Disability Deep Dive Episode 77: More Than a Mascot: Challenging Ableism in School Symbols – with Erin Elswood and Jillian Curwin

Keith Casebonne (00:00):

Want to talk about how school mascots, disability and advocacy collide? We're going deep on a topic that's often dismissed as just tradition, but is rooted in real harm. Welcome to Disability Deep Dive.

(00:38):

Hi everyone. I'm Keith.

Jodi Beckstine (00:40):

And I'm Jodi. We're your hosts, and today's episode is More Than a Mascot: Challenging Ableism in School Symbols.

Keith Casebonne (00:47):

We're joined by Erin Elswood and Jillian Curwin of Mascots Matter, an advocacy project that's calling out Ablest language and imagery in school mascots across the country.

Jodi Beckstine (00:58):

This one really hits home for me as a person with dwarfism. The way people talk about tradition in school often leaves out how dehumanizing those symbols can be and the damage it causes disabled students and families.

Keith Casebonne (01:11):

Yeah, Erin and Jillian bring up such a personal and thoughtful lens to this issue, both as advocates and as people with deep lived experience. And they're not just raising awareness, they're pushing for real change.

Jodi Beckstine (01:24):

Yeah, so stick around after the conversation for our Deep Cut segment. This week we're highlighting a beautiful children's book, Little Imperfections: A Tall Tale of Growing Up Different by Peet Montzingo and Rockwell Sands.

Keith Casebonne (01:36):

It's a perfect companion to today's episode. Just like Erin and Jillian are challenging the stories schools tell through mascots, Little Imperfections challenges the story we often tell kids about being quote, "normal".

Jodi Beckstine (01:53):

Hi, welcome. I wanted to thank you guys for joining us today. Let's get started by getting to know you both a little bit. If you could each introduce yourself. And for the folks who may not be familiar, can you let us know what Mascots Matter is and give us a little bit into why you guys started the campaign?

Erin Elswood (02:11):

Sure. I'll start. My name's Erin Elswood. I'm from Texas and I'm a co-director of the Mascots Matter campaign. We are a campaign that started, we could talk kind of how it started later, but it started basically as a way to end discriminatory disability mascots. There are used to be five, currently four high schools in the US that use the term midget, which is a derogatory slur towards people with dwarfism as their mascot. And all of these schools are in the Midwest, and I am a parent of a little person. The other co-directors and Jill, one of our communications director on the campaign are also little people. And so this is all near and dear to our hearts, but I'll let Jill introduce herself and cover anything I missed on the campaign part.

Jillian Curwin (02:56):

Thank you, Erin. Hi, I am Jillian Curwin. I am a little person. I am based in New York City, and as Erin said, I'm the communications director for the campaign. I kind of came on at the beginning of this year as kind of helping shape our message both outwardly to representatives, to collaborators, et cetera, but also on social media as well, and crafting our message and sort of letting the public know what it is we're doing and more importantly, why this matters, which I think has definitely been a big part of explaining the M slur, why it is offensive and why these mascots do need to be, why we do need to get rid of them.

Keith Casebonne (03:36):

It's wonderful organization and can't wait to learn a lot more about it from you guys and this is going to be an exciting conversation.

Jodi Beckstine (03:43):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (03:44):

I wanted to start it off with you, Erin. You've got this powerful dual perspective both as a school counselor and as you mentioned, a parent of a child with dwarfism. What kind of messages are kids picking up from mascots and school traditions even when adults might think it's quote, "harmless fun"? What's actually landing with students?

Erin Elswood (04:04):

Sure. I think that's a great question because it's a perspective that a lot of times people don't really think about, but a lot of these schools that we're dealing with, they use this mascot K-12, so it's not just a mascot for just the high school. These are smaller schools, majority of them, and this is the mascot K-12. Even our largest school district that we dealt with, it was K-12. And I have personally been a counselor in the K-12 area. I've had all levels as a school counselor, and I know without a doubt that whether schools intentionally do it or not, they're indoctrinating these kids with the pride of this mascot from the youngest ages on. I think about the schools I've worked at, we had one who had Panther pride. It was a Panther school, like Panther was the feeder pattern they were in.

