Kelly Cervantes:	00:10	Lauren Schrero is the co-founder of The Nora Project, a non-profit created to spark friendships between students and their peers with disabilities. The organization's flagship program is currently in 85 classrooms across four states. I am so excited to have you here today, Lauren, to chat all things The Nora Project and empathy. To start things off, what inspired you to create The Nora Project?
Lauren Schrero:	00:36	Well, I didn't create it, my cousin did. I'll tell you all about that, but it has certainly become an inspiration for me. My daughter Nora was born prematurely and had a series of surgeries in her first year of life. At first, they were GI surgeries and there were complications, but we expected her to recover and live a fairly normal life. Then when she was nine months old, there were complications with one of her surgeries that actually caused epilepsy. They caused brain damage which in turn caused seizures.
Lauren Schrero:	01:11	After that surgery, there was a brain scan, and the doctors drew straws to come in and tell us what the MRI looked like. When they came in at 9:30 at night, they showed us an image of a brain that was very significantly damaged. That was when the doctor said, "Not only do we not know if she's going to live through this, but if she does, we have no way of prognosticating what her abilities will be - if she'll be able to walk or talk or take care of herself."
Lauren Schrero:	01:45	My knees buckled. I know you've had those moments. But I never really thought we would lose her. I don't know why I never entertained that, but I didn't. Though I couldn't imagine her life. I was starting to try to imagine her childhood and it was like a blur to me. I think I realized in that moment I had never been friends with a child with disabilities or differences, like the ones my child was going to have. I wanted Nora to have a joyful childhood.
Lauren Schrero:	02:20	Immediately after that conversation with the doctor, I excused myself and called my cousin, who was a fifth-grade teacher at the time. She said, "What can I do? Can my students do something? Can we raise money?" We actually fundraised for CURE while we were in the PICU for a couple of months. What I said to her at the time was, "I don't know if we're going to be able to find something that's going to change Nora's outcome, but I do want her to have friends, so teach your students to be nice to kids like Nora." That's all I could ever ask for.
Lauren Schrero:	02:57	My cousin actually went off and developed what has become The Nora Project in that year. That was in April, and so she

spent the summer working on the curriculum. Then in September, she and a bunch of teachers at her school launched the program. Throughout that year, Nora was in and out of the hospital. I was hearing from my cousin about how things were going, and it was this bright spot in our lives. We had no control over how Nora was doing but we had this mission she was inspiring which we heard about all the time.

Lauren Schrero: 03:37 Right before her second birthday, my cousin invited us to come see the capstone project, which were these documentaries her students created. When we saw them, we looked at each other and thought, "Maybe this is what it was all for." We saw there was a real opportunity to teach kids about differences, to teach them how to be compassionately curious about people who are different from them, and that's where this all began. It's been three years, and now the project has grown. We're moving forward with it.

Kelly Cervantes: 04:09 I'm so inspired by your story. You went through this incredibly emotional journey. Nora was not supposed to be disabled. That was not what you saw for her future, but you were able to take that experience and turn it into something which benefits all our children. I just think it's so incredibly beautiful. You were a lawyer, and you left that career to help organize and run The Nora Project. Why make this change? What is it about this project that caused you to jump from being a lawyer to running a non-profit?

Lauren Schrero: 04:56 I went to law school and became a lawyer because I wanted to help people. It was always what I wanted to do, and I think I did that. I practiced for seven years as a litigator and then as a law clerk. I believe in our justice system, and I enjoy being an advocate. But life has taken me down a different path. When I was deciding whether or not to move away from the law and toward The Nora Project, I had a conversation with the judge who I was working with.

Lauren Schrero: 05:29 I said, "I think instead of going back after my clerkship into practice, I might leave law and do this." He said, "You might not be the lawyer you thought you were going to be, but you have an amazing kid and she's given you an amazing opportunity." He was right. I feel like I can do a lot of good. I feel like there's a major shift that needs to happen, and if I can play a small part in the way we talk about disability, treat people with disabilities, and include people with disabilities in school and in life, I can't imagine a more fulfilling way to live my life. I am very, very excited to wake up every morning and work on this.

