that, if I can jump in, Holly. And I want to say too one thing I didn't mention is that our son Jake passed away two and a half years ago, and I think that's an important part of our story too. He got quite ill in the Fall of 2017, and then two years later, as a fallout from that illness, he passed away. But we carry him in our hearts and think about him all the time. So as Holly said, I know I do a lot of this work right now. I have more. time I can advocate, and then we do it in honor of him. So I really have seen how inclusive play, on the one hand, I'm doing it for Jake, for my child who was in a chair. But really I'm not doing it just for Jake because we see the importance of so many things. So for example, there is a great, great inclusive playground at Spalding Rehab, which is several miles away. Probably takes us 15 or 20 minutes to get to. And it was one of the playgrounds we would frequently go to because both Jake and Lukas could play together. And we were very used to being stared at because Jake was in a chair, because he was non-verbal but still made noises, his movements I guess sparked curiosity in other kids. And we were stared at, and we were used to it. We were stared at, which I wished it didn't happen, but we were used to being stared at wherever we went.

And so one of the afternoons we arrived at the playground, and we were sort of unloading and getting onto the playground. My son Lukas, who was probably four at the time—I think Jake was about eight—he noticed a group of kids just staring at us. And he looked at them, and he noticed they were staring at Jake. And he just says in his four-year-old voice, he just says, oh, that's my brother Jake. He can't walk and he can't talk, but he can play. And then off they went and started singing. And by the end of the hour, weren't they all playing together. And I thought not only is that good for Jake because he wants to play just as much as any other kid and he gets to because it's an inclusive playground, it's good for Lukas because he gets to play with his brother. We're not splitting up the family. We're letting the siblings play together. And it was good for every one of the other kids because it went from them staring at him and thinking how different he looked to realizing oh, wait, he can play to realizing, oh, he has a personality, oh, he can communicate what he wants to do, oh, look, he's laughing, he really likes it. So I feel like every one of those kids was positively impacted simply by the fact that this playground was designed to include all kids together.

**Michael Murray:**

Yeah, that is so good. And thank you for sharing about Jake, and thank you for continuing the fight. And we at the Disability Garrison are honored to join you in honoring Jake by continuing to fight for this. Holly, talk a little bit more about that. Let's stick on this. Why are we taking this fight? Why are we continuing to push for this? What is the importance of unstructured play?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. I mean honestly, there is so much. The data, the science, and the research also strongly supports this concept that all kids, regardless of whether they might have a disability or not, do better when they can play together and play with one another. As Julie's story so greatly highlighted, kids figure out a way to play. They're more creative. They develop stronger social skills. And I think there are some real thoughtful things that parks and recs folks, school boards, and playground designers can be thinking about when they're designing a playground. I think the main issue that we face in terms of playground accessibility isn't one because these folks are planning this and saying, we are going to not let anyone using a wheelchair play. I think that it's just not well thought out. And when you think about this concept of universal design, it's really thinking through the different ways every type of playground user can benefit. And these could be grandparents in walkers playing with a grandchild. This isn't even just talking about children in some aspects. It's thinking thoughtfully about how this space will be used and what are ways that we can create the types of play environments we want.

So one of the things that we talk about in universal design, for example, are making sure that you have varying challenge levels of the same play type grouped next to one another. So often a big mistake that playgrounds make is they kind of make a toddler area, right? Like oh, this is where all the easy stuff is. And then all the more challenging stuff is over here. But when you have a child who isn't developing, typically you may need to use the easier stuff, but maybe the age of the older child, they're segregated unnecessarily. And really there are ways and there are smart pieces of equipment that even can combine challenge levels so that a kid with one level of challenge can go right alongside another and play together and interact and socialize and have all of these beautiful opportunities that are intangible and can't really be created intentionally. It's just you create the environment, and the kids do the rest. It's pretty magical.

**Michael Murray:**

That is so awesome. So we've outlined the problem. The problem is that inclusive playgrounds are very hard to find. We've outlined the incredible value that it can bring having inclusive playgrounds. I would love for us to spend a little bit of time talking about both of your fights and how you've had success. And then I promise, I know that both of these guys want to dive into the core of this, which is going to be how do we create, what are those accessible playgrounds look like. We're going to get to that. But before we do, both of you guys have fought and succeeded in creating these inclusive playgrounds, and I think that our listeners want to know how can I participate, how can I be a part of this. I agree with you. It's a problem I agree with you. We need it. And so Holly, I love hearing this story. And so let's start with you on this one. How did we get an inclusive playground in Sturgis, Michigan?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. In Sturgis, Michigan, a little town of only about 11,000 people, and we're the largest city in our entire county. And like I said, we didn't have a single accessible playground. And in my—and I will say professional since I did go online and get certified and read the ADA regs as part of that certification—in my professional opinion does not meet ADA regulations even, which is the bare minimum. When we talk about inclusive playgrounds, we're talking about more thoughtful beyond just simply ticking a compliance checkbox. But even that basic aspect, we weren't there. And I started raising this issue first amongst just at the preschool itself of what can I do. My daughter can't play. Like how do I fix this? And just hearing about the woes of funding, and we can't. There's not enough funding to do this.

