

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Areva Martin Transcript

Announcer: [00:00:04] Welcome to The Dots, a podcast about connecting. The Dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now you're host, digital strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur Kathleen Buczko.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:31] Attorney, advocate, television host, legal and social issues commentator, and author Areva Martin is the embodiment of a woman doing and having it all while raising a family and awareness of autism. Welcome to The Dots.

Areva Martin: [00:00:45] Thank you.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:47] I really appreciate you taking the time. Tell me a little bit about your your journey--lawyer, media star, activist. How did you come to all of this?

Areva Martin: [00:00:58] Well I started my journey with autism once my son was diagnosed. I had been practicing as a traditional trial attorney, a litigator in my old firm and I was representing individuals in a range of discrimination-type cases, race/sex cases, some disability, but nothing focused on autism or developmental disabilities. And after my son was diagnosed I went on a journey to find for him the best in care in terms of medical care, education, health... I wanted him to have every opportunity that my two girls that are older than him had for a rich and productive life. And in doing so, I actually started a special education and disability rights department in my law firm and started representing families who were involved in disputes either with their school districts at the administrative level and then even federal lawsuits under some of the federal statutes that protect individuals with disabilities and that was really my beginning. And from there I realized that there was a need for a more parent-focused organization to help parents like me who, when they got a diagnosis didn't know where to start. So that led me to forming the Special Needs Network which is now in its 11th year and continues to be one of the leading organizations in California working on behalf of special needs kids and their families.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:02:33] At the diagnosis of your son. What were you feeling? It can be jarring.

Areva Martin: [00:02:43] Yeah I was, I was really just devastated by it. Like so many families, I knew my son wasn't developing language at the appropriate rate because I already had two daughters so I knew what the developmental milestones look like even though as parents I don't think we walk around saying you know did you get this milestone, did you hit that milestone. We just know it when we see it.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:03:06] Exactly.

Areva Martin: [00:03:08] And I knew my son wasn't doing some of the same things my middle daughter was such a quick learner. At two years old, she declared herself potty trained and took her diapers off and from that day forward wore underpants and never had an accident.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:03:24] Never looked back!

Areva Martin: [00:03:25] Never looked back. So I knew what kids were capable of, even at 24 months so when my son wasn't speaking at 18 months, I started asking friends and kind of touching on the subject, but not really...and I found comfort with one friend who had told me her son had a speech delay around the same age and she had gotten speech therapy for him and that he was doing well. So that's where I put all my hope that this was just a good old standard speech delay and if I got him some speech therapy he would be fine. So that's how I really started. It was by softening the blow for myself by renaming what he had and staying away from anything that was too heavy or too permanent. But once I got the autism diagnosis I just-- I was depressed, I was sad, I was grieving. Sadly it happened at the same time that my mother was passing away. My mother had a long illness and I can remember vividly leaving the doctor's office after having gotten Marty's diagnosis to be on the phone with my mom who-- my mom's doctor, because my mother lived out of town and I was her caregiver and did all the care with her doctors and, the doctor after beating around the bush and being somewhat vague finally said to me, "Areva, your mother's dying. There's nothing else we can do." And so getting that news on the same day that I got Marty's diagnosis, it was all just a whole lot.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:56] Right. How did you not you know just close down, put on a big bathrobe and eat whatever ice cream was available?

Areva Martin: [00:05:06] Yeah, I think I did in my own way. I was raised by two women who were incredibly resilient and never complained about their circumstances and never let life's you know curveballs stop them from just getting up and doing the work and handling the business of a family so, I don't think not going to work has ever been an option in my life. Through the most difficult periods I've ever had, through the happiest period I've ever had, work has always been the constant and steady thing in my life. So, I remember coming back from my mother's funeral (I had to be out of town and bury her) and thinking that I was going to take some time off and probably took the day off that I traveled back to Los Angeles and then work the next day or so-- I don't know. So for me, yeah, I was grieving. I was depressed, but I just motor through probably robotically because work is that thing that helps keep me going. But it took a while, I mean, emotion, and I'm pretty good at compartmentalizing my feelings. And so as long as I didn't talk about, it long and I didn't use that big word, 'autism,' you know I could get through that work day. But if I had to talk about it, if I had to think about it, that's when they get really tough for me emotionally.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:06:36] And how did you motor through that?