(04:48):

And so you had all this Panther pride stuff and the kids starting in kindergarten got Panther points in the hallways for good behavior and things like that. And even in another school I was at, they were the Eagles and they had Eagle bucks for trying to get kids to have good behavior, and that was even in the elementary school. So this pride for the mascot starts at a really young age and it just grows. Even my son, he's eight, he'll be going to third grade and he has been at two different schools with two different mascots, and he can tell you which one was his favorite because even as an elementary student, he knows the power of that and how exciting that is.

(05:25):

And so as a parent of a child with dwarfism, it's a huge issue for me and as a school counselor, just because I know personally, I send home at the beginning of each school year a letter to all the parents in his grade level, my son's grade level, explaining that he has dwarfism and explaining just a little bit about what that is, and I discuss the M slur and how it's not appropriate and not how you should address someone. And I do that so that parents can have that conversation with their student on their own accord and use the verbiage that they to have that conversation with their child about how we address people with disabilities or who are different than us, any sort of diversity.

(06:05):

And I can't even imagine what that would look like as a parent trying to send that letter home in a district that uses that slur as a mascot. And so I'm coming from the parental aspect and school counselor aspect of let's educate on the appropriate use verbiage for addressing people. How do we address diversity? How do we address disabilities? And it's very difficult to do that when the school is putting a sense of pride or an empowerment and indoctrinating these kids that this slur is acceptable to use. And so my big issue with it as a school counselor is it sends a message to students that using a slur like that is appropriate. And so if they're going to use it for one disability, that doesn't mean that that's not going to cross over to other disabilities or other students who are diverse within their population.

Keith Casebonne (06:53):

Yeah, that's a great point.

Jodi Beckstine (06:56):

As a little person who grew up in the Midwest, I understand how that word is deeply ingrained when I was growing up that it was just acceptable and used very readily. Speaking of traditions, Jillian, I wanted to come to you for this. There's got to be a challenge when you're talking to people, they get defensive because it is such a longstanding tradition. How do you use storytelling to reframe this conversation and make them more open to understanding?

Jillian Curwin (07:25):

Yeah, I think that throughout this campaign, and Erin, feel free to interject with your thoughts as well, I think definitely that has probably been one of the harder aspects of this campaign is because in a lot of these communities that we're talking to, they are very proud of this. Going back to what Erin was saying with being proud to call themselves the M slur. I mean, they wear merch, it's proudly displayed across their chest. And so for us on social media, it has been really interesting because we're trying to talk to them in a way that's understanding. We're not trying to attack them, we're not trying to combat them.

We're trying to come at it from this place of education and wanting to be heard and wanting to be understood. And so for us, it's been really, I think a lot of it has been doing the personal storytelling. I think that helps a lot with myself as well as the two of the other co-directors are people with dwarfism.

(08:20):

So getting our perspective as little people, but then also sharing Erin's perspective as a parent of a little person who is raising a child with dwarfism who is going through the schools, and so sharing that point of view. And I think one of the more effective ones, and they started doing this right before I joined the campaign that I think was the most effective, was using their words and audio from a school board hearing when they were debating about the mascot and kind of showing how we are hearing it versus how they're hearing those words. And I think that was really powerful to show that these words that they're using, this one word in particular really does matter.

(08:58):

It really does have an impact and it really does, how they're using it is not okay. It's never been okay, however it's been used, but really in this instance using it as a mascot and trying to be proud of it when it's a slur towards a group of community members. So you never know when you might have a little person in the heart of your school. So I think that's been really... I think that's when I think where our messaging is most effective is when we're really sharing our perspective of this word as well, sharing our voice. Because our voice is little people is often not heard in these conversations. So I think that's been important for me in crafting our message.

Erin Elswood (09:39):

I think too, for me as an average height person, parent coming to these communities, I think it shows a little bit different perspective to them that I'm, like I told you guys earlier, I'm six foot tall. I'm average height by the medical world, but I'm not average height. I'm extremely tall for a woman. And for me, I always tell them, 80% of little people are born to average height parents. So I have four children, only one has dwarfism and I'm six foot tall. Just because you think there's not a person right now in your community that this affects, doesn't mean that that couldn't change it any given moment.

Jodi Beckstine (10:10):

Absolutely.

Erin Elswood (10:10):

So I think that part of the storytelling has been important for me to let people know that this isn't something that runs in my family, and even if it did, it wouldn't matter. I love my son and wouldn't trade him for anything, but it can happen to anyone. And they need to know that too, that this isn't something to just affects a certain amount of people. It affects others. And like I said earlier, this mindset of using this slur for one group of people could transfer to them being more willing to use a different slur for other groups of people.

