



Celebrating LD Advocates: Meet Lydia Pinto & Shoshana Holt-Auslander

Lauren Clouser:

Welcome to the LDA Podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents, and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world.

Hello everyone, welcome to the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Shoshana Holt-Auslander and Lydia Pinto who are ambassadors for the Neurodiversity Alliance. So welcome both of you.

Lydia Pinto:

Thank you.

Lauren Clouser:

We're so excited here to have you and for you to be able to talk about your advocacy work and your journeys. So to start off, Lydia, I'll start with you to tell us, just a little bit about yourself. What are your hobbies, your favorite school subjects, plans for your future? What are you studying?

Lydia Pinto:

Yeah. Of course. So my name is Lydia Pinto. I am currently in my master's studying recreation sciences with a concentration in recreational therapy. And so I'm currently studying and doing my project thesis on accessibility and the new accessible icon that has come out that's transforming the old previous logo of the international symbol of accessibility, which marks buildings and kind of like, where people who use assistive devices can park. And so at my school, I'm currently helping us repaint all the spots and then studying what kind of perceptions that people have with symbols and how it affects people with disabilities. And so that's my current thing that I'm, like, focusing a lot of my time on. But when it comes to hobbies, I love to scuba dive, and I love to do arts and crafts.

I just think it's so fun to DIY. It's one of my favorite things. And currently, right now, I'm decorating for Christmas. That's a big hobby. And, my favorite school subject growing up was actually science. But now I would say that just because it's more generated into my, like, focus, I like to do a lot of classes on adaptive sports. And so I recently studied abroad in the Paralympics for an adaptive sport class. So I loved doing that.



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Lauren Clouser:

That's really exciting, and that project sounds super interesting. So I'll be curious to see what comes out of that.

Lydia Pinto:

I'm writing my thesis right now. 66 pages as of today. So...

Lauren Clouser:

Wow. Well, best of luck on that.

Lydia Pinto:

Thank you.

Lauren Clouser:

Shoshana, did you wanna go next on just telling us a little bit about yourself?

Shoshana Holt-Auslander:

Yeah. Of course. Thank you so much for having me. My name is Shoshana Holt Auslander. I am currently a 2nd year dual master's student studying social work and nonprofit management. And really, the area of focus that I wanna have is that I wanna create a nonprofit organization or program that supports black and brown neurodivergent youth on the south side of Chicago. And so that is really the focus of what I like to do and the work that I'm currently doing. And in terms of hobbies, I really like to decompress and color.

I also really like to meditate. I think it's good to take a second to be in my own mind and kind of allow myself to take a deep breath. And I also really like to horseback ride. So that is another way that I kind of decompress and, I don't know, just be positive in life, and it gives me something outside of the academic work that I'm currently doing.

Lauren Clouser:

Well, you're both involved in such great and beneficial projects, so I'm so excited to hear about this. So just to start off, maybe towards the very beginning, and something pretty basic, what are some of the challenges of being a neurodiverse student that you faced?

Shoshana Holt-Auslander:



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Can I answer that question first? So I think really thinking back to the the beginning of being neurodiverse and when I found out, which was when I was 14 years old, a lot of the challenges was really in figuring out my own process and figuring out how I learned and what I learned and also, like, why were things so challenging for me. And so that was a lot of the journey that I had from when I was 14, really through college as well, I was continuously figuring out not only, like, how my brain worked, but what strategies were out there that really supported the strengths that I bring to the table. And now that I think more towards the future and where I currently am as a neurodivergent grad student, I think some of the challenges that I face are really unlearning some of the languages, and words that have been told to me. And so my relationship to the word failure and not trying hard enough. Like, these were things that were said to me when I was trying twice as hard, and so I have realized that, I naturally will work a lot harder on certain things, because my relationship to those words is just different from some other people. And so I think that while I've figured out more of my process, from the last 10 years or so, it's been still really hard for me to unlearn some of that language and put forth my process and feel confident in the work that I do and in my own process.

