



S1:E6 "Dropping Out" Transcript

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Karen Costa:

Welcome to the ADHD gallery, a podcast about teaching, learning and living with ADHD. My name is Karen Costa, and I'll be your host and curator. This podcast is for the ADHDers in the world. People like me. Join me to venture through this gallery of ideas, curiosities, brain science, random hyper focus interests, and reflections on what it's like to live with the gifts and many challenges of ADHD. Fellow dopamine hunters, let's be weird together. Stay connected at theADHDgallery.com. I'm aiming to be increasingly less active on social in the coming months and maybe even years. So my website and email newsletter will be the best way to stay in touch.

Hello, everyone, and welcome to episode six of the ADHD gallery. Come on in. My name is Karen Costa, and I'm your host and curator. Today's episode is called "Dropping Out."

I just dodged a huge tech fail. Well, at least for the time being. I almost did not turn on my microphone. Close call. Rocky is back on my lap for those who have been following along, and I have reached the point where I'm recording these at a certain time of day, and he goes and eats an early lunch, and then he comes and sort of sits and stares at me and starts to whine a little bit, and I'm really at the point where I think he is telling me like it's time to go record the podcast. So I've trained him to remind me to do this work. So that's kind of fun.

So today I thought I'd share the story of dropping out of my doctoral program. Before I get into that, I do want to say oh, it is the first week of May 2022. And sometimes it feels like there's no words. But we are experiencing attacks on human rights in this country, and it's just a very scary time. Incredibly enraging, horrific time. And I just kind of walk around asking people "how do we live in this world?" How do we live? And there are thankfully teachers, friends, members of my communities that I have worked to cultivate and become a part of who are answering that question, and one of the things that I am learning and have been learning for a long time is to be very aware of where I put my



power. And if I'm trying to force things in areas where I don't have power, that it's only going to drain me; it's only going to burn me out, and it's only going to keep me from places where I do have power. So I'm really trying to balance processing everything that's happening this week, and making plans for activism and advocacy and building more of these supportive communities and continuing work like this podcast that I have been doing. So just wanted to put that out there.

As I said, I'm going to share the story today of dropping out of a doctoral program, and how in hindsight, I can see how a lack of support for ADHD, for my ADHD which I didn't realize I had at the time, might have changed that experience for me.

All right, so here is the story. I want to start with the why and when of how I started this program. So let's start with the why. I love to learn. If you are a listener with ADHD, if you love people with ADHD, we love to learn. I am just a voracious learner. always have been. And I love all kinds of learning experiences. So I'm absolutely a fan of informal learning, unstructured learning, but I do love many structured learning experiences in formal education. I have thrived in many aspects of formal education. There's an asterisk there, right. So when I am forced to study things that have no interest or relevance for me, checked out. When I'm forced into dehumanizing learning situations, forget it. However, when I'm in humanizing, positive, generally speaking, formal education spaces, and I get to explore things that interest me, I absolutely thrive.

So back in, oh my gosh, 2009, I was working at a community college. I was in my 20s, late 20s, and very naive at that point about the importance of the fit between your values and your vision for your future and your needs and your work. So I don't think we talk enough about that fit and the importance of work values. We talk a lot about, I think, skills and interests and salary requirements and those obviously are very important. But what I have learned through this experience is that I don't think we talk enough about work values. And at the time, I was working as sort of a mid-level manager. This is 2009. Again, I thought I wanted to move all the way up, up up up and straight to the top and become a community college president. You know, looking back I see that was just not in alignment with my values, with my vision, and with my needs, but that's what I wanted to do at the time.

So in April of 2009, I had just delivered my son and about he was about two months old, and I decided to return to school. I enrolled in a 95% online slash hybrid program to get



my doctorate in higher education. Again, the goal here was to be a community college president, and in order to do that, I knew I needed a doctorate. I knew that I loved to learn about higher education. And, you know, I had a two month old at home and was just about to return to work full time after maternity leave. So I'm not exactly sure if I would do that again. Not exactly sure what I was thinking, but definitely, for me, work and learning and school have historically been coping mechanisms, and I was dealing with a lot of personal stuff at the time. And to be honest, this was in part a way to avoid dealing with some of that. There was a lot of positive aspects to it, as well. Again, I love to learn but absolutely, this was a coping mechanism.

