

OCALI | Podcast – Family & Community Center

From My Perspective - Interview with Starr

JENNIFER BAVRY: Welcome to From My Perspective. This is OCALI's Family and Community Outreach Center podcast. In these podcasts, you will hear from people with disabilities, their families, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. You'll hear about everyday life, their passions, their interests, their opinions. You'll be inspired. You might laugh or cry. But most importantly, you will better understand what life is like from our perspective.

I am your host, Jen Bavry, Program Director of the OCALI Family and Community Outreach Center. With me today is my colleague, Starr Dobush. Starr supports the work of OCALI's Lifespan Transitions Center as a transition adult living specialist through both her work and personal experience as she has supported efforts to create more inclusive work and community opportunities for people with disabilities. More recently, she has turned her attention to enhancing voter registration resources and accommodations for people with disabilities by sharing her own personal experience with access to election information and voting options. As we record this episode, we are in the middle of National Disability Voter Registration Week. I am really excited to be able to have Starr join me to share her experience and perspective and offer support to others to ensure their voices are heard as we prepare for election day 2020. Welcome, Starr, to From My Perspective.

STARR DOBUSH: Thanks, Jen, and thanks for having me on the podcast.

JENNIFER BAVRY: So Starr, as I mentioned, efforts are underway to increase the political power of people with disabilities by increasing voter registration and engagement as well as access to election information and voting options. Why is this so important?

STARR DOBUSH: It's important because every voice and every person counts in our community. We need to be-- and when I say we, I mean people with disabilities-- need to be seen in our local community. We know that we're really missing a large population of voters based on disability. And so I think the push to have more voting rights or voting access is really going to help better our community and our nation.

JENNIFER BAVRY: So recently, you had an opportunity to share your personal journey with voting and access. Can you share a little bit more about your experience in this journey that you have been on?

STARR DOBUSH: Sure. So last year I saw on Twitter a post for Vote For Access all call for people with disabilities to share their accessibility requests when they were voting. And I had recently used the option for the ballot to be read aloud to me. And so I thought, well, maybe I will add to this conversation. And so I responded, and they emailed me back. I had a pre-screening, and they were very interested in having me speak. So in November, I recorded a short 10 minute video. And a part of my clip was used on their five video release for Vote For Access. And that

can be accessed at vote4access.us. And I really highlighted the things in my life that kind of influenced why I thought voting was so important. And I reflected back to when I was a kid and I thought about my family and how they really connected my ideas of voting. I can recall as a kid going to presidential campaigns and hearing campaigners speaking with my mom in big airdocks and hearing those. And I guess that just influenced me that I do have a part in our government, even though I was maybe 10. And then when I was probably in fourth or fifth grade, I can remember going to the polling station and the old school push pins that you would actually stylus to vote and thought that was a really cool thing to do. So while my mom was casting her vote, I was doing a practice ballot and then got a sticker. I thought that was the coolest thing ever. So I guess because based on past experiences, I knew that some accommodations did exist depending on what county you lived in and where you-- what state you lived in, you were able to have accommodations. So really kind of connected with me. And I also realized that my grandma, who at the time was 93 years old, was no longer going to the ballots to vote. She was doing the absentee ballot. And so I would help her fill out the form, because she was legally blind, where she would need to mark her signature. So I helped her with a signature card, and I read the whole form out to her. And I was very familiar and comfortable with helping someone with accommodations to vote. And so then I thought to myself, why am I not using any accommodations when I've been in the world of accommodations and know that these accommodations exist? But I haven't done it myself. And I don't know that it was a stigma or that I thought I would look down on. I'm always comfortable learning new and I really don't mind finding out and asking questions, because that's the best way to be an advocate for yourself is to know your options. And how do you know your options if you don't ask questions? And so based on that information, I went and voted in 2019 and requested that voice to speech. And then I told my grandma about that, and she said, oh yeah, I had used that when I was in my 80's, but I no longer want to go there, because I don't want to stand. And I said, we can offer you a chair and all. She's like, no, it's fine. She has a very large visual aid that blows up the ballot for her, even though she does requests a large print voting ballot. And so it was really interesting to have family connections of asking for accommodations and then also being in the field of disability and knowing that there are accommodations, I decided that, yes, I should do this. And so I used those accommodations to really help me understand the ballot, the ballot issues. And I would say that prior to voting and not using accommodations, I was using accommodations at home when I was researching the issues and the candidates. I was always having my computer read the information out to me. So I thought it was super ironic that I would go and vote and not have that same option. And so I thought, yeah, maybe this is helpful. And I also want to say in my journey of learning, I figured out how I learn, and I understand more information if it's shown to me and read to me. And so why would I not use those same resources and accommodations to vote for our next leaders in America or in the state of Ohio or in my small town? It definitely synced. I was able to connect the dots and realize that these accommodations should be used in all parts of my life, not just in one area.

