Season 7 | Episode 1

Meet Special Needs Mom, Advocate, and Leader Roberta Dunn

Roberta & Todd Dunn

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Stephanie Daniels:

Hi friends! I'm your host, Stephanie Daniels, and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. We're sharing hope as we answer real questions about disability. Join us every week for an honest and encouraging conversation, along with practical ways to include people with disability in your church and community. So, grab a seat, and let's jump in!

The birth story for Roberta Dunn's twins was filled with several wild surprises, but facing the unexpected redirected Roberta and her husband to a brand new role serving as advocates for their twin sons.

Today, Roberta's grown children are thriving, and their journey has opened doors for Roberta to serve in the disability community for the last 30 years. Join me as we talk about how she was empowered to advocate for her children and how you can, too.

Welcome to the podcast, Roberta.

Roberta Dunn:

Thank you so much, Stephanie. It's my absolute pleasure to be here with you.

Stephanie Daniels:

Well, I'm so glad you're here. Your story has some pretty wild twists and turns. It had a wild start. A lot of times parents find out they're expecting twins early on in a pregnancy, but it was just one week before your babies were born that you found out you were having twins. Can you take us back to that time?

Roberta Dunn:

Absolutely. I was as big as a house. I was so large, but the doctor kept telling me, you're having one big baby. One big baby. If I had heard them say it again, I was just gonna smack him in the nose because I just kept hearing "one big baby."

Finally, my doctor started to get concerned and had me go in for a third ultrasound. I had already had two and on the third ultrasound, he said there's the head, there's the heart, there's the legs, and there's another head. And it wasn't until that third ultrasound that they discovered that I was having twins. That was seven weeks before my due date. And one week later I gave birth to the boys, and for that week I was totally consumed with the idea that I was gonna be the mother of twins. So, I joined Mothers of Multiples, all of these different groups thinking that the journey that the Lord had us on was that of having twins. Then, they were born six weeks early and I thought, oh Lord, the journey you have us on is of raising children born premature.

And I barely was getting my arms around the idea that there were gonna be two. And now I was thinking, what about them being born so early? What are the complications related to being born so early? And then as soon as I was getting my arms around that, the doctor came in at night, my husband and my 3-year-old had left for the evening, and uh, not to my bedside, but just from the door jam, in the dark, said "Mrs. Dunn, do you know what Down syndrome is?"...

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

And then all of a sudden I realized, oh Lord, this is the journey that you're taking us on. So in the course of one week we had been on a whirlwind ride and that's the day our lives changed. The day before that, I knew very little about disability and that day I knew that I was gonna be these little ones number one fans and advocate.

Stephanie Daniels:

I get chills hearing that ' cause I can only imagine that image was imprinted in your brain forever. You know, the doctor in the dark saying that to you and it rocking your world. What an incredible start to this journey. So before you had Todd, what was your experience with disability?

Roberta Dunn:

So I had very little experience with disability. My youth group tutored some young men that lived in what I now know is a group home. But otherwise, I really didn't have any firsthand knowledge. It sounds so silly, but I think many listeners might be able to relate to this, the only thing I knew about genetics was what I had learned in ag science. You know, how to get a brown cow. I just didn't know anything else about genetics.

The twins diagnosis is very unique. They're the only known set in the world like them because they are actually identical twins. So, when they were one baby, the baby had a 47th chromosome, which is what Down syndrome is. Then they twinned, and when they twinned the

47th chromosome stayed on Todd, but broke off of his twin brother Jay. So, getting to the diagnosis was its own journey and took months because they were so unique, the doctors didn't even really know what to tell us. So, it was quite the journey, but I didn't bring any real knowledge to it.

I remember the geneticist sitting at the dry erase board trying to describe their diagnosis to us. If you just envision that dry erase board sheet, this is the egg, this is the sperm, and then she'd do all the multiplications, and then she would describe to me what she was drawing, then she would turn around and look at me and say, "So do you understand?"

And everything in you wants to say, "Yes. I get it now." But then I would have to humbly admit, "No, I don't get it." She would erase it and she'd start again. It was like freshman biology, all over again.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah, I can't even imagine what that was like. It's probably like she's speaking Greek. And then you've had the boys at this time, right? And so you're probably just on a rollercoaster trying to understand and just wrap your mind around reality.

Roberta Dunn:

When I think about that night, Stephanie, I think to myself, I was 25 years old.

Stephanie Daniels:

Oh.

Roberta Dunn:

So, I was young for someone having a child experiencing Down syndrome. It's much more prevalent as women age, but it does happen for a woman at a younger age to have a child with Down syndrome.

As I remember that night, the thoughts that were running through my head. Keep in mind, my husband had left, so I was processing all of this alone in the dark in that hospital bed. And two questions kept running through my mind while I laid there. Questions that really surprised me. I didn't see them coming. I thought the questions I should be pondering was, would Todd have GI trouble? A lot of infants born with Down syndrome have GI trouble. You know, how impacted would he be by intellectual disability? Those weren't the questions.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

The questions that ran through my mind were, will my son go to the prom?

