

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 podcast. I'm your host, Eric Neal. Today we have a very special guest. How do you go from sitting in a special education classroom as a child to speaking on behalf of people with disabilities at the White House, the United Nations, and Departments of Education across the United States as an adult? How do you transform your learning disability into a lifelong passion for the art of the spoken word? How do you expand your family's impressive civil rights legacy to include tireless advocacy for the rights of all people with disabilities? If you're LeDerick Horne, you just do it and you simply never stop.

Labeled with a learning disability as a child, LeDerick defies any and all labels. Today he's a noted spoken word poet, an advocate for people with disabilities, the founding board member of a national nonprofit, a co-author of the definitive book on hidden disabilities, a bridge-builder between learners and leaders everywhere. And as you're about to experience yourself, an ambassador for all, whether you have a disability or not.

Thanks for joining us, LeDerick. How are you today?

LeDerick Horne:

Eric, I'm doing amazing. How are you?

Eric Neal:

I'm doing real well. It is a real pleasure to have this time to talk with you. You've had an incredible professional journey. You've worked with numerous state and national education organizations. You've served on the board of advocacy groups, represented people with disabilities at the United Nations and you've been asked to a gathering of disability and civil rights leaders at the White House, which I'm very jealous of that.

What are some of your favorite experiences in your career so far?

LeDerick Horne:

You've listed off some of the big ones. The White House invitation during the second term of the Obama administration was really nice and it was great to see that the folks at the White House were actively looking for a person of color who had a disability to be represented on that day. There are things that come to mind. You mentioned my role in nonprofit organizations. I served on the board of Eye to Eye for 15 years. I was a [inaudible 00:02:20] board chair. I held titles associated with chairing their programming and their strategy work and so to support that organization over the years was very rewarding.

There is a school in Kenya, a boarding school for students with learning challenges, particularly dyslexia and autism in Kenya in East Africa called the Rare Gem Talent School. It was founded by two amazing sisters. The head of the school is an incredible advocate and educator and a mom of someone with dyslexia and so I've been supporting and helping them to raise funds. The school started in a house and they are now renting a motel and we're looking to purchase land and they've actually started building a school that can support 500 students. There's nothing like that in the region.

Closer to home, over the years, I've worked with, as you said, different state agencies and Departments of Education and really proud of the work that I've done in the state of Nevada. They have an incredible leadership team at the state Department of Education. They do a youth summit there supporting youth leaders and their transition support. Over the years, the mission of that summit has shifted and changed, but it has always at its core empowered young people and their adult allies to

make substantial change in their districts. We've built up a real capacity of youth leadership within the state and I guess maybe two years ago they hired, I believe around 25 young adults with disabilities to start going back into their old high schools or high schools in their region where they live in the state and supporting students learning how to run their own IEP meetings. I'm really proud of that.

I began this work in supporting youth leadership and development. It's always been an important part and I think oftentimes underappreciated resource in the work that we do and so it's great to see it supported at the state level and it's great to have me from out in New Jersey to be able to support the work of that state.

Eric Neal:

That's really interesting. It sounds like your work is about advocacy, but that program sounds like you're teaching students how to be advocates for themselves, which is not always how things go in the system. A lot of times you're really relying on other people and their expertise and all of that, but no one really knows themselves as well as the person so I think that's really important.

LeDerick Horne:

I just took a call maybe a week or two ago from a parent who is also doing amazing advocacy work in New York City and she just wanted me to meet her son and talk to her son and so I got to meet him. And I said to him, and this is a message that I give to a lot of young people with disabilities, is that very few of us actually have the luxury of just being students. There's so much change that has to happen within our schools and unfortunately in many areas, there's a real deficit as far as professional development for people to really know how to support all students. What that requires is for many of us, even while we're students, to actually be teachers. And in a perfect world, I would to see it where every kid could just show up in a classroom and have a conversation with the teacher and say, "Hey, in order to be successful in this environment, this is what I'm going to need." And it would be an open dialogue between the two people.