Lydia Pinto:

For me, some of the challenges that I've faced as being neurodiverse kind of started when I was super young. So I went to a college preparatory school from junior k through 12th grade. And so the standard was just success and that you just need to reach this high standard of A's and, like, doing every extracurricular you could, playing three sports, and so it was, like this high level of just kind of work and everything that you did. And so I always had to push myself extra, extra hard because the standard of, like, learning disabilities as a whole wasn't really talked about at the school I grew up in. And so I remember when I got diagnosed, the school wasn't necessarily accommodating for my family, and they told them, like, I'm sorry. We can't really provide the resources that are needed. But luckily, my parents stuck it out.

They advocated for me from the beginning. So I think from the challenges that I face is a lot of people not understanding neurodiversity as a whole and not really knowing anything about it. Even now in college, especially in grad school, I feel like it's something that isn't really talked about a lot and that, like, your brain learns differently. And for me, I'm like, why is this not talked about? Everyone's brain learns differently. Everyone has a different way of learning. Why is it this cookie cutter standard that we all need to meet in school? So I think that that's something that I've kinda wrestled and struggled with is just the differences of levels of success and what it looks like for people. So I think that's, like, the number one thing that was super hard for me



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growing up with neurodiversity.

Lauren Clouser:

Yeah. Definitely. That's something that's very common that we hear. And I think, just establishing what success looks like for you is so important. So to talk a little bit about the Neurodiversity Alliance, how could you tell us about how you both got involved?

Lydia Pinto:

For sure. I can go first. So for me, my experience with the Neurodiversity Alliance kind of started in high school. I had a learning specialist who worked with me every day on my learning, and she had actually seen Dave, who is one of our, like he's one of the founders of the ND Alliance, but at the time, it was called Eye to Eye Mentoring. And so she learned about the Neurodiversity Alliance's Eye to Eye mentoring program and was like, this is a great program. Like, we should bring it to our school now that learning differences are being talked about more and more. Let's talk about it as much as we can and educate people and create a fun club that everyone's gonna wanna be a part of. And so my senior year, or my junior year going into my senior year, I got to go to the OI, which is, a leadership summit where all of the students and the people that are leading different chapters of the ND Alliance's mentoring program come together and, like, learn and create community. And so from there, I got involved with that, fell in love with the program, I loved it so much. I was like, how can I get involved? I need to get involved in as many ways as possible. And so going into college, I've tried to pick a school that had something similar and a community that was kinda similar to the ND Alliance. And so I was in a program specifically for students with learning differences. They kinda helped you to advocate on campus and learn, and had a space that was just for students like me. So I really got to see the importance of the ND Alliance and how to find it in my college setting.

And then from there, I was in grad school during COVID. And so from that, it was kind of hard to find community, but the ND Alliance was still offering, like, online Zooms in different ways for us to connect and build community. So I stayed involved through there. And then in the past 2 years, I was, or last year, I was a public ambassador, and so I got to travel around the states and tell my story with some of my friends. And then, over the summer, I was a social media intern for the ND Alliance, and then I renewed that. And now I'm one of our lead social media ambassadors currently for this school year. And so I kinda started as a chapter leader, but then transformed into more leadership roles. And then now because my college didn't have the ND Alliance mentoring program, I was actually able to start it at my college, and our 3rd art room is



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today.

And so we just started it, and we have a bunch of mentors and a couple mentees, a couple middle school boys, and it's just great. And so I think that my getting involved so young has been something that was so cool for me because I was able to see the importance of the ND alliance. And as I grew, I wanted to be like the people that were mentoring me when I was younger.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well, congratulations. That's such a great journey of starting from when you were younger and now, you were able to start a new organization. So that's really exciting, and congratulations.

Lydia Pinto:

Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Shoshana Holt-Auslander:

So I think my journey is similar and also different to Lydia's in the sense that I also initially joined the Neurodiversity Alliance's Eye to Eye mentoring program when I was in high school. And it really started because my friend was, we had sat down and talked about how our brains worked differently and what accommodations we were both using and resources and strategies. And we were kinda just sharing it back and forth. And one day she kind of came up to me and was like, hey, do you wanna be a part of this program? It's 4 people who learn differently like us, and we'll get to be paired with some middle school students. And we get to kinda share our story and talk to each other about how our brains function. And we need to share resources and be in community with each other. And I'm not gonna lie.