Stephanie Daniels:

Hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

Will my son ever know the intimacy of playing footsies with a spouse in bed.

I remember, it took me a long time before I really realized that what I was wondering was, would Todd find his place in the world? Is our world ready to be an accessible and welcoming place for someone like my son?

Stephanie Daniels:

Oh.

Roberta Dunn:

And the weight of that I was crying because one, I was okay with going to my prom. It wasn't the big deal that it maybe should have been. And I'm not all that into playing footsies in bed but when I had a son that experienced disability, I realized there's something about that intimacy that I really wanted for him. And what it created a desire in me for was to pursue an idea that he needs to be able to feel welcome and part of community.

Stephanie Daniels:

It's like those things were born in you in that moment hearing...

Roberta Dunn:

In that moment.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm. Hearing what his diagnosis was, and I can only imagine that any parent, when they're just hearing your child has X, Y, or Z, they're gonna be going through the list of okay, what's their life gonna be like? So, I feel like those questions that you were asking yourself were very legitimate.

Roberta Dunn:

They really led up to a moment when my husband and I were having a conversation. Todd was still in the hospital, but Jay had been released, and we had Jay in the backseat leaving the hospital.

And the boys are 32 years old now, but this still sits in my mind as if it was yesterday. We were leaving the hospital and my husband said, "Remember when we were dating, we would be canoodling in front of the fire and talking into the night about what our lives would look like. And we would ask, what is something you don't think you could ever handle?" And my husband said, "Remember when we said the one thing we thought we couldn't ever do was have a child that experienced disability?" And he reached out and he grabbed my hand and he said, "God's gonna show us we can."

At that moment we became a team, and we became our son's number one fan and advocate. We did it together, which I think is really important.

Too often families at that intersection, the husband and wife, the mom and dad, they're not necessarily on the same page. And I will forever be grateful for that day when the Lord just allowed for that clarity of vision for us to see that we were in this together.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm. Man, that kinda hit me like a ton of bricks, because the thing that you think you can't do, God shows up in your weakness and empowers you to walk it out, to go where you think you could never go. He leads you and he's with you. That's just so encouraging to see where you are now.

Roberta Dunn:

The morning after I'd gotten the news my girlfriend called me and she was so excited and she didn't know anything. And so I, I said in tears, "They think Todd has Down syndrome." And there was a little bit of a pause and "Is he healthy?" And I said, "Yes." in tears and crying. And then she says, "Well take that baby home and love him." And I was like, "Okay."

I needed someone to give me these marching orders that were black and white and common sense. And that dear friend, she had no prior experience with disability, but she spoke truth…

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

...in a raw way that I needed to hear. And again, 32 years later, I'm forever grateful for her. That she just spoke truth like that for me and I needed to hear it.

Stephanie Daniels:

Sometimes you do need a loved one, a friend, slap you back into reality to say, "Girl, you can do this. 'Cause God's equipped you and he called you."

Roberta Dunn:

Absolutely.

Stephanie Daniels:

So, I love that. Roberta, could you maybe share, at that time how prevalent was Down syndrome in your community? Was it something that you were familiar with?

Roberta Dunn:

No, absolutely not. I recall when I was in high school, there was a young man on our school bus, and he was being bullied. I remember rising up with such a fervent anger that these bullies were taking advantage of this young man. I knew he experienced disability, but I didn't know anything about disability because our worlds were very segregated.

People experiencing disability were in special classes at special schools our paths didn't cross. And it wasn't until after I had Todd and Jay that I ended up joining parent groups. And while this ages me, I'll admit it, we didn't have the internet. So, if you wanted to get support, if you wanted to get resources, you had to go to that classic third of the month support group or whatnot, and that's how you got to know other families that were walking a similar journey with you. Sadly, you also didn't see people experiencing disability in your church.

I was well loved by my church, I will emphasize that. Our church really rallied around us, and we had a great support network. They didn't all know, an etiquette. One of the sweet women from our church, doing the best she could, wanted to bring us dinner and was holding Todd in her arms and said, "Oh, this is the first time I've held a mongoloid."

I remember just wanting to throw up because I hadn't heard that term before. But our church did surprise us. The women's group brought us meals for at least a full month or so...

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

...and I remember one time the doorbell rang, and I answered the door, and the woman said, "hi, I'm Shirley. I'm here to do your laundry." And I was like. "What?" And she said, "my gift is hospitality and as a mother with babies, you're gonna have laundry so point me to the washer and dryer. I'm here to do your laundry." And she would come once a week for weeks...

Stephanie Daniels:

Oh wow.

