

Catching Health Podcast

Conversations About Aging: Donato Tramuto

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Hello there, I'm Diane Atwood, podcasting from my little home studio in southern Maine. It's also where I write my blog Catching Health. Well, sometimes. I changed things up a bit last year and now also spend time in a co-working space in Portland. It's called B-Side Creative Studios and it's run by some wonderful people — Toderico Creative and Adam Burk & Company. I have the best of both worlds -- the solitary comfort of home and the inspiration and excitement of sharing space with other people smack in the heart of the city.

Several months ago, I heard a quote that I haven't been able to shake. That loneliness and isolation have become the chronic health conditions of this century. I realized that those same issues helped influence my decision to not just work from home. It also made me think about how fortunate I am to have the option, especially now that I'm older.

I heard the quote from Donato Tramuto at a conference his company, Tivity Health, co-hosted in Portland this past summer. The focus was on loneliness and social isolation and their impact on the health of older adults living in rural areas.

Maine happens to be tied with Florida for being the oldest state in the nation. We also have the highest percentage of people living in rural areas. I wrote a blog post about the conference and along with thinking about my own situation thought maybe I should do a podcast. Travel the state and interview people 60 and older about aging and the issues of loneliness and isolation.

As I started talking to people, I quickly realized that everyone has a story to tell and while yes, some do touch on loneliness, I heard more stories about resilience and strength and wisdom and inspiration.

So ... here I am kicking off my new Catching Health podcast. I'm calling it *Conversations About Aging* and I thought it would be fitting to begin this exciting project by interviewing the man who inspired me in the first place.

Conversations About Aging is sponsored by Avita of Stroudwater and Stroudwater Lodge, both in Westbrook, Maine. I could go on and on about Avita which is a memory care facility. It's where my mother spent the last two years of her life, loved and nurtured by everyone there, as was I and the rest of our family. Right next door is Stroudwater Lodge, which is a lively assisted living community. You can learn more about both places at northbridgecos.com.

And now my conversation with Donato Tramuto.

I know you're a very busy man, Donato, and I appreciate your taking the time to talk with me. One of the first questions I wanted to ask you was why are you so interested in aging issues?

Donato: Well, I think from several points, first of all, as the CEO of one of the largest providers of services to the seniors, I have had the opportunity to get out there and meet with thousands and thousands of our members under the silver sneakers program. And much of my desire to get out and meet with them probably goes back to the unfortunate year of 1992 when I lost both my parents seven months apart. And in that time period my mom lost 40 pounds and I missed all the signs and signals. Even though I was an executive in healthcare, I missed all the warning signs of my mother's loneliness. She and my dad had been married for almost 55 years. They had experienced good and challenging times in their lives yet what they

really respect most of one another is that they had one another. And when my dad passed, my mom just went into a deep state of sadness.

And as I was getting out and meeting seniors under our Silver Sneakers program, I was hearing the same stories. I met this member. I attended her 103rd birthday celebration. And when I was there, it hit me that she wasn't a member of Silver Sneakers because she was bench pressing 150 pounds at the gym. She joined the physical fitness program because it was an opportunity for her to meet people.

And so my commitment to this cause is more than a professional endeavor. It is in fact an opportunity to correct what I think is an absolute epidemic. And I think we all know now that loneliness is the new chronic condition of the 21st century. And it's particularly, yes, impacting our vulnerables, the older, but it's also impacting the young and my hope is that if I can address this with the older folks that maybe we can develop an intergenerational program that brings the young and the old together. And so there is a residual benefit that I see out of this focus on the aging and that is, can we connect them to younger folks and address, if you will, the epidemic from two perspectives. The young and the old.

And there's two types of loneliness. Social isolation is an objective measure and it's defined as having a small number of social contacts. And you might be living in rural America, which as you know in Maine, there's a lot of seniors living in rural America and they are unfortunately detached and they're not around people. But then there's the other, you know, aspect of loneliness. And that's a subjective state. And that's where my mother was. My mother was lonely and that cohort, they're not willing to admit it. My mother never raised her hand and looked at me and said, I'm lonely, but I do remember one time, about two months after my father died, I had taken my mom out to dinner and we were going back to her home and she took her key and she put it into the keyhole and she looked at me and she said, there's a missing link. I will never forget that. And again, you

know, my mother was like the, you know, a rock, you know, I just couldn't imagine that I would have at that time said to myself, she's lonely.

And so one of the other things that I think I'm working on is that loneliness has to come out of the closet. We have to make it okay for individuals to say I'm lonely and that's not happening right now.

Diane: Now you've mentioned your program, silver sneakers. Not everybody knows what that program is. Can you explain it?

Donato: Sure. Silver sneakers is one of the premier programs that's offered by the Medicare Advantage Insurance plans for free, for seniors. We develop classes that we put on for the seniors, um, we connect them, if you will, to the 16,000 gym partnerships that we have. We train those gym partners what it means to address the physical needs of a senior.

