



## DENISE RESNIK

1960 -

Honored as 2023 Arizona Historymaker  
Compassionate Changer for Autism  
Treatment, Businesswoman



The following is an oral history interview with Historymaker Denise Resnik (**DR**) conducted by Carolyn Hartman (**CH**) for Historical League, Inc. and video-graphed by Leonardo Buono on May 25, 2023, at the Center for Positive Media in Phoenix, Arizona.

*Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona. Interview edited for clarity.*

**CH** This is Carolyn Hartman interviewing Denise Resnik for the Historical League's Historymaker Program. The date is May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Mrs. Resnik, I would like to first offer congratulations on your selection as a 2023 Arizona Historymaker. Thank you also for taking the time today for this interview. Let's begin your story with your early years. Where were you born? Tell us about your growing-up years.

**DR** I was born in Phoenix by what is now Spectrum Mall, formerly Christown Mall and I loved our community. I loved being able to go to Christown as a young adult and go shopping. I loved being able to go to the bowling alley and walk to 31 Flavors and have a real community. A real neighborhood that was walkable, where we knew our neighbors, where we played at night in the streets and where my parents felt comfortable allowing us to do so. I also grew up with my very best friend, who's my sister, who's just 17 months older. And she continues to be my very best friend and my very best and biggest supporter.

**CH** What was it like growing up in your family?

**DR** It was fun. My mother, who's not that much older than we are [*laughs*] – and certainly not that much older at heart--made sure we had fun. She is very creative and she in essence, was growing up with us as kids. She also got us very involved in things that were important to both her and my dad. And that meant getting involved charitably in the community and volunteering our time and seeing friends or relatives on the weekend and particularly those who might've been sick.

And so, my family was always very active, and they brought us along. I'll also never forget being able to travel around the community with my dad who was in real estate development and his idea of a Sunday was driving to look at land. And as children, that was never an exciting time for us, but my mom made sure that we always had fun along the way, stopping at the candy store and making sure that we had little care packages along the journey. And then we always looked forward to the picnic, which was sometimes in the trunk of the green Chrysler that they drove. They'd park the car. They'd raise the trunk, and my sister and I thought it was a really big deal, to sit in the trunk and have our picnic.

**CH** It's been said that you were a shy child. How did you overcome that?

**DR** I was shy in some ways because I was allowed to be shy because my sister did all the talking for both of us. And when we needed to negotiate with my parents, I always sent my sister to do that. But it wasn't easy at first for me to overcome that shyness. Actually, when I tried to assert myself, it often resulted in tears. It made me uncomfortable. And it wasn't until we found a ventriloquist puppet that I really took a liking to, and I started projecting my voice into this puppet. And he had a much different personality. He did assert himself. He was never shy. He actually was a little sassy at times, and he was very funny. And so that allowed me to project my voice and build my confidence, particularly when my mother took us to places where both my sister and I could entertain. She was a magician. I was the ventriloquist. We entertained kids who were disadvantaged or sick or just needed an extra smile in their day. And that was part of our weekend.

**CH** Can you name the places that you went to? Do you remember?

**DR** We went to Gompers. And we went to Hacienda de Los Angeles. I remember how it made me feel, both proud and privileged, that we could bring a smile to these kids. But I also felt uncomfortable after. Not always, but I had my moments. And I'll never forget one of those moments driving away from Gompers. And my mother seizing the opportunity at that moment to remind both my sister and I that if we wanted to have healthy kids, that we needed to stay away from drugs and alcohol and all that bad stuff. But we know that those aren't the only things at play when children are born or develop a disability or a diagnosis like autism. But I never forgot that, and I still don't drink *[laughs]*. You know, I realize now, that what I was experiencing then was the challenge of any parent who is parenting a child that has a disability. And both the privilege that it is, but also trying to find everything inside of us to be the best parent we can be when I had no training for autism; when I barely knew what autism was. I only had one course, one chapter perhaps, in my psychology class at ASU about autism. But I've learned a lot since, that's for sure.

**CH** What family experiences or influences led you to become so organized and able to develop

purposes and plans?