Roberta Dunn:

...became a dear, dear friend. Another time the doorbell rang and it was a woman. She says, "I'm here for you to nap." And I was like, "You're here for me to what?" And she said, "I'm here so you can nap. Tell me what I need to know. Tell me when you need to be woken up." Jay and Todd, Todd, particularly at that point was still on a heart monitor, he needed to be fed with an NG tube up his nose. So, she was there just so I could sleep.

Stephanie Daniels:

Hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

We were loved well, and I'm so forever thankful for that. The reason I even say that is because I do meet a lot of families nowadays that don't feel that...

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm.

Roberta Dunn:

...and too often our church communities are feeling awkward or clumsy about how to support that family as they're navigating disability. And I would recommend, I would share from my personal story, lean in. Lean into the awkward ask the family, what do you need? Do you need your laundry done, you need a tank of gas, you need a pizza? What do you need? How can we be here and love on you?

And for that family that's navigating disability, open the doors, open your arms, let people in.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

Don't feel like you have to isolate yourself. And if you are feeling embarrassed or in any way awkward in your new real lived experience, give that to the Lord and let people love on you. Because that isolation, that families self-impose on themselves, sometimes it's the heaviest burden you'll ever carry. And people in your community, your neighbors, your family, your friends, and your church family, many of them wanna love on you...

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

...and they either are stuck in an awkward, or they don't know how.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

So.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's so important 'cause we are made to live life and community and in fellowship with one another. So that's very encouraging to those who may wanna shut the door to keep it open and let people in to love on you. That's good.

So, you've now worked in the disability community for 30 years, but you've been living it on a personal level, even longer than that. So will you share about when your boys were ready to start school?

As a stay-at-home mom, you showed up to a meeting in a power suit with a briefcase full of blank papers and a plate of brownies. So, you were a mama on a mission. How did you get your boys rolling in school?

Roberta Dunn:

After we were processing diagnosis, we were making our way into this new journey, we had developed a mission statement for ourselves. That we would raise our three sons to be able to one day look themselves in the mirror and say, "I am beautifully and wonderfully made in the image of my creator exactly who I'm supposed to be." And that each one of them would embrace the Imago Dei of who God has created them to be.

Once we, as a mom and a dad, had that vision for them, every decision we made for them was on that trajectory. It was with that goal in mind that they would each see the Imago Dei, including Todd with his 47th chromosome, which we didn't believe was an accident or an anomaly, but part of the mastery of his creation.

When we started to make those decisions, we realized that every decision from preschool to kindergarten, they each led to that ultimate goal. And in order to make smart decisions, I started to attend parent trainings. I had gone to a parent training on how to be an advocate at an IEP meeting, individualized education plan, for kids as they were transitioning into kindergarten. And like you said, Stephanie, I arrived at that meeting wearing a power suit with a briefcase full of paper and a tray of brownies because that's what they had taught me at the IEP training. Look professional and always bring baked goods. And that's what I did.

Stephanie Daniels:

I love it.

Roberta Dunn:

And so at that first meeting, I thought I was prepared. I had a vision, I had the brownies, I was in the power suit, and at the end of that first meeting they said, "Well, we have determined that Todd's gonna go to school at this special school, on a special bus, in a special program, and it's only 45 minutes away."

I said, "Wait a minute, what do you mean?" I went to the meeting, I brought brownies, you're supposed to say that he's gonna go to school with his twin brother at our neighborhood school. I had to process all of this because I thought, wait a minute somewhere we've had a disconnect. So I told them, I said, you know what, we have a vision for Todd one in which he sees that he's beautifully and wonderfully made, one in which he belongs in his community, and he won't be able to reach that goal if he's at the special school, taking the special bus, that takes him 45 minutes away from home and has him away from his brothers. So, we're gonna need to reconvene and discuss this to make sure we can put the supports in place so that he can be successful at his neighborhood school.

From that, we were able to build on years, and years, and years. Todd was always successful being included in his general ed class at his local school, attending school with his brothers. But that advocacy started by having a vision, having a dream for what the future could look like, and then making sure that we took every opportunity to keep Todd on that trajectory.

Stephanie Daniels:

I'm curious, do you think that all parents who might have a child with a disability have that same idea? "I need to have a vision for this child." Or, do you think that when they get the news they kind of lose that and say, "Okay, all hope is lost." Is that common for a parent to still dream for their child?

Roberta Dunn:

Oh, Stephanie, you almost have me with tears in my eyes because one of the challenges that I've undertaken all of the years that I've worked in the disability community, the number one message that I work to get out to families is: dream a bigger dream.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm.

Roberta Dunn:

Dnd don't let this world take it from you. Our culture and our world at large still doesn't value the Imago Dei of individuals experiencing disability.

Nowadays, it has a name, we call it ableism, but for so often, families are starting to hear that message. Many of them prenatally by the push to consider aborting a child with a prenatal diagnosis of disability.