JENNIFER BAVRY: I really liked when you talked about just getting excited about voting and being part of having your voice heard and being part of your community early on through your family and through fourth and fifth grade. And I remember also being able to do some practice

voting too. I think I was in first grade and we were able to do it. And it was just cool to experience it. But through those experiences and kind of starting to figure out that process, you've mentioned that you would do some things on your own to figure out how you could understand the ballot, figure out what would help support you in casting your vote when it actually came time later on in life to be able to do that. How has that supported your learning style and being able to cast a ballot and have your voice heard?

STARR DOBUSH: Definitely. And I just also want to add that I think because of my family community or family experiences, I was able to know that those accommodations exist and maybe making that opportunity known for every kid, no matter their disability, I think is a really good key to starting the self advocacy for voting and standing up for what you want in your community. So we should be giving our students and our youth those opportunities at a very young age, no matter their disability, because they need to know what it's like to be in a presidential campaign or go to the local voting or even know that there is local voting polls around. But then there's also a 365 day office that's devoted to voting. I didn't realize that till I was my 20's. And that was more because I was, again, traveling and knew that I wouldn't be able to vote on November 2nd or realizing that you can vote prior to the real date. I had no idea. And so I think that reading through the local web pages and then also just going to some webinars that I hear on Facebook or on Twitter that are posting. Vote Access and REV UP To Vote and other organizations, such as the Arc, send out information on how to vote and those issues. And I think that really helped me to know how many more resources are out there. So going back to how I learn, I realized that if I wanted to really understand something, I had to have it simplified as well as being read aloud to me. I was more so just using the built in speech navigation that I can highlight text and have it read aloud to me the specific information. But thought it was interesting how each issue, you could look at that before you went to vote, and that there was a ballot that you could see prior to voting. And I think in the future, that would be really helpful instead of physically going to a location that I could vote on my own at my house. But I understand that we're still continuing to make sure security is an issue. And I also understand that it may not be accessible for some people, because they want to have-- they want to be in that physical location to show people in their community that they have the same options as you, a person without a disability. And so I understand both sides of that coin, to be able to vote on your own but then also to be able to vote at your house. You're kind of stopping that community influence or that ripple effect of inclusion, because people aren't seeing you in your community casting those votes. And so when I realized that I could download a ballot and read it out prior to going to the polling station, that really helped me understand. Because it's not always the clearest. Are you for a levy or are you against a levy? And the way that's worded it's not always very understandable. And so you have to kind of pull out the dictionary and define what those words really mean. I have found some websites that pull the candidates that are for the state level. They don't go as rural as my community. But I also read a lot of local newspapers, and my husband and my mom are not always on the same token when they're voting. And we talk about a support system. We know that you can have people that come with you to vote. I don't think I knew that until a few years ago. And so knowing that, having those conversations prior to going to the polling place. Really, I understood more of why I was voting for a certain candidate because I saw two different sides. And I think that's helpful for me,