Eric Neal:

Definitely that. That is the goal you want to get to. It also sounds like you work around disabilities as the central theme, but you work in so many different areas. Do you think that really helps keep the energy up and keeps you motivated and excited about doing this work?

LeDerick Horne:

Yeah. Yeah. Areas as far as geography?

Eric Neal:

You work with state departments, you work with nonprofit organizations. You write books. It's around the same topic, but these are all very different kind of venues where the work's happening.

LeDerick Horne:

Yeah, it's exciting. And I'll also tell you that it can also be very frustrating because I've had the experience of speaking at a university and then being invited to go talk at a high school very nearby that university and it's like, all the challenges this high school is having, there are people doing research in that university that can support them. And as well as just the abundance of folks who have solved problems, some that, in some communities they think of as just being unsolvable in certain parts of the

country. And I think part of what I try to do, both as an advocate, but also I think as part of my role as an activist and certainly also as an artist is to try to spread as much awareness and ... There's really awesome research that gets published and stuck in journals that nobody reads so I think it's part of my job to turn it into language that is actionable and then to also connect, sticking narratives to it where people can really see, this is something we should actually be doing.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, no. That's true. I do a lot of school improvement work, is the bulk of what I do at the State Support Team and my wife is a third grade teacher and I get these great ideas and I get all this stuff going and everything, and she's like, "Yeah, that's great but how am I going to fit that in my schedule? Don't bring me anymore initiatives and these things." But you need to keep that motivation high and keep people engaged and really reach to their hearts to be able to do this kind of work. It seems like you're able to do that, you're able to get the message out and have those kind of conversations, sometimes difficult conversations and get people to dig in and do it because, like you said, you have idea in the world or the best research article or anything, but if people aren't really engaged and want to be doing this work, you're not really going to get anywhere.

LeDerick Horne:

Yeah. And then I also get really jazzed by connecting with folks like you. Ohio is an amazing state and the co-author of my book, Margo Izzo, works at Ohio State University. Aaron Washburn, him and I have worked together for many, many years and the transition expo we used to do together, I used to speak up in, I guess that's the northwest corner of the state. I firmly believe in collaboration and I think unfortunately we have so much of an image of what it means to be an educator, and really even just what it means to work as people get caught up in this idea that it's something that you have to do on your own, and that could be in any industry. But the truth is, is that most work is team work and that goes for education as well and supporting folks around inclusion which you consistently hear is that inclusion, one of the key components is collaboration. Collaboration among the educators. And even as an artist, I love to collaborate. I love to be a part of ensembles and that sort of thing. To be able to connect with someone like you and your colleagues all over the US and all over the world, that's, like you said, it's fun. It's what I think makes the work exciting.

Eric Neal:

Definitely, this is one of my favorite parts of my work is getting to do stuff like this.

LeDerick Horne:

You've got a good gig here, man.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, right. Your life hasn't always been this glamorous. We just talked about a lot of these amazing, fun, and wonderful things that you get to do. Can you talk a little bit about your life growing up and what brought you where you are today?

LeDerick Horne:

I come to this work as someone who has lived the experience of having a disability, someone who passed through special education. I was initially diagnosed, I'm recording my side of this from New

Jersey and I grew up in central New Jersey, still live here, but I was initially diagnosed as being neurologically impaired when I was nine years old. Initially was placed in a self-contained special education classroom. Just dealt with a lot of different challenges, relatively restricted environment, segregated environment in classrooms that were predominantly full of black and brown boys. Got towards the end of my education, my last couple of years of high school and was just terrified by what was going to happen once I graduated. I didn't know what was possible for me and so I sank into a really deep and dark depression. And I was fortunate that I've got a very supportive family and along the way I had amazing educators and people in my life that really invested a lot in me and gave me a really positive self-image. And there was enough of that countered the narrative around the lack of success for people who passed through special ed.