I loved this program. I loved the courses. I loved the professors. It really was, you know, a group of excellent online educators. A lot of what I've learned about being an online educator, I learned in this program. I was really, really busy. Obviously. I was in school full time, I was working full time, and I had an infant at home. But overall, this was a really positive experience.

And then things shifted. As I mentioned, I started this program in April of 2009. And I finished my coursework in December of 2011. So I finished my coursework in about two and a half years. Again, while working full time with an infant at home. And I did really well. I thrive in structure. One of the things I say when I try to describe my brain is that it's kind of like a bobsled, and it needs a track, and you know, picture like a giant bobsled flying through the air. Not so good. So my bobsled brain does really well when it has a track and formal education and programs like this. Give me the structure of the work that needs to be done. This is the course that you need to take next. And I really - that works well for me - might not be true for others, but it's true for me. So in December of 2011, when my coursework was done, it was time to enter the dissertation process. What happens at the university where I was learning, which is a really well respected university in Massachusetts, what happened was, I was enrolled in a quote unquote course. But it wasn't really a course. It was basically we have to enroll you so we can keep charging you, and keep you officially enrolled in this doctoral program. And I was assigned to an advisor as part of this quote unquote course.

So what this not course looked like was pretty murky. I can remember going into Boston to meet with my advisor, maybe a few months into the start of this process. We met in a coffee shop. At that point, I had changed my topic, my dissertation topic, I couldn't even tell you what it had originally been, I had changed it at least once at that point. My



advisor wasn't really happy about that. And was just like, you need to decide on something and make an outline. I remember her saying you need an outline. That's all I really remember. I don't remember any conversation about the hows and whys of, you know, me changing my topic. You just need to, you know, you just need to do this, right. You just need to have an outline and decide, of course, obviously, right so easy.

At that point, after that meeting, I continued to, let's call it what it was, I continued to spiral. I remember changing my topic, like, at least once a month. I would go into the journals and read books about a topic that I thought was, this is the one, this is the one. So I start reading about it. And as you know, for anybody who's done academic research, one of the reasons that I love it is that it sends you down the rabbit hole right? So you read something and that sends you to something else which sends you something else, which I love. However, because I didn't know about my ADHD and I didn't have the support structure in place, I just kept falling, you know, I was going down and down down the rabbit hole. So I would say, oh my gosh, no, I thought this was the one, but I read something else. And now this, this is really, this is the one, and there was no structure. There really wasn't.

I had this advisor who I could reach out to if I needed it, but I didn't know what I didn't know. I didn't know what to ask her for help with. I just knew that I was making no progress. I was just going around and around in circles. At the start of 2012, so right around the time when this shift happened and I was moved from structured coursework into the dissertation process, I also left my full time job, because remember what we spoke about before with work values. It was a really bad fit for me and a toxic environment. I told myself at the time, you know what, this is a really intense life change, but it's for the better and one of the things that this will lead to is that I will now be able to focus on and finish my dissertation, right. It'll just happen by magic. The other thing that happened in 2012 around late spring, early summer 2012, my former boss was diagnosed with a severe form of ALS, which I'm sure all of you know is already a severe disease. I was very grateful in that year or so to have this newly flexible schedule from having left my full time job which allowed me to spend a lot of time with him. No regrets there. No dissertation progress either.

My boss, my former boss, my friend, passed away...woo, it's still, it's still brings it up. He passed away in August of 2013. It was such a tragic situation. He was in his late 40s and getting to spend that time with him in that last year of his life was so life affirming,



just to watch him navigate that time, and he was so focused on being with the people that he loved. And it was a really kind of simple, quiet time. I would go to his house. I would sit with him. We would just goof around. We exchanged emails because he lost his, he lost his speech pretty early on. So that was, that was limited. And we just spent time together. So it was really difficult, but it got me thinking of course, how do I want to spend these precious days of my life? Two days after he passed away, and I know this, I remember this, but I looked it up again. I found the email. Two days after he passed away, I sent an email to somebody, some administrator in this program, and I said I'm going to withdraw from this doctoral program.

I had this very strong sense that life was way too short to try to keep forcing myself to do something that felt impossible. Hindsight. For several years, when I would look back on that decision, I had no regrets. I would think about my friend. I would think about what I wanted to do in my career and in my life, and with my family and friends. I was very clear that priorities were always my husband, my son, making the best of every moment. And bonus, perhaps I get to have an interesting and fulfilling career. So I was continuing to work on that. So I didn't have any regrets for the longest time.

