

THE STORY GOES | DAWN DIXON | CONNECT + ABILITY AT WARM SPRINGS

MOLLY: Hey! It's me, Molly Cox with SA2020, and I'm coming to you with The Story Goes, a collaborative podcast between SA2020 and KLRN, where we talk more specifically about the stories that you're hearing sort of in the media and on the Book of Faces, and then unpack those stories to really understand and learn more about the individuals and organizations that are disrupting, sometimes quietly-- cause sometimes it's quiet—and sometimes louder, which is also enjoyable. So, today I've got Dawn Dixon, who is a fancy Executive Director of Connect + Ability at Warm Springs. She's also my friend. (MOLLY giggling) We keep realizing we are going to get the giggles. So, I apologize now--

DAWN: (serious voice) Good afternoon, Molly Cox. [\(0:45\)](#)

MOLLY: (laughing) What was that?

DAWN: It's my podcast voice.

MOLLY: That's your podcast voice! Great, we are basically turning into that shtick on SNL, where it was like (stereotypical radio voice) "Yeah, good times." (normal voice) We wanted to talk specifically about the story goes in San Antonio that are population is growing exponentially. Over the course of the next twenty years, we are basically going to double in size, so another 1.1 million people are going to be in our community. We also know that, right, our senior population, the Texas Demographic Center has shown that people aged 60 to 74 will increase 2% in Bexar County. And for 75+, that number becomes over 100%, so we are seeing population exponentially grow in San Antonio, and our infrastructure—I hate that word, but I'm going to use it—but our infrastructure, particularly as it relates to sidewalks, the public transit, our commute times are already expanding, our vehicle miles traveled are becoming more and more, we see our complete streets are not keeping up with need. Our sidewalks aren't nearly as accessible as they need to be, and it starts to feel (wah wah noise). And then, we start having these silly conversations that are about sidewalks and streets, and we are not having broader conversations about why streets and sidewalks are important. They get us to the jobs and places that we need to be, the schools we go to, and the healthcare we need. I think it's funny, or at least interesting to me, when an organization was not built to think about one thing and ends up having to think about mobility and accessibility and transportation because of the work that you do, and I wanted to learn about—you're a new-ish organization, about three years old—tell me a little bit about what Connect and Ability at Warm Springs is and I want to circle back and bow tie about this idea of accessibility. [\(2:47\)](#)

DAWN: Okay, okay. So, Connect Ability at Warm Springs, like you said we are new-ish, um, just have been around three years. The programmatic initiative of the Warm Spring Foundation. I think in San Antonio lots of us are familiar with the Warm Spring hospitals. Those at one time



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were owned by the Warm Spring Foundation, sold about a decade ago, which is where the Foundation got a large corpus of their funds. Warm Spring Foundation provides grants in the community to nonprofit organizations, but about three years ago, they decided-- Board decided—that there really were gaps in service for folks with traumatic and catastrophic, life-altering injuries. Traumatic Brain injuries, Spinal Cord injuries, amputations, stroke, those kinds of—you're leading your life one day this way and then after this injury your life is completely altered. [\(3:43\)](#)

MOLLY: In our report that we put out in January of 2019, which you can find online at sa2020.org, we specifically highlighted a man by the name of Joe Trevino, who had a Traumatic-

DAWN: a spinal cord injury--

MOLLY: That's right. He fell off a roof--

DAWN: while he was working. He was a carpenter.

MOLLY: Yeah, and it has drastically changed his life. He has been working with you at Connect Ability. [\(4:04\)](#)

DAWN: Yes, so one of the things we do is try to connect people to resources. Um, I guess the fancy term is care coordination, but really it's about how to navigate what is a very complicated medical system.

MOLLY: Yeah, just generally.

DAWN: Yeah, just generally. That's how we met Joe, um very shortly after his injury. When he was a carpenter and doing very well, and then the next day, he was in a hospital and would stay in the hospital on and off for almost a year. [\(4:33\)](#)

MOLLY: Wow, okay. And you, is there, and y'all are the only organization doing this type of work in San Antonio?

DAWN: Certainly not connecting people to resources, but around these catastrophic injuries.

MOLLY: And to me, right, these catastrophic injuries, it's important to sort of, like one day you're walking down the street and the next day you're not. Right, it changes your life exponentially.

DAWN: Yeah, and you don't know what you don't know--



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MOLLY: Of course.

DAWN: (continues) until you're living it.

MOLLY: Right.

DAWN: It's like, "Oh my gosh, I can't get out of my house because I don't have a ramp."