**DR** Both our parents are highly organized people. My dad is not one who has readily accepted or adopted technology. But he still loves to reach in his pocket for what he refers to as his palm pilot. And he brings it out and it is a typed list of everything that is on his priority list at that time, including many of the honey-dos of things for the family that he needs to check off. My mom is also very organized and from the earliest days I'll never forget the calendars that we both kept in our home. And so early on in high school, I purchased one of those calendars so I could too. I could create my lists and all my important meetings and appointments. And you know, at some levels, I remember my freshman year at ASU, that I had a feeling so big and so overwhelming. And not knowing where to go, what to do. But I also remember getting into my junior and senior year where I was carrying a briefcase and I think about myself back then. Was I a nerd? Who was I that I felt I needed to carry a briefcase? But it was how I kept myself organized and maybe at that time how I felt I was professional. And now I'm busted because that's so totally not cool. *[laughs]*

**CH** Tell us how you were able to organize the birthday party for your 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher?

**DR** Wow! I'll never forget Miss Brannigan. She was a remarkable teacher. She was tough. She taught us a lot in that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and I wanted to do something special for her. It was my first experience of leadership and delegating. And at the time, building the menu with the other kids in terms of what we thought would be cool for Miss Brannigan. And then having them go back and bring those cupcakes in and bring the cookies in and bring the decorations in. And – and not having to do it all myself. And I thought, wow, that's cool when the kids work together to build something that none of us could've created on our own. And later, I became close to my high school counselor who was her sister, Mary Louise Brannigan. And those two women, I stayed in touch with for decades. And I'll never forget how each of them helped me shape myself as a leader and gave me the courage and the spirit to say, "I can do this."

**CH** How do you think that ability to delegate grew?

**DR** It was taught in many ways by both my parents, and by Miss Brannigan for that matter, that as a leader, you can't do it all yourselves. You need others who are going to lead with you or follow you, and leadership has a lot of definitions. And I am comfortable in all those spaces. I'm comfortable leading out front. I'm comfortable leading from behind. I love leading by the side of other leaders.

**CH** What motivated you to become involved with school leadership?

**DR** As I mentioned, when I got to ASU, it was so big and it was the sorority, Kappa, Kappa,

Gamma, that allowed me to organize my world, and recognize where I wanted to be spending my time. It wasn't in athletics, but it was in philanthropy. And the more I got involved with the causes on the campus and that connected to the broader community, the more I loved being able to lead and connect and dream about things that were bigger than any one of us could do. So, by my junior year, I became the special events director at student government, then called ASASU, and I got involved in addressing some of the concerns that we were having on campus that involved racial tensions. And so I thought, what is it that we could do in terms of multicultural understanding and experiences? I also got involved in a space of alcohol because I saw so many challenges associated with alcohol, not just in the fraternities and sororities, but in the broader campus. And people who were really hurting. And it wasn't just a weekend of fun. And then I wanted to do more. And so decided, and encouraged by some of my friends, to run for office. I ran for study body president and I was elected in 1981.

**CH** Congratulations, that must've been an exciting time for you.

**DR** It was a very exciting time. I was the second or third female student body president and was also fortified by a Kappa sister, Susan Eastridge, who had been student body president four years prior. And just four years after me, was Karrin Kunasek Robson.

**CH** Your dad started a business and you and your sister went and worked with him. Would you share what that was like?

**DR** It was called Sunray of Arizona. And that brings up an amazing collection of memories. So, it was a family business. The family manufactured women's clothing. And at the time McDowell was almost North Phoenix, so it was early. And, and by the time my sister and I started volunteering or working weekends at the business, things were really humming along. We would spend time making buttons for the clothes. We would spend time, yes, cleaning and straightening things up. It was also the time that invoices were cut into triplicate and there were, oh, the paper in between, I can't even remember what it's called.

**CH** Carbon?

**DR** Carbon paper. And my sister and I used to love to freak each other out because our fingers were so dark. And my dad would always bring home a briefcase filled with work. And I remember sitting in front of the TV, and my sister and I would separate all those triplicate invoices. And we got – we got paid for that. Then on weekends, my grandmother, may she rest in peace - Boobie, she would create what we called spreads. And the spreads were from Miracle Mile Delicatessen. And she would bring in all this food and the whole family, and those members that were not related, but who became our family, would also get to enjoy our Saturday spreads. So, I have to say, that what my family did, what my parents did, is they made work fun. At least they masked

it as fun. And we believed them.

