

## OCALI | Podcast – Episode 17

### “We are All Able”: A Conversation with LeDerick Horne on Vision, Inclusion, and Belonging

[RADIO CHANGING]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Welcome to Inspiring Change from OCALI, our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. I'm Simon Buehrer.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** OK, so I grew up on Alex Place, which is a dead-end street in central New Jersey. And I still live on Alex Place. A few years back, I bought the biggest house and renovated it, and that's home.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** In a recent post on his Facebook page, LeDerick Horne wrote, "The cucumber patch in our yard is really producing."

There's a photo of a small mound of freshly picked cucumbers resting in the grass. There's another one of a cucumber actually growing through one of the holes in the chicken wire fence that surrounds the garden. And a third photo of LeDerick himself, big, electric smile, holding a half-dozen cucumbers.

He's wearing a black t-shirt with slim, elegant, multicolored lettering. It reads, "Everyone belongs." As a poet, speaker, and advocate, growth and belonging are two pervasive threads in LeDerick Horne's work.

He's a champion of hope and opportunities for people with disabilities, a mentor for adults and students alike, and a talented word artist. He makes words dance.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** When I was a kid, there was a tradition of my parents playing records. So this is a poem which captures a lot of what I heard growing up as a kid and it's called "Alex Place Soundtrack."

"Mama gave me P-Funk, George Clint, 45 spinnin' like a windmill. You'll kill yourself chasin' after break beats. Break down, turn up the volume when the godfather screamin' like that.

Now we goin' uptown. Last poet, Congo lyrics use a gas man. Jones B fallin' when I hear at some party. And BS but don't be scared when the revolution hits you like that. That? Mm-hmm. Now what?

Papa playin' James T, Simon, Garfunk-era with the Hotel California, rockin' plus the doo wop. Didee didee dum didee doo, had my whole house singing like that. Yeah, man.

This is just a soundtrack. Childhood, young boy, movin' with the least stitch. Music sewn in my genes. Had a BMX. Jump right with the rhythm. I was F-R-E-S-H like them girls turnin' rope on my block, singin' run and tell your mama 'bout that. Yeah. It was like that."

**LEDERICK HORNE:** I-- at the end of that poem, I spell out the word "fresh." And fresh is significant because that is the first word I learned to spell on my own.

**SHAWN HENRY:** Oh, wow.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** And the reason was is because there was a song on the radio when I was a kid. And the hook was the MC spelling out the word "fresh." So I had the mnemonic-- right?

[LAUGHTER]

**SHAWN HENRY:** Right.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** --I could latch on to.

**SHAWN HENRY:** That's awesome.

**JEN BAVRY:** Great.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** OCALI'S Jen Bavry and Shawn Henry sat down with LeDerick Horne to talk, share, and laugh about a wide range of topics and issues, including reflections on his own educational experiences, the importance of having a positive vision of one's life, what it takes to build more inclusive communities, and the need to recognize and utilize the strengths and assets that we all have.

Jen opened the conversation by first asking LeDerick about the book he co-authored with Margo Izzo, entitled Empowering Students with Hidden Disabilities-- A Path to Pride and Success.

**JEN BAVRY:** Can you explain a little bit more about how that book came to be and what it means to empower students?

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Yeah, so Margo and I-- well, first of all, thanks for having me, being on this podcast. Margo and I met back in 2010. And she's a project director that runs a number of grants out of Ohio State University's Nisonger Center.

And I was asked to be a keynote speaker at a project director's meeting in new-- in Washington DC. This was back in 2010. And yeah, we met each other at that event, and she brought me to Ohio State. And I worked a little bit with her.

And then over the time, after going back and forth, we became friends and started talking about wanna make a book together.

Margo is a person with ADHD, and I have a learning disability. And so the book is us really looking at what we know to be true around best practices around transition, proving transition outcomes in folks with disabilities. But it's also seen through the lens of two people who have lived the experience of having a disability.

And so I think that the book is unique in that regard because we don't have enough people with disabilities informing the work of this field. So yeah, that's how Margo and I got together.

And I think to empower students is-- it unfolds throughout the chapters of the book. But a lot of it has to do with the elements of self advocacy, that self-awareness.

And one of the things we really push in the book is that it's really key that our young people have a community that they realize they're part of, a long lineage of human beings who have had differences and have contributed great things, and that they connect with each other now in a really-- sort of form a fellowship, and not just being in the same room together, but having community, learning from each other, being able to laugh and share strategies and all those sort of things.

**JEN BAVRY:** So it's wonderful you mention community because I know that that's part of where OCALI is focused, too, in trying to make sure everyone knows that we are all part of this community, and we all make a difference in this community. Can you share a little bit more about what your community was like growing up?

