



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 9, Episode 16

Lisa Drennan

Tim Villegas:

Friendships are important for everyone. And so I want you to think about a good friend that you have. Go ahead, take a second. And once you have that person in your mind, ask yourself, where did I meet this friend? Was it at school? Was it at your place of worship? Was it at your job? Or is your friend your neighbor? You see, chances are you met your friend where you spend a lot of your time, the physical and sometimes virtual spaces that you are. And for people with disabilities, especially those with extensive support needs, the spaces for them... Well, let's be honest they're limited. But our guest today, Lisa Drennan, the founder of merge consulting, she has a great idea that goes beyond making schools inclusive. She asks what if we can make community inclusive, specifically recreational organizations like YMCAs, community rec programs, and libraries. You know, those organizations that are supposed to serve all people. My name is Tim Villegas and you are listening to the think inclusive podcast presented by MCIE.

Tim Villegas:

This podcast exists to build bridges between families, educators, and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education and what inclusion looks like in the real world. To find out more about who we are and what we do, check us out at thinkinclusive.us, or on the socials, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Today on the podcast, I interview Lisa Drennan, inclusion expert, founder of merge consulting. We discuss how families of children with disabilities can advocate to join community recreation groups like the YMCA or even a local summer camp. And the strategies for advocating for change in recreation spaces are not that different from what we use for schools. But before we jump into our interview with Lisa, I wanted to share a story from a publication that Lisa talks about near the end of our interview. It is called building friendships between people with and people without disabilities, a toolkit for community recreation, cultural, and faith organizations.

Tim Villegas:

I picked this particular story because it shows the power of friendships when students with extensive support needs are included in general education classrooms. But there are other examples throughout the toolkit. The story of Jesse and his friends. Jesse had friends, friends like Jamie and Kyle, Adam, and Kelman. Friends who would come over to his house to go swimming, listen to music together and partake in the shenanigans that go along with a sleepover. Jamie Becker met Jesse when they were in seventh grade science class together. She started talking to him and even though he was nonverbal, they did not have trouble understanding each other. "I Felt like I could communicate with him by not even saying a word. We just got each other," shares Jamie, as she recounts the first day meeting him. In fact later that year Jamie's teacher had to move her seat because she was always talking too much to Jesse.

Tim Villegas:

It was not too long before Jamie and Jesse started hanging out together outside of school. "I Would bring Jesse a newly burnt CD of all the music I liked. And we would get kick out of listening to them together," Jamie shared. "A Favorite memory with Jesse was when we (Jesse and their friend, Kyle) got dressed up for Halloween and handed out candy to the neighborhood kids afterward, we watched scary movies together. It was so much fun." Jamie's recollection of how she shared with her parents about meeting a new friend was similar to that of Adam, a friend from elementary school who is described by Jesse's mother Maryanne in her memoir, knowing Jesse. He made friends, two: Adam and Kelman, neither one the sensitive type you'd think would be attracted to a non-verbal kid in a wheelchair. Adam told his mother there was a kid in his class who hated to color as much as he did.

Tim Villegas:

And could they have him over for a visit? A few weeks later he asked his mom, what does non-verbal mean? His mother told him. Adam was puzzled, but Jesse can talk. People just don't listen. Adam's mom was shocked when she met Jesse. Adam hadn't mentioned the wheelchair. It just wasn't important to him as was the mutual hatred of coloring. When Jesse came over to visit Adam and his brother, Derek, included him in their boisterous games. Jesse shrieking with laughter as they maneuvered his wheelchair in a dizzying game of tag. Later, they became bowling buddies one day a week at the local lanes, Jesse pushing the ball down a shoot that fit over his wheelchair. Adam carefully positioning the shoot. Their team was called the Outlaws. Jamie and Jesse's friendship continued into high school. At the end of middle school, they attended the traditional and ceremonial eighth grade semi-formal dance together.

