



The  
Teach**Able**  
Project

## Introduction

Jenny Williams, Student  
Trustee, Toronto DSB  
in Conversation with the  
Hon. David C. Onley

**Video Transcript**

**[Jenny Williams]** I guess one of my first questions to you, just to get a little bit of background is, um, what careers have you had in your life and what would you say the highlights of those careers have been?

**[David Onley]** Great question.

Um, the longest portion of my, uh, working years was at Citytv as, an announcer, a broadcaster, sometimes producer. And that was 22 and a half years. And, uh, prior to that I'd had a whole series of jobs, uh, in radio, uh, part-time, I worked for a real estate company, I did a number of things.

And, uh, looking back it's difficult when you're a student because you're not a hundred percent sure at all really what you want to do, or you think you are, and then it leads to one dead end after another. Uh, and it certainly did for me.

But, um, I look back and realize that the different work experiences all contributed, and they all were funnelling me towards where I was supposed to end up being anyway. My career was in television but it got there, uh, through, um, uh, a route that took me through many different stops along the way.

And, uh, in total it was the combined life experience that, um, gave me the opportunity of becoming Lieutenant Governor and without that combined life experience, had I just simply gone into radio and television arts coming straight out of high school, which is exactly what I wanted to do but my parents were adamant that I not go directly in - they wanted me to get experience in other areas. And, uh, bless their souls, they proved to be right. So....  
[laughs]

**[Jenny]** Well that begs to ask the question, when you were younger, did you, ah, ever think that you would be in this position - being the Lieutenant Governor?

**[David]** No.

**[Jenny]** Did you have an idea about politics or...

**[David]** No, I mean, I was always interested in politics and I had it in my mind that someday I'd like to be Prime Minister. You know in my early 20's I was involved in politics and I enjoyed it immensely but, you know, after a short period of time into my 20's I realized, no, that wasn't really the calling that I had. And yet I was always fascinated with politics and one of the great advantages of being on television, as I was, is that it gave me opportunities to interview and meet politicians and, and cover election nights.

And so, uh, I really thought that was going to be the fulfillment of my career. So when the opportunity came along to be the Queen's Representative in the province of Ontario, it was, uh, um, an opportunity that simply could not be turned down.

**[Jenny]** What I typically find in school is that, um, it can be hard to empower yourself to, uh, make decisions that are life changing. Like to decide whether or not to go into science or into music or the arts. So how did you empower yourself to achieve the success that you wanted to in your life?

**[David]** That's a very good question.

Um, I think one of the key things that I had - I was very fortunate to have some excellent teachers and very good mentors and sometimes they're not the same person. Uh, sometimes your, your best mentor can be a teacher. You don't even have one of their classes but perhaps you know them through sports or through, uh, another club function in the school. Um, so I think that's the start point, uh, really is, uh, is seeking out a mentor that you can trust.

And, and I was very fortunate in that regard, that I had a number of people, uh, along the way who gave me, uh, individual wise words of advice um, that in some instances were nothing more than a single conversation that just stuck with me, uh, my entire life. I think the other thing is, and this was a, a quote that I heard just recently, "Your internal motivation must be greater than your external circumstances." Now, it's really simple to say [laughs] but you can have a lot of really adverse external circumstances. But I, I think you have to, you know, draw upon yourself and realize that, you know, for the most part no matter the difficulties that you're encountering right here, right now, uh, that in this country, we have more opportunities and you have more advantages than just about anywhere else on the Earth. And that if you look for mentors uh, that you can strengthen your own internal motivation that you can get through, uh, difficult times and that, uh, that you are going to succeed in, in whatever it is that you, you end up doing. You have to have that faith and that belief.

