

**[00:00:09.850] - Lauren**

Welcome to our mini-series finale of the LDA podcast. We've enjoyed bringing you information about our main mission of support, education and advocacy for our last episode on learning disabilities awareness. In this month, we're celebrating the strength of individuals with learning disabilities. This week, we talk to different individuals about the strengths they found within their experiences with learning disabilities.

**[00:00:35.730] - Carolyn Phillips**

Hello, everybody. My name is Carolyn Phillips, and I am a very proud individual with learning disabilities. I think it's definitely been the secret to my success in many ways.

**[00:00:48.690] - Lauren**

Carolyn is an assistive technology expert and serves as the director for Tools for Life, Georgia's Assistive Technology program, and she is the director of services and education at the Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation at Georgia Tech. She talks to us about the benefits of thinking differently.

**[00:01:05.070] - Carolyn Phillips**

I've had several jobs, all focused really on helping people, the nexus, if you will, the synergy, and I guess the way that all the dots of my career have been connected. The theme is helping people and usually through technology. And so I struggled very, very much as a student, both going through high school and then into college and getting my degrees. And I just would be lost if it wasn't for assistive technology and technology in general. And so as I've moved through my career, then I have wanted to dedicate my life to helping people be able to implement those technology solutions and know about them. So I feel like I have a dream job because of that.

**[00:01:58.830] - Lauren**

That's fantastic. So when were you first aware that you had learning disabilities?

**[00:02:04.650] - Carolyn Phillips**

So I've always been one of those folks that marches to my own beat, if you will. Early on in elementary school and middle school and high school, I would test into gifted classes. As I got into high school, I would struggle more with that. And then when I actually got to college, that's when I officially got diagnosed went through the whole process to determine that, yes, not only do I have learning disabilities, but here's how those affect me and exactly what they are. I take that as incredibly important information. The University of Georgia Learning Disabilities Clinic and the center there, the disability center is outstanding, and they did a great job helping me understand that. Here's how my learning disabilities affect me.

**[00:03:00.620] - Lauren**

Do you happen to remember around that time what you were sort of thinking when you realized that you had learning disabilities? Was it more of an 'aha' moment or were there some maybe concerns?

**[00:03:11.260] - Carolyn Phillips**

Oh, yes. So when I was officially diagnosed as having learning disabilities, it was a huge mix of emotions. I was relieved on one hand because I was like that wasn't all in my mind, that I do indeed have issues when it comes to auditory processing and that I do have issues when it comes to reading and writing. And yes, that's not all in my head. So it gave me hope, which is great. But I did go through a grieving process, too, because I think, like a lot of people with learning disabilities, that I could educate my way out of it or that I could grow out of having learning disabilities. And clearly, it's just who we are. It's how my brain works. I see it very much as the gift of learning disabilities. Now, I absolutely embrace that difference. And as I started out this whole conversation, I am very proud and very open about it. My dad used to say to me that our rights are undeniably linked to our willingness to be authentic and open about who we truly are. And part of my interest has been working in policy. Part of the work that I do right now at the center for Inclusive Design and Innovation is making sure that people have textbooks on time, making sure that the world is more accessible in the built environment and virtual environment, making sure that people can get captioning and that they can get also websites that are more accessible so we can use our screen readers and use our voice and what have you to navigate them.

**[00:04:58.770] - Carolyn Phillips**

All of that is really tied back to that knowledge. It goes all the way back to receiving that documentation. The documentation, also the evaluation. It's opened doors for me. I am now a student getting ready to get my PhD at Texas Tech. I'm thrilled, thrilled to be able to finally start making that dream a reality. And that wouldn't have happened had I not had this important diagnosis, this important information about how my brain works. I got one of my degrees was from the University of Kentucky. And as soon as I got my acceptance, the next thing I did is I sent my documentation to disability student services. And I'm just very thankful that we have rights and that we have that knowledge.

**[00:05:53.190] - Lauren**

Absolutely. So individuals with learning disabilities can have different challenges than people who don't have learning disabilities. Has this been a strength for you at all?

