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**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH  
KAREN VAUGHN  
NOVEMBER 16, 2009  
INTERVIEWER: JENNIE TODD  
VIDEOGRAPHER: PEGGY HOLTZ  
RECORD ID: 115-DO**

**JT:** JENNIE TODD

**KV:** KAREN VAUGHN

[TITLE CREDITS]

[00:00:10]

**KV:** My name's Karen Vaughn and I'm from Indianapolis, Indiana. And I have been a person with a disability for the last 33 years. And of course, when I was young I knew nothing about any legislative activities or laws that would allow an individual with a disability to have any kind of civil rights. Because I stayed in several nursing homes and at that time there were no patient's rights. When I went through Partners in Policymaking in 1992, I learned that there were more than just rights. We had civil rights on just about every level. And I was extremely interested in making sure that the state parks were accessible to anybody with a disability.

Because on the back on the brochure it said, for the average citizen we want our properties to be you know-- enjoyable. And that irritated me; that I felt excluded. I know I'm not the average but I wanted to do everything possible. And 1992 was the perfect time to go through training because that gave me the opportunity to get more training from DREDF, Disability Rights Education Defense Fund. It's the most elite training on the ADA that you can get. And it was eye-opening. And to be able to take an actual sheet of paper around to a state park, where I'd already been, where raccoons wouldn't go, it was January, and help the park managers do their compliance plans, was pretty awesome.

It felt like I had a little bit of power. And actually we had a lot of power, we just weren't as organized as we should have been. But to see the fact that they-- even the parks had to have a plan to accommodate any needs that folks with disabilities had. That was wonderful. Then I wanted to of course work for the Department of Natural Resources, but that didn't work out.

[00:03:19]

**JT:** So what kind of impact do you think the ADA has had on you personally and professionally?

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**KV:** Oh well life-changing. It's not only -- just because of what the Americans with Disabilities Act has done with giving public access. We have the right to get on the bus just like the average person and not have specialized transportation. We have that right. We should have the right to have a lot more. And Indianapolis is working hard on trying to catch up because, you know, they're going to have the Super Bowl in a couple of years and they don't know how to-- I live downtown now and you would think that this being the capital of the state it would be, you know, totally accessible.

Well all the curb cuts are more like curb-- just curb slants. And what I would consider accessible and what someone walking around considers accessible is many times two different things. They're going through modifications right now. Unfortunately you don't know what curb cuts are going to be inaccessible until you get to the end of the sidewalk, and there are barrels and everything. So they're going through a large renovation here in Indianapolis now. And what year is this? Better late than never. But of course they've just been awarded most visitable city in the country. And if Indianapolis is the most visitable and they're talking about by people with disabilities, I'm really sad for the rest of the country.

But they're moving along, for whatever reason.

**JT:** So what sort of changes would you like to see the city of Indianapolis make?

**KV:** Not just the city of Indianapolis.

**JT:** I was just trying to narrow it--

**KV:** Narrow it down. I would like them to live up to that most visitable. I would like them to have level sidewalks. Have doors that you can go to through the front. I have to go around the back of my bank, up through the alley and I have to access a major bank downtown through the back door. I mean that's what we're used to, so some of us are very compliant. What I would really like to see is the legislators, a mandated—I'd like to see them-- yeah, training. I mean actual training. I'd like to see them go out on the curb cuts using wheelchairs and trying to get on the elevators, and not come away with the idea of oh, what a terrible way of life.

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But oh, we really need to fix this. Everything boils down to money and once they see that somebody could fall down and hurt themselves and sue the city, maybe that spurs things along. But actually having equal access to things. Most people think that if you have-- have an apartment-- I moved into an apartment downtown recently. And I just knew that because, you know, the Americans with Disabilities and ANSI and ASCII and all the guidelines are set, that they couldn't possibly make someone carry me down the stairs in case of a fire. Knowing about the Americans with Disabilities Act is not enough.

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You have to know about the other laws. That's the Fair Housing Law that covers that. Then there's the fact that the voting is no longer covered under the ADA, it's covered under HAVA. So when I went to my polling place the other day, for a special election, they were going through renovations and there was no notification that the polling place was somewhere else. They couldn't tell us where, but it was somewhere else. And you call up, one of the headquarters of a political party and they said, well the address is 120 Walnut. Just go down Delaware, you'll find it. And unfortunately we found it, but the machines automatically shut off at 6 o'clock. So, you know - it's my right to vote.

I've got the right to vote. I've got the right to get up on the sidewalk and get in. But then that's a HAVA problem. So you just have to keep informed and make sure that we are paying attention to the judges, like the speaker said this morning. The federal judges and make sure that the president appoints Supreme Court judges that are very open-minded and see the merits in the Americans with Disabilities Act so they don't make any more cuts to them.

**JT:** What would you say was the greatest accomplishment of the Americans Disabilities Act? Now that we're coming towards the 20th anniversary, what would you say made the biggest impact, or made the biggest accomplishment in 20 years?

**KV:** It gave us a right to be out in the community. It made it the law to let us be out, get out, ride the bus, have an opportunity to be at least fill out an application. It gave us the right to go into any other place like any other citizen. It gave us the freedom from the Ugly Act. Are you familiar with the Ugly Act? Up until 1972 there was an act that was still in the books in Chicago, that if someone was physically offensive, visually, they weren't to come out in public. Well that fits someone if someone had maybe cerebral palsy and maybe they had you know a twist. Or maybe they had a problem with drooling or something. It was against the law for people to be in public.

