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Byron Smith, January 18, 2013, interview 011-mi, transcript, Indiana Disability History Project, Center on Aging and Community, Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, Bloomington IN <https://indianadisabilityhistory.org>

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
BYRON K. SMITH
JANUARY 18, 2013
INTERVIEWER: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS
VIDEOGRAPHER: PEGGY HOLTZ
RECORD ID: 011-DO**

JHS: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS

BS: BYRON SMITH

PH: PEGGY HOLTZ

[00:00:10]

BS: My name is Byron Smith. I live in Bloomington, Indiana and I'm retired from Indiana University.

JHS: Can you tell us what you were doing at IU and how you got into that line of work?

BS: I worked at Indiana University for 37 years full-time, and two or three years part-time. Before that, the name of the office kept changing. But basically it was a PR unit of the university and I worked providing radio material, audio material to primarily radio stations for most of my career of various kinds, commercial stations, public stations, high school radio stations, and I interviewed many, many faculty members who offered expertise about various things. Today, we would be talking about presidential politics, national economics, environmental issues, whatever seemed interesting to the general public. And I work in the various areas as street reporter, producer, on air talent, tape editor, programmer.

[00:01:35]

I pretty much over the years grew into various parts of the radio world. Let me pause there for a sec and figure out-- oh, in the line of work, okay.

JHS: All right.

[00:01:49]

BS: I kind of fell into radio in an interesting way, at least it was for me. I took a survey course in what was then the radio and TV department in the mid-1960s and I enjoyed the course and the professor was very stimulating and a great professor. And talked to him after class one day and I said, "Well, I know I probably can't be an on air anchor for radio or TV." And he said, "Well, are you real busy right now?"

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And I said, "Well, not particularly." He said, "Come, on." And he took me up to his office and he told me about producers and writers and bookers to people who arrange interviews, the people who edit the tape, the people who coordinate travel, all of the dozens of people who work off camera and off mic to make shows possible. And we decided I could do all kinds of those things.

So, I had some experiences that fortified or cemented my interest in radio and I changed my major and graduated with the degree in radio and TV and worked in that field my whole professional life.

[00:03:06]

JHS: It sounds like that professor was really pivotal in what you ended up with your career. I don't know if you wanted to mention that person's name if you happen to remember [inaudible].

BS: I credit three people with my career as it turned out. The first would be Professor Jack Sheehan, who taught a survey course that I took that peaked my interest in the field and he stimulated my interest in career possibilities. He died in the summer after I took the course in the fall and we all had quite a loss. There was a graduate student and who later became quite famous in the Bloomington media, Keith Klein. And Keith introduced me to the WFIU newsroom and everything that went on in there, and I think I lived half of my life in that room for 4 or 5 years. And then our journalism, broadcasting radio and TV professor Dick Yoakam pretty much took me under his wing and made sure I took all the right courses. I did take some alternative courses. They didn't think I would do really well with the utilization and film and television.

[00:04:22]

So I took lots of history and lots of political science to prepare myself to be a fairly well-rounded interviewer and producer. So, Jack Sheehan, Keith Klein and Dick Yoakam were the three people that contributed most to what became my career.

I'm going to clear my throat, hang on. I don't want to blow Peggy out of the water over there. [Clears throat] Get rid of the frogs. Okay, I'm fine.

JHS: Okay, I think we're going to come back. I want to hear more about your career and also your time at IU. But let's make sure to talk about your early years. I think, you know, as Phil put it when I was sending around to my questions, for you for other people's comments that you've really unwittingly or deliberately made your contribution to Indiana history in your being such a pioneer and attending public school. So, I want to make sure we talk a lot about that period.

[00:05:33]

BS: It's hard to think of an 11-year-old as a pioneer, but I suppose in some ways I was. I attended nursery school and kindergarten and the first semester of first grade in Bloomington in the public schools and then lost my sight in the summer of 1951. So that fall then I enrolled at the Indiana School for the Blind and was there for grades 1 through 5. And my mother was a driving force in the change that we made, she kept finding out that blind students were attending regular public schools in all of the surrounding states and she couldn't figure out why weren't doing that in Indiana. So, my 5th grade here was my last

year, the Indiana School for the Blind, and I "came home," although I certainly was home every weekend. I still lived in Bloomington with my family but I then enrolled in 6th grade in a new elementary school that opened that fall.

[00:06:42]

As far as I know, there were only two people who ever attended public school in Indiana to visually impaired people who attended public schools in Indiana at the elementary level. And I was one of those. And then after that 7th and 8th grades at University junior high and freshmen through senior years at University High School and I went on to college at IU.

JHS: So, tell us a little bit about what that was like to be a pioneer in that situation?

BS: The situation for me-- I'm going to clear my throat, I'm sorry. [clears throat] The education situation for me was a little unique and that I always sat over at the far edge of the room because I had a bookshelf next to me with my braille books on it and my beloved Royal portable typewriter. And so, I would type for example my answers to the spelling tests an anecdote about that. A fellow student told me years later that when he wasn't quite sure how to spell a word he would listen and see how many letters I typed and he would go, "Oh, okay I'll add that extra letter in there, probably need it." So, anyway, there were some, not concessions, but accommodations that were made, my braille books and my typewriter and that kind of thing.

[00:08:25]

I did take typing tutoring the summer of 1956. That'd be '56, I can't count, yes, before I enrolled in 6th grade so I could type my homework and so forth and of course I do that all the way through high school and college.