**[00:06:04.050] - Carolyn Phillips**

Yes. I absolutely believe that my learning disabilities, my struggles, all of it, it's one been worth it. But two, it is kind of a superpower. It is my strength. I have come to realize that I do indeed see the world very differently than a lot of other folks, and that has helped me problem solve differently. There are solutions that I see to problems, whether it's something that's being truly developed, like a product or it could be an ethical dilemma, it could be a policy dilemma, it could be any number of other problems. So solving problems comes very natural to me. And I attribute that absolutely to my learning disabilities. And also my dad would say I'm painfully patient, and my mom would say the same thing. And there's a stick-to-it-ness, a grit, a resilience that comes with those of us who have had to navigate the world that was designed not for people with learning disabilities, but that we've had to navigate differently. And so I would say that there are strengths that come with that, whether it's that I'm going to stick with something and be painfully patient to get to the resolution or that I'm going to come up with a solution that nobody else is thinking of in the room because I just see it differently.

### **[00:07:37.290] - Carolyn Phillips**

So those are all very good things. I also think it's helped me with my parenting. One of my cousins says, yes, it's great to be a straight A student. There are times that and that was part of my frustration is knowing that I could be a straight A student. But oh, my gosh, I could never quite make it. I did. Thankfully, with my graduate studies, I was able to be a straight A student. But aside from that, it's been a challenge. So it was A,B student and CC ya later. So sometimes it's taking that win of a B or a C and moving on with your life. And I think as a parent, being able to be understanding know that we really need to be well rounded. I try to be as balanced as I can in my life, whether it's taking those walks, playing sports, playing sports with my children, playing games, and really being a part of the community. And all of that, I think, goes back to having learning disabilities and seeing that victory comes in different ways. And building success breeds success. And so how can we build upon those successes? I will also say that I am somebody who does not believe in giving up and knowing that about myself and having this.

### **[00:09:10.290] - Carolyn Phillips**

I would say it's not necessarily optimism. It's more just persistence and sticking with things. So all of that, as I see it, all goes back to our strengths and whether or not you can hone those and really lean into it and embrace your difference. Yes, we're different. We do think differently. We navigate differently, and that's not a bad thing.

### **[00:09:36.390] - Lauren**

Next, we talked to Beth McGaw, a past president of LDA and a current member of LDA's Board of Directors, to talk about some of the strengths she saw through her son's learning disabilities.

### **[00:09:46.440] - Beth McGaw**

Hi, I'm Beth McGaw, and I am on the board of directors for LDA and a past president, and have been involved in LDA for about 14 years. It's been a lifesaver for me as I've navigated the system with my youngest son.

**[00:10:05.430] - Lauren**

Okay, so one of my first questions is what was your introduction to learning disabilities?

**[00:10:12.390] - Beth McGaw**

Well, I have three boys, but my youngest son was born with some challenges, and when he got into the public school is when he was diagnosed with learning disabilities. So I'd say from Pre-K on, we've had to help him with accommodations and getting the help that he needed to succeed in the classroom.

**[00:10:41.670] - Lauren**

So do you remember when your son got the diagnosis, what was sort of going through your head at the time?

**[00:10:47.550] - Beth McGaw**

Well, we didn't really know what that meant for him going forward. He had other issues that led up to that. So we had physical therapy, we had occupational therapy, we had speech therapy. So the learning disabilities kind of went with that, which was more auditory processing, language processing. So it was kind of just another step for us. But still, I think as his parents and my husband and I weren't really sure what that was going to mean for him in the future. But what we did know was that we were going to do all that we could for him at that point. He has had his challenges for sure. But one thing about my son is that he has always been very resilient. He's had moments of having a tough time in school, being bullied and all of those negative things, but I think it's made him stronger. Would I like him to not have to have struggled? Sure. But because he has, I think it's made him the young man that he is today, and I'm very proud of where he is. He's now a senior in college. So going back to your other question, did I ever see us in that space?

**[00:12:11.890] - Beth McGaw**

No, I wasn't really sure. But I think having to have those struggles has made him much more resilient, and he's very motivated to be like his brothers and his friends. And so we're very proud of where he is today as a parent of a child who has grown with him through his learning disabilities. And like I said, we've definitely had our challenges, and I've likened it to a roller coaster. We get to a peak, and then we slide a little bit, and then we go back up and we slide a little bit. And as they get older, the peaks and valleys tend to even out a little bit more. But there is hope. Recognize their learning disabilities, recognize of what they

are. Don't hide them from them, and also help them self-advocate for themselves. So at first, parents are the child's first advocate, right? And then as years go on, hopefully you are teaching your child to be their own advocate. So when they get out of your house, out of your hands and to somebody else, like college or a job, working with a supervisor, whatever, they have that strength and they have that knowledge to be able to advocate for themselves in situations that might be difficult.

