

Transcript for NM-ABC Podcast Ep 03

Amy E Glass: Welcome. This is an episode of the NM-ABC Podcast: Conversations about youth mental health in New Mexico.

----INTERVIEW BEGINS----

Amy E Glass: Welcome to this episode of the NM-ABC podcast, and today I am very happy to be talking with Gay Finlayson, who has an inspiring history as an advocate for youth mental health services in New Mexico.

Amy E Glass: I'm excited to hear more about her experiences, past and present, and also some thoughts about where we are now in New Mexico related to meeting the needs of youth facing mental health challenges.

Amy E Glass: So, welcome!

Gay Finlayson: Thank you.

Amy E Glass: Great. I would love to hear about how you originally became an advocate, for youth and young adults with mental health needs, how you moved into this space.

Amy E Glass: And, you know, what can you tell us about why and how you got involved?

Gay Finlayson: I became involved because I'm a parent.

Gay Finlayson: And I've been doing this for a long time because my daughter with autism is now in her 30s.

Gay Finlayson: And when,

Gay Finlayson: we realized something was going on with her, we had to leave the state of New Mexico to get an autism diagnosis. So, I came back home.

Gay Finlayson: pretty determined to build autism capacity in New Mexico.

Amy E Glass: Can you say why you weren't able to get a diagnosis in New Mexico?

Gay Finlayson: When I went to the pediatrician, when I went to,

Gay Finlayson: oh, what is now our early childhood evaluation program. They said they'd just never seen a child like her, and, you know, weren't comfortable.

Gay Finlayson: Making a diagnosis.

Amy E Glass: Okay, they just didn't have the expertise.

Gay Finlayson: mute.

Amy E Glass: Okay.

Amy E Glass: So you went out of state, and then came back determined to try to change that for other families in New Mexico.

Gay Finlayson: to change that for other families and for my daughter, because I'm thinking if we don't have the expertise to make a diagnosis, we surely don't have the expertise to serve these,

Gay Finlayson: children very well, and when I came back,

Gay Finlayson: I learned there were, at that time, unbelievably, there were 7 kids, diagnosed with autism in the state.

Amy E Glass: Wow.

Amy E Glass: Okay, and what time frame is this? Just for context.

Gay Finlayson: She was born in the late 80s, so it was the early 90s.

Amy E Glass: Got it. Okay, and there were 7 children who had been diagnosed.

Gay Finlayson: Yeah, 7 children that people knew about.

Amy E Glass: Wow. Okay. So then, how did you move into advocacy?

Amy E Glass: How'd you start?

Gay Finlayson: Yeah, I advocated for her to get her needs met, and at that time, it was speech and occupational therapy, and

Gay Finlayson: Our insurance didn't pay for it,

Gay Finlayson: We got... tried to get other insurance and got denied, that coverage, and so, join the,

Gay Finlayson: State high-risk pool that would pay for,

Gay Finlayson: for insurance, but then I,

Gay Finlayson: and therapies. Then I got really interested in Medicaid, and

Gay Finlayson: Medicaid services for children with autism, and at that time, the DD waiver

Gay Finlayson: waiting list was 2 years. So we waited for 2 years.

Gay Finlayson: And then she got on Medicaid.

Gay Finlayson: And then I just thought, well, then Medicaid has to figure out,

Gay Finlayson: how to serve people with autism better, and that's what I've focused on through the years.

Amy E Glass: Okay.

Amy E Glass: That is important work.

Amy E Glass: And in the years since then, when you first realized that this was a big...

Amy E Glass: problem for families. How has your work as an advocate evolved.

Gay Finlayson: Well, we actually... I got the opportunity... a state senator called me, kind of out of the blue, and asked me to work on an autism insurance bill, which, was for private insurance, to cover autism services. So,

Gay Finlayson: I agreed to do that, and actually, Thinking back, it was,

Gay Finlayson: really smart on his part, the senator's part, and my part, because when we got autism insurance passed in New Mexico.

Gay Finlayson: the rules from the Affordable Care Act were, if you have a state mandate, Medicaid has to cover those services. So I had been working towards Medicaid services for a long time, and just hadn't made much headway, but suddenly, you know, here we are. And so that was really encouraging.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: Indeed.

Amy E Glass: are you able to say who the... the legislator was, or is that...

Gay Finlayson: No, it's not a secret, and, he...

Gay Finlayson: Clinton Hardin from Clovis, he died just last week.

Amy E Glass: And he was a grandpa.