JHS: The accommodations that you mentioned, who initiated those types of things and was there much advocacy involved in having to get those things in place?

BS: In terms of accommodations, it usually was a matter of my mother talking with-- in 6th grade, of course I just had one teacher. And so it was a matter of working with the teacher and making sure that way in advance we knew the textbooks that we're going to be used so we could order the braille editions of them. And just talking through with the teacher how we might handle various situations like the spelling test or the math test. Try taking a math test on a Royal portable typewriter. But that kind of thing was just a matter of talking things through and figuring out ways to handle things. I do remember for example my sophomore year taking geometry and my teacher Frank Smith made a point to find and ordered and may have been out of his own pocket, I don't know, model, wooden models of trapezoids and rectangles and parallelograms and all those kinds of geometric figures.

[00:10:04]

And I could take the wooden pieces apart and examine them and put them back together and get a real understanding of tangents and arcs and all those things that we learned about in sophomore geometry.

[00:10:19]

JHS: So, for all the teachers you've described have been pretty-- it seems like open-minded and flexible, assuming they had never had to deal with this kind of situation or did you have any teachers that were not so accommodating?

BS: I did have one teacher that was a little uncomfortable but it wasn't my blindness, it was my memory. I made the mistake of saying, well, two weeks ago-- and this is a fictitious example, I don't remember what really happened. But two weeks ago, you said that Georgia was the 12th Colony to become one of the 13th and you've kind of just mentioned that maybe Virginia was the 12th and I have wondered which one. But that was stupid in front of the class to bring that up. So, there was a little conference with my mother and when he has questions like that, he can bring them to me later and not in class, 'cause I'd obviously shown up that he had told it one way two weeks ago and telling it a different way today and that was not good. So that was more of a problem 'cause I remember things and initially brought them up.

I, of course, stopped doing that and that was the only problem I ever remember with teachers. Now, I will point out that University Junior High and High School was a laboratory school connected with the IU School of Education. So we were already used to books that hadn't been published yet, more student-teachers per square inch than most schools had, teachers who were here earning their doctorates or teaching while their spouse was here earning their doctorate. So, it was already a school that was open to differences and variations.

[00:12:23]

JHS: That's interesting.

BS: I'm not being articulate as I would like to be, am I okay? Am I--

JHS: I think you're great.

BS: Okay. [clears throat] I'm stumbling for words here more than usual

JHS: [inaudible] you got the sentences and putting the question in the answer.

BS: Alright.

JHS: You got it.

[00:12:38]

JHS: So, I want to talk more about this public school experience. You know, you said that you got in trouble for your memory, were there abilities that you had that the other kids didn't have. I mean, looking at it in a different way were you-- were you kind of different not just because you didn't have sight?

[00:13:04]

BS: I would like to think that I was different in various positive ways besides being a blind student, but I wasn't. I was a pretty average student carried a B plus, A minus average barely made the top 10 percent of my class. In fact, I didn't, if I remember. I think I was in the top 20 percent I had to go before I made in the top fraction of the class. I was in various clubs and I participated in some sports. I managed basketball and I, for two years, went out for the wrestling team and failed miserably so I gave that up. And I was pretty averaged person, pretty average student in the University High School environment.

JHS: You had a good memory though. It sounds like from what you were talking about with the teacher that you offended.

BS: My memory was always very important and it still is and I find it harder and harder to keep it being as sharp as I would like, but I quite often have relied on my memory rather than taking notes although I find that I'm taking notes more now and remembering less.

JHS: Oh, yeah. I think we all were.

[00:14:24]

BS: My-- Let me-- My one trick to memorization has always been alphabetizing. For example, when I was a bachelor living alone, I would go buy maybe a dozen frozen dinners and I would stack them up in my refrigerator freezer and I never could decide whether Yankee pot roast was in the bottom because of the Y or whether it was in the middle because of the P. But I would alphabetize, oh, anything, shopping lists, things I was supposed to remember for a test. If I ever forget the alphabet, I'll be in real trouble.

JHS: That was great. And in school with these other public school kids what was it like socially?

BS: I fit in pretty well socially even at all grade levels. I think my social life was more or less average and similar. I do remember some potential situations. I can remember that the playground at the 6th grade Rogers School was pretty elementary because [room noise] -- are we going to have a problem here with that? [clears throat]

JHS: Oh. Remember when we're speaking memory, where Byron was when that started [inaudible].

PH: We were talking about...

BS: The socializing, social life.

JHS: Okay.

BS: Okay, you're ready.

[00:15:54]

JHS: Yup.

[00:15:55]

BS: Okay. I think my social life at all grade levels was pretty average, pretty normal. I do remember that the playground at Rogers School where I went to 6th grade was pretty elementary being a brand new school, no pun intended. And part of our playground, it was really back in the almost wooded area with some fallen logs and so forth, but we certainly did have the basic jungle gym or monkey bars, call it what you will. And my mom got a call one day from a teacher who knew us a family and she said, "Byron is out there on the monkey bars and he's sitting on the top bar and he's sitting there with not hanging on with his hands. And, you know, should I go get him and pull him off?" And my mother said, "Is he grandstanding. Is he showing off?" "No, all those stupid 6th grade boys are out there doing the same stuff, same usual half dozen guys out there."

And my mom said, "Let him alone. Yes, he may fall. Yes, he may get hurt but as long as he's not being irreverent or grandstanding or behaving poorly, if he's just out there with the guys, shooting marbles in the gravel or climbing the monkey bars, let him go." And so, that was pretty much the attitude that my family had and I had was, you know, do as much of everything with everybody as I could.

