



SIP and Sam Inclusion Coffee Talk

Podcast Transcription

Guest Speakers: Teresa and Mark Burnett

00:00:07 Janelle Mercado

Welcome inclusion allies! You are listening to the SIP and Sam Inclusion Coffee Talk, a collaborative conversation focused on creating inclusive opportunities for all students. This podcast is brought to you by the Supporting Inclusive Practices project, SIP, and Changing Perspectives. We are your hosts, Janelle Mercado and Sam Drazin.

00:00:29 Sam Drazin

A special thank you to the California Department of Education for funding this project, along with the El Dorado and Riverside County Offices of Education, for their ongoing support of inclusion for all students, including students with disabilities. If you are committed to being an inclusion ally, this podcast is for you.

00:00:52 Janelle Mercado

So, we are thrilled to have two special guests. Today we have Mark Burnett and DJB Diamond, also known as Teresa Burnett. Mark Burnett is the father of three including Teresa Burnett, who was born with Down syndrome in 1996. Teresa is an events DJ, also known as DJ B Diamond, who is also an aspiring model and actress. Mark manages Teresa's DJ business. Mark believes everyone deserves to be included, not just in school, but in society as well. In addition to managing Teresa's DJ business, he successfully advocated to have Teresa included in most of her K-12 school tenure. Mark is a retired deputy sheriff with 30 years of service and holds an Airline Transport Pilot Certificate in Helicopters as well as a Certified Flight Instructor Certificate. So, Mark and Teresa, thank you so much for being here with us today.

00:01:49 Mark Burnett

Thank you for having us.

00:01:52 Teresa Burnett

Thank you!



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00:01:52 Janelle Mercado

So, Teresa, I want to start by asking you some questions. You are a ray of sunshine and I wish everyone could see Teresa's face right now because I think she has a permanent smile. What do you think, Sam?

00:02:07 Sam Drazin

Definitely, I've only had the pleasure of meeting Teresa a couple times, but that was one of the things I noticed right away.

00:02:15 Janelle Mercado

The most infectious smile, Teresa. So, tell us about your school experience.

00:02:22 Teresa Burnett

I liked my school experience. I especially liked being included. Being included meant I felt like I belonged. I was able to meet friends and participate in activities in school. I was sometimes invited to activities outside of school too. It was not always easy. Sometimes I had difficulties like being picked on. It was challenging, but overall, everything was good.

00:02:50 Janelle Mercado

So, Teresa, what did that feel like when you felt like you were part of a school community? Being invited to activities outside of school? What was that like for you?

00:02:59 Teresa Burnett

I, I just love people! I love...I just I just love people! Because that's I, I really, really depend on and I love to feel trustworthy in my life. Have a family and I know it doesn't mean in the family, but still. Just be, uh, be be up to it and not afraid to speak. You know that's the main, that's the that's the main thing.

00:03:25 Janelle Mercado

Yeah, you're not afraid to speak. I love that about you. You come into these meetings and these conversations with adults around you. And you're like this is who I am. This is what I'm about.

00:03:38 Teresa Burnett

That's right!



00:03:39 Sam Drazin

So, Mark I want to switch the conversation over to you. So, you know, as a parent, I'm sure that there were times where you felt very kind of on the same page and aligned with Teresa's IEP team at her schools, and perhaps there were times that that you weren't so aligned. But in terms of, kind of, thinking about that alignment, what does it look like to be a parent when the IEP team shares that same sort of vision and mission and motivation to create a more inclusive learning environment.

00:04:15 Mark Burnett

That's a great question Sam. It's not just what it looks like, but what it feels like. I can remember when Teresa was entering kindergarten, we saw I think it was a school psychologist and, and, and some others that were going to make up this IEP team; really excited about the possibility of Teresa being at the school, I could see it in their eyes. They, they were almost convincing us that it was: this is the right thing for you, you should go forward with this. From that, that I believed this is how it was going to go for our entire IEP career with Teresa.

Unfortunately, when an IEP team member might rotate out, another one would rotate in in their place and they might not share the same vision for inclusion, and unfortunately those attitudes can transfer to other people on the team. And when the other team members saw that different attitude, they tended to adapt it as well, unfortunately. So, when it's working fine and the IEP team recognizes the value of it, shares it, they, they, they lean forward with it, and we respond to it. Then it works beautifully and feels great.

