

Susan Robinson 00:00:06 I was diagnosed with what's called Starva disease or the adolescent onset of macular degeneration. And my retina specialist at the time of diagnosis said, you know, you're gonna have to think about a career because you can't be like a fighter pilot. And I was thinking not a problem. Wasn't really thinking on that one anyway, so no harm, no foul. And then I said, you know, I can't be an orthopedic surgeon. Right. And he said, no, you can't be an orthopedic surgeon. I just sort of sat back as any, you know, committed, ambitious Penn Stater at the age of 19 would say. And I said, if, if I can't operate in a hospital, I'll just operate the entire hospital.

Ryan Newman 00:00:46 This is dare to disrupt a podcast about Penn state alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host Ryan Newman. And on the show today is Susan Robinson. Susan Robinson is a speaker consultant and leader making an impact on the world in a truly unique way through her corporate and conference keynote, commencement addresses, workshops, client initiatives, and writing. She masterfully blends 25 years of multi-sector leadership with her experiences being legally blind to shift thinking elevate potential and inspire action. She has worked with global firms and fortune 500 companies, top non-for-profit organizations, leading universities, and the United nations. Susan presented a Ted talk in 2017, entitled how I fail at being disabled, which has over 1.5 million views. Susan graduated from Penn state in 1994 with a degree in health policy and administration, and received her master of public administration in health policy and management from New York university. Susan, thank you so much for joining us. This is a big first for dare to disrupt. You were our first Ted talk speaker who had over a million views on your Ted talk, uh, actually over a 1.5 million views, which is pretty extraordinary. So that's a first for us. I wanna thank you for making time for us here on dare to disrupt.

Susan Robinson 00:02:31 Well, thank you for inviting me today. And it's a, it's quite a humbling experience to have that kind of resounding response for a Ted talk. I'm, I'm honored to have it and, and glad to be able to offer something like that to the world.

Ryan Newman 00:02:44 Great. Well, we're gonna definitely get to that, but let's like get ahead of ourselves. We'd like to start the way we normally do, uh, which is at the beginning, if you wouldn't mind sharing for, uh, us and our listeners, Susan, uh, where you grew up and who some of the big influences were in your life in those very early years.

Susan Robinson 00:03:00 Sure. Well, I grew up in a very small town in Pennsylvania, Northeastern, Pennsylvania called Burwick. And I, I, I loved it. It was a very idyllic childhood and riding bikes in the summer and going to school and participating in community things. I'm an only child. So I spent a lot of time with my parents and with my extended family before coming to Penn state, I, I would say my, some of my biggest influences were in my family, my parents and my grandparents. They always encouraged me to do my very best. And I had a lot of teachers who inspired academic thought and, and paying attention to the world and, and figuring out where your place could be. Most importantly, though, I have to admit that my childhood priest, father, Dominic Marella, who unfortunately passed away a couple of years ago, he was incredibly influential in two ways. He first insisted that all of us seventh graders took a speech class. So my first introduction to a speech class was in seventh grade and he also loved New York city. And so when the eighth grade class graduated in the spring of their graduation year, there was the annual eighth grade class trip to New York. And in my eighth grade class trip, that's when I fell in love with New York city and why I live here today.

Ryan Newman 00:04:23 That is incredible. And that's also, I think the first time somebody's referenced, uh, somebody of the religious order as being an inspiration. So that's also equally as interesting. So you, you, you have this amazing experience growing up a single child and, and in this small town of Pennsylvania, how did the decision Dakota to Penn state, uh, arise? And what was it like when you first arrived?

Susan Robinson 00:04:45 I went to Penn state because I applied to three schools. The oth -

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-- er two shall remain nameless and Penn state was the first to accept me. And I said, if, if they were that committed and knew that they wanted me, then surely I knew I wanted Penn state and I, I accepted the acceptance as a biology major incoming as a, as a first year, I was able to apply and got accepted to a, a summer program for all students incoming in the biological sciences. And my first few days on the Penn state campus were during the summer. So it was very quiet. There were about 40 of us. We really got to know each other and it was very fun. And to create those relationships before the fall semester, the rigor of the fall semester starts. And I just, I loved it. I think I was on campus for 72 hours and I thought, I really don't ever wanna leave. This is one of the most fantastical places on earth. And then I got to do fun stuff like electrophoresis and, and go to some of the mushroom labs and have Creamery ice cream every day. And I was just sold

Ryan Newman 00:05:50 Well, that's, that's an amazing way to explain how quickly it took for you to fall in love for life with, with Penn state and, and more importantly, happy valley in general. So your you're a biology major. You have an, an interest in the sciences. How did your educational journey and academic pursuits evolve and potentially change as you spent time on campus at Penn state?

