



## Episode 15: Sex: Elevatus Training

Transcription possible by Wreally, [transcribe.wreally.com](https://transcribe.wreally.com)  
[www.DisarmingDisability.com](http://www.DisarmingDisability.com)

[Upbeat intro music]  
Disarming Disability

**Nicole:**

Oh hello and welcome back to Disarming Disability. My name is Nicole Kelly

**Sarah:**

and my name is Sarah Tuberty and we are your hosts of this really cool podcast.

**Nicole:**

We're so excited to have you with us. We're recording here on a weekend and I was just hearing rumors about Sarah having a wild cool weekend. And was hoping she would share with you their what have you been up to?

**Sarah:**

I am excited! I'm back in Philadelphia now, which is just such a treat to be home. And I think really just recognizing and appreciating what home is and what home means. So we had a party last night. I'm living with a really good friend of mine and his mom is she grew up in the Philippines and she makes so much food.

So she threw a party yesterday and it just was like constant food was being had all of the time. They're just like- I wish she would make something and then bring it out on the table and then we'd eat it and then something else would just like magically appear and we would eat it. And so it just was so amazing to have all this really great food. So we loved that and

I am I'm dating somebody this is he's a big deal. I'm really excited. His name is Erik. So he's my partner and we've been dating since really kind of the end of January and something that Erik loves in addition to all of the fun things that he does but his big hobby is music.

So yesterday at our party we met up with two of my really good friends Sabrina and her husband Matt and then they're like, "well, we got her instruments. Let's just start jamming."

So Erik is on the base and Matt's on the drums and Sabrina and I are just sort of singing and it's, you know, two o'clock in the morning and we're just playing Tool and it was just so much fun and just really how much my heart needs those moments and and how just happy I am being surrounded by music- I of course like I like need to go to singing lessons for a good chunk of my time and energy to be sing-able.

Maybe I don't know something to work on for me, but it just is really cool because the fun thing is and met Sabrina, Matt, and my partner Erik all on the same day it back into 2014 so Sabrina and I were sitting a rotation at the airport. We just hang out for four hours. And if you get called, then you go on a flight. If you don't get called then you just go home. So we sat there from 8 a.m to noon and she we didn't get used that day and I was talking about like just moving to Philly and I really liked science and she's like, well, I don't have my kid today. Do you just want to go see my husband? He's working at the National Academy of Sciences in downtown Philly.

Like just want to go and I said, Yes, and then he gave us his private tour and we got to see you like woolly mammoth teeth that like Lewis and Clark collected and like gave to Thomas Jefferson. I don't even know if they're around at the same time. I believe that's what the story is, but I just saw these like woolly mammoth teeth and and every time Sabrina goes into the city because she was living in suburbs outside of the city every time she goes in she calls up her friend Erik who she's known since I mean all of her high school friends then became Erik's roommates and so then that's how she knows Erik and Erik is just like a solid amazing person.

So she called him up and then you know, I'm on this tour with like Matt and Sabrina and were like turning around this corner and like up these stairs walks Erik and it just was really fun. I was like "he's super cute" and I like him and we became friends it just wait but we didn't start dating until now, which is awesome.

So it just was really fun to be like, yeah and that all of you guys on the same day. Erik had thought that Sabrina and I had been friends for a while same with Matt. He's like, "why would Sabrina show up with this girl she just meant that morning?" but I was just like "I need friends!" and Sabrina's awesome.

**Nicole:**

It sounds like such a such a Sarah thing. Like you are someone who can like walk into a room and just be like and "we are best friends now." It's a great talent to have.

**Sarah:**

It is! So it just was this really magical moment last night just sort of like honoring our friendship and that we've all like been friends for six years and and just honoring but we all met on that day randomly. and Sabrina has been just so foundational to my life and and you're now she has two little girls and and and sort of how much our lives have changed. But this core of it hasn't and just really appreciating an honoring that and I'm

just so grateful for all of them. They're all just like such a great fantastic people and then we just jammed and played Tool as a way to do that.