MOLLY: Right. When we think of accessibility and mobility, and we think of sidewalks and streets and transit, etc, etc, an organization like yours is also helping navigate the most complicated thing – I think – which is healthcare, generally, is also now saying, "how do we connect to ramps, better sidewalks, transportation." Because a catastrophic injury, while that happens overnight (snaps) in just a blink of an eye, getting to places when you are now in a wheelchair or without the ability to sort of spontaneously jump in the car, it changes. (5:49)

DAWN: Correct. It changes everything. It changes the lens at which you look at the world. It changes your life. Often times people become so isolated, simply because you know, they may have to, once they qualify for certain types of transportation that is available to them, they may have to wait weeks to get a ride to their sister's home. So, there's no spontaneity. I think as a result, I mean people start living a very small life.

MOLLY: Inside the bubble of their home or—(6:29)

DAWN: Exactly, and it should not be that way.

MOLLY: No, not at all. Particularly, the reason, right, when you think about a city like San Antonio that is so sprawled out anyway, decreasing that bubble is even worse.

DAWN: Right, absolutely. It not only takes its toll on the person with the disability, it takes its toll on the whole family. So then, we are looking at systemic changes within the family. So you think, "well gosh, transportation can't certainly impact all of those things." It can, and it does. (7:00)

MOLLY: Okay. In our community, when we are looking at the information or the data, the population of the people who have disabilities and are of—I'm using working age because that's what the census calls it, right—this 18 to 64-year-old, right, we are looking at about 13% of our population. That's not an insignificant number, not that even 1% would be, right, not significant enough. It's a large population, and I'm curious how when we talk about things like accessibility or shrinking bubbles or not being able to be spontaneous or looking for jobs or not being able to go to school or navigating healthcare, when we talk about this population of



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people who are active members of our community contributing economically, as well as brain power, um there are so many different things that have come out of understanding when we work very specifically towards making things accessible for *everyone*, right, if we do things for people that are in wheelchairs, it benefits everybody. [\(8:12\)](#)

DAWN: Absolutely.

MOLLY: It's the Curb- Cut effect.

DAWN: Yes, absolutely. We, so if you look at the most vulnerable population, and you say, "Okay, this is the bar. We are going to make things accessible for this group of people." Just like you said exponentially it grows. Automatically, you have increased capacity for numerous groups of people to be able to—but we think of transportation almost upside down. We don't think about making it the most accessible right out of the box. That's unfortunately an afterthought. [\(8:52\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, it's the idea of choice-riders versus need- riders. Like, "hey, I want to be able to get on an app and get on my scooter." We aren't thinking about the people who *need* it. It's a very different conversation. I think particularly in San Antonio through with people sort of using phrases all the time like "equity lens" and "equitable outcomes," etc., if we are meeting communities needs and thinking through histories challenges, etc., then of course we'd change the way we are even creating programs or efforts or whatever. [\(9:21\)](#)

DAWN: Yes, we'd think that that is not an afterthought or a secondary thought, that is forethought. That is right in the front part of our minds. You know, as I've heard in the realm of folks who were with older adults, just like you said the population is just going to explode. The "Silver Tsunami," right, is coming to San Antonio.

MOLLY: Right, it's one of my favorite phrases.

DAWN: The Silver Tsunami is coming!

MOLLY: (overlapped) Right, I can't believe we call it that.

DAWN: But if you think about it, 70% of older adults have some sort of mobility issue. So, when we talk about older adults and people with disabilities, we are talking about one in the same in the large part of the population.

MOLLY: Yeah, for the most part.

DAWN: I think, it's too large of a group to leave out of the planning. [\(10:12\)](#)



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MOLLY: When the Warm Springs Foundation said, “Hey, let’s start this organization,” Connect + Ability at Warm Springs, you were the founding Executive Director. That’s why you’re very fancy (BOTH laugh) because I added the word “founding” to it. Whatever. You this is like you’re like, I know we said earlier that we’re friends, but I remember you taking this job, and you were so excited about this position. It feels like this is the space for you. I want to know how, like where did this come from? [\(10:45\)](#)

DAWN: Um, well, I mean just personally I’ve always worked with people with disabilities. I started out a long time ago working with adults with disabilities, and then worked with children with disabilities for quite a while here in San Antonio at Any Baby Can. So, when this opportunity came around to create something where people are telling you what they need and to able to start something from the ground up, that was very exciting to me. And I think we have luxury of creating and basing this program on what people are telling us what they need, not on what *we think* people need, but on what they’re telling us. Sometimes there’s a disconnect there.

MOLLY: Yeah, I think that happens all the time. Policy makers, program providers, people who are leading efforts are consistently saying, “I believe that *those* people,” which we always, it’s like we are doing unto as opposed to having the conversation that says, “No, you tell us, and we’ll pivot.” [\(11:47\)](#)

DAWN: Right, yeah, you tell us, and let us do what we can to support you, not to fix you, but to support you. I think sometimes when policies are being formed, it’s sort of around fixing instead of supporting people.