**[00:13:46.150] - Beth McGaw**

The piece of advice I would give to parents is to teach their kids to be an advocate early and often and be positive.

**[00:13:54.910] - Lauren**

Lastly, we sat down with Colin Diedrich, a scientist and President of LDA of Pennsylvania, to talk about his experience with learning disabilities.

**[00:14:03.250] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

I'm a scientist, and that's like my day job, so I'm fortunate enough to do that. I'm actually an infectious disease immunologist. I studied the interaction between HIV and tuberculosis. I essentially want to know why people that are infected with HIV are more susceptible to TB, and TB is the leading killer of people that are infected with HIV. So it's a big deal and a big issue worldwide. With that said, I am also a learning disability advocate. I have multiple learning disabilities. And through my advocacy over the years, I've been trying to do more for other people because I've been so fortunate enough to be a scientist with these LDs. And so then a few years ago, I got introduced to some people from LDA and became more involved in the organization. And then I was like, hey, I can start a Learning Disability Association of Pennsylvania, and here we are, I don't know, like a year and a half later, two years later, and I am President of LDA of PA, and it is an incredibly rewarding and amazing experience.

**[00:15:10.770] - Lauren**

Would you be able to dive into your experience with LD?

**[00:15:13.670] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

Yeah. So I have multiple learning disabilities. I was diagnosed in third or fourth grade with an unspecified learning disorder and an unspecified reading disorder. So this was in the DSM 4, DSM 4, the diagnostic standard for people who aren't familiar. And essentially, I read between the 6th and 9th grade level. My reading comprehension is in the bottom, about 14 or 15th percentile. And my processing speed is also in the bottom, 14th or 15 percentile. So essentially, I have a hard time understanding language, whether it's written down or even when people are talking to me. It's made everything very...It makes learning new

things and studying and things like that very difficult. And even just like everyday life as well. I was diagnosed for the first time in third or fourth grade, and then you have to keep getting re-diagnosed to continue getting accommodations. So when I was originally diagnosed, I understood what was happening just in a context that, like a third or fourth grader could understand. I knew that learning was harder for me, and I also knew that reading was always more difficult for me than-I have a twin sister and an older brother.

**[00:16:33.410] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

And so I knew something was wrong. And my parents were able to identify that relatively early. So I was fortunate. And because of my slower reading, I also saw tutors. And so I saw my first grade tutor, our first grade teacher. She was my first tutor. I saw her from first grade to third grade. And then in third grade after my official diagnosis, third or fourth. And I can't remember I can't remember the small details of this, which is one of my issue with my LDs. Then I started seeing a special education tutor, and then she gave me a lot more confidence because she understood she helped me see that it was okay to think differently and that it was okay that I wasn't as fast as my peers when I was reading or trying to learn things. So my primary issues are with reading and learning new information. And so that's just the hardest. Just like overall. And I think a lot of times people think that that only affects you when you're in class or when you're trying to learn something new. But that's not necessarily true. And it's absolutely not true for our everyday lives where we are constantly reading news or constantly trying to process an incredible amount of information.

**[00:17:47.010] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

And so that has always been a very big obstacle for me. And so that's something that I still have to deal with today, whether I'm reading, like, a news article or reading something, like, stupid online, or if I'm reading, like, a hardcore scientific journal where I just want to be able to advance my research. And so there are certain techniques that I have to use when I'm reading those articles versus when I'm reading something silly or not as important online. I only really started to notice some of the strengths associated with it when I started to fall in love with science. And so this was actually when I was an undergrad, and I was the person that always sat in the front of the class. I always had a digital recorder with me, and I would go over my classes after every class and take notes and highlight, and I use flashcards and doing all of this stuff. So I was able to do that because I love to learn, and which really dovetailed really nicely into me wanting to be a scientist. And so what I started to realize, though, is that the way that I think is literally and figuratively differently than a lot of the people that I'm surrounded by.