**Nicole:**

So that there's a lot of tool that is listen to at my house as well big big tool fans. Lots of metal actually. Sarah my favorite concert that I've ever gone to is- Oh man time is weird. I think it was last year? Last year we went with a bunch of our friends to a big ghost concert. And so we are jamming to ghost all the time around here. We're big fans. So I feel I feel the affinity for how much fun that would be to just like sit and jam and chill and just hang and be with one another and yeah what special what special people surround you -I love that you have a good core a group of people there that really like know you and know your heart. You know, that's so good. I'm so glad

**Sarah:**

Me too! So what have you been up to this weekend?

**Nicole:**

Oh, well, I actually got to do kind of a fun full circle thing this weekend. In high school I'm sure you'll be surprised to hear that-I was involved in like all the drama and on stage not not High School drama, but like the drama club, you know, like all the nerdy on stage speech and debate type things. I was in the middle of of. And one of the things that's really popular in Iowa is the Iowa Thesbian Festival. And so you get together with all the other Iowa schools from around the country and November and it's a big Festival where you get to watch other schools do plays and you get to meet other kids who are really into drama as well.

And and I got to actually they did a leadership day this past weekend and invited me to teach some sessions which was so fun. So I got to come back and be like the cool older kid who now, you know because I'm working at a fabrication company that does theater sets and Museum work, you know, I'm still within that world and I've worked, you know in different professional spaces and interned in different professional theater spaces. So I got to be like the cool older sister who came back to talk to the high school kids and it's really special and it was a really special community for me in high school.

So it was just a really kind of fun full circle. I got to come in and be big sister and talk to these kids and share with them and it was a great time. It was really fun. I wish it could have been of course in person, but we're living in a virtual world. So it was over Zoom that we did it. But I don't know it was it was really kind of a fun walk down memory lane and and also fun to like talk to the Next Generation and see what's on their heart and that they're still excited about theater and theater like things so it was good.

It was really good. That's so fun.

**Sarah:**

Such happy harts!

**Nicole:**

I love it great. Should we talk about sex now?

**Sarah:**

Yes.

**Nicole:**

Yeah cool. If you've been following along with us, you know that this now is the third episode and our chapter all about sex. So we've talked about it from a sociologist perspective. We talked about it from a psychologist perspective. And now this week we're going to talk about really concrete ways to move into spaces and really educate around sex. So, of course we have an amazing amazing guests because disarming disability is so lucky to have the coolest people ever come be our guest. So let's hop right in and let's hear about our guests. And let's hop into the interview

Katherine McLaughlin is the founder CEO and Lead trainer for Elevateus training. As a national expert on sexuality, she trains professionals, parents, and individuals to become sexual self-advocates and peer sexual educators. She's the author of Sexuality Education for people with developmental disabilities curriculum. She has developed two online courses and a three-day certification training. She has spent the past 25 years of her career committed to elevating the status of all people which is why she is named her growing company Elevateus training check out disarming disabilities website to find out more about Katherine.

**Nicole:**

Catherine hello! We're so glad to have you here. Can you please tell us a little bit about your professional Journey? How did you get where you are today? And specifically how did you become interested in sexual trainings?

**Katherine:**

Yeah, so I started working right out of college for Planned Parenthood of Northern New England in New Hampshire. And I'd always wanted to work at a place like Planned Parenthood. I liked the the mission of your organization and the feel of your organization. And so I started to working in the health center there at Planned Parenthood and then I became an educator and trainer so that's sort of the beginning in my 20s. And I ended up working there for 22 years and loved just about every minute of it.

But I also early on when I was an educator. I had an accident and and have a spinal cord injury. So I started using a wheelchair early in my you know, I was 26. So all of a sudden people were treating me differently, even though I was the exact same person, right? So

if someone I think born with the disability you have that experience the whole your whole life where I was able-bodied and then became disabled.

So all of a sudden, you know, I was like at this different person. And so I think personally I started wondering like what about sexuality and disability and you know some experiences that I've had it when I was in rehab for my injury and things like that. So I started to become sort of personally interested and then at the same time a lot of special educators were reaching out to work specifically with people with developmental disabilities.

So I started that work and I wasn't afraid of that work. It was a really interested in that work and there wasn't a curriculum sexuality education curriculum. There were a few out there when I first did this work, but I thought okay I want to start I need to create a curriculum- There isn't anything and a lot of people want to be able to to teach these classes. So I started as an educator. This is sort of you know, my aha moment. I was like, okay, I'm the educator. I'm going to create the curriculum. I'm going to teach the curriculum and I started working with Green Mountain Self-Advocates. So it's a group of people with developmental disabilities and they were like, no we want to be part of writing the curriculum and we also want to be one of the teachers of the curriculum and I was like, yes, of course, do you do, you know.