Areva Martin: [00:06:41] With a lot of help from my pastor and my husband. I always had a strong religious foundation. I grew up very Catholic. And in L.A. my husband and I settled into a Methodist church and I became very close with the pastor so he was one of the first people that I talked to about Marty. He was the person I called at the hospital when I had to make a decision about my mother and life support so, I could always count on him to give me encouragement. And my husband had just the most incredibly supportive and approach and this was the best approach. We left the doctor's office that day. We both stood out by our car and we cried together. And then he wiped his tears and said, "OK we're good. Let's go do this." Now, I wasn't ready to go do this, but he was. And from that day forward he started himself, you know, reading books and finding articles. And I don't think for him that it ever, once he--and maybe that's the testosterone, that's the male make-up--but once he had his emotional moment he was, he was ready and he was ready to tell... You know, unlike me who couldn't talk about it, he wanted to talk about it. He wanted to share. He wanted people to know. He wanted people to understand. And he just had a very positive attitude. Of course, I'm sure he had his moments where he wished things were different but he never showed it and he and my son are the absolute best friends ever. And he didn't go through that

denial. Some dads that I work with in my program really go into denial, like, "Oh, you know, my son who's going to be the big strong football player or a big athlete..." He never went through any of that. So being with someone and watching them, you know, be so strong, I can't help but I think wear off on you and I think over time his strength is what helped me find my footing. And again I grew up in a home where you really weren't allowed to complain, you weren't allowed to whine or... you know, and that nowadays you know things are different. We want kids to express themselves right?

Kathleen Buczko: [00:09:10] Don't keep it bottled up.

Areva Martin: [00:09:13] Yes. And then get therapy and talk about it and that was how I grew up. You did and you persevered. You ask questions and answers are going to probably be I don't know why that way. What does it matter? Go to work. Well it was, you know, I drew upon those lessons to get through it and eventually, as I've seen so many mothers in my program, you move. You just do. You start finding the beauty. You start finding the wonderful things. You start celebrating the positive. And the next thing you know one day you wake up and you're no longer grieving. You're an advocate. So that just happens.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:10:09] So talk about your advocacy. Tell me about the Special Needs Network and how you're bringing together those voices in the autism community.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:10:18] The Special Needs Network is such an incredible organization. It really became... It started as an idea I had with another mom about how do we bring parents together and give them the information they need while providing a support network for them? And from that thought and giving classes in churches and reaching out to families in organizations like Boys and Girls Club, where we held one of our first events. It's grown into this organization now with over 70 employees providing everything from direct care, direct ADA interventions to still being very very active in advocacy at the state level. So I do a lot of work--policy advocacy work--in Sacramento, and we just try to provide a safety net, a special place where parents can come and meet other parents, where they can feel supported, they can feel loved. They can, you know, share their experiences and get hope and get encouragement and most of all, get resources. And that's so important when we have a child with special needs. Where do they go to school? Where do I find a dentist? Where do I find a barber? Some of the simple things that you don't think about when we have neurotypical kids become really big issues with special needs kids. So we're that place hopefully, that you can call and get those answers.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:11:48] Yeah, when you don't, you don't think about that. But I know for my youngest who's on the spectrum the haircut was the worst thing.

Areva Martin: [00:11:56] Yes. Big issue. We even started, at a big back to school event that we give every year, we started inviting a barber college about four or five years ago to give haircuts and to again have a therapist on hand to help the barbers and help the kids have an experience. So every summer, parents can come to our event and know that they their kids can get a haircut and we're helping to train our barbers right now can provide that service in their shops and so on.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:29] And again it's one of those things when you're neurotypical and you're, you don't think about it. It's simple. It's just something you do, right?

Areva Martin: [00:12:38] Absolutely.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:39] Right? And then when confronted with someone on the spectrum, that can be disarming for, you know, the hairdresser or the barber.

Areva Martin: [00:12:48] Oh my God! My son, you know, took a long time for our barber to be able to communicate with him and for him to get comfortable in the chair. But now they're friends.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:57] Exactly. Yeah. It's just-- it's just a different path to that, to that same end. I was taken by, when I was preparing for this interview, your motto [in the] Time Magazine article where you said, "Don't question. Persevere.

Areva Martin: [00:13:19] Yeah that's pretty much it, Kathleen. Again when I go back to my upbringing, that was the motto in my household. The women that raised me faced a tremendous amount of adversity. It was a part of their existence. Being an African-American woman living in a low income community--a community that was void of a lot of--devoid of a lot of resources and support and they just managed to persevere. And that's one of the things I learned really early on. When my son was diagnosed, as much as I wanted to pity myself, and like you said curl up under my covers and not go out, the voices in my head wouldn't allow me to do that. So that's how I got to the point of becoming an advocate around autism and that's what I try to encourage other people to do. And recognizing that everyone is on their own journey and it takes everyone; it's a personal situation so it may take someone six months, it may take someone else two years, but what I do know is, having worked with thousands and thousands of families, that it can be done and it's not uncommon to see parents start off feeling really defeated and feeling overwhelmed. But yet later, you know, the standing tall and being leaders in their communities whether they're leaving their support group out of their home or they're meeting a group at their church or synagogue or are somehow taking what they've learned from the process and then sharing it with others and then becoming mentors and spokespersons an ambassadors or to help other families.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:16:04] You were raised by strong women. Tell me about them.