MOLLY: Yeah, of course. And I think particularly, we’ve been sounding the alarm for San Antonio and Bexar County at large for years saying, “We are having a problem.” The fact that we are growing so fast, infrastructure is not keeping up with it. It’s just going to get worse and worse and worse. It includes things like finally having a real conversation around housing affordability, finally having real conversations around conversations like there is a strategic plan around mobility, ConnectSA is happening right now. Even collaborative efforts happening around aging in place, right, so successfully aging and living in San Antonio--

DAWN: The SALSA. [\(12:47\)](#)

MOLLY: Look at me! Remembering that it’s not just SALSA. It’s so silly, and also adorable. (DAWN laughs) The San Antonio Area Foundation has groups of people determine, “hey, we need to be focusing better our resources on community needs.” Um, I’m curious as when you got this started at Connect + Ability, I know that it’s out of the gate, you’re thinking *traumatic injury*, and foremost thinking, making sure they’re connected to healthcare, right, or the



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resources they need within healthcare. Did you know that it was going to expand, potentially, to transportation, mobility, job searching, did you know that? [\(13:28\)](#)

DAWN: Um, you know, no, I didn't. But as we started working with more and more people, those kinds of things were bubbling to the top very quickly. "Because I don't have insurance that I need yet, I can't get a ride to the doctor yet, how do I do that? And I'm using a wheelchair." Or "my injury is so severe I need medical transport and I don't have the insurance yet to cover that" because of course to get Medicare when you have a significant disability, it's a two year wait. So, you know these big gaps that we see. So, if you need a medical ambulance because you may need to go on a stretcher to your doctor, until your insurance kicks in, you have to figure out a way to get there and pay for it. [\(14:23\)](#)

MOLLY: Is that something that then your organization figures out for someone?

DAWN: Yes, we work with someone side by side to really help them navigate all those benefits because this is something, once you have sustained a traumatic injury, you're walking into a world that most of us will never understand, that we'll never know, and it's one of those things that you don't know what you don't know until you know it. And you go, "Oh gosh, we need a system for that, and I don't know where to start." So, we really help navigate those benefits and fill in the gaps in those waiting periods because there are waiting periods through all of that. [\(15:04\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, I'm, I guess it comes back to it being a forethought rather than an afterthought. Even our healthcare system, it's not thinking as a forethought. If you have a traumatic injury, there should be no waiting period. Right, like the next day you should be able to walk into, or wheel into, or do whatever you need to get the thing--

DAWN: Yes, yes. You should be, but that's not the case in this country. Thankfully, um, there are organizations like ours, and many, many others across the country, and certainly here in Bexar County, that help fill those gaps, while people are in that holding, waiting zone to get the help they need to try and live life more fully and become contributing members of society again—go back to work. [\(15:57\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, I think what struck me about Joe, Joe's story, and again you can read about it in our report. He was a carpenter and doing really, really well, and just fell off a roof. It's just so simple to just, "I was doing my job, then I fell off my roof, and now I can't do that job anymore the way that I had always done it." And I can't imagine, you wake up on a Tuesday, and you're going about your day, and then you wake up on a Wednesday and it's totally different. I don't even know, we as humans, navigating the world think about, "what if tomorrow my day started completely differently than today, and do I even know the person to call?" [\(16:41\)](#)



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DAWN: Right, exactly. It goes back to that, “you don’t know what you don’t know until you know it.” Joe is now, he’s a perfect example of a person who was you know supporting his family, doing great work, vital member of the community, this one freak accident happened. He is now two and a half years post-injury. The one thing I will say about Joe is he has such a resiliency about him, as most people do, it never ceases to amaze me how resilient people are. Joe’s resiliency has allowed him to, he has now entered into a partnership with a friend of his, and they’ve created a company. They’re going to do home remodeling and assist people with accommodation. For example, bathroom remodels, for when they come home and have to have their whole bathroom remodeled to be able to get into it using a wheel chair. [\(17:41\)](#)

MOLLY: Stop it!

DAWN: Yeah, I know. So, Joe’s using the skill set he has before, and now he’s not able to do a lot of the hands-on work, but he’s able to do the designs and create the plans for that.

MOLLY: Yeah, of course. And well also to be able to take such an amazing skill set of being like a carpenter, this guy who can do all these things, and then having a brand-new sort of outlook on the world generally and being able to use that for something even bigger and better is fantastic. I’m always curious, I get it when we do conversations like this, what is the call to action here? It seems so simple, like start thinking about--

DAWN: People with disabilities and older adults. When you’re looking at equity, I think you have to, I mean just the word itself right, we have to think about those who appear to be more vulnerable off the top. When we start conversations around equity, that cannot be an afterthought, that has to be right in the forefront of everything that we’re looking to change because if it’ll work for those people who have challenges, it’ll easily work for everyone else who don’t have the same types of challenges. [\(19:12\)](#)

MOLLY: I know we mentioned earlier, I kind of tossed it out there, and I want to make sure we circle back, I yelled out curb- cuts like it was my thing that I’m yelling. But curb- cuts were specific to making sure, right on the curb where it’s sloped a wheelchair can get up on that space, and it also happens to work for bikes, strollers, it works for so many other things.