Jodi Beckstine (10:40):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (10:41):

Yeah. And if that's the kind of language that you grow up with, I mean, it kind of reminded me when you were saying this about whatever your parents use. When you're young, you hear that and you think, "Well, that must be right." And so you just start using it yourself without really understanding maybe what you're saying at a really young age. And so it's sort of the same thing with these mascots and starting out in kindergarten. So why would anyone think there's anything wrong with it automatically?

Erin Elswood (11:10):

And we've noticed that too, that particularly from the community members who are responding to things on social media because they'll make a comment like, "This isn't about a disability, this is about a team that was short. I don't know why the M slurs are mad." And so they'll then use the slur in their response to us, but not in reference to their mascot. They'll use it in reference to little people. And so to me, that's a prime example of this is being made okay by this district because this student is using it as a slur, not just as a mascot term.

Keith Casebonne (11:45):

Wow.

Jodi Beckstine (11:46):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (11:47):

Wow. Well, how do you guys make sure that dwarfism and other disabled voices aren't just part of the message but actually centered in it, especially when you're engaging with communities that may not have that lived experience? How do you keep the storytelling grounded and authentic?

Erin Elswood (12:06):

I think it's important to note too that just because someone has dwarfism doesn't mean that that's their only disability. I know I talk about this a lot with my son because my son is also part of the deaf and hard of hearing community. He wears a Cochlear Baja to help him here. And it's very interesting, the parallels of things we see with different things with dwarfism and how that community reacts to different treatments or reacts to slurs, reacts to the pride for being a little person is very similar to that of the deaf and hard of hearing community. And so it was really important for us when we started working with the politicians on these bills that we have to make sure that it wasn't a bill specifically for dwarfism, but to end discrimination of all disability mascots.

(12:49):

Now, unfortunately, or fortunately, I think it's both, honestly, there are no other schools that are using a disability slur or a disability as a mascot. The only one that we have found in our research is the M slur against dwarfism, but it would be, we would never want a bill to pass that just says dwarfism and then a school start a mascot about paraplegics or the deaf community or whatever other disability that they want to choose. And so the bills, the wording in all the bills that we had proposed doesn't say dwarfism specifically, it says disabilities, disability-based mascots.

Jodi Beckstine (13:21):

That's fantastic.

Keith Casebonne (13:22):

Smart, yeah.

Jillian Curwin (13:22):

And I think just to add onto that, I think in terms of how society in general, not just with these schools but in general sees dwarfism, it doesn't necessarily understand that dwarfism is a disability. So I think that's also been really important for us to communicate when explaining to even those outside of our community, why are we doing this? Is to say this does impact the disability as [inaudible 00:13:44]. And in talking to the disability community, getting them to understand, getting them to support as well is explaining, this impacts us now, but that doesn't mean it can't impact you later. So that's another reason, again, effectively saying we are part of this larger community that you are also impacting by using this slur.

Erin Elswood (14:00):

And like Jill said, that's a big pushback we've gotten, I don't know how many times we've seen the comment, "Since when is being short a disability." And they don't realize that there's so many-

Jillian Curwin (14:08):

I get that now and I'm 30.

Erin Elswood (14:11):

Yeah, yeah.

Keith Casebonne (14:11):

Wow, wow.

Erin Elswood (14:11):

And there are so many other, of course, medical complications that come along or can come along with dwarfism. And I know with my son, like I mentioned earlier he had a trach and was on oxygen and had a nurse 24 hours a day for almost four years. And that's not every person with dwarfism, but it happens, and it is. And when I'm from a school perspective talking about it, I'm like, it's an orthopedic impairment. I was like, "That's protected under ADA. That's exactly what dwarfism is an orthopedic impairment." And so it's kind of that, like Jill said, getting the communities to understand that this is bigger than just someone being short and being angry. That's not what this is. This is a protection for the greater disability community, not just dwarfism alone.

Jodi Beckstine (14:53):

I want to talk a little bit about tactics with you as someone who's in communications. When you go to the schools and the districts, and you're speaking not necessarily to the community at large, but to the specific school district, are there certain tactics that you guys use to really explain to them where you're coming from?

