

OCALI | Podcast – Episode 31

This Music Will Continue to Play: A Conversation with Amy Bixler Coffin

Amy Bixler Coffin: The most challenging thing is that it takes time to make change. These are things that we celebrate together and we cry together about. You're going to get me going, aren't you? [LAUGHTER] That is one of those questions that you asked me about, what will I miss? Those connections. It's been a good 20 years here at OCALI.

[MUSIC]

Simon Buehrer: Hey, everyone. Welcome to *Connecting the Dots*. The *Inspiring Change* Podcast series, courtesy of the Autism Center at OCALI. I'm Simon Buehrer.

Megan Trowbridge: And I'm Megan Trowbridge. Thanks for joining us again today. Today, we have a very special treat for you. We are joined by our colleague and good friend, Amy Bixler Coffin. Hey, Amy, welcome to *Connecting the Dots*.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Thank you, Simon and Megan. It's a pleasure to be here, I think.

Simon Buehrer: No, come on. This is going to be great fun. [LAUGHTER]

Megan Trowbridge: We're really grateful that you came in today to the office. We're at the office today. Thanks for joining us. If you know OCALI, chances are, you probably know Amy, because she's one of the OGs who was here from the very beginning ...

Simon Buehrer: Yeah, she is. Back from the start!

Megan Trowbridge: ... all the way back to 2005, she joined OCALI. Just as a brief introduction for those who may not know Amy, she is the director of our Autism Center at OCALI as well as the Multi-System Navigation Center at OCALI as well. She's led both of those centers since their inception, so she was there at the very beginning and continues to be to this day.

Simon Buehrer: And it is sort of a bittersweet day for us as we [LAUGHTER] sit with Amy because we are on the brink of her time winding down here at OCALI. She will be retiring later this year and we wanted to capture this precious time with her today to reflect on what she's seen and done over the last 20 plus years and also celebrate her leadership and her wisdom, her insight and compassion, so many things to talk to you about today, Amy. There's a lot to celebrate, as well as your contributions and your center's contributions to building better opportunities and supports for autistic people, people on the spectrum and their families, and so many other folks who take advantage of OCALI's tools and resources

and leadership and opportunities as well. So again, thank you for being here, Amy. Let's get into it. Are you ready?

Amy Bixler Coffin: Sure.

Simon Buehrer: [LAUGHTER] Let's start at the beginning. Talk to us a little bit about your story, your path, your journey, your origins. How did you start out?

Amy Bixler Coffin: I worked at a summer camp when I was in the beginning of high school. It was a camp for children with special needs run by the University of Akron. My girlfriend and I, who grew up in church together, went and we did it together. Every year I went back and at that time, I was assigned a camper who was not at the time, diagnosed with autism, but she, I'm pretty sure, had autism, had a lot of needs, so they assigned her to me. From that moment that I worked with her, I knew this is what I'm doing with my life.

Megan Trowbridge: That's awesome.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Every year I went back and I worked through college and got a special ed degree.

Simon Buehrer: Wow. What did you do with her? Were you able to figure out how to help?

Amy Bixler Coffin: We swam. [LAUGHTER] We ran, because she loves to run. She was a very active young lady. She didn't sit very much, so we really just tried to explore the camp and get her engaged in activities that provided her what I know now as vestibular and proprioceptive input and really gave her a lot of sensory input because that's what she needed, but at the time, a lot of people didn't understand that. I probably ran marathons during the summer with her because we just explored that campground a lot. Yes.

Simon Buehrer: That's really cool. You figured that out on your own as a teenager? We talk about really customizing things per individual needs and without really having any formal background, you just figured that out in the moment?

Amy Bixler Coffin: I guess. I don't know if Megan would agree, but there are some people that just they get it in their heart and in their gut. I think I was one of those because she did not respond to the camp-type routine of go sit here, sing camp songs, go here, do this. We could have "made" her do that, but it wouldn't have been comfortable for her, so we did a lot of running. We swam. She loved to swim. I am not an Olympic swimmer. I can swim.

Simon Buehrer: Wait, you have a pool.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Yes, I know. We swam, and as time went on, and as she got more comfortable with me and I got more comfortable with her, she was able to engage more in the routine of the camp in that. That was my start.

Simon Buehrer: That set the stage at a very early age and it's really cool to see that arc throughout your career, then. Take us back to when you were interested in this job at this new center, what happened back then?