**Michael Murray:**

Which is a really obnoxious reason. How many years has the ADA been around?

**Holly Carmichael:**

The ADA has been around for over 30 years. So you should have been saving.

**Michael Murray:**

30 years. Right. Come on. And you can't find a single inclusive playground.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes, yes. So funding can't be—that is very frustrating I think for people with disabilities to hear that. It can't be used as an excuse anymore. There's been a long kind of tale there. But in reality, that's what they were up against. And so I talked with our superintendent and some of the principals at the elementary schools to kind of figure out what this looks like, educate them on the issue, show them the gaps that existed I think from truly a regulatory standpoint of here's a picture of our playground, here's what the regulation states, and here, by the way, is an OCR complaint that has the same type of issue that won. So this is a real issue. It does not meet basic compliance.

**Michael Murray:**

And for our listeners, Office of Civil Rights.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes, yes. Office of Civil Rights. Yes. That's the enforcement body. And one of the reasons why so many playgrounds I think you see still aren't in compliance because it's very hard and tedious as a parent or as a person with a disability to go through filing a complaint. And it's a very tedious process, and that's the enforcement mechanism. And it's difficult even for myself that that has support and resources to be able to do something like that. That just would have been a hard challenge. But instead, the route we took is figuring out okay, you tell me what the hurdle is. I will figure out how we get over it. It's funding. Okay. Then how can we get funding? And so there was an opportunity to look at a millage getting passed to support the schools in, they call it a building and site sinking fund millage that can support renovations of parks, playgrounds, or buildings.

**Michael Murray:**

And Holly, what's a millage? How does a millage work?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes. So a millage is essentially raising the property tax for a period of time in order to obtain a certain amount of funding from property owners in a school district to do a certain project on that school that supports that population. So I ended up I guess doing my homework on how do you pass building sites sinking fund millages and partnered with a group of community members.

**Michael Murray:**

Sounds like a riveting research project.

**Holly Carmichael:**

It is very interesting. And really—

**Michael Murray:**

I don't think I would find that interesting.

**Holly Carmichael:**

You go with your yes’s. She would, she would.

**Michael Murray:**

You would, you would. Okay. Well, that's why you guys have successfully done this. Okay. But keep going, keep going.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes. So you find, and just ended up essentially creating a campaign to get this millage passed and explain. I think it only passed by like 13 or 19 votes. It was very tight. Raising property tax is not an easy—

**Michael Murray:**

Well, but remember you raised property tax in a red area that doesn't like taxes, but they said this is worth it.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. There was a lot of, on behalf of the school, I mean, of course, the playgrounds was one piece of the project. And so they also had other renovation projects with the buildings that were rolled into the funding. But we got it passed, and we were able to sit down as a planning group and select and design kind of what play elements needed to be there. And it was a really just rewarding experience to work alongside and I think educate others about different ways to look at things. So for example, we ended up getting a metal rolling slide on our playground because those are really important for students that might use hearing aids or have cochlear implants because the static of a plastic slide can impact that. So normally, those kids are like taught, don't go on slides, don't go on slides. So we wanted to build a space and make sure that we were just thoughtful about all the types of students that go to the playground.

And I think one of the biggest things that I guess that I faced was there would be some naysayers or people who would say, well, this is just one kid. Like just for your kid. We're building a super expensive playground. And so going through and kind of making sure that a) they understood some of the other benefits that come with having a universal and inclusive playground, especially surfacing. Surfacing is a big one. So the woodchips that I talked about was a huge piece for Maggie. But they're also not very safe for even typical kids because they're often not maintained well at all. We would have huge bare spots or were rarely any at all. And as far as having enough cushion to brace for a fall and prevent an injury, that unitary surfacing, and unitary is meaning kind of like a solid, flat, almost rubberized surface. There's different types. There's tiles. There's poured rubber. There's even turf could be considered a unitary surfacing. But it's not this loose fill type of woodchip, and it's definitely shown and proven to be much safer and much lower maintenance down the road. Although there is a higher initial cost, if playgrounds and parks maintained the woodchips as required through ADA, the cost would be astronomical. The reality is they don't do it.

