

Rachel Quednau: Hi, everyone. Welcome to the first episode of The Bottom-Up Revolution podcast in 2022. I hope you all had a peaceful, cozy, safe holiday with your loved ones. It's great to be back with you and we've got an exciting episode to kick off the new year. This is one I actually recorded back in November, and I'm glad to finally be able to publish it.

Billy Altom is the executive director of APRIL, which stands for Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living. It is a national nonprofit consisting of over 260 members, from centers for independent living for people with disabilities, specifically located in rural areas.

Altom has been involved in disability advocacy on a number of levels, including testifying for state and federal legislatures, working on committees, working for several independent living organizations and now leading APRIL. He's also a musician.

In this conversation, he talks about the importance of peer support, of seeing someone who looks like you and knows what you're experiencing, whether that's encountering a fellow wheelchair user on the bus or meeting another deaf person at school. This is particularly essential in rural areas where the population of people with disabilities can be fairly small and services can be quite sparse.

Altom knows from his own experience the power of simply connecting with someone who also has a disability. Then he brings that to his work with organizations connecting with one another as they seek to serve people with disabilities. He talks in this conversation about rural transportation and housing challenges in particular, as well as the impact of COVID, both negative and positive, for people with disabilities.

Throughout the interview, you'll learn that he holds a deep commitment to engaging the people who are impacted by his work and ensures that his organization is always rooted in community needs. Something that we are constantly advocating for at Strong Towns. Altom is a super engaging and dynamic speaker. I know you're going to appreciate hearing his story and learn a lot from his perspective.

Billy Altom, thank you for joining me for this episode of The Bottom-Up Revolution podcast. We are glad to have you here.

Billy Altom: Oh, thank you very much. It's my pleasure.

Rachel Quednau: Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and how you came to be leading your organization, APRIL?

Billy Altom: Absolutely. Well, my name again is Billy Altom and I'm the director of the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living, or APRIL. APRIL is a

membership organization of small nonprofits all across the United States and in the territories as well. These nonprofits we call them independent living, but there's kind of a misnomer with that name because independent living has been co-opted by the aging group.

When somebody says independent living, you think of, "Well, how many people live there?" Well, for us, independent living is about living in the community independently, being in control of all of the services that you need to live independently. We want folks in the community not living in institutional settings. When I talk about independent living, I'm talking about folks being out in the community.

We are a membership organization of these centers for independent living all across the country. We have 260 organizational members and 45 states, still working on a few states to get everybody to be a member. What we do as an organization then for our membership, is we provide training and technical assistance.

One of the things that we noticed years ago with our organization ... We've been around now since ... We became a 501(c) in 1994 so a few days now. But one of the main things that we've done with our organization that is kind of unique is we do focus on rural America and in the smaller communities.

What we've learned in the independent living movement with people with disabilities is that peer support is crucial of finding someone who has a similar disability. I myself I'm a person with a disability. I have a lower level spinal cord injury, so I'm a wheelchair user. Finding someone who experiences life in the same fashion that you do is incredibly valuable.

I have it happen to me quite often of just by being out, people will come up to me and go, "Dude, thank you. I've only been injured this long and wasn't sure I'd ever drive again, do this." All of the things that we take for granted. The peer support mechanism is just fabulous in how it operates.

We were thinking if an individual can mentor an individual, could an organization mentor another organization? We put together a program of peer mentoring where we mentor organization to organization, and it has just been a phenomenal success. People rave about it, of if you're new to being an executive director, there are a lot of things that you may not have learned through schooling or other avenues to prepare you to be an executive director.

What we try to do is offer a couple of options for folks to get mentoring. Because as I say, mentoring is a very individual thing to be doing peer support and not everybody jibes with each other. We give folks options of going, "Hey, here's a couple of folks, two or three people that can do what you want them to do. Why don't you talk to them individually and figure out which one of these folks can you work with for six months to a year doing some peer mentoring?"

It works out swimmingly well to have folks who have similar interests, similar likes that can mentor each other. As APRIL too, we continue to grow. Part of what we really focus on too, is young people with disabilities in rural America. At our conference, we try to do a conference each year and it moves around the country and bring in a lot of young men and women, and those who identify as non-binary and bring them in together and help create a safe space for them to share ideas, to realize that they're not alone.