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Oh, well. Yeah, so I was first diagnosed with having a learning disability when I was nine years old and first placed in a resource room in a self-contained, special ed classroom for a number of years. And there was a mix of students with disabilities in that room.

Our teacher was Miss Yates, Miss Priscilla Yates. She had a teacher's aide named Miss Norsha, who were just really great human beings.

**JEN BAVRY:** It's impressive that you remember the names. That's great.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Well, I mean, and that's for all the educators and just all the people out here. When you do good things people remember. You do bad things people remember, too. Right?

**JEN BAVRY:** True.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** And I've said on a number of occasions onstage that that self-contained classroom was not an ideal setting. It was not inclusive at all. We were at the end of the hall. I felt very segregated. I felt very segregated, but I was also very clear that Miss Yates and Miss Norsha loved each and every student in that room.

And later on in life when I got to be a teenager, I was dealing with real mental health challenges, depression, anxiety, different things along those lines. And I was fortunate to be able to graduate from high school and do as well as I have.

But yeah, a lot of that time growing up there was a lot of shame. There was a lot of embarrassment. And I think what helped me to get through it was being able to look back at experiences, like that love and compassion, and then just a true belief that educators like Miss Yates gave to all of us, as well as having remarkable parents. I think I won the parent lottery, and they were very supportive throughout my life.

**SHAWN HENRY:** Now, LeDerick, you mentioned the word love. My wife-- I mention this a lot, she's a special educator, today-- and when she comes home, and she might be frustrated and just a little tired and things like that, and not sure she's getting through to the students, or frustrated that another teacher may not understand them. And she'll say, what do you think I should do?

And instead of talking about strategy or getting into that, I just say, just keep on loving them.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Keep loving them, yeah.

**SHAWN HENRY:** Just keep loving them. They need to know that you do love them and that you believe in them, right. And don't let that belief go away. We talk a lot about strategy. We talk a lot about these interventions. But sometimes, we just forget that the human element is so critical to just life and success. Can you speak to that?

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Yes. It's sort of a cliché, but it's a powerful cliché, that you can't get the minds if you don't have the hearts first. And I firmly believe in that. And I think it's one of the things that our society is not doing a great job of, is just really encouraging us, even with all the connectivity, encouraging us to have really deep relationships with each other.

And I think if you're in education, that that's where you need to start. You have to have that caring about the students who are-- who you are-- who you're working with. And I also think it's just our teachers need a lot of love, too.

When I think about what inclusion is and when inclusion works well, inclusion it's not about everybody being in the same room together.

But one of the key ways that I can use a marker whether a school is doing inclusion well is if whether they provide time for collaboration for the teachers, professional development for them to have spaces where they can learn from each other, build those connections, support each other, because it's remarkable that so many of our students will perform poorly for one teacher and then exceptionally for another, right?

And so for educators being able to learn from each other, right-- and I think of that, particularly when you can build in a professional environment that allows for that time as an expression of

love. Yeah, because the reality is that a lot of our educators are coming out of their teacher preparation programs not ready to be able to really perform to their best in an inclusive setting.

So we need more professional development, and we need more time for collaboration. But yeah, the love piece is really important. It's also important that all of us just think about that self-care piece, too, right, because it can be very easy to get burnt out.

If you've got 30 people in front of you on a daily basis who you are caring for-- so it's one of the pieces of advice that I give to educators all the time and families is, the kids are great, but take care of yourself first. You have to make sure you're strong because that's the only way you can be strong for everybody else.

**SHAWN HENRY:** I'm glad you mentioned that. That's-- we've been talking a lot about it.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** OK, great.

**SHAWN HENRY:** And actually, we were just talking about the-- right now, the morale being a little lower. And the teachers-- and they were feeling-- we were just-- and we could feel this almost national vibe.

And we were just saying, we just need to talk about a message of hope. And that they're doing great things. And there is change, right? And that there is a community. And that community is part of what's being here.

And so know you're not alone. Take care of yourself. But also know don't lose hope because if you're losing hope and your ability to be effective, that'll translate to the kids. And they'll lose hope, right?

And so that community piece is so critical to make sure that we can just-- there's a narrative of negativity around public education, sometimes. And I don't think that narrative is always true. I think there's some really wonderful things happening. And we have to fight through what's been portrayed, at times.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Yeah. Yeah, I'm a big fan of public ed. The narrative, and I think there is this national sentiment. I would actually expand that globally, of just pessimism, and people aren't satisfied.