Kelly Cervantes:	06:12	Explain what it is exactly The Nora Project does. How does it spark these friendships? How do you teach empathy?
Lauren Schrero:	06:23	One of the really cool things about empathy is it's not hard to teach. We're all hardwired to care about each other. We just need to practice caring, and it's something that isn't frequently done. The flagship program, the one my cousin created, has been revised, and I think improved over time. The program has essentially four phases. In the first phase of the project, kids study the components of empathy. They study what it means to be a good listener, what it means to problem solve, what it means to connect with someone, to adapt to their needs, to be a good host. We talk a lot about hospitality and what it means to make someone feel comfortable. That's the first nine weeks.
Lauren Schrero:	07:05	There are four phases, one for each academic quarter. Phase one is really just reading books, having discussions, and doing journal entries. There's some mindfulness exercises our students do, but none of it is super-complicated. In the second phase of the project, kids actually study disability, which is so important because disability is misunderstood, confusing, and can be scary if it's not explained. But obviously, as you know, it's not scary. We're all just humans who have different needs.
Lauren Schrero:	07:31	In the second phase of the project, students study adaptive equipment. They study the best way to talk about disability and to think about disability. The second phase is when they're actually introduced to a new friend with a disability. The kids make introductions first by video, and then the students host their friends in their classroom. They plan an activity and host them. Those activity days continue throughout the year.
Lauren Schrero:	07:56	The third phase of the project is about storytelling, because, as you know from so beautifully sharing your story with the world, the way we connect, the way we really learn about each other, and the way we support each other is through our stories and who we are. We ask all our students, including our Nora Friends, “If someone were to tell a story about you, what would it be? What are the defining moments in your lives?” The students explore that question in journal entries and then start to ask each other, "Tell me your story?" And to really explore that with one another.
Lauren Schrero:	08:28	In the final phase of the project, they share their combined stories by creating documentaries about the friendships they've created. Empathy isn't something which has a specific structure to teach, but it's something that, by being curious about another person, exploring that curiosity, and wanting to

connect and making connections, you cultivate. That's really all it is. It's simple, but it needs to be practiced, and so that's how we do it.

Lauren Schrero: 08:56 That's our flagship program. Next year we're going to be launching some exciting new empathy programs, but that is the program which is currently in our 85 classrooms right now.

Kelly Cervantes: 09:04 Disability is such a broad term, but how many kids in that classroom have a learning disability, or maybe they have a hearing aid or there's certain other things (which maybe aren't as obvious a disability as perhaps they are with your Nora or with my Adelaide) which these kids now also feel more comfortable sharing. Beyond helping them to see a Nora or an Adelaide and not be afraid of them, know how to ask appropriate questions, smile, and just be their friend, they also grow more comfortable with their own uniqueness.

Lauren Schrero: 09:48 Absolutely. We have so many amazing stories about kids sharing their differences. We had a teacher tell us last year that she had a child who was fully included, fully mainstream in her class who had an Asperger's diagnosis. He had never shared with his peers that he had a disability. During one of their Nora Project discussions, he raised his hand and he told his classmates very proudly about his diagnosis and used it as an opportunity to educate them. It is great. We're empowering kids to feel proud of who they are, because we're all different from one another and we all have things that make us feel different. If we can just share them and see that these qualities are accepted - it's a good feeling.

Kelly Cervantes: 10:27 Absolutely. What are the responses you receive from the parents both of the able-bodied and minded, mainstream kids as well as the Nora Friends?

Lauren Schrero: 10:40 The responses have been really exciting. I think one of the most common responses we get from parents of typically developing students is that they've learned so much. We didn't get this kind of education when we were growing up. I didn't know how to approach a person with a disability, include them, and modify play. So many parents have been grateful that they're learning through their kids how to be kinder people, approach people with differences, and include them.

Lauren Schrero: 11:14 There's one little boy who was a four-time Nora Friend. He did the project for four years, and he was in the same school with his peers from kindergarten on, but he was in and out of the gen ed classroom. He had autism and had some behavioral stemming he would do in order to calm himself in difficult situations. Before The Nora Project, he would leave the room with an aide, and she would calm him.

Lauren Schrero: 11:40 After The Nora Project, his classmates would say, "Sam, do you need a squeeze?" They'd give him a squeeze; a nice firm squeeze to help him calm down. He didn't have to leave the room to have his stemming behaviors. He could just be part of the class because the kids knew how to deal with it. What his mom said was that Sam had been included. Sam had been part of the community, but The Nora Project brought his inclusion to a new level where he was just one of the kids, and the kids really got to know his needs and participate in his success at school. That felt great.