Susan Robinson 00:06:14 Well, there was a monumental shift during my sophomore year. I, I loved science. I always had loved science in high school. I was able to witness surgeries and I, I wanted to be a doctor for a very long time and had settled on being an orthopedic surgeon because I, I understood at the time that there were a few women in orthopedic surgery. And I thought that that would be really great to break down some barriers and, and create equitability there as well as to have impacts on patients' lives. How fun is it to help someone walk their daughter down the aisle after a hip replacement or help someone run a marathon after a knee replacement? I, I just thought that could be fascinating to help people in that way, but sophomore year I was diagnosed with a genetic vision impairment that has no correction or cure.

Susan Robinson 00:07:03 And so my first year and a half or so at Penn state, I kept saying to my mom, mom, I need my glasses changed, mom. I can't get all the notes before the professor moves ahead. Mom, I'm MIS recognizing people, mom, I can't finish tests. And so finally I, I was diagnosed with what's called star art's disease or the adolescent onset of macular degeneration. And my retina specialist at the time of diagnosis said, you know, you're gonna have to think about a career because you can't be like a fighter pilot. And I was thinking not a problem. Wasn't really thinking on that one anyway, so no harm, no foul. And then I said, you know, I can't be an orthopedic surgeon, right. And he said, no, you can't be an orthopedic surgeon. I just sort of sat back as any, you know, committed, ambitious Penn Stater at the age of 19 would say.

Susan Robinson 00:07:51 And I said, if, if I can't operate in a hospital, I'll just operate the entire hospital. And I changed my major to health policy and administration. I tacked on minors in business and economics, partly because I thought it would be very interesting to thoroughly understand healthcare from the business side of things. And I'm a bit of an overachiever and I just thought all things worked well together. And I pursued that academically at Penn state graduating with that degree and really, really understanding and liking the business side of things as much as I understood and like the science piece.

Ryan Newman 00:08:24 So I can tell in hearing you speak, how, how comfortable you are speaking about this visual impairment. But I imagine that that must have been an unbelievably halting challenging moment when things started to change more importantly to presumably have had full vision. And then all of a sudden have your vision start to be impaired. Can you, can you take Susan, our listeners inside? What was, what that experience like of, of having full capability and with respect to your vision, and then all of a sudden having that change for you? Uh, no pun intended right before your eyes,

Susan Robinson 00:08:57 Right? <laugh> before and within. Absolutely. So the macular degeneration often is known as an adult diagnosis, but there are circumstances where pediatric and adole --

-- scent patients have not exactly the same. It's not exactly the same progression of disease or the same outcome, but there are a lot of similarities and scientifically biologically it's very, very similar as well. When I was eight, I got glasses for the first time. So I'm nearsighted just like anyone else who was nearsighted and glasses or corrective lenses adjust that. So 2020 vision is possible at the age of 16, I was like grown up enough to get contacts and responsible enough to get contacts. That was a really big day in my life at 16. I also had a driver's license. So what we've been able to sort of retro figure out is that there was no digression within my vision at the point in time that I got my driver's license by my senior year in high school, I'm now 17.

Susan Robinson 00:10:01 I'm getting out of my front row in class to get closer to the chalkboard, to get the notes. And the running joke was, oh, Susan, you need your glasses changed again. And I had very, I have, uh, a pretty strong prescription. So I had very thick glasses at the time. And thank goodness for technology that makes the, the lenses thinner these days. But the running joke was your glasses are gonna get even thicker. And so what we think is that that was the beginning. It could be both. I needed my prescription changed and the degeneration started, uh, it's, it's very hard to tell. So by the time I got to Penn state, the digression had gotten to the point where sitting in Schwab auditorium, for example, 1100 seats, that was bio 101 for me. And I'm sitting in the first row, second row, third row.

Susan Robinson 00:10:49 I can't get all the notes. And it was just curious to me, why was this not possible? I remember being able to get all of the notes before. And so I was more perplexed and looking for a solution to this problem. And the easiest solution was I need my glasses changed. And that's why my comment to my mother was pretty consistent. Mom, I need my glasses changed. I can't get all the notes before they get switched. Mom, I need my glasses changed. I can't finish tests. And I'm watching other students complete tests so quickly, and I'm not done in the total amount of time where a lot of other students were done in half the amount of time. So again, it was just what's, it's curiosity what's going on here. This doesn't make any sense, but I remember walking across the hub lawn and I called out to someone who I thought was someone I knew, Hey, she, Lynn, how are you?

Susan Robinson 00:11:42 And as the human being that I thought was she Lynn got closer. It wasn't Shely. And it was a person who was looking at me with a strange look saying like, why are you calling me something? That's not my name? I don't know you. So when I was diagnosed, after having three years of these sorts of increasing perplexing experiences, when I got the diagnosis, I wasn't relieved to have a vision impairment, but I was relieved to have an explanation to an experience that made no sense to me. And then once I had the explanation, I could then go to other people and be the self advocate that I sort of instantly turned into, which was, Hey, professor, Soandso, I have a vision impairment and I'm legally blind. I'm not able to get all of the notes before you switch to the next ones. Would you mind printing out your slides and giving them to me so I could follow along in my seat. And everyone was very accommodating. I had absolutely no negative response from Penn state. And in fact, Penn state, I give Penn state a lot of credit because they just said, how can we help? And what do you wanna do? And how can we support you getting there? Uh, it was, again, I was not happy to have a vision impairment, but considering all the circumstances, it, I think it was an a plus scenario of all the things to be able to support me, to create a life that's highly fulfilling and deeply rewarding.