**Michael Murray:**

Absolutely. And we're going to dive deep into all of those different pieces. You can tell they just want to get there. But I want to make sure that folks hear the storyline. You found out that there was a problem. You worked it out, and there were multiple choices in front of you as many of our listeners are going to have. You chose a millage, and the reality is that people came in behind you and they said, yes, having inclusive play is of value to us. And so before we move to Julie to ask her kind of the same question and hear that same story, Holly, what was it like watching Maggie actually get to go on this playground that you had fought for and enjoy it with her peers?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. It's pretty magical. I still get to see her go play on the playground even today, and I still have to pinch myself a little bit. Because I think when you do advocacy work, it is a lot of tiring, it's kind of never done. You climb one mountain peak only to see where the next one is. And so a playground is such a real tangible thing. We can visit it. We can see it. She can touch it. She can interact. She can play. I mean it's her favorite part. I mean I think if all of us reflect back on your favorite part of grade school, recess comes top of the list for nearly everyone. So to make that able to be Maggie's favorite thing too and make a space where it could be her favorite thing and she can play with friends, it's pretty magical.

**Michael Murray:**

I love it. Julie, I'd love to turn to you and just ask that same question around how did you, talk to us and tell us some of the fight that you've had and some of the victories that you've seen.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Sure. I'd be happy to. So ours started this time around in February. Given that the playgrounds were closed last summer, all of a sudden our district received some ARPA funding, and they decided great, let's put some of it towards the playgrounds. And they wanted a very, very quick turnaround. So they shot out a survey to us at the beginning of February—I think it was February 8th—and told us that the first hearing would be on February 18th where they would show us an idea of a playground and two weeks later would be the final vote. So there really wasn't much time for community input at all. But they did that on purpose because they wanted the final drawing to go out in March, go out to bid, get the bids by May, start construction in June so that by next September, the playgrounds could be built and all of these kids at the school—this is a town playground but it's adjacent to the school so it is the playground that those students use at recess time—they've gone all of this school year with only a partial playground. They were very eager to have it up and running for the beginning of the school year next year. And if we slow down, then just so everyone knows, we might not have a playground for all of next year. So it was very, very quick.

And for me, I took the survey because I thought, oh my gosh, this is great. Our experience at the playground now is there's one thing that Jake could play with, and that's it. And I thought, this is going to be the opportunity. This is great. Let's make it better. So we took the survey, and I realized of all the things they were surveying us about, they had us prioritize certain elements. Of all of this, what's your most important? Is it climbing walls or rope ladders or slides or whatever. There were seven ideas. Prioritize them. New page seven new implements. Is it the swing? Is it the monkey bars? Seven new elements, prioritize them. And as I took the survey, I thought, none of this is my priority. My son couldn't play on any of this, and this isn't my priority at all. So in the box at the bottom of the survey when they allowed for open input, I just went heavy on wheelchair access, including inclusive play. That's my priority. So I'm sure a number of people filled out the survey, and I went to the first meeting where they had us vote right at the beginning of the meeting between two play structures. And I looked and I just started having this sinking feeling. And I thought, neither of these play structures, they were billed as being accessible, which I'd love to tell you about, but in reality, Jake couldn't have played on any of them. So we voted, and we voted—we, we, the people who were attending that Zoom meeting voted. And one of them was chosen, and after that, they allowed the opportunity for question and answer.

And so I did realize everyone comes to the table with their own lens. So there were people asking about trees and shade, and there were other people asking about the memorial. I was the one asking about access, wheelchair access and inclusion. And there were two features in particular that really stood out to me in that first meeting. The first was that the way to get to the upper elements of the play structure were a climbing wall, a climbing rope structure, and a staircase. And the staircase was labeled on the diagram, ‘accessible staircase,’ which I just didn't understand. And so in my most curious tone, I said, I think that I just need help understanding. I see the word accessible, but can you help me understand how the staircase is accessible. And what I was told, the designers were there, that it was ADA. This was an ADA structure that they were offering us, and it was accessible because it had a wider platform at the bottom. So someone who was in a chair, if they had the upper body strength, could transfer to that wider platform and then could drag themselves up the stairs. And there's so much that I saw that was upsetting to me about that.

**Michael Murray:**

That's terrible.

**Julie Kenerson:**

The human dignity factor, not to mention the interruption in the flow of play. And my son couldn't have done that, right? My son didn't have the upper body strength. So I was also told that it was accessible because the stairs were wider than typical stairs. So a child could be assisted by an adult making their way up. But we all know that is if children are playing together, as soon as an adult enters the play, the nature of play changes. So that I sort of put a pin in and thought, okay, I'm going to leave—

**Michael Murray:**

What a load of crap.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah.