JHS: Did you go over to other kids houses or have them come over to your house that kind of thing?

[00:17:43]

BS: I don't remember that I went to other people's houses for what they now call play dates or whatever. I think I only remember a couple of occasions when a friend came and stayed overnight at my house. I did have some neighborhood friends and we would sometimes play together, but I don't remember, you know, other than going to pick up a girl for a date going to other people's houses.

JHS: So, it sounds like you didn't feel like socially isolated by your visually impaired in your school, your young school years?

BS: I never felt particularly isolated because I was visually impaired. I was just-- I guess I was in sort of a click especially my senior year. But I was certainly on a friendly basis with all the clicks and all the people in my class and we're working on our 50 year reunion. So we're remembering a lot of those relationships. But I was in the same group of four guys that would skip out for lunch to a local fast food place and, well, I don't know, get into various kinds of meanness over the years. I do remember in college that-- and all my life I recognize my blindness. I lived with it. I never deny it of course. But I do keep it as low key as possible. And I knew I was doing it right because two friends came to me and said, "You really caused us a problem." And I said, "What? What? How did I do that?"

[00:19:25]

And they said, "Well, we weren't sure that we both-- we're talking about you and one of us couldn't quite remember your name and we were saying, well, where does he live? Is he in our Sunday youth group. Is he majoring in this or that? Wait a minute. The guy I'm talking is blind. Yes, that's him." But that was the fourth or fifth thing they remembered about me to try to see if they were talking about the same person. And I said, "Thank you guys." That means I'm doing it just about right.

[00:20:01]

JHS: That's a great story. Let's talk a little bit more about how your mother advocated for you to get into public school? How well did that happen? What were the steps involved? Where there resistance? Was there barriers?

BS: My mom was very influential in my education life. She had not had a lot of education herself, certainly no higher education, but she realized that education was going to be my key to any professional success and any professional career. She did find out that blind children we're going to public school at various levels in surrounding states. And she did that by going to conventions and going to gatherings and so forth and she did lot of that especially when I was in fourth and fifth grade. And she couldn't figure out why we couldn't do the same. So, along with my dad, they went to each member of the school board and they said, "It's going to come up about admitting a blind local kid to attend 6th grade at Rogers School." And we're not here really to influence your vote but just to provide you information. Here are his grades.

[00:21:23]

BS: He's academically qualified. You know, we have been Bloomington residents all of our lives. And just talk about me and our family and when it came up for a vote it was passed unanimously by the local school board that yes I could be admitted and enrolled in 6th grade. And then came the 7th grade decision and I could've had my choice as to where I wanted to go because they thought I should go where the best place would be. And at that time, both junior high and then in high school -- University High, University Junior High -- because of being laboratory school and having lots of differences already, one more school for me to attend. I think I was in that district anyway but they allowed me to choose that school regardless.

JHS: You said that your parents would go to conventions and what do you remember or would know what organizations they were affiliated with that they gave them this kind of information.

BS: I don't remember the specifics. All I know is that dad pretty much kept thing going at home and in our businesses and allowed my mom to take a couple days off here and there. I used to remember that she went to Atlanta, Georgia one time. I do not know the sponsoring organizations or the convention she went to. But she would talk to exhibitors and she would talk to educators and she would talk to other parents and try to get a sense of what was going on out there and what maybe could go on for us.

[00:23:16]

JHS: Were these national conventions or things here in Indiana.

[00:23:21]

BS: My memory is that she went to regional and national conventions to find out about what was going on in the education community particularly and in general in the way of services to the blind and visually impaired. That's my sense but she certainly didn't give me a diary and didn't tell me every place she went and I wasn't at home during the week when she was gone so I don't have a real clear memory of all the places where she might have gone.

JHS: Sure, you know, that's helpful though, too. There were some things outside of Indiana that enabled her to advocate for you. It's great. I'd like to know a little bit more about what it was like at the Indiana School for the Blind because I think a lot of the people that will be viewing this videos and materials really have no idea, you know, what that was like. So, if you could talk about that.

[00:24:18]

BS: I will give you a sketch of life at the Indiana School for the Blind in the 1950s but I want to preference that by saying that that's light-years away. Pretty much comparing the dark ages to the modern ages and the examples I give were true then. But I think fairly quickly even in the 1960s, those differences disappeared, thank goodness. Oh, examples, in the first place, there was no parent-teacher organization. And my folks kept running into two other couples who kept bring their kids back to school about the same time every Sunday evening and said, "Well let's go have coffee and talk about our common experiences as parents of visually impaired kids." And they decided, well, this school needs a parent-teacher organization. So, they talked to some teachers and they said, "You bet."

Well, my mother was-- to put it politely, an assertive person. So she was nominated to go over to the administrative wing on a Sunday afternoon and let the administrators know that if they were interested they could attend the meeting that night of the parent-teachers organization. And he said, "We don't have a parent-teachers organization." And she said, "You do now." And that was the organizational meeting of that group which had not existed before. Oh, the canteen, let's talk about the canteen. Kids, you know, at that age, we all loved them, candy bars, Cokes, chewing gum. Our only source for that kind of stuff was when the kids who were partially sighted would walk across the large campus, cross a busy street, cross a railroad track and go to a gas station and buy Cokes and candy bars and chewing gum.