Ryan Newman 00:13:06 Well, it's amazing to hear you refer to that in the, the frame of curiosity I'm reminded of Albert Einstein's famous quote. I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious. It's clear to me that that curiosity extends to you as well, Susan and credit to you for advocating for yourself to find out how to be adaptable. I assume adaptability really is the key word here and welcome your thoughts on expanding on the role that adaptability and other related words played in your, in your success in college.

Susan Robinson 00:13:36 I would say adaptabi --

-- lity is, is one of the focal points of my day to day experience without thinking about it in, in that term for me, I just do what I need to do in order to figure it out the world is, is for created for and by the 2020 site. Understandably so, and it's just, it's possible to do things differently and to have success differently. You just have to kind of figure it out. And to your point, I think that's where the curiosity also comes into play. How I navigate the world is, is not unavailable to 2020 sighted people. It's just, we process the world differently. So for example, if I'm in an airport and I'm looking for gate 14, the first thing that I'll do is look for the change in gate nine to 10, because for me, it's a single digit versus two digits.

Susan Robinson 00:14:27 So two digits is twice as wide as a single digit. So first I look for gate 10, for me, 10 looks sharp on the left and round on the right, which would indicate the numbers one or the numerals one and zero. And so I then am looking for the next gate. And what does it tell me if it's two sharp items? I know it's gate 11 and that the gates are going in sequential order. So I just need to go three more, 12, 13, 14, if the next number after 10 is sort of round at, uh, sharp on the left and round at the top and sharp on the bottom, I've got gate 12. So I have gates that are even on the left and odd on the right, or even on one side and odd on the other. And so I need to find gate 14, continue where I'm going, but it's just one further gate after 12.

Susan Robinson 00:15:24 So it takes a lot of words to explain. And when I do, I often get the response from 2020 cited people saying, oh my gosh, that's just so much, it, it must be exhausting with your vision. It's not, it's just the way that I do it because how I do it is, is not typically what a 2020 cited person would do, but with macular degeneration, what's interesting to me about it is that the center of my retina is gone. Those cells process static and detail. And so I'm left with the peripheral, the, oh, I just saw something out of the corner of my eye part. And those cells are designed to see things in motion. So it is possible for me to see something move quicker than a 20, 20 sided person. So once I was in a public place, I saw something moving on the ground.

Susan Robinson 00:16:14 And I just jumped because I don't know if it's a quarter, a bottle cap, a Roach, a mouse. So I just jumped out of the way. And the person next to me was like, that's just a bottle cap. What were you jumping for? Uh, so it's indicative of, of what I can see. Uh, but since it is football season, I'll share that with my dad. I can see false starts and off sides quicker than my dad can. And he said to me, once you said, you couldn't see to which point I responded. You said you could <laugh>. And so one of the, one of the things that I like to offer is that someone with a vision impairment, or even someone who has no usable vision at all, just process the world differently, we're able to exist in the world very successfully. It's just, our process might be different. And, and it's a good thing. There are skills and characteristics that I've cultivated as a result of being vision impaired that sometimes are, are pretty helpful assets to a team. And it's great to be able to offer them when, when the time is right.

Ryan Newman 00:17:11 Well, that's really incredible. And we're gonna have more opportunity to hear about that when we talk about your four way into the world of Ted talks. But before we get ahead of ourselves, you said a very entrepreneurial comment. You said, well, if I can't work in the hospital, I might as well try to be, get the job to run the hospital. So health, health, policy, and administration. Can you talk to us about after graduation? What were some of your initial thoughts about launching your career and, and, and, and where did you sort of, um, where did that path take you after graduation?

Susan Robinson 00:17:40 Sure. Well, to get a degree in health policy and administration from Penn state, you have to complete a three credit, non substitute internship. And I did mine at the New York city department of health, and really got introduced to big city healthcare and the importance of the governmental structure within that, that healthcare ecosystem. I then worked at an orthopedic and rheumatology hospital here in New York. So interestingly enough, it came full circle to working with orthoped --

-- ic surgeons and supporting them and supporting patients. And I did a lot of patient navigation at that time, amongst other things at the hospital. It was very, very interesting work. And I really liked working with patients and supporting the best possible health outcomes that were available from there. I moved to an organization that provided a medical home to medically underserved and homeless children and adolescents throughout the country by mobile medical unit.