One of the things in rural America, people always think that, "It's just me, nobody else is experiencing this problem." No. Everybody's experiencing that problem. We want folks in rural America to be connected as much as possible. Interestingly, through COVID has presented a couple of opportunities for us of typically things weren't done over the internet.

Then with Zoom, Google Meet and all those different platforms that you can use, what we found is that we could get our youth connected, and for a lot of them, they were already using some of these platforms that we're now using. So we were able to actually learn a lot from our young people of how to access a lot of the programs, what works well, what doesn't work well, what has access capabilities, what doesn't have access capabilities, because it's not one size fits all for everything.

There are a lot of generalities, but there are some programs that work better for folks who may be visually impaired versus someone who may be deaf, all of those. You just have to find the thing that works best for you and keep going.

Rachel Quednau: Yeah. You started to get into something that I wanted to definitely ask about and focus on, which is, are there challenges that you see rural residents with disabilities facing that might be different from those who live in suburbs or cities? Why does your organization choose to really focus on rural here?

Billy Altom: Well, we focus on rural primarily because rural. The organization was founded, oh gosh, '86 when a group of folks got together up in Montana. The office now is housed here in Little Rock Arkansas. I'm an Arkansas fellow. Can't get much more country than I am. Trust me on that. We just have a natural instinct of wanting to help folks in rural America and realizing the differences.

What you had asked me is, what are some of the differences? Oh, gosh, there's so many places to start. One of the places I always like to start is transportation. If you live in an urban area, there's chances that you might have some fixed-route transportation in your city. If you're living out in rural America, chances are you do not have that opportunity for transportation and you become more transit-dependent on family, friends, or other organizations.

A lot of the organizations that we work with, those centers for independent living, also partner with a lot of other organizations, one in particular are Area Agencies on Aging. We have a lot of similarities with them. Serve a lot of folks in

rural America too. Partner with folks that can get you where you need to be. Our Area Agencies on Aging are typically the ones who have a lot of these transportation.

We try to work with them to figure out how can we assist? How can we make them stronger? Because it's not about taking resources from one place and giving it to another. It's about how do we share all of our resources? I'm the guy who preaches equity all the time. There's a huge difference between equality and equity.

I believe in the equity aspect and we have to look at equity through when we look at transportation in rural America that ... Well, all services in rural America, may be a little more expensive due to the nature of the beast, because you're out there in the country, but it doesn't mean that it's not worth it. What is the old story about the guy walking down the beach, picking up a starfish?

There's just starfish laying everywhere. He'll pick one up and he'll throw it back into the water. He encounters this guy walking towards him. He just, "What are you doing?" He goes, "I'm saving the starfish." He goes, "But there's millions of them. You think you're going to make a difference?" He goes, "Well, I made a difference to this one."

That's what I try to do too, is go, "Look, I may not be able to get every single person, but we've got to try to get that one. We can't turn our backs on everybody." Transportation is always an issue. Housing sometimes can be an issue, finding accessible housing, housing that's wheelchair-friendly or any type of disability that makes it more user-friendly for that individual.

Then just the wide open space of being in rural America presents its own challenges and they can all be resolved for me around transportation most of the time. There's so much windshield time between places and if you're a person with a disability that requires personal assistance services, that's someone who comes in to help you with your daily activities, those can be difficult in rural America just due to the fact that some of those personal assistance services make they can only work an eight-hour shift.

If they spent four of it in their vehicle with some windshield time, you're not serving [inaudible 00:12:17]. We have to figure out ways that we can be creative in how we serve people in rural America.

Rachel Quednau: For you, what led you to be the executive director of this organization? What drew you to this type of work?

Billy Altom: Well, for me, I was a young man growing up here in Arkansas and I was 22 years old and involved in a vehicle accident that gave me a spinal cord injury. It was one of those I ... Being in rural America, I believe I was the first person with a

disability I'd ever met, which was kind of a unique experience of not knowing anybody. This is why I love the pure aspect of independent living.