As of now in 2025, I believe there are still four states in the United States that institutionalize individuals experiencing disability and where we lived when the boys were younger, they were still institutionalizing children experiencing Down syndrome.

So, the message to families was, you got the short end of the stick, you got a bum deal, and we'll take that off of you and, and you can institutionalize that child. The world has changed, but the importance of the dream hasn't...

Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

So, I would do a lot of trainings and a lot of presentations to families. It sounds almost ironic to say this, but I would know that I was heard when I saw moms crying because I would see families that had come in with no dream that left understanding it.

I spoke to a mom not too long ago, Stephanie, her daughter just turned 21. She heard me speak when her daughter was a little girl and she took a copy of the mission statement that I mentioned to you and she put it in her closet. She told me that mission statement is still in her closet reminding her that she's her daughter's number one fan and advocate, and that she's dreaming a dream, and that she's gonna do what she needs to do to help her daughter see that she's beautifully and wonderfully made.

I count it all joy to be able to think about every mom or dad that came in with their head down , and left thinking, "Wait a minute, my son or my daughter is beautifully and wonderfully made exactly who they're supposed to be and my job as their mom or the dad is to shepherd them into what the Lord has for them."

Stephanie Daniels:

Wow. Wow. It's so powerful and empowering. It's powerful and it's empowering and I pray that parents who are listening today will take that seat of dreaming for their child and seeing them with the value that they have.

Roberta Dunn:

Stephanie, one thing that I'm thinking of as I'm recalling something that Todd shares. He will often say, "I'm the boss of me." He's very proud of the idea that he's his own self-advocate. That is a learned behavior.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

So, moms and dads, if you are out there and you are not modeling that behavior to your son or daughter, I encourage you to start today. And I don't care if they're 2, 22, 32, 42, or 52, it's never too late. Model the behavior of self-advocacy, model being their advocate because they will see that, they hear how you talk about them. Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

They see how people talk about them when you show them how to advocate for them, they will grow into those shoes and become their own number one fan and advocate.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's so true and important. I grew up hearing our pastor always say, "More is caught than taught." We do model what we see and so that is a great encouragement to parents. You've got eyes on you. Make sure you're doing the things that are gonna help those eyes emulate what they see.

Roberta Dunn:

Absolutely.

Stephanie Daniels:

So good. Well, so you really became an advocate for your son. We've kind of just touched on it, but why is advocacy so important and how would you encourage other parents to advocate for their own children, especially those living with disability?

Roberta Dunn:

So, I think that one of the things that's always been important to me is the idea of appreciation for each of us in our Imago Dei, having strengths, gifts, and talents.

No matter how someone is impacted by disability, any level of impaction, everyone has strengths, gifts, and talents. So, I think it's important for moms and dads to be able to see and look at their son and daughter and not just see what the world sees.

Too often in the way that the world sees our children, it's by deficit. We're brought into a meeting to talk about how far behind they are. One year behind, two years behind. Often we make the mistake of describing our children by their developmental age, and I'm a big believer that your son or daughter deserves to be treated for every candle that's on their cake.

Todd's a 32-year-old man, and I need to treat him like a 32-year-old man. I need to talk to him like a 32-year-old man, and I need to expect others to treat him that way as well. That's one of the ways that parents can step into that role and do that.

I think of several examples. One time we went out for pasta and the wait staff came up and they looked at Todd, then they looked at me and said, "What would he like?" So, I looked at Todd and I said, "Todd, they'd like to know what you would like." That may sound silly and maybe it gets lost as you're listening to it, but what I was doing was modeling to the wait staff that this gentleman knows what he would like and that when you ask him, he's gonna tell you.

It also models presumption of competence, which is the top shelf word for the idea of believing in someone. When I look at Todd and say, "What do you want?" I'm modeling to Todd, I believe you know what you want. I'm also modeling to that wait staff that you need to believe he knows what he wants. That is all a part of this recipe for that empowerment that you're talking about, that equipping that you're talking about.

When Todd goes in to order that strawberry frappuccino, he knows that he is disgusted by whipped cream, so he knows that if he does not advocate for himself, that strawberry frappuccino is gonna come covered in it. So, all of a sudden it becomes important enough for Todd. I always love to see this about my son, his words are the clearest when something is important to him.

Speech for someone with Down syndrome can sometimes be difficult to understand. If something's important to Todd, all of a sudden he annunciates and makes all of his sounds. So when he's ordering a strawberry frappuccino he can say, "No whip." And he can do that because he knows he is his own advocate.

I love when people in community surprise me and they presume competence. They look Todd in the eye and say, "Sir, what would you like?" I've always been able to be next to him and be able to support if he needs help. But I'm always pleasantly surprised that when someone presumes competence and believes in Todd, Todd is a stronger advocate for himself.

