

ARISE Podcast 096 Merger: EFR and ARISE

Host Tania Anderson, CEO of ARISE

Guest Bruce Drake, CEO of EFR

Transcription:

Tania Anderson 0:00

Music.

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson, CEO at ARISE, and it's my real pleasure to have with me today. Bruce Drake, who is the CEO at Exceptional Family Resources, otherwise known as EFR. Welcome Bruce.

Bruce Drake 0:17

Thank you, Tania. I'm happy to be here

Tania Anderson 0:19

So, we are together because we're recording this in mid-September 2024, and on September 11, we've made a really exciting announcement that EFR and ARISE are going to merge. What is your take on why this partnership is going to be such a success?

Bruce Drake 0:38

That's a great question. Thanks. So, thank you for having me. Let me just say that I think the world of ARISE and the services that you provide, thank you. When we're looking for partners in our space as a not for profit, it's a very small list of people that we feel comfortable that from a cultural standpoint, and also from a mission standpoint that we think we connect really well with at EFR, we provide all services one on one in the community, but we only provide services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and then we look at an organization like ARISE, who provides services to people of all abilities and disabilities through many different counties, and we just think those are people that we want to spend more time with. So that's why I think this is going to work out well for both organizations, just because we think so highly of each other and we have similar missions.

Tania Anderson 1:36

Great. I also think very highly of the work that you do and that EFR does, and I think you couldn't be more accurate in terms of the philosophy and the missions you know it ARISE. We talk about the

Independent Living philosophies being the foundation of what we do as an independent living center. But it's really not too different from the way that you approach your work at EFR. And can you tell people a little bit about when we use terms like person centered, and one on one, there's more to it than the language. What do you think that really means?

Bruce Drake 2:09

So, I think our job is to allow people to help people to live the lives that they want to live. Right? It's getting to know people, understanding what's important to them, understanding what barriers they might be facing to live the lives that they want to live. And then as a service provider, we should then be going in and helping them, either by filling the gaps for things that they just don't yet have the skills to do or helping them learn the skills to achieve the things that they're looking to achieve. So, we never want to be about 10 people in a classroom with two staff working with somebody. We always want to be one staff person working with somebody, either in the house where they live or in the community where they participate and support them in that role. And that's how that's what I believe person centered planning, or person centeredness is, is really just working with people to achieve their goals in the way that they want the help to have.

Tania Anderson 3:14

You know, I couldn't agree with you more, and you basically articulated the independent living philosophy. So, it is the same kind of language, different language, rather, for the same philosophy. And a part of that, which is kind of hard for some service providers to get their heads around, is that sometimes the people that come to us are going to make a choice or a decision that we don't agree with, but they're their own person, and they get to make those decisions.

Bruce Drake 3:41

That really is tough. We're not parental in how we do things, but sometimes I think about it, in regards to my two daughters, and that you give people the information, or you make sure that they have the information that they need to make a decision, and then you allow them to make the decision that they feel is the right one. And though every part of you is screaming that is not the right, you have to allow people to do that right. And there's, there is, you know, they call it the dignity of risk, which I think is a good term, and that people have the right to fail as much as they have the right to succeed. And there's a learning process that goes through that failure. So, though I always want to keep people safe, and sometimes I want to wrap people up in a bubble, it's just not the right way to do things. People get to live their lives the way that they want to live.

Tania Anderson 4:30

Right and a lot of times when we fail, we learn more from that failure than if we just had smooth sailing.

Bruce Drake 4:36

I had a bit of a misspent youth in my younger days, and it's the things that I learned during my 18, 19, 20 and 21, year old Bruce learned that really helped me, still to this day, about how the way to do things right and how the way to do things wrong.

Tania Anderson 4:52

Well, that sounds like another podcast! Bruce Drake Completely different title for that podcast. Tania Anderson But let's talk about your background, because you started as a direct service professional.

Bruce Drake 5:01

I did now say this is the middle of September, so it was 40 years ago I started working as a direct support professional on Long Island for Nassau AHRC. I worked at Nassau AHRC for about nine years, including three of which my wife and I had an apartment inside of an IRA, where we spent a lot of time.

Tania Anderson 5:24

And in IRAs, sometimes people would call it a group home.

Bruce Drake 5:28

A group home, it's an IRA stands for individualized residential alternative, and generally speaking, it's all the two that I lived in one house had seven people with developmental disabilities who lived in the house, and we had a one bedroom apartment there. And then the second house was a home where eight people lived, and we had a one-bedroom apartment there. And you know, we would, we would be there on Christmas, and we'd be there on Thanksgiving, and we would work and support them and living independent lives. And then after that, I moved up to Columbia County, New York, which is just south of Albany, and I worked for an organization called Cowork, where I was the Chief Operating Officer, but supervised a number of programs for OPWDD.

Tania Anderson 6:15

So how do you think that work as a direct service professional informs the work you do in your administrative role.

Bruce Drake 6:23

I think it gives an understanding, I think if you haven't done the direct support professional role before, I don't know if you really understand the connection that you can make with somebody that you're supporting, and how, even though it's a professional relationship, it feels so much more than that, how they can certainly feel like a close friend or even a family member at times, and how you can live and die with the decisions or the successes that the person you're working with has, unless you've done that role, I don't think, I think sometimes administrators who haven't had the personal connection don't grasp how important that is as part of the process. You know, I could be the best CEO in the world, and maybe someday I will be, but unless we have really good DSPs who are doing the work, it really doesn't matter. So, you really, if you have a good DSP, you can change somebody's life.