Susan Robinson 00:18:40 And it was such an interesting concept to be able to see a doctor's office on wheels that provided care to the people who needed it most. And it was in rural places and urban places and where one car for the entire family. And so the mobile medical unit would drive 90 miles in order to deliver care. And there I learned, you mentioned entrepreneurialism, this particular organization invested in EHR before EHR became a thing, because it was much easier to, to have technology on the mobile medical units than schlep every paper, patient record that you had not knowing who might walk in as a walk in to the mobile medical unit that day in that role. I also did a disaster response when hurricane Katrina came through Louisiana and Mississippi, I did a lot of event planning. I did a lot of pulling organizations together in coalitions on a national scale was really a phenomenal role.

Susan Robinson 00:19:39 And my first entry into senior leadership from there, I went to a volunteer health organization where I was responsible for the entirety of mission delivery. So I worked on, uh, patient services, patient education, policy, and advocacy, and a basic science research awards program that was all national in scale, along the way I, I picked up organizational turnaround skills and, and came to find that my, my mind really does work effectively at that executive leadership that enterprise wide level and working within the healthcare space was just very interesting to put all those pieces together. I was recruited over to the corporate side and I worked in the pharmaceutical industry for a while, was very interesting to learn there because on the notfor profit sector, you spend a lot of time making requests for funding. And on the corporate side, you do a lot of work in, in saying yes to those requests or saying no for certain reasons.

Susan Robinson 00:20:40 And being able to understand, and then translate between the two sides was incredibly fascinating. Once I wrapped up in the pharmaceutical industry, there was a 22% worldwide workforce layoff from which my entire team was a part of when there was a franchise shutdown. I sat back and I thought to myself, you know, a lot of really smart people have, have asked for my thoughts. And I've always been very humbled and felt very privileged that not only did they do that, but a lot of times what we talked about materialized in some way. And so I decided to launch, hang my own shingle, as they say, I, I launched a consulting business and that's evolved over time initially thinking about how I can work as teams, and then thinking about maybe how I could be more of an executive business partner. And I've worked on some really interesting projects over time initially within the healthcare space and now a little bit more.

Susan Robinson :21:38 And then when my Ted talk came out, it added a layer to my career in what I do into leadership and speaking in advocacy and talking about creating possibility for people who don't often have that opportunity, where folks are judged for what they can't do, as opposed to what they can. And so it's really fun to help contribute to a world that's increasingly becoming inclusive and how we can shape mindset and even reframe some of our own definitions to make sure that that, that opportunity is as broad as possible. So as many people as they can, can contribute their very best at work and also at play school and home,

AD 00:22:19The national science foundation's innovation core program also known as ICOR uses experiential education to help researchers gain valuable insight into entrepreneurship, starting a business or industry requirements and challenges. Penn state is a proud partner member of the ICOR Mid-Atlantic hub, working collaboratively with a network of universities to build and sustain a diverse and inclusive innovation ecosystem across Pennsylvania. To learn more about the program and how you can get involved, please visit inven

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Ryan Newman 00:23:02 Let's do a deep dive into the whole Ted talk experience. I think our listeners would be really interested to understand how all that came about your preparation, the execution, the result, uh, take us through that right from the first inkling of how Ted and the Ted talk conference came on your radar.

Susan Robinson 00:23:22 So this is, I, I think this is an interesting story and I, I appreciate the opportunity to share it throughout my career. Many people have said to me, wow, how do you do that? And you're legally blind. And initially I thought to myself, oh, you silly, fully sight people. You do the same thing if you were in my shoes. But the comment kept coming from disparate groups within my work life. And even as I changed jobs, new people that I met kept saying the same thing. And it just became very curious to me when I launched my consulting business, the same thing happened, but it included leaders within organizations that were designed to support people who are blind and vision paired. And I sat back and I thought if, if people who are representing this group are also wondering why it's so surprising that I could be successful.

Susan Robinson 00:24:21 I, I really have to reshape the thought that 2020 vision is the linchpin for success. And I, I, truth be told, was getting a little frustrated with a couple of people who I was interfacing with at the time who were just so insistent that I accept the label of disabled and what that meant to them. And there was sort of no negotiation on their side. And I sat back and had very Frank and direct discussions with them saying, look, I have a master's degree and you, don't not, not because I think I'm better, but just as one specific outcome, you have 2020 vision. I don't, you are telling me that I'm disabled, but I have an academic credential that you don't have. And so how does this, how does this play out that somehow I need to take on this label that clearly what's embedded in it is disabled and, and the word disabled in the English language has diametrically opposed meanings.

Susan Robinson 00:25:22 So it takes something that's perfectly fine, but it deliberately is interrupted to make, not work like a disabled alarm, or it means something that's not capable of functioning for what it's been designed to do without intervention to fix it like a disabled vehicle at the side of the highway. So my confusion leading to my curiosity is why is someone else's definition or what they think the word means when applied to me, why should I accept that? So sort of brewing with all of this over about 18 months, I was a little late to dinner with a friend and she was there first. And as I was putting all my bags and taking off my coat, she said, how are you? And it was sort of the, just the, the question of the moment. And I just sort of laid everything out for her with great gumption, because I was so frustrated.