I just did a deep dive into redefining myself and came out of this really dark period just determined I was going to go to college. I didn't really know what that meant. It was just like a shot in the dark. I didn't know about disability support programs in higher education. I didn't know about any of that. I was just like, I'm going to a four-year college and said that to my IEP team. I don't remember my father attending any of my IEP meetings except for my last one and he was a champ. He stood right by my side for that. The team came up with this idea that I would go to a local county college and then from there go on to wherever I wanted and I was fortunate that both the county college I went to, Middlesex County College at the time, was ranked around, I think it was in the top five of all associate granting institutions in America. And then they had this magnificent support program for students with disabilities called Project Connections.

I think because of all the work that I had done personally, I think I was just really prime to accept all the help that I could be given. And then it was like another world. The class structures were so different. It was the first time I started using accommodations and one of the more powerful things was being able to have meaningful connections and build friendships that were supportive with other students who had disabilities. I started writing. I had a counselor that encouraged me to just write and stop worrying about spelling and that was something my fear of misspelling words had prevented me from really diving into a talent that I think had always been there ever since I was a little kid. I started writing my first poems and emceeing open mics and traveling throughout the northeast doing poetry. And then I also realized that I was really good at math, not basic calculations, but with a calculator, calculus becomes fun.

I had to do a year of remedial classes in college to catch up academically, to actually learn how to write and how to do math, but then I transferred after five years with a 3.75 GPA, went on to New Jersey City University. I was a part of another support program for students with disabilities. I did my last two years of my degree in two years. I recall taking 26 credits my last summer-

Eric Neal:

Wow.

LeDerick Horne:

Because I was just so determined to get the hell out of college. My last semester before I graduated, Bill Freeman, Bill Freeman at the New Jersey Department of Education saw me speaking at on a panel at a conference that was hosted at New Jersey City University and Bill invited me to speak at a conference in Virginia and I did well there. And his colleague, Bob Hall, and I give Bill and Bob a lot of credit for giving me a launching pad and really allowing me a platform and that really began my career. Bob asked me to start emceeing and speaking and doing work at events designed to support young people with disabilities here in the state. I worked here in New Jersey just for, I guess, maybe the first two years out

of college while simultaneously being involved in real estate and then started forming relationships with different nonprofit organizations and different agencies and began doing this work all over the country.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, I had a similar experience with going the community college route. I was a late starter on school or higher education. I started community college when I was 26. I had to do the remedial classes.

LeDerick Horne:

Yeah. Yeah.

Eric Neal:

I can identify with a lot of that it makes me think about different things that they've tried to do to help students with disabilities, but all students really. And it makes me think of your video that you made, Normal isn't Real. That reminded me of this TED Talk that I saw once called, The Myth of Average, by Todd Rose. He also, student with disabilities, went on to do really, really great things in his career. He talked about the challenges that the US Navy had in designing a fighter jet cockpit for the average-size pilot. They spent hundreds of millions of dollars, all this research, all these things to find out that there's no such thing as an average-size pilot. They ended up going through and redesigning to where they make everything in the cockpit adjustable because every single person is a little bit different and has different needs. And so I think it's not just a thing of let's help people with disabilities. How can we do that important work and then use what we learn from that to help all people that can use supports in different ways, because everyone learns in different ways, everyone expresses how they learn in different ways.

LeDerick Horne:

Yeah, yeah. Just to be fair, the Normal isn't Real, I'm featured in the film, but it's Chris Cormier's, the filmmaker and I felt very honored to be a part of that project. And I would encourage the listeners to check out Normal isn't Real, the film. You can find it online and Chris sets up community viewings. I firmly believe in this idea that there is no normal or there is no average and the closest we can get to the average or something that we think of as being normal is variation. It's the idea that we're all different and that variety and diversity is actually the norm. And very much as it's said in Rose's TED Talk, we unfortunately build many of our systems to an average and what ends up happening is that it's very little service to anyone. The thing that I think is important and I think this is where the connection to civil rights and education really connect is that our schools are, yes, built to an average, but also normalized to a certain student and that student was determined a long time ago and it's generally like a middle class white person.

Eric Neal:

Male.