So that was a good you know, I don't know everything. Oh I started working with them and the curriculum is designed to be team-taught between someone with a developmental disability in a professional.

So, you know sort of just different things come along in your life, right? And that's where my professional Journey kind of has gone. And one big piece of the curriculum is Sexual Self-Advocacy. So how do you how do you advocate for yourself to be in a relationship to have privacy to ask for sexuality education. Also in a relationship-how do you advocate for yourself as well? So that that whole theme is threaded through the curriculum as well.

So that's kind of a and I did do lots of trainings and things and then three years ago I started this particular business Elevatus training. I've been doing this on the side. I've had other jobs and I would do trainings and sell the curriculum and things like that and teamed up with a friend who's a business coach and she you know, really helped me get some structure and how can you run a business around your passion? And so I've been doing that for I think almost 3 years full time. So have be able to I've been able to career out of.

**Sarah:**

It that's amazing. And so awesome and so much needed! That's incredible! Can you speak a little bit on what it was like working with the self-advocates and sort of maybe what were some things that you are finding in your training that when you were

building the curriculum initially, that then you maybe didn't think of, or what are some things that they really brought to the table that you're like- Okay. Yes, like these are components that are really essential to be built into program?

**Katherine:**

Yeah, first question I asked was why do you want and need sexuality education? and you know, they had a bunch of responses to that. So I think that helped guide like what was important to them? I think part of it is that sexual self-advocacy that self-advocates say that it's harder to be a sexual self-advocate than a regular self-advocate that when they ask to get a job or live on their own people go "Okay. Great. Yeah, what do you need to you know what? Let's write down your goal. Let's figure out the steps to getting there" But when they say I want to start "dating or want to have privacy in my room" they get this sort of awkwardness.

And so I think that definitely came up as an important concept and that they also have to advocate for the right -where most people the assumption is that you will be in some kind of a relationship as you grow up, right? I mean, maybe not everybody but people with disabilities the assumption is that they won't. And so sexual self-advocacy is saying "I want this even if I have a developmental disability, this is something that I want in my life."

So I think that's a piece that was nothing. I had used with the general population before

**Nicole:**

I love that and I love that you are bringing in specifically a toolbox and educational toolbox saying here are concrete steps that that you can talk that we can talk about you can talk about we all can talk about and ways to talk about it and ways to practice. When you when you are first encountering a group where you're bringing them this toolbox what usually are the stigmas specifically specifically associated with intellectual disabilities that you're going up against?

**Katherine:**

Yeah. I mean, I think that the big one as if they're not sexual that they don't have any desire or dreams or and so they don't need this information. So often times I will be working with 50 year olds with developmental disabilities. That don't know how babies are made right? I mean just basic information self-advocates have told me that they were in the mainstream health class learning about nutrition and physical activity and when the sexuality unit started they were removed from the class. Right so I mean, right I mean who know

**Nicole:**

WHAT?!

**Katherine:**

Yeah -my exact, and I -you know, I'm like wow, this was maybe 10 years ago. This person told me this, you know wasn't the 1930s that were talking about. So they were actually removed which is this message of "you don't need this this isn't for you." And so I think that's really the hard piece is having people realize that everyone is a sexual being from birth to death. And it does sexual being doesn't mean you're having sex. It means that you have a sexuality. And so I think that's the biggest that certain people are sexual not people with disabilities. And I think as a culture we you know, we're not good at that. Anyway, we have a pretty narrow box of who we consider is a sexual being. So a lots of people get that feeling of being left out of the picture of who is a sexual being. so So yeah, so I think that's it. Also thinking of them as children too. So they you know, and I'm always saying that you want to base it on the biological age of the person. So if it's a 21 year old with a developmental disability and a 21 year old without they need the same topics. How you teach might be a little bit different based on somebody's cognitive ability, but not what you teach. Because biology happens feelings happen all those things. So they need the exact same topics, where a lot of people might look at it and say oh well, their cognitive ability is like a five-year-old. So we're just going to teach this 30 year old what five-year-olds need which doesn't work. Right?