After I acquired my disability, I get through the acute care hospital, I get into rehab. I still haven't had clothes on. I've got a pair of sweatpants, a tortoise shell for my back. I'd also broken my neck so I had a neck brace on and I'm working with my therapist and I see this dude come through the rehab center. He is wearing blue jeans, t-shirt, baseball cap in a manual wheelchair. I mean, just zoom, zoom and he went.

I looked at my therapist and I was like, "Who is that?" She goes, "Well, that's Marty Johnson." I went, "Marty Johnson?" She goes, "Well, actually." She said, "It's you in about three months." I went, "Ah." I said, "What's his name?" It's Marty. Years go by, and I'm at a meeting and there's about five or six of us wheelchair users sitting around. We're introducing ourselves going, "Hey, how you doing? How you doing? How you doing? Who are you?"

A dude said, "I'm Marty Johnson." I went, "Marty Johnson, you have no idea how much you changed my life." He goes, "Dude, I don't even know you." I went, "Exactly. That's the beautiful part of the pure mechanism is that you don't have to know someone. You just have to be out there and be visible. That's how you make change." Because I'm the guy who always talks about familiarity leads to acceptance.

Well, if you've never been around anybody that uses a chair, you don't know how to act with them. You watch, "Oh, did I say walk in front of that dude that uses a chair?" I'm going, "Well, hell I stand in line all day and I'm a chair user." I don't get hung up on the vernacular. I get hung up on intent.

You can tell when somebody is sincere and when they're learning, but it was just so amazing to get to meet Marty and then have it that it happens for me quite frequently that I will be out and about doing something and somebody's going to come up and talk to me about, "Man, I can't wait to get home and tell my son, my daughter, my cousin."

Anybody in their family that has experienced a disability that is anything similar to mine, they want to go home and tell them that, "Hey, man, I saw this dude at Kroger. He's pushing his cart around. He's doing all kinds of stuff. He's whistling the Kroger theme song." In fact, they owe money, but it's all about attitude a lot of times and how you approach life.

After I'd met Marty and I had been a musician most of my life growing up, my parents were musicians so I'd been in bands all my life, and started playing music again and that was ... Boy, talk about some great advocacy work. You [inaudible 00:15:44] be sitting at a bar and up on stage playing. I was a drummer too so that was always good. I'd be playing drums.

We'd take our first break and my guitar player, bass player would help me down off the stage using a wheelchair. People's eyeballs were huge going, "Oh my goodness. Not only was he playing drums. He was the lead singer in this band." It just opened up so many doors of how people viewed other people.

I'm going, "Hey, just, you never know. You didn't think it was going to be me that was up on stage, so who knows the person you meet on the street that has a disability what they're capable of. Never make those snap judgments." Anyway, after I played music, I realized maybe I should do something with my life. I wound up going to college at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville.

Growing up in Arkansas, I was a die-hard Razorback fan and getting to go to college there was a dream come true for me. After I finished college, I got up there in the summer of '89 and left in the summer of '92. I crammed four years into three because I loved summer school. If there's kids out there listening to me and you're going to college, rack up on the summer school. Man, I love summer school. Anyway, it's a different story.

After I get out of college, I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. Actually, I had a map on the wall and I threw a dart at it and it hit Little Rock and I went, "Oh, looks like I'm moving to Little Rock is what I'm going to do." Didn't know a soul. Just moved here. Found a place to live. Started looking for a job, and I found a job at the advocacy services, which are now our disability right centers.

At that time it was the Protection and Advocacy System for the state of Arkansas. I got a job there in the PAIR program, the Protection and Advocacy for Individual Rights. I go in to apply for this job. I don't know anything, don't know anybody really, and just a room full of folks, but I did do homework, and I encourage all of the young people that I talk to, do some homework about the organization that you're applying for.

Not necessarily have to be that field, just know about that organization and who they are and what they do. Because when I came in for my interview, I knew when that organization was founded, who their first director was, where they were officed before they're at this building now and just went through their whole history. They were like, "Holy crap, we didn't even know that."

I wound up getting a job mostly because I knew stuff about them they didn't know. I always encourage folks, if you want to score brownie points with the organization you're applying for, know about them and brag about some of the stuff they've done and why you're there, why you want to work there. Then so I get the job at the PAIR program and I was very limited in what I could do within that job.