[00:26:27]

And some of the parent decided that wasn't really safe and that wasn't really the way to go. So they established a canteen so that we could buy the stuff there. And some of the students worked in the canteen and sold the other students the candy bars and stuff. However, there were sexual segregation. And an example of the canteen and the huge playground, lots of stuff, equipment on the playground, there were boys' days and girls' days. And in the canteen, of course you know what happened. When it was girls' days, we'd go out in the hall and say, "Hey, Susie could you go in and get me a Hershey bar and a Coke?" And on boys' days, Susie would say, "Hey, Byron, could you get me a Coke and a Hershey bar?" On the playground, of course, there was no way to share that. The only time that a brother and sister, siblings could get together was in a supervised public waiting room.

[00:27:33]

That's how tight the sexual segregation was. They never could figure out how some of the older junior high and high school girls got pregnant, but the segregation continued for years and years and years. It was an interesting sociological situation. One that we never figured out why that had come to be or why it continued.

JHS: Did you have girls in your classes though or?

BS: Yes, but we sat on different sides of the room. Oh, I'm sorry. Responded to your question. The segregation of sexes even existed in the classroom with the girls on one side and boys on the other side. There was just no connection which I found rather odd because every year at Christmas time there was a dance. And one, we didn't know how to dance. And two, we didn't know how to dance with each other. And I am remembering a story now about my mother questioning sexual segregation and she was talking to the principal and she said, "This doesn't make sense to me that you separate the boys and girls so dramatically." And he said, "Why Mrs. Smith, would you rather have your son feeling up some girl?" And she said, "I'd rather have that and at least have him know what a girl was."

[00:29:06]

JHS: Do you think there were some connections between these children having disabilities and there being more of an emphasis on keeping boys and girls apart?

BS: I have no idea of the sociological or demographic or entomological reasons for the sexual segregation. It's just-- All I know is it just existed and I don't know why.

JHS: Yeah, that's interesting. What about learning braille with the school?

BS: When it came to learning braille, I was very lucky. I had already learned to read and in first grade my teacher was a family friend, Louise Hudelson, was a wonderful first grade teacher in Bloomington School for many, many years and she knew that I was facing the likelihood of blindness. So she pushed. I read a lot my first semester of first grade. So, when I went to the School for the Blind, it was a matter of learning about the dots on the page, how to read them and how to write them and not learning how to read at the same time. So, I was just learning about dots on the page in fit of lines on the page. Although it was hard to really learn braille until I lost all of my sight because as long as you still had a little vision, you held the page as close as you could to your face and try to see the dots, and until you could not see the dots and absolutely had to rely on your fingers perceiving the dots then it went much better.

[00:30:47]

JHS: And there are many people that don't use braille, of course. Do you feel it's been advantage? I mean, how have you used braille throughout your life?

[00:31:00]

BS: I'm a very much blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I am very supportive of braille literacy. I think it's essential and I am distressed at the lowering percentage overtime. I know tape recorders are great. I know digital speech, computers, digital output, and I know they're wonderful and they're great learning aides. But I think of it this way. A person can be well educated with all this machinery, but if they can't sit in a lovely setting whether it'd be under a tree or out on the deck of a lake or whatever and have a book in their lap and have direct connection to that book their hands and the book instead of their eyes and the book, then they are illiterate, that they are missing that strong connection of-- there are many cases where grabbing a slate and stylus and writing down somebody's phone number, you may not have your pocket computer or you may not have the phone line to connect to a recording machine.

You might actually have to write down this person's name and phone number. Of course, if you have a wonderful memory, you can remember until you can get to your machine, but maybe you just want to make a note. John wants me to find out about that book by a certain author. And then you just whip your slate and stylus and make your notes. In meetings, professional meetings maybe they don't want you mumbling in to a speech to text machine and may be they don't want it mumbling back to you. So maybe having prepared some notes for the meeting if you have a presentation to make or notes to follow along if someone else is making a presentation, maybe that's a more positive way and a comfortable way of handling it. The National Braille Press in Boston has a very interesting philosophy about braille books and braille publications. They have this crazy idea that eventually impaired braille reader should be able to pay the same price for the braille publication and the braille book as that people who are paying for that book and print.

[00:33:31]

For example, the Harry Potter book that sold for 29.95 in hard covered print sold for 29.95 in seven volumes of braille. Now they raised a lot of money. Braille was very expensive to produce. But they think, I get a newspaper every week with columns from the best of the newspaper columns and I pay 50 cents a week and that because that's what it would sell if it was on the news stand. And we support National Braille Press financially and philosophically because of their view of that. That give you what you want?

JHS: That's great. Do you have sense of how different it is today at that school in terms of how braille or if braille is thought? Do you have sense of how things have changes with education for blinds students?

[00:34:32]

BS: I've had some contact with one or two administrators at the Indiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired as it is now known. But I don't know much about-- actually I don't know anything about their curriculum or about the role of braille teaching or any of that. I just have had no reason to learn about that.

[00:34:55]

JHS: So, the decline in the use of braille is more because of these alternative ways of getting information that have become available with change in technology? Is that--

BS: The modern changing electronic technology in some people's minds began to make braille obsolete. I disagree strongly with that. But yes, there are screen reader programs. I have one myself. There are voice recognition programs. There are all kinds of modern things and more coming every day, the iPhone, the smartphone. I don't have one. I don't need one. But braille, I can't imagine. And yes I read a lot of audio books both talking books from the National Library Service and commercial. Audio books on CD in digital form. But I still take several magazines and there are many magazines still being published in braille and I hope they continue to be.