Megan Trowbridge: [OVERLAPPING] How did it start? Was this considered statewide when it first started? A statewide agency?

Amy Bixler Coffin: Well, it had just been birthed. Really, I interviewed with one director and the team that was at OCALI. Mind you, back then, the team at OCALI when it was birthed there were maybe 10 people. Not even that, I don't think. When I walked in to interview, they all were sitting at a table ready for me, and I'm like, "Ahhhh!"

Simon Buehrer: [LAUGHTER] Which is a practice we continue to this day ... We love our group interviews.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Yes, we do. Interviewed and thankfully, got the position. Right after that, our executive director was interviewed.

Simon Buehrer: You were here before ...

Amy Bixler Coffin: I got to interview Shawn Henry. Yes, I did. [LAUGHTER]

Simon Buehrer: Do you want to tell that story?

Amy Bixler Coffin: No, I don't want to tell that story, no. [LAUGHTER] But he was given the position. He and I have pretty much been together from the beginning. You know, Shawn's a visionary person, and Shawn's a big picture person. He started seeing big pictures and so we have expanded into a variety of centers that now OCALI is not just known for autism. It is known for assistive technology and accessible materials. It is known for deaf, blind, visual, hearing differences. It's known for curriculum access. It's known for PBIS and universal design for learning.

Simon Buehrer: Transition to adulthood.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Transition to adulthood, little people— preschooler, toddlers and our birth to three years of age. We cover now the gamut of birth through adulthood.

Simon Buehrer: When you first started, what were the goals, aspirations, needs, challenges? Like, what were you focusing on first, like, back in 2005?

Amy Bixler Coffin: Well, when I was hired, I was hired to be more of a consultant and go in and work in buildings and work in classrooms and help.

Simon Buehrer: But you were physically traveling?

Amy Bixler Coffin: I was traveling a lot.

Megan Trowbridge: She traveled down to see me in her original couple of years. I don't remember how far back it was, but Amy, I met her when I was in the classroom.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Yes. Thanks, Megan for coming all down. Yeah, long time ago. As Shawn got his feet planted in Ohio and at OCALI, the mission and the vision of OCALI started to develop and I was able to hire regional specialists to come work in the Autism Center, and then we just started to grow and grow.

Simon Buehrer: But I think part of our challenge, because we were established as a statewide center, but we didn't have a lot of staff members, as we've already talked about. So how do you function as a statewide center across ... and Ohio's not the biggest state, but it's a big state. It's hard to physically be in all places.

Amy Bixler Coffin: For the Autism Center, because the Autism Center at OCALI is really focused on building capacity, we hired these regional people. We had people in southeast Ohio, southwest Ohio, Northeast Ohio. We would work with the state support teams. They have been fabulous partners for OCALI in general.

Simon Buehrer: But I think it does go back to— I remember in the earlier AIM, the Autism Internet Modules, there was always this emphasis on there's just no way we can physically cover ... and you talked about Shawn as a visionary. We are an Ohio based center, but we've always been global, national and international even. There's always been this, like, aspirational to, we are Ohio based, but what we produce, what we offer, the connections, the resources is applicable, anyone anywhere. Planting that seed, early on and I know Sheila was instrumental in leading a lot of that work, our colleague Sheila Smith with the Autism Internet modules. But I think that was an early characteristic hallmark of OCALI.

Amy Bixler Coffin: AIM was one of the first, if not, the first online training professional development opportunity through OCALI.

Simon Buehrer: Anybody anywhere could access it—

Amy Bixler Coffin: Yes ... you can take them ... From AIM, then as we saw colleges use the modules and courses. As we saw people taking the modules for renewal of their license and things like that, we saw that people still needed training. But couldn't necessarily go to a training to do it. With AIM came ATIM, the Assistive Technology Internet Modules, who Jan Rogers and Heather Bridgman had a huge part in that. Then came ASD Strategies in action, which there was a bunch of us that worked on that.

Simon Buehrer: That was a shift because it was more video based.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Very video based.

Simon Buehrer: We went out and recorded a lot of onsite examples to show people.

Amy Bixler Coffin: We would go into classrooms. We would go into homes. We would go into work settings. We would go because a person with autism or an autistic child will grow up to be an autistic adult. We need to see all environments so that we can provide the most beneficial programming, supports, services, and practices for them to be successful at all ages of their life.

