HOST: The Disability & Philanthropy Forum presents “A Conversation About Language” with Julie Petty.

EMILY: Hello, everyone! My name is Emily Ladau, and I am so excited to be here today with a fantastic disability advocate. But before we get started, I just wanted to give a quick visual description of myself. I am a white woman. I have brown hair, which is in a bun. I’m wearing a blue shirt with a diamond pattern on it. I have glasses on and also, a pair of triangular earrings with little blue gemstones in them. And I’m sitting in a brown chair with a white wall behind me. And my preferred pronouns are she and her. So, I would love to turn it over to our amazing guest to introduce herself!

JULIE: Hi, Emily. My name is Julie Petty. I am a white woman with long brown hair. I’m wearing a black shirt. In my background, there is a armoire with pictures on it. And I prefer pronouns she and her. And I live in Arkansas, and I work for the University Center on Disability and Excellence. And at the university Center, I work on, I work on serving victims with disabilities. We do prevention work and then intervention. So, thanks for having me.

EMILY: I’m so glad you’re here. And I am such a fan of the work that you do, and I think it’s so important and so necessary. And I really wanted to talk to you today about something that I think a lot of people without disabilities have questions about, and that’s disability and language. So, when we think about the language of disability, it can be incredibly complex, right? Because everybody has different preferences, and identity is really, really personal. So, can you tell us a little bit about the history of person-first language and identity-first language? Let’s talk a little bit about how it originated and why these types of languages are such an important part of disability history.

JULIE: Well, I can certainly talk to you about the history of people-first language, I feel. I believe it came out of people in the late-‘70s wanted out of institutions. And they wanted not to be there just because of their disability, and they wanted to be seen as a person first. And they were then, “We want to live in the community just like everybody else.” And so, and then, when the self-advocacy movement, when people were deinstitutionalized, the self-advocacy movement got started. And that’s where I believe people-first language really became the preferred message for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. They wanted to be seen as a person and not their label, not their disability, so.

EMILY: I’m really glad that you talked about the fact that for so many people, especially people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, that disability was seen as a negative label because when you called someone “disabled,” you were not recognizing their personhood. And I know that there’s certainly been a shift in certain cases now to what’s known as identity-first language, where some people do prefer to say “disabled person” instead of “person with a disability” because it’s a way to reclaim disability as a part of a positive self-identity. But I think that we need to acknowledge that there is no wrong way to refer to yourself as long as your personal decisions are being respected.

So, I’d love to know how, if you’re comfortable sharing, you personally choose to refer to yourself and why is that?

JULIE: Well, I used to be—I think language has evolved over time—I used to be really strict about being called a person first because I feel I deal with ableism all the time, and people see my disability, and that’s what they see first. So therefore, they don’t treat me maybe like a person; they treat me as a child or talk down to me or. So, I prefer people-first language. But as I said, I have evolved, and we have evolved as a disability community. And I don’t mind being called a “disabled woman.” I’m proud to reclaim my disability, as you were saying. But don’t call me “cerebral palsy girl,” you know? Don’t call me by my disability. So, I go back and forth between people-first language and identity-first. But I think people should be able to choose, and I always say, Emily, everybody has their, everybody has their name. Just call people by their name! You know?

EMILY: It’s so true. And when you said, “Don’t call me cerebral palsy girl,” it made me think of how, although it’s not visible in the camera, I’m a wheelchair user. And so, I’ve often had people call after me and say, “Hey, wheelchair girl! Hey, wheelchair person.” And that’s not identity-first language.

JULIE: No!

EMILY: And I think that we need to ensure that people understand that there’s a crucial difference between saying “disabled person” and saying “cerebral palsy person” or “wheelchair person.”

JULIE: Yes, yes. I definitely agree, so.

EMILY: So, I’m so glad that you brought that up. And speaking of things that are kind of harmful and uncomfortable and offensive, can we talk a little bit about other language that’s offensive to the disability community? I mean, the word “disability” and the word “disabled,” they’re not bad words; they’re not dirty words, right? But there are some incredibly harmful slurs that I think get thrown around. And we don’t even realize it sometimes, but they can really sting. So, can we talk a little bit about that and why it’s so important to avoid it?