JHS: All right. One of the questions about the school-- early school experience, that was a residential school and those were young kids there were and it had-- I know you mentioned you went home on weekends and maybe you can talk about that. Was this difficult for some of the kids to be separated from their families?

[00:36:24]

PH: In line with that 'cause I was-- that's what I was thinking about is what it was like in the evenings? What was the routine?

BS: The residential school setting was certainly the way to go in the 1950s and 1960s. And since I was not separated from my family, I went home every weekend and I only did not come home seven weekends out of the five years. And on one weekend each year, we were asked to stay at the school for the Indianapolis Star Fund Christmas party and dance. And the other two weekends, the weather was so bad that my parents were worried about my safety. But they weren't worried enough about their safety. They came visit me. So, I-- except for those five weekends, I was with my family every weekend. I don't know about the separation of families. I do know that there were fellow students who lived at the school and only went home because the family had to let them come home because of the school was closed.

Only at Christmas break or Easter break or certainly summer break were they able to go home. I won't call it a dumping ground. All I know is that most of the students didn't go home. I understand that that's very different today that there are very few residential students, even if most the people in the area are just day students and they do go home every evening. Life after class in the 1950s was interesting. We pretty much had to do things on our own. We listened to a lot of radio soap operas. Not as much physical activity as there might have been or maybe should have been. Yes, we did have a wonderful playground with lots of equipment and all kinds of things to play on.

[00:38:44]

But lots of playing cards, lots of reading, both before and after supper. That was pretty much our lives as we led them.

[00:39:00]

JHS: Great!

BS: I give you what you want Peggy?

PH: Yes, I was just thinking because I have a son who's in fourth grade and the bedtime type of deal, your parents aren't there what-- did you have-- how many to a room?

BS: The rooming situation at the Indiana School for the Blind in the '50s, at least for the guys, was two or three guys to a room. And certainly that was true in the two dormitories I lived in. I never lived in the older boys' dormitory. But I assume it was the same. Reading was rather important. I figured out, my fifth grade year especially, that you can read braille through bed sheets. Bed sheets are thin and you can read braille. So, I would be reading and I would hear the house mother on night patrol and when she was approaching our room I would just rest my hand quietly on my book which was under the covers, under the sheet and till she gotten into the hall and I would resume reading. So, then I, of course, I would pull the sheet back and read directly.

But when I needed to I could read braille through the sheet. I read a lot of books my fifth grade because I was such a voracious reader I read lots of westerns and lots of biographies and I was a real good reader.

[00:40:36]

JHS: So, it didn't work to say lights out in [inaudible]?

BS: Nope, nope, lights out didn't cut it.

JHS: When you were taking this big step to live the school and go-- that Bloomington and go public school did-- was there reaction from the other kids and then second part is how-- was it difficult to anticipate living a familiarity and I supposed safety, relative safety of the school?

BS: As far as when I left the school for the blind I don't know about the reaction of other students when I didn't come back in the fall because I didn't know, they didn't know, no one knew when I was there at the last day and we were asked to stay for commencement for the high school seniors and then pack your stuff and go home for the summer. And no one knew at that time that I would not becoming-- my parents did. But no one else knew that I would not be coming back in the fall. So, I don't know what they thought when I didn't show up in the fall for sixth grade. And actually it would have been seventh grade because I was doubled promoted and-- meaning skipping sixth grade. But my family decided that coming home to public school was enough of a change without skipping a grade on top of that. I just remembered coming home late because we were asked to stay for commencement.

[00:42:09]

And I remembered getting home at 10 or 11 and my dad was still up and that was unusual. And then we had cookies and milk in the living room and that was even more unusual. And kind of a quiet time and I guess together they said, "Well, how would you like it if you didn't have to go back to the Indiana School

for the Blind?" And I, in my wonderful naivete` said, "Well, where would I go to school?" And my parents said, "Well, as far as we know, you'll be going to the new Rogers School in the fall right here and you can just stay home." I thought that it sounded pretty cool.

[00:42:57]

JHS: So, they really didn't consult you in the matter in a sense?

BS: No. I was not aware of all of the-- let me stop and think of a word. Oh, I can't think of the right--

JHS: Behind the scenes--

BS: Yeah, what is the word that won't come to me? So, I'll just do it this way. I was not aware of all that went on to make it possible for me to come home to public school, the research, the meetings, the discussions, the exchange of ideas and how that might work. All that went on during the week and I didn't know about it all.

JHS: So, you weren't apprehensive about living that familiarity and the routine then and known quantity of the school?

[00:43:51]

BS: I think a new school is always a little unnerving for anyone who's going to a new school and having new classmates and that kind of thing, but I always was a Bloomington kid. I never left Bloomington. So, I just stayed home instead of going away for five days a week.

JHS: Kids are very, very flexible and they're very adaptable? All right, that's great!

JHS: All right! Well, you know, we might think about some school stuff to ask about later but I think that was really, really great. I love the story about, you know, your parents sitting you down with the cookies and telling you that-- [Laughter]

BS: I knew something was up. We never had cookies and milk in the living room. [Laughter]

JHS: What about high school and then, you know, I just want to hear about being an undergraduate at IU.

[00:44:49]

BS: High school I've often said and I still believe were the best years in my life. I didn't have career pressures. I didn't have a marriage. I didn't have money problems. I didn't have any of the problems of adult life. High school was taking interesting courses with wonderful teachers, great classmates, lots of social activity, and I believe that those were the best years of my life and I'm looking forward to a 50 year reunion where we can recall some of those wonderful years. I went to IU an undergraduate, didn't really have a choice. I did not think I was ready to go to college at age 18 and two or three months, I graduate from high school and I tried to find I couldn't join the military but a paramilitary job as a civilian or something. I tried to figure out something I could do for at least a year before going to college, and I couldn't find anything and I'm getting parental pressure to go anyway.

