

## Dr. Jeff Gold and guest Dr. Timothy Shriver

**Jeffrey Gold, MD:** Hello. This is Dr. Jeff Gold, and I'm the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska Medical Center. And I want to welcome you to "Health Care Heart to Heart," providing insights into the medical and the scientific issues of the day. As you may know, I'm a recovering cardiothoracic surgeon, a longtime medical educator and a firm believer in the ability of science to change lives for the better. Today, my guest is Dr. Timothy Shriver. Dr. Shriver is chair of the board of the Special Olympics International. Well, welcome back. It's great to be with you again and to have this opportunity to chat.

**Timothy Shriver, PhD:** Thanks for having me. It's always fun to be in the orbit of the university and all the medical and academic faculties that are doing so much work in this field of intellectual developmental disability more broadly and making such a big contribution.

**Dr. Gold:** Well, thank you so much. And you know, I think we should start off, of course, with just asking you to comment on the importance of Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. You know, this is one of the reasons that we've chosen this time to have this conversation on our podcast, and I know this is an area that you've dedicated just countless parts of your career to talking about and building a better world for those that struggle with developmental disabilities.

**Dr. Shriver:** Yeah, well, it is an extraordinarily important time and awareness. You know, I think one of the things we've realized, chancellor, is that awareness is in some ways, the key to action. And awareness around disability has changed dramatically over the last 20 years, since this month has come on the radar. I think a lot of people would have seen you know, awareness around disability 10 or 20 years ago as just knowing that there are people who have disabilities; knowing that they exist; knowing that they shouldn't be hidden.

But today, that agenda is quite different. Now, we're starting to understand that disability is part of every life, that disability is part of every experience, that disability is part of every family. That diversity -- we talk now about neurodiversity. I know it sounds like a heavy, heavy language, but we're starting to use the disability in, you know, mentality, the idea that we should be aware and sensitive to and respectful of and empowering toward people with disabilities. We're starting to see that not just about them, so to speak, but about all of us: That we are, in a way, all in this together.

So at this time, in the year 2023, disability awareness is about yourself, one's own self, about one's family, about the schools we go to, about the hospitals and health care systems we have, for all of us. Because attention to people who have visible and explicit disabilities, mean better attention and better care for all of us.

**Dr. Gold:** Well, that's a really profound and important shift. And you know, we also talk about special abilities. And as I'm sure you are well aware, because we've talked about this a lot, many individuals who are, you know, struggling with one type of disability or another -- and that

includes a broad cohort of our population, whether they choose to admit it or not --also have special abilities, and they do tend to go hand in hand.

**Dr. Shriver:** That's exactly right. And the gift of the differences we all bring -- for instance, when you talk neurodiversity, I mean I'm not a doctor, like some people in your orbit. But -- many, many people in your orbit, I dare say -- but you know, when you talk about neurodiversity, here's the answer, everybody's diverse. And my weakness, often -- we've known this, neurologists have been telling us for a long time -- a weakness in one portion of the neurological functioning often contributes to a strength in another. Too often, we just see the weakness, the vulnerability, the challenge, instead of mining one another, listening deeply to one another, uncovering the strength because there are enormous strengths and hugely valuable ones in the community of people with disabilities, and in particular, as you know, in my work alongside of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

**Dr. Gold:** So one of the areas that I think we should touch on is the Special Olympics Global Campaign for Inclusion, and maybe you could describe that a little bit for our audience. And then again, just comment about the timing and the impact.

**Dr. Shriver:** Well, we've been very lucky to have the Stavros Niarchos Foundation fund our work. The leaders in the foundation, they saw something very important. They saw the idea that children with intellectual differences were helping develop and grow the compassion and the intelligence of their peers who don't have disabilities. They started to see children with Down syndrome or autism as important contributors to the growth and development of children who don't have Down syndrome and autism.

So everybody's child was growing, you know. In the schools where we were doing inclusive sports --Special Olympics is an inclusive leadership -- they noticed that everyone was benefiting. And they said, 'You've got to get this message out.' So they have been giving us generous funding to challenge governments around the world to promote inclusion in schools. Yes, so that children with intellectual disabilities can go to school, but also so that all children can benefit from growing up in inclusive and welcoming environments that benefit them all.