**Julie Kenerson:**

And the second thing that I had heard was they knew and they mentioned in that meeting, we've gotten input about accessibility so we know that we will work on making this wheelchair accessible. They wanted to be sure everyone knew it was an ADA playground because there would be a path to the play structure, and that was the ADA accessibility. So I, of course, am listening for my lens, and I'm hearing them say, there's a path to the structure. So I asked, so then, what happens at the structure? And the person leading the meeting said, well, it'll be mulch. And I said, oh. And he said, yeah, I know.

**Michael Murray:**

Nobody likes mulch.

**Julie Kenerson:**

And so that's where we ended, and that was a Thursday night. And I remember I just chewed on it and chewed on it and chewed on it for several nights. I lost sleep over it. And what I realized is that I wouldn't be okay with myself if I didn't say something and I have to say something. And so it happened to be right before our February vacation. So it became a very intense February vacation for me where I started on that Tuesday and I just did a ton of research. So in terms of process, I called an adult friend of mine who is in a chair, and I was like, Dave, talk to me about mulch. And he's like mulch is horrible.

**Michael Murray:**

The worst.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Horrible. Sand is horrible. You can't have asphalt. That's dangerous when kids fall. But you know what's really good, and he mentioned one playground in town that had that rubberized surface. He's like, that's really good. I was like, okay. And then I called someone who had helped the city of Burlington, Vermont get an accessible playground. She's also a special ed director. She happens to be my sister. So I was like, hey, talk to me. And so we had a very long and heated conversation about it. I also went online. So my town, to their credit, had done an ADA analysis of their playgrounds a number of years ago. And so they had every public space analyzed for ADA. And I read that entire document and discovered and learned—I'm learning a lot through this whole process—that there's a difference between ADA best practices and universal design. And so that was important for me to note. And the best practices, which these are ADA, in 2010 the standards were rewritten, and the best practices in the field allow for access to 51%, so more than half, of the upper elements in a play structure and access and interactivity to a certain number of the ground level elements. So I thought, that's good to know because this proposal doesn't meet that. And then finally, I called the vendor itself. I found out who the vendor was, and I called the vendor. And I said, can you just help me understand, because we're having a conversation. I'm being told that this play structure is being sold as an ADA play structure. And it is. So it was being sold, and it is officially an ADA structure, which I think is curious or very problematic because—

**Michael Murray:**

Or a bunch of crap.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Well, I didn’t say it that way. So the fact that an accessible staircase makes something check the ADA box, so confusing. And then the elements underneath, there were four elements. One was that a wheelchair could roll under the bridge. Okay. There's no play involved in that. There was one panel, so that would be something that a kid like Jake could access. There was a hammock that was considered accessible. I'm not even sure that it would have been like size-wise safe for Jake to go on. And then there was one area that was a social space, and a wheelchair could roll under to make it social. But then I'm thinking, where's the play? That's not play. That's allowing a chair to move around except that it was mulch. So actually no, we couldn't move the chair around, and we were landing on a new playground that once again would have one panel, one element that Jake could play with. So armed with all of that, I called the department, the director of the parks and rec department and just asked if I could go talk to him. And to his credit, he made himself available almost right away. He said, I have a meeting later. And I said, I can come right now. I'm on vacation, if you want. He's like, sure. I was like, I'll be there in 10 minutes. And he sat with me for an hour and a half, and we just got on his computer, and I told him who I was, I told him my story. And I said, this is the lens I'm coming to. Can we just take a look and can we really walk through what this would look like? And he listened, he talked, he brainstormed. Like I really give him credit for sitting and talking with me. And in the end, he sort of leaned back, and he's like, okay, so here's the deal. You're not going to win this one on ADA because we are offering an ADA playground. You're going to win this one on best practices. And I said, okay. So I felt like he almost started coaching me about how I was going to win this. And he said more than once, he's like, you have to talk to the money guy. He's like, here's who you have to talk to. You have to talk to the money guy, and you have to talk to this woman who is the head of our town's disability commission. He's like, those are your next two conversations. And I was like, thank you very much. And I let him know I felt like it was my role and something I could offer to raise awareness.

I really feel like part of the problem is that people just don't think about inclusive playgrounds. If families don't have any personal experience with knowing anyone who would need an inclusive playground, they might just not think about it. But I also think a whole lot of them, if made aware of the issue, would say, oh, I support that. We totally should do that. So I approached it as what I could offer was to raise awareness. And then I had a whole series of conversations where I met with the money guy. I talked to the leader of the disability commission. She offered to let me share my thoughts with the whole disability commission. I ended up speaking with the principal at the school and had a meeting with him. I spoke with the district director of diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I said really clearly, it is an inclusion issue. And one of my lines continued to be if we don't intentionally include these kids in this design, then for the next 15 years, we are excluding them. This is not just the one-shot deal. They're not going to go back—

**Michael Murray:**

Julie, say that again.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Yeah. If we don't intentionally include these children in this design, then we are knowingly excluding them for the next 15 years.