Stephanie Daniels:

That is so wonderful. Gosh, I just, it is so important to model that for your children. And so you have done a great job in doing that for Todd, and you also created a one page profile for him. Can you explain what that is?

Roberta Dunn:

Absolutely. It's a strength-based tool that helps you to introduce an individual experiencing disability, or for them to introduce themself, by their strengths, gifts, and talents. And again, too often individuals experiencing disability only get known or recognized by what supports they need or what deficit they have.

A strength-based tool instead says that these are the things this person likes, these are the things that this person doesn't like, these are the things that work for them, and these are the things that don't work for them. And this is an amazing tool in all community settings. Anything from Parks and Rec and a little league all the way to your Sunday school.

Todd even used his one page profile when he was recently attending a men's ministry event. He was going to the men's group at church, and I was gonna be in the women's group down the hall. And he had said he'd wanted to get to know some of the men at church. He knew he was too old for say the high school group or the college group.

We went to the kiosk on a Sunday morning, and I introduced him and met the man that did the men's ministry. They happened to have donuts, Todd's a big fan of donuts, our magical match was made. Todd went that next Wednesday night to men's group.

I walked into the room with them totally awkward as the only woman. You know, men don't normally take their mom to men's group. But I went in, I helped him with a name tag, and I found the man that had the donut on Sunday to make that connection. And Todd had a couple of pages of his one page profile, and he sat down at the table, he handed them out. A few of the men took time to read it. It, it says things on there like my favorite things to do or listen to Jeremy Camp or watch YouTube videos. And it said that some of the things I don't like is, I don't like when you talk to me like a baby, or I don't like when people make decisions for me without me.

And it said that some of the ways you can support me is if you don't understand my words, ask me what it starts with, and I'll tell you the letter. So, it says a few of these things and then it says things that he's working on, I wanna be more independent in community.

So, these gentlemen all read that and then warmly welcomed him. And so, when I picked him up, I said, "how'd it go?" And he said, "it went fine. They all read my one page. They asked me a few questions." And then he, he was good to go. And again, it's an example of what we mentioned earlier, but our communities, I believe, really do want to be welcoming and accessible. But we have to lean in, lean into the awkward it's awkward to go somewhere where you don't know anyone. It's extra awkward when you're gonna have to introduce that you have some support needs, but it's worth it. It's worth it every time.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yeah, that's so true. I can't remember how many things that I've stepped into that I'm just like gosh, this is uncomfortable. But it's like as long as you go into it knowing, okay, it's gonna be weird for a little bit, but we're gonna get through this and it's gonna be so worth it, like you said. And I love just hearing about Todd and the confidence that this has just really cultivated in him.

You advocating for him. As you've served as his advocate, how has that led to him advocating for himself?

Roberta Dunn:

It's been amazing to watch him grow and to take on his own mantle of advocacy and to be responsible for that. Todd was taking a class one time, and the instructor was up talking about what was gonna be expected for the students that were in this class. And all of a sudden, I saw Todd shoot his hand up and I thought, “Uhoh, what's he gonna ask the instructor?” And the instructor called on him and said, "Well if I'm gonna need to do all of this reading, I'm gonna need some help with that." And it was great to hear Todd say that in order to be successful at this, I'm gonna need some support.

One of the terms that I introduced families to, and that I had talked to Todd about, was the idea of, if you don't stretch, you don't grow. So, Todd one time was learning how to use the public bus system. He had gotten a job at Buffalo Wild Wings and he was gonna need to commute. He asked me "Why when I'm on the bus, do my legs shake?" And I said, well, honey, "You're nervous." And I said, "Nervous is great. Nervous means you're trying something new. And that you're being brave and bold and you're stretching and you're growing." I said, "If we don't do things that cause us to stretch and grow then we get stuck." That has been something that Todd's really embraced.

When we were living in Oregon, Todd had his own condo, a few condos away from our condo. He liked to say that he was close enough to tell us if the toilet was plugged, but far enough away that he could say, I don't live with my mom. And that meant a lot to him to be able to be in charge of himself. And he leans into that.

Still to this day, this isn't something that finishes, it's not a book that doesn't have a next chapter. There's always a next chapter. But right now, even at 32, Todd will tell me if I've hurt his feelings, if I've said something that sounded like I was taking a choice away from him, he'll say, mom, that's my choice to make.

It's actually got another fancy word for it, but it's called supported decision making. We make sure that Todd has the information he needs, but ultimately, he has to make a choice. And that goes to the idea and the concept of self-determination.

Todd got a diagnosis of fatty liver and he knows he has to cut some weight and he has to eat a little bit more of a careful diet. I don't tell Todd that he can't have certain foods, but I let him know if you have these foods, you're more at risk of needing more treatment. That's this premise of self-determination and supported decision making.

And I think that's like graduation, and preparing your child to be their own advocate is when they understand that there are consequences to the decisions they make. And we will make sure as mom and dad to make sure you have all of the information. But ultimately you are the boss of you, as Todd says.