**CH** How did you choose ASU?

**DR** The decision to go to ASU wasn't hard. I didn't see it as a party school because after all I wasn't a partier. I saw so much good that ASU was doing in our community, and I had the opportunity to be exposed to some wonderful leaders. And I also didn't want to leave this community. At the time I was involved in Mayor Hance's Youth Commission. And for me that was a big deal. I was involved in the Arizona Diabetes Association. I was involved in a lot of other community things. And I didn't want to go that far.

**CH** You graduated in business. Did you want to major in business in the very beginning or did you have other interests?

**DR** When I first got to ASU I was torn between communications and business. And I opted to go the business direction because for me I felt it could make more sense. I recognized what good businesses can do in our community. And I also wanted to earn a living. And so, business was a great path for me. One of my best courses at ASU was my business English course. I loved it. And I still channel that instructor today. The other wonderful course that I had that has forever impacted my life was business strategy and I greatly enjoyed that strategic planning and visioning and having that peripheral vision because, it's not just the business. It's all the things that you need to consider around the business that can help it be successful and can also create a failure.

**CH** So that probably really influenced you into DRA. But I'd like to go back to that. After graduation how did you become director of marketing and investor relations with the Del Webb Corporation? What were your responsibilities?

**DR** Well, when I first got to the Del Webb Corporation, I was an administrative assistant to then president, Tom Arnold. He oversaw real estate and real estate development, not subsidiaries. And I learned a lot. He gave me many chances to learn and many chances to demonstrate what I could do, and I volunteered a lot when I was at that company because I wanted the next opportunity. So, within six months I was volunteering to work on that strategic marketing plan. And created a path for myself with others of how I could get there and so I followed my passion around marketing and communications and demonstrated to others within the company what I was capable of. And then I was hiring. I found myself hiring agencies and recognized through those agencies all that I could learn. And there were some great role models out there.

And then within a few years of being the director of marketing communications and, also investor relations for then a real estate investment trust, I realized that these agencies that I was

hiring out there, well, I can do that. And so, it gave me the confidence that I really could do that. And when we transition from something, it's important to do so with some confidence and measured risk. And I was able to transition with a few clients. They were groups that had worked with Del Webb. There was no conflict. But they wanted to hire my agency to do work for them. And so, during that first year of my being 25 years old, and starting this agency, I spent about 20% of my time on actual agency work and billable work and then I spent 80% on new business. Within that year, those percentages flopped and so it didn't take me too long to get where I was going, to build a business.

**CH** Wonderful.

**DR** And to love building a business. And not only love building the business but recognizing that what I could do through that business, in terms of contributing and being involved in so many of those non-profits and community concerns that I was passionate about.

**CH** Were there any obstacles and how did you overcome them?

**DR** Oh, there are plenty of obstacles in starting a business. There's no question about that. Things that you didn't know you needed to know when starting a business or in being able to sustain a business. Things with employees, things with contracts, things with clients who pay or clients who don't pay. There's so much to learn. And I was fortunate that I was surrounded by a lot of people who I could go to, to ask questions, including my dad. My dad and I officed together when I first started that business. And my dad and I have always officed together. After Matt's diagnosis of autism and after building this business and having far more employees than my dad ever did, in his second career phase of real estate and investment, he allowed us to have space in his building. This incubated the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center. And then incubate First Place when that time came.

**CH** Oh wow.

**DR** So I always had a go-to person who would be very resourceful.

**CH** So you would recommend for people that want to start businesses or that when people that are thinking of a plan that – that there are “go-to people”?

**DR** There are go-to people and there are villages. And build one. And I feel very fortunate to have had the support of my parents and our family. But villages can be created everywhere. So, surround yourself and fortify yourself with people who know more than you do. It's a great strategy.

**CH** Tell us about meeting your husband Rob and getting married.

**DR** Well, I had my plans set after college. I had just accepted a scholarship, a Rotary scholarship, and I was going to be studying abroad. During that last semester at ASU when I was no longer student body president, I got involved in some passionate concerns and was working at that time as a volunteer for Governor Bruce Babbitt. I was volunteering at campaign headquarters and loving it. I didn't realize I could love it even more after meeting Rob. He walked in one day to campaign headquarters as a darling political consultant from the East Coast and I thought, I need to spend more time here at campaign headquarters. So, my political interests really paid off. Fred Duvall ran the campaign with Chris Hammill who were great colleagues and friends while I was at ASU. They ended up hiring Rob unbeknownst to each of them that we might find each other.