JULIE: Yes. I, you know, I don’t think people realize what they’re doing. So, that’s why it’s so important for us to keep educating that words like the R-word, words like “crazy, insane, suffering,” I don’t suffer from my disability. I might suffer from muscle spasms or might have a good day and not so good of a day sometimes, but those are some of the words that come to my mind, Emily.

EMILY: Yeah, and I also think about words like “lame” or “stupid” or “moron,” right? Words that are part of so many people’s everyday vocabularies, but they can really hurt. And I also agree with you about suffering. I might suffer from chronic pain, but certainly my disability itself is not the cause of suffering.

JULIE: Right. Yep.

EMILY: So, I’m so glad that you brought that up. And I think that it’s so important for people to recognize that language has power, and language has impact. And it shapes how we think about disability. And so, is there anything that you want to leave people with when it comes to thinking about disability and language?

JULIE: So, I think it’s important, like you said, for people to recognize the language they use and understand that it comes from centuries of oppressions. People with disabilities are still being oppressed, and we still have to stand up for our rights, you know? And I live in this South, and it’s a little different down here. So, and I think the oppression has contributed to the discrimination and the mistreatment of people with disabilities. When hurtful slurs are used, they give the impression that we do not value everyone, so.

And language is the core that we use to make connections, so. And language, like you said, can have a lasting impact. I mean, when I hear the R-word, I go back to the playground where kids used to call me the R-word, so. And I always say, what you call people is how you will treat them, so.

EMILY: I totally agree with you. And I think that you raise a really important point about how what we call people shows whether or not we value them.

JULIE: Yes.

EMILY: And can I ask if you have any advice for someone who really does make an honest mistake in their language, and then realizes or is told that they’ve said something hurtful?

JULIE: Well, I’ve had to learn the hard way. I had to tell people their language is not appropriate, so we do, I need to be more sensitive when I educate people. But it really hurts when people use language in a meeting, and you’re the only person with a disability in the room! It’s hard for me to keep my mouth shut. But we have to be sensitive and try to tell people why it’s important to use other vocabulary, because words contribute to the ableism that we have, that I experience. And words can also give me trauma. Like I said, when I hear the R-word, I go back to the playground and the kids making fun of me. So, I think we just need to be as polite as possible and say, “As a person with a disability, I don’t, I don’t like that vocabulary” or however you wanna say it, so.

EMILY: I am right there with you, and I don’t think we should have to keep our mouth shut. I think we should be able to speak up for ourselves in any way that we communicate and say that that’s just not okay. But at the same time, I know that sometimes people who make a mistake once will feel so terrible about it, and then they’ll just go ahead and do it again. So, we just have to keep reminding and keep reminding. And that can be tiring sometimes, right?

JULIE: Yes, totally. I think it’s okay for people to make a mistake. But after you know, you can’t say you don’t know. You know what I mean?

EMILY: Yeah, and then it’s not a mistake anymore.

JULIE: Yeah, so.

EMILY: So, I think that this has been a really, really important conversation, and I hope that people will look at it as a jumping-off point for why it’s so important to respect people’s language choices and also to recognize the history and the value behind people-first language and the advocates who built that up as a movement.

JULIE: Yes.

EMILY: So, is there any final takeaway that you want to leave people with before we wrap up this conversation?

JULIE: Just as I said earlier: Words have a lasting impact on people. So, I just think we should go forward and be respectful.

EMILY: I couldn’t have said it better myself, and I hope that’s what people will carry with them from this conversation.

So, I wanna say thank you so much, Julie, for giving of your time and your story, and I’m so grateful that you were willing to talk with us about disability and language today.

JULIE: I love to educate people, and it does get tiring. But we still have to do it, so thank you for having me, Emily.

EMILY: Thank you, Julie.

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