So I think those two sort of thinking of them as children and not as sexual beings.

**Sarah:**

Right that when we're talking about the sort of like it's not the 30s anymore and sort of not having access to sexual education -or just health education. I mean that's that's these are Health topics. It reminded me of when I was in my disability studies through occupational therapy that that's when I first learned that like eugenics were happening and sort of about that disabilities intellectual disabilities and developmental disabilities was a particularly -group that were being forced into sterilization.

So just sort of a It's a history that we come from that's happened within the past 100 years and how so much of that stigma still exists. It significantly better than that thankfully, but there that's still like we're roots of the stigma come from because sometimes I'm like it is 2020. We should be over these things, but we're not.

**Katherine:**

Yeah, it's sort of like it might not be to the same degree as for sterilization, but it's still there in some ways write a sort of discriminating against people saying they can't make their own choices. And another topic that I was thinking about to when we were talking about what are some different topics. You know, one of the pieces is just body autonomy and knowing that your body is your own. Because many people with developmental disabilities are really taught to do what they're told. And you know, and so there's a the self-advocacy movement is all about speaking up and you get in to decide what you want in your life. But there's so much when I'm working with people with developmental disabilities and I say "it's your body you get to decide what's right for you"and then I might put give a little pressure something they give in- they comply

to me and "I say no no, it's your body" Like I'm do this name tag game where they can put their name tag on the left side of the right side. And then I say, "well, I'm a teacher. I think you need to move it" and they start to I move it rather than "no. It's my body I get to decide what's right for me." I mean that's good for all of us. Right? So that's a big piece is really helping helping people learn how to say no to authority and to say no to anyone.

**Nicole:**

Yes, all of that makes so much sense and and yeah relating it back to- I feel like my experience with my disability it has been taking steps to learn how to do that. In situations where big or small where I am being told or directed in a way that people think, perhaps is best for me, and learning to speak up can be it can be hard but it certainly is helpful again, when you're given this this toolbox and you're given the chance to to practice practice the situations out loud.

I feel like Sarah and I talked about that a lot as much as you can set up children, to to know okay, you're going to be in situations where you know people people are going to come up and do the you know, "oh bless you, you're so extra special and God anointed you" and all of these different things. "Let's pray for your healing that you'll grow another hand back, right?" That's a situation that Sarah and I specifically encounter and I'm sure you have in your personal life as well have encountered that so the more that you can specific situations, you know, you're going to be in you can give them that tool belt. So when it's happening you can say, "oh wait, I have practiced this. I know that this thought process maybe isn't correct, even if that person thinks that it is and here is my appropriate response to that maybe to educate them or to advocate for myself or both."

**Katherine:**

All right. It doesn't seem like that. I mean you're just making me think of you know, just whether whatever disability it is. It is when or any difference when people make assumptions about you and push things on to you. How do you not have that get in? You know, how do you sort of protect yourself from people's thoughts and beliefs and yeah, not easy.

**Nicole:**

It's not easy and I feel like the more that I've been able to identify them and isolate them. I feel like that helped me not only kind of compartmentalize them, but then again be ready when we that time comes. And you know which is why I love so much what you are doing is you are bringing that toolbox into spaces for both educators and for those who need to advocates for themselves, which I think is amazing.

So yeah, can you tell us a little bit more about your business were are a group of, Sarah and I. are a group of teachers today and we have now hired your services to come in.

What can we expect if we're sitting down? Down with you either online or in person?

**Katherine:**

Yeah, you know I do different trainings but in general one particular training that I'm doing now is a three-day training and lots of teachers will come to that. And so what they're going to get out of that they're going to be able to work with three different populations. They're going to be able to teach people with developmental disabilities about sexuality. They're going to be able to lead staff trainings as well on how to you talk about sexuality one-on-one with someone with a disability and then all the third one is how do you lead parent workshops for parents on how do you talk to your own children?

So sort of three ways of getting the information to people with disabilities. So they'll learn that, they'll get a curriculum. They so you as teachers you would get all the skills to being a good sexuality educator. You'd learn about things like how to figure out what your values are around sexuality and how do you set those aside so you're not imposing them on someone else like one of your students. So that's something you would learn as a professional as a parent. I do more do very similar skills. But I do say as a parent you can share your values. That's your job as a parent. Share your values.