So, you know, we're very excited. We've got almost 200,000 young people already in schools that we call Unified Champion Schools. There are several in Nebraska, and I've had the great pleasure of visiting them, where the young people have decided they want to own creating a school culture that validates and welcomes children with intellectual and developmental (disabilities). They want to make the school safe for their peers who have intellectual and developmental disabilities; not just safe, but welcoming, affirming and joyful. And they find, the kids do, in these schools -- as I say, almost 200,000 of them -- find that making the school welcoming for their peers who have intellectual and developmental disabilities makes the school better for everyone.

So our goal is to get these kinds of programs. You know, everyone thinks Special Olympics is when the Summer Games are coming up. People say, 'When's the next Games,' right? And I like to tell them, you know, in a normal, not a COVID year, we have over 100,000 games a year at the local level.

**Dr. Gold:** Wow.

**Dr. Shriver:** This is where the power is. The power is in one high school's Special Olympics team, unified team, playing against another high school's Special Olympics unified team. I'd like to see a day when every school in Nebraska has, if they have a basketball team, they have a boys team and a girls team and a Special Olympics unified team. And they have the same pep rallies and the same uniforms and the same competition schedules as their peers who are playing in the competitive, more competitive teams. Special Olympics is now at the forefront of trying to challenge educators, invite educators around the world to make inclusion an integral and expected part, not just a classroom programming, but of sports, extracurriculars and school culture.

**Dr. Gold:** Well, Tim, that is a great aspirational goal. And I'm sure it will excite our community here in Nebraska and more broadly, because we care deeply about it. So before we close, let me ask you, was there a special day, moment, an event, that triggered in you a passion to get focused on the area of developmental disabilities? I know you put an incredible amount of time and talent and have been a global leader in this area, but how did you make that decision? There must have been a time...

**Dr. Shriver:** Well, I would say, you know, everyone in the Special Olympics movement – some of your listeners will have volunteered at one point or another. I would almost ask them right now to pause and remember their own experience. What moved them, what they saw, what they didn't expect, what they felt. For me, it was very clear moment in my life. I grew up. My mom had me playing what we now would call unified sports when I was 4 years old in my backyard. She had a camp for children with special needs in my backyard when I was at the youngest possible age. So I grew up, and she -- passionate, determined -- you know, we're also just passed through International Women's Day. You know, this is a movement founded by a woman, founded mostly by women, who were angry at the way they were seeing their children get treated by the systems around them.

But when I started to think of Special Olympics as something that was changing my life, it moved me. I met, you know, and listened deeply to Loretta Claiborne, one of our great athletes, who kept telling me “You know, Tim, we're not trying -- we people with intellectual disabilities - - we're not trying to join the mainstream. We're trying to get the mainstream to join us.”

And she made me see this work not just about helping, but about changing myself, opening my own eyes to the gifts of others, making my own lens, if you will, clearer to see the gifts of those around me. And for me, that became an enormously positive experience. It made me a better person, made me a happier person, made me a more open-minded person. So this movement, a lot of people think of it as a charity. Yes, it is. But I think of it much more as a service to the world, from our athletes, and that's what they've given me and why I stay so passionate about participating in it and trying to amplify the lessons of our community for others. We are not just a movement for people with intellectual disabilities anymore. We are also a movement from them. And the world needs to learn from them as much as it tries to help do things for them.

**Dr. Gold:** Well, we are all better as a result of this movement, and we're all better as a result of you. Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Dr. Shriver:** Thank you, and thank you to everyone at the university: to Dr. Mirnics, the Munroe-Meyer teams, all the work that your university has invested in taking this work to a level of quality and rigor and commitment to excellence. You know, at your university people with

intellectual disabilities don't come through the back door. They don't come through the side door, they don't come to the out... They are at the front and center of the best medical, health care and social supports available to anyone in the state or I daresay in the country. Bravo. Thank you for that, and may it continue.

**Dr. Gold:** Thank you for tuning into this episode of “Health Care Heart to Heart” with Dr. Jeff Gold. And until next time, stay healthy.