



# Friday Conversation With ...

## Deborah Turner



*National 211 Day will be observed Feb. 11, presenting an opportunity to highlight the indispensable role that the 211/LIFE LINE service plays in the region and to remind the community that there's a number besides 911 they can call for help. The 24/7 confidential information referral hotline is run by Goodwill of the Finger Lakes and serves individuals across Monroe, Wayne, Cayuga, Ontario, Livingston, and Seneca counties. The hotline provides free and confidential guidance for those struggling to find resources such as food, clothing, shelter, and mental health assistance. Deborah Turner is its director, and here's what she had to say to Louise Hoffman Broach about herself and the importance of the program in the Finger Lakes:*

**LHB:** Where did you grow up, and what was your childhood like?

**DT:** I was raised in the small city of Jamestown, N.Y. Both of my parents worked full-time; my mother was an overnight nurse, and my father worked in manufacturing and welding. I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood surrounded by many children. My mother was dedicated to ensuring that me and my two older sisters had a fulfilling childhood, sometimes shielding us from some of the more challenging dynamics within our family (addiction, mental health, and domestic violence). Looking back, I feel fortunate to have been loved, encouraged, and protected during my formative years.

**LHB:** What did you do after high school?

**DT:** I attended Rochester Institute of Technology while working part-time in the college admissions office.

**LHB:** How did you get into the counseling field? What was your path to 211/LIFE LINE?

**DT:** I graduated from RIT in 2012 with a BS in psychology, a minor in criminal justice, and a concentration in women and gender studies. I was unsure if I wanted to move forward

### Deborah Turner

**Age:** 35

**Resides:** Rochester

**Family:** One toddler and three cats

**Occupation:** Goodwill of the Finger Lakes' director of Crisis and Referral Services at 211/LIFE LINE and 988

**Book you're reading:** "Where the Crawdads Sing" by Deila Owens

**TV show you're watching/streaming:** "Star Trek: Discovery"

**No. 1 thing on bucket list:** Have coffee with Harrison Ford ... yes from Star Wars!

■ See CONVERSATION Page 4A

# CONVERSATION

Continued from Page 1A

with pursuing a master's degree and was exploring my options. Then, a friend told me about their work at Goodwill of the Finger Lakes 211/LIFE LINE, which I found fascinating. I interviewed and was hired full-time as a tele-counselor.

**LHB:** What were the challenges?

**DT:** Throughout my life, I've been highly attuned to the emotions of those around me, which taught me the importance of setting boundaries to protect my mental health and peace. In both my personal and professional life, I've learned that boundaries are not only about self-care but also about fostering mutual respect and understanding in relationships. It's a continuous process of balancing empathy and self-preservation to ensure that I can be there for others without compromising my own well-being. It is that empathy that has contributed to my success.

**LHB:** How does that balance work?

**DT:** I believe that vulnerability and authenticity are powerful tools to connect our team

and the community we serve, providing a safe place to feel empowered. Given the inherently stressful nature of our work, leading with compassion is crucial to facilitating a psychologically safe environment to address and prevent staff burnout. As a leader, I recognize that expecting team members to "leave their issues at the door" is unrealistic, and I continue to foster a space where they feel supported.

**LHB:** Tell me more about the Coordinated Entry Project that led to the directorship? You mentioned some of it was difficult. What did you do to adapt the culture to the needs of the organization?

**DT:** The Coordinated Entry Project was my initial role at Goodwill of the Finger Lakes that involved collaborating with external partners to address barriers for individuals experiencing homelessness in accessing shelter and develop solutions. My responsibilities included creating and leading training sessions, conducting quality assurance and compliance reviews, generating reports, attending meetings, and engaging in challenging

discussions about the issues we encountered.

**LHB:** And homelessness was found to be a huge issue?

**DT:** The homeless services sector comprises various partners with diverse approaches to assisting the unhoused, ranging from structured methods like those of the Department of Human Services to housing advocates employing protest tactics to voice their concerns. This diversity required me to actively listen and consider different perspectives to be an effective partner.

Although the project concluded with data indicating that 211's role in providing screenings was not the most effective path for serving this population, it facilitated further collaborations and support for our unhoused community. I remain grateful for the conversations and lessons I learned developing my leadership style to be collaborative.

**LHB:** Can you talk about the other needs of the people who call for assistance? Has that changed much over the years?

**DT:** In recent years, the challenges of securing safe and affordable housing have intensified. Rising inflation has significantly impacted our most

vulnerable populations, making daily life increasingly difficult and amplifying the need for more resources to sustain their households.

**LHB:** Where would you like to see 211/LIFE LINE go in the future?

**DT:** I envision that someday 211/LIFE LINE will be recognized and funded on par with 911, establishing our service as a public utility that empowers individuals to access necessary resources as effortlessly as dialing 211.

**LHB:** You have some interesting hobbies. Tell me what you like to do outside of 211/LIFE LINE.

**DT:** One of my favorite aspects of living in Rochester is experiencing the changing seasons. My family and I enjoy riding our e-bikes to take advantage of the beautiful weather and various events throughout the year. Being passionate about combating climate change, we prefer to travel by train during our vacations, appreciating both the journey and the reduced environmental impact.

In my leisure time, I also enjoy engaging in creative activities such as crafting and painting, and have recently taken up crocheting.