Diane: Well, I'll have to find out how many of these programs exist in our state here in Maine. It's available, but you have to have somebody who's actually running the program?

Donato: Well, we have 16,000 gyms on the network and we have quite a healthy network in Maine. And, um, perhaps, uh, you know, we'll follow up with you and you know, the key is, you know, insurance companies who offer it. And we do have insurance companies who are offering in the state of Maine.

Diane: I have discovered that Maine does have a lot of resources for older people and many of the organizations were represented at the conference that you sponsored. I'm curious what you learned from some of the participants.

Donato: Well, I'll tell you what I learned and I talk about this in my book that I published a few years ago, that the higher your collaborative IQ, the

more you can get done. The reality is that there are programs out there, but the seniors don't know about it. Like silver sneakers is a great example. We have over 15 million seniors who are eligible for the program for free. That's a significant percentage of the total cohort of seniors who are 65 and older yet only three point 6 million of that 15 plus million have signed up for it and so I think what I took away is that we've got to get the message out there and we have to drive forward a better connection and awareness and bring these programs together under an integrated model. Single point solutions don't work anymore and the more we can collaborate with one another, we don't have to innovate.

We need to integrate. And that was my biggest take away is that innovation. We have been doing it for the last 20 years. A lot of it fueled by Steve Jobs and the great you know, silicon valley, you know, innovators. Yet, I think the greatest, the greatest opportunity now is how do we integrate what's out there.

And you know, quite frankly, I am concerned about the loneliness epidemic. I'll be 63 in July. And quite honestly, you know, when I look at our senior population, these are the individuals that were the policemen, the teachers, the professors, you know, the scientist, why should they not have a wonderful, you know, decade or two of great living as they get into their eighties and nineties. And maybe I'm focused on this because I am hoping that I will be the beneficiary of what we do here today.

Diane: Well now this is a nice segue because I want to get personal. You've told me that you're 63 and so that means you qualify to be interviewed for the podcast because I'm planning to travel the state of Maine and talk to people who are 60 and older. And so you're 63 and you also have a home here in Maine. So... **Donato:** I do. **Diane:** So can we get personal for a few minutes before we say goodbye? Please? **Donato:** Go ahead. **Diane:** Okay. I'd like to know what makes it a good day for you.

Donato: Knowing that I have been compassionate to others and that I have in some small way, listened to their stories. I believe that every single person has a story, and by the way, that's part of this loneliness is that the technology today, these iphones and all that, we thought it would help to connect and it's actually hurt our connections. And so for me, a good day is when I have taken the time and asked someone, tell me your story, uh, what is your why? Why do you do what you do? To me getting to the core of knowing somebody else, um, makes my day.

Diane: When would you say you've been the happiest or the most fulfilled in your life?

Donato: I think when I have been in my foundation's work. As you know, I started a foundation in 17 years ago and I think for me the happiest moment is when I have been totally immersed in helping to, right the wrong that is out there in our world. You know, somebody who's born in a certain zip code might do better than somebody who was born in a zip code where there is a significant amount of crime. And so the ability to help make the world a better place is when I am at my best. And I have fortunately had many of those moments.

Diane: Do you mind sharing the story behind why you started the foundation?

Not at all. I launched the foundation four weeks after the fateful day of September 11th. I was scheduled to be on that second plane, United flight one 75 that was leaving Boston for LA. I took route nearly every week for five years. I had started my company in California and the day before I woke up with a, uh, a tooth ache on September 10th and I was speaking at a healthcare conference in California that week and I was concerned that the tooth ache would impair my ability to make the speech. And so I decided I would go to Boston and see my dentist.

I was at my home in Maine and my two friends and their three year old had traveled from LA to visit to visit me that weekend. And they changed their flight on Saturday, September 8th. They changed their flight to go out with me on September 11th. We decided we would fly all together. They had arrived in Rhode Island because the young lad had overslept and they missed their flight from LA to Boston, so they went from LA to Rhode Island.

In any event, because my dentist office was very close to the airport, Boston Logan, I called my travel agent to see if I could go out that night and not out on September 11th and he was able to get me on the 5:00 flight on September 10th. And so I called my friends and said, I'm going out on Monday night. Why don't we all travel together? And they said, no, we've already traveled once and little David is expecting you to join us and he's disappointed. And I was playing with my mind. I can still remember that day I was playing with my mind in terms of, gosh, maybe I shouldn't change the flight. I'm going to disappoint the three year old.

But then I finally said, no, I'm going to go out, get a good night's sleep, and then I can make my speech on Wednesday, September 12th. Well, that decision saved my life. And unfortunately, the decision that my friends made to go out with me on September 11 cost them their lives and the three of them lost their lives when the second plane hit the tower. And so it was a very painful moment for me still has some painful, aspects to it. But, you know, I decided that I would devote my life to doing good and I launched the foundation so that I could find a new channel to channel not only my grief, but to really make some good out of what was clearly a horrible event. And that's how the foundation was started.

Diane: And what do you fund?