**Michael Murray:**

Wow.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Yeah.

**Michael Murray:**

That’s so good.

**Julie Kenerson:**

And I mean that is the truth. That is very much the truth. So go forth. And if we don't make this design be inclusive not only to kids in chairs but, as you mentioned, Holly, it's not only the kids and chairs, it's kids who use a white cane. Mulch becomes very difficult for any maneuver. It's for kids who are in walkers. It's for anyone that has a balance issue. It's for the grandfather who's there in his ***[inaudible 00:36:27].*** It's for the friend of mine in a wheelchair who would love to bring niece and nephew to the playground but can't because it's just not safe. So there's really so many people in our community who need to be considered if we're really going to try to make an inclusive community, and that's how I tried to sell it is we can do better. If you know better, do better. And we know better.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes.

**Michael Murray:**

I think I've heard Holly say that.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Absolutely.

**Michael Murray:**

So one of the things that I've heard from both of you guys is research, was knowing the right people, it was getting out there and educating. And Julie, I promise we're going to dive into some really specific things that you guys feel like every playground should have. And so we'll play with that. But before we do, how did that story end? How did you win the day?

**Julie Kenerson:**

Well, yeah, and I want to be sure to mention also that I had posted first on a website, a Facebook page of diversity, equity, inclusion in town, and a number of people said, here's who to talk to, here's who to talk to, let me know if we can write letters. So I wouldn't say that it was—there were really many people right at the ready to write if they wanted. And when I started and met, first, I said, first, let me meet with the person. I really believe in addressing the issue directly first. I'm not going to complain about it. I'm going to try to address it directly with the person and then have the support come in behind. So a number of people wrote letters. We had a letter from a seventh grader. We had a letter from a fourth grader. We had a letter from some of the parents in the community, from an occupational therapist, from someone who was in a wheelchair. So they all wrote letters to the parks and rec commission. And he told me too. He's like, if we get two letters, we might pay attention. If we get 15 to 20 letters, we're going to take notice. If we get 200 letters, that gets annoying. And I thought, that's very good to know. I will keep that in mind.

**Michael Murray:**

So did you want to annoy them or not annoy them?

**Julie Kenerson:**

No, for real, I did not need to annoy them; I needed to raise enough awareness for the change to happen. That's what I was thinking. And so at some point, I looped around, and I said, hey, how are we doing on letters? And he said, we're good on the letters that just say let's have inclusive playgrounds. We get the message. What we could use now are specific examples of what we could—

**Michael Murray:**

So good.

**Julie Kenerson:**

So I really felt like he was willing to collaborate, and that was the vibe I got. I got that from the principal. I got it—the money guy, he came to the table ***[inaudible 00:38:57]*** money. I get it, right? But other people were like, I'm with you, I hear you, I got you. So what happened was—

**Michael Murray:**

There was a disability garrison out there waiting to join and to fight alongside you. I love it.

**Julie Kenerson:**

So they ended up extending the second public hearing by a week and that was because they went back and talked to the architects and the principal. And I began to hear a little—like at that point, my conversations were done, but I began to hear about other conversations that were happening. I also was invited to present to the parks and commission, which I'll tell you all about later. But in the end, they came back with a new design for the play structure and the playground, and the play structure itself had ramp access with three turning points, the three turning points all had panels to play with. It had a slide that was one of those roller slides, Holly, that you were talking about. It had all three—they were redoing three playgrounds, and I focused just on the one because that was about all I could—I couldn't bite off more than I could chew on this round. But all three playgrounds were being put out for bid for that poured in place rubberized surface. So all of a sudden, ***[inaudible 00:40:08]***. Our playground in particular went out to bid with an accessible carousel, a picnic table that had built-in access for wheelchairs, and an accessible swing, one of those basket swings. So I feel like all around, it was a totally different and inclusive playground. And I think, also, so it's not for my son Jake because he's not with us anymore. But it is for the child two streets up that I know is in a chair and it is for my son's friends who where I see my son so comfortably interacting with that child and the other friends just a little more timid because they don't really know. But if we build in the opportunity for them to play together, they will get to know and interact with all sorts of kids, and it will become very normalized for our typical kids.