LeDerick Horne:

Not initially designed for people of color. They were not initially designed for English language learners. It is important that we all realize that there was a time in American history in certain states where it was illegal for people with disabilities, particularly more profound disabilities, to be educated with everybody else. There were a lot of people who fought and sacrificed to make our schools integrated on multiple

levels. And so I think where we're at now is us trying to shoehorn and supplement supports for the others that are now in our schools. The world I want to see is a world where, and I hope not to offend anybody, but that there is no special education, that we give all of our teachers the tools that they need to be able to support all students. And again, that's too much to ask of perhaps of any one person, but through collaboration, through people working together supporting each other in spaces where folks are interested in learning and constantly willing to jump in and roll up their sleeves and tackle problems.

And when leadership is willing to provide them with that professional development, I think it allows us to redefine, to stretch, and expand the population that our schools are able to support. And that requires a lot of vision, a lot of vision, a lot of commitment, a lot of imagination within not only our educational leaders, but also within the communities that our schools are in.

Eric Neal:

No. 100%. It's still, to this day, a huge issue that we're grappling with from a lot of administrators standpoint that the solution to the issue is remove the student from the core instruction to give them this different thing that supposedly will meet their needs better. But what you've done is you've separated them physically, but also emotionally from that connection with their classmates and again, going back to this normal, whatever the normal thing that everyone else is getting, and separated them out. But what you've done now is completely taken away that thing that everyone else has gotten, yet there's no way to put that back and you've just now said, "Okay, now we've given you this intervention, but you've got none of the foundational stuff." It is much more difficult logistically to say, you're right, you can't ask the teacher to teach the core instruction at the same time be doing these different interventions or supports and do this, but how do we take those resources from all of these separate settings and redirect them into a classroom to support and co-plan and co-teach with what that teacher's doing so that everyone's getting the same thing, but with equitable supports and things that they need to be able to be successful in that.

LeDerick Horne:

And one of the things that I hear consistently over the people who have taken up this challenge and are doing it well, one of the things that I think a lot of people don't think about is peer support is real important too. Like building a culture of inclusion within the entire school and having every single kid, every kid onboard that this is a place where we support and we love everybody. It's not uncommon for kids to provide supports for their peers. There's pretty substantial data around, it's necessarily beneficial to have an adult hanging over every kid. It's certainly not beneficial to have people totally segregated and stuff and sent out.

When I think back to my own experience passing through education, even now as an adult, a lot of the emotional work that I still have to do comes from I think a lot of damage that was done because I was separated from everybody else and what that conveyed to me as a child as far as what my value was, what my potential contribution to this world was. I don't want to see that happen to one more child so that's part of the reason why I do this work.

Eric Neal:

That makes so much sense. Last fall, my twins, I have boy and girl twins, four years old now, at the time, three, ready for preschool. COVID, like everyone else, it got in the way of that, but I signed them up in the district to be peer mentors.

LeDerick Horne:

That's great.

Eric Neal:

For the special needs preschool program. Having this conversation, I'm conflicted in the moment while we're having this conversation because I like the idea of that, of making sure that they're getting typical peer interactions and things, but why not figure out a way to just have just the preschool and provide a student buddy or someone within that setting, because again, it's a separate thing. With the best intentions, I'm signing up for that, but I'm also perpetuating that in a way.

LeDerick Horne:

I don't know. I remember being in middle school and not being able to open my locker and I don't know what that is. Is that like maybe some of my issues around just like my digit span and being able to remember numbers, I don't know. I didn't need a parent to open that locker and the person next to me is the one that showed me how to open that lock.

Eric Neal:

Yeah.

LeDerick Horne:

I remember working in the state of Wisconsin and meeting an incredible advocate who was a wheelchair user and him really advocating for county-based transportation supports to be open to taking him to more than just school, work, and home. And part of his argument was, I like to watch football games and so I want to be able to go to the bar and sit and watch a game. What I tried to convey to people was, think about the way that all of us got our jobs, our first jobs, our employment. It's not always because of what you know, but it's who you know. It's the connections that we make. That is the richness of life beyond just being able to help facilitate vocational outcomes and what have you, but it's the connections that we build with people.