So it's morphed into, we started it in 2001 only as a college scholarship program and we started with a high school in wells and we now honor to

one from wells and one from Bangor. It is a significant scholarship, four year scholarship and the individual has to demonstrate some challenge that they've had in their life, some bulldozer moment that they've had. And it has been one of the most proudest segments of the foundation.

We have several that work in our company here. It's not only providing scholarships, we provide mentoring and help these individuals who we know can be great, but they need that inspiration and they need that guidance and they need that help. And we've now had about 80, 85 laureates in the program. But about 10 years ago the board and I decided we wanted to do more, we wanted to scale this.

And so we decided that each year we would pick three or four major organizations whose goal it is to make the world a more just and fair place and honor them with significant grants to deliver on their vision. And so in Maine we have a three year partnership with the Good Shepherd Food Bank, a significant partnership there, Frannie Peabody. Last year we launched, because of my executive involvement in business, I have seen workplace bullying with my own eyes. I have been bullied because of my loss of hearing. I've been bullied as a child, been bullied in high school. And even in the corporate world. So we funded last year a \$1,000,000 grant to the Robert F. Kennedy Center. That's a three year grant for them to develop a workplace dignity program that we can take out to employers and help them understand that executives bring biases to the workforce and with the me too movement, how can we be a conduit to train executives to make the workplace a more gentle and kinder place?

And so we have a scholarship, endowed at Boston University, we've endowed that scholarship where they, each year will bring a student from a developing country and provide them education in public health so that they can go back and be the ambassadors for their country. We also have one at the Jefferson College of Population health. And so we have now

probably we have about 75 different grants that the foundation has supported over the last 10 years.

Diane: That's amazing. You mentioned bulldozer a moments. I know you wrote a book about bulldozer moments and you've mentioned some of your own. As a child, you lost your hearing and you have taken your bulldozer moments starting with that, I think, and turned them into good, into positive and that's inspirational.

Donato: Well, you know, listen, I want others to know that my life has not been, but no one's life has been without challenges and you know, I chose to pull the bootstraps up and rather than be angry and upset at people that may have not been so nice and polite to me to try to demonstrate that you can rise above that.

And my goal is to really inspire the young and when I get letters from these young children and the parents who indicate that their child would not have been able to accomplish with what they've accomplished if it wasn't for, this scholarship and the fact that we were mentoring them. You asked what makes me happy. That makes me happy. No amount of wealth or no amount of material well being can ever replace that moment where you are saving a life or you are in fact removing somebody out of their state of loneliness or you've done your part to make the world a better place.

You know, I was asked recently by a reporter, I've never been asked this question before and it was a very provocative question. They asked me what are you most afraid will not be here 10 years from now? And I was quick to answer it, which was a surprise because I've never been asked that question and I said, compassion. I feel like we have lost this sense of compassion. And I guess when you say your compassion, sometimes people equate that with being weak and it's not. I think we need more compassionate leaders today and that's my goal. I'm trying to do my part to

educate others that being a compassionate leader does not mean you're weak.

Diane: Well, Donato I realize that our short window of time is just about up and you need to get back to what you were doing. Is there anything that you wish I had asked you but I didn't? Maybe it is this piece about compassion, but is there anything else that's on your mind?

Donato: No, I just want to thank you. You know, it is, look how Collaborative IQ has worked there. You met us what a year, two years ago. Was it last year? **Diane:** It was last year. It was last summer.

Donato: And look what you've done and I want to just applaud you for that. And I think that that's the tipping point of collaborative IQ. We don't have all the answers, but certainly we do have networks and my hope is that you will now spread the word. You'll get more people to jump on this bandwagon again. I think in five or 10 years we will have moved the needle remarkably so that when I'm 73, I can look back and say, wow, this is not a world of loneliness, but we've done a great job to unlonely the world and to make it really a collaborative and a much more a respectful place. So thank you for your part.

Diane: Thank you. I see it as an important project, but at the very least I've been having a wonderful time visiting people and recording their stories, including yours, so thank you for helping me kick off *Conversations About Aging*. I appreciate it very much. Very good.

Donato: You make it a great day now.

Diane: Okay, you too.

This is Diane Atwood and you're listening to the Catching Health podcast: *Conversations About Aging*. I've been talking with Donato Tramuto, who first inspired me to do this project. Before I say anything else, I need to apologize to him. He was very gracious not to correct me when I said not once, but twice that he was 63. His birthday isn't until July, which is months away. Sorry Donato!

If you'd like some more information about his company Tivity Health, the Silver Sneakers program, or his foundation, you'll find links on CatchingHealth.com, which is homebase for my blog and podcast.

Now a few thank yous — I could not produce this podcast without help from Smith Atwood Video Services -- yes, the Atwood is a relative -- my husband Barry Atwood is my editor. See what else they have to offer at SmithAtwood.com.

I'd also like to thank Tom Meuser for his support. He's Director of the Center for Excellence in Aging and Health at the University of New England. Tom will be using some of the interviews for research on aging issues in Maine.