Rob wasn't so interested in getting involved when he first landed here in Phoenix. And he did not think that Phoenix was going to be his forever home. But I changed that. And it wasn't an easy path, but it really helped me set my priorities early on because, as I mentioned, I had my plan. I knew what I wanted to do. I was going to study abroad. I was going to create a business. I wanted a family. I was going to get involved in politics and then I realized that I needed to reshuffle some of that. And so, I chose love over that Rotary scholarship. So, I apologize to you Rotarians because that was such an exciting opportunity, but I needed to make the best decision for me at that time. And it was really to follow who I loved and who I wanted to stay here. So, we got married in 1984 and that was just a few years before establishing my business, and I really felt all the pieces were coming together. The love of my life, someone who made me laugh, who was super smart, and who I could always learn from, and have a good time with. He was someone who also wanted a family and prioritized family. So, then I started my business in 1986, DRA Collective - Marketing and Communications Solutions, wanting to have that flexibility for when we would have kids. And then our children arrived, six years after we got married.

**CH** Let's talk about your children and your autism journey. You had a daughter who was thriving at 17 months. And then you gleefully welcomed a son, Matt. I know you've told this story about what happened, but if you could share about after his first birthday, it would be appreciated.

**DR** Sure. So Matt was born a healthy kid. I could count his ten fingers and ten toes, and we had a boy, we had a girl. My prayers had been answered. And he was thriving during that first year of life. He had a few issues, some gag reflex – reflex issues, but he was walking at the age of 8 months. And his sister was encouraging him, and he had to giddy-up and go if he wanted to get those toys.

After his first birthday he stopped responding to his name. We took him to the audiologist. We

thought he might be going deaf. And his hearing checked out perfectly. And then soon thereafter his eyes no longer looked at us and it was hard to capture his attention. And we were told by our pediatrician then, don't worry about it. Your daughter's doing the talking for him. And I could relate to that because my sister used to do the talking for me, too. But, by his second birthday we knew there was something wrong. And when we received that diagnosis of autism, I didn't know what to do.

I remember sitting in disbelief, and reading a book called, *Let Me Hear Your Voice* by Catherine Maurice. And I only got through the first few pages, and I went for a run. And I kept running. And I cried, 'cause I couldn't believe that our son would have autism. I barely knew what autism was except for Dustin Hoffman's performance in *Rainman*. And I didn't feel I was prepared to have a kid with a disability. I didn't know how I could be a mom to a kid with autism. So, I had to learn.

**CH** After being told in 1993 that institutionalization would be the best for Matt's autism, what did you and your husband begin doing?

**DR** We were told that it would not only be the best for Matt's autism and for Matt's life, but we were also told it would be the best for our family's life. And today that could be the furthest from the truth. Matt has enriched our lives in innumerable ways, and we have found joy in places we didn't know joy existed and celebrations that we never thought we would be celebrating. So immediately though, we looked for resources and other families who were similarly situated and families much older than our own who had traveled this path, and tried to journey learning where they had gone, what they had done, and learning what life would be like for adults with autism.

So, in 1997, I co-founded the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center with another mom and our amazing developmental pediatrician, Dr. Raun Melmed. And determined what it is we could do to answer questions and question the answers we were given, because we didn't want to believe all the answers at that time of institutionalization and that being the best thing for a child or for a family. And so, we plowed away. First, as a virtual research and resource center and by 1998, we had our first physical space. It was a whopping 1,800 square feet and within eight months we grew to 4,000 square feet and SARC grew every year after that. I was fortunate that my dad had allowed us to incubate SARC in one of his properties and that gave us a running start. And we have been building and building community from the get-go of creating more options for more people, and at different ages.

**CH** I'd like to go back to two major studies that you were involved with, *A Place in the World*, - *Fueling Options for Adults With Autism* and *Other Neural Diversities and Opening Doors*. What were the impact of those studies?



**DR** Well *Opening Doors* was published in 2009 after we spent almost a decade evaluating other options across the country, looking for the best programs, the best properties that were out there, thinking we were going to bring the model back to Phoenix, Arizona. That 2009 report published ten design goals and guidelines that have been used and continue to be used around the world, including here in Phoenix at the very properties that we've developed through First Place. And what that research didn't demonstrate was what was going to be replicable and scalable and financially sustainable.