Erin Elswood (15:12):

It's interesting with the schools, because we had five schools that we're dealing with, four now. One school did choose to retire the mascot on their own, which is phenomenal.

That's the best case scenario. But in these schools, we have the one school that is kind of like the ideal school to deal with in a situation like this that chose to retire, they were phenomenal with communicating with us. They were open to communication. They responded to us. We were able to work hand in hand with one of their special education teachers who does a peer-to-peer program within their school to, her program was started for working with students who are in the special education program. And one of her big curriculum pushes was the R slur and not using that in the classroom, why that's important. And we were able to connect with her and provide her information and videos and curriculum to help do the same type of conversation around dwarfism and the M slur.

(16:09):

The students are who prompted the change for changing that mascot and part of that is because of them allowing that communication with their peer-to-peer program, with the people within the school. They've been great about communicating. But on the other hand, we have schools who only respond to FOIA requests, Freedom of Information Act requests because they're legally required to. So outside of those FOIA requests, those schools have zero communication with us, will not communicate with us. And so that's kind of... And we of course start nice and not that we're never not nice, but we want to be professional and give them the information, give them multiple chances to talk with us, reach out to school boards, try to talk with them.

(16:52):

And so for these schools who refuse to communicate other than those FOIA requests, that's what kind of pushed us to moving to legislation because we're like, "We've exhausted our efforts. We've reached out to principals, superintendents, school boards, we're getting zero response from these people." And so it makes it very difficult. And then we have to reach out to those state representatives and legislators to try to make that decision for them to get rid of these disability-based mascots that the schools aren't willing to respond.

Keith Casebonne (17:23):

Well, you were mentioning that you just had a success. So the next question kind of leads from that. Is there a moment that has really stuck out with you? And that could be either this win or a particularly difficult interaction that maybe even reminded you why the work matters so much?

Jillian Curwin (17:41):

I think for me it was the win. I think it was hearing that it was actually happening and then hearing, we knew it was happening, but there's still that waiting period of, okay. Until it's really official, you always have that thinking in the back of your mind of something could change, someone could change their mind, public opinion can shift, and suddenly there'll be a reversal and they're like, "Never mind. Or, "Sorry." But it was really when they announced their new mascot, it's like, "Okay, this is official." For me, it was this really sense of pride. And growing up, the first time I was called the M slur, I was in school and I was in elementary school and a kid just said it to me in passing in the hallway, and I didn't know what it was. I knew to be hurt, but I didn't fully understand why, and I had no one to really go to until I went home to have them explain it to me, be like, "Why did this person say this to me?"

(18:35):

Because at the time being in elementary school, I still didn't fully understand what it meant to be, what it meant to be a little person in general, and also what it meant for me to be a little person in an average-height world. And so it was a lot to process, but I vividly remember that moment. And so to now get to this point however many years later where a school is finally taking a stand against the word, for me, it was like, okay, this is not for nothing. This was because it does seem like every day for me as an advocate and also just as a little person in an average height world, it does feel like oftentimes that we're having this fight just to be seen as people. And so this was like, "Oh, we're finally being seen and we're finally being heard, and this is why we're doing it." For me, it was reinforcing of we're in the right direction, and we're being seen and we're being heard as we are, as we truly are.

Keith Casebonne (19:29):

Is it possible to tell us which school that was and what they changed their mascot from and to?

Erin Elswood (19:36):

Sure. So it's Dickinson High School in Dickinson, North Dakota. They're the largest of the schools that we were dealing with, but they were the Dickinson Midgets and had been for almost 100 years. And actually it was honestly, I think we all had tears watching the video. Dickinson put out a video of their students' reactions to the vote. They allowed students, I think starting in either third grade or fifth grade all the way up through 12th grade to vote on the mascot. They had got it down to two, the Dickinson Mavericks or Dickinson Defenders, and it was going to be the same kind of imagery for either one. And so the students got to vote and they put out a video of their students' reactions when they were announcing what it was in the classrooms. And it honestly brought tears to see those students so excited for the new mascot, and they're now going to be the Dickinson Mavericks.