because I want to know, well, what would be the other option? Not always the negative or positive action, just what are the options so that you can make your own decision? And then write that down and record that. Or if you see a levy being passed or not being passed, to understand why that didn't pass. Because you don't always understand. Oh, they want money, sure. But you don't realize that when a person is asking for money that they could also be adding to their property tax. So I mean, those are all things that connect with the ballot and understanding that and knowing that you can ask questions prior to going into the poll. And then just when you're in the poll station, feeling comfortable to talk to the people that are there helping to run the polls. I feel more confident asking questions to the main office where I go to vote than to the neighborhood pop up polling stations. So I guess that self advocacy piece comes for people to call their local group and polling agency to know that you can request those things and that you should request those things. And I know that there's timelines for when you can change your address or when you can register that you are on one party or another party. And those timelines affect if you can vote or not. And I think that that's a connection that we need to push. If everyone's using social media, maybe we should post those kinds of deadlines on social media, just to give more access. And include everyone, no matter their ability. I continue to look for resources that are more plain language. And I love YouTube videos. It explains it, and I can see the words. And The Arc, the local Arc of Ohio has put out a lot of videos on bigger issues that are nationwide or presidential. They've talked about the candidates. And so because that is-- it's covering more of the nation. It's not just specific to Ohio. So yeah.

JENNIFER BAVRY: Yeah, I've been doing some just investigating some of the efforts that are underway right now. And one of the groups, the American Association of People With Disabilities, or AAPD, is doing the REV UP campaign. I know you've mentioned that. And they've shared several resources. And one of the things that they shared and one of the resources that they mentioned is steps to prepare to cast your vote. And you've just mentioned a ton of things that kind of fall into this. And again, several the resources that REV UP campaign has shared talks about helping people to prepare a plan. There is, I think, all together there's five things that they've mentioned that you can look at or consider as part of these steps in preparing to cast your ballot. One is, as I mentioned, making a plan. One is being informed and educated about the election so that you are aware of the different candidates, you're aware of the different ballot issues. Accessing resources and training, you mentioned the YouTube. And then learning about voting options, such as absentee ballots. And then of course, asking for help before and on site. So those are some of the key things that really stood out to me to help support anyone that's going to cast a vote, but even more so for an individual who maybe needs additional support or access or accommodations. So walk me through again how you prepare to cast your ballot.

STARR DOBUSH: So I like to say that I start two weeks prior to casting a vote. But to be honest, it's probably two or three days prior to casting a vote that I actually pull up the practice ballot. And I look at the party candidates and I see their names and see what their past experiences are. When you get down into the county auditor and things like that, it's not as much information given. They might have a Facebook page. It depends on your region and where you

live. And being in a rural area, they don't have as much information. But I'm sure in Cleveland or in Columbus, they would have a lot more websites probably and social media connections to hear about. And so then I also go to if they mention anything about disability. So I'll just do a Google search and talk about disability and hearing their stance or what they're doing on their platform to better our community. I also look at if they have any connections in the disability world, because I think that really helps me. And it actually pulls me to that vote, because in politics, you need to see people that are like you making decisions. So if you're only seeing a standard decision or a person that's supposed to be representing their local community, I think your local community is a diverse group. And so you should have diverse members in Congress and in Washington, DC making these decisions or at the state capital in Columbus making these decisions. I also talk with my mom and I talk with my husband about that. And yes, I'm 30. I'm going to be 35 next month. But I still connect with people and have a support group about these politics and about what's coming up. And I say to them, what are you thinking on these topics? So that I can hear their point. And maybe I write some notes down or I go to a website they're talking about or they share a YouTube video with me or send me an email from someone. We do a lot of emailing. And I also think it's helpful to get an understanding of the issues, not always the people that are going to be on your ballot, and realizing that those issues are not-- when I live in Ashland County, there's actually four other counties in this area. And so when I see something, when I'm driving to the grocery store, it's like vote yes on issue 12. And then you realize, you look at your ballot and you don't have an issue 12. That's a real learning curve. Oh, I live in this school district. And understanding that and knowing what school district and what firehouse is in your area, those are always going to be on the ballot. And so you need to understand that so that you can make an informed vote and decision. I guess just understanding more of the community you live in can help you to influence the ballot and what you decide to vote on. I know that you plan and you think about transportation. I'm lucky enough to be able to drive. So I don't need to worry about that. But I do think about that, because I am in the rural country and still have Amish buggies around. But knowing what resources you have in your community to be able to get to the polling place to be able to vote.

