

Walk the Talk Radio: Monica Moshenko and DisAbility News and Views

Wanted: 50-year-old single mom with little money and no media experience—holding a full-time day job while raising an autistic child—to launch weekly radio talk show for the disabled community. Major media outlets largely indifferent, but people with disabilities likely to tune in. Exhausting hours with no assistants; blind faith and fierce determination a plus.

This imaginary classified ad is one that Monica Moshenko might have unwittingly answered last year after the owner of a small, family-owned country radio station in Lancaster, New York agreed to rent her an hour every Sunday evening for a talk show focusing on people with disabilities.

Lou Schriver, owner of WXRL—1300 AM, had never considered a talk show; WXRL's staple fare is country western music during the week with religious programming and specialty shows such as "Polkamotion" on Sundays. But Schriver liked Moshenko's spirit and appreciated what she was trying to do. He agreed to sell her the 5 pm to 6 pm slot—between "The German Show with Herman Endres" and "Stephanie's Polka Show"—for something she called "DisAbility News and Views." Moshenko went live in June 2004 and has been on the air every Sunday since.

Moshenko's unlikely journey began in 2000, when her 6-year-old son, Alexander, was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism. Moshenko explained that, on the autism spectrum, Asperger's is considered the "highest functioning," meaning that, to most observers, Alex appears normal. Only through regular contact does Alex's disability become apparent—difficulty forming friendships, inability to understand social cues, clumsy movements, one-sided conversations, and a hyper-sensitivity to sound and touch.

"It took a long time before Alex was diagnosed," Moshenko said and she began an exhaustive regimen of research to learn more. "Not only did I want to learn as much as I could

about Asperger's Syndrome and how it affected my son specifically. I also needed to know what my son's rights were under federal law and New York State law. I began a quest to seek out as much information as I could through training and workshops, along with having knowledgeable and experienced advocates working with me as I learned the laws."



Monica Moshenko was inspired to create a show about disabilities based on her experience with her son Alexander, who has Asperger's syndrome.

Once the support and educational services that her son needed had been secured, Moshenko says, "I wanted to help others who had struggled like me. There are just too many." She began a small consulting agency called Power Advocates (www.poweradvocates.org) to help promote awareness of special education laws for parents and, in 2002, she helped organize the first "Inaugural Walk for Autism" in nearby Buffalo, which drew over 3,000 people and raised nearly \$100,000 for the National Alliance for Autism Research (NAAR). The following year she did it again and raised over \$90,000.

From her research and her determined activism on behalf of her son, Moshenko discovered in

herself a profound personal sympathy for all individuals with disabilities, not just autism. At the same time, she discovered a new direction in life. "Alex was the catalyst for everything I've been able to accomplish," she said. "He keeps me grounded about what's important. I see life differently. I have more purpose."

In early 2004, Moshenko decided that a live call-in talk show could reach far more people with disabilities and there was, potentially, a huge demand for such a program. "In this country, there are talk shows about money, politics, sports, entertainment, you name it," she said. "The only subject not being talked about is disability. And eighty-five percent of the population will acquire a disability at some point in their lives. People don't realize how important this is. It's going to happen to most of us sooner or later."

And, as the saying goes, Moshenko fully intended to not just "talk the talk," but "walk the walk" as well.

With two months leave from her job at the University of Buffalo to recover from a minor neurological disorder, Moshenko began researching the business of radio and sending out proposals for a special talk show devoted solely to the issues of people with disabilities. "I wrote to every major network in the country, trying to explain the seriousness of the problem and how people were so uninformed about disability." But, as it turned out, none of the majors wanted anything to do with it. "They weren't interested. They said they didn't have any time slots available or they couldn't see the demand for a talk show devoted to issues of the disabled."

But Moshenko was undeterred. "It took perseverance, knocking on every door, and never giving up," she says. Finally she crossed paths with Lou Schriver at WXRL, and with a small inheritance that she received when her mother passed away, Moshenko bought the air time she needed to get DisAbility News and Views off the ground.

The station reaches northern Pennsylvania, western New York, and southern Ontario, Canada—with a potential audience of about five million listeners, she said. Each show is broadcast live. Moshenko conducts telephone interviews with her featured guests, all experts in some aspect of disability, and then fields questions and comments from listeners. The programs are taped and archived on a Web site (www.disabilitynewsradio.com) where they can be downloaded at no charge by anyone with access to a computer.

Recent guests have included Gary Meyerson, a nationally known attorney specializing in helping families get the appropriate special education for children with disabilities; Rob Davies, CEO of Disability Access 4 Me, an Internet-based information exchange; Max Donatelli, Executive Director of Parent Network of Western New York; Stanley D. Klein, PhD, Director of DisABILITIESBOOKS, Inc.; S'Wayne a noted rap and gospel music personality who also has a disability; Jim Steinke, founder of HOPE, Inc., which offers an equipment lending program for children with disabilities; and Joseph Valenzano, publisher of *Exceptional Parent* magazine.

“The personal stories are what’s important,” she said. “I learn about someone new each week; it’s an honor for me to talk with them. It doesn’t matter what the disability is, everyone has a story, an interesting human interest story about how they cope.”

But it’s a one-person operation. Moshenko does it all: books guests, conducts interviews, schedules shows, handles marketing and advertising, recruits sponsors, raises money, and attends to every detail. She estimates that she spends between 60 and 70 hours per week preparing and marketing the show—which is in addition to her regular full-time job at the University of Buffalo. A self-confessed “Internet junkie,” Moshenko is continually developing media lists, contact names and addresses, searching for marketing opportunities, and coming up with creative ways to get the word out.

Money, too, is a constant worry. Her small inheritance is long spent. “Now the money’s gone and I’m paying air time fees out of my own pocket,” she said. “We had our gas turned off at home for two months last summer because I used the money to pay the radio station instead of the gas bill.”

The program currently has seven corporate sponsors and Moshenko says that with a few more she could cover her costs for air time. “The easy part is getting guests. People want to be on the show. They want to get their message out. The hard part is getting sponsors, convincing companies in the disability community what a deal I’m offering. My rates are very low; this is the most cost-effective medium available, but it’s like pulling teeth.”

She adds, “I don’t make anything on this. It’s not about the money. It’s about making a difference. I just want to get the message out there.”

“Disability News and Views” was also recently syndicated on the Global Talk Radio network, a dominant force in the internet talk radio industry available 24 hours per day.

Moshenko says that, despite the headaches, listener response has been gratifying. “The show fills an amazing void out there. I get constant feedback from listeners telling me how grateful they are that I’m doing the show and how important it is to them.” Moshenko’s dream is to someday have the program syndicated across the country. Until then, she intends to “write to everyone and keep knocking on doors. This is real human interest, important human interest. People need to understand people with disabilities.”

For Moshenko, the experience has changed her whole approach to life. “It’s a blessing for me to be doing this,” she says. And the patience, tolerance, and good humor that she sees again and again in people with disabilities has put her own occasional troubles into clear perspective. “They don’t complain, they’re grateful for everything they get. I just pray: ‘Help me be more like them.’”

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