Roosevelt Belton: Welcome to the Possibilities Podcast Series, the official podcast of Michigan Developmental Disabilities Institute, also known as MI-DDI. I'm Roosevelt Belton, your host, and MI-DDI's Dissemination Coordinator.

In 2023, MI-DDI celebrated 40 years of service to individuals with disabilities.

In honor of this achievement. We recorded interviews with key figures who played significant roles in our development. Over a three-part series we'll look into these stories to explore, MI-DDI's past, present, and future,

Starting with this episode, we'll focus on MI-DDI's past, beginning with a story of how it began from Liz Bauer former Disability Advocate for the Michigan State Board of Education.

Liz Bauer: Well, the federal government passed, a Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act. And within that, they provided for University Affiliated programs, that was the terminology back in 72 (1972), and they were to be research and training institutions and in Michigan, there wasn't one in every state, like there is now, but in Michigan the institution was at the University of Michigan, it was focused on research and training. And as time went forward,

the Developmental Disabilities Council were implemented in the legislation and in Michigan the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council was chaired by Howard Shapiro who, is also the executive of the Epilepsy Center here in Detroit.

And I was on the board of the Epilepsy Center at the time and as was Dr. Sandy Cohen who was Provost here at Wayne State and we were looking at the possibility of moving. they university-affiliated program from the University of Michigan to Wayne State for the purpose of a refocus. Away from research and training of professionals to support for community living, community programs. In other words, getting the program out of the institution per se and into the community statewide.

And because by the 1980s, I was now executive director of the protection and advocacy system, which was also authorized in the Developmental Disabilities Act. We now had two prongs working together, myself, and Howard Shapiro. And so we at the same time, worked with the federal government to move the program from the University of Michigan to Wayne State University. And the commissioner of the administration on developmental disabilities. At that time, was a woman named Jean Elder who had been on staff at the Protection and Advocacy system, okay, you can see that the players were all in place and so the rest is history.

And also, the university that had been housing the university affiliated program was not funding it very well. So, it was the perfect time, and it came to came to Wayne State and then we really focused in on programming in the community, not at the University, but, you know, in community centers throughout the state, working on issues like housing and access. And you know, a lot of this was prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act. So, it was really a leadership initiative.

And then over time the federal government, they reauthorize these pieces of legislation all the time, so now they're called centers of excellence for developmental disabilities and not University Affiliated programs, which again, underscores the commitment to community activity, and it has over the years involved, more people with developmental disabilities and leadership opportunities…

Roosevelt Belton: That was Liz Bauer telling the initial beginnings of MI-DDI. Right now going to hear from former MI-DDI Director, Barbara LeRoy on how she initially got involved with the Institute.

Barbara W. LeRoy: I was the director of DDI for 20 plus years and I'm happily retired. When I first came to DDI, it was through a contract. I worked at the State Department of Education. And in that job, I traveled to all the Intermediate School Districts helping them to include students in vocational training programs. And then, by being at the state, they asked DDI, I wasn't there yet. They asked me to work with DDI-- to write for inclusive education grant from the federal government. They were very interested to move away from segregated programs. So, I did write it. We did succeed in getting it. And the second day of having that wonderful five-year program, the director of special education for the state came to me and said, “we really want to have this, politically we cannot house this at the state” and so he said, “you'll be moving to Wayne State to run it”. And at that point there were four of us there. We need to hire staff. We needed to, you know, build up and become really seen in the community as somebody who could make this happen. And so, we did that program for ten years and then we were asked to focus on transitioning, students to post-secondary education out of the high schools that we created and then into employment and it just kept growing in all the different areas and Fields.

Over the 40 Years of The Institute being in Michigan, and of course it was at the University of Michigan first and then Wayne State, its greatly changed. It moved and I think someone else has talked about this from a medical service model to a community service model and it used to only focus on disability as a medical condition and not recognizing that people could live normal lives like everyone else could do things maybe differently but still succeed and be successful in the community. And that has just been a philosophy that's changed over time as people have seen more and more people in the community doing things. And so that's the biggest change that I think that, you know, that we've supported that's just been a movement across the country.

Roosevelt Belton: Now, we're going to fast forward a little bit and hear Barbara discuss the early role of community inclusion and funding at MI-DDI--.

Barbara W. LeRoy: I initially started working on training people to do jobs who came out of the Michigan institutions. So here we had adults in their 40s and teaching them for their first job. And then realized, well, this is only going to work if they've had an opportunity to be with people without disabilities through their high school years. So, then we went and did secondary education and were like well this isn't going to work, unless we get them together, in elementary school and sure enough, that was too late already, we needed to do preschool.

So, it's sort of been an evolutionary kind of thing, and then well, okay. They've come through regular education now, but they're still living in group homes. They're still living in semiinstitutional settings. Now, we have to work on community inclusion and so across the lifespan, but it wasn't like we were smart enough at the start to think let's just do it here and move. But with you know, as people aged, we really had to be either most often at a younger stage than an older stage. Funding in a sense, drove what we did. But we also realized from the funding that we had, that there were missing pieces. 100% of our work, had to be finding money. So, that we had a core grant, as I think someone has mentioned, from the federal government which really was shared with the university, for you know, part of our being there. And then we had to use that money to pay people to help with development of other funding sources. So, and the requirement out of the federal government was that we had to match that funding 3 to 1, minimum. So, it was always driving us, but it also allowed us to look for what are the issues we really want to address and where are the unique sources to find that money. So, we were quite successful. Very successful, we brought in 30 million dollars to the university so that we felt good about that.

