

Lauren 00:12

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. In this episode, we talk with Patricia Buckley, an educator with over 40 years of experience in special education, who is the winner of the 2020 Sam Kirk Educator of the Year Award. Patricia provides us with some education advice that she's gained throughout the years.

Kristina Scott 00:40

Hello, everyone, I'm here with Patricia Buckley, the 2020 Sam Kirk Educator of the Year Award winner. This Sam Kirk Award is given to an educator who has made an outstanding contribution to the education of persons with learning disabilities. Patricia has been a full time special educator since 1977. She spent the first 28 years of her career teaching in Massachusetts utilizing Wilson or Gillingham, Lindamood Bell and Project Read training. Since 2003, Patricia has been teaching at the Richland Elementary School in Crest Hill, Illinois. She is an active member of LDA Illinois. Thank you for joining us, Patricia.

Patricia Buckley 01:17

Good afternoon. It's great to be here.

Kristina Scott 01:19

Right. So what led you to pursue a career in education to begin with?

Patricia Buckley 01:23

I think the first time I vividly remember wanting to become a teacher was when I was seven. My dad was the youngest of six children. And all of my cousins were substantially older than I was, there was a big gap difference. And several of them were teachers. And so that was part of an inspiration there, what they did and how passionate they were. And I just liked when I was playing and the kids in the neighborhoods to play school and I always wanted to be the teacher. So I think it started from seven and being really early on. And then it kind of moved into, I had lots of opportunities to babysit in the neighborhood. And I was a passionate reader. So moms always loved me coming over and read to their children and things like that. So it started really early on. And initially I wanted to be a history social studies teacher, because that's what my cousin did, and then it moved to various types of experiences. In fact, I had the opportunity, my senior year in high school, instead of going to school one day a week, I was paired up through a partnership with Boston Public Schools to go to Emerson College, and was in university now, and work in their clinic for two and a half year old children that had just been determined to have hearing loss, and got to work in the clinic with all of the graduate students who were pursuing speech and language therapy, audiology. And I got to go and learn from all of these wonderful people, and had the opportunity to teach concepts to kids. So I would have my little group of kids and I would teach up, down, in, out, on, off. And I guess my most valuable teaching lesson I have ever learned was in that experience. One of the things at Emerson was they did not teach lip reading, their philosophy was we needed to...was to teach lip reading and not to do sign just because they felt that that was going to be more universal for the kids to be able to navigate the real world. And so the lesson that we learned was that we were never able to say the word 'no' in our instructional practice, because the parents were taught, they were on the other side of a one way mirror observing the classroom instruction and doing parent teacher work, was that when the children heard the word no, and said at a

certain level, they would freeze because they were in some perilous situation. They're gonna go touch a hot stove, or they were at the top of the staircase or run across the street. So as we sat there, in the little group and you said, 'Oh, no, no, no, that's not it honey,' there was like, no. At the end of each session, all of the professors and all of the practitioners, we sat around a table and we would talk about each of the students but then they would say, Patricia, you said the word 'no' six times. And they would have to keep you know, they kept track of what you did. And it really then taught me what 'no' is, but that how to reframe your questions or your feedback to students. So it continues to be my most powerful lesson that I've ever learned in education. From that opportunity as a school senior.

Kristina Scott 05:03

That's awesome. I never heard of that. And then just because it makes sense now, like saying no, it's only used in safety situations for these students, and then how often do I even tell my own child 'no.' Or maybe I should be reframing that and really structuring. What can you do so that they know exactly what to do rather than what not to do? It's a great lesson. And you got to learn it so early.

Patricia Buckley 05:31

Exactly. No, it was, and that kind of led to this sort of trajectory in terms of where I went in terms of my teaching. Initially, I had applied to Emerson. And you could probably tell from the accent I have, I can have a very strong Bostonian accent because I was born and bred there. And they told me yes, if you come, you will have to take speech and language classes because we have to get rid of that accent.

Kristina Scott 06:00

I'm going to tell you that I don't notice it but I'm from Massachusetts.

Patricia Buckley 06:02

So we're from the same neighborhood. But because of you know, family situations, and my dad was taking a job in the western part of the state, I was applying to Boston schools. And at that time, you couldn't apply for housing if you lived in Boston Proper, because it was such a low availability of housing that they were using it for out of state students. So I ended up going to Bridgewater State College, but went into special education and was dual certified in both elementary and special education.

Kristina Scott 06:44

And you've made a career of it.