I know, and I've been able to benefit from being able to connect with a very diverse group of people all over the world, my life is better for it. And so I think one of the things that we can all use is early exposure to being support and supporting different kinds of people. And then again, it's like, and school leaders know this, one of the complaints is, we don't have enough money, we don't have enough time. Having your school population, and again, it's everybody, the lunch ladies, the bus drivers, all the parents, crossing guards, everybody's got to be online with, we need to be a place where we support each other. Yeah, I really lean into it. It's the kind of world I want to see.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. Your book that you co-authored with Margo Izzo called Empowering Students with Hidden Disabilities: A Path to Pride and Success. That pride part is really, really important. Promoting disability pride is one of those themes. Why is it critical to develop the pride in addition to things like pro-disability policy and evidence-based practices and things like that?

LeDerick Horne:

I think that we unfortunately have a dominant culture and then you can even drill it down to communities and families where we don't talk enough openly about disability. I would say that many, many people with disabilities are walking around with a lot of shame, a lot of embarrassment. I can also

say, and I'm pretty confident in that it's part of the added challenge of being a person who has a hidden disability. It's like, I could pass for like everybody else. If I wanted to, I could try to just sort of disappear and do things on my own and this is part of what I think we see in higher education when you get all these students with hidden disabilities who been on IEPs, they leave, they go on to higher ed, and then they just don't want to disclose, they don't want to access disability supports. Many of them fail and then it's only after being on academic suspension or being in a horrible place as far as their mental health that they begin wanting to reach out and ask for help, if they ask for help or if they don't just drop out.

The piece about pride I think is important as a support for transition because the reality is there are a lot of supports out there for young people with disabilities, young adults with disabilities once they enter into the adult world. But one of the things that has to happen is that you have to be willing to raise your hand, to check the box, in some way have enough pride in being able to identify as a person who needs support. I think that's part of the reason why that pride is important. Also, I think as part of helping someone be a quality self-advocate, they need to be connected to the history, the lineage of people with disabilities. I definitely think of people with disabilities as being an identity group. Disability culture is a very real thing. And again, unfortunately, we oftentimes think of people with disabilities as folks who are operating with just deficits instead of our heroes and our sheroes and people who have consistently made the world a better place. That's a big part of why we push the idea that supporting our young people and developing a sense of disability pride is so important.

Eric Neal:

I agree. It's a mindset issue as much as it is, again, a focus on practices or things like that. It's just as important, and they go hand in hand if you want to be able to be successful and help them be successful. Speaking of success, your book does serve as a guide for disability advocates, allies, and parents. What are some of the other topics that you cover in the book?

LeDerick Horne:

The major focus in the book is around transition. Being able to support our young people as they move into higher education, transition to the work force and independent living. The last chapter has a real emphasis on the importance of supporting our young people and building quality relationships and it's sort of a nod to social/emotional learning and just how critical that is to be able to just connect with each other in a positive and a healthy way. Transition is a big piece of it. And then I'm very proud of what Margo and I did because we did, I was talking to a mentoring group last week in doing a Q and A, a young woman pulled out the book. She said, "It looks very textbook-ish." I was like, "It is very textbook-ish."

Eric Neal:

She meant that as a compliment.