Roosevelt Belton: That was former MI-DDI Director, Barbara LeRoy. Coming up now is Janice Fialka MI-LEND trainer, author, and disability advocate. Here, she describes the role, MI-DDI and inclusion played in the development of her son, Michah.

Janice Fialka: Yeah, it goes back, my son, Michah who is now 38 years old at the time, was 4 or 5 years old and we were learning that he had what we would have then called special needs. Now referred to as a disability, you know, language changes over time and I remember learning about DDI and partly because I was a social worker and mainly because I was a mother who wanted to do the best for our kid and decided to make contact with them and learn about this thing called, I'm sure I couldn't use the word then, disability.

And I remember sitting in an office with someone, a young man who was saying words, I wouldn't remember the words. But what I remembered was that we were moving into rebuilding our dream about our son who had a disability. So, we started to learn some of the specifics about what it would be like to make sure that he was fully included in his school, not in a segregated, or a self-contained classroom. So DDI, and several other few other groups were really sort of the signposts that let us know more about what we needed to know, about to be the best parents that we could.

Often disability or special needs is seen as a special ed issue. You know "what services do you get so, you can continue to grow." But what they helped me understand is that by supporting Micah to be fully included with his peers, we were opening up doors that would allow him to live in a community and the community would begin to change by having him live in that community. So, it wasn't one way, it was always a two-way. So specifically, we began to learn about how do teachers support someone who doesn't even, in Micah's case, doesn't read or write, what tools do they need to know about in order to allow him to participate in the classroom in the way that he could. So, that was part of a major part of what they did vision and tools. And a sense that there was a community of people out there that we're really advocating for something new, a very different vision. I mean, we're more comfortable now, talking about diversity and inclusion. The world has changed significantly in the 34 years since I've been to DDI, but initially that, that vision of all means, all did not exist in the way that it does today.

Roosevelt Belton: Now we're going to hear how inclusion ultimately help Micah succeed in college.

Janice Fialka: As I said, disability is now seen as an identity, it's a part of who you are it’s not something to be ashamed of and I think you know, DDI is one of the leaders in moving that thought to a different place. So anyways, I was playing with the DDI and I thought you know if they wanted to rebrand themselves they could call themselves the “Dare To Dream Institute.” And that's really, you know, dreams are critical to being able to shape a different kind of future. And that role of DDI-- has really grown over the last several decades as well.

Our son Micah was one of the students, part of the new wave of students who were going to college. Micah, doesn't read or write. If you looked at his IQ testing, it's 40. Kids like, Micah didn't go to college and about 12-15 years ago, that started to, that door of college, post-secondary education stuff started to really open up, those doors did. And so Micah was part of that new wave of students going to college and it was so successful and so important. Both for him and the student body, that I worked with DDI-- to actually hold one of the first conferences,

where we brought in the national leaders who were actually thinking about and supporting students like Micah to go to college. The title was “Think College.” And so, we pulled together, I don't know, close to 200 people who came together for a full day conference to learn about how do we open college doors for students with intellectual disabilities as well. So, they've stayed current and engaged with leaders in this field for decades. And in part it's because they're rooted in the disability field people who work there have family members who have disabilities, they're not service-oriented, although they provide services and support and tools, but as I keep saying they're visionaries they’re thinking about what is possible.

When you think about how unusual it was for someone like Micah to be in a general education class, it was scary to the teachers, it was scary to us. No one quite knew how to recognize success. You know, how do we know that this is the right place for Micah. As a parent you know, in the middle of the night wondering “you know maybe we should put him back in a special ed classroom, right? Because they know what they're doing.” So, it was a place like DDI that said, “Here's some of the research. Here's what we're learning about students with intellectual disabilities being in the classroom.” It was like they were the, you know, they could be the nudge or even the place where you're held in your belief and say, “keep going, it's okay to question, but keep going.”

We can't do a whole lot if we’re alone and so when DDI is there to say, “Let me share with you some of the resources that you can take back to the teachers.” There's that sigh of relief “Okay, I can keep doing this. I'm on the right track.” So that's pretty important, even though it just might be one article. You know I can tap into my own worry that I had as a parent. You think, you know what you're doing and it’s right. But then the world questions you. So how do you get over that hump? You connect to, you know? An organization of people and resources and that definitely includes DDI.

Roosevelt Belton: You just heard part 1 of MI-DDI’s 40th, anniversary, podcast series to keep up with future episodes visit DDI dot Wayne dot edu slash possibilities podcast. My name is

Roosevelt Belton, your host and dissemination coordinator at MI-DDI. I'll see you in next episode where we’ll be exploring some of the work MI-DDI is performing in the present.