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**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
RIC EDWARDS
NOVEMBER 16, 2009
INTERVIEWER: JENNIE TODD
VIDEOGRAPHER: PEGGY HOLTZ
RECORD ID: 118-DO**

JT: JENNIE TODD

RE: RIC EDWARDS

[TITLE CREDITS]

[00:00:10]

RE: Alright, my name is Ric Edwards. I am currently the director of Safety and ADA Compliance for the Department of Natural Resources. And I'm also the Chairperson of ADA Indiana the steering committee in Indiana responsible for implementation-- promoting implementation of the ADA across Indiana. I joined the crowd in 1970 when I broke my neck as a result of an accident that I had in the back of a Volkswagen Beetle. And broke my neck like I said and ended up using a wheelchair for-- ah it's been too many years now to mention that. I'm not going to give away what my age is. But I'm going to be a grandfather here in a couple of weeks. ADA since it was being discussed in Congress I've been a part of the discussion about the ADA and what it should be and what it means to people with disabilities.

So I've had a lot of experience in the ADA and dealing with it. So it's been interesting dealing with the history and going from not having an ADA to having an ADA. So do I need to readjust things or are we in good shape?

JT: No I think we're okay.

RE: Okay.

[00:01:50]

JT: Do you want to talk a little bit about the early days of the ADA, because it was passed in 1990 and you said you'd kind of been involved since the '70s. So could you talk a little bit about the early days?

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[00:02:00]

RE: Right. Well for example back in 1970 when I went to-- going from high school, I was going to Culver Military Academy before my accident and afterwards couldn't do that because of the marching and all that sort of thing involved. So I went to my high school in Spencer which was not accessible; it was on two levels. And my dad, who was the school attorney, told the superintendent, yes he would go back to school in Spencer. So they carried me up and down two sets of ten steps each to get to my classes in the upper levels and back down again at the end of the day. So much different with the passage of the ADA. Of course not that everything was perfect after that, but it certainly changed the mindset of a lot of people about what their responsibilities were in terms of people with disabilities, and how they were supposed to treat and react towards the issues that they had; the barriers that were there.

JT: Do you remember any early rallies or any significant meetings?

RE: One of my favorite stories involved Justin Dart who is the father of the ADA and this was when I was working as the state's ADA coordinator. We thought it would be a good idea to invite Justin to Indiana to speak to some of the people that were in Indiana, just beginning to understand what the ADA was all about. And I had never met Justin Dart. So I didn't know anything about him but by his reputation. And I thought, well here's a gentleman who my goodness was going to be just an amazing person and very outstanding and all that sort of thing. So I'm sitting in the lobby of the hotel where we had invited Justin to come speak and I'm looking around keeping an eye out for him. And I see this gentleman coming down the hallway in what looked like a wheelchair that was right out of Goodwill, wearing this funny looking hat and I thought, I'd better go take care of this guy and deal with him before Justin shows up.

Well it turned out it was Justin Dart. And I quickly found out that my flaws and my pre-conceived notions about people was quickly changed. He was very gracious and he was definitely a character. I got to -- because I had a wheelchair lift equipped van, I was able to take him around a couple of places and we talked and got to know each other as well as you can in that short period of time. And it was entertaining because not only did I get to hear a lot about what he had been dealing with, but we got to share the camaraderie and the understanding that, you know-- this was not just a thing that was going to affect us, it was going to be a thing that was going to affect our kids and our kids' kids and many generations to follow. So what we were doing was vitally important not only to us but to our kids.

JT: So once Justin got to Indiana, tell me about the process and what he did to help Indiana kind of get on board with the ADA.

[00:05:42]

RE: Sure. So once Justin was there we sat down and we had town meetings where we actually heard from a number of different people in a lot of different communities, what the issues were; what was bothering them. What were some of the problems and barriers that they were dealing with. And basically that is what developed the ADA was hearing that people were having problems with employment, Title I. They were having problems with transportation, Title II. They were having problems in their local store, Title III. State and local governments were creating barriers for them. So all those stories that we heard laid the groundwork and the foundation for the ADA itself. And so we were able to not only hear from

people as to what the real problems were, but we were able to put that into an act and actually try and address some of those questions some of those problems and remove some of those barriers.