Kelly Cervantes: 12:13 That's amazing. That's so great. What would you tell a parent of a typically able-bodied/minded child who doesn't have access to The Nora Project yet (we'll get to access in a minute)? What do you tell those parents? How can they talk to their child? What do they tell their child? How do you teach them to be open, kind, and not afraid?

Lauren Schrero: 12:43 That's such a good question, and we're really working on parent resources, because we know this is a quality parents want to instill in their children. We do have some really great free resources on our website now. I think the main piece of advice (if I could just tell a parent one thing) is to allow your kids to be curious. Allow your kids to ask questions. There's nothing wrong with wondering why someone is different, because the answer will assure you that everything is okay.

Lauren Schrero: 13:14 Why does Nora scream when she's happy? Because she's super-excited, her body is filled with joy, and she doesn't have words. Now it's not so annoying when she screams, because you're so thrilled that she's fill with that much emotion.

Kelly Cervantes: 13:26 She's so stinking cute too.

Lauren Schrero: 13:27 She is cute, but when she screams loudly, her classmates now understand. I went in and spoke with her classmates, and they had questions. They're legitimate questions, because it's not something you see every day. We do have a Best Practices in Inclusion pamphlet, which addresses how to talk about disabilities and using person-first language. People are not their disabilities. Their disabilities are just a part of who they are, so we always like to talk about a person and not about their diagnosis.

Lauren Schrero:	13:54	We have some lessons plans available online, which parents can go through with their children. We have a very simple mnemonic device about how to adapt activities so they can be accessible to a child with any developmental level. The example I always give is, if you're doing a cutting activity, think about maybe helping a child tear, so they don't have to do something different, but they can still do the same art project the other kids are working on. We have a whole guide on that on our website.
Lauren Schrero:	14:24	We also have a disability resource guide which has great videos about different diagnoses that you can share with your kids. If there's a child in their class who has Down syndrome and you want to be able to explain it, you don't have to do a whole bunch of research. We have a bunch of great videos from the National Down Syndrome Society you can watch. We have pictures of equipment and how it works - how oxygen equipment works, how trachs work, G tubes, and central lines - so parents can explain all of these things so their kids aren't nervous when they see them.
Kelly Cervantes:	14:54	What is the ideal age range that you work with, with these programs?
Lauren Schrero:	14:59	We've been in fourth and fifth grade classrooms for the last couple of years. This year, our third year, we're piloting a second and third grade program, as well as a high school program. Both are going well so far. We're not exactly sure if we'll be offering all three versions next year, but I think we will definitely stick with fourth and fifth grade. High school, probably as well. Second and third grade's a little young but we think we have an alternative program we might be able to offer.
Lauren Schrero:	15:26	There's no bad age to start talking about differences. It can certainly be done in different ways at different ages.
Kelly Cervantes:	15:34	Tell me about the impact and the changes you are seeing in the students who are going through the program?
Lauren Schrero:	15:41	That's been one of the most exciting things. We ask our students a bunch of questions. They get a survey three times throughout the year. One of the areas where we saw a lot of growth last year was in how students identified with kids with disabilities. We asked our students at the beginning of the year to rank on a Likert scale of from strongly disagree to strongly agree how they felt about this statement, "I have things in common with my peers with disabilities."

Lauren Schrero:	16:08	At the beginning of the school year, before they'd gotten any Nora Project instruction, they answered neutral. We had a solid three response where they just really weren't sure either way. We asked them again about halfway through the program but before they had met their Nora Friend for the first time. At that point, they were between neutral and agreeing with the statement that they had things in common. When we asked them at the very end of the school year, after they had had a chance to really get to know their friend and create a documentary telling their story, they were between agree and strongly agree.
Lauren Schrero:	16:42	They really felt like they had a lot in common with their peers with disabilities. That was really impressive movement for us. We saw that result in a number of areas. Another question we loved - the data point related to a 2012 Harvard survey, which asked 10,000 teenagers what's more important to you, personal happiness and achievement or caring for others. 80% of respondents said their personal happiness and achievement was more important to them. Harvard called it an empathy crisis and put out this great report about it.
Lauren Schrero:	17:12	We asked our students the same thing. By the end of the school year, 80% of our students answered caring for others was more important to them.
Kelly Cervantes:	17:21	Oh my gosh.
Lauren Schrero:	17:22	We had really flipped the statistic on its head and we felt like we were onto something. We were showing kids that caring for others feels as good as getting a good grade, or excelling in your swim team, or whatever - that this is really what life is all about. I think it really solidified for us that we're on the right track here with the work.
Kelly Cervantes:	17:47	That's so amazing.
Lauren Schrero:	17:49	Thanks.
Kelly Cervantes:	17:50	What are your goals for The Nora Project? Where would you love to see it go? What are the outcomes you would love to get out of it?
Lauren Schrero:	18:00	Our vision is a world where people with disabilities are included in every aspect of life, where they live with dignity and are part of their communities in an important, significant way. I think everything The Nora Project does from here on out will build to