Stephanie Daniels:

I love that. I feel like you guys have really set him up to be well adjusted and when he has questions about, why are my legs shaking when I'm getting on the bus? You frame it in a way that still enables and helps him to be confident in the way that you're going. It's okay. And he's growing as a man.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels:

So, I think that that is so important and I love that you guys are doing that for him.

So, how have you seen Todd become more independent? I mean, if he's riding public transit, he's pretty independent and he had a condo that he was living in just down from you all. So how have you seen him become more independent? And you've shared that he's gone to some of the men's meetings. How did you get Todd to the point to where he was confident enough to step out and do some things by himself.

Roberta Dunn:

We may sound like we're a little bit harsh, but we just never let it be an option not to. When it came to going to church, we would work with the Sunday school teachers, the youth group leaders, to always make sure that Todd had the supports that they needed. We would always make sure that they understood our commitment to presuming competence and the importance of having high expectations.

We always created an environment where Todd was expected to stretch and to grow. Now it'd be a missed opportunity to point out that Todd has always had a non-disabled peer in his life. He had a twin brother.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm-hmm.

Roberta Dunn:

If I put cookies out for the boys, Todd knew I better do everything I can within my power to get there as fast as my brother is, or I'm not getting any cookies.

And so, there was something to be said for there being a natural modeling from the time that Todd was a small child. He always had non-disabled peers around him to role model after. When he would see someone he knew in high school go off to college, Todd said, well, I'm gonna go off to college.

Or he'd see someone go get their own place. And he was like, well then I need to do what I need to do to get ready to move into my own place. He had an appetite for those things, so he started to pursue them on his own. Our job now that he's an adult is to steward and to accompany, but he's really dreaming the dreams for himself right now.

Stephanie Daniels:

So Roberta, I'm curious, how would you encourage the church to embrace Todd or others living with disability as they take a step out to engage in their community?

Roberta Dunn:

It's such a great question and the time is so right for this, it seems the larger church is at a precipice of appreciating the need for us to be welcoming and accessible to people and to be safe places for people of different races, and ethnicities, and socioeconomics. And the idea of churches that are inclusive of people like me that are gray headed, but also of young people just starting their journeys.

And as the church is doing that and appreciating what it needs to do to make sure that it is welcoming and accessible, now's the time to make sure to ask, are we welcoming and accessible to families impacted by disability? And I think that one of the things, and you've probably heard it in different ways as I was sharing, is sometimes I think we make it harder than it really is.

Let our guards down and be welcoming, treat people the way you wanna be treated, and just appreciate that everyone in the Imago Dei of appreciating that we're all created in God's image. We all have strengths, gifts, and talents to contribute...

I think that one of the mistakes we make is overcomplicating things. I would really encourage our brothers and sisters in the church to embrace the awkward. If you've not ever been with someone or spent time with someone experiencing disability, lean into the awkward. Go ahead and say, "Hey, my name is Roberta and you look like you might need a hand getting that cup of coffee? Is there a way I can support you with that?" Or, "Hey, my name's Roberta and I've so enjoyed worshiping with you. Is it helpful if I sit down so that you can see the screen? Or, is there a way that I can support you getting that hymnal or passing the tithe plate?" Or whatever the situation is...

What can we do to support you being able to be involved, but not just in the building, Stephanie, I think that it's, the time has passed for us to say that we've hit the home run because people experiencing disability can get in the building. Can they belong? It's not just okay to get in, but are we a part of it?

I remember attending a church service it's been a year or two now, but I remember it just melting my heart. As we walked in I could see that it was a very multi-ethnic church, which I loved because for me, that's what heaven's gonna look like.

Stephanie Daniels:

Right.

Roberta Dunn:

We should all, you know, the Children's Sunday school song of red, and yellow, black and white, they are precious in a sight. I wanna see it in my church. And so as I walked in, I was just overwhelmed with that right away. Then I noticed seniors, young 20 somethings. Then I was able to see that there were people with neurodiversity. Young man wearing headphones because he had sensitivities to sound. And then as I looked up to the front, they had a ASL interpreter for the hearing impaired and the deaf. It was so impressive to see that their general culture, not a program, not a law, a rule or a regulation, but this congregation was going to be welcoming and accessible to everybody and you could feel it.

And you know what? They didn't have a program. There was no placard somewhere that said, this is where you go if you wanna know more about disability. There was no person even in charge of it. The church had decided it and it had become a part of their culture. It was amazing, amazing.

I just don't think there's any reason why we can't see more churches doing the exact same thing. But two things have to happen. This is what's really key. Someone at the church has to have an appetite for it.

Stephanie Daniels:

Yes.

Roberta Dunn:

But the family also has to have an appetite for it.