Gay Finlayson: called me because he had a grand, grandson with autism in Clovis who wasn't getting any services, and so he had been a,

Gay Finlayson: Real champion for people with autism at the legislature, and then when he left the legislature, just in community life.

Amy E Glass: Well, much gratitude to him.

Gay Finlayson: Right.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: And, I am also aware that you do wonderful work at the UNM Center for Development and Disability, because that is where NM-ABC is based, so I get to cross paths with you and work together at times. Can you tell us briefly about your work here at the CDD?

Gay Finlayson: Yeah, I've been at the CDD for a long time. I started out at the autism clinic being the,

Gay Finlayson: family resource person on the clinic team, and then as advocacy increased and we started getting more funding for autism, I've

Gay Finlayson: changed positions. And right now,

Gay Finlayson: I, manage a program for all our family peer support workers here, and we've got a group of, seven, folks who, their job is to assist families in, navigating the

Gay Finlayson: The process through... from diagnosis through adulthood.

Amy E Glass: I... I can't imagine that 7...

Amy E Glass: folks are trying to take on that huge role. You must be very, very busy.

Gay Finlayson: We are busy, and...

Gay Finlayson: The whole staff is really good, and

Gay Finlayson: Really committed to what they're doing, so, it's always fun to come to work.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: And... and so any, any family, in the state who has questions or is confused about how to navigate these systems can contact the team.

Gay Finlayson: Right, and we will help.

Amy E Glass: That's amazing. Okay.

Amy E Glass: And you have a really unique perspective, because you've seen a lot of changes from the 90s,

Amy E Glass: through now. Can you share some thoughts about how pediatric behavioral health systems have changed over time in New Mexico?

Gay Finlayson: You know, thinking about that, and thinking about kind of my own involvement there.

Gay Finlayson: Some years ago, I want to say maybe it was 15 years ago.

Gay Finlayson: Autism was not considered a behavioral health diagnosis in New Mexico. It was strictly a developmental disability, and I looked around, and all these kids are having, you know, the

Gay Finlayson: thing that people are challenged by are their behaviors, you know, not,

Gay Finlayson: Not other aspects of their, disability. So,

Gay Finlayson: we worked here at CDD, going to the Behavioral Health Collaborative that existed at that time, and just asking that they add,

Gay Finlayson: autism as a mental health diagnosis. So, eventually they did, and that was, so it's considered a serious emotional disturbance for kids, and then a serious mental illness for adults. And,

Gay Finlayson: And what I think about that is,

Gay Finlayson: our service system is now a bit more open. You know, we're not siloing kids who have

Gay Finlayson: autism and behavioral health issues into just developmental disabilities. We're looking at, kind of, their entirety of need.

Gay Finlayson: And I think that's helpful. It's helpful for the kids, and it's helpful for our system.

Amy E Glass: Yeah Yeah.

Amy E Glass: With our...

Amy E Glass: consultation service with NM-ABC, we are finding that the majority of, the calls that we're getting are related to kids who have both

Amy E Glass: a neurodevelopmental disorder and mental health needs. And they... they are not separate silos, right? Those are situations that, you know, it's a spectrum on all ends.

Gay Finlayson: Sweet.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: So, what would you say is going well with youth mental health services these days?

Gay Finlayson: I do think, that we have more awareness, and I... part of that, I think it has to do with COVID, where, you know, everybody was having a hard time with mental health, and also started thinking more about children's mental health.

Gay Finlayson: Because I really think I've seen a big change in the last 5 years.

Gay Finlayson: Around acceptance and awareness that children have, mental health struggles.

Gay Finlayson: I also think we're building provider capacity, and that's...

Gay Finlayson: kind of strange to say, because I know that we're a state that, you know, doesn't have the amount of providers that we need. But I think that the providers we have have become open to serving, neurodiverse populations, and I think that, again, is going to serve us well.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: You know, I think,

Amy E Glass: I would agree with you that there is much more willingness and recognition. I don't know about the training, though. You know, I think we still are lacking in training for providers on how to best serve.

Amy E Glass: these youth. Would you agree?

Gay Finlayson: I agree, and I had the opportunity to,

Gay Finlayson: be involved in the training for the, mental health echo that is happening through,

Amy E Glass: CDD? Yeah.

Gay Finlayson: And it is looking at serving children with, neurodevelopmental... children and adults with neurodevelopmental disorders and,

Gay Finlayson: behavioral health needs, and it is, aimed at community mental health providers, not at, you know, our traditional developmental disability providers. So I think it's,

Gay Finlayson: those kind of trainings start to take hold, and people become more interested. Again, we'll have more expertise.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: That is, that will be a helpful area to increase our capacity in.