Tania Anderson 7:22

I completely agree. And you know, here at ARISE, many of us that work here, we have disabilities ourselves, or we've got family members with a disability, and so it's a similar kind of thing, and that there's a really personal stake and a personal connection to that that informs the work that you do, whether you're working in finance or HR it or in a program, whatever it is. And you know, my daughter has a developmental disability, and I've had DSPs in my house for a very long time, and they are some of the most creative people I have ever encountered, and they're way more fun than me as a mom.

Bruce Drake 8:01

That's easy to imagine, but. Tania Anderson Oh! Stop!

Tania Anderson 8:05

So, let's talk a little bit about the community aspect. Because I think another thing that makes a really good match between ARISE and EFR is the fact that everything we do is inclusive in the community. No certified settings, the strategies always, how do I figure out how to make this person successful in the community with what they want to do? How important is that to you, and in terms of how you look at the work that we do, and what sort of progress have you seen in that over your time in the field.

Bruce Drake 8:41

I'll start with the progress question. First, you know, I've been in the field for a long time, like I said, and I think in the beginning, everything was in pretty much certified sites where we would put people on busses, and we would pick up, you know, 10 or 15 people with disabilities, and take them to a location and they would sit in a room with people who only had disabilities or people who were

paid to be with them, and we would teach them skills that they may or may not have needed to be successful, but it was with the regulations required, and over the, you know, certainly over the last 30 years, but I think more so over The last five or 10, you know, there's been much more of an effort to make services self-directed, giving people that we support control over who's going to be working with them and where they're going to be working. And I just think, from my perspective, is that I think you're much more likely to be successful learning to cook, if you're learning to cook in your kitchen, as opposed to someone else's kitchen, and then having to translate those skills of somewhere else, and you're much more successful learning to navigate, you know, walking down the street and crossing the street, if you're doing it in an area that you're familiar, maybe you're probably already more comfortable there already, but that's where the majority of the time you can do spending activities is going to happen anyway. I think it makes sense for anybody, if you're learning a new skill, to learn it on in a place that you feel comfortable and with people who make you feel comfortable and people of your choosing. And it's easily translatable into what your everyday life is going to be. So, I think that movement from the center base to the more individualized just it's a much better service to people than bringing them somewhere else.

Tania Anderson 10:32

One of the things we've been talking about in terms of person centeredness and inclusion in the community that goes along with that is advocacy, and, you know, as an independent living center, advocacy is one of the primary responsibilities at ARISE. But I am certain that EFR staff are also engaged in advocacy, maybe not so much on a systems level, but on an individual level. How do you see that work complementing

Bruce Drake 11:04

So, you're right. We do have a number of individuals that we support who might struggle with something or need supports that they're not getting, that our staff are very active in that individual's life and getting them the supports that they need, whether it's funding, whether it's services that they're not receiving, whether it's just support in the school district in which they're attending, there's a number of ways that we advocate on an individual basis. I think where we're going to benefit EFR is that learning from ARISE on how to advocate on a more system wide basis. It's not something that we are currently strong at. But I think ARISE really is, and I think in reading more about ARISE in your history, I think it's it's littered with places where advocacy has happened and really made an impact on the communities in which you provide services. So, I think we're very much advocates on an individual level, and we're looking to learn more about being advocates on a system wide level.

Tania Anderson 12:09

And we can't wait to do that work together. And really, I see advocacy certainly on those levels, but sometimes it's an act of advocacy just to have someone with a disability fully included and with no apologies, no explanation, this is who I am. Sometimes that's the most radical thing you can do.

Bruce Drake 12:33

Yeah, this might not be appropriate story, but I have a nephew who has who just has a son who has autism, and his son is five years old, and they're really struggling, I think, like most parents do with going out in the community with their son, because I think there's a little bit of embarrassment. They don't want to put their son into a situation where he might not feel comfortable or might not be successful, and he hasn't gotten a lot of support from his family. And recently they came to visit, and we went to all sorts of places, you know, parks and to the zoo, and all places where Declan could just be Declan. And they were very emotional talking about it when they got back to the house, because they've never gone on vacation before. They've never really gone anywhere. So, when you talk about letting people just be themselves, with not being embarrassed and no apologies necessary. I think of people like my nephew and his son who struggle with that, but now are saying that, you know, this isn't something to be embarrassed ever to hide away from. You know, we have a right to be out in the community, just like everybody else.

Tania Anderson 13:38

Absolutely, and that's how we change the world. So as we wrap up this conversation, let me say again how excited I am about the partnership. What's your vision for what our combined organizations are going to be doing? Say, a year from now, two years from now?

Bruce Drake 13:59

That's a big question. I think together, we're going to be able to learn from each other and really amplify our strengths, minimize our weaknesses. Not to say that ARISE has any weaknesses, or EFR has any weaknesses, but really maximize our strengths. I think by coming together, I think we're going to be able to be a better employer. I think we're going to have more opportunities for our staff. I think we're going to make it harder for the good staff to leave. We're going to create an environment where people want to spend the rest of their careers. And I think from a service provision standpoint, having 1500 staff who are like minded and believe in a mission. I think is going to make us a better service provider, and hopefully provide people with the opportunities that they want and need

Tania Anderson 14:51

And will change the world!

Bruce Drake 14:52

And, we'll change one person at a time.

Tania Anderson 14:54

Great, thank you so much, Bruce. It's real pleasure to be working with you and now and in the future.

Bruce Drake 14:59

You too, Tania, thank you so much.

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