Patricia Buckley 06:46

Yes, I had. At that time that I graduated, it was Proposition Two and a Half in Boston said there were no teaching jobs available, you had to look outside of the state and had the opportunity. I was the State Secretary for the Student Council of Exceptional Children, and arranged for a group of us to go to Atlanta for the National CEC conference. And they had a job fair and I had actually then got a position to go teach on an Indian reservation 150 miles north of Flagstaff, which is, well, this will be a great opportunity. But in the interim, I had graduated and I was like, 'What am I going to do for the summer?' And I had already been in contact with a headhunter for a teacher and an opportunity arose to work at a summer school program. I'm at Eagle Hill in Hardwick, Massachusetts, and paid for them to find me the

job. But I said, 'Oh, this would be a great opportunity for me to go and have my own classroom and kind of learn and practice my craft' and I went to that summer school program. And then I didn't leave for 20 years later, but I found a home there and great, amazing learning opportunities in terms of being able to work with children with specific learning disabilities, but had the benefit of also doing lots of work with them because they live there, residentially and...

Kristina Scott 08:23

The full wraparound.

Patricia Buckley 08:24

Patricia Buckley 08:24

Yes, kind of, yes. And helping them with homework. And you know what that looked like for school and making good choices. And so I've been blessed by the experiences that I've had early on in my career that, I think part of it has led me to continue to do what I did. One of the frustrations for me being at Eagle Hill was to see the number of children come, there were high school students that couldn't read or struggled with reading and they had all of these other amazing attributes and talents, but that was the thing that was holding them back. So I had this opportunity to look at a position in grades one through three to work with kids in reading. So I left there and I continue to serve that population of younger kids that hopefully make a difference that they don't have to wait until high school to figure out that they need help and support so that they can navigate their world and to be able to share their talents and their gifts that they have.

Kristina Scott 09:41

So often in education, we are asked to do a lot or are asked maybe to be a therapist or a cheerleader, the teacher as well as maybe the parent sometimes, and what I see a lot is kind of a burnout in teachers. You often hear about teacher burnout. So what has kept you going for 40 plus years? And what has it been that you have avoided the burnout?

Patricia Buckley 10:10

I will say my burnout was probably very early on in my career, because then you just really kind of question yourself, Am I being effective? Am I making a difference? You know, and I had this incredible special education director at Eagle Hill, Norma Shields, and she'd go, 'What flag is up? Is it the S Day or the L Day of the staying flag or the leaving flag?' Because you just, particularly early on, you kind of question, are you making a difference? You know, do you have the skills and the talents and she gave me a valuable lesson, because it was like, I always try to, we get to pick the kinds of classes, you know, I want to work with kids that really need to work on handwriting, and they need to work on oral language, they need to work on reading and, and you'd always put down what you don't want to teach and I always put down writing. Like I don't want to teach writing. And every time we did new classes, she would give me a writing class. 'What are you doing to me?' But again, it was a valuable lesson, I was determined that I was going to make writing successful and pleasurable for me to teach and look at growth for students. But for them to feel like that they can be successful writers and things like that. And it's kind of one of my greatest joys I have when I get to work with students that come to me for writing,

and let them see themselves as writers and communicators and things, but it was like, 'Okay, I'm going to keep working at this' and kind of one of my personal philosophies has always been, I always go and take on a new challenge every year to learn something new, whether it be personal or professional, and do things that are out of my comfort zone. And that it helps me then to appreciate what struggles or challenges the students that I have to have to face when I'm asking them to do things. You know, I'm a reader, I can read. But I don't always think about what I do to be a reader when I sit down and enjoy a book to read. But for them, it isn't always enjoyable. So by taking on that personal challenge to learn something new, it has kept me mindful of what my students have to do and how I have to work with them to know that it's okay to make mistakes. What you do to pick yourself up to persevere, looking at a new strategy or a new skill, to work through something. And the other thing is those 'aha' moments when you have a kid sitting in front of you is, 'oh, my goodness, I get it. This makes sense.' To me, it is the most warm feeling that you can have. And so I look for those everyday.

Kristina Scott 13:20

Sounds like you have an incredible growth mindset for both yourself and the students that you work with.

Patricia Buckley 13:25

And I think in terms of me professionally, if I have any opportunity, I can get to avail myself to professional development at my school, I always take advantage of it. The other thing I've done is, I really look at finding my community in a school system. The reality is, people are all at different places, and where they are. And I find my miracles and I find these group of people who have similar mindsets, that, to me in terms of being open and learning and growing and, and creating that community of support that helps to keep that positive mindset and to like to continue to do what we do, and to be able to have somebody that I can go, Oh my God, you wouldn't believe what my students did today. And that same person is going to have that same joy and thrill for me. So I think that that is really important. I think also just involvement in different groups and organizations like the Learning Disabilities Association and whatever, you know, if it's ASHA, American Speech and Language or Council for Exceptional Children or any organizations that also provide you with that other community. Sometimes it's very easy to feel like you're all alone on this ship, and to be able to have resources and places to go that...

Kristina Scott 14:15

Support you and embrace you.