Professionals really have to learn how to not share their values. And since we're in a culture that doesn't really talk about sexuality much - people often rely on their values as a way to teach so they say, "oh don't do that!" From their values rather than well. What do you think about that and you know sort of how do you reflect it back to other people to figure out what they believe and what they think rather than imposing your value. So the sexuality education is fact-based not value based and we just have to be careful because sometimes we think something is a fact when it's actually a value.

So someone might say, oh when two people love each other they have sexual intercourse. Course and make a baby. Right? Well part of that is true. Not at you. Don't always love each other. Right? I mean that's a value that you're versus like a fact which is sometimes people don't love each other and have intercourse and have babies right? I mean, that's true.

So you have to always say is this true? is this a fact? or is this just this my value? And I think that's hard for people to do. So, that's a helpful tool and then I give lots of tools on. How do you answer questions different models, you can use that help you kind of answer questions, you know, especially if you're uncomfortable with something. You know, how do you if someone asks you a question, you know, there's a five-step process that you go through and it helps you kind of do a needs assessment and figure out what they know and what the question really is and then you can answer it simply -and so tools like that as well for teachers as well. As you know, how do you create an

environment and the classroom where people can speak up and ask questions and be who they are and not be worried or scared as well.

Another piece with teaching people with developmental disabilities as a very high rate of sexual abuse among this population. I don't know if you heard the National Public Radio series on people with developmental disabilities and sexual abuse and really there's you know, they looked at National crime statistics and it looks like people with developmental disabilities are 7X more likely than someone without a disability to be sexually abused and women with developmental disabilities are 12X more likely so that's a big deal. You know, just how do we prevent that and how do we give people- so you might have someone in your class that has gone through some kind of trauma sexual trauma- And so how can you make your classroom safe but also how to be trauma-informed as well, which is another piece of work that I do.

So, how do you make sure people know the topics that are coming up make sure you warn, you know, let people know that you're going to take a picture out of a you know, a body part sexual part or something, you know sort of how do you create a space where people feel like they're there they're safe or as safe as they can be. And that they're not going to be surprised by something. So that's another piece of what I teach as well.

**Nicole:**

That's amazing. I mean those the statistics that you're sharing, you know are just heart-wrenching and I'm wondering and maybe maybe there isn't a known answer to this question. What what steps can we take as a society help combat that? what what is currently being done to try to address that like what how do we fix that?

**Katherine:**

Well, first of all, I think it's really important to say that the reason that there's abuse is that people are abusing, you know, and that the only way for it to stop is for them to stop right? I think one way that people are trying to manage this is they are doing more background checks on people who are going to be working with people with disabilities. And then you know, we can also teach people what sexual abuse is and how do you speak up then? What do you do if someone believe you the people that are most at risk are often times people with severe developmental disabilities rely on someone to do a lot of their care and may not be able to speak up. May not be verbal and they're really at risk right, but I think you know the more we can teach what it is and that you it's your body and you get to decide what's right for you and it's okay to say no and get out of there and but I you know, yeah.

**Nicole:**

I'm wondering if you would be willing to share a little bit about your own disability journey with us and in with that how that plays in to the job that you do every day now. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, so I think just I'll do the job part. I think one thing because I use

a wheelchair- So I think that when I'm teaching I have no people with developmental disabilities feel like I understand them on some level, you know, even though it's not the same disability, but I'm part of this club, right? And they're part of the club and we're all part of the club. And so that gives me some credibility and people have said, you know, "you really understand what I'm going." So or you know so I can so people feel like I can relate to them. So I think that's that's really helpful.

I also think that when I work with professionals and parents, it does give me some credibility as well, you know around just disability culture. Which a lot of people don't know a lot about disability culture. And so I'm often times teaching people about the language you want to use and you know, what's the sort of current thinking in the disability community? So I think that really helps in my work as well. So I've got some credibility I think for that and yeah.