Gay Finlayson: Yeah, I think that, they had, like, over 20,

Gay Finlayson: Providers from all over the state taking part, so that's... that is such a good start.

Amy E Glass: Oh, that... that's exciting.

Amy E Glass: I'm glad to hear it.

Amy E Glass: And then, I... I'm not part of it, but I am certainly aware of the wonderful work that the START team is... is doing in... in terms of trying to help provide some community-based,

Amy E Glass: Support for youth who have neurodevelopmental disorders, as well as behavioral health.

Amy E Glass: Yeah, please?

Gay Finlayson: Yeah, START will see, children over the age of 6, and then, through adulthood, and really wants to build capacity of the...

Gay Finlayson: Teams that surround these kids and youth and adults.

Gay Finlayson: So that, crises can be averted.

Amy E Glass: M.

Amy E Glass: Okay, and really,

Amy E Glass: as I understand it, they're also trying to, get systems to coordinate better, right, and communicate more, and

Amy E Glass: And understand that, right, get out of our silos, as you were saying.

Gay Finlayson: And that...

Gay Finlayson: That is so needed. That was an original goal of when the Behavioral Health Collaborative happened, you know, during the Richardson administration, was they talked about silos, and that we were going to get rid of the silos, and it just seemed that

Gay Finlayson: That didn't happen, and so it...

Gay Finlayson: programs like START kind of chip away at that and urge people to collaborate. And the outcomes have been good, so I am hopeful that people will collaborate more, or systems and agencies will collaborate more.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: Yep.

Amy E Glass: Yeah, there's a whole nother conversation to be had about the Behavioral Health Collaborative, and... And, and...

Amy E Glass: The obstacles faced there.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Gay Finlayson: It went great guns at first, and then just... yeah.

Gay Finlayson: Didn't fulfill what it wanted to do.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: And then we had, A, a real breakdown in our... in our, service providers, during...

Amy E Glass: another administration, right? That...

Gay Finlayson: Right. You know, we were already behind, and that put us far, far behind.

Amy E Glass: Yeah, I think we're still trying to catch up from...

Amy E Glass: From those... those issues. Okay, so, along those lines, what do you see as... as some either new gaps or... or gaps that have not yet made much progress?

Gay Finlayson: I'm...

Gay Finlayson: have been concerned for a while, and I continue to be concerned, that the state has delegated, CYFD as the Children's Mental Health Authority.

Gay Finlayson: Because there are just so many children and families who don't interact with CYFD,

Gay Finlayson: And in my experience, CYFD really focuses on those kids in custody.

Gay Finlayson: And not children in general. So when you are doing advocacy around kids' mental health, I almost always get told, well, you know, what does CYFD think about this? What is CYFD?

Gay Finlayson: you know, how are they involved? And...

Gay Finlayson: really, I mean, they have a lot on their plate just meeting those needs of kids in custody, so I do wish,

Gay Finlayson: that there was another office that would more... look more generally at kids, and that they would collaborate with CYFD, but that some of the burden would be taken off CYFD, because I just don't think they can meet that need.

Amy E Glass: CYFD certainly has a lot on their plate at any given time, and leadership that is...

Amy E Glass: Pretty regularly changing, which makes... yeah.

Amy E Glass: Okay, do you think that the...

Amy E Glass: The, the legislative shift this year to,

Amy E Glass: restructure things through the administrative office of the courts is a positive development, or a problematic one? What do you think?

Gay Finlayson: You know, I really have been trying to keep up with that, and I... there's not a whole lot of information, kind of to be had by the general public. Again, I worry that they're going to look at

Gay Finlayson: Justice-involved people, because that's just where they come from.

Amy E Glass: And.

Gay Finlayson: A focus will be substance use.

Gay Finlayson: We need substance use services, and we need,

Gay Finlayson: mental health services for people who don't have substance use. And so I'm... I'm a little bit concerned about that, and I've...

Gay Finlayson: I've lived through many behavioral health,

Gay Finlayson: redos in New Mexico, and so, I, I, I'm not,

Gay Finlayson: quite sure about that. One thing that I had the opportunity to do this past summer was I was,

Gay Finlayson: Involved in the stakeholder group who was making,

Gay Finlayson: Recommendations about a behavioral health waiver.

Amy E Glass: Oh.

Gay Finlayson: what the group did, was they first went to the legislature and asked the legislature to,

Gay Finlayson: make a law that the state had to apply to, children, CMS, the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services.