LeDerick Horne:

Right. I think so. But I said, If you open that book up, one of the things you'll see, it's about 50% research and 50% supports and strategies and all of those sorts of things. The other half of the book is a lot of narrative. It's a lot of Margo and I pulling from our own stories, pulling from the stories of the folks we interviewed for the book. And again, I know it's the way people learn. We learn through storytelling. I'm a poet. I think it's part of the value that I bring to this work is an artist's sensitivity and using the arts as a way of being able to convey information. That's, again, something that I'm proud of. We've heard that,



that there are people who just will look at it and just use it as a resource and just sort of skim through and look at all the URLs and the studies and that sort of stuff. And then there are other people who are just interested in those narratives and being able to hear information directly from people who've lived this experience.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. I myself am a parent of a student with a disability. My son has ADHD and I often feel like my experiences with his school and district are compliance-focused and they are really interested in just making sure no one gets in trouble, especially working with two parents who are in education. They are a little bit more attentive sometimes than maybe they would be for other people that don't know the rules as well and things like that. But at the same time, part of my work is in coaching schools and districts how to engage with families. What do you feel we can do to help create supportive and authentic family engagements with parents just in general, but specifically with parents of students with disabilities?

LeDerick Horne:

This is something I learned from working with one of your colleagues in one of the regions in the state, and maybe when I mention this, it'll stand out to you, but I remember interacting with someone who, in their region, they were working almost like a parent ambassador. They would pass through the school system in support of their child in special ed and now they were a part of almost like a corps, a group of folks who were, when someone was identified as having a disability, when someone moved into the region and their child was on an IEP, one of the first people they got to talk to was a fellow parent who was like, here's how things go here. Here are your rights. Here are the things that you should know about. I love it because it's a proactive approach to supporting families and not waiting for there to be an issue and someone from the school has to show up.

It not only being someone who's connected to the state or the district, but it also being someone who they can relate to. So much I promote this all the time, is that we oftentimes have to think about the messenger, not just the message. And so I think that's one of the things that's really important. Amplifying parent voices. There are districts that I've seen who are utilizing video very effectively now and by that what I mean is, we should all be trying to capture the story of the students who have disabilities, who access services, who use supports, who've gone on to do great things. Capturing that, capturing the stories of our families and their positive interactions with the school. And then being able to use that as, playing that for families creating spaces where they can learn from each other by capturing those authentic stories.

Those are just some examples. And I also think that providing, we can think of them almost like professional development opportunities for families are also really important. We want to invest in our families. We want them to be empowered. And I think a knowledge of your rights and everything else is something that should come from the school and I think showing families that degree of respect is important. And I think it's also really key that we acknowledge the diversity of our communities. I will oftentimes, all over the country, be called in to speak at a district and everyone's really proud to talk about the percentage of their students who on free and reduced lunch and the percentage of their students who are from different ethnic groups. And I always ask, "But how is your teacher population changed to keep up with those differences?" And what you will commonly find is that, as the demographics of the family population has shifted, there is still oftentimes, middle class, white folks who are running the schools and have not, again, given an opportunity to get that cultural awareness so they can be really effective with being able to support all students.

I think actively recruiting from the communities that you look to serve as far as filling different positions, building that diversified team. I think that's also a really key piece to it.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. It takes me into the next question I was going to ask you. In your book, you talk about careers and self-determined adult lives for students with disabilities. I just completed this diversity, equity inclusion in the work place course and they recommended that organizations actively market job openings to workers with disabilities. Something as simple as saying that people with disabilities are encouraged to apply in the posting rather than things like you'll see, must be able to lift 40 pounds. I've never lifted more than a pound doing my job the entire time I've been at my job. There is nothing about lifting 40 pounds required to do what I do, but it's probably in the job posting and that would exclude a lot of people.

Things like that, I think about, just being that meticulous in all of your work and signaling out to the community that we want to actually be inclusive and diverse and equitable and it's reflected in our hiring practices and how we communicate and all of those things, I think, can be really helpful. What are some other things organizations can do to be more inclusive?

LeDerick Horne:

You're picking up on something that I think is really key, is that all of us, and I think the past 12 months, our nation's, really the world's response to the police violence, some public lynchings that we've seen on the news, I think it has forced all of us to really just sort of question what we're doing to either support a more just world or what we're doing to reinforce old standards. I think all organizations in a way sort of have a momentum and we can get very caught up in just doing the same things the way that we've always done instead of pausing and asking ourselves questions like, what are the policies and practices that we have put in place that we've inherited oftentimes that are exclusionary. And that piece around lifting, if I had to pick up something that was 40 pounds, I'd struggle with it as well.