**[00:18:57.590] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

And so when you're a scientist, you want to pursue questions that you don't know the answers to. And so one of the things that I've really noticed, because knowledge has always been incredibly hard for me to understand and to learn, I've never taken it for granted. And so that actually has forced me to go back into

a lot of the older literature and say, okay, so here's a dogma in the field, or here people are saying X is happening, but I don't know why that's happening. And so then going back and trying to research that and trying to figure out why that's the case. I've written multiple papers that have questioned a basic premise that was just thought of as being true. And I think that my learning disabilities really helps me do that. And so then not taking knowledge for granted has really been helpful. And thinking differently literally just allows me to approach questions in a different way as well. So I think those two things have been really critical for me. And then the last thing, though, I think, is what's really important is that it's taught me how to empathize more with people.

**[00:20:02.350] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

So I have an incredible amount of privilege, and I was so incredibly fortunate to be diagnosed early and I had all the support that you could ever possibly need. And so as I went through grad school and got my PhD, and I started to realize I was like, wait, it's not fair that an upper middle class person like myself is getting all of this extra help. Everyone should be able to get the help that I got. And so that was really a huge driving force of me, that's been a huge driving force of me, like, wanting to restart the chapter of LDA of PA and really with a lot of my advocacy. So it shouldn't just focus on if we have great tutors, that's awesome. But if you can't afford them, then that's a problem. And so, like, my learning disabilities really, like, helped shape my personal views of the world. And then even beyond that, with just how, like, a lot of different people experience the world. And that's really that's really helped shape, I think, who I am as a person. So I think those three things really have been incredibly beneficial to me.

**[00:21:05.800] - Lauren**

Absolutely. Well, this question kind of builds off of what you were just talking about, is that you've done a lot of advocacy work. You've done a lot of programs that help individuals with learning disabilities, and through those, have you been able to find any other strengths of other people that have learning disabilities?

**[00:21:21.050] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

I think that creativity is probably one of the biggest things that I've noticed with students and adults that have LDs or have ADHD. And that's the thing that I think I'm the most impressed with. And I think that does tie into the thinking differently thing. But the thing that I also have noticed in that same area is when someone with a learning disability or when someone with ADHD really wants to do something and they get that hyper focus where they just want to challenge a certain problem or they have this hobby or something that they just really like to do what it appears. It's like, oh, wow, you're able to overcome a lot of these other difficulties and focus and be able to do that. I think those are the types of things that I think are really that can be really wonderful with people that have LDs and ADHD that kind of balance out some of the negatives that people associate with them. I do think it's incredibly important to understand for

people with LDs to accept some of the things that they aren't as good at. And so with me, I will never be a good reader.

**[00:22:31.340] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

I don't read books, I listen to audiobooks and podcasts, and I never will be good at reading. However, once I was able to finally accept that, then I was able to say, okay, so I'm not so great at reading. So I need to use some of these other techniques or something to overcome some of those negative parts of my LD. And so my tutor, my special education tutor early on actually taught me a lot of those so I learned them really early on and so some of the things that I think people can do that has been really helpful to me is just like how you organize information in your head and how you organize it on paper. So I bullet point everything. I think that's really important. I use a lot of different colors when I'm highlighting things and it all means different things but when I look at a page I know immediately what I'm supposed to know when I look at a yellow highlight versus a blue highlight and so there are certain things like that that I've been able to use over the years that have been incredibly helpful and so I think that learning whatever techniques that are good for you you may need to go through a handful of different ones to figure that out but I do think they can be incredibly helpful and so I highlight with different colors.

**[00:23:49.510] - Dr. Colin Diedrich**

I bullet point, I use webs when I'm trying to connect different ideas as well and it can be really helpful.

**[00:24:09.350] - Lauren**

Thank you for listening to the LDA Podcast. We're so glad you can join us for this special mini-series for LD Month. As always, our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. If you enjoy listening to the LDA podcast, consider giving us a review or subscribing and helps us to reach a wider audience. We really appreciate it. If you're looking for more information about learning disabilities, visit our website at [ldaamerica.org](http://ldaamerica.org).