Gay Finlayson: for such a waiver. And,

Gay Finlayson: That didn't fly, but the group managed to get the funding

Gay Finlayson: In the budget to pay for the state to do an application.

Gay Finlayson: And so the state has said that they will do an application to CMS by December 31st around a behavioral health waiver. I don't know, like, you know, with

current things in government, how that's gonna pan out, but it's encouraging that we're starting to look at

Gay Finlayson: Behavioral Health, the needs of people who, you know, if, if,

Gay Finlayson: they have this... pretty much the same needs as some of our folks with DD, they just have a few...

Gay Finlayson: more IQ points that make them ineligible to be on our developmental disabilities waiver.

Amy E Glass: Okay, so... so what would the...

Amy E Glass: Practical impact of that waiver be?

Amy E Glass: I... I'm not familiar with it.

Gay Finlayson: Well, we talked about, services like,

Gay Finlayson: Life coaching, life skills, helping people, manage things in the community,

Gay Finlayson: being able to actually access what services are available for Medicaid. Looked at a big housing,

Gay Finlayson: Components, since housing is a big, issue for, adults with,

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Gay Finlayson: Mental illness, and it also is, you know, we're working with a family right now that housing is a big issue, and it's the child who has the, mental health diagnosis.

Amy E Glass: Right.

Amy E Glass: Okay.

Amy E Glass: Okay,

Amy E Glass: So, do you have any words of wisdom for those who would like to help advocate for changes in our system? You know, people who, you know, have other jobs and other things.

Amy E Glass: pulling their time away. So what actions can people take that you feel have an impact?

Gay Finlayson: I think that every opportunity you have to learn something so that you're, you know, a knowledgeable consumer of mental health services, or know the... understand more about our system in New Mexico, that that just puts you in a place where

Gay Finlayson: You can become a better advocate, and you can, you know, you can show up when you choose, but you show up in a way that's meaningful.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: And it's hard to find that information. I would say, personally, as someone who is

Amy E Glass: Worked in the behavioral health field for...

Amy E Glass: about 4 decades now, it's still hard to find who's doing what, and, you know, where are decisions being made, and what are the new initiatives? Where do you think people should look for those sources of information?

Gay Finlayson: I, it's because my, you know, interest is autism. I follow news from the disability advocates,

Gay Finlayson: in the legislature, I look to them for a lot of information. And then I, I mean, I read, and again,

Gay Finlayson: people like to separate policy from politics. I don't know how possible that is, but I read, like, the New Mexico Political Report, and

Gay Finlayson: Kind of, you know, read what newsletters are...

Gay Finlayson: Congressional delegation is... is putting out there.

Gay Finlayson: just to kind of get the big picture. But,

Gay Finlayson: like you said, I know... I have seen very little in, you know, our local or in state news about the,

Gay Finlayson: You know, the behavioral health transformation that we're undergoing right now.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: Yep.

Amy E Glass: You have to find the right website, and then you have to check back regularly to see if they've put any news on there, and there... there really should be better ways to get out information to people.

Gay Finlayson: Yeah, I, I do think that that is a gap that,

Gay Finlayson: All our state agencies have is kind of that information.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: And there are... are not good sources that consolidate that information into usable chunks, so you don't have to read through long congressional reports.

Gay Finlayson: Right, but at the same time, it's just so interesting how,

Gay Finlayson: You know, how everything that's national is local right now, and just trying to,

Gay Finlayson: So, really, just the more you are informed, the better decisions you can make for your own family, your own mental health, and,

Gay Finlayson: Just be a better advocate.

Amy E Glass: I don't even know where to start in asking if you have any, comments about

Amy E Glass: So many of the current...

Amy E Glass: national trends that are having an impact in New Mexico related to Medicaid changes, you know, related to the marketplace,

Amy E Glass: You know, subsidies related to information about autism diagnosis and treatments.

Amy E Glass: I wouldn't even know where to begin. Do you have any thoughts you want to share on any of those things?

Gay Finlayson: So, first I'll share a positive, New Mexico

Gay Finlayson: happening. Okay. The legislature did approve, and the governor signed, the no behavioral health co-pays.

Gay Finlayson: They had signed...

Gay Finlayson: That bill had gone to effect a few years ago, and it was supposed to sunset, and they decided to make it,

Gay Finlayson: permanent, so that means that families who have, private insurance, not Medicaid in New Mexico, are not going to

Gay Finlayson: Be faced with a copay every time they access behavioral health services.

Gay Finlayson: So the idea is that that would cause more people to access behavioral health services, and folks wouldn't wait till they were in crisis and had to be seen at the ER.

Gay Finlayson: So then...