**[Jenny]** Uh, who was your mentor and what types of messages did they bring to you?

**[David]** I was very fortunate. I had a, a series of mentors. Uh, my high school principal, uh, was quite a mentor just for one simple conversation that he had with me. And he took me aside and he, um, just, uh, I think it was probably in the last 15 or 20 minutes that I was actually in the school getting ready to out out the door and he said, "Dave, um, you have the potential of actually being the Prime Minister of this country." Well that caught my attention. [laughs] And he said, um, "But you are an ideas person." He said, "Your strength is not in organizing or administering." And he said, "So I want you to promise me that if you ever get yourself into a position of responsibility, that you will make sure you have a very good ad- administrator and a very good organizer who accompanies you and who is a part of your team." And yet for all those years, I never had the opportunity of using that

piece of information, but the day I took office as Lieutenant Governor it became real. So, there was a piece of advice from the late spring of, uh, 1970 and I was not able to apply that message until September 5th, 2007. And yet, um, there was that piece of advice that I, I held on to.

The reality is, is you go through life even as a young person in high school, look to be that kind of person yourself. Look to say that one sentence, that one moment that might just stick with somebody in a moment of adversity or difficulty that they're going through, or just a moment where somebody needs encouragement. 'Cause you just don't know, uh, how it's going to stick, uh, in their minds, for the rest of their lives.

**[Jenny]** So, with all the teacher mentors that you've had,

**[David]** Mm hmm.

**[Jenny]** ...um, I'm sure you have some advice to give them. What advice do you think you would give to teachers who are teaching students with disabilities and how they can incorporate those disabilities into the classroom?

**[David]** Mm hmm. Well I think, um, the message would be, is that, uh, I, I think the vast majority of young people who are in high school who have some kind of a disability, uh, don't want to be treated, uh, especially different. Students want to be just treated, uh, as individuals. And I think that was, in a sense, how I was treated. There was no favouritism that was given to me, there were expectations that were given. Uh, were there allowances in different areas? Yes, but not many and only when it was appropriate. Um, I think the other message I would say to, uh, teachers is to be mindful of, I would even say, depression on the part of the disabled student.

That there can be and likely will be, uh, different days, different times, where just the sheer coping with the disability is about all that student is capable of on that given day. I've often said in speeches that I've, I've delivered over the years that - and I say it with great respect to anybody who, even right now, who is listening, i- is coping with a, a recent death in the family. But I think in many, many ways that coping with a disability on a daily basis is more difficult than dealing with death. Because when you h- have a loved one that is, that, uh, passes on, uh, there's grief, there's deep sadness, there's a deep sense of loss. And then time goes on, and, and time changes things and you still miss the person, but it lessens over time. And that's a reality.

On the other hand, in a lot of instances, a disabled person - it's every single day. And there's a reminder, and sometimes it's a big reminder and other days it's a smaller reminder. So that's something that I would remind teachers about, to be mindful of that.

Uh, the other thing, though, is kinda almost like a flip side of it, and that is that, a motivated, uh, disabled student, a student who's been able to transcend disability, has been able to move above their circumstances is in fact a very highly motivated person. And that teachers can spark that motivation even more and encourage them even more and, uh, see very significant accomplishments, uh, come out of that student.

So that would, those would be the messages I would give.

**[Jenny]** Yeah, but I find that also in my school, I've been taught in, in working with students with disabilities, that really it's not the disability that should limit the student.

**[David]** Mm hmm.

**[Jenny]** And do you find that true though out your life - that you were never limited by your disability?

**[David]** That's true. I mean, I realized there were certain things I could, could not do. And so you, I mean, you do have to come to grips with that, and you just can't encourage somebody to do something that they're not capable of doing, but it's what they are capable of doing.

I think it's important to recognize that definitions are important too, and one of the items that I, uh, speak out, uh, regularly about is the definitional difference between disability and handicap.

But then, a disability is a condition that comes about as a result of an accident or a disease or a degenerative condition, but that most people with disabilities find ways of overcoming them and being functioning members of society. The barrier does not occur with disability, the barrier occurs with handicap. Handicap is something that is a barrier that is applied by someone else - not the disabled person - it's by the barrier of bad design or bad attitude, so th- the limiting factor on a disabled person, in the vast majority of cases, is not the disability, it's the handicapping attitude of other people. And most other people would shocked to have that label attached to them, but if you've been responsible for bad design, you're handicapping them.