At first, I was like, what? That seems a little weird, But sure. Like, why not? I've really enjoyed our conversations, and so I definitely would like to continue that. And so that's really how I started initially being involved. And honestly, it was an amazing experience. Like, it was one of the first environments that I felt smart in, and it was really where I learned and understood that it was okay for my brain to learn and function differently and that there are others in my community that I didn't even realize who also had similar challenges, but also had very different academic challenges as well. And then, I've had the pleasure of being a mentor for my sophomore year as well as junior year, before I graduated to go to college. And then there was



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not a peer mentoring program when I was in college. So I had a short little break, but I did have the amazing pleasure of working in the office of accessibility resources for my college.

So I still stayed involved in that type of work in supporting students and getting academic resources. But then I really wanted to get more involved and come back to it. I tried to bring it to my school, but, unfortunately, we didn't have the capacity for it at the time. And so I was just looking on the ND Alliance's website and seeing what opportunities they have because they always have amazing opportunities. And in 2023, I had the amazing pleasure of being Dave's research fellow. And so I conducted a research project with the founder and CEO, Dave, on person-first language, and it was just a really amazing experience. And then through that I continued, wanting to be in and create more spaces by neurodiverse people for neurodiverse people. And so that's really what led me to create, or co-create and co-lead the Neurodiversity Alliance club that's currently at my graduate school program.

And so it was just really being in community that drew me to it, but also what kept me to it and has kept me in the programs for so long.

Lauren Clouser:

Fantastic. So I just wanted to expand too because you're both ND ambassadors right now. So could you tell us a little bit about what that means, what you've been doing as an ambassador?

Lydia Pinto:

So being an ambassador has been one of the best opportunities that I've ever been given. I think that growing up, I actually recently read over my college application. And in my college application, I wrote down the job description of an ND ambassador without knowing that that was gonna be my one thing that I could be involved in in college. Like, I wrote it down as, like, my dream would be to travel around the states with my friends who are like me and tell our stories about our neurodiversity. And I literally wrote that before applying to college as a junior in high school, and now I'm getting to live that dream. So it's really cool to see that we're able to tell our stories and travel around and educate people that it's okay that our success looks different. It's okay that our brains learn differently. And I think that it's given us really cool opportunities to kind of show what our success looks like, but also the different types of people who have neurodiversity.

I think that we have a very diverse population of people involved in so many different things at



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different ages. We have graduate students, and then we have senior ambassadors, and we have high schoolers that are still in school and still in class every day. And we all get to come together at different times throughout the year and build community with each other and then go out to our different states, our different schools, different jobs, and talk about what neurodiversity is and how important it is to educate people on it. Because I think that the biggest and most grateful thing that I am about being an ND ambassador is the opportunity to share and educate those who don't know about it. Because I think that the reason that there's sometimes a stigma around it is because people just don't know. And I think that there's, like, the opportunity for people to create a stigma when they're uneducated and just don't know about it. They're just gonna make an assumption. And for me, some of the things I've gotten to do as an ND ambassador is, one of my favorite trips is we got to go to Orlando, and we spoke at that, lots of fun.

And we had educators come, and they just asked us follow-up questions about our panel and really got to know us and figure out how to better their schools DSS programs. And so that was really cool. And some of them were just teachers that then got to learn how to better accommodate and advocate for their students in their class. And then with that, we got to do some fun bonding things together because we were in Orlando. And then a couple other places that have really been fun for me is we got to go to DC for LD Day of Action. And when we went there, we got to talk to representatives and congressmen and women and kind of advocate for different acts that we thought were super important and share our specific story and why it is important to us and how it impacts us directly. And I think showing our faces as ambassadors is kind of the point of us being ambassadors is for people to see our face and hear our story and learn about us and not just the title of neurodivergent.