So that's where we set our sights with First Place. And as we continued to venture into real estate and community development, we realized that people weren't speaking the same language. Autism is a very broad and diverse diagnosis, so you must figure out where people are and what they can do and where they need help. And where perhaps, some people might consider autism a super-power ability, others consider it a disability.

So, how do we create a big tent to recognize what people need and what they want, not just through a diagnosis? We also realized that when you talk to the non-profit community and people in our disability bubble, they speak a certain language. And then when you talk to the public sector, they speak a much different language, and then certainly the private sector is looking at it a bit differently too, with some bottom lines included.

I like to think about the trisector approach as a superhighway. When you're on a highway, you need to speak the same language. And so, *A Place in the World* was our expression of how we brought all those sectors together, so we could build that highway together, so we knew what everyone was talking about. And we didn't talk about low functioning people or high functioning people, but we talked about them based on their needs, not just as autism or Down Syndrome, but what they needed and what they wanted.

With that nomenclature, that new narrative is helping guide and fuel this generation of housing and it's also allowing us to segment the market importantly because if you're the private sector, if you're the public sector, if you're any sector, you want data. You want to know how many people want a planned community, or a group home, or a different way of living. And what they need in terms of their support.

So, I love to think about this place in the world as a place where we can all participate to create community and create more housing options. And I like to think about that superhighway of onramps and offramps, of different lanes on the highway, of recognizing what philanthropy and social capital can do to help us innovate, to de-risk it. I like to think about what the public sector importantly can do with their precious and dwindling resources in terms of services and support. I like to think about what the private sector can do because that's when you can get going, when we can privatize and recognize where it becomes an incentive for the private sector and the real

estate industry to want to get involved.

And over here in the HOV lane, I really think about us as non-profits. Because I feel like when you're in the HOV lane, you can bring those charitable dollars together with the public sector, together with the private sector and you can go a lot faster. And so, when I look at the model of First Place, it was founded based on those principles of trisector leadership and trisector infrastructure to make sure that there was something for everyone.

**CH** Can you give me some of the names of the organizations within the community that needed to be brought together in that triangle to make First Place a reality?

**DR** Right, when I start naming names of organizations, I'm going to be leaving somebody out, so I want to start by saying that there were a hundred collaborating partners that allowed First Place to be what it is today. And that infrastructure and those leaders who stepped up early, early on to allow us to use their conference rooms, to use their talent, to use their smarts, their wisdom, their resources, where they applied what they know to something bigger than that next project. And, and so if I get going on names, I'm going to be kicking myself. *[Laughs]*

**CH** I understand. Describe how the idea and the model of First Place became known throughout the country and internationally?

**DR** First Place started with some really big dreams, and it was 2012 when we established the non-profit of First Place. And the name itself recognizes that it may be the first place that you live after you leave your family home. It may not be your only place, and few of us live in the same place forever. But we also wanted First Place to respond to those who need it and wanted a forever place. So, it lives and breathes like any other beautiful apartment community. That it can be a forever place. Or it can be just that first place. And in 2014, we purchased the land thanks to the Kemper and Ethel Marley Foundation. And in 2016, we had built up our philanthropic supporters and our capacity to break ground on this vision of First Place.

I'll never forget those early adopters, those early contributors and philanthropists who gave us a chance to go for it. And in 2018, we opened our doors and we've been learning ever since. Never in our decades had we planned for a pandemic and so that's taught us a lot too. So, First Place has been noted nationally and globally because of its innovation, because it's brought so many lanes on that superhighway together, because it is a demonstration of what we can do to raise the bar in terms of what we dream about, and what we think about for housing and community for people with different needs.

It also was featured most recently in "A Different Key" which is the award-winning autism documentary that was featured on PBS in their top 50 markets. And just prior to that autism

documentary in 2016, it was acknowledged in the PBS NewsHour series about autism at the time that Phoenix was the most autism friendly city in the world. And when you think about housing, you know, none of us just live in a unit. What do we do all day? And where do we go? And who are we meeting and why do we want to get up in the morning? And so, it is about our community. And by building supportive, inclusive communities, we're able to build more homes for more people.