DAWN: People to get up on wheelchairs, people getting up on a cane, people who are visually impaired, right, what’s not great when there’s a bump right after the curb-cut stops which unfortunately we see some of that, too. [\(19:50\)](#)

MOLLY: Right, so I think it comes back to number one: what is the purpose of this? If the purpose of something is, right, when we think about streets, our streets are to get us safely to our jobs, our schools, our health providers--



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DAWN: (overlapped) our destinations.

MOLLY: (continues) Right. We should be thinking about who needs to get there safely. Oh right, it's *all* the people. (MOLLY laughs)

DAWN: Yeah, yeah.

MOLLY: It's everyone. The fact that I think we don't think of that as a forethought, and I don't think, I think it's that we are moving too fast, potentially.

DAWN: I agree, I agree. Um, and I also think sometimes loud voices get responses faster, and that's good they should. So, I think the call to action here – this may be early in the podcast— (MOLLY laughs) I think the call to action here is that those of us who are working with people who have quieter voices, we need to ensure that we are rallying those people, and that we are rallying ourselves to make our unified voice equally as loud as those other voices. [\(21:01\)](#)

MOLLY: Okay.

DAWN: There's a call to action, and I think that's one of them certainly.

MOLLY: I think that's perfect. Be louder for those that are quieter. What about from a policy or programmatic, where are the gaps? What can we sort of do to help Connect + Ability at Warm Springs? As a nonprofit, how do we support you? [\(21:25\)](#)

DAWN: Yeah, um, you know, I think as employers, being willing to look at a person with a visible disability as a very viable part of the workforce is certainly something that we see every day. Not looking at that person who comes in for that interview as, "Oh my gosh, that's an accommodation I'm going to have to make," looking at that skill set and realizing and educating ourselves that there lots of agencies out there that can help employers make those accommodations, free of charge to the employer because some of those accommodations are so small. Um, but I think that would be something wonderful because we have so many, unfortunately, especially with spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury, you know, we see a disproportionate amount of that happening to young men, right, um for various reasons. You know, young men are young men. They take unnecessary risks sometimes that's part of the--

MOLLY: (laughs) You say that as the mother of a young man. [\(22:35\)](#)

DAWN: (overlapped) Right, as a mother of an eighteen-year-old. Yes, they take unnecessary risks. So, we see that a lot in that, and that is at the beginning of their life. Often times, we see that they are not able to reach their fullest capacity and contribute to our wonderful



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community near as much as they could and would, if they didn't have this disability. It doesn't mean that they are not perfectly capable of contributing--

MOLLY: Yeah, of course. [\(23:07\)](#)

DAWN: But often, times we have these blinders on, and we think that that injury, um, that that injury caused them, will cause them not be able to work or lead a productive life. That is certainly not the case, especially when you see such a large group of young men that this has happened to.

MOLLY: I feel like there's, yes, I'm like yes to everything. I've got the calls to action completely, I hear them, I'm ready. I also think that you're asking us to sort of be better as humans, just be better. [\(23:48\)](#)

DAWN: Well, I, you know, I'm thinking just the word "community" itself makes you think of inclusion.

MOLLY: Sure, of course.

DAWN: And I think sometimes, we have to step out of our way sometimes to include others, so I think that if that's something we can keep at the top of the mind, that really it's about people being fully included in their communities. That means they need to be able to get where they need to go, they need to be able to do that spontaneously—just like anybody else. You know, and they need to be valued for all the contributions they can make. [\(24:29\)](#)

MOLLY: Dawn Dixon, thank you for coming and being on our second podcast.

DAWN: Ooooh, this is the second! This isn't inaugural, it's the second.

MOLLY: Yeah, we've done one before, so thank you for coming and doing this—

DAWN: You're welcome!

MOLLY: And being smart and saying really smart things. (BOTH laugh) And not locking your knees and falling down--

DAWN: I know, 'cause I'm standing. I couldn't sit on the stool.

MOLLY: It's alright, it's fine. We'll figure it out. We're working, we are in a closet for crying out loud! Alright listen, you can hear about everything that Dawn was talking about, that we mentioned here on [KLRN.org/thestorygoes](https://www.klrn.org/thestorygoes). Everything is linked there, and this is our second



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one. Number two! (BOTH laugh) I'm Molly, and this is the collaboration between KLRN and SA2020, and thank you so much. We will try to do a number three.

DAWN: (whispers) Hashtag number three. (25:30)



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