[00:46:00]

So, IU being just down the street settled that situation. I'm not sure anyone even ever thought of me going away to another school. I don't know why. It was just convenient. It was easy. So, I enrolled at IU as a freshman in the fall of 1963, interesting living situation. The halls of residents would not let me sign up for a double, unless I had already agreed to share the room with someone who would be willing to be my roommate. They said they did not want someone to come in unassigned and suddenly discover they had a blind person for a roommate. So, I -- even though it was cheaper, I was given the cheaper rate but I'd lived in a single. And just because of the geography and the way that the residence hall was built, my single room was at the bottom of a staircase, separated from the rest of my floor, by a fire door.

So, Byron spent too much time on the floor socializing and not enough time studying, so I got a two-six my first semester. I moved home because I knew that my grades weren't getting better unless I took hold and had some discipline about my studies and my academic pursuits. And I did not go back to campus as much I promised myself I would. But I was okay and did much better academically all though I could not find a major. I can never remember the eighth one, but I claim that I had eight different majors. Sometimes not formally, but this semester I'm going to major in government, which is what we call today Political Science. Oh, this semester I'm going to major in sociology. I took pretty nearly every survey course I could lay my hands on trying to, as they say, find myself.

[00:48:07]

But the radio and TV survey course in the fall of 1966 and some related experiences proved my doorway or my gateway into my final major in my career.

JHS: Well, the way that they isolated you in that room which, you know, I was like feeling sorry for you and then you started talking about it, how you were just always out there socializing. So, obviously, I didn't need to feel sorry for you. But that just seems really kind of cruel in some way that, you know, unless that what you wanted. Were there other weird things that you encountered with the administration and the faculty and their relations with you?

[00:48:53]

BS: I don't know why, but for whatever reason the housing situation was the only problem I really ever experienced. I was always able to work out with the professor or the teaching assessment. What we needed to do in the way of taking tests or whatever. This could be a good time for me to mention the Delta Gamma sorority. My education would not have been what it was without the Delta Gamma sorority, the Theta chapter at IU. University High School was a wonderful environment, but very demanding academically. And neither of my parents had had higher education. I made it through my freshman year. But as we started my sophomore year, I was deep water and they were trying to help me with my homework when they would get home from work and at 8 o'clock at night or so we were tackling some pretty hard homework. And it was early October and we were struggling and it was getting to be a problem.

[00:50:04]

And my mom got a phone call and a young woman name Judy Kamen [phonetic] called from the Delta Gamma chapter and we're not exactly sure how it fell but one way or another the chapter found out that I existed and I could use some help with my schooling and they have as a national foundation project aid to the visually impaired. But they decided, in the Theta chapter, that it would be more interesting and rewarding to work with, in my case, a young blind person, instead of having a bake sale or a cookie sale and writing a check and sending it off to national in support of the national foundation work. And Judy K called and talked to my mom and said we understand that maybe we could, you know, your son might use some help with his homework and with school and we'd be glad to do that.

And my mom cried and even as I remember it, I can barely keep from crying. It was a godsend and for years we thought of the women of Delta Gamma as my education angel, the last period of everyday. It was convenient because their sorority house was only, oh, at the most a long block away from my high school. So, a member of the sorority would show up and we were given a room and they would help me get ready for a test or they would help me go over the handouts I've gotten that day or they would help me get a handle on the homework I needed to do for that day or that week. And that continued on for two or three years even as an undergraduate at IU. And even to this day I have several close friends that I've met then and have been close to all my life. So, the women of the Delta Gamma made a big, big difference in my education.

JHS: That's great!

[00:52:10]

BS: I almost forget that.

JHS: Yeah!

BS: It just popped into my head. Wait a minute. We need to get the DGs in here.

JHS: You were able to take advantage of it, too. It was-- there was two-way street there, it sounds like. Were there other students with visual impairments at IU at the time, did you know any [inaudible]?

BS: I'm sure there were other visually impaired students at IU. I knew one guy that was there for a year and he went somewhere else. So, I certainly did not have any visually impaired friends at IU.

JHS: Were there any physical barriers that you encountered with the campus and the buildings and things that were problematic for you?

[00:52:53]

BS: The barriers that exist for someone with a mobility impairment, someone who, for example, uses a wheelchair or a walker are not there for the visually impaired person unless they need to use the wheel chair or a walker. I certainly could go up and down the stairs and the main thing which is learning the geography and learning where to turn and which sidewalk to take and as I always said the parts of campus I know, I know. The parts of campus I don't know, I don't know. I always just learn each year to

get to the buildings where I needed to get to and, of course, after the first week of classes I knew exactly where to go get to my classes. And I always find my way back home to the residence hall.

[00:53:43]

JHS: You know, I think for those of us who see it's kind of mysterious. You know, how you do that. I don't know if you want to tell us what your--

BS: Okay, all right.

JHS: -- the processes that you use to learn and also to navigate? I think that'd be helpful.