Tim Villegas:

She recalls this as one of the fondest memories she has of her middle school years, a time, which so many often wish to erase, but somehow made better for her because of her friendship with Jesse. Unfortunately prior to their freshman year, their school went through a redistricting change resulting in Jamie having to attend a different high school than Jesse. Jamie recalls being so devastated by this change, she asked her parents to purchase a house in Jesse's town, so they could still be in school together. School and life went on and they still kept in touch and spent time together outside of school. Sadly, the following year, Jesse passed away. "I Had a true connection with Jesse that I've never experienced with anyone else to this day," she recounts sadly. "Jesse Was so handsome. He had a great sense of humor. He was smart. He was caring and he had a beautiful soul. And now years later, I can honestly say that I've never had a friend quite like Jesse." Thanks to Lisa Drennan for giving us permission to share a story from the building friendships toolkit. Thanks for listening, subscribing and rating us on apple podcast or Spotify. And now our interview with Lisa Drennan.

Tim Villegas:

Today on the podcast, we welcome Lisa Drennan, who is an inclusion expert, trainer, consultant, and speaker. She's the founder of merge inclusion consulting, where she uses her 37 years of leadership and experience in supporting people with disabilities to build more inclusive communities where everyone has a valued and meaningful role. Lisa Drennan, welcome to the think inclusive podcast.

Lisa Drennan:

Thanks Tim. Thanks for having me. I'm so glad to be here and having this conversation with you. I'm really excited.

Tim Villegas:

Would you introduce yourself to our audience and tell us a little bit about merge inclusion consulting?

Lisa Drennan:

Absolutely. And my story goes way back to the cough cough early eighties. When I started working in the field. I was working at a local organization called new England village. And so this was a residential community for adults with IDD, intellectual developmental disabilities. And I was a, at the time they just, our title was staff right now. It's direct support professionals. So I worked my way up while working there and I spent 30 years in my career there working up to be, you know, manager of a house and, and, you know, further up, I became very interested in recreation though. I found that that was a space that, you know, the men and women we were supporting, I could see them shine. Right. You know, I could see somebody jump into an art class and discover a new talent that they didn't know they had, or hop into Zumba class with some friends and be having a great time together.

Lisa Drennan:

So it really, that was a became me a space that I was very comfortable in wanting to expand upon. So I became the recreation director and then we built on the campus. So it, again, it's a campus style setting in Pembroke, Massachusetts. That's where I'm from. And we built a wellness center right on the campus. We had aquatics and fitness and music and art. Now at the time it was the primary focus was to be an amenity for the men and women who worked there. So, you know, very kind, I guess we say specialized or one might say segregated, right? So that this wellness center was originally built for them. So, you know, in the building process were used the, that's where I was introduced to the whole process of universal design and, you know, building and creating, hiring staff that would, I would teach how to, how do we teach to this population to make sure that they're engaged and everybody's having meaningful participation which was just wonderful experience for me.

Lisa Drennan:

I moved on to be the association director of inclusion in my own, YMCA, I was a member there and they had a position and I thought, oh, this would, this would be interesting, kind of working outside of this community and what happened there. I started working there and I had this huge aha moment, like just literally could have, you know, hit, hit me over with a ton of bricks because it was so eye opening to me that I thought I have been spending 30 years helping folks who worked with this population and everybody engaged in helping this population too, you know, be engaged and to get out into the community as well, particularly where it was a residential setting that was more of a campus to make sure that folks were out in the community. And now I'm working with, let's say camp counselors, right.

Lisa Drennan:

Or somebody who is a yoga instructor, lifeguards membership staff, who were at the front desk, teaching them how to welcome and engage and include community members with diverse abilities into their programming, their existing program. And in this huge aha that, okay, if, if we don't teach the rest of the world, how to do this, no wonder in the 30 previous years, it always felt like we're on this treadmill, right. Constantly, you know, just trying to help our folks to be engaged out in the community and, you know, to attend church or to join, you know, join a, a dance team or, or horseback riding lessons or whatever was of interest to them. But it always felt like a treadmill constantly. Right? So you'd try something and you'd maybe the staff who was wonderful left and then you'd have to start all over. But it, it just dawned on me that there's a huge need, what I call like the other side of the bridge, right?