(20:23):

And so they'll start as that in the fall. And for me, there was just so much joy in watching that video because I was like, it came full circle to see that the students were ones who were helping push for the change for this, and then to see them so excited about the new mascot and what their new image would be for their school. And so I think that was for me watching that... And I'm so thankful that Dickinson put that out because we don't always get a glimpse of what's happening inside the school as an outsider. And so that was really neat to see,

Jillian Curwin (20:54):

And Mavericks felt really fitting, considering that the students were part of it. So it's like, "No, they really are Mavericks." So it felt like it was the right-

Jodi Beckstine (21:01):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (21:01):

Nice, yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (21:02):

The right fit.

Keith Casebonne (21:03):

Yeah. Oh, that's great. That's wonderful.

Jodi Beckstine (21:05):

I watched it last week. It was like...

Jillian Curwin (21:07):

I know.

Keith Casebonne (21:10):

On the flip side, what about a difficult interaction? Is there something that stands out particularly to either of you or both of you that has just been really, really challenging and just again, reminds you why the work matters?

Erin Elswood (21:24):

I mean, I feel like there's lots along the way. There's so many different things that happened that were just constantly reminded that, man, this is really an issue. But I know, I guess a big one is we had three bills introduced and two didn't make it out of, they didn't pass the houses or whatever. They didn't even make it out of committee, two of them. And so that was challenging, but it was a good learning experience for us because we were able to kind of regroup and figure out what angle we need to come on those bills for next session. I think for me, it was a little disheartening because to me, this is a bipartisan issue, disability rights, it shouldn't matter what party you are. But working with these legislators, we've realized that their votes lie on party lines, which is kind of crazy.

(22:09):

And depending on which state you're in and you have the bill in, it kind of depends on what that looks like. And so we have good perspective moving forward on that. Our bill in Illinois has been the most successful. It passed the house and went to the Senate, and it has stalled currently in the Senate, but it's not dead. It'll be one that we are restructuring over the summer for their fall veto session to get back in and see what we need to do to get that moving. And so that bill, honestly, it seems like it should be a very successful bill. We've had very great responses when we went to the capitol there in Illinois and did an advocacy day there, which was hugely successful. We were able to speak with some other groups there and do some presentations there and talk with legislators and do a press conference and things like that and it was very well received.

(22:59):

So I think overall it's good, but for me, it was kind of shocking to see that this is still not a bipartisan issue, that it still falls that way along party lines. But I think too, I think we started this campaign kind of as a social media campaign, and then it has grown to what it is now, but the negative comments are just something. I know all of us, we have comment filters on there so that we don't have to deal with it. But it's very interesting to see how deeply rooted that bias is that people are using with that slur. And so I think for me, that's been the harder part. I always joke because Jill of course has a podcast. The other two co-directors, Rachel and Shelby have a very large social media following. And so I'm like, I'm the one that's not an influencer, because I'm not an influencer. And so I was joking, "I'm not an influencer." And so learning that aspect of it has been, I think for me, has been a little bit different and seeing how awful some of those comments are, even when we filter them.

Jillian Curwin (24:01):

Yeah, I think piggybacking off of that, I think that's for me kind of been the hardest because being on our social media and seeing the comment and then seeing just that people really have no shame in hiding behind their keyboards and hiding behind their phones or computer screens and saying the things they say. And it's hard, because I think also knowing that as a little person, again, being called it bin public, people are not necessarily afraid to say it to our faces either.

(24:28):

And I think for us though, as hard it is to see, and as much as we try to filter and remind ourselves, and I do think this is also a reminder of why we're doing it, and as much as it's hard to read and hard to hear people say this, this is the why we're doing it, because this word does carry this weight and does need to, it can't be a mascot, it can't be representative. It's a slur. And so I think it's also serves so as a reminder of this is why we're doing it. And as hard as it is to hear those comments, at least for me, and I don't want to speak for Erin, but I'm sure in dark conversations, it definitely fuels the fire too as well.

Erin Elswood (25:13):

Without a doubt. I know this is not necessarily related to the campaign, but there was an article that came out a couple of weeks ago about my son and some accommodations that a school had done that was applauding them for doing what they should. And there was all these love things, people loving it because it's really about a school doing a good job. That's what the article was about. And literally the second comment on it was just someone commenting midget in all caps. And I was like, this isn't even-

Keith Casebonne (25:39):

Why?

Erin Elswood (25:40):

And it kind of made me wonder, I'm like, is this a person who knows that, because I was quoted in it, and I was like, do they know that, are they commenting this because I'm part of the campaign? Or are they commenting this, because this is really their feelings? But it's interesting to see that even on posts that we're not pushing hard on, that slur is still being used.