I mentioned earlier if a family self isolates, if a family says, well, we just can't find a place to belong, then the church isn't gonna be there with the appetite to make it happen. But if your family shows up and you're holding your head up high. You're believing in the Imago Dei, if your loved one experiencing disability, you're having the expectation that they are a part of the body of Christ, an elbow, an ear, or a nose, then all of a sudden, your church will rise up. I'm counting on it. I'm believing for it. And we will see our churches change.

Stephanie Daniels:

Amen. I believe that. And I wanna see that with you. It's so beautiful to get a picture of that. Roberta, that's so, so good because that is the mission of Joni and Friends. The mission and vision is that people would find hope and dignity in their place, in the body of Christ. And so, I stand with you because I wanna see that as well.

Roberta Dunn:

Amen.

Stephanie Daniels:

I have enjoyed everything that you have shared with me and I'm really looking forward to this next part because we have a special guest that we are gonna have join us. You all have heard a ton about him, so it's time for you to meet him. This is Todd Roberta's son. Todd has asked his mom to clarify a few words if needed. So Todd, thank you for joining us.

Todd Dunn:

Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Daniels:

Okay, so you've had several jobs. What has been your favorite thing about working?

Todd Dunn:

I like working at the restaurants because you can eat after your shift.

Roberta Dunn:

You get to eat lunch after your shift.

Todd Dunn:

Yep.

Stephanie Daniels:

I would love that too. I think that that's a great reason to love working. Would you call yourself a self advocate? And what does that mean to you?

Todd Dunn:

Yes, I am self advocate. That means I have to say what is important is me, and to make decision about me.

Roberta Dunn:

You make your own decisions.

Todd Dunn:

Yep.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah. You like to say that you are the boss of you.

Todd Dunn:

Yep.

Roberta Dunn:

Yep.

Stephanie Daniels:

I think that's so great because you are an adult and you do have to advocate and stick up for yourself, so that's very important. What are some things that you would like people to know about interacting with people with disabilities?

Todd Dunn:

Treat me like, like you want to be treated. Don't talk to me like I'm a little kid. Get to know me.

Roberta Dunn:

Did that "to" got stuck? That ‘T’ got a little stuck.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

But you really want people to get to know you, don't you? Yep. You were telling me earlier, Todd, as we were talking that, you watched a YouTube video, I think you said, and on that YouTube video, it was talking about don't just get to know about the disability, but get to know all about the person. Right?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah. And that's important to you. And you also, for a long time, since you were little, you really don't like when people talk baby talk to you.

Todd Dunn:

No.

Roberta Dunn:

Even if they think they're being nice.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels:

I think that's so important because I know that when I've stepped into a conversation with somebody that has a disability, I feel like I'm always blown away by what I receive from those conversations and what I walk away with.

And] it's so great to step into any conversation you have with anyone and know that they have value and something to add. So that's really important. Thank you for sharing that.

Todd Dunn:

Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Daniels:

So, Todd, do you think that people need to know about Down syndrome to get to know you?

Todd Dunn:

Not really. Make sure that they do know about me, not just that I have a disability. I like Christian music, watching YouTube videos, and then getting a chai at Starbucks.

Roberta Dunn:

Getting a chai at Starbucks, and listening to Christian music, and watching things on YouTube. So, there's a lot about you, isn't there?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And having Down syndrome, having a 47th chromosome, that is what Down syndrome is, that's just a part, right, but that's a very small part of who you are.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels:

Are there opportunities that you have had to serve [00:47:00] others, Todd?

Roberta Dunn:

So where is an opportunity or what's an opportunity, Todd, that you've had to serve other people?

Todd Dunn:

Yes. I volunteer at the food bank so people without food can get some. I, I really like to help people. Get the food, I don't like sorting bad onions.

Roberta Dunn:

Todd doesn't always like to use the word favorite. We are not completely sure why, but he's a little against the idea of having something that is your favorite.

So, I was asking him what he likes to do or what he enjoys when he is at the food bank. And Todd had shared with me he really likes to help people and so the helping them pick out their food and that is one of his favorite things, though he doesn't use the word favorite. But he also, in balance, was telling me something he didn't like to do. And in case you missed that, he does not like sorting bad onions. That's the one activity at the food bank that is not Todd's favorite. They rot.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And that's gross.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels:

And how did you discover that you didn't like to sort bad onions? Did you maybe grab an onion that had rotted?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels: Oh goodness.

Roberta Dunn:

Was it gross and smushy?

Todd Dunn:

Yep.

Roberta Dunn:

And it stinks.

Todd Dunn:

Yep.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah. All the things, Stephanie. All the things.

Stephanie Daniels:

All the things. All the things. Well, I don't like touching bad onions either, so I don't blame you.

Okay. So, you just mentioned that you like Christian music and I think you can explain a little bit about a Christian artist that you really like, but I won't say your favorite. But how do you grow in your walk with Jesus? Can you tell us some ways that you do that?