And so perhaps that's why First Place is becoming known across the country and around the world. Through our First Place Global Leadership Institute we have brought together through our Global Leadership Institute Symposia, trailblazers from every state in North America and twelve countries outside the U.S.

**CH** I was going to ask you about the Leadership Organization and that's great to hear. Tell us about Matt's business with his father creating Smile Biscotti if you would.

**DR** It is daunting to think about how you fill 168 hours of meaningful productive activity after your son with special needs leaves high school where they had so much structure in place and so many goals and so many people to support him. And so, our family created a business with Matt. And it's called "Smile Biscotti." And Smile is an acronym for Supporting Matt's Independent Living Enterprise. And you think of a biscotti which is shaped as a smile. And it is a product that started from our grandmother's Mandel bread recipe. And it's a little softer than traditional biscotti and it's delicious. And it has given Matt purpose. He is a master egg cracker. He is very organized. He has come up with systems in the business of putting labels on biscotti and packages and creating greater efficiency than what we had seen. He's also brought other people into the business and that has represented some part-time work for some others. And it's beautiful to see what a community can do where someone can be a master egg cracker and another person can be a master measurer, and someone can be a master sticker, you know, labeler.

So, there are all kinds of things in a business that people can do, and I learned that early on that I wasn't going to be good at everything in my business. And so, Rob and I have supported Matt in the growth of his business. It was a little difficult during the pandemic when Peet's Coffee and Tea at Sky Harbor was our number one client, and nobody was flying out of Sky Harbor. So, those kinds of timeouts during business can also provide us with some reflective time to figure out what we can do differently, what we can do better, and what we can do to involve more people in the business. So, we have pivoted a little bit on that business and Matt is very focused on the packaging of the product and learning how to get where it's going using Waymo - Google Self-Driving Car. He's not going any place alone, I might add, just yet. But he's learning skills that help him not only in his business, but in his life.

**CH** Through the years, and I think you've probably already answered this, what's a key strategy that helped grow your business and that of eventually getting to First Place? Would it be one strategy or...?

**DR** Let me tell you one trait that has allowed me to get through business and to First Place. And – and that's humility. I appreciate that I don't know it all. And I appreciate what it means to bring smart people into the room. And what we can learn when we do. I appreciate when I don't lead out front but do what I can from behind or by somebody's side or – or maybe not even lead at all, but to follow those who've come before us. And so it is in that spirit that I feel we have created First Place as something that is antifragile, which is beyond resilient. And to make sure that we continue to attract really smart people, because with every era, with every generation there are new tools and new talents that we need. And so, age is not a determining factor in terms of who the really smart people are in the room. I love working across the generations.

**CH** In addition to your work with autism and DRA, what kind of organizations or foundations hold a special place in your heart? How are you involved with them?

**DR** I'm involved today with other housing organizations, specifically "Home Matters to Arizona," which also recognizes that home is just one part of the much bigger question and concern. Home matters to safety. Home matters to education. Home matters to employment. Home matters to health. Home matters to everything we care about. Recognizing that health begins at home, I have intentionally helped First Place and myself get outside of just the First Place bubble, to connect to that broader community that is addressing major concerns like our affordable housing crisis today, recognizing that we all want homes with affordable rents and mortgages. That we all want homes that are in safe neighborhoods. That we all want homes where kids can play like my sister and I got to play, you know, in our neighborhoods. And so, it is both through the mission of First Place, that directs me to groups like Home Matters to Arizona and Arizona State University where we find smart people doing amazing things that we can bring back to my current employer at First Place, and also to my north stars, which I consider my family.

**CH** I've read that you are a dreamer. Share with us a little of what that means.

**DR** A dreamer means you sleep with and without a pillow. It means that there's a lot of waking moments spent dreaming. And it means recognizing not just what is, but what can be. And as a communications person, I always "love" for my clients and now myself and my passion to think about what are those headlines you want to write that you want other people to read? What is it that you want to accomplish and how would you want to write that story? And I've written a lot of press releases in my life. I don't know if I've written this press release yet. But it does help me cast forward in terms of what I want to accomplish, what we need to accomplish, what we must accomplish, for our family and others who are similarly situated. And – and so dreaming comes

in a lot of forms. I love being able to live the dream too, and it not being just when my eyes are closed.