00:05:28 Sam Drazin

I think one of the unique things in schools is the makeup of an IEP team, right? And year to year, the makeup of the individuals on the team and the, the perspective that they bring, and the roles that they have at the school varies.

So, you kind of already spoke a little bit about this, but I'm wondering, you know, Mark what, what did you do to help an IEP team that was maybe less aligned or less kind of committed to inclusion. How as the parent advocate for Teresa? What did you do to assist them in kind of common... finding some common ground?

00:06:06 Mark Burnett

Well, I think you could look at this from two points of view. First of all, you could look at it from obtaining knowledge as a parent, as as best you can. Finding online resources about your federal education rights, your state and local education rights, and becoming familiar with those. So at least you know what you, what has been asked for in the past and what parallels with you and what you could ask for in your own case. But the other part of it is working with the IEP team to let them know that you're there as an equal team member and, and that what you really want for your daughter is not (or your son) in in any case, is not for them to have to, you know, create something that's that's



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otherworldly. But just to understand that the inclusion and all the benefits of it: being able to model appropriate behavior from the other children and learnings transferring from one activity to the other, or what not? All is is part of the goal of being included. It isn't just the academic part only.

00:07:04 Janelle Mercado

Mark, I love that you highlighted that because I'm thinking about so many of the educators that might be listening and just being able to hear from a parent perspective: what matters? I mean, I think I hear you saying that Teresa being a part of a community and feeling good at school and being around her typical developing peers was really the focal point for you all.

00:07:31 Sam Drazin

I think sometimes, we as educators, get bogged down in the um, shall we call it the stress for the academic gains. And sometimes forget about what I would call social inclusion, right? How do we ensure that all students have a sense of belonging and are participating and have an opportunity to participate in the social environment that they're a part of.

00:08:01 Mark Burnett

That's, that's such a great point, and I, I suppose maybe an improvement to the IEP goals would be to have that be is equally as important as learning how to count money or tell time. Doesn't seem to...

00:08:14 Janelle Mercado

Absolutely!

00:08:14 Mark Burnett

Yeah, that doesn't seem to be represented with this. The point Sam made as strongly, as as it is important, it's not represented on the IEP goal sheet that way.

00:08:23 Janelle Mercado

Sure, so making sure that as IEP teams, we are absolutely focusing on academic skills, but people-person skills, how to become a good person and how to interact with others and how to problem solve. I mean I, I look at Teresa and how she has this level of confidence coming into the spaces and places that she has. And the times that I've interacted with the two of you and I think that's what I see stand out so much about you; Teresa, is your level of confidence and your willingness to put yourself out there. Those are essential skills in life. Where do you think you learned that Teresa? I want to be like you when I grow up!



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00:09:12 Teresa Burnett

It's gonna be tough! When it comes to, um, with my mom and dad with me and because they raised me as a daughter. And being a DJ is a lot, and anyway that's emotional for me. But anyway, I have the most amazing dad in my life and he's important to me.

00:09:34 Janelle Mercado

So, you get, you get a lot of that, you get a lot of that confidence and support from your parents, is that what you're saying?

00:09:40 Teresa Burnett

Absolutely!

00:09:41 Janelle Mercado

Yeah! Can you think of your school experience and what helped you? You know, you talked about some of those challenges that you faced. What helped you to push through and put yourself out there and be confident and ask for what you need?

00:09:57 Teresa Burnett

Yeah, I'm like that! Well, the otherwise person is my mom. And I was 16, um the, the, the two girls that picked on me and it was on my birthday. And I was, I wasn't called hanky then, but then I was. And my mom came up to me and said, 'let's go out for dinner'! on my 16th birthday and that has saved my life and that my mom makes me more... absolutely makes a difference, and that's my mom and I love her so... and I love her so much.

00:10:33 Janelle Mercado

So, Mark going back to some of the conversations we were having earlier about the IEP meetings and some of the obstacles and some of the challenges. What would you say was the biggest obstacle that you all faced during your conversations about how to include Teresa.