JENNIFER BAVRY: What about if you decide to vote in person, what are some of the things that you have made sure that you've looked into, you've asked about to help prepare you for being able to vote on site?

STARR DOBUSH: Sure. When I went to the polling place, I actually asked for the accommodations for the first time. And I've only done it once since then because of when I requested a vote. The next time I can vote, I will ask for accommodations again. When I was voting, I actually went to the office where Ashland County voting is housed. And so I was able to vote. In that area, they had four carousels, and the staff were able to help me with the accommodations that I requested. I would like to use that same accommodation when I go to the local neighborhood pop up polling stations in November when everyone votes. But when I was at the office to vote, I voted a few days ahead of November, the big November vote. And I asked if I could have the ballot read aloud to me. And the woman was like, sure, just wait. We only have one because of our community size. And so that was the request. And that was fine. I didn't mind waiting. And then when that person was done, they actually cleaned off the

machine prior to COVID and cleaned off the earbuds. And they gave me earbuds, and I was able to scroll through on the touch screen and hear everything being read. And then they would say if I hadn't selected something. I was able to move through the ballot questions. And then I actually started looking at the ballot and was a little concerned, because I didn't see some of the people that I had written down on my note. And I said, um, I don't think this is right. And she was able to come over and help me and be like, oh, you're Orange County. And so I was in a different county. So I was able to get that fixed. It was no problem. And so after, there was only about three-- there were three issues and maybe five candidates. And the voice commands let me know who I was selecting. I didn't really use it for the people's names or selecting the issue. It was more just to comprehend the issues and read through if there was a levy or if there was a change in the law that they wanted to update. So it was really just getting my head around that concept even though I had heard it multiple times at home. If you're in a new environment, you want to hear it again. So having that opportunity to listen to the ballot really helped me. And then I also when I was done voting went out of the polling area into the office, and then continued to ask more questions, just because I wanted to know, not that I needed it, but wanted to know are people able to have this device that they're voting on lowered for if they're in a wheelchair? And she said yes. And I said, well, are you able to also offer ASL or interpretations? She's like, we've never had that request. So we're not sure, but I'm assuming yes, we would do that. I said, well, what about different languages? And she's like, based on the census, we know that no one in or area, in our county requested a Spanish-- or speaks Spanish. So we do not have a ballot that is written in Spanish. But then she added that Cuyahoga County in Cleveland, Ohio does have a ballot that is Spanish, because in the census people said that, yes, they speak Spanish as their native language.

JENNIFER BAVRY: Interesting.

STARR DOBUSH: Yeah. So understanding that your census definitely connects with your ballot was very eye opening to me as well. And then the last question I asked was, are people able to sit instead of stand? And she's like, oh yes.

JENNIFER BAVRY: I think these are all important things that any voter, but especially an individual who maybe does need some additional support when they're voting or accommodations just to be aware of the process. And I want to go back to some-- I know you asked a ton of questions of the folks in your county, and that's great, or your polling station, and that's great that they were able to answer all of those things. Did you find in the research you've done and in your own personal experience that you knew about these things before walking into the polling station? Or you asked for it and they were able to accommodate?

STARR DOBUSH: Sure. So going back to asking for accommodations, I, A, thought most of my life I've been able to go to school and I've received my masters. And so in education whenever you ask for an accommodation, they want paperwork. They want to know what is the disability. Or even if I go to a job interview and I ask for accommodations for a screening test to have extended time, they want to see that documentation. And so I thought, I wonder if I can do this. And I didn't have anything on me, but I know that I use accommodations in the rest of my life.

