

# Debbie Kunz / Dave Allison, Broomfield Out Loud interview (2023-11-09 09:16 GMT-7) - Transcript

## Attendees

David Allison, David Allison's Presentation, Debbie Kunz

## Transcript

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**David Allison:** Also going to follow up by sending you a permission form to include the oral history in our collection. So we'll do that piece of it as well. So great.

**Debbie Kunz:** excellent

**David Allison:** So I guess I just wanted to start by asking you a little bit more about your personal story. So how you ended up with Bal Swan and kind of what your journey has been in early childhood and that sort of thing. Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah, thanks for asking. I grew up.

**David Allison:** right through

**Debbie Kunz:** In a professional Medical family and I always loved children. My teenage years I babysat all the time and I loved children and families and yet I was good at my academic subjects. So there was a lot of pressure to be something else, so I went to school. I went to college thinking I was going to study math or accounting and I did that for a couple of years and then I went and spent my junior year in Germany, the whole year.

**David Allison:** Wow.

**Debbie Kunz:** And during that time. Of course a lot of soul searching happens when you're abroad for your first time ever at 19 or 20 years old.

**David Allison:** Right, right.

**Debbie Kunz:** And I changed my major to German and the school I was attending didn't have any early childhood classes, but I switched and started studying education. So I graduated with this hodgepodge degree that had a major in German and then a lot of different other things.

**Debbie Kunz:** After I graduated from college I worked for an international nonprofit called "Up With People". Yes, so we traveled,...

**David Allison:** yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** All over the world doing community service and really using music and as a vehicle to bring people together in their common Humanity. And so you...

**David Allison:** Hey.

**Debbie Kunz:** I traveled all over then. I was actually hired to work in Germany Up With People doing PR and marketing. So I worked in Europe for a while and then through Up With People ended up meeting my husband and this whole idea after meeting him came back around. I wanted to do something with families and children, so I went back to school.

**Debbie Kunz:** And got enough credits to have Early Childhood credentials. And then low and behold I was pregnant with our first child and...

**David Allison:** You all right.

**Debbie Kunz:** We were living here at the time because Up With People's headquarters were in Broomfield and Interlochen. And we moved to Missouri where my husband could be a teacher and we could afford to live there and I could be more of a mom. And then I started doing child care at home and then worked for a parent's day out. So kind of doing part-time work and then when our daughter was one I ended up working part time in the job that really changed me in the early childhood world. It was a home visiting program called parents as teachers.

**Debbie Kunz:** And really at that time it really truly was the embodiment of everything I ever thought. I wanted a career because I really had a compulsion to help families and really believed in the power of the nuclear family and how the health of a family impacts children. So I got to do that.

**David Allison:** mmm, right

**Debbie Kunz:** So for over 20 years I was first a parent educator and really spent my time on the living room floor of family's homes with children, birth prenatal to age five, so kindergarten entry. helping parents learn about their child's development and empowering them in their ability to become the best parent that they could be and believing in themselves as their child's first and best teacher.

**Debbie Kunz:** So then I ended up growing with the organization as our kids got older. I became the director of the organization. I got much more academically involved with parents and teachers, The National Center for Parents and Teachers,...

**David Allison:** Okay.

**Debbie Kunz:** Parents and teachers received state funding in the state of Missouri. So it was a universal home visiting program. Then I went back to school and I got my masters in social work on the administrative side University of Missouri had two kinds of tracks, a clinical and administrative side. So I focused on the administrative side and wrote a curriculum for parents at Teachers National Center on reflective supervision.

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**Debbie Kunz:** And then this opportunity came literally we were ready to leave Missouri. It was time. Our kids were both in college and I was kind of dabbling in the world indeed and I got this email that says this job might interest you, balance one children center and I swear I went to the website and got so

emotional. Because there was this business entity that lists love as a core value. where do you find that and so, ...

**David Allison:** Mmm Yeah

**Debbie Kunz:** I really dug into the practice of Bal Swan and

**Debbie Kunz:** Luckily from Missouri. They gave me a phone interview and then a zoom interview and then an in person interview and this was really that next step when I felt like parents as teachers. Was that embodiment in the beginning? This was really that next step because I wanted to lead an organization. and I was leading the Parents Teachers program, but it was just a program within a very large school district.

**David Allison:** yeah, yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** And this was a place where I felt like I could really then enact more changes and I'm pretty compelled to see my ripple in the pond and wow, I can go to this place and shape this culture and make sure that their core value of Love is really being upheld.