Susan Robinson 00:26:06 And at the end of my monologue, I'll call it. I said, you wanna call me disabled? I'll tell you what I fail at being disabled. And I, the words just came out of my mouth and I sat back in my chair and I said, wow, that's a really good title for a talk. <laugh> the very next day, a dear friend who was aware of something called a Ted residency. It was accepting applications for its second class. And he sent me the application and he said, oh, you have such really innovative ideas, very Ted, like you should put your, uh, put, put some of your public health work into this application and send it in and see if you can get the residency, which was four months at Ted and concluded with the Ted talk. And I said to him, I have a better idea because in as much as I got all my frustration out at that dinner, clearly I was hanging onto a little bit of it.

Susan Robinson 00:27:02 So I took this concept of how I fail at being disabled. I put my Ted residency application together and they said, Hey, why don't you come join us? So for four months, I spent every day at Ted with 19 amazing human beings, working on incredible world, shifting perspectives and projects. We all gave our talks that night, uh, altogether in one night. And so we worked on our project during the residency, but then we also worked on our talks. And since your question was a little bit more specific to the talk, um, it is rigorous. The talk that you heard was probably the, the edited version after 250 to 300 edits. It is a process tha --

-- t encourages you to step so far outside of your comfort zone, but yet say so authentic to who you are and finding the balance point of those two things with as many people who you would like to ask, giving you an opinion on your draft, uh, it's an incredible experience.

Susan Robinson 00:28:10 And then you stand on that big red dot for the first time and the practice that you've done on your 187th version that you can spit out pretty quickly. All of a sudden you can't get the words out because you're standing on that big red dot and you know, how important it is. And you know, that you have an opportunity to really impact people in a meaningful way.

And, and it's humbling to the point where you get to be a little speechless, um, which I was, but you get through that and you continue to practice. And we were in a space where we were all so very encouraging of each other and of ourselves. We all wanted to do a good job. And we all wanted all of our other fellow Ted residents to do an exceptional job as well. But there were two sentences in my Ted talk that I could not get out without them coming through the wood.

Susan Robinson 00:29:06 Chipper is what I was calling it. And so I remember the week before my Ted talk, I was up until two o'clock in the morning, pacing my apartment, saying those two sentences over and over and over. And I would also walk the streets of New York with my headphones, sort of presumably listening to music by, by external folks' point of view. And all I was doing was repeating my talk over and over and over. So I'd call someone and say, do you have six minutes? And I would give them the talk. And then they would say, Hey, how you doing? And I was like, I don't have time until after my Ted talk is over, but I'll call you back back. And so it was practice, practice, practice, practice. And then what resulted is, is what you saw on video.

Ryan Newman 00:29:48 Amazing. And, and just, just the title itself, you know, how I fail at being disabled. I mean, that in itself is so thought provoking to your point about driving, not just your own curiosity, but the curiosity in others and the results speak for themselves. So you, you give this amazing Ted talk and obviously once it's in the can, as they say in the industry, you have no idea how it's gonna be received. So what was it like after you actually did the talk until the time that you saw the reception take hold? And what was that experience like for you?

Speaker 1 00:30:19 Oh, God, you, no, one's asked me that question before. So I was honored to be selected for ted.com. And when I found out that my talk would be featured on ted.com, I, I was bursting, but there's, there's no one to tell. Um, it, they, it it's important for, for the talks to come out as they do. And so my parents were very proud and, uh, and a couple of mentors, uh, were very proud, but you are just waiting. You're waiting for your talk to come out. And the talks change at not a specific time every day, based on my understanding and experience. And so I, it was my day and I was just waiting for the talk to change. And then the talk changed and my phone blew up. I I've never received so many text messages in a 15 minute span of time. Friends took it and threw it all over social media organizations around the world, put it on their sites.

Susan Robinson 00:31:20 And I had, pre-scripted a dinner with friends that are pre pre-planned, a dinner with friends that night. And two of them weren't really engaging in the conversation, which the other two of us were like, what's up with the two of them. But what I realized after the fact is that they were refreshing their phones every minute until the ticker switched to 100,000, which happened during dinner that night. So that was very, and we just got to celebrate. So it was very, very fun, but it was interesting feeling the talk go around the world. So it, it changed, uh, about 11 o'clock in the morning. And at 11 o'clock in the morning, people in California, it's eight o'clock in the morning. They may not necessarily be checking things out. And so it was fun to watch the talk sort of go around the world. Cause I, I have a, a great network of friends and colleagues, and as they would get to it, as they would wake up in the morning, not knowing that it was going to be me, um, the messages that would come up in the people who gave really complimentary feedback, but also very thought provoking feedback when they had diffe --

-- rent points of view.