**Michael Murray:**

That's so good.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Yay. And I forgot one more thing, which is that because there's so many playgrounds that closed, I've heard word that one of our—so we're a larger town. We have 40,000 in one of the suburbs of the city nearby. So one of our larger playgrounds is due to be gutted next year, and when I was presenting to the parks and rec commission and sharing all of these ideas, at the end of that, the director of the parks and rec said, hey, everybody, we have this opportunity. He said, we all know that Robbins needs to be renovated next year, and I see this as a really good opportunity for us in universal design. And inside I was like, oh my God.

**Michael Murray:**

That's so good when people start repeating the things that you're fighting for. I love it.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Right.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah.

**Michael Murray:**

And so congratulations to both of you guys. And I think it also demonstrates though that this is not impossible, that you can make an impact. And we'll finish out by talking a little bit about that. But the thing that both of you have been wanting to talk about the entire time, which I love, I think it's awesome. So I want you guys to have an opportunity to geek out a little bit and talk about some of the cooler features that inclusive playgrounds have. And let's kick it off with the one that we've been hitting all the time. Nobody likes mulch. What's our alternative?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah. The unitary surfacing is really big, and I think Julie's touched—

**Michael Murray:**

You said unitary surface.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Unitary.

**Michael Murray:**

I don’t think people know what that is.

**Holly Carmichael:**

So something that is not loose or in pieces. So something that is solid and slip resistant and is flat. So these can come in a variety of forms. There are some that are called poured in place rubber where it's actually really fun and soft and like squishy to walk on, kind of a little bit cloud like. They also make a tiled version of that same rubbery surface. There is field turf can be unitary of what they put under. Like they can put like a rubber pad under this false grass that can kind of keep it flat. Those are the primary ones that I've seen done. But surfacing is such a huge gap because it is the engineered wood fiber technically meet the regulations of ADA but in reality do not. They meet regulations of ADA if, and only if, they are maintained, meaning raked, tamped, and filled daily. So parks and recs, city managers, mayors, superintendents, don't bullshit me. You are not doing that daily. That is not happening. That is not. We'll post on the website with this episode a study on playground services. But there's this quote from it that I highlighted in my presentation to the city and the school board, and it says, failure to recognize the significant role of the surface material is the conscious or unconscious decision to design for segregation. And I think that just repeats Julie's thing of choosing to not design this well now means you are choosing to segregate and leave these students out. And that is just absolutely not okay. And it's not even about it—there's also safety for typical kids too. And I mean I talk to teachers all the time. Like the cleanliness in classrooms of what gets brought in from the playground, unitary surfacing, there's loads of benefits to it and choosing to not do it is you're making the choice, especially once you know, if you've heard this episode, then you're consciously making the choice and there's lots of alternatives out there. But surfacing is a huge piece of any inclusive playground and kind of a must-have. Like you've got to have unitary surfacing to be an inclusive playground.

**Michael Murray:**

Yeah, speak to it, Julie. Come on. I know you want to jump into it.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Absolutely. No, I can only echo and amplify what you have to say. I think the minute you hit mulch, a whole population, many populations of people are now excluded. They go from being independent to now becoming dependent again. So you're taking away their independence by having mulch as a surface or any other uneven surface. I agree with you. I think that it has to start with that.

**Michael Murray:**

So good. All right. So we've got time for a few more features. Julie, I'm going to let you pick the next one. Which one are you super excited to nerd out on?

**Julie Kenerson:**

I'm going to go with two if that's okay. I just was thinking how earlier you were talking about how a thoughtful design of playgrounds has certain elements at different levels right next to each other.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes.