Let me try in this part of my life as well. And so I think maybe sometimes people don't realize that, oh, if I was really excelling in school and I was using that accommodation and now I'm being put in a new environment but being asked to do the same thing like read and understand and comprehend, maybe I should try and use that accommodation here. And I think that in high school even, we don't-- I was an English teacher. That was my past job. And I didn't really tell my students, if I'm using this accommodation in the classroom, I better use it when I go to college. But I never said and in the community. And so I think just that idea of changing the way we talk to our youth about being advocates for what they need, it's not just in one environment. It's in every environment that they're connected to. I think that we should tell people that there are accommodations. The only reason I knew that there were accommodations was ties with my family and because I'm in the field of working with disabilities. Not every person is always eager to ask questions, and so we need to honor those people. I know that even though they don't feel comfortable asking questions, they probably still want that resource for that accommodation.

JENNIFER BAVRY: Let's talk a bit more about the individual. What are some tips, ideas, things that you would share with to help, I guess, equip them and empower them to be an advocate, to have their voice heard, and to cast a ballot?

STARR DOBUSH: Being an advocate means that you know that you have the right to ask for things. And so that starts at a very young age, and we foster those ideas in their pre-teens, even in childhood, working your way up. So you need to be comfortable asking for accommodation. I have heard other people talk through the videos, Vote For Access, and through webinars about their experience on how it was to go and vote. And I don't think you always hear that. And so if you don't hear other people's stories, then how do you know that you could ask for the same thing? People don't know you have a disability until you tell them you have a disability in the adult world. And that's a big curve, I think, for a lot of our youth, There's a lot more options and there's a lot more people that can help you with resources, but there's so many great resources through REV UP access. And I think we're seeing more of a push on social media from those organizations. So our youth do know. 10 years ago, I would have had no idea what organizations help with voting. And I was not even, because I wasn't in this field, but social media, I know that it influences what you select and what you see. But if you are creating a profile that has disability, that's probably going to pop up on your interests or an interesting Facebook email that says you should join this group. I think that that's really helped to spread the word to our youth that use technology and use social media that we can have a voice and it can be heard, no matter our disability.

JENNIFER BAVRY: That's actually the perfect point to end on.

[LAUGHS]

I guess as we wrap up, I'm looking through all of my questions. And I mean, you have hit on every single one of them as far as what has worked for you and based off of your learning style what are some of the accommodations that you have accessed, other ones that might be available, just in your conversation with your own local polling agency. Is there anything else

that you want to share about your experience or inspire others, encourage others, kind of ending statement that just basically get out and vote and here's where you can-- this is how you can do it? Anything else? Anything else that you want to share right before we wrap up?

STARR DOBUSH: Sure. Some points that still stick with me today is that you're able to vote before the November date. And know that. And know that you need to register, and there's deadlines. I didn't know that. And so those are helpful hints. And the last thing is the environment that we vote in should be this same environment that everyone else has an opportunity to vote in. And I heard a young woman speak, and she was living in Oregon, but she had moved from Ohio. And she referenced how being able to vote was really hard for her because of the temperature and the climate. And so she had to make sure that she, A, was dressed appropriately to go outside, and then when she was in the polling station that she would have a chair to sit on. And so understanding all those aspects of going to vote are maybe a lot more checks and a lot more planning before a person can go and vote. But that shouldn't stop you from voting.

JENNIFER BAVRY: Good point. Great. Actually, great point.

STARR DOBUSH: Yeah. I don't even think about that.

JENNIFER BAVRY: No, no you don't. I mean, I think for some people, it's just a matter of, OK, what time am I going to be able to get to the voting station? Not having to think about all of these other things that could help support you once you get to that voting station. It is, it comes back to that whole idea of having a plan and knowing deadlines, knowing what you need to do, how you can advocate for yourself to make sure that you can participate in this opportunity to vote. Well, thank you so much, Starr, for sharing your experience and your perspective.

STARR DOBUSH: Thanks for having me on the air, Jen. It was a real pleasure to talk about access and ballots and my first experience with voting. And I hope to continue to use voting and accommodations through the rest of my life.

JENNIFER BAVRY: Wonderful. Thanks, Starr, so much. Thank you for listening to this episode From My Perspective. By sharing the experiences and perspectives of others, I hope you are inspired to take action to support yourself and others and being able to fully participate in the 2020 election. To learn more about OCALI and its resources, including additional From My Perspective episodes, please visit ocali.org.