One of the first things I had to do was put together an advisory council. Again, as someone who I had no idea of ... I was the first person with a disability I'd

ever met. This is still so new to me and who do I find people with disabilities to put on this advisory council? One of the workers there told me that there's a gentleman in Hot Springs named Phil Stinebuck and Bill runs the region six independent living program.

I went, "Oh, cool. Let me try to get ahold of him." I called over the region six IL program and I went, "Hey, I'm trying to reach a Phil Stinebuck." They go, "Oh, well he's out." I went, "Well, of course he's out. That's the story of my life, what I need." I said, "But anyway." I said, "I'd like to send him a letter of invitation. Before I do that, could you tell me, how do I spell Stinebuck?"

Because I was going to spell it S-T-I-E-N. She goes, "No. It's S-T-I-N-E-B-U-C-K." I'm like, "Oh, thank you." I wrote Phil a letter. Didn't think much about it. A couple of weeks later, I get a phone call and it was Phil. He goes, "Hey, man, I got your letter." He goes, "You know, I don't normally join a lot of folks' advisory councils." He goes, "But you spelled my name right, and that doesn't happen often. I'm going to give you a shot."

Little things in life too that can make a world of difference in just spelling somebody's name right. I spelled his name right. He came over, I was talking to him and he goes, "Dude, you're in the wrong place. You need to be in independent living." He started telling me about IL and what those folks do. I went, "Oh, God, you are right."

There was a job that came open the next year in Hot Springs, Arkansas. I applied for that job. Got it and was there for a few years. Started working my way up the ladder of independent living, was the program director of sales there in Hot Springs. Then a job came open in Pine Bluff. I applied for it to become the executive director.

I was hired there as the executive director and was the director there for almost a decade before I was hired here at APRIL. I've been at APRIL now since 2007.

Rachel Quednau: Wow. Okay.

Billy Altom: Yeah.

Rachel Quednau: Very impressive.

Billy Altom: A few years. It's been a great run. It has afforded me to do a lot of things that I'd never thought would've been possible in my life. Within being the director of APRIL I had the opportunity to go with a group of folks to Peru. We went down to Lima to help start the first ever center for independent living in Peru. To establish a pure relationship with those folks, we spent a week with them, they're still kicking.

We still talk to them even after it's been well over a decade and they're still going. Getting the opportunity to travel every now and then. I was appointed by President Obama to serve on the National Council on Disability a few years back. My term was [inaudible 00:22:02]-

Rachel Quednau: Oh wow, okay.

Billy Altom: ... a few years ago. Just some things that I never would've thought would've happened. I was appointed to chair, the Rail Vehicles Accessibility Advisory Council. There we go. RVAAC. I've gotten to do a lot of really cool stuff that I had no idea was going to come my way.

Rachel Quednau: Yeah. That's wonderful. What are some of the issues that you or the partner organizations that you work with are really focused on and trying to advocate on these days for residents in rural America?

Billy Altom: Yeah. Right now it seems to be everything is COVID. Transportation, you got COVID-related issues there. Now you can't have more than so many folks in a vehicle, this, that. We're always working on issues of that, of even inside the COVID bubble that we're working on. What has happened that has been, I guess, really unforeseen it's I've always preached that folks with disabilities could work remotely, work from home, but businesses "Oh, I don't know if we can do that."

Then suddenly COVID comes and everybody and their brother's working from home. We go, "See, told you people can work from home and be productive. It's been a little bit of a eye-opener for folks to go, "Hey, see, how many people with disabilities did you pass over just because you thought, 'Well, I can't let them work from home.'" Now we're realizing that, "Man, you actually can work from home."

I guess one of the other big things is for those who want it, is to help them get access to the vaccine and the booster shots. Again, it's back to the transportation sometimes. I'm always one of those ... Gosh, I don't know, I want to meet people where they are. I like to take services to people as opposed to making people come to services a lot of times. But then again, I think differently than a lot of folks most of the time, which is a good thing.

Rachel Quednau: I also wanted to ask, tell me a little bit about some of the organizations that are part of your network. What sort of things are they doing on the ground?