If you've formed an a priori assumption about that persons ability to achieve something, you are handicapping them. So, these are definitional differences that are very basic, very basic terminology, and yet, um, we need to understand it.

We need to understand for instance that the, uh, Carleton University, in terms of the actual origin of the words, that the origin of the word handicap actually came about in the 1800's in Ontario, and that, as it applied to people with disabilities and it wasn't a negative. It was used at the time to make a reference to the game of golf and horse racing, where in both

senses it was an equalizing factor and so the social advocates of the day were seeking to equalize the playing field for people with disabilities by applying the handicap to them.

But the handicap in those days was to assist, to be of some help, and ironically, uh, over times the word has morphed, as it applies to disabled people, as something that's negative. So we have to get to the point, I suggest, where start to apply the word handicap in that same positive meaning. We have to look at it from its original definitional difference, and all it really means is helping equalize the playing field.

**[Jenny]** I'd agree with you. Many of the students that I talk to, um, they tell me that instead of looking at it as a disability, they call themselves, "I have a special ability,..."

**[David]** Yeah.

**[Jenny]** That is different than anybody else. I am gifted in a certain way."

**[David]** Yeah.

**[Jenny]** Which I find is quite inspirational - that they would never let whatever disability they're dealing with stop them from achieving what, what they want to do with life.

**[David]** Absolutely.

**[Jenny]** Um. Now, you, you touch a little bit on, um, what types of messages that you would bring teachers. Do you think that there is a place in the classroom, in the curriculum in particular, um, where accessibility and these types of terms can be discussed?

**[David]** I would certainly hope so.

It might even, uh, be better to be actually be in Teacher's College to, to get to that level, uh, and, uh, until it can uh, then perhaps in terms of, um, you know, professional development days as a, as a source of, uh, discussion. The start point though, is to really come to grips with some of these definitions. Uh, we need to look at the definition of the word inclusion, um, which, uh, is also a positive, at least it's being used as a positive, but we have to ask some very basic questions about that word, because it's a word that is mandated and it, it can be enforced and, uh, it can achieve benefits, but the word we should be looking at is membership. And membership is a very different word.

Uh, membership, uh, means that you've been invited to join, to be a team member, to be a part of, to be included in, uh - it's a positive. Um, these are really basic terms, and I know they're basic terms, but, uh, I think that's at the heart of it that's what we need to be, uh, focusing on.

**[Jenny]** I can already see this morphing into the History curriculum and the English curriculum,...

**[David]** Yep.

**[Jenny]** I like where it's going.

Um, what type of advice would give to students with disabilities?

**[David]** Well I would say this - um, you are in a more difficult situation than able bodied students, that's number one. Uh, number two, you're gonna have bad days. Uh, you're going to have bad days for real reasons. It's difficult coping with a disability. It's hard. Um, develop mentors. Find friends outside of your family that you can confide in. Um, from that, I would say don't despair when you do have the bad days. The fact that you are wrestling with the problem indicates that you have the wherewithal and the mechanism to overcome the problems. Uh, and that as difficult as things are for you right now, there has never been a time where there's been a greater, um, a greater improvement in terms of accessibility.

We are just now moving into a spectacular new era of new technologies, of computerization that is beyond anyone's thinking even from a couple of years ago.

In terms of employment, uh, those numbers are starting to change.

Major corporations, big companies in this, uh, country are beginning to realize that until and unless they have a significant proportion of their workforce, uh, represented by people with disabilities that they are not going to be able to make the profits that they want to make. So there's never been - if you have to be disabled, um, and no one wants to be, if you have to be disabled, there's never been a time in human history where there are more opportunities in front of you. You just have to get through, uh, the barriers and the difficulties um, that tend to confront you on a, on a day-to-day basis. You do that part of the job and I think the rest will take care of itself.

**[Jenny]** That's good. Thank you very much.