And I think it's because we are in a point of multiple paradigms shifting, right? And so it's hard to know where the stable ground is. And so that's just-- that's natural. It's kind of how things go.

And that hope piece is important. We all have to-- you have to have a vision for where we're going, right? And hard work can only be sustained with a powerful vision, right?

**SHAWN HENRY:** That's right. That's right.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Yeah, so whether it be a young person with a disability working in their schools, maybe struggling with different issues, if they can have a positive vision for what their life can look like. And a lot of that comes from community. It comes from mentors. It comes from role models.

And also, the folks who are doing the hard work in our schools, particularly around inclusion, they have to have a vision of what those schools look like.

A lot of the fights that I'm a part of around creating more inclusive schools for different nonprofits and what have you, I think so much of it just kinda comes down to-- some of its momentum, like educational momentum. People are just used to doing the same thing, over and over again.

And even separate, segregated schools for kids with-- or programs, or what have you, that can sound and seem very rational if you look at it from the past, where we are now.

But if you have a beautiful future, an idea, a vision for what a school can be beyond just that, I think people will-- they'll fight very hard, right? But they oftentimes have to see it. And it's one of things we were hoping to do with the book, and I hope to do as a speaker, is to give people a vision for what is possible for our schools and for the lives of people with disabilities.

**JEN BAVRY:** You share a little bit about giving the vision to students. What are some examples of things that you've shared to help in that-- being that self-advocate and helping students become self-advocates?

**LEDERICK HORNE:** The first thing that comes to mind is the mentoring piece. I'm on the board of a nonprofit organization called Eye to Eye. And we take college students and high school kids who have learning disabilities and ADHD and they mentor middle school kids who have similar disabilities.

So we have chapters all over the U.S. Because when I think about my life, I got classified. I was in the third grade. I go into this self-contained class.

Between third and fourth grade, I started giving up. And wasn't really conscious that I was giving up, but everything around me was communicating to me, whether it was that class at the end of the hall, not being able to go out and engage with the rest of the school body.

I mean, there was a lot of communication-- and also just a larger, cultural narrative around special ed that was not positive, right? I noticed that on your signs, you crossed out the "special."

**JEN BAVRY:** Mm-hmm.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** All right, I love that. Right? And that's the vision, too, right? It doesn't have to be special. This is the way we're supposed to treat everybody, right?

**SHAWN HENRY:** That's right.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** But yeah, when I grew up, there were very few positive examples of people who were going through or passing through special ed.

The best one, though, was the rapper Special Ed, who was bold enough to call his name Special Ed. And he's got that whole rhyme, like, I've got it made. It was just all these incredible things that he did. But yeah, there were very few examples, apart from him.

Yeah, so when I was younger, I know that I was losing that hope. And what would have made a difference in my life would have been if I could have met someone who was a little bit older.

When you're in elementary school, when you're in middle school, a high school student-- they all look like rock stars.

**JEN BAVRY:** So tell us a little bit more about how you having that-- what it would've been like to have had that mentor and how you're trying to encourage that now?

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Yeah, so. So I think for me, if I could have had someone who was a high school student or a college student who number one, just would have been like, hey, you got an incredible future ahead of you. I think that would have made a huge difference in my life.

But particularly if they could say, I have a disability similar to yours. Like, yeah, school isn't great. But it wasn't great for me. But look at where I am right now.

And as I got close to the transition, as I got older and older and older and closer to graduating from high school, I think the depression and anxiety was increased because I didn't have an example of what life was going to be like for me.

I graduated from high school in 1996. Transition, we-- I mean, we just really started talking about and setting up systems to support transition at that time. So it was kinda just like luck that I ended up at this really great disability support program when I was in college.

But again, I think it's part of that community power, right. It's one of the aspects of disability culture which makes it unique is that we pass this culture, not oftentimes from parent to child, but from person with a disability to a person with a disability.

**SHAWN HENRY:** This concept, or this thought around-- when you talk, I just think about students feeling that they're enough and that not being taken and just holding so that they say I'm enough. I have something to contribute.

Can you to speak to that? As you were talking about your mentorship, and when you see that light bulb go off, what it means for the rest your life?

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Yeah. I mean, it's-- It can be-- I think many of us tend to focus on the negative, right? And the reality of being diagnosed with a disability, you don't do that because

you did something right. Right? It's like, you didn't meet someone's metric of stage development. And so, unfortunately, a lot of the conversation tends to be about what our young people can't do, what they're not good at.

And so I think that it's important that we all are conscious of our impairments or our deficits, or what have you. But no one can face the challenges in their life by just knowing what they can't do. You have to know what your strengths are. And we all have strengths. We all have assets. And that is enough.