Jodi Beckstine (26:01):

I'm the only little person in my family. And to kind of bring levity to it, we always joke that I hear the word once a day, whether it's someone saying it to my face in public or reading it in a book or seeing it on TV or something. I always hear it once a day and we will always say, "Oh, there it is." So then I don't have to hear it anymore. I've heard it my once a day, it's done. Instead of being so down on it, try to bring a little levity to the subject. But just to kind of go off on a little bit of a tangent, what we like to do is talk about media that might be relevant to the topic that we are doing. So is there a piece of media, a book, a movie, a song that kind of captures the spirit of what you guys are doing that really to what you guys are trying to inspire? Hello.

Jillian Curwin (26:49):

Oh, Erin, you have... I'm thinking. I like that question a lot. I'm trying to think.

Erin Elswood (26:55):

It's interesting, because I feel like I've read, I mean, I use books all the time as a school counselor with students, and I have several books on dwarfism. And so I usually go and read at least one to my son's class, and we always donate one to the library so that there are some books, some literature for students on dwarfism. So there's lots of books that I use that way. But I think the only one that I've been reading recently, which was interestingly suggested to me during an interview process, but it's called Far From the Tree, and it's a book. It's a little bit older because now that I'm reading it, I'm like, yeah, this is a little bit outdated, but it was still interesting. But it is a, the gentleman who wrote it is part of the LGBTQIA plus community, and he did a lot of research on different disability groups, but dwarfism, went to national conferences, met the people, did all the things, truly got involved in the communities.

(27:51):

But part of the book is on people with dwarfism, part of the book is on people in the deaf and heart of hearing community, part of the book is on the autistic community and the Down syndrome community. And it was really interesting. I've been reading that book and it's been really interesting to see the parallels that are drawn between the experiences of the different disability groups. And so for me, that's been, I was really glad that the book was recommended to me because as part of this campaign, like I said, our bills are to get rid of disability-based mascots, not just dwarfism-based mascots. And so I was glad that that book was recommended to me because it kind of opened my eyes to how many parallels there are between the different groups within the disability community.

Jodi Beckstine (28:34):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (28:35):

Wow.

Jillian Curwin (28:37):

For me, and I don't know if this is going to fully make sense, but it's kind of where it explains my brain at the moment. First, I want to highlight a book that I remember reading, I think is kind of how my parents introduced dwarfism to me, and it was a book that I remember reading too. And to this day, don't remember how or why I was asked to do this in first grade, but I was. I read this to a third grade class just to kind of explain that I'm a little person, and it's called Thinking Big. It was about a little person, I think it was written in the '80s, and it just followed her around for a few days of inner life, I think kind of explained, this is her doctor, this is how she goes to school. This is her mom making her clothes, and just these simple things that everybody does, and just explaining how she did them.

(29:20):

And for us, I know it was really cool because her doctor was my doctor at the time. So for me, it was like, "Oh my gosh, you're still practicing." So that was a book that I know we always used to kind of explain it, but a book that I just finished reading, and it doesn't have anything to do with disability or dwarfism. It's called Marathon Woman, and it's a memoir by Kathrine Switzer, who was the first woman to run the Boston Marathon. And reading her story through that experience kind of, and during the time, and she ran registered, and at the time, the Boston Marathon didn't explicitly say that the woman could not enter. And so she registered, and it wasn't until she was out on the course that the officials kind of noticed that there was a woman and got very offended by this and physically tried to remove her from the course.

(30:09):

And there were pictures of it taken, and the pictures went, viral was not a term in the '60s, but the pictures kind of went viral, and that experience just fueled her fire to ultimately lobbying for them to include the marathon for women in the Olympics. And it just started with her wanting to run. And I think reading her story and just kind of seeing that she was just so determined to make this happen, not even just for herself, but for others and for the next generation, I think that kind of represents a little bit of, I think what we're doing now is a sense that all of us are out of school. Erin though, being a mom with a child who's in schools right now, but there's so, so much more, and we've hit stumbles, we've hit roadblocks. We're still going, and we're still kind of running this campaign until these schools change their mascots, essentially. So I think that kind of represents... I hope that fits.