And again, like for most of us, in most of our job places, it's about collaboration. I'm going to call, "Hey, Eric, we need to do this together." Looking at that language, examining that, examining the soft policies that are in place for who gets hired, who gets promoted, those things are really important. During the past 12 months I received phone calls from some of the major disability organizations from all over the country asking for advice, asking for presentations. Oftentimes wanting to have that same conversation about disproportionality that we would have had prior to the murder of George Floyd and what I have said consistently to everyone is what this point in history I think asks of all of us is in part for us not to be ... Yes, it's important to be critical of the outside world, but also just look internally.

Look at your boards, yes, for race, and also for disability. We need more people with disabilities on our school boards to be able to speak to their experience and inform policy. We do not have enough school administrators who are also people with disabilities and I think as part of us embracing the idea of diversity, disability should be a part of that. And then the other thing that I think is very challenging is that the dominant cultural narrative around disability is still oftentimes a very white story. It's been great over the past couple of decades to be able to turn on my television and see such representation of major characters in different series who are people with different kinds of disabilities, but oftentimes those are folks who are also not people of color.

Realizing that identity is very complicated and that we need to be looking at and being able to ... I think the teams that win are the teams that are diverse. And so being able to, particularly when it comes to our leadership, having a strong commitment to being as diverse as possible and realizing that

it takes real effort. The systems we've inherited make it effortless to continue the status quo and so it means that we can't necessarily rely upon our own social networks because generally the history of segregation means I live in a black community. It was designed through redlining to be a black community. Pretty consistently, it's making this shift from black to brown, but there aren't too many white folks here. If I was just looking for my immediate social network for hiring practices, which is what a lot of us do, I would have a hard time.

It takes us getting out of our comfort zone, building alliances, making recognitions that, we haven't done things well in the past but we want to do things different. And then being brave, being really brave.

Eric Neal:

I'm with you 100%. You hitting on that disproportionality, it's a real thing that's on my heart because they are difficult conversations and because of that a lot of times people try and avoid them. They'll separate things out and they'll be like, let's just talk about the disability part. Or if you dig into the data deep enough, the special education identification of African-American students with disabilities is higher but also different for the type of disability, all sorts of things, or behavior. You'll get lumped in with an emotional disturbance diagnosis or something, which maybe the behavior is the result of an actual different learning disability or something. And so I think for organizations, it's about educating your staff. It's about creating, like you said, an actually more diverse group of people in the organization, but then creating the organization to not ... the word I like the most about this in this day and age is performative.

There's almost like two kinds of work going on right now. There is, hey look at us, we're doing diversity, and equity, and inclusion in a performative way to check off the box that we're doing it. And then there's people that are getting down and doing the hard, difficult, scary work sometimes of really having these hard conversations and facing up to some of these things. I think if you can start by getting a diverse group of people in the room, that can help you to set up the system because the system by itself necessarily isn't going to fix it. A system is made up of people.

LeDerick Horne:

And I remember getting this call not too long ago from a group that was like, we're building a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee to help our organization become more diverse. I was like, okay, who's on the committee, because you need to be able to fill that committee with people who actually have power and capital within your organization so that they can actually exercise some sort of change. And then here's another one that a lot of people don't think about. What power are you going to give that committee? If that committee comes out and says now we can point to places where we're actually having very racist policies and practices. I've seen people just take those reports and basically just stick them in a drawer and said, well, we're just going to continue doing things as usual. And so really being clear about what the other side of this work may look like and how we're all going to be able to transform. Because if we don't do things differently, we're going to keep getting what we have now and that's not working for anybody.

I think that we, to take it back to just a broader conversation about inclusion and particularly as it pertains to disability, inclusion supports all of us. It doesn't just help the kids with disabilities, but it helps students who don't disabilities. And there's data around that as far as academic performance, but I think also just as far as being a human being and that's true for all the dimensions of diversity, all the ways in which we measure diversity. The more that we can connect people and honor and respect them, the better off we all are.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, I'm glad you said that because this course I took was through University and sponsored by a global engineering firm and all this so it was really focused on the business case, which is good and important, but at first, we're all human beings, let's treat each other the right way. And it's also good for business and good for academics and those things.