**Debbie Kunz:** And I try to live it, of course in my personal life and the way I interact with people and in the way I lead and so to take that to the next level of leading an organization that was just perfect and literally I came here to the school and a board member came in and welcome to me and then I walked around the school and I was like, my gosh, this is perfect to the focus on the social emotional teaching and what I saw was what I think kids absolutely need which is a place that was meeting kids where they were.

**David Allison:** He yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** As a parent I was really frustrated with my kids having to fit into a mold that the school system wanted to create for them when they didn't really fit. I knew my own personal struggle and...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** Academia and

**Debbie Kunz:** I just felt like we have really failed our kids in many ways of really doing child focused holistic work and this is what we do at Bal Swan and of course, it's not perfect. But to be able to try to lead that charge is the best complement of all time. So that's a long answer to that journey.

**David Allison:** amazing No, that's wonderful. Thank you so much, Debbie, and I guess I kind of have a follow-up question which is kind of you mentioned in the mission, the piece about love being so important. What else do you think is distinctive or makes Bal Swan a place where clearly it's had a lot of success and continues to grow and develop but then what else kind of makes it what it is.

**Debbie Kunz:** I think probably two primary things outside of love. The child focused environment there is truly a commitment of everybody on this staff and the parents. to focus first on the child and seeing them as an individual learner. Then the second part is the commitment to the inclusive classroom.

**Debbie Kunz:** And I know this now, I know how much it costs. I know the emotional toll it takes on staff. And yet we have people here for whom that is their commitment.

**Debbie Kunz:** We obviously use this pyramid plus model that guides us in doing inclusion to the best of our ability. But then when I think about the impact that school has on children.

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**Debbie Kunz:** Their emotional development, their social development, their academic development. removing kids from peers isn't healthy. And I see this world we live in now. That is polarized and if we started at three and four years old and changed the way we saw the world and its strength and other people. We wouldn't even have this vitriol as adults. So I really believe that we are contributing to a kinder world by committing to that inclusive classroom and...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** People could start to call that a stretch and that's fine if they want to I believe it.

**David Allison:** Yeah, I'm getting a little choked up just talking about it right now because I see it in action and I see that benefit, in my own personal life with our son. So thank you for that appreciate that you'd mentioned pyramid plus could you describe that just a little bit more?

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah.

**David Allison:** I'm a little unfamiliar with

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah, the pyramid plus is actually the theoretical framework that we use here. It's an evidence-based framework. studied through Vanderbilt University and other universities around the country had this collaboration to study.

**Debbie Kunz:** Basically, utilizing the peer to create a successful inclusive environment. Really two things: the successful inclusive environment and mitigating challenging behaviors. So the framework is literally a pyramid that starts kind of like a hierarchy of needs. Start with this base level if you've got to have organizational capacity and will to do this work.

**David Allison:** right

**Debbie Kunz:** So it starts right with the business policies with all of that the way you treat your staff, how you hire people. So it starts there and then we get into the classroom where we actually measure certain things that the teachers are doing such as, how many positive deposits are you making in the child during the day as opposed to withdrawals of negative remarks? Is there affirmation occurring, is the environment set up? So everybody can be successful? I always will say Circle time at Val Swan is so encouraging because you see

**Debbie Kunz:** A cube chair, a flat chair, somebody sitting on the floor, somebody sitting on a ball, everybody is sitting on a different device that works for their body and their brain and yet they're all paying attention. So the focus is on the objective, not the activity. So the activity would be, we are all coloring the same thing or we're all learning the letter A. Maybe somebody's not in the place of learning the letter, maybe somebody's reading full sentences already. The objective is what is right for that individual learner and most schools focus on the common activity and they measure the child's success based on that common activity. So the pyramid plus kind of guides Us in individualizing the approach to the child and...

**David Allison:** right

**Debbie Kunz:** creating an environment where everybody can be successful.

**David Allison:** nice

**Debbie Kunz:** There it definitely emphasizes nurturing relationships between the teachers and the students. And then ultimately at the top of the pyramid what their research would say is that only about five percent of kids are going to have such extremely challenging behavior that you're going to need additional intervention.

**David Allison:** good.

**Debbie Kunz:** So there's data collection along the road and all those things. But really it's a framework that requires adults.

**Debbie Kunz:** To hold themselves accountable first to doing right for the child and...

**David Allison:** Interesting Yeah, yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** Then we can say wow did I set up this environment? maybe if I tweaked this or I did it this way or gosh, what if all day long, all they heard me saying was you're not standing in a straight line or whatever they're not doing right and are they hearing a deposit, you...

**David Allison:** interesting

**Debbie Kunz:** hearing an affirmation. So that's one of the things a tool that we use and that would actually have a standardized and validated measurement. So we go in and we measure all of our teachers and their fidelity to the pyramid model every year and we believe if we're at least 80% fidelity then that classroom should be a classroom of success for all learners. Yeah.