I think that it gives us the opportunity to share that and give people a new perspective on what learning differences are and what neurodiversity is as a whole. I've loved every experience that I've gotten so far with the Neurodiversity Alliance, and I'm excited for more. I hope we have more coming up soon.

Shoshana Holt-Auslander:

Yeah. I feel like I would echo everything that Lydia has said. When I think about being a ND Alliance public speaking ambassador, it's really being given a platform by neurodiverse people, for neurodiverse people for us to share our stories, the struggles that we've had, as well as, like, the laughter and the joys and the superpowers that we all have and the unique perspectives in



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which we see the world and how that shapes not only our understanding, but how we decide to move through the world. And it can take a variety of different formats, whether that's through a panel, whether it's doing a podcast like today, or, if it's being asked to do just like doing a presentation or a speech. I think there are many different ways under which we are asked to share parts of our stories. And it has also been an incredible experience for me just being able to go out and share and relate to people in a different way. And some through more difficult moments of, like, shared struggle and challenges, but also some in, like, rejoicing and like, oh, your brain also functions this way. Like, you can see three-dimensional shapes of your head.

That's so cool. And recognizing that not everybody can do that, and so that there's unique abilities and to really be an inspiration to those around you. And I think to Lydia's point as well, to educate those who are less aware and don't know as much about what it means to be neurodiverse or neurodivergent. And so it's been an amazing platform and opportunity that I've had the pleasure of being a part of for last year as well as this year, and I'm really excited to continue to share my story and my journey as I continue to move through this year.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. So this question might be a little difficult. So maybe you can pick multiple, but do you have a favorite experience or memory, participating, not necessarily as an ambassador, but anytime with the Neurodiversity Alliance?

Shoshana Holt-Auslander:

Oh, I can start with that. There are definitely a lot to pick from, but I would say one of the experiences that really stands out to me was one that we had at the end of this past October at our leadership summit. So the ambassadors, the interns, as well as students that sit on the National Student Advisory Council all came together as well as some senior staff. And it was really just such a wholesome experience to be in an environment that was, like I said earlier, created by neurodiverse people but for neurodiverse people where really the only thing that you were being asked for is showing up authentically as yourself. And it was already built in that, you know, there may be things that are challenging or there was a space where you could go if you got overstimulated. There were headphones. There were fidgets. There were snacks throughout. So it was really a space where you didn't have to ask for much because it was already accounted for, and the space was made accessible.

And being able to reconnect with some of my neurodivergent friends that I've made over the last



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couple years, being a part of the ND Alliance as well as meeting some new individuals and hearing their stories has been a really powerful community for me to be a part of. And I think one of my, honestly, most favorite experiences is watching the community and our big ND family grow, as we all embrace each other for all of the differences that we have and, are excited to see each other grow in the best way possible.

Lydia Pinto:

I completely agree with Shoshanna. That was one of my favorite memories too. It's just every time we come together, it's really cool to see how much we're alike, but how much we're so different. And I love that the space is made by people that are neurodiverse for people that are neurodiverse because, like Shoshana said, there's everything and anything you can need in that moment. You don't have to take time to advocate for yourself because they get you. They understand you, and they're part of our ND family. And so I think that that's really cool and always a fun memory of mine. But recently, just starting our art room has been kind of... our art room is, like, the ND Alliances mentoring program that we have.

And so art room is kind of a space where we create projects that help us learn self advocacy skills, accommodations. We were talking about identity last week, and so we do these different art projects that help really get your brain working and thinking, and we pair with the middle school. And so the middle school that I'm paired with is so much fun. There's so much energy just as you walk through the halls. But we have kinda struggled getting mentees to sign up because it's a new program, and it's just intimidating to sign up and go to. But we had one of our coordinators that helps coordinate the Eye to Eye mentoring program, was there. And so when she was there, she came from out of state to come see our program as well as see our university and really get to see all the mentors and meet them. And we had the opportunity to go bowling.