		that at different stages of life. We're focused on the next generation right now. We're focused on educating kids about how to be includers. I think we'll continue to think of new programs which will help advance that goal.
Lauren Schrero:	18:29	We hope the legacy of The Nora Project is just that people are saying hi to one another despite their differences - that they're asking questions, that they're hiring people with disabilities, including people with disabilities, championing the causes that matter (like Medicaid and social security), and that people with disabilities live as full lives as they deserve.
Kelly Cervantes:	18:53	How can people learn more about The Nora Project? You mentioned the website. The program is in four different states, so this is not just Illinois-centric. How can people bring The Nora Project into their schools?
Lauren Schrero:	19:07	We'll be posting our applications for the next school year on our website, and we are looking for schools that have a really comprehensive approach to inclusion, or at least want to. We're happy to help facilitate that. There's an application process, and we'll be selecting 40 schools for next year. Even for schools that aren't ready to take the full plunge into The Nora Project, we are, as I said, going to be offering some new programs for next year.
Lauren Schrero:	19:34	Everything is available on our website, but we'll be offering a literacy program with read-alouds for classrooms, featuring characters with disabilities. We're going to be offering a STEM program, engineering a more inclusive world, that isn't going to be quite as intensive, but will allow students to think about whether their school is inclusive and how to make it more inclusive.
Lauren Schrero:	19:56	We have two different focuses in terms of community engagement. The first is to focus on organizations that are doing youth development. We're trying to partner with Girl Scouts on creating an inclusion patch program and we're working with the YMCA for inclusion programming, as well as the JCC. Any organizations working on youth development, we want them to think about inclusion when they're thinking about their programming.
Lauren Schrero:	20:22	At the same time, we're working with organizations that serve people with disabilities. We've gotten an unbelievable amount of support from Misericordia, which has been so wonderful. They're obviously working primarily with adults with disabilities, but they also have playgroups. Nora and I have made a number

		of friends through that. They've just been supportive in terms of helping us think about what the future looks like for people with disabilities.
Lauren Schrero:	20:46	We've also partnered with Best Buddies and other organizations that are similarly minded in terms of their inclusion focus and goals. There's many different ways to engage the mission. Head to our website www.thenoraproject.ngo.
Kelly Cervantes:	21:02	Are you on social media?
Lauren Schrero:	21:04	We are, yes. We're on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. We are constantly, constantly posting and reposting great material, including how to talk to your kids, but also about the great community events we're hosting. We're hosting events here in the Chicago suburbs and in the city, but also in the various other states we're in.
Kelly Cervantes:	21:24	I find the articles you post very beneficial on this complicated, special needs parenting journey we're both on. It's nice to have that resource and to have someone who is collecting all those articles for us.
Lauren Schrero:	21:41	We're trying to put the best stuff out there for you. Search our page if you need answers.
Kelly Cervantes:	21:43	So much appreciated. Absolutely. Thank you, thank you so much for coming out, for chatting, and for sharing The Nora Project and empathy. This speaks to my heart and so many others, as we just want our babies to be included and to have friends at the very basic of levels. Thank you for teaching other kids how to be their friends.
Lauren Schrero:	22:10	It's my absolute pleasure. Thanks, Kelly.
Kelly Cervantes:	22:15	Empathy happens when you talk, listen, and learn from those around you. It is the foundation of any community. If you want to be part of the *Seizing Life* community, we ask that you share this episode with your friends and on social media, so more children can receive an education on empathy. Thanks so much.
Speaker 3:	22:45	The opinions expressed in this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views of CURE. The information contained here is provided for general information only and does not offer medical advice or recommendations. Individuals should not rely on this information as a substitute for consultations with qualified

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