Jodi Beckstine (31:07):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (31:08):

That's a great answer, yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (31:08):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (31:10):

Great answer.

Jodi Beckstine (31:11):

Definitely. I'll check those both out.

Keith Casebonne (31:14):

Yeah, for sure. Well, listen, thank you both so much for sharing your work and your stories with us. I mean, it's clear that changing a mascot isn't just about a symbol. This is about shifting a culture and making sure that every student grows up in a school that respects who they are. So we're really, really grateful for the work you guys are doing.

Erin Elswood (31:32):

Thank you.

Jodi Beckstine (31:35):

Absolutely. I want to thank you both. As someone who's a little person, it means a lot to me. You don't feel alone, and other people are doing the hard work. You guys are doing the heavy lifting on this, but I wanted to thank you guys so much for that. And to our listeners, if this conversation sparks something for you, check out mascotsmatter.net and see how you can support this important campaign.

Keith Casebonne (31:58):

Yes, indeed. Thank you guys.

Jodi Beckstine (31:59):

Thank you both.

Jillian Curwin (32:00):

Thank you.

Keith Casebonne (32:01):

This week's Deep Cut brings us something a little different, a children's book that packs a big message, Little Imperfections: A Tall Tale of Growing Up Different is a heartwarming, whimsical story by Peet Montzingo and Rockwell Sands that touches on disability, difference, and the journey towards self-love.

Jodi Beckstine (32:32):

Yeah. And while it's written for kids, it's a message is just as powerful for adults. It's a reminder that what makes us different can also make us great. And that stories we tell young people really matter.

Keith Casebonne (32:43):

Yeah, for sure. Children's books have this incredible way of saying big things in simple ways, at least the really good ones do. And Little Imperfections is a good one. It does exactly that. It's a story about a young giant who doesn't quite fit in, but finds strength in the very things that set him apart. So Jodi, what stood out to you about how the book portrays difference and self-acceptance?

Jodi Beckstine (33:09):

Well, what stood out to me is that the story doesn't treat being different as something that needs to be fixed or something that's wrong, it kind of celebrates his difference. And in his journey, he's not necessarily trying to blend in, but it's about that his strength comes from his difference. And I think it's a powerful message for kids and adults, to be honest.

Keith Casebonne (33:34):

Yeah, that's a good point. For sure. Well, sort of on that vein, how might this book be helpful for children, especially those who do feel quote, "different" in some way?

Jodi Beckstine (33:46):

Yeah, I think it can actually change them, their life a little bit, because they see him in themselves. They see that just because they don't fit in, it's not something bad. Difference is a good thing. That's what makes us human. And the book kind of gives them a language and a character who can reflect that experience that they might be feeling, and instead of feeling like they're the odd one out or they don't belong, they get to see difference as something to kind of be proud of.

Keith Casebonne (34:21):

And related to that, as the main character of the story. I like that he did sort of a twist on it in the sense that he is technically not the person with a disability. He's the quote, "normal" one, but he's being raised in a family, the only family that he knows or really should say more just other people that he's familiar with until he goes to school are all, they're all little people. They all have dwarfism, so he's the one that feels... I think it's just an interesting take on something that I think kids who don't have a disability, or at least who don't have dwarfism maybe could take that and see it in that different perspective. Because I think too often it's hard for people to put themselves in someone else's shoes, but this is who most people will be who are reading the story.

Jodi Beckstine (35:18):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (35:19):

And so it's not a stretch. And so I think it's a really interesting take on telling the story and how, yeah, you feel different, but it's you. It's who you are and how you would feel different. And I think that's really relatable in a unique way.

Jodi Beckstine (35:37):

Definitely. I think children who may be seeing someone with a difference for the first time, especially if it's multiple people, like he's in that situation where he's the odd man out, I think it kind of helps them kind of just settle into the idea that that's okay. It's okay to be different in a very complete way from anyone else in the room. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. And I love that part of the story, how they flip that.

Keith Casebonne (36:06):

Yeah, it's really beautiful. Well, so do you see any parallels between the story and real world conversations about disability, identity, representation, that sort of thing?

Jodi Beckstine (36:16):

Yeah, I think when you're having these real world conversations about disability, they try to put everything into this little box, fit everyone into a system. Instead of creating space that celebrates difference, you tend to create spaces where you're here and they're there, and everyone needs to fit into this little box that as a society we want to put them in. And I think the book feels like a metaphor maybe on how we can shift that mindset, that seeing difference is a strength, not a flaw. And there's so many differences out there, just I think it can really change how children see themselves and view themselves.