BS: My experience as a blind pedestrian is as a user of a white cane. I have chosen over time not to use a guide dog and I used a lot the same landmarks and cues that a sighted person uses, but maybe some differences. Someone who walks by the IU Auditorium sees the awning and the banners and whatever. I hear an echo when I go under an overhang. The time of year when fountains are running are wonderful permanent landmarks and, you know, I go around it not through it and they serve as the same kind of landmark people admire the dolphins and the splashing water and I just listen to the splashing water and go from that. I pay attention to the curves of sidewalks and to the curb cuts and some of it is route memory.

[00:55:04]

Only in a few instances did I count the number of steps. I basically did not do that. I just had a sense of, okay, right about now I should be coming to that set of stairs or to that fork in the sidewalk or to that bridge over the Jordan River. And sure enough I would find that landmark and go on my way.

JHS: All right, anything else about college? [Laugh]

BS: No.

JHS: [inaudible] maybe we could start talking about how you got into your years--

BS: Yeah, I'm going to told you I alluded to the radio story in Chicago and we should tell that story but nothing else particularly about the college years.

JHS: Okay. So, how did you get from-- what happened after college?

[00:55:58]

BS: My real change or my-- oh, what, epiphany? My epiphany as far as a career concerns happened in January of 1967. I had taken the radio and TV survey course in the fall and enjoyed it very much and did a little work in the news room and got acquainted with some of folks and a little bit with the news operation and that was kind of fun and it was okay. But the so called storm of the century hit in late January of 1967, and I was in East Gary visiting a girl. And we were pretty much snowbound for three or four days and with the help of my friend's mother's boyfriend, whom had a construction truck, I got out and made it to the train station and took the first train that went into Chicago with the idea of making

my way back to Bloomington. And I figured out that it was going to be at least several hours between my arrival at Union Station and getting a train down to Indianapolis.

[00:57:17]

And during the storm and during that time I had been listening to an all news station in Chicago, WBBM, and they're still all news today and enjoyed their coverage and listened to a lot of it. And so with the naiveté of how was, I guess, just turning 22, I called the radio station. And I said, "I am a student at Indiana University. I just had little bit of radio and TV. I really like what you're doing. If I could be of any help, I'll make sandwiches. I'll put carbon packs together." Remember carbon paper? And they said, "Well, if you can get here, we'll find something for you to do." So, I took off and walked through the snowy, snowbound sidewalks of Chicago and crossed the Michigan Avenue Bridge and the [inaudible].

Then the guy walking along said, "Hey, you want to share a cab?" I said, "Sure!" Not being an idiot. So, we shared a cab and dropped me off at the radio station. And the guy I talked to on the phone, one of their really good reporters, Jeff Cayman [phonetic] was just leaving to go out on a story and he said, "Well, go upstairs." And I'm, "Hi, I'm the guy on the phone." Okay. "Go upstairs and find John Callaway and, you know, he'll find something for you to do." Well he didn't tell me John Callaway was the news director for God's sake. So I go upstairs and I find Mr. Callaway and I gave him my spiel. He said, "Well, I think we can have you doing something more than putting carbon packs together. Come on." So eventually, I ended up on the phone along with half a dozen other people and we were answering various types of phone calls and whatnot. And one of my favorite memories is that I started on the desk about 6:30 and we had some people from TV who would come down to help.

[00:59:23]

And at 9:30, Joanne from TV said, "Well, how long have you been working here in WBBM?" And I said, "Hmm, about three hours." She thought I was a regular staff member and I had just loved that. So I worked through the night and in the morning Jeff came and gave me some specific assignments and I did some things for him. And then they were going to open O'Hare to flights, so I got to O'Hare and took one of the first planes out back to Indianapolis and I was hooked. I knew then that radio news was where I could live and work. And the folks at WBBM kindly, a few weeks later sent me a clock radio, which I no longer have. But the plaque on it I still have and that this was given to me as a gift from my work during the storm of the century at WBBM News radio 78.

And John Callaway who became a CBS Radio Network Vice President wrote one of the recommendation letters for me when I got out of college and in my search for a job in commercial radio. So, between the survey course and the storm of the century, that just took care of my career choice and sent me through that doorway which I never came back.

[01:00:53]

JHS: What a great story. Great consequential snowstorm. But you really had a lot of initiative to do what you did. [Laughs]

[01:01:20]

BS: I was too stupid to know what I was doing. I was insane what I did. But it fell-- it fell just right.

JHS: You told me something about wanting to teach and how that became a dead end. Can you talk about that?

BS: Sure. In searching for a major and a career, in about 1965, I thought maybe I could be a teacher and I hadn't really decided what I would teach yet. But since the school of education where it's one-third of building where I had gone to high school. I trotted over there and talked to some people and they gave me to understand that the only job I might ever possibly get might be as a faculty member at a private school and that there would no way a public school would ever hire a blind person to be a teacher. So I thanked them very kindly and slunk out the door and closed that door emotionally and mentally on ever being a teacher. This was the mid-1960s, mainstreaming had not come in, civil rights movement was just beginning and that was mostly racially based at that time. So that was a different world.

JHS: Did you have a sense that you're being discriminated again since that wasn't really the way people were thinking back then?

[01:02:31]

BS: I felt when I was told of the unlikelihood of my getting work as a teacher that they were just giving me the facts and I still believe that. That they were right, I would very likely have not gotten a teaching position certainly in public school.

JHS: So let's see. More-- Maybe more about working at the news bureau and radio station, the things that we should ask you about that?