00:10:51 Mark Burnett

Well, I think that the biggest obstacle was just trying to agree that the placement we wished for her was at her home school and the next grade, as it were, to continue with the supports that that she needed to do that. It seems like, with that, it's like a relationship and each time you had the IEP meeting, it was almost like the relationship was up for question! Or, or are we going to continue as a group and as the team? Or are we going to break up or I don't know? It seemed like that was the case. But you couldn't, you know you, it just seemed like there wasn't a year to year: OK, we did this successfully last year, so let's continue to do that again next year. I, I don't know why



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that can't just keep taking a stride forward. Why it has to come up for like, renegotiation at each point?

And so those, that was to me a big obstacle was, was it's almost like a year before wasn't, we're erasing what we learned anew as a team, and we're going to go forward and, and and create another wheel and then we'll have to figure out. Which didn't typically include a continuation of, of inclusion, but a suggestion for a different site or a more restrictive class and and so the challenges were going out to those. First of all, holding back on judgment, sitting there when an offer was made for a different placement, because that's what somebody thought was better or heard was better. But go out there to look at it, see it exactly as they described it, yourself. Talk to the teacher, look at the class makeup, and then come back to the meeting and say, 'OK, well, I went and looked, this is what you said was going to be better and here is why it's not in my opinion, or in our opinion.' And, and try to convince them that what we're doing here is is better, and then and sometimes that's all it took. So that was maybe a hurdle that was surmountable. But at the same time, it was a hurdle, nonetheless.

00:12:41 Janelle Mercado

And I can see why going out and doing that research and really looking at the different options for Teresa would be so important and valuable. But also, from your perspective Mark, what was it that kept you all fighting for keeping her in an inclusive setting?

00:13:03 Mark Burnett

Well, it's, it's the a- all the overriding goals of her being included in society. I mean, after all, school is just a part of life. It's a part of it, it's a good part of life, but it's just one part of life. So, there isn't a separate society to then go out into after school is finished, or there isn't a separate grocery store to go into after school is finished or whatever. So, it was important for me for her to be included in society from school onward and outward from school. I think too that, not only did Teresa benefit from her experiences with everyone, but I think everyone else benefited from their experiences with Teresa, because it it's OK for them. We're we're not all the same. Even all of us have different abilities, even if they're unseen. We need, we all need to be together in our lives and be able to interact with each other in our lives. And so, school is that part of her life, and I wanted it to be that way for her, because everywhere else she was going to go was going to be an included environment. So why, why make that different?

00:14:13 Sam Drazin

So, one of the things that I found um, is that when we create more inclusive learning communities for students with disabilities that it not just supports the student with the difference but also supports other students as well. And in, in, in focusing in on students with a disability, one things that I found is that it can really boost individual self-confidence. And I find that if we're confident in ourselves, we then become greater self-advocates.



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I'm wondering Mark from your perspective, for Teresa, have you seen that to be true? Has has inclusion of Teresa in school equated to Teresa's ability to be more confident in herself? And how has that helped her to become the incredible young woman that she is today?

00:15:05 Mark Burnett

Well, that's a great question, Sam. And, I mean, she's lives, she lives this example. I mean, some of these things that you mentioned about her being confident and comfortable with herself, which makes her comfortable around others, and other people are seemingly comfortable around her. She makes she makes friends faster than I do. She's just as confident to, to introduce herself, she's confident to approach a counter and ask for something she needs or wants from somebody who might be working on the other side of the counter. And I think too it it brought her to realize what her own sense of purpose in in the working field, and that was to not be hidden somewhere in the back, but to be out in front.

00:15:50 Janelle Mercado

Well, I think everyone who's listening right now wants to know: Teresa, what was it that made you want to be DJ? How did you become an entrepreneur?

00:16:01 Teresa Burnett

Ok, so that's a good question. I always wanted to be DJ. I like to see people dance, it just make me happy. I tried in learning other job skills in school and afterward: like wiping tables, folding napkins, and organizing shoes in a store. It was exhausting for me to work in a restaurant, it was not my kind of work. That's not a good fit for me. Luckily, I love to go to dances, I saw a couple of different people with disabilities being DJs. I thought if they could do it so could I, but now I had to tell somebody about this idea. So, I began talking to my dad about it, and at first, he did not understand how much I wanted to do this. I was persistent though, I kept asking and asking him. Finally, after about two years of asking, my dad agreed. I have been an events DJ for three years now and I have performed at over 62 events. I still love to DJ, and I still get just as excited as I did in the beginning.