Susan Robinson 00:32:30 And it was great to have those kinds of dialogues as well. And to be engaged with folks around the world, understanding culture and understanding perspectives, individual perspectives, community perspectives, national or regional perspectives was fascinating. Um, and, and I really enjoyed the opportunity to have those conversations, but what I will say, one of the things that still tickles me pink is that Qantas airlines selected my Ted talk as part of their flight entertainment, which I never would've known, uh, not flying to Australia on a daily basis, but one of my friends happened to be flying back from a United Nations event here in New York to Sydney. And she happened to see it and she took a picture of it and sent it to me saying, is this, you, it looks just like you. And so it was fun to learn that way. And, uh, and I tweeted at QAs, which was really fun to save flat. Susan is on our way to, to Sydney and 3d Susan hopefully will come sometimes soon.

Ryan Newman 00:33:25 <laugh>, that's fantastic. So you have this amazing experience with this Ted talk. You explained how it really caused you to shift how you thought about what you were doing from an entrepreneurial impact standpoint. Can you just take us through the evolution of your way, in which of your, of interacting with the community from a financial perspective, from a business perspective, what that journey's been like and how that pivot has occurred for you?

Susan Robinson 00:33:50 So the Ted talk layered on speaking for me in a way that I hadn't anticipated it a tremendous opportunity and one that I'm so glad to have, and it's interesting where people see the talk and then the, sometimes their next question is an email to me saying, can you come keynote our conference? So it's interesting being a speaker and I enjoy it very, very much. However, I'm also coming to that role as a person with senior and executive leadership experience. So my work in that space is really partnering with clients to make sure that what I'm there to do is supportive in what they're trying to achieve. So I have some general themes that I talk about, but not canned scripted speeches per se. Uh, I really like to make sure that when I'm being brought in, I I'm being very complimentary to the framework that I'm stepping into.

Susan Robinson 00:34:54 And then the work that I do from a consultant standpoint is complimentary. So what people are interested to know when I speak generally, if it's a, a corporate keynote or, or conferences where there's a professional audience in mind, the intersection of leadership and quote unquote disability is what's most interesting. And we can unpack that in lots of different ways. We can look at it from an HR perspective. We can look at it from a D E and I perspective. We can look at it from a, we get it from a strategic point of view, but how do we tactically implement things that actually work? And I like being a thought partner with, for clients in that way. And then sometimes it's just pure leadership. Um, how can you be the best leader? We have sort of rumble strips in our career. As we transition from student mindset to professional mindset, those are two really different things.

Susan Robinson 00:35:52 And then when you shift from individual contributor to being a manager, those are different skill sets and then manager to leader and leader to governance. And, and I love all of those kinds of roles, as well as the progression from one to the next, because we assume that someone who perfectly knows how to make a widget can then supervise 12 people who also make widgets. And that person certainly has the subject matter expertise in order to, to convey they have the knowledge to convey, but do they supervise all 12 people the same way? Do they support all 12 people the same way? Do they convey the information in a way that each of the 12 can hear? And so it's really a different job. So to be able to offer that in a meaningful way, I, I really enjoy, and I'm very, very grateful to have the opportunity to do that.

Susan Robinson 00:36:44 But then to have the add on, of extracting, people's surprise that someone with a vision impairment could do that work is incredibly meaningful and significant and fun because that's when we start to create opportunity for everyone to bring their best to the table. I often share with clients and I always talk about Penn state. I've talked at --

-- Penn state at the UN stage. Any, you gimme the opportunity. I'm talking Penn state and I talk about football, no one ever says to a center you're not quick enough to run down the field and catch the ball. So you can't be on our team. And no one ever says to a wide receiver, you're not big enough is strong enough to be the center. So you can't be on our team. It's the composite of all of the best strengths that create a winning football team. And that's what we know and love us Penn state, but in the business space, if someone has a disability, it, why people think someone in a, like a legit people think someone in a wheelchair couldn't be a CEO. I'm not sure why, why that is. And I really enjoy the opportunity to refrain the mindset so that someone who has the capacity to be a phenomenal CEO wheelchair or not has the opportunity to do so

Ryan Newman 00:37:58 Well. It's, it's really extraordinary, Susan. And I want to thank you for taking time today to share your perspectives and more importantly, really to give our audience an education of what it means to really achieve your full potential as you've, uh, really exemplified both in your career, as well as in your speaking prowess. I'd now like to take a moment to hand things over to a current Penn state student who's in the midst of her own entrepreneurial journey and is very active within the Penn state entrepreneurial ecosystem. Belle Peterson is a junior studying bio behavioral health with a minor in global health and is currently preparing to apply to medical school. She's the co-founder and senior health analyst at AEO, an electronic health record platform that works to expand psychological and psychiatric care by streamlining the diagnostic process and identifying patients with complex medical histories. Uh, now turn it over to bell.