Lisa Drennan:

So there's, you know, individuals with disabilities, their staff, their family on one side of the bridge. And then the other side of the bridge is the community. And we really have to help the community to become more comfortable, right. And give them the tools and confidence to be welcoming and engaging and supportive. So it made me think I wanna do this more. I wanna, I'd like to help other communities. I loved helping my Y community and learning about Y's and I did help other Ys across the country, I let a resource group it was called DOG: diverse abilities working group for Ys across the country. And it, it energized me to have someone call me from, you know, Texas or Florida or California and say, Hey, how do you do this, Lisa, what would we do here? And I just did so much, I thought this is what I'd wanna do.

Lisa Drennan:

So I made the decision to start merge. And my original intent was to focus on recreation, sport, and camp organizations and helping them to become more inclusive, but really any community organization. Right. So anyone who offers something for the community, so churches, libraries you know, any kind of clubs or first responders even, right. So just working with the community and helping everyone to be more comfortable. And that was in 2018. I think I was about a year and a half in, and I realized that a lot of the old human service providers that I would work with or had connect with for the Y we're reaching out and saying, Hey, can you come do a training here? Or could you come talk to our families? Cause our families really feel like they get stuck on trying to, you know, help their child to access an inclusive camp, right.

Lisa Drennan:

Or their adults son or daughter to participate in something in the community. So I started I added another arm to my, you know my branch of offerings, so to speak. And so I do work with human service providers or any agency that supports folks with disabilities. So I kinda have those two arms, which is really perfect. That's the bridge that we need to build. And the bridge needs to be strengthened from both sides constantly. So I've had this really awesome and unique background and experience that just what I do for work. And I don't even call it work. This is my mission in life. This is what I was meant to do. And I've found the perfect, perfect setting to do this and to help others in the community.

Tim Villegas:

So I know we have talked about this before in our previous conversations, but let's say there's a family who wants their son or daughter with down syndrome to be at their local, YMCA for whatever, whatever program they're offering. Right. And that, YMCA says you know, I, we just don't know how to do this. Like, we don't know how to include, like we want to, or maybe they say they'd, maybe they say that, but they don't really want to. Yeah. But like, what does that family do? You know? Because well, I mean, we can get to get to more about specifically what the Y does or doesn't do, but like imagine some of our listeners are in that position, you know, as they're looking to the summer in camps and stuff like that.

Lisa Drennan:

Right. Absolutely. So, and I have a lot of inquiries from families too. So this is what, where I would start with them is by saying, I would suggest you start at the top. And if it's a YMCA for instance, go to your local branch and ask to speak to the associate director, right. The person in charge there, and, you know, just start with a very welcoming and collaborative kind of conversation, as opposed to maybe you don't have this, and ADA requires this and maybe it maybe not starting on that kind of approach, just real,

really welcoming. And if there are generally the, no, or the, we don't do that, or we're not equipped comes from the ground level. Right. So it's from that aquatic instructor or the person who teaches this particular offering or camp director.

Lisa Drennan:

Oh, no, we can't take, or we can't. Right. So the usually language comes from that level. So I just say, go to the top and just ask about what their barriers are. And then in most cases it's going to be, you know, maybe a, a lack of education, a training or confidence that they can include kiddos with disabilities. And if we start there, and, you know, perhaps suggest an inclusion training, right. That would be a, a good place to start. So if we start there find out what their barriers are, perhaps they can start breaking down those barriers. And then I think it's important for them to, you know, look at perhaps ask their local providers, right. Maybe it's an arc or another human service provider. What other programs in the area are more inclusive. Right. So, and I, and I say this twofold. I think it's important to know who else is doing inclusion well, cuz there are not just to jump ship and keep going.

Lisa Drennan:

You know, now you gotta travel 20 extra miles, have your child participate in a swim class. But to just understand that, because sometimes saying, well, I know that the why down here is doing something, maybe you could talk with them. Right. So, and it has to be a lot of that collaborative, which I find almost all Ys are so open to helping other ones because they don't want to, you know, that whole assimilation process, they don't want their Y to get, you know, over, you know, overrun or just not overrun, but overpopulated with too many kiddos because then it's not the most more natural balance kids with and without disabilities. So we wanna try to avoid that assimilation process and by giving every Y or rec program or, you know, whatever organization is out there, JCCs and boys and girls clubs, give them all the tools.

Tim Villegas:

Can you tell us what that acronym means?