**Julie Kenerson:**

And so one of the playgrounds we really love has three slides right next to each other. And one of them worked for my son Jake. The other two didn't. He would get his legs—he would like skid and ***[inaudible 00:46:07]*** his feet on them. Whereas the slide that has the rollers worked for us with him. I loved the design that had the three slides right next to each other so that Jake could go on the slide that worked for him and Lukas could go on the slide that worked for him. And we were all sliding together. And in the same vein, looking at swings. I think a lot of people see the bucket swings and say, oh, that's so great they have an accessible swing. Well, as someone who uses those and used those with my kiddo Jake, as often as not, the straps have been cut off by people who are worried that their children might choke on it. And as soon as you take the straps off, you've rendered that bucket swing inaccessible. And now there's nothing that my kid can play with. And the other thing that happens is that sometimes those bucket swings are placed near the toddler swings, and that is something that, again, I think people just need to be made aware of. That's not appropriate when it's a nine-year-old playing with a seven-year-old. They don't belong near the toddler swings. They belong in the big kid swings. And that still requires a transfer. So another swing that I love are the roll-on swings where they're little. It's a metal platform with two ramps on either side, and you unhinge the ramps, and then the person can roll on. Someone can hinge them. And I know that requires some assistance. Our son of required assistance anyway. And then the child can stay in the chair and swing. And I often think about people who say, well, I've had conversations with a friend where I think he was worried that designing a playground would take something away from his child. And when I got into more details about the different types of changes, part way through the conversation, he's like, oh, so actually it doesn't take anything away. It just makes it so they could play on it. And I said, yes, that's the whole idea. So that kind of platform swing, I have been to playgrounds where two typical kids have been using it and swinging back and forth. And it's a fun, different swing for them. But yet, it's built so that any child can go on it. So those are two of the ones that I love.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah, yeah. No, I think those are good ones. I think oftentimes when the folks are just designing a playground without putting that thought into it, they're not really finishing out a play type. So whether it's spinning, they're only including one spinning thing and really only one type of level of child can use it. And really kind of each type of play element has multiple levels to it regardless of even typically developing children, right? There's that quote about the popcorn. Like the popcorn kernels are all in the same oil, the same heat. Yet some pop right at the beginning, and some pop towards the end. So there needs to be some thought put into ensuring you're including all of those challenge levels and that you're grouping them close to one another and that you're really thinking about the different types of folks that'll use the park, whether it's a public park and we'll have grandparents who will be picnicking or lots of strollers. We need to have wider paths because we got dueling strollers or whatever it might be. One of the things that in my inclusive playground certification that that we talked about that really hit me was this idea of the coolest thing. And designers might not know what it is. But you kind of have an idea of what's going to be the coolest thing on the playground. That thing needs to be accessible to everyone because nobody wants to feel left out of whatever the coolest thing of the playground is. So making sure that you're finding that central item and ensuring that there is access for everybody to play meaningfully. Julie, you talked about how like, well, technically we're ticking the boxes of ADA because the kid can roll under the bridge. Are we playing or are we—

**Michael Murray:**

That's not meaningful. Are you serious?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yeah, yeah. Like really truly think about what our ways that—

**Michael Murray:**

It’s accessible because they can see the playground from 10 feet away.

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes. Exactly, exactly. Yes, yes. The coolest thing. Elevated play, you talked about this in your story too. It is really meaningful. Kids want to go high. And so figuring out ways to do that. Ramps are an option, but making sure your ramp doesn't lead to nowhere either, that you're thinking about how would this actually be used for a child who may be a wheelchair user. What can they do when they're up there and what happens if they get out of their chair when they're up there and how do they get their chair back? Just kind of thinking through that play cycle and how the playground is going to be used instead of just kind of throwing a random hodgepodge of activities and pieces. How will routes and maneuverability, that was a big piece that we worked on in our congress playground design of how will kids go around the playground. There's a different access points and some kids will use the balance beam to enter this way and some kids will use the monkey bars to enter this way and there's a ramp that meets in the middle that they can kind of all tee off at. So there's so many components to it. It's not super hard though I wouldn't say. It's just a matter of learning, educating yourself a little bit around these different points, and there's lots of materials out there to do that. Then it's speaking up when the opportunity comes because oftentimes, we're all paying for these playgrounds, folks. These are public dollars, your dollars paying for this. So speak up on how it should be used.

**Michael Murray:**

That's right.

**Holly Carmichael:**

And taking that action to kind of rally some troops to support and make sure that the folks in charge understand how important and how critical this is.

**Michael Murray:**

And I think Holly already answered this question, but I'm going to turn it to Julie to close us out. If you could give some advice to—there are going to be listeners who are going to be ready to make a huge change and want to have an opportunity to ensure that the next 15 years, we're intentionally including by creating those playgrounds. So what advice do you have for those folks who are about to step into this journey?

**Julie Kenerson:**

So my advice is to do the research. I was on a very steep learning curve when I started this. Holly, it sounds like a whole lot about inclusive playground. But I only knew the experience as a parent who would take my children to them. It certainly helped to have conversations, to do some reading, and to learn more about the law, about expectations, about the town environment, about the research, about the funding so that when you go have the conversation you are informed and you know what you can pull, what facts or data or experiences you can pull from to advocate. I really worked hard on saying who's in the decision-making seat because that's who I need to talk to. So I think that it's important to know who in your town or in your area is sitting at the table, making the decision, and try to see if you can have a conversation with any one of them. I personally, like I said, always like starting and speaking directly to them and say I'm coming to you first. After speaking to you, I see my goal is raising awareness. So I am going to become more public. I just want to let that. But I think out of respect for—I mean these people spend a lot of their time and a lot of its volunteer hours on their part too. So for me, out of respect, starting directly with them and then following up with some more publicity. And I think that I just knew it was going to take a lot of time, and my family knew. For me, it was a very intense turnaround for that period of time. Tell me when you're free. I will make myself available, and I am happy to talk. I will also say that I was told by many people that showing pictures and showing visuals made it so much clearer.