Megan Trowbridge: I think one of the things I love about the Autism Center coming from the classroom and then working at the SST, and now within the Autism Center, is how you revamp your resources all the time. Talking about the Autism Internet modules, when I was in the classroom, I would use them with my paraprofessionals, like on a Paraprofessional Day, why don't you guys work on some Autism Internet modules? Then when I went to the SST, it was collaborating with Julie and Denise and you to do these virtual autism internet module studies, which we do with Bobby Huffman, as well. Now we're always thinking about how we can reuse our products, how we can revamp them. That's one of the things I appreciate about you as a leader is, it's, we don't always have to create something new. It's how can we reuse what we already have?

Amy Bixler Coffin: Thank you. Also looking through the universal design for learning lens that some people enjoy reading texts. They enjoy that. Some people learn better when they see. Some people learn better to listen to. That's why we explored podcasts this year. We're really trying to represent in a way so that those learners can retrieve the information, but in a variety of formats, if you will. Now that we have Teresa Crowson on, who— shout out to Teresa— is just a fabulous adult learner expert and instructional design, autism. She's BCBA, she's an OT. She's a jack of all trades. She is really going to hone in on making AIM even a little bit more interactive. As Megan said, you don't always have to start from scratch. Things change. You need to tweak and you need to kind of morph and bend a little bit. You have to be Gumby in this field. [LAUGHTER] You do. I mean, you got to be able to bend and pivot and—"Squirrel! We're going this way now." That's just what education's about. When we get more research in autism, or in complex needs, and we learn more about trauma responsive practices, or we learn more about catatonia, or we learn more about interoception and all of those things, we need to include those in our information, but we don't have to necessarily start from scratch.

Simon Buehrer: Just thinking about the evolution of us as an organization, I think we still are highly focused on education, but I think we've also broadened, and you've hinted at it. Like you said, the child on the spectrum is going to grow up to be an adult. As an

organization, I think, under Shawn's leadership, we've had this expansive vision and we are a lifespan agency, which makes us a unique entity.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Absolutely. When you think about it, kiddos can start school as early as three, for preschool. Maybe they're in early intervention, but preschool and they can go until through their 21st birthday. Okay, that's ... how ... three to 21, subtract ... That's 18 years. [LAUGHTER] That is one fourth of your life? One sixth of it? However ... Adulthood is what we really need to focus on. Whatever we do during these 18 years really needs to prepare for adulthood. We have heard from colleagues ourselves that have adults who are autistic that it's hard out there. The services are different. You're not under IDEA. You don't have a free and appropriate public education. You don't have all the services and supports that fall under education. We need to continue to develop those services and supports in the adult arena because we live long lives. They need the support and services to have a quality life that they so desire. Not what we think they desire.

Megan Trowbridge: Like you said, Simon, like we do focus on K-12, PK-12. But I do know from the Autism Center point of view, is that, you're always asking, so how do we also support the families? How do we go and work with the Board of DDs? It's not just working with school districts, it's working with the community.

Simon Buehrer: Which I think is another characteristic of OCALI, right? From the very beginning, we're not doing this alone. We're not going this alone. We've always leaned heavily, graciously, appreciatively into our partnerships, whether they're on the very local level to leadership across the state and across other states. I think that's just another element of what makes OCALI, OCALI. We are a convener and a "partner-er," if I can coin the term? But that's how we get things done.

Amy Bixler Coffin: That's how we roll.

Simon Buehrer: That's how we roll.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Yeah, we roll— and both the Autism Center and the Multi-System Navigation Center lean heavily on experts in their areas. Two of my closest dearest friends are Kelly Mahler and Dr. Ruth Aspy. I have worked with them forever now. I would be lost when I'm not talking to them almost every other day.

Simon Buehrer: I think, especially in this field, like, when you are so passionate, the work and the personal really start to blend together because you can't help it. It's hard. It's not easy stuff. I think these are things that bind us together in a lot of ways that you maybe wouldn't find in other professions.

Amy Bixler Coffin: These are things that we celebrate together, and we cry together about. That is one of those, and you're going to get me going, aren't you? That is one of those questions that you asked me about. What will I miss? Those connections. They have helped me to grow both personally and professionally. I have friends all over the country that I can call colleagues and friends and lean on when necessary and say, hey, let me pick your brain. Can I pick your brain? Or, have you heard about this? It's been a huge part of my life. Who I am is very much made up of the years that I've been in this field and the experiences that I've had and the joys that have come into my life. I'm so grateful and so thankful for the opportunities that OCALI has given me. My dear friend Jill Hudson and I wrote a book! I would have never done that if I hadn't come to OCALI and met Jill. We just sat at a coffee shop and started brainstorming about a book. I would have never been able to present across the country or been able to work alongside DEW or DODD to create projects from the ground up that impact hundreds and hundreds of people or been able to train thousands of people and not it being about me training, but about getting the information out to people.