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**David Allison:** Nice, That's fantastic. one of the things I was thinking about as you were talking and it's just kind of how you lead your approach to leading a group of people that have a very hard job that is,...

**Debbie Kunz:** he

**David Allison:** very, challenging emotionally and physically, all of those pieces are true about what the teachers and aids and the various folks at the school do for the staff. And so I'm wondering, one of the things I noticed and appreciated about when our son was at Bal Swan was you modeled and you were out there with people side by side and supporting and I think that to me if I were a staff member, I would really appreciate that. But what are some other kinds of things that you found as a leader help you in supporting your staff?

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah, I'd say one thing is encouraging, network life balance. So, what we do is our full-time classes are only a seven-hour day. So that means the teacher can be here a half an hour before and half an hour afterwards. And that's an eight hour day. Then they also have one day a month where they have somebody come into their classroom for them, like a substitute so they can have a planning day. So giving them an opportunity to have balance in their life.

**Debbie Kunz:** It's something we do from an organizational level and...

**David Allison:** Thanks.

**Debbie Kunz:** That and I don't think that happens, in many places. Although I think this next generation is pushing that a little bit and that's not a bad thing. But it is difficult when there's a scarcity of resources. So I understand that too, So I think that's one encouraging work life balance. The other is the extra staff.

**Debbie Kunz:** Whom we employ and that's also the rub for me because we couldn't do this without Community Support. I mean, I spend a lot of my time trying to raise money for Bal Swan so we can do things with fidelity. So we have a coach who is trained in what would be called reflective supervision or transformational coaching and that person's job is to meet the teachers where they are as professionals. So we're still focused on the profession and the teaching and allowing that to then

**Debbie Kunz:** It allows the teacher to acknowledge how that work is impacting themselves emotionally. So, we must acknowledge that we bring ourselves into work good and...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** bad and there are any implicit biases that we have. And so a coach can help people work through that because what we know from research is that children of color, particularly black boys are targeted with behavioral challenges. They're suspended at any higher rate than any other demographic. Because there's an implicit bias there so the coach can help teachers.

**David Allison:** right

**Debbie Kunz:** zoom out a little bit

**Debbie Kunz:** and identify what variables might be impacting that relationship with the student and trying to keep it healthy. And that's an extra layer of support. So, what comes out of that is all types of different things and of course we try to keep it focused on work, but it keeps that emotional Wellness of the staff person also front and center and that's something that a business can do for their staff.

**David Allison:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Debbie Kunz:** Then you saw of course. I'm out and about all the time. I think a leader has to be visible. They have to lead by example. I don't steer away from difficult conversations. One of my most favorite quotes I ever heard. And I think it was from brene brown, but she said the health of an organization. has to do with how they manage conflict. so we

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**Debbie Kunz:** Have transparent communication. I don't like things to rest for a long time. If we need to bring something up. It's not an accusatory way. It's very much a curiosity kind of mindset but really addressing things right away and saying, you seem tired today what's going on meeting people...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** where they are and seeing the staff as humans and I don't do that perfectly because sometimes I get so hyper focused on work that I forget to see people is as humans, but I try to

**David Allison:** Yeah, no, that's fantastic. I really appreciate that and just really one of those things where I feel like this conversation could be put into a business podcast and would be super helpful for folks. So thank you really, really great. One of the things I wanted to ask about and I think we're kind of getting closer to the end of the conversation. I want to give you a chance if you have other things to say too, but one thing I wanted to ask about is just what kind of role Bal Swan in Broomfield and then Broomfield as a community and what that kind of feels like from your perspective just to kind of put on that a little bit.

**Debbie Kunz:** yeah, having come here from a poor town in the midwest moving to an area where there are resources and there's intention Community it has been fascinating to see because I see Bal Swan and many other nonprofits in Broomfield. emerging out of the community's desire to create something that reflects their values and that's exactly how I started. So I mean it was this Grassroots initiative families who said I don't want to institutionalize my child, but I don't know what to do and the community came together and rallied their resources to make this happen.

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** And now I mean luckily Broomfield does have the resources to sustain something like this and this should be a national model. We should be doing this all over the country and...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** we aren't In many times because of a scarcity of resources. So it's amazing to see what community can do one when they have the will and when they have the resource to do it.

**David Allison:** It means yeah, yeah. Absolutely now,...

**Debbie Kunz:** The means yeah.

**David Allison:** that's great. Thank you for that. I appreciate that. And yeah, it's fun at the Museum we of course talk about bouse on the man and people will say that's like the school and...

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah.