**Michael Murray:**

That's a great idea.

**Julie Kenerson:**

and I always started the visuals with what we were aiming for. I didn't start with criticism, and I was really clear to say, I am not here to complain. I am here to raise awareness and to be part of the problem. I think we can do better and sign me up. I will be a part of it. I will research. I will invite people to playgrounds, and I'll have wheelchairs there so they can see what the experience is like. I'll go on field trips and go look at inclusive playgrounds in our area. Sign me up. I am willing to be a part of the solution. I think it's really important. And so my line was play is for everyone. So let's make sure that we can make it so play is for everyone, and I'm working with you on this. So with that, then having a lot of conversations, raising the awareness, that's what worked for me so far.

**Holly Carmichael:**

You're absolutely right. You're dead on. You have to come at it from a standpoint of trying to be collaborative and raising that awareness despite, I will tell you, there are times I wanted to pull my hair out and just felt so frustrated at some of the feedback that you may get or the lack of understanding. And so I just want to—I guess I just, I don't even know if we'll include this or not—but I just wanted to say yes, you're absolutely right. I think it's hard. Some days that is hard as an advocate to be the honey and not the vinegar.

**Julie Kenerson:**

Fair enough. And I lost a good amount of sleep in those couple of weeks, tossing and turning and being like, what?

**Holly Carmichael:**

Yes, yes, yes.

**Julie Kenerson:**

But then also sitting at the table. And yeah, again, if we know better, let's do better.

**Michael Murray:**

Well, and I can say this emphatically. Both of you are a part of the solution. Both of you have offered solutions and made such an incredible impact in your communities, around the U.S., and around the world. And I know that to be true. So it has been an honor to interview both of you guys, and we're going to make sure that everyone has access. We're going to continue to fight for this. We're doing a campaign called hashtag Fair Play for All where we celebrate play, and we're going to continue to work for this. And Disability Garrison, all of you out there who are joining us in this fight for justice and equality and for inclusion, it is an honor to join alongside you. Some of you never even heard this podcast, as Julie just mentioned, but we consider you a part of our garrison, and together we're going to continue to make a difference.

What an incredible interview. It was such a privilege to be able to interview my co-host Holly, and man, our special guest today really was so incredible. So as always, we want to leave you, the Disability Garrison, with three things that you can do to impact this issue. And as always, we start with something that you as an individual can do. Then we want to talk about a systematic change that we're trying to make. And then last but not least, we want to talk about a great organization that we donate to and that you also can donate to. So first, what can you do as an individual to have an impact on this issue? Be aware. It's amazing, until you see that there's a problem, often we can't fix it. How many inclusive playgrounds are around you right now? When you go to those playgrounds, are you seeing that there's something going on? Are you seeing that it's inclusive? Are you able to advocate for inclusive playgrounds the next time that it comes up at your school or county board? Keeping your eye open for these things and talking about the importance of inclusive play with friends and family is one of the things that we can do as individuals to make a huge impact.

Second, and I'm really excited about this, hashtag Fair Play for All campaign is starting today. For those of you who haven't participated in hashtag Fair Play for All, this is something that GT Independence does every year, and it's our way of highlighting this issue and talking about what we can do. So I want you to go to our website at GTIndependence.com or go to DisabilityGarrison.org, and on there, you're going to have the opportunity to vote for which one of these accessible features that we talked about today you like the most. So you get to vote. And when you vote, you're going to be entered in for an opportunity to win a super awesome prize. Let me tell you about the prize. In September, we're going to go to Morgan’s Wonderland, which is a non-profit, inclusive, accessible theme park in Texas, and we're going to be giving away a trip to joining us for Maggie's birthday, which is going to be super awesome. It'll be a great way to celebrate and also, just a great way to have a systematic impact on this issue. So hashtag Fair Play for All, everybody make sure that you go on our website, vote, enter for an opportunity to win this really awesome prize.

And last but not least, we want to talk about an organization that you can donate to. We want you to support Unlimited Play. Unlimited Play is an award-winning, non-profit organization that builds inclusive playgrounds for children of all abilities nationwide. We really encourage you to go and donate to them. Again, Disability Garrison, we are honored and privileged to bring these things before you and to be a part of the army of disability rights advocates that's having an impact on these issues. Thank you for joining us. Hashtag Fair Play for All. Let's celebrate play together.

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