Simon Buehrer: You obviously you have so much passion and so much of your life invested. But was that a hard decision to decide to retire at this point? Because I will say, you have a very youthful countenance.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Thank you.

Simon Buehrer: Energy.

Amy Bixler Coffin: Yes. I am young to retire.

Megan Trowbridge: Trust me. When I found out she was retiring, I was like, wait, no. You got at least five more years! [LAUGHTER]

Amy Bixler Coffin: I had the opportunity. I graduated right away from college ... Surprising. [LAUGHTER] My husband's like, "Yeah! Surprising!" Then I got a job right away. Our son came on later on in life. I really didn't take time off from my career. Yeah, 35 years. They always say, you'll know when it's time. I know ... that I am leaving the Autism Center in great hands. The woman next to me, Ms. Megan Trowbridge, will be taking this role and filling my shoes. I have no doubt that this center will continue to develop and even maybe go into a little different area that maybe expand into other areas that aren't what I was thinking, but that's okay. Change is good. As our society changes and as kids needs change, and families change, we need to change. That's hard. It's very hard. But Megan, as she said, she's known OCALI from a very young teacher all the way through. She is very informed of OCALI and we're not going to miss a beat in this center. The other ladies that are in this center, you would think Teresa was with us forever and a day. She's only been here a couple of years,

but she's like, our long-lost redheaded cousin that lives in Virginia. She just stepped in and joined the family and that's what this center's been about. I think that's what will be hard.

Megan Trowbridge: Well, I think that's, like, the nice thing about this center is the people here have not left. Julie and Denise have been a staple, Wendy, whose job I took over. All of them have been here for years.

Amy Bixler Coffin: I hired them—all. They came in a couple of years after me. Julie and Denise had been here 16, 17 years. Wendy was here just as long. She retired about a year or so ago, going on two years. People who come here ... We've had people leave in other centers, but most of the time people stay because of the vision and the passion and the dedication. I will say at OCALI, I have never seen more dedicated people towards an area of concentration being people with disabilities and families. Yeah. It's been a good 20 years here at OCALI. I kinda look at it ... the analogy of a symphony. And a conductor. I've had the privilege of conducting these centers for several years. But each of the instrumentalists brings their own expertise, the violin or the pianist or the big bass drum or whatever the case may be. The conductor really helps them to play the music together. But each of them have an expertise that without that person, you can't create that beautiful song. Now it's time for me to pass the wand to Megan so she can conduct. They'll continue to grow and add more instrumentalists as our colleagues continue to retire or move on. But this music will continue to play. It will.

[MUSIC]

Simon Buehrer: That was Amy Bixler Coffin, program director of the Autism Center at OCALI and program manager of the Multi-System Navigation Center, again, at OCALI, helping us connect the dots on her 20 plus years here at OCALI. She's been here from the beginning and her 35-year career in education. Megan and I are so grateful for Amy's time and reflections as we celebrate and commemorate her leadership and contributions over all these years and the impact that her centers have made on families, professionals, and people with autism and disabilities. It's a big and bittersweet moment for her and for OCALI. Amy is retiring later this year. Of course, it is a well-deserved milestone and transition after all her years of service. But we will miss our colleague and friend. I am excited that my podcast cohost, Dr. Megan Trowbridge, will be the next program director of the Autism Center at OCALI and have no doubts that she and the Autism Center team will continue Amy's work and legacy. Congratulations, Megan. We look forward to your next chapter, as well. You've been listening to Connecting the Dots Podcast series from the Autism Center at OCALI. You can find out more about the wide array of resources, offerings and opportunities from the Autism Center by visiting ocali.org. [MUSIC] We'll close out with a thank you, Amy, or ABC, as we like to call you. We wish you all the best because you are

the best. Sounds like though you're maybe not going too far away, and we may see you again in some capacity. Maybe taking on some new projects? Heck, you've got this podcast thing down. Why don't you come back as our senior correspondent? Well, whatever it is, stay tuned. We look forward to the next adventure with you. Thank you, dear friend. I'm Simon Buehrer on behalf of myself and co-host Megan Trowbridge. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time.

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