Areva Martin: [00:16:07] Yeah I was raised by my grandmother, her name is Devan and my godmother, Ethel and just two women. My godmother was... and I talked about some of this at the conference I just spoke at the California Women's Conference and I gave a speech I called 'Find your Hidden Figures, Reinvent and Rise' and I wrote that speech because one, I was moved by the women in the Oscar nominated movie 'Hidden Figures' about their resilience, about their triumphs and all the successes that they had that many of us didn't know about until the book was written and then until the film was made. But I could relate to those women and they reminded me of my grandmother and godmother although they were you know much more successful and they've become national heroes. But for me my grandmother and godmother- they were my heroes. They worked hard in the face of adversity and they provided for their family, they love their family, they taught all of us--me and my siblings--strong Christian values, strong work ethics, gave us a good

sense of what our moral compass should be. And I think that's important. And as we look around the world today particularly in our country and we look at what's happening in Washington around health care and immigration and education and social justice issues, I say to people all the time, "It's going to be the women." You know, whether it's the Democratic women or the Republican women, just something tells me it's going to take women to get us out of this quagmire. This is the crisis that we find ourselves in because, you know, we are the nurturers. We are the great compromisers. We're the gender that leads and leads with compassion. And so I got a good dose of that growing up.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:18:11] And you've become an incredible compassionate leader. And from all accounts an amazing voice in the social justice system as we talk about people with special needs.

Areva Martin: [00:18:24] Well, thank you.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:18:24] And those certainly within, as as you've just so eloquently put it, in our political climate today where everyone is supposed to be alienated against everyone else as opposed to coming together and bringing a voice of reason and change. You know, we've talked about your godmother and your grandmother. How did they help you find that voice?

Areva Martin: [00:18:50] I think it was the modeling that they did. You know sometimes parenting is not about what you say but it's about what you do. So you know as a parent, too, we can often give our kids long lectures and maybe 10 percent of it sinks in. But it's what we do on a daily basis that will stay with them throughout their maturation process. So just watching my grandmother and godmother, watching--and my grandmother was in a wheelchair--so watching someone in a wheelchair be a care giver and again, without complaining. That that speaks volumes. And watching my godmother worked as a janitor go to work day and night clean houses, clean offices, buy a home, buy a car, take so little and yet make so much out of it. And that again, watching that. At the time, as a kid you know you're not so keen; you're not so astute as to know what you're watching and you definitely don't think it's a life lesson at the time that you're experiencing it. But as I grew older, in college and law school and as I face challenges, I again, I would you know think back. How would they handle this? What would they do? You know, how would they respond? And their response inevitably often you know is the response of persevering and you know, showing up, doing the work, being compassionate, helping others. So those were all the lessons that I learned growing up with my grandmother and godmother.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:20:32] You know in the past few weeks have been and we're putting this show together very fortunate to talk to a few people and it's interesting the threads they pulled together and perseverance, showing up, being committed are there common themes that people come to the table from a myriad of walks of life. And it's a very powerful thing and if harnessed correctly, harnessed for good, can do amazing things.

Areva Martin: [00:21:00] Absolutely.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:21:02] So Areva, tell me what's next.

Areva Martin: [00:21:06] Well, definitely continuing with the great work that the folks at the Special Needs Network have been doing. We're working on building the first ever autism clinic in south Los Angeles. That's a big, big priority for us. On the professional front, I have a new book coming out in March of 2018. You'll be hearing a lot about it over the next couple of months. But I wanted to share what I've learned about finding your voice and deploying that voice to the media. So I wrote a book called "Make it Rain" that the publishers will release in March of next year. So

I'll be spending a lot of time talking about the issue of finding your voice and what motivates you and how do you get your message out to a broader audience.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:21:57] Well thank you for sharing your voice on The Dots and Areva, keep us in mind and we love what you're doing so just keep telling and finding your voice.

Areva Martin: [00:22:09] Thank you so much. And best of luck to you in this new venture.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:22:12] Yeah. Thanks so much.

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