And so we took one of our mentees bowling, and it happens to be a family friend of mine, so I know the kid pretty well. And he was so excited that we went bowling throughout the whole rest of the week. And leading up to this point, he just keeps repeating that, Lydia, this is the best program ever. Like, I am so thankful you brought this program. Like, this is the best program ever. We had pizza, and we went bowling. And so it's just everything that our mentees are appreciating so much is making it all worth it and also just making a space where they feel like the program is the best. And they might not fully understand why the program is the best yet because they're still in middle school, but it's cool to see that they already recognize and love a



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program that I love so much and is so dear to my heart.

It makes me so happy and excited to see, like, how much they love it. And it's definitely one of my favorite memories just thinking and recapping recently what we've been up to, but I know that there's hundreds of memories that could come to mind of things that we've loved and appreciated from the Neurodiversity Alliance. But those are just the ones that come to my mind right now.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. I love that. So one more question here before I let you both go. And this is sort of a big one, but do you have a message or something you'd like other younger neurodiverse students to know who are thinking of maybe getting involved in advocacy or just maybe some words of encouragement?

Lydia Pinto:

Something that I would want students with neurodiversity to know and something that I wish I was told in 3rd grade when I was diagnosed with dyscalculia, dyslexia, ADHD, testing anxiety, and auditory processing disorder is I wish that I was told from a young age that it's okay that my success looks different. My success is supposed to look different. We're not designed in this world to be cookie cutters and to be looking exactly the same as the person next to you. And, like, I would want to honor our students to know it's okay if the person next to you is flipping the page a little faster and reading through it. I think that it's something that's really hard to deal with when you're younger, especially even now in grad school. If someone's finishing before me, I still get anxious about it. So I think that I would want everyone to know it's okay that your success looks different. Success is going to be different, and it's a great thing that your success looks different.

And I would really want them to believe in themselves and to know that it's okay if you fail. You're gonna fail, and it's okay. But it's how you get back up and how you kind of move on from that and how you view yourself. So I would say remember to be ND proud to be and be proud of your neurodiversity because it's okay. It's a great thing. It's really cool as you get to learn and understand your brain that neurodiversity is a great thing. It's a gift. It's a superpower.

And so I would just make sure that they know that and that encourage them to do that.



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Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. That's such a great answer.

Shoshana Holt-Auslander:

I love that answer as well, Lydia. You were, like, stealing a lot of words that I wanted to say. I think that a message that I have just for younger individuals or just other neurodiverse individuals who are out there, I think first is that you're not alone, that there are so many of us out there, and it can seem and can be very lonely at times. But know that there are people who are struggling in the same way as you, and so you need to find your community, and there is a community that is out there for you. I think the second thing is, like, trust your process. Right? And, like, you know your process. You know what works for you.

And if you feel really strongly about working with specific pens like I do, don't beat yourself up about it. Like, use those pens and allow yourself to really sit in the process and enable things to be as most enjoyable for you as possible because there's already a lot that is super, super challenging. And then I think that really the last thing is that if you have accommodations, don't ask for accommodations. You're telling your professors you have accommodations, and you're entitled to them. And so you need to tell them how you wanna utilize them and how it works best for you. It's not really up to the professor to figure that out. Like, you know what's gonna support you and trust that you know what's best for you and how you learn. And, yeah, celebrate your neurodiversity and how your brain works differently because we all bring amazing qualities to this world.

And our brain and how we view it is just one of those amazing ways that we can share a perspective.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well, it has been such a pleasure to talk to you both. You're both doing such really exciting, impactful things, and I can't wait to hear more about both of your projects. So I just wanted to thank you again for taking time out of your really busy schedule to be on the show. I know that your stories are going to resonate with our listeners, So thank you so much.

Lydia Pinto:

Thank you so much for having us. We're really grateful for the opportunity to share our stories and to get to meet you. I think it's super fun. And so thank you. I'm really grateful for this



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opportunity.

Shoshana Holt-Auslander:

Yeah. I feel what Lydia said, and I really appreciate your time and for you to have us and to hear our stories.

Lauren Clouser:

Thank you for listening to the LDA Podcast. To learn more about LDA and to get valuable resources and support, visit Idaamerica.org.