Belle Peterson 00:39:00 Hi. Yes. Thank you so much for having me. I'm so grateful to be here and to have the opportunity to learn more about you, Susan. Um, I wanted to start off by touching on that passion that you kind of been expressing during your time with Brian for the healthcare field and how your diagnosis impacted that. So for many individuals, including myself, we can't picture ourselves doing anything else, but working in medicine. And you mentioned your original dream of wanting to become an orthopedic surgeon. And then after receiving your diagnosis, you pivoted and decided to work in business administration, health policy administration. Do you feel as though you've been able to receive the same fulfillment in like health policy administration that you saw in practicing medicine? And if so, what does that look like for you?

Susan Robinson 00:39:54 What a fantastic question bell. Thank you so much. Thank you. I don't know if they're the same, but I think that they're equitable having had the opportunity to be in an or to be around patients to help or support someone as they're trying to achieve something, just to feel better. I think physicians and clinicians, physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, nursing assistants, I think their role as clinicians is fulfilling because the direct result of their intervention is often readily apparent. And I think that that's a really unique opportunity and something that is incredibly fulfilling coming at it from the administration side and even a philosophy I've I've had with my staff, my teams, my interns, my role sometimes is clearing out the pathway. So almost like using a broom to brush away all leaves that have fallen down so that my staff can follow through and with ease, do their jobs.

Susan Robinson 00:41:04 So in the healthcare space, my roles might have been one step or ultimately three or four away from the patient. But in working together as a team, we all were patient focused. So I think it's a different kind, but I think it's still very equitable. Now I think about if I were a surgeon, how fun it would be to be the person that helped someone walk their daughter down the aisle, but being part of the larger team, doesn't change the goal and the outcome is still there. And I, I enjoy being a part of that.

Belle Peterson 00:41:41 That's wonderful to hear. And it sounds like you really have gotten that fulfillment from your experiences.

Susan Robinson 00:41:47 I think so. And, and I also think like you gotta know your strengths. Yes. And we go back to Penn state football, the center, I imagine the center isn't having hopes and dreams of catching the --

-- touchdown, the game winning touchdown. Uh, but the center is part of the team that allows that game winning touchdown to happen.

Belle Peterson 00:42:05 So you have had a significant amount of roles in, you know, the healthcare field, um, and in consulting. So do you wanna explain a little bit more about the lasting impact you hope to have on the world? Just based on all the different communities that you've touched and the work you've tried to do and kind of the diversity of experiences you've had?

Susan Robinson 00:42:30 Mm. Legacy is a, it's an interesting word. And I think the definition of it belongs to others or to history or, uh, to people who, who are much more clever than I in defining that what I hope is that I am able to create and be a part of creating a place in the world where everyone can bring their very best selves. The question I often ask myself is what if everyone had the opportunity to give of their very best, what if a hundred percent of a board of a company's employee workforce of a community of a school? What if a hundred percent gave a hundred percent of their best, a hundred percent of the time? And what could that outcome look like?

Belle Peterson 00:43:38 Mm-hmm <affirmative> do you feel like you've been able to do that?

Susan Robinson 00:43:44 I hope I have.

Belle Peterson 00:43:45 I, I feel like you have, but I was curious about your perspective.

Susan Robinson 00:43:49 Oh, I'll take your word for it. I, I have to admit, I, I don't think about it very often. And if my mentors were here, I think they would be chuckling a little bit saying I'd rather be using that time and energy to focus on the next thing that I need to be working on. What I do respect and acknowledge is the feedback that I get from others. So for example, I, I had a speaking engagement yesterday and there were about 350 people who joined virtually, which is really quite an incredible number, all things considered. And the comments in the feedback in the, in the, in the chat and the feedback, the questions that were coming through were, were very inspiring to me because I could feel the energy in the room building, and I could feel the, the firing synapses and the, the possibility that people were able to see.

Susan Robinson 00:44:42 And they gave me feedback saying like, thank you so much for inspiring this. And thank you so much for sharing that and reframing and redefining and, and asking us to think differently. I I'm humbled by the feedback, but I'm more excited that that happens because if I'm the only one that's doing it, it's not enough, but if 300 more people are doing it too, it's creating a world that's even more inclusive and creating more space for everyone to do their best. And that data point is much more interesting to me to say, great, that's now we've got momentum in that direction, and now I can move on to the next one to create more momentum there. So it's, it's less about, uh, it's less about feeling complimented and more about knowing that the right thing landed the right way. And, and now I get to do it again.

Belle Peterson 00:45:31 Of course. So you mentioned that in that talk, there was a lot of feedback and new ideas, um, and perspectives. And with that, I would assume that you, you take that and you consider it, and maybe you act on it. You, you have a change in your life that is constantly happening as you continue to have new experiences and kind of explore their perspectives. So going off of that, do you feel like your focus has changed throughout your career and through these experiences getting to meet so many different groups of people, especially with such a diversity of thought

Susan Robinson 00:46:12 The focus has changed? I, I think about my first job out of graduate school and the language that we use now is patient navigation. And it was super exciting and I loved it. I loved making sure that there was not a single barrier to care for a pediatric patient who needed it. I loved that. And I also grew, my curiosity always wants me to do more and more, and what's the next thing. And what else can I learn? And what skill can I develop? And I'm very appreciative for those early building blocks. And then growing in my career, being responsible for budgets, learning how to do budgets, planning, conferences, creating an opportunity where communication needed to be crafted so that lots of people in the room understood what was important to be conveyed and what the i --

-- important takeaway points were. Disaster response. Again, getting back into that, that patient support, um, when, when hurricanes blow and wash everything away, um, supporting other people and developing their career, taking on 20 Penn state HPA interns in the past three years, and really digging in with them, what do they want to do?