Keith Casebonne (36:57):

Yeah. Yeah, I agree.

Jodi Beckstine (36:59):

So what I really love is that this book doesn't just stop at a cute little story. It offers something deeper. It can show how kids' literature can be a starting point for conversations about identity, inclusion, acceptance, and I think it can help parents and teachers and even caregivers open up to these tough but important discussions that they can have with their child or with each other. So why do you think that this story resonates across these big age groups?

Keith Casebonne (37:33):

Yeah. Well, I'll preface my answer by saying I'd be lying if after I read the book, it's a kid's book. As an adult, it took about 10 minutes to read, but I'll be honest, I felt very emotional near the end of the book. I got a little teary-eyed, if I'm being honest. And so I thought to myself, I'm like, "Okay, I'm at the target demographic here. I'm 53 years old." But this book is really, the story is so sweet and I'm feeling it. I'm really understanding it. And so I think that that says a lot right there, that the story has such depth to it, even though it's written in a simple way for kids to understand. And I think that simplicity, first of all, just the idea that children's literature can be used as a powerful tool for advocacy is really an interesting concept.

(38:31):

And I know he's not the first one to write children's books about disability, but I like that people are doing that, and I think that it's a really great way for children whose minds are so open and ready to accept this variety in the world. I think that's a wonderful way to educate and inform people about how there are a lot of differences out there versus the other aspect of sometimes parents don't even realize that they're instilling biases in their kids. This is a sort of the way to do the opposite. And I just think it's wonderful that a children's book can be that powerful. And again, like I said, I think it kind of works across all age groups. I felt just as empowered and influenced by it as I think a child would.

Jodi Beckstine (39:25):

Absolutely. How might the story be used in a classroom or maybe a therapy setting or at home to spark conversations?

Keith Casebonne (39:34):

Yeah, again, I think the idea of teaching kids acceptance and openness and learning about the differences of people in this world as a good positive thing influences that idea of using it in the classroom. Other than the classroom, there's also, like you mentioned, a therapy setting or even at home, I think it makes a lot of sense because there's a lot of emotional honesty in the book, and so I think can I see that being used as a tool for real discussion, real conversation. Again, like you said, whether it's a classroom, in a therapeutic setting or just at home with your parents reading a story to you, it kind of makes you vulnerable. There's also humor, and it's just there's an emotional richness to the story. Again, even though it's a children's book, it is so well thought out and written that there's a lot of depth in there. And yeah, I can see this being used in so many different ways, in so many different environments to really help kids grow in the way of looking at the world.

Jodi Beckstine (40:48):

Absolutely, I agree. Well, Little Imperfections might be a tall tale, but the message it sends is beautifully grounded. Being different isn't a flaw, it's part of what makes us whole.

Keith Casebonne (41:00):

For sure. If you'd like to check it out, the book is available through major booksellers. We've also included a link in the show notes.

Jodi Beckstine (41:08):

That's this week's Deep Cut. Thanks for diving a little deeper with us.

Keith Casebonne (41:18):

Well, that's it for today's episode of Disability Deep Dive. Huge thanks to Erin and Jillian for sharing their insights and helping us unpack the deeper impact of ableist mascots.

Jodi Beckstine (41:27):

This conversation reminded me why advocacy like this matters, because these so-called harmless school symbols aren't really harmless at all. They shape how young people see themselves and how others see them too.

Keith Casebonne (41:39):

Yeah, for sure. If today's episode made you think or feel something, we hope you'll subscribe. Leave a review and share it with someone in your circle.

Jodi Beckstine (41:47):

And don't forget to check out the work being done by the whole Mascots Matter team at mascotsmatter.net.

Keith Casebonne (41:53):

Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time on Disability Deep Dive.

Announcer (41:57):

Disability Deep Dive is produced by Jodi Beckstine, Keith Casebonne, and Disability Rights Florida, Florida's protection and advocacy agency. You can learn more about the services we provide, explore a vast array of resources on a variety of disability related topics, and complete an online intake at disabilityrightsflorida.org. Any comments about the podcast can be sent to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org. Thank you for listening to Disability Deep Dive.