**CH** When did you realize that you had, and I'm calling this a talent, for networking and collaboration? When did you know that you had that talent? Was it third grade? *[Laughs]*

**DR** It was third grade. That's exactly when it was. But it was also being raised in a family where you stayed connected. I mean, with my grandmother, we would go back to Kansas City where both sides of the family were from. And we just couldn't believe all the ways my grandmother and grandparents were connected. And how much they cared about people. Not only our family, but their friends. And how, you know, all the people that my sister and I needed to visit, you know, when we went back there. And I love this definition of community, which is really all about connections. And it is about the people in your life you do not pay to care about you. And you think about the people in your life who you do not pay to care about you. Think about who you care about. Think about the calls that you make to check in on the family or the friend who might be sick. Community can happen everywhere, but you have to build it. And I saw my grandparents, I saw my parents' building community and also you never know. You never know who you're going to meet again. And so that was important that they never cut people off. And I've attempted to do the same.

**CH** What are the themes that have gone through your life that would help others achieve their dreams? I think you've already said it, but...

**DR** Themes that are fundamental to achieving dreams are family, faith, things that keep you grounded, things that while your head may be in the clouds and, you know, ambitious, that remind you of who you are. Friends do that. Family does that. And I think from a strong base in that foundation, so much can be possible. I also think we have to recognize the blessings that we have in life, and I have been blessed with good health and a lot of energy. And so, I apply that where I can.

**CH** How would you like to be remembered, Denise?

**DR** I'd like to be remembered as a doer and a dreamer. I love listening to my friend Phil Frances who talks about vision without execution is hallucination.

**CH** Can you say that again please, louder?

**DR** Sure. Vision without execution or I think it's – Phil Frances says, vision without implementation or execution is hallucination. And you think about all the visionary plans that people have

created and all those notebooks and strategic plans and what has and what hasn't gotten implemented. And so, I think that's a valued piece of wisdom that we should all remember, is that when we are visionaries, when we are dreamers, that you can't do everything at once. So, if you can't boil the ocean, what is it that you can do recognizing that one first, leads to the next.

**CH** Any other thoughts?

**DR:** The fact that you brought up Sunray of Arizona. It brought back a wave of memories. I remember the green shag carpet my mother had in that living room and how we had to be very careful not to get the carbon paper on the green shag carpet. And my sister and I just spooking each other with our little black fingers and being paid a quarter, and that was a lot of money. Got us to Circle K and back. *[Laughs]*

**CH** Tell me a little bit more about puppetry and your being able to throw your voice. How did you learn to do that?

**DR** I studied it a little bit as a kid, and I watched others. But I never had any formal training. I just practiced it a lot. And I was able to use it to entertain. So, there was some reinforcement, and there was some great joy. And my mother with her amazing imagination, to this day, helped me with a lot of fresh material to work with, too.

**CH** What puppet did you have?

**DR** A Danny O'Day puppet. And I had a few, but Danny O'Day was my first. That was at the time the ventriloquist puppet that sold at Town & Country and, and it was a great way to learn how to express myself and build confidence. It takes practice and it's amazing what you can do when you have not only practice, but when you have confidence, and can withstand things that don't go well. Because some of our greatest lessons are when we fail. And we must remember to take those timeouts to learn why we failed and not see it as a personal failure, but the beginning of another chapter of what we're going to be doing differently. Because not everything that I've touched has been golden. There have been challenges along the way.

And I'll never forget what my friend Jerry Bisgrove told me, who has been a generous philanthropist, and donor to First Place and SARC. He said that he doesn't donate to people who don't fail. People who haven't failed haven't learned some of those important lessons, or maybe even haven't tried hard enough to push the envelope, to take that risk. To imagine differently what's possible. He also talked about a few other pieces of wisdom which people give to people.

People are attracted to big ideas. And never underestimate a donor. So, I feel I am blessed to have a lot of pearls of wisdom that *[laughs]* that I can rely on and people who I do rely on to help me to get to where we're going next.

**CH** I have a question before we're finished. If I were to write a book about you, what would the title be?

**DR** I don't think I can come up with anything as good as the Wrestler, but, oh...

**CH** OK, just think about it. Thank you so much.

**DR** Thank you. This was a pleasure.

[END OF RECORDING]