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Gay Finlayson: It's a positive. The other things were just, again, even... and I think of myself as a good consumer of information.

Gay Finlayson: Don't know exactly, you know, how...

Gay Finlayson: Medicaid is gonna play out, but .

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Gay Finlayson: families that I work with, and, my...

Gay Finlayson: two kids are on, on, on Medicaid for,

Gay Finlayson: One has autism, and another, my son has schizophrenia.

Gay Finlayson: you know, they worry about their continued benefits. They worry about work requirements, and

Gay Finlayson: And these kind of things. And we've been, you know, reassured that this is gonna go okay, but...

Gay Finlayson: Folks aren't reassured.

Amy E Glass: They're pretty...

Gay Finlayson: Worried.

Amy E Glass: Yeah, there is a whole lot of anxiety about all of these changes, and...

Amy E Glass: And that the changes seem to happen unpredictably, just...

Gay Finlayson: Right, and that anxiety is not good for anyone's mental health, and so for our folks who have those kind of struggles, it's just,

Gay Finlayson: It exacerbates things, it makes things harder.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: Indeed.

Amy E Glass: Okay, well, before we wrap up, I just wanted to sort of open it a little bit. Is there other important stuff or just general comments that you would like to share?

Gay Finlayson: I,

Gay Finlayson: interested and concerned, and I don't want to end this on a negative note, but I am concerned about the misinformation around autism right now.

Gay Finlayson: And what is gonna, you know, what new families are thinking, what we've considered evidence-based and are now being, you know, told by the administration that

Gay Finlayson: know that, you know, we prefer to look at things this way. I think it's gonna impact,

Gay Finlayson: Our behavioral health system, and it's, it's surely gonna impact,

Gay Finlayson: children, their families, and adults with ASD, so...

Gay Finlayson: I remain hopeful that, you know, science will win out, and that,

Gay Finlayson: But the idea that a family now has to figure out if information they've got... they're being given is peer-reviewed, and is it accurate, and that's just a lot for a family who has a

Gay Finlayson: A little person or a big person, with autism.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: Yep.

Amy E Glass: And... we have

Amy E Glass: Pretty extensive research at this point, that early screening, diagnosis, intervention is so powerful and has such a positive impact, and there's a lot of concern that now we are going to lose some of those gains.

Gay Finlayson: Right, because we're going to lose, yeah, some of those agencies, some of those services.

Amy E Glass: Yeah, and... and some of the families that would have been willing otherwise to... to get some... some help and some support around,

Amy E Glass: A diagnosis or various services that... that could have been beneficial.

Gay Finlayson: Right, we still do talk to families who say that they're afraid to get the diagnosis, because they're afraid what that will mean for

Gay Finlayson: kind of... their child, and not in terms of accessing services, but in terms of...

Gay Finlayson: Is the, administration going to be... Kind of following us.

Amy E Glass: Right.

Amy E Glass: And will they only approve funding for interventions that are nutrition, or, you know, very specific areas, yeah.

Gay Finlayson: Right, so there is just a lot of... Fear and uncertainty.

Amy E Glass: Yeah.

Amy E Glass: Well, in order to not end this on a negative

Amy E Glass: I will bring it back to the fact that you are someone who has

Amy E Glass: been working for decades on these issues, and works with a wonderful team of... of other family support workers, and

Amy E Glass: is able to be out there sharing good information and connecting people with helpful agencies and systems, and you know, as long as there's good folks doing the work, we have reason to be hopeful.

Gay Finlayson: I absolutely agree with that. Even agencies that I,

Gay Finlayson: struggle mightily with, on behalf of people. I've found, staff there who are just lovely and who want to do the right thing.

Amy E Glass: Yeah, that's just kind of the beauty of New Mexico, is that we have so many people with heart.

Amy E Glass: Oh, that is the perfect place to wrap this up.

Amy E Glass: Thank you. It is really nice to hear about the work that you've done and are still doing for young people with mental and behavioral health needs in New Mexico, and thank you for all of that, and thank you for your time and being here and just sharing your thoughts and your experience.

Gay Finlayson: Well, thank you. This was fun.

----INTERVIEW ENDS----

Amy E Glass: Thank you for listening to this episode of the NM-ABC Podcast. If you have any questions or comments, please get in touch with us at NM-ABC@salud.unm.edu. We also want to thank BatchBug and Chozic for the music included here.

Amy E Glass: NM-ABC is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration of the US Department of Health and Human Services. The views expressed in this program are those of the speakers, and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by HRSA, HHS or the US Government. Thanks for listening.