Lisa Drennan:

Oh sure. Oh, JCC is a Jewish community center and then boys and girls clubs as well. So those are, you know, different organizations that provide recreation maybe after school programming. If some are camp things of that nature. So they're JCCs are across the country as well, and very committed that they happen to be very committed to inclusion. It's just a, you know, part of their faith and part of their mission is to be very open and welcoming of kiddos with disabilities.

Tim Villegas:

So, I'm hearing a lot of similarities in strategies on how you go about making inclusion work and, and move forward in your, in your community with, with schools. So a couple things I heard was go to the top. Right. And what that, what that means to me is that even if even if you were to make a little bit of change on the ground level, in order for change to be long lasting, it needs to come from a director or an associate director or someone that has the power to make change in that organization. Is that what I'm hearing?

Lisa Drennan:

Absolutely. So inclusion isn't a program. It's not a staff member, right? It's not an event. Inclusion is the organizational commitment, right. So that has to start from the top down. Sometimes I come in at the, the mid level or the bottom level, someone's just really excited. They came to one of my trainings and they, you know, I'd like to build more inclusion in our camp and without that top level support, it's, it's not gonna be sustainable. So you really do. You have to have, you know, whoever's at the top, it has to become part of their mission. Right. Cause eventually what we wanna do is start transitioning for it to be culture, not a program, not a staff member, you know, often, unfortunately we hear this oh, we're inclusive. We have that special needs program. Okay. Or oh, we're inclusion. We have that staff.

Lisa Drennan:

She's really good. I know she's a para during the school year, so she's really good with those kids. Okay. So, so the same type of thing that that's, you know, perhaps that's a piece of the formula of what helps an organization to be more inclusive, but it's not inclusion, you know, so there's a lot of teaching to go out there. And I think they're all very well meaning. Right. And you have to understand that most, a lot of my aunt, most of my kids, most people I train are 16 to 18 year old camp counselors. Right. And they don't have this background. So it's actually wonderful. I love training. I, I would a hundred times over rather train a group of camp counselors than say a group of teachers who have been in their position for, you know, 20, 30 years. Because they're pretty rigid set in their ways. I think it's, I love working with camps because they, they want to do better. Basically. I find that once they invite me in they're in that position, they wanna do better. They just don't know how right. What does that look like? So.

Tim Villegas:

Yeah. So there's another point that you made about finding other programs I hesitate to use the word program. There are other organizations that are including people, individuals with disabilities. So you said, Hey, you know what the Y down that 20 minutes away, they're, they're doing it. Maybe you could talk to them. That's another, so again, top down, there's another strategy that you can use for schools is, you know, what the, the, the district across the way they're actually including students with autism in regular classes, or they're actually including students with intellectual disabilities, maybe you could visit, maybe you could talk to them.

Lisa Drennan:

Absolutely. And you know what I think it, it has, when we think about a, you know, rec program or camps or, you know, sport organizations, I think it's so hard to even envision because they don't, I haven't seen this happen maybe in their setting and in their world. No, we don't. We don't have of quote unquote special needs kids in our aquatics program. So we don't do that because they haven't even seen that it's possible. So when you see that it's possible, then all those guards go down. Right. And those barriers start to melt away. I think what happens is that there's in the immediate focus on you know, what could go wrong, right? So there's, well, what if this happens or this could happen? And the, our minds go directly to that. And I have, my, one of my principles of inclusion is thinking let's get to yes.

Lisa Drennan:

Having that focus instead of saying, well, if they come, what if they, I know kids with autism have behavior, what if they have a behavior, right. Or whatever that means, right. What if they do this? Or what if they do that? Well, what if any kid does that? Right. Because really that's what kids do. Right. so there's so many fears based on just stigma, what they maybe see on TV or hear from a story or, you

know, something like that, that, that, what if that happens, I don't know how to deal with that. So instead of when approached with a new situation or you know we have a seven year old, Sarah's gonna be joining your group next week and Sarah has down syndrome. She also has a hearing impairment so let me tell you a little bit about her. And the immediate response from most people would be like, oh, I, I can't do this.