[00:06:47]

JT: You're doing a great job and [inaudible]. So when Justin got here and you had those meetings, you talked to people that would benefit from the ADA. Did you talk to other government officials, or other people that were really involved and significant in helping with this movement?

RE: Because of Justin's stature and his position in government, we were able to get hold of some of the folks that were the policy makers, some of the movers and shakers and say, here's an individual who was appointed by presidents. And an individual whose capabilities and expertise just plain and simple desire was so great that they had no choice but to listen. So he also instilled in me the ability to recognize that it's important to be at the table. In order for us to make a change, people with disabilities, not only do we have to have this act, but we also have to have the ability to communicate with those people and become those people that are making the changes and the decisions.

JT: That's great. Did you ever have a chance to meet any other strong advocates such as Senator Ted Kennedy or Senator Tom Harkin or Andy Jacobs?

RE: I've been dealing with a lot of folks in my position. I've been privileged to be able to meet with some of those folks that were instigators in the ADA. Some of the ones locally that paved the way are the ones that I think are more important frankly, the Jim and Frieda Pauleys. The ones that were the ones battling before there was an ADA. The ones that laid the groundwork for us that made it so much easier. When I went to Ball State, my alma mater, I broke down some barriers there with the disability community and was able to make some significant changes there. And it was kind of humorous. I went back a few years later after I graduated from Ball State and talked with Rich Harris who was the disability coordinator there at Ball State and he was kind of chuckling and saying, you'd really get a laugh out of this.

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They were complaining, the students were complaining about the lack of an accessible drinking fountain at the student center. And what was so funny about that was that we had had such struggle getting the administration to understand that we should have access into the student center. And now they're complaining about the fact they couldn't get a drink there. It shows that we have come quite a ways. There are still lots of things that need to be done. We're not at all saying that we're in a utopia because we have the ADA. We have a lot of work that has to be done. We have a lot of barriers that need to be removed. Most importantly, we have a lot of people that need to become more educated about what this is all about. Being a person with a disability is something that can happen to anybody, anytime, anywhere. Knows no sex, knows no race, knows no age. And so any one of us can become one of us, at any time. And so that's why the ADA is so important to the whole world. It is something that is going to change minds as well as break down the barriers.

[00:10:51]

JT: That's excellent.

RE: Okay.

JT: Alright there's some other questions. I kind of like where we're going.

RE: Okay.

JT: I like the fact that you talk about there's more work to be done and the fact that we've made some progress and there's some other things that you'd like to see. Are there some things that you feel are right there that you feel need to be tackled first and foremost in terms of the ADA?

RE: Sure. Of course right now in this day and age 2009, everybody is struggling with employment. It's much more significant for people with disabilities just because you've got the additional barriers that employers have towards people with disabilities. They don't understand many times what people with disabilities can do. And so the ADA, and I've said this before, the ADA is really a tool that needs to be used correctly so that people with disabilities can get the jobs that they need. And can remove the barriers that need to be removed. My biggest concern with the ADA is that it will be used incorrectly and because of that, damage some of the work that's been done. I have a difficult time sometimes when people try to use the ADA as a club, rather than a tool to encourage folks to understand what's necessary and what should be being done.

Not to say rather that the ADA can't be used as a club, it may sometimes have to be used as a club because there are people sometimes who just for whatever reason don't get it. And so it's good to have that arsenal there. But it shouldn't be abused. It should be like I said used in the correct way, to try and get folks to understand. Again you could be joining this group, a person with a disability is somebody who may or may not have had that disability their entire life. And so it's something that, again, I hope that the ADA is something that encourages people rather than beats people into submission.