Susan Robinson 00:47:30 How can I help them get to their dream jobs? So for me, in some ways it's been iterative, uh, but I'm always looking to make sure that, that the next version of whatever we're working on is there and, and that we don't become stagnant. So a number of years ago in coming out of my Ted talk, I was talking about people's general responses to me when I tell them that I have a vision impairment. And I talk less about that now, because maybe I've said it enough, maybe it's maybe I've gotten bored with it. I don't know some of the stories I still tell, but the framework is a little, little different, but I'm much more focused on, we still know that these responses exist and, and how can we change the mindset? Just telling the story of my experience doesn't necessarily help someone else in a decision making leadership capacity, create the broadest diverse space for hiring. So if that's the refined problem that we're trying to solve, how can would I contribute help to solve that problem?

Belle Peterson 00:48:43 And when you talk about, you know, expanding that diversity and inclusivity and equity, I would imagine that while you've been trying to do that, you've encountered a great deal of inequity and of hardship, whether it was directed at you or perhaps someone that you were working with, a population that you were helping to support, how do you navigate those hardships and those frustrating moments, and still maintain your mental and emotional health to avoid burnout and to continue doing the work that you're so passionate about?

Susan Robinson 00:49:21 The passion is an incredible fuel that solves some of what you're talking about. You know, if I was a person that got up every day and hated the work that I did, it's hard to find the energy and the commitment to follow through. So passion is an incredible driver, but you do know a couple of things, which, you know, I have had even recently, people who say some really mean and unkind, or just kind of jerky things to say, and over the years, I think I've developed a sense of humor that helps to disarm that there's no point in creating an argument, but, you know, in the same way that I, I joked with my dad about the offsides and, and the false starts, you know, you said you couldn't see, and, and with him, I can really joke because we know each other very, very well.

Susan Robinson 00:50:09 And so to be quite sassy to say to him in return, you said, you could see is, is kind of, I try to take that nugget and apply in other places to help bring down negative emotion. And also to help folks understand that complicated things like, like policy around disability. It is complicated and there's no one right answer. And there is a lot of work being done. We don't have the full playbook yet. We're all working it out together and, and it's okay.

But also if we're going to highlight how to move things forward more, we have to acknowledge that there are some thoughts, some embedded thoughts, some inherent bias that once we talk about it, we can move it to the side, but we have to talk about it in order for it to be moved to the side. And so navigating those conversations, some kind sometimes can be a little delicate. That's where I think that the humor comes into play. And, and it seems to be very successful for me so far. And hopefully it continues.

Belle Peterson 00:51:19 Mm-hmm last question for you is share with us something you wish you had known prior to going into the industry and into your career, feel free to share any pieces of advice that you think others interested in healthcare, or with similar experiences to you might benefit from knowing.

Susan Robinson 00:51:45 I wish I knew a lot of things before I went into my career. That's a very good question. I, I think I'll, I'll answer the question in two ways. If that's okay with you, one is there's no way to enter a career with all of the skills that you will need in order to be successful at the end of your career. So you have to start somewhere and if we're focused on perfection, we'd never get going in the first place. So whatever you're cultivating as a --

-- student, as an early career, as a career shift, if you're mid-level, and you're just sort of trying to continue in a career, always keep learning. Whether there's no way to get it right from the start or all the time, quite frankly. But if there's one thing that I, I would have liked to have known, it's navigating a career growth, we change jobs.

Susan Robinson 00:52:47 We grow out of jobs. We find new opportunities. We career transition sometimes, you know, I've met plenty of people that were in finance and came to healthcare or were in manufacturing and went to film. I think I, it would've been nice to know that there is more support for the fluidity of development of a career than sort of the pressure that comes with the language of now you've graduated. Now you have to get a job. It's a very important statement, but it's, to me in my experience now, it, it feels very two dimensional when living it is very three dimensional. And I, I wish I would've known that going into my career. I think I would've been a little less stressed out and amped up. I, I, would've been a little chill, a little bit more chill about it, I guess

Belle Peterson 00:53:46 Course. Well, an honor, to get interview and learn more about you.

Susan Robinson 00:53:54 Pleasure. I've really enjoyed our conversation and I'm just delighted to be included in the podcast

Ryan Newman 00:54:05 That was Susan Robinson, speaker, consultant, and leader. If you have not already be sure to subscribe dare to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.

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