**SHAWN HENRY:** That's right.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** That is enough.

**SHAWN HENRY:** Yeah, so like you said, from that strengths-based side of it, right, just getting the student to really believe. We see that side.

On the other side of that, can you speak to this side of, I know what students are saying. Embrace this, right, because there's some real beauty in what's happening because your thinking is so different. And we want to pull that out of you.

Yeah, I know over here, this is hard. It's going to be a little harder for you to get through. We are going to work through it. But over here, we want to develop this and see it blossom.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Yeah, one of the more profound things we can do to help any self-advocate is to give them that awareness of all aspects of who they are, right? I think the more powerful thing that we can do for anybody is just to help them be able to see their strengths.

And I think the other piece of that is making sure that we give our young people the tools that they need to leverage their strengths because just saying you're great, and you're talented, and what have you, is not enough. We actually need to give them the leverage, right, to be able to put that talent into action out in the world.

**JEN BAVRY:** Speaking of talent, how or when did you discover your passion for poetry?

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Well, I think the passion had always been there, even when I was a little kid, right? So I've always enjoyed language. And when I was a kid, I used to walk around with the recorder and just record dialogue off TV or lyrics to songs that I really enjoyed.

I remember even wanting to learn the definition of DNA and being able to look it up in the dictionary but not being able to read the definition. And so having my mother read into this recorder so I could learn it by memory. So my first natural, sort of stumbling on to the power of audiobooks or audio recordings, right?

But I've always loved language. And when I was a kid, my mother used to play for me The Last Poets, who were a revolutionary poetry group out of Harlem in the '60s. And she had one of the



original records. And guys like Gil Scott-Heron-- and this was also-- when I was a kid, it was the time where hip-hop was being born, so this renewed push of spoken word out into the world.

But I was someone who didn't learn the alphabet until I was in the-- I was probably 10 years old. So I was afraid of spelling. I was afraid of writing. And so I didn't really attempt to write till I get to college. And I'm a part of this support program. And my counselor says, stop worrying about the spelling and just write.

And I literally just began waking up in the middle of the night, just writing poetry. It was the excuse that I needed to be able to express something that had always been there. But I was held captive by the tyranny of spelling. But once that was lifted, the first poem started going.

So I started writing when I was in college, and I was an open mic poet. And I used to run a number of open mics. And that's how it started.

And I was in my work-- when I found poetry was also a time when I was working through a lot of identity issues around what it meant to be an African American and also to be a person with a disability. And so my work is a fusion of me exploring those two identities.

#### **[MUSIC PLAYING]**

**SIMON BUEHRER:** You're listening to Inspiring Change from OCALI, our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. I'm Simon Buehrer.

That was a conversation between my colleagues Jen Bavry and Shawn Henry and poet, speaker, and advocate, LeDerick Horne.

If you don't know, Shawn is OCALI's Executive Director, and Jen is Program Director of the Family and Community Outreach Center at OCALI. She also hosts our sister podcast, From My Perspective. You can find From My Perspective at [ocali.org/podcasts](http://ocali.org/podcasts), or wherever you get your podcasts.

Early on in the interview, LeDerick mentioned some of his personal mental health struggles. If you or someone you know is dealing with mental health issues, depression, or anxiety, please seek professional help or counseling.

The national helpline from SAMHSA is a good place to start. You can reach them at 1-800-662-4357.

Also, if you live in Ohio, you can contact the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to get connected with supports and services in your area. You can reach them at 1-877-275-6364.

You can learn more about LeDerick Horne at his website, [LeDerick.com](http://LeDerick.com) How cool is that to have your first name as your website URL? That's pretty cool.

And I think, yeah, I'm calling the shots, here. We have time for one more poem.

**LEDERICK HORNE:** Back when we were celebrating the 35th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the feds asked me to narrate a short documentary film about the history of inclusion in the US.

And so if you go on YouTube or on my Facebook, and you search, "Celebrating 35 years of IDEA," you'll see that film, which has been viewed by tens of thousands of people. And at the end of it, I do this poem, which is, "An American Idea."

"It's an American idea. Today's child will be tomorrow's citizen. Education shapes our expression of liberty and separate? Well, that has never been equal. We are the students of a new day.

Brave scholars who claim desk and classroom, book and school, until the self-evident truths, expressed through our victories, gave this nation's first declaration renewed life.

Each mind is beautiful. Strength has many forms. And we are all able."

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That was poet, speaker, and advocate, LeDerick Horne.

Thanks again for listening to Inspiring Change because the need for change is everywhere, and inspiration can come from anywhere. I'm Simon Buehrer. See you soon.

**[MUSIC PLAYING]**