Todd Dunn: I listen to a lot of Christian music. Jeremy Camp is my favorite. His song "Trust in You" helps me when I'm nervous or, or, or afraid. Sometimes when I praise, I listen to hymn songs. I feel close to God when I was listen.

Roberta Dunn:

When you're listening.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

So, you had shared with me years ago you were signed up to go to your very first stay away camp. And how were you feeling about going away?

Todd Dunn:

Nervous.

Roberta Dunn:

You were nervous, weren't you?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

And so, what song did we sing all the way to camp?

Todd Dunn:

"Trust in You."

Roberta Dunn:

"I Will Trust You." And ever since then, Jeremy Camp has been just one of your favorite artists, huh?

Todd Dunn:

I, I had to have a, my friend Ben took me to his concert.

Roberta Dunn:

You got to meet Jeremy, didn't you?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

Your friend Ben took you to the concert and you actually got to meet Jeremy Camp.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

That was really cool, wasn't it?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

You learned that Jeremy has a brother that also has Down syndrome, and so you actually got to sing your favorite song with your favorite artist.

Stephanie Daniels:

What?

Todd Dunn:

Yep.

Roberta Dunn:

Yep.

Stephanie Daniels:

How cool. Okay. Did you, was that like backstage or did he bring you up on stage to do it?

Todd Dunn:

Back, yeah. In back.

Roberta Dunn:

That was backstage. Jeremy invited him into his tent, and he got his guitar out. And Todd and Jeremy broke out and sang "Trust in You". It was pretty cool.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's amazing. Were you nervous to meet him? 'Cause I get starstruck.

Roberta Dunn:

Were you starstruck?

Todd Dunn:

No.

Roberta Dunn:

No.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's awesome, Todd.

Roberta Dunn:

It was really cool because some friends of Todd's that don't experience disability that he'd gotten to know while he was in a college program down at University of Oregon, they did a viral campaign and put out there into the sphere that their buddy Todd really liked Jeremy Camp. They really thought that maybe they would just get a signed picture or something. But one day Jeremy's wife Adie called me and said, Jeremy's gonna be in town and he would love to meet Todd.

So, because some good friends of Todd's, young men that don't experience disability, which is really important to share because I think it's important to know that you don't have to be a specialist to be somebody's friend. These were just gentlemen that had gotten to know Todd and they made that connection and Todd ended up getting to meet his favorite artist.

Todd Dunn:

I also saw his movie! The movie "I Still Believe."

Roberta Dunn:

"I Still Believe"

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

That meant a lot to you, didn't it?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah. I hear the stories about him, about his first wife passing away.

Roberta Dunn:

She passed away.

Todd Dunn:

Because she had cancer.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm.

Roberta Dunn:

Now that's a whole different story, but that meant a lot to you too because I went through a journey with cancer.

Stephanie Daniels:

Mm.

Todd Dunn:

Yeah.

Roberta Dunn:

Knowing that Jeremy went through that and how important the song, "I Still Believe" and "Trust in You". Those songs really meant a lot to you, didn't they?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah. And when mom was in the hospital, she listened to the newer artist called Brandon Lake.

Roberta Dunn:

Yeah. So, Todd's, Todd's telling my story. I was in the hospital not too long ago, and Brandon Lake's song really meant a lot to me. Music means a lot to Todd. And so, I think that his faith is really growing and anchored in how he enjoys worship music.

Stephanie Daniels:

I think all of this is so beautiful and it just displays perfectly why it's so important to get to know Todd and people like him because there, there's lots of layers and lots of dimension and we would be missing out if we didn't take the time to just sit and listen to what you have to say.

And what an amazing story about getting to meet Jeremy Camp. Did you take a picture with him?

Todd Dunn:

Yeah, I did.

Stephanie Daniels:

That's awesome. Well as we're wrapping up this incredible episode that we've had with Roberta and Todd, Roberta, is there anything else that you would like to say or Todd?

Roberta Dunn:

I think one thing I would add is just to anyone that's out there, especially if maybe you're just beginning your journey with disability, maybe you're a mom that's just gotten a diagnosis, Todd really spoke some wisdom to us when he shared how important it is to trust in God.

So, no matter what journey you're on and where you might be, while you're listening to this podcast, on behalf of Todd and I, I just wanna let you know that God's got you, and our journey has been a beautiful one. And the journey you're on, God's got you.

Todd Dunn:

And remember, God always told me to love him and trust him.

Roberta Dunn:

Love him and trust him.

Todd Dunn:

Yep.

Roberta Dunn:

Good words to live by, Todd.

Stephanie Daniels:

We hope this conversation touched your heart today. If it did, consider sharing it with someone who might be encouraged as well. And don’t forget to follow us on your favorite podcasting app so you never miss an episode. See you next week!

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