However, since getting my ADHD diagnosis, I have started to see things differently. It's not that I regret my decision. I think I did the best thing that I could in that moment with what I had to work with. But I'm kind of upset. I regret that I didn't get the support that I needed. How do you go from completely thriving in coursework to absolutely spiraling in the dissertation process? And when I look at that, I don't feel like that spiral was my fault. I feel like I wasn't given the support and structure that I needed to succeed. The institution didn't know that I had ADHD, because I didn't know that I had ADHD however, I feel like as somebody who works in higher education, I feel like we can create systems and structures and supports that work for everybody and build systems and structures and support for folks who do struggle with focus and who might have a difficult time with that shift into the dissertation process. I think that's going to benefit everybody. It's going to benefit the people without ADHD. It's going to benefit the people who are going through trauma and stress. It's going to benefit the people who do know they have a formal diagnosis. But it just wasn't there. I did the best thing that I could at the time for my well being. But I feel like the system let me down, and I know for a fact it's let so many other people down, and it continues to let so many other folks with ADHD down.



Since my diagnosis, I have actually reached out and put out some feelers to find out what it would take for me to finish my doctorate. I have completed, I think it's 39 credits at the doctoral level. Again, I did really well in those courses, invested a lot of money and time and energy in those courses. And what I have been told by my institution where I took those courses and by other institutions is basically I would have to - some schools tell me I would have to completely start over. Some schools told me they would take some of those courses, many of them, but I'd still have to retake a lot of them, and it looks like it would cost me at least another \$20,000 to finish my doctorate. That's a pretty high tax on ADHD. Ah, it sucks.

I've kind of accepted it, that this is not my path. I'm focusing, you know, as I mentioned earlier, I'm focusing on what I can do and focusing on where I do have power. It's not fair. I wish I had known. I wish that there was a way to move forward without having to take what feels like 10 steps back. However, what I can do and what I am doing is that I am trying to do my part to educate educators about ADHD. I'm trying to do my part to advocate, this sharing the story as one of the ways I can do that. To invite people to ask this question, what would a supportive system have looked like for somebody like me? I have been thinking a lot about that. And here are some things I've come up with.

It would have helped me to have someone who would have coached me and held me accountable to a deadline. To create a clear set of tasks with dates associated. So I need to know exactly what I need to do. And I need that broken down into chunks and I need dates associated with it. I've learned that primarily through working with an ADHD coach and my own blood sweat and tears of living with ADHD. I have learned that I need to know exactly what I have to do broken down into small tasks, dates associated. And I didn't have that. I didn't know how to do that at the time, so I needed help with that. I would have also benefited from weekly meetings, whether in person or I don't know if we had zoom back then, oh my gosh, getting old, but we had something, that I'm sure. The phone, we had the phone right? Weekly phone meetings. Or asynchronous check ins. I would have benefited from an academic coach or an advisor who was familiar with the needs of learners with ADHD whether or not I identified as that at the time, and people's ability or excuse me, people's tendency to lose focus and how we can coach people who are losing focus and have a difficult time staying on task. Whether or not they have ADHD. Somebody in my life who could have coached me around how to get back on track. I would have benefited from somebody who would have honored those tendencies in me and not shamed me or made me feel like I was



failing for having those tendencies while also nudging me forward toward my goals. Somebody who would then celebrate with me when I hit those milestones, somebody who would have cheered me on. And the last thing I've thought about is a community to connect with other people who were struggling with the same things while working on their dissertations.

I don't remember having any of that. I was on my own in the rabbit hole. And it didn't work out. That is my dropout story. I hope that sharing this created some space for people who have dropped out of anything because of their ADHD. And I hope that this is just a reminder that it's really tough to persist when we didn't get the support that we need. And we can forgive ourselves and we can accept that we did our best. I hope that this encourages us to share those stories and to work toward creating better systems, better support, stronger communities for folks with ADHD in the future. We can do so much better here.

Okay, everyone, that is a wrap for Episode Six. Thank you so much for making the time to listen today. I know that you have a lot of choices about what to give your attention to and it's an honor that you chose me and the ADHD gallery. Your support means the world to me. Please rate the podcast share with your friends and colleagues. And of course, make sure to sign up for my email list. By visiting theADHDgallery.com. Thank you friends.