JT: I'm going to ask you a few of these formal questions that they have. And some this you may have already addressed and if you have you can just I guess tell me that. Basically one of the questions goes, who was doing some of the important work in Indiana, basically getting the word out about ADA and talking with people in organizations? And I know you mentioned some of the--

[00:13:44]

RE: Sure. Jim and Frieda. Some of the people who have been involved in the ADA in Indiana. Jim and Frieda Pauley even before the ADA was there. Of course, Suellen Jackson-Boner has done a great deal of work, positive work. Christine, Paul, and the whole crowd there at the Governor's Planning Council. The people who have been doing the work-- there have been people with disabilities and people without disabilities. I think of Mayor Goldsmith and even our current governor, making those inroads, not because they had anybody necessarily with a disability on their mind, but because they recognized that it was the right thing to do. I hate to mention people by name because there's so many times you'll forget so many of the folks.

Of course most recently we've lost Sharon Byrkett and she was a real advocate. There are people like Nancy Griffin, like Costa Miller. Oh golly. Again I hate to mention them because there are so many others that are not getting mentioned. Norton Brown, another name that people may not recognize that's been around forever and making those changes before we even had an ADA.

[00:15:18]

JT: How did people get organized 20, 30 years ago. Did they use calling tree? Did they – how without all the technology that we have now, how did people get organized?

RE: Yeah. People got organized in the early years before the computers and the emails and all those sorts of things by using telephones. By like you mentioned the calling trees. I can remember licking a lot of stamps and doing a lot of envelope stuffing, that sort of thing to try and get the word out about things; and making a lot of a lot of phone calls. I can remember the ear getting so red and swollen that you had to switch ears. And by word of mouth. We had a lot of folks that would just simply go to conferences like the Governor's Planning Council conference and just simply say, hey. This is something that's out there.

JT: And do you remember the day the ADA was signed into law?

RE: The day the ADA was signed into law. It was July 26th, 1990 and I was not able to go to Washington DC. It was however, something that swept across the country especially for those people with disabilities. I think they, we, recognized that this was something very significant. And of course on the steps of the White House, or the lawn of the White House rather, when President Bush I signed the act into law, there were a lot of us that were watching on TV and enjoying that. Wishing we'd been able to be there, but recognizing that again, it was something that was going to have an impact across the nation.

JT: Okay and then as we approach the 20th anniversary of the ADA, how would you describe the greatest accomplishments? And then you could follow that with what still needs to be done and you've talked a little bit about that already.

[00:17:38]

RE: As we're getting close to the signing of -- the 20th anniversary of the signing of the ADA, the most significant change has to be the mindset that has been changed because that has much more of an impact than any kind of brick and mortar changes, or programmatic changes, because that's where the whole problem starts is in the minds of people. And so the ADA has been most valuable for changing some of those minds about people with disabilities in general. I can remember going to a grocery store one time with a-- I use a wheelchair and of course, going around a grocery store there's always lots of little kids. And I like little kids. I'm on their same level physically and mentally sometimes. So you know I enjoy little kids. There was a little boy that was walking with his mom and he was seeing my chair and of course it sticks out and it's interesting to little kids.

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And he was kind of pulling on his mom and pointing and I knew he wanted to ask a question. He's looking at me and asking what's that? Why is he doing that? And the mom was just pulling him away, you know, trying to get him to not even recognize that I was there. Trying to move away, I don't know, because she thought it was rude or something like that. And I thought oh shoot, you know, you've got to let the kid ask these questions because that's how he's going to learn. And I don't recall right now if that was before the ADA or after. I think it was after but I thought that's one of the things that's most important about the ADA is that it changed people's perceptions about asking somebody with a disability you know, is it okay if I open this door for you? Is it okay, you know-- do you need some help doing whatever? Again the ADA brings that to the fore and lets people feel a little more comfortable, be a little more ready to ask the questions. What can we do to remove a barrier? Is there a barrier here?

[END OF INTERVIEW]