LeDerick Horne:

I just yesterday got done talking. A foundation brought me in to work with a group that included higher education and people within a certain region in the northeast that were representatives from financial institutions and other businesses who were interested in having, again, the element of disability as part of their diversity work. And it was very, very similar conversations. But what I found interesting is that, I think people, they logged on thinking I was going to talk about how to provide support for their customers and clients who were folks with disabilities. And I was like, no, no, no. I want you to look, because in our schools as well as in our businesses, it's employees, the leadership. And particularly when it comes to making cultural shift, the more that you can imbed and have an inclusive environment and an open and supportive environment as part of your team, the better you're going to be able to support all those people that your organization or your company is supposed to be serving.

And that's true for our schools as well. Again, more representation, the representation of people with disabilities within the classroom and administration is part of how we build an organization's capacity to serve a diverse group of people.

Eric Neal:

No, you're right. Imagine you're a student with a disability, it's great that people are talking about all of the things that you can do, but what's more inspiring than seeing another person with a disability in a leadership position, as a teacher, as a principal. That's not telling you that you can do it, that's showing you that you can do it. And that's really powerful.

LeDerick Horne:

And that's a truth in poetry. Poetry isn't saying, it's showing. And I think it's part of the way in which we have poetic organizations when it's not someone up there lecturing you, but they are actually showing you, here is what is possible. And again, I think representation matters and so remembering that and making that a core of the work that we do and really, I mean that. That is the work. That is the work. It's part of the way in which we push ourselves.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. I'm really excited. SST-11, we're hosting a virtual family engagement event with you in June. Can you give us just a little preview of what that is and what people can expect?

LeDerick Horne:

I'm going to just be giving advice. Advice to the families who tune in and are part of the event. I definitely want to talk a bit more about my own story. I'll be sharing some poetry. And just giving the things, from both my professional and personal experience that I think is going to empower those families to empower the young people in their lives. Again, I appreciate you guys even asking me to be on this podcast and asking me to come in because I think we have better schools, we have better communities when we invest in our families so I just want to be a part in helping that happen.

Eric Neal:

Absolutely. If people would like to know more about you and the work that you do, where should they go?

LeDerick Horne:

It sounds funny. LeDerick.com. Just go to LeDerick.com. That's my webpage and I have a newsletter, but I'm also active on social media. I have a YouTube channel, if you put in LeDerick Horne on YouTube, it will come up. Instagram and Facebook as well.

Eric Neal:

All right, LeDerick, I really appreciate having you today and you taking the time out to share your story with us and preview your upcoming event. You mentioned that you'd like to leave us with a poem. Why don't you go ahead and do that.

LeDerick Horne:

Sure. This is, to give the audience a glimpse, I plan to do at least two poems as part of our session for families. This is a poem. It's relatively short and it's a poem that I wrote to celebrate the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It's called, An American Idea.

It's an American idea. Today's child will be tomorrow's citizen. Education shapes our expression of liberty and separate, but 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 its first declaration renewed life. Each mind is beautiful. Strength has many forms and we are all able.

Eric Neal:

Thank you so much, LeDerick. I really appreciate it. It's been great having you.

LeDerick Horne:

That you, Eric.

Eric Neal:

That wraps up our discussion today. Once again, I really would like to thank our special guest, LeDerick Horne. If you'd like to find out more about LeDerick's upcoming events and our professional development opportunities that we offer here, you can check out our website. We're at SST11.org. Our SST11 Facebook page or on Twitter @SSTRegion11. If you'd like to reach me, send me an email. I'm at ERIC.NEAL@ESCCO.ORG. Until next time, thanks again to LeDerick. I'm Eric Neal, thanks for listening.

LeDerick Horne:

Thank you so much.