**David Allison:** we'll say that it's connection that's made it always a fun thing, and so yeah, but yeah, I think the role of the school and the community and what you just said as far as people coming together. Around this idea that hey we want a different model something that will be, hopefully transformative and help people who need that kind of support and that's just a wonderful thing. so thank you for sharing that.

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean I can't imagine the pride not in an arrogant kind of way. But the pride that some people must have felt knowing that Bal Swan still exists and that we are thriving like they created something that they knew in their heart was right, but you don't know...

**David Allison:** Yep.

**Debbie Kunz:** if it's gonna work and by God, it is worked and...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** I mean gosh and just so I just met this 89 year old woman who lives in Fort Collins now and Hoffman she was really the first higher of the foundation for exceptional children, and that's what this was

called before. It was about one Children's Center. It was so these parents apparently and you might if more the story I want to be corrected because I'm trying to tell it right.

**Debbie Kunz:** These parents got together and called this foundation for exceptional children and they were looking to hire somebody to be the teacher for their children and they had a community meeting and Dr. Bill Markle who was a physician in town went to the meeting.

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** He and Hoffman worked for him as a nurse. And apparently he called her in the next day at work. and in more ways than one basically gave her permission to leave his practice so he could be the teacher for these children and...

**David Allison:**

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**Debbie Kunz:** then the foundation hired her. And she was pretty Cutting Edge still is at 89 years old. She's awesome.

**David Allison:** Yeah. How cool that's great.

**Debbie Kunz:** I just got to meet her last week and...

**Debbie Kunz:** she come to the ball this year.

**David Allison:** Nice.

**Debbie Kunz:** She's amazing. But she was trying all kinds of innovative medical approaches with kids that you're using kind of bilateral function of their brain and various things the different types of stimulation.

**David Allison:** Good. Wow.

**Debbie Kunz:** It was some Italian word that she said it was really cool and she really wanted to do that and they saw good success with her kids and then the inclusive approach began when they were at Cold Cottage.

**Debbie Kunz:** So Boulder Valley School District, I think gave Cold Cottage then to the foundation. I don't know if they leased it or what and then some kids from Cole Elementary would come over at lunch time and play at the cottage with these other children with disabilities and...

**David Allison:** Me, yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** they would feed them and touch them and do all things and play with them and that's when these adults realized. my stars. These kids are not talking for me, but they're talking for their friends. They come over here the power of the pier and...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** then that's kind of how then it grew and grew and then the Marlene Pulitzer was then hired and Hoffman moved with her family to Ohio Marlene was hired and then Marlene really grew this and I'm



still a little bit fuzzy on how she met Mr. Val Swan. I don't know how she was so connected that she met these people and got them to donate land and donate all this money to build this building. I don't know.

**Debbie Kunz:** If you know more about Bal Swan and why did he have such a heart for this?

**David Allison:** Yeah, no, it's really interesting. it's a great question and one I definitely need to do a little more work on to myself to get a little bit smarter on it.

**Debbie Kunz:** Okay.

**David Allison:** Before we finish today. I wanted to show you something that we have a couple things in our collection. I can just share my screen and show you real quick. But yeah,...

**Debbie Kunz:** awesome

**David Allison:** I think you're right. It's a fascinating story and even I'd love to have Ann Hoffman's story too. It sounds like would be somebody really interesting to interview as well. So

**Debbie Kunz:** I can give you her number if you want it and...

**David Allison:** yeah, absolutely.

**Debbie Kunz:** I can yeah, she would be happy to talk. it is amazing how sharp she does give All credit to Dr. Markle and apparently he is suffering now with Alzheimer's and Dementia and...

**David Allison:** mmm

**Debbie Kunz:** his wife is his caregiver there in their early 90s and they're not in a great physical space in their life to do interviews and want to talk about this and it was so long ago for them. this was 16 years ago,...

**David Allison:** Yeah.

**Debbie Kunz:** so I think it feels like a memory to them. And yet they started a movement. so How we honor them is feeling a little bit tricky to me.

**David Allison:** Yeah for sure. Yeah.

**David Allison:** Yeah. That's wonderful.

**Debbie Kunz:** And I know would love to talk to you.

**David Allison:** Yeah, I'd love to have her a number when you have a chance and that sounds great.

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah. awesome

**David Allison:** All I'm gonna go ahead and say again, thank you so much for taking some time to interview and share your story and also on story a little bit today. And yeah, I did forget. Could you just introduce yourself by saying your name and your title? I should have done that at the beginning and I didn't do it so

**Debbie Kunz:** Yeah, no problem. Yes, my name is Debbie Kunz, and I'm the executive director of Bal Swan Children's Center.

**David Allison:** Thank you so much. That's fantastic. I'm gonna stop our recording here.