Lisa Drennan:

And I'm gonna start telling you all the reasons why we can't do this. And what I, you know, suggest is to take that deep breath, switch your focus. And when you're presented with that, instead of thinking why I can't have and start thinking, okay, how are we gonna make this happen? So it's just, how do we get to yes. And our focus on inclusion should always be thinking about how can we get to yes, because I've, you know, I think if COVID has shown us one thing, we've learned how to be flexible. We've learned how to be resilient. We've learned how to be creative. We can make it work. And that's always my, you know, approach or attitude. Oh, we can, let's just put all our brains together and we'll figure this out together. Right. And there's a team and the team is your camp director, and it's also, you're counselor who's going to be working directly with them. It's the, the camper who's coming too. Right? You want a little bit here. What gonna help make camp successful for them, their parent, maybe the teacher, if they, you know, that from school can help provide some good guidance on how Sarah would be successful in this setting. Maybe it's a camp counselor from another camp. They just moved from another town where it was inclusive. Maybe you talk to the camp counselor there. So there's this team that's going to come up with, you know, the strategies and the support and how are we're going to help engage and make sure Sarah has a very, you know, successful time at camp. So, you know, basically it's that mindset shift is what we're looking to achieve.

Tim Villegas:

Why is inclusion in community organizations important and why is it, why has it been important for you to, you know, for you to do this work with merge?

Lisa Drennan:

Yeah. You know what I think, you know, if you think about community organizations or recreation programs of any type churches, you know, where you go to practice your faith I think what really draws me, it's where people like to be and is where they choose to be. So I think that's a, you know, an important space. It's also where somebody can shine. Right? When we think about, you know, schools are work settings, right? And it's not just talking about kids. When we think about schools and work settings, you know, often there are these measurements or standards that somebody has to reach, and that certainly creates the separation or labels. You know, you're, you're here. If you're hired this, this level, that level, what have you because of those measurements, but I think in recreation, recreation is where you go to have fun and everybody's capable of having fun and everybody's capable of being on that team or taking an art us or joining you know, a camp and just having a blast there.

Lisa Drennan:

So I think there's, that's really important to kind of point out is that recreation is a space where everyone should belong and it's where somebody's going to shine. Right. They, you get to choose, what do you gonna do this summer? Right. If you had some free time yourself, Tim, right. If you had free time and you, you know, money, wasn't an object, or you wanted to try something new, you had a weekend to go try a new class, you're gonna pick something you like to do. And then the good thing about it is

you're going to be with other people who also like to be in that group or class, or have that similar interest. So now you're opening up a social relationship opportunity that, you know, may not happen as much in other settings. Right. Because, oh, we both like this. It's something for you to talk about and expand upon.

Tim Villegas:

Okay. So Lisa I understand that, that you produced the a toolkit with the arc of Massachusetts in surrounding friendship and community inclusion. So I would love for you to tell our listeners about that.

Lisa Drennan:

Yeah, absolutely. So I, I was the primary author on this toolkit and the arc of Massachusetts has a program called widening the circle which includes the pathways to friendship project, right? So this is all an initiative on, on social inclusion. And when I met this group, I was introduced to them. I, I learned about a series of books that they have and it's friendships how to help develop friendships, where you live, where you learn, where you work and where you play. And they had already been created. And there's a, you know, series of trainings that go along with them and there, so the audience for those are family members maybe educators, right in the school instance individuals with disabilities or staff, you know, direct support professionals. That was the audience. And then they heard of me and my work, I met up with them and that same aha moment that I had, you know, with the Y saying we have to teach the rest of the world, there were just gonna be constantly on this treadmill.

Lisa Drennan:

Well, they had that same aha moment. They had written these four books for family members for, you know, direct support professionals for that audience persons with disabilities, but there was nothing for the rest of the world, so to speak. And they asked me to create the fifth toolkit. So it's called building friendships between people with and without disabilities. And it's, this is a toolkit for community recreation, cultural and faith organizations. So this is a tool that someone would hand to an instructor at a Y, somebody who runs over at camp, somebody who works in a library or boy Scouts, girl Scouts, right? Any scout organization, this toolkit was written for the rest of the world, right? The other side of the bridge, so to speak. And, you know, it starts with... All my work, Tim, I have to consider my audience and I have to break it down into bite size pieces.