Billy Altom: Yeah. On the ground again, centers for independent living are consumer-directed organizations. What I mean by that is they are 501(c)(3) organizations. They're community-based. They're housed in the community. 51% of the board of directors must be people with disabilities and 51% of the decision-making staff must be people with disabilities.



You want to ensure that these local communities are consumer-led, not that people without disabilities are not great advocates because we still want them involved, but nobody knows more about what a person with a disability needs than a person with a disability. I see folks do the Disability Awareness Days, and I value those, but it's still not a true reflection of what it's like to be 24/7 in a wheelchair or 24/7 blind.

Pick a disability. You can get a little feel for it in a few minutes, but not to the degree of the lived experience. That's what we look for is that lived experience. If you're community-based, what you're doing in your community may look totally different than what's happening in somebody else's community. What I mean by that is I talk a lot about transportation.

There are certain areas in the country that have great transportation so that's not important to them as advocates. They may be more concerned with getting folks out of institutions. Some of them have really big focuses on that. I mean, spend a lot of energy and effort on ensuring that folks with disabilities, number one, don't go into institutions to begin with. But once they're in there trying to get them back out, if they want back out.

Again, it's about consumer choice and control of what do people want to do? I don't know ... Well, I've seen a lot of folks in nursing homes and help get a lot of folks out of nursing homes. I never had anyone say that they really wanted to continue living in that nursing home. Everybody loves the freedom that they can get by living in their own home, their own community.

A lot of the transportation programs that folks run and if there's not a fixed route and you're working with other agencies and you're collaborating with each other, I know several organizations that have developed voucher programs for transportation. What this is they've combined their monies.

If you want to get wonky within the 5310 program at the department of transportation, transportation for physically disabled and elderly, there are monies in there that you can do projects like vouchers. What, for me, the important part of the voucher is, is it gives some control to the person trying to get a ride like me.

If you're a person with a disability and you've got some of these vouchers and you go ... I can go, "Hey, I need a ride and I can pay you." Whereas you feel like such a burden if every time you turn around, you're asking for a ride from somebody. Or if you call the same person over and over for a ride, "Hey, can I get a ride? Can I get a ride?" You know eventually they're going to go, "Ah, man, I'm not taking that call anymore."

But if you can call and go, "Hey man, I need a ride and I can pay you for your gas and time and effort." They go, "Well, hey." First thing you know, they're calling

you going, "Hey, man, you need a ride to town today? I need to ..." Figuring out ways that benefits everybody.

A voucher program is one of those that does, because it benefits the person providing the ride and it benefits the person who is receiving the ride, knowing that they're not having to be such a burden of going, "Oh, they're not doing this for their health. They're doing it because I'm paying them for it." Each community is going to have something unique to them that they're working on.

They may be working on infrastructure, looking at curb cuts in the smaller communities. It's a variety of things. What I like to tell folks, if you've seen one center for independent living, you've seen one center for independent living because they should reflect their community of what's happening in that community that [inaudible 00:29:09] they're probably working on.

Whenever I was the director down in Pine Bluff, we served a lot of people with mental health issues. Part of that is the staff that I had all identified as mental health consumers. People were freely walking through the door and felt comfortable saying, "Hey." It's that peer mechanism again. I'm going, "Oh, hey, I feel comfortable talking to you." You are who you serve is what I tell folks a lot of times too.

If I can look at the staff of a center for independent living, I can tell you probably who they're serving because it's the peer mentality. I [inaudible 00:29:48] folks talk about all the time, "We've never had anybody deaf come in our center." I go, "Do you have anybody deaf that works there?" They go, "No. Not one." Do you have anybody that can sign that's in there? Can they come in and communicate with you? They go, "[inaudible 00:30:01]."

I'm going, "Well, why would they go there? I wouldn't." It's the same difference if you didn't have a ramp leading in your front door, I couldn't go in so essentially you're telling me you don't want me there if you don't have the interpreter. What I try to do with APRIL is anytime we're doing a webinar, conferences, you name it, we're going to have sign language interpreters and CART available.

You don't have to call in in advance. It's just going to be there because I think it's ... Well, it's just not fair to my other colleagues, especially my brothers and sisters who are deaf and hard of hearing who have advocated so long for my issues. I have to continue my advocacy for them too so I try to make it where I don't want them to have to call in advance to go, "Oh, hey, I'm going to come to this meeting. Could you make sure I have it?"