I think we'll just sort of my own Journey with disability as I mentioned, I was 26, and all the sudden was using a wheelchair. And you know, I think as I'm sure you can imagine it was really hard in the beginning, and now you know like I'll say to people I rarely think about it. But I think it's been so interesting just how I'm treated and how I have two hats. I have two kids who are in their 20s and I had them after you know, I had them as a woman in a wheelchair and just some of the things you know that people said along the way or are amazing.

I mean not not in a positive way, but you know when I had a baby, the nurse one of the nurses said "have you thought about how you're going to take care of it?" you know, and I just I felt like a Teen Mom, you know, like just this assumption that I couldn't take care of this child or people ask like was I in a wheelchair because of the pregnancy versus like being in a wheelchair and deciding to have a baby and you know, so just those just the assumption one as I just say a person with a disability doesn't decide to have a baby. And you know do it the regular way to. So a lot of those messages- I think I got and I think some of the other ones and I don't you may have had an experience like this as well.

But this I remember getting out of my car and I take my chair apart and put all the wheels on everything and someone was getting out of their car and she Big leg brace on it was like a temporary thing, you know that she was struggling with and she said to me I was feeling sorry for myself until I saw you right

**Sarah and Nicole:**

NOOOO!

**Katherine:**

and I said, what? I'm fine. What are you doing out? So this idea that my life is so awful. You know, I feel like there's a lot of that. And a lot of like you're a hero as well like oh, you know, you're amazing and I just feel like we're all heroes or none of us are heroes,

you know, like, you know what I'm talking about. Yeah, so I think it and also just like questions and I don't know if the two of you get questions but really personal questions, like what happened to you? like that's like that's personal! and I don't think there's sort of no boundaries with people with disabilities, you know sort of like the pregnant woman touch their belly, right? You never touch anyone else's belly. And so that's always surprising to me when people say what happened to you like I'm going to dig up all this these past things and tell a stranger? No!

**Nicole:**

These are the exact like moments and encounters that I feel like even in talking about the work that you do but like in our daily life, we have to have those tiny moments to learn how to advocate for herself and no I don't want my teacher told me to move my name tag, but I want to keep it here. So I'm going to speak up for myself. You know, you have to be be ready in those moments and. But also so many of those microaggression moments that is constantly the world telling us how we think we should be seen right? Because the rest of the world is seeing us in that way.

So yeah, it really does. I feel like especially in the work that you're doing it gives you such an advantage because you're right- it's not always exactly the same thing it being intellectual disabilities which comes with a different different kind of Rolodex of barriers, but still that idea of stigma - and that idea of just like ridiculous questions coming at you. You don't just get it you *geeeeeet* it and I think that's so so valuable for you to have in your toolbox. And I'm so glad that you can bring that into the trainings that you have because because you do have the compassion and empathy that goes along with it. That's that wasn't a question. That was a comment. We want to be respectful of your time. So, is there anything that you feel like you haven't had a chance to speak to or about that you'd like to share with us?

**Katherine:**

Yeah. I mean, I think we covered a lot of it. But I mean I think one of the things I'm always sort of making sure comes to the to the top is you know, lots of times people will think that all the work I do is with professionals, but you know people people with developmental disabilities are learning how to be sexuality Educators as well and I'm working in Michigan and we've got all these teams trained to teach sexuality.

So I mean that whole idea of someone with a developmental disability being one of the teachers and what what does that do for you as a person in the class, you know, and I just I'm always trying to put self-advocates like my first, you know, I'll say I work with self-advocates parents and staff because I feel like they're really the ones I want to reach either with information about sexuality or would like you can be part of the solution and you can be a teacher and you're a leader and yeah, yeah.

**Nicole:**

Thank you so much for giving us in a whole chunk of your time here.

**Katherine:**

You're welcome. Thank you both keep in touch.

**Sarah:**

Yes! Have good rest of your day. Yeah.

Thank you for spending part of your day with us. We want to give thanks to our Network Public House media. And for intro beats Jason Barnes with cybernetics for logo art. We want to remember Patrice. You can find his work at [normal person's.com](http://normalperson's.com).

**Nicole:**

Be sure to follow [disarming disability](#) on Facebook and Instagram. and lastly be sure to check out our website [disarming disability.com](http://disarmingdisability.com) where you can find all 13 Episodes of Season 1, links to resources, transcriptions, and discussion questions for each episode. Check out our blog where we feature amazing Disability Advocates.