00:17:17 Janelle Mercado

So, you tried other jobs and you're like, no? This is not for me. I'm a DJ. And it took some convincing, but boy, you're persistent, and you knew exactly what you wanted to.

00:17:30 Teresa Burnett

Exactly!



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00:17:31 Janelle Mercado

That's impressive! Not everyone knows that at such a young age, and it's like you, you knew you went after it. Mark, what was that like for you? Here you're trying to get her to do other jobs,

00:17:46 Teresa Burnett

Laughing

00:17:46 Janelle Mercado

It sounds like. It sounds like she was, she was learning other job skills.

00:17:50 Mark Burnett

Right, and I know we we were able to visit her on occasion or two at a job site where she was working. And you know, it's always exciting for her to see, you know, her parents, you know, come up and see her at a place where she was working. But I mean, even I could see that that although those jobs are needed jobs, they're n-necessary jobs. I could just, I could just tell that they weren't what was speaking to her. And although they were important skills for her to learn, and I think it was even part of my recognizing that she had other ideas.

And with, with support like we all need and and love to have, she could do really what she wanted to do and and that was being a DJ. It was just wait her waiting for me to catch up with it, with her enthusiasm and idea. And, and I'm glad I did. It's, it's, uh one of the best things for her that could have come from all this, and it's another opportunity for her to spend some good father daughter quality time.

00:18:50 Sam Drazin

And I think it all kind of builds, right? Those formative years in schools help us build that confidence that we talked about earlier. The confidence to be a self-advocate and for Teresa to to be persistent and ask you, Mark, every day for two years. This is what I want to do, right? Like that's a skill of self-advocacy. It's a skill of independence. So, Mark and Teresa, this has been such an amazing conversation. You're both so incredibly insightful and inspirational when it comes to following your dreams, Teresa, and and being an advocate for your daughter, Mark.

Mark, I'm wondering if if you left our listeners with one kind of last word what? Would it be?

00:19:33 Mark Burnett

Ohh OK, first of all, I mean, inclusion is such, is such an important part of your particular son and daughter's life. As I've seen this, as Teresa has grown through being included, I just feel like it's been such a tremendous addition to her personality. Her, her ability to express herself, her ability to advocate for herself in the community in such a positive way. And I found honestly that the community is largely accepting of her and and



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welcomes her and and so for those reasons, I find that it's it's worth every step of the way of effort to to make it happen.

00:20:16 Janelle Mercado

And Teresa, for you, is there any last words that you want to share with our listeners today?

00:20:23 Teresa Burnett

Well, I just want to say thank you, that's all I can say. I just feel so honored and blessed to be here and who's listening right now, and this makes me more happy. And I just feel so compassionate with other people, what they, what they deserve, what they deserve better.

00:20:43 Janelle Mercado

Sure, yeah, well thank you. Thank you for educating us, Mark, and Teresa, and can't wait to see you at your next DJ event. And, and for those of our listeners who want to come find you and see your incredible DJ skills, how do they find you?

00:21:00 Mark Burnett

Well, Teresa has a website, it's www.djbdiamond.com it's, you know, DJBdiamond.com, that's the best place to start, I think.

00:21:12 Teresa Burnett

And my, uh my Instagram too!

00:21:16 Mark Burnett

Oh, she also has Instagram at [DJBDiamond7](https://www.instagram.com/DJBDiamond7)

00:21:20 Janelle Mercado

Got it, [DJBDiamond7](https://www.instagram.com/DJBDiamond7) on Instagram! We'll have to follow you.

00:21:24 Teresa Burnett

Yay!

00:21:25 Janelle Mercado

Alright everyone, thank you so much.

00:21:28 Mark Burnett

Well, thank you for having us, it's been a pleasure!



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00:21:31 Sam Drazin

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00:21:53 Janelle Mercado

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