**JT:** I never heard of that.

**KV:** Well that's because we don't live in Chicago. [Chuckles]. It's just amazing that we had to fight for civil rights that should have been there, you know, when the constitution first was made. But giving us a sense of our right to be here and a right to have access to everything, every opportunity that every other individual has.

**JT:** So in the 20 years, and 20 years wasn't that long ago, but if you look back 20 years, do you see much of a difference between then and now? Do you feel a lot of personal differences?

[00:12:09]

**KV:** I do, because after my injury I was fortunate enough to have a van and I would go wherever. That was back in the late '70s. And when I would go out, I would be the only person in the shopping mall or wherever I went that used a wheelchair. And now, and you know we all look alike [chuckles], but there's a lot of people out. I mean a lot! I used to get so excited if I saw somebody going down the street using a wheelchair. I'd go, oh my gosh. There's some other crazy person out. But just the way that children are growing up now and they're growing up in inclusive classes.

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And you know they've got a shot at, you know having a-- whatever a normal life is, at least you know, having a job, having a family. We've always had the right to that but we've got a law that says we have the right to go out and pursue these things.

**JT:** Right and more support to help encourage that and [inaudible].

**KV:** Sure. And if not then-- and we get great parking spots. We have great parking spots but, you know, we don't always get them.

**JT:** So like I said we're coming onto the anniversary. They've done some great things. There's still a lot of work to be done. What would you look to the ADA to do next, for it to prioritize in the next 10, 20 years?

**KV:** I would like to see this Americans with Disabilities Act and all other civil rights laws being a mandatory course in high school, just like history. And I think it should be a college course, something that people know about and they don't have to ask. Mommy, why is that person in the wheelchair? And there should be, not just a law-- but you can't mandate someone's attitude-- but the newer generation, it's-- they should just--they're much more accepting. My nieces that have grown up with, you know, -- they've never known me any other way, and their generation is going to be much more empowered by what has come along.

**JT:** And that kind of ties into a question that I haven't asked you yet. How do people learn-- in terms of how people learn about the act and how people learn about the law? If like you said, it was taught as part of history or in a class then at any point, if someone is in an accident they already have a lot of information. Not only does a person with disability learn it growing up, but other people learn about it. So sounds like that was one of the things you were suggesting.

**KV:** I think it should be-- I mean there's mayor's advisories, councils. There's the Governor's Planning Council. I think it should be just like-- you know where the newspaper stands are? There should be a legislative publication there. I mean they have all kinds of strange things that are free. And I think there should be PSAs on where you look on the web for, you know, whatever legislative law you're looking for. Civil rights is not just about reading the law, you know it's getting over the attitudes of--you know, there are pre-conceived notions of folks with disabilities.

**JT:** Yeah. Because we have talked to a lot of people-- well not a lot of people, we talked to some who don't know what ADA means.

**KV:** Oh sure. It's the American Dental Association, right. My doctor asked me that. My doctor.

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**JT:** Right. So I agree that there probably do need to be PSAs and just information that's just public awareness because, how do people find out about it. How do people get information?

[00:17:22]

**KV:** Well when there's 19.5% of the population has disabilities. And there's approximately a million people in Marion County, that means there's 100,000 people with some type of disability, whether they admit it or not. It shouldn't take a curb cut or—you know, we're all -- everybody's going to experience some kind of-- somebody's going to break their leg. By the year 2010-- boy that was a long time ago-- they estimated that there was 57% of the population, at some time in their life, is going to experience some type of disability. Well I think it's more than that and with medicine, the way—you know the changes and the advances that they're coming up with medication and treatments, we're living longer.

But I see people with arthritis using canes and all kinds of things and they're covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act. I think it's something that should go with—you know, the older you get, the more information you need.

**JT:** Okay. Well do you have any stories or anything else you want to say in regards to the ADA?

**KV:** I will try to make this as quick as possible but it doesn't-- the Americans with Disabilities Act doesn't always cover you the way it's supposed to. Social Security has work incentives programs and one of them is called a PASS Plan. That's a Plan to Achieve Self-Support. And after I had my training from DREDF and I was going to be an ADA consultant when I grew up, well the first thing I did was-- I got a PASS plan through the Social Security office, and it allowed me to set aside some funds to buy a van. Well Medicaid didn't want to allow me to have that. They wanted to charge, what's called a spend down on that money, because in their policy it's stated that unless you were blind or visually impaired, you were not allowed to utilize a PASS plan.

Well under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, state and local government, they're supposed to provide the same program for all folks with disabilities. And I fought that with Protection and Advocacy; was in litigation for a year. Then I lost that battle and I didn't understand why. This is blatant disability-- I mean discrimination. So we filed a class-action suit and we lost. Here in Indiana. And so I filed an appeal with the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago. We went and we lost. How can we lose? It's obvious, it's blatant. But when Medicaid came along, the federal government gave states the opportunity to opt out of providing the same services if they thought it was going to be cost-prohibitive.

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And Indiana being a very-- conservative state and financially conservative, of course, they said that this would cost too much. So they were found-- we were found-- we lost and that was going to set a precedence for the other 12 states in the country. So it just boggles the mind. If they would have allowed me to utilize the Social Security Work Incentive Plan, I would not be on the rolls of Medicaid at this point in time. It just didn't make sense. So sometimes what you think is going to save you, and it is right, there's a loop-hole.

[END OF INTERVIEW]