You don't have to call in advance. I'm going to have it. You just come on down and come on in. Again, I think a little differently and I want to treat people differently. I'm a simple guy. I treat every single person the way I want to be

treated every day. Doesn't matter to me who you are. I'm going to treat you the same and all I ask for in return is generally just consistency.

I want to be the same person. Every time you see me I want you to go, "Oh, man, that's the same a-hole I met last time." I just love consistency about people and knowing who they are. I don't know. I talk in circles too. That's one of my other ... It's either a curse or a blessing. I've had the opportunity to testify in front of Congress once and testified in front of Arkansas folks several times.

I was answering a question years ago from one of our senators and I must have talked in a circle because really that wasn't a great answer for the question he had. I gave him about a 20-minute answer. When I got done, he looked at me and he goes, "Dude, you're going to make a great politician someday because if you answered my question, I missed it." All right then.

Rachel Quednau: You're a great storyteller. I appreciate that. To close this out today, I want to ask, what advice would you have for someone that's listening that might want to help? They're passionate about helping make their community more friendly and welcoming to people with any type of disability, especially someone in a rural area. What are some steps that they can do?

Billy Altom: If you are living in a rural area and you'd like more information you can go to our website, which is [www.A-P-R-I-L-rural](http://www.A-P-R-I-L-rural), [R-U-R-A-L.O-R-G](http://R-U-R-A-L.O-R-G). We've got a lot of different resources on our website. Feel free to email me too, [B-W-A-L-T-O-M@sbcglobal.net](mailto:B-W-A-L-T-O-M@sbcglobal.net) with any questions you might have because as you can tell here, I love to talk, so come.

A lot of times, it's the brainstorming that solves a lot of the ... People don't know what they need until they start talking. They think they need this and then when we get talking, they go, "Oh, actually that's what I need." I'm like, "Yeah." A lot of times just talking. Contact me. I can hook you up and help you identify a center that may be close to you and if there's not one close to you, we'll figure something else out.

I'm all about talking to folks and figuring out, how do we make the world a better place? If you don't have services, how do you get services? One of the other things that I talk about a lot with folks is that I don't know anything, but I know everybody. Give me a call. I may not be able to fix it, but I can certainly send you in the right direction that we can get some issues resolved. That would be my advice, is just to look through our resources and reach out to me.

Rachel Quednau: Well, thank you so much for that offer, Billy. I'll make sure to put those links in our show notes for this podcast. I really appreciate the chance to talk with you on the show today.

Billy Altom: Oh my gosh. It was my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Rachel Quednau: I'm so glad to have the chance to share that interview with you guys. I hope you appreciated it and definitely learned something from that conversation. Big announcement as we kick off the new year, we are again holding our Local-Motive event series. That's going to be taking place in February and March and tickets just went on sale so get your ticket now.

This is a series of eight live events and then two bonus prerecorded events if you buy the round-trip ticket. They're all focused on giving you the tools that you need to take action and make your community more economically resilient. We've got a whole host of amazing speakers this year and we're covering topics from infrastructure funding to fixing dangerous streets, to working with people who have different political backgrounds to get things done.

Definitely grab your ticket, head to [strongtowns.org/localmotive](https://strongtowns.org/localmotive) to do that today. You definitely want to take care of that before the month is over because everything kicks off on February 3rd and I don't think you want to miss this. Each session costs just \$25, or if you grab that round-trip ticket, it's only 125 so you're saving a lot of money. You're basically getting five free courses. So [strongtowns.org/localmotive](https://strongtowns.org/localmotive) to grab your ticket.

As always, thank you to our Strong Towns members. We were really feeling the love from our members at the end of 2021, and would love to have some more new members join us in 2022. If that's you and you've been listening for a while, maybe think about joining, [strongtowns.org/membership](https://strongtowns.org/membership) is the place to do that. Thank you so much to our current members who continue to support this show and all the resources we create, the stories we share, everything we do at Strong Towns.

All right. Thanks y'all for listening. We will be back. We are on our regular weekly schedule from here on out, so look forward to next week's episode. Thanks everyone. Take care.