Lisa Drennan:

So there's not a lot of talk about this study and that study, I'm just gonna share with you. Here's how you become more inclusive. Here's how you think about becoming more inclusive. Here's what it really means. Here are some of the barriers you either have hit, or you would likely hit. And here's how here's some suggestions on how we can overcome those barriers. So that's the first section of the book. And then the next section is introducing this new idea that you could have a tremendous role. So I receive this and I run drama productions at my local, you know, arts council. And I receive this copy. And not only do I, I learn how to be more inclusive in my practices, but I also learn that I may have a role in helping to connect one person with another one who has a disability, one who does not, but they both have that common interest of, you know, theater, Thea being theatrical.

Lisa Drennan:

They have that common interest of Pokémon or NASCAR or swimming, whatever the common interest is that that person, the instructor, the coach, right, the person who's in charge of the group and in

directing the group would maybe recognize one person with, and one person without a disability and, and help to prompt to, to start not force. Right. It's and it's just to plant those seeds to potential friendship. And there's all tips again, the same thing, the barriers you might overcome from an organizational level, from the barriers from the individuals with disabilities or their families, and then individual barriers that you might overcome that come from the, the attendees, other, you know, the rest of the community, right? So it takes each one of those three categories and goes over the barriers and then suggested, suggested ways to you know, overcome those barriers.

Lisa Drennan:

And what I did again, I wanna show what's possible. I found five and it was hard to, it was really, really hard, which speaks to how important this work is. I found five friends, pairs, friendship pairs, one person had a disability. One did not, but they met, or their friendship was evolved through a recreational activity. So, you know, we're looking at mutual reciprocal, friendships that meet because of a common interest in participation and that they are now like some of them 30 years, friendship, right. 10 years, five years, what have you that? So I interviewed them and they're in the book as well. I want to show what's possible. I think if people could just see, you know, that a person with a disability can and should have friends of whether they have disabilities or not, but I think we have to open that up. Right? We have to say this is possible and show somebody what's possible. So that's what the toolkits about. It's a wonderful, wonderful tool. And early you talked about what can a parent do if they hit a roadblock? Well, this, this toolkit can be an incredible, incredible tool for them to hand to somebody, you know, and just say, this might be worth you taking a peek at.

Tim Villegas:

It's a fantastic resource. Where can people find the toolkit?

Lisa Drennan:

Yeah, fantastic. So all five of toolkits, it's on thearcofmass.org/friendship. And you'll be brought to a page where there's the five previous books on, you know, friendships where you live, learn, work, and play. And then there's the fifth toolkit, that's for the, a different audience. But it's a tool for family members for direct support professionals, for a person with a disability to hand with, to one of those organizations. So you can hop on there, you have downloadable versions. And if you live in Massachusetts, they'll mail it out to you as well. So just a tremendous so happy with this work and the response that it's gotten the community that, wow, this is needed. This is so necessary. And really having these conversations about friendships, because when you can have a reciprocal and mutual friendship, not a, you know, wanna be clear, not a, can you volunteer to be their friend? You know, would those kind of setups where you, you know, fulfilling a role because of a requirement is not the type of friendship, you know, relationship we're looking for, looking for authentic friendships.

Tim Villegas:

Will you share with our audience, how people can find you, you know, whether you're on the socials website, email, whatever you'd wanna share.

Lisa Drennan:

Yeah, absolutely. I think the first place to go is to my site and that's mergeconsulting.org. And there you can click on the link to receive my monthly newsletter. That's a great way to stay in touch, see what I'm doing, what's going on, what's coming up. But I'd also love to invite anybody to connect with me on, on

social media. I have a Facebook page it's merging inclusion consulting on LinkedIn as Lisa Drennan, and then on Instagram as merge inclusion. So, yeah, please join me and just watch and comment or ask questions. You know, they could also reach out to me via email it's LisaDrennan@mergeconsulting.org,

Tim Villegas:

Lisa Drennan. Thank you so much for being on the think inclusive podcast. We appreciate your time.

Lisa Drennan:

Pleasure to be here. Thank you for the opportunity to, to raise up this important conversation

Tim Villegas:

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