Patricia Buckley 15:01

Exactly, you know, and that it's kind of like the wonderful thing of over these last couple of days and going to all of the workshops and you go to seminars like, 'Well, I knew that.' But isn't that great confirmation is like, yes, what you're doing is still really valid, relevant, it's still practical, but also to see some of the struggles that you know, that other places in the country you're dealing with, it's like, yes, you know, how are we dealing with anxiety and children and, you know, dealing with ELL students, and how that has increased, and how best to serve that population of students and you know, how to work with and preparing students for life transitions. And so there's all kinds of things that you gain from

those kinds of experiences, from a multitude of people with all kinds of experiences and stuff. So I guess I'm kind of like a sponge, I just enjoy learning.

Kristina Scott 16:11

That's great. That's what we want to see in our teachers, the love of learning and the self reflection that goes with learning and the continuous learning process that's ongoing.

Patricia Buckley 16:20

And that makes a difference. Because I'll tell you that when I go back to school on Friday, it's like, 'Where have you been Miss Buckley?' and I'll finally be able to tell them where I've been but it's like: "Guess what, this is what we're going to try, because this is something that I learned, and we're gonna see how it goes," and get feedback from them. They're kind of a great resource for, yeah, good feedback.

Kristina Scott 16:42

Right. Exactly, exactly. So you've been in education for over 40 plus years, what have been the biggest changes you've seen?

Patricia Buckley 16:53

For me, I think the saddest part of just looking at my students, because kids are wonderful, they are joyful. It's the unfortunate adult circumstances that many of them have to contend to deal with on a day to day basis. That, you know, if you're five, or six, or seven, or you're 17, that they'd have to contend with issues from home life, that you really need to know your kids and what they come to school with. And it's not that they don't want to try harder. But I think a lot of them have a lot more stuff in there. They're worried about, you know, it's like, where am I sleeping tonight, and I don't have a coat, have I had breakfast? I've seen just more of an impact on that, in terms of, of my students. But for most of them, you know, they want to learn, they want to feel accepted, they want to do well.

Kristina Scott 18:04

For some school is that safe place for them/

Patricia Buckley 18:06

It is their only safe place. So that's what my school room is like, it's a place to be safe, and to build that for students that they know that when they come there, it's a positive place to be that they're going to be supported, and they're going to be cared for. And it's okay to make mistakes. The best mistakes are the best teachers. That's why I have erasers all over my room. So I make them all...I make them all the time. But in terms of what you know, of what I have to deal with, in terms of my students. You know, there's been many great things just in terms of, you know, what we're doing in research and practice in terms of reading and really looking at reading and how best to serve students. The fact that I started, like I said in the 70s, and, you know, it was PL 94 142. And, you know, being off in a little classroom, you know, in the basement and having kids have more opportunities to be involved in school wide community and not being held back because they can't read, that they can partake in many experiences like everyone else.

Kristina Scott 19:29

So being in that inclusion general education classroom instead of that basement dwelling class right now where nobody sees them. It's a big change with IDEA and the reauthorizations that have happened over the years as well.

Patricia Buckley 19:43

Exactly. So those are some great things that I've seen.

Kristina Scott 19:50

So you have a wealth of knowledge in terms of the teaching profession. What advice do you have for new teachers or educators that have been around and are kind of feeling burnout?

Patricia Buckley 20:02

I think, and I've had many, I've been blessed to have had the opportunity to mentor student teachers, to mentor colleagues. I've had colleagues mentored to me and I think, for me, the two lessons that I always share with them, one I've already shared with you about continuing to be a student, because it helps to keep you in perspective of what your children have to do every day. But I think the most important thing is reflection. And every day, I get out driving home from school, I am, you know, replaying my day and looking at what worked, what I would tweak, what didn't work, you know, how do they make this child feel? Did I deliver the instruction in the right way? Did I feel like I rushed them, but just always reflecting on my practice, and what am I going to do the next day to make it be different? So I think reflecting on your practice, and what you do makes a big...is an important lesson that I would share with them.

Kristina Scott 21:20

Yeah, great advice. I think that really promotes that whole continuous learning process and the cycle that we do as teachers. And if we stay in that cycle, it's hard to get burned out because we're always looking to improve and then...

Patricia Buckley 21:35

Well, it is kind of like looking for that next challenge. What is it going to be? and stuff and so I was always looking for that next challenge.

Kristina Scott 21:46

So thank you, Patricia, for all you have to share. And congratulations on the Sam Kirk Award. We obviously chose a very deserving recipient.

Patricia Buckley 21:55

Well, thank you so much. I appreciate you taking the time to let me talk to you this afternoon.

Kristina Scott 22:00

Thank you.

Lauren 22:10

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes, and this series was made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. Next week, we sit down with Dr. Helene Dion and Laura Polvinen to discuss some of the social and emotional challenges for students with language based learning disabilities. For more resources from Ida, visit Idaamerica.org