BS: Alright. My first job in radio, my first paying job was just a part-time worker at the IU News Bureau and I started there in the spring of 1968. And a family friend who had also taught a course in advertising that I took lost his student worker. She just decided to stop working and he asked me if I would be interested and I said yes. So mostly what I did for that spring, every Friday afternoon I fed a feature by an IU School of Business professor, Larry Kreider [phonetic]. We called it "Off the Air, the Kreider Report". Two-twenty or 25 radio stations in Indiana and I would call them up and I edited on a reel-to-reel and they would say three, two, one go and I would push the button and Larry Kreider would talk for 45 seconds saying the employment rate was way too high and if we didn't bring it down, we were going to crash.

[01:04:07]

No, usually not that dramatic. But he would say that the upcoming meeting of the Federal Reserve to set the new rate of inflation might be important. So I did that and then I got a little more into some other programming and produced a couple of special programs during the school year of 1968-'69. And then I "graduated." Not literally because I carried too big an academic load, my last semester, and I left - how many? I'm counting on my fingers. I left 15 hours unfinished. So-- But I emotionally and mentally considered myself a graduate. I finished all my radio and TV courses, all but one I guess. And I was

ready to go to work. And I went to Chicago, I went to San Francisco, I went to Saint Louis interviewing for jobs in commercial radio and we may want to talk more about that -- we're going to be disorganized.

[01:05:29]

JHS: No, good ahead.

BS: Let me add on there-- from there. I did not find work in commercial radio. So I thought I've got to do something. So I worked for free on the staff of the Indiana Daily Student in the summer of 1969 as a reporter and occasionally as a columnist to build experience in print journalism and to build a clip file. And I stopped working at the news bureau at the end of the spring semester. But I heard that they had an opening for a writer, so I applied. Of course they all knew me. So August 1 of 1969, I started work at the IU News Bureau as a print, writer. Well after a few months, the managing editor called me and he said "You know Byron when you're interested in a story, you're a pretty good writer and come-- you know, and you really -- get it. But if you're not really interested in the story, I'm using a lot of blue ink on your copy."

[01:06:33]

And Bob, the radio guy who'd hired me for the part-time job and I've been talking and we decided that we're going to make a trade here and we're going to send you across the hall and you can go play radio with Bob. And after that the only print stories I wrote were contemporary, rock and roll groups that would come to campus. I was the youngest member of the staff and I was the only person who never heard of any of these folks. But other than that, I started playing radio. Certainly started as a street reporter, going out and grabbing Professor Jones to explain why the economy was going to heck to find out from a different professor why the Environmental Protection Agency was going to be established and the need for it. And I enjoyed many enjoyable interviews with faculty members. And I would come back and I would edit the tape and feed it to radio stations.

Here's Professor Mike Jones explaining the state of the economy or whatever. And so at that point, I became a very good tape editor. Some have considered me the best tape editor they've ever known. And so I moved up. And, of course, I know I wasn't in sales but I certainly was in public relations dealing with the stations. And then I moved on to become a producer of programs. I thought them up and then I would produce them and then we market them to stations. And then I guess in about 1976 or '77, I did a weekly quarter hour show, interviewing a professor on their new book or on a topic of general interest. In 1981, I talked to my boss, Bob, into expanding that to a half hour. Some stations could only still carry the quarter hour, so we edited a version for them.

[01:08:38]

But for six and a half years I did a half hour interview show every week and that was at our peak on 35 stations. And those were the days-- does anybody remember reel-to-reel tape? We would record and have a reel master. We had the copies duplicated at the IU language lab and we would mail out seven inch reels of tape with a half hour of wonderful interview material which played on radio stations at 5:30 on Sunday morning. But there were people listening. I had professors say that when they went to

church, someone said "I heard you talking about your new book. I was up and having coffee and I turned on the radio and there you were." So that's certainly was my most enjoyable years as on-air personality. Haven't been on the air regularly since then. I've been strictly a producer and an editor since that time.

[01:09:40]

JHS: The-- you mentioned on reel-to-reel tape. When you said you were a tape editor, I think maybe some people noticed, wouldn't realize mechanically what that actually involved. Can you describe that a little bit?

BS: When I was a tape editor in the '60s and '70s, we actually, heaven forbid, used razor blades and scissors and a little gizmo called the Gibson Girl splicer. And you would cut the tape where you wanted it and cut out the bad stuff and you had two good ends, we would put them in the Gibson Girl and it was a device that you didn't put the scotch tape-- well, it wasn't scotch tape obviously, but the adhesive tape over and it would cut the tape and put the two ends back together and you had your-- had your edit. I never did learn how to edit digitally. I had engineers who did that for me. So as of the mid-'70s, I would sit with them. Now, there was a kind of period in between. I would transfer the interview material from cassette to our big reel-to-reel production machine.

[01:10:55]

And so I would selectively transfer the material and do that at the editing process. So if I ended up for the smooth cut on the reel but it may have, oh, 5, 10, 20 sections, 1 or 2 seconds long in it and that's the extreme. But, a sentence or two here and there and then the professor would digress and I'd wait till we got back to his point. And I would pick it up there. So I did-- that my best editing was from cassette to reel-to-reel. That took a lot of hand-ear coordination. Letting go with the button, and hitting the button at just the right time so the reel would be rolling and pick-up the material and not leave a gap or make a click so that-- I always thought of it this way. If I went back in the professor and said, "I've only got 35 seconds for you to explain the point you made about inflation.

I'm going to play that for you. If you only have 35 seconds, are you happy with what you said?" And my hope-- well, I never did that. But my hope was that they would say, "Yeah, if I only had 35 seconds to talk about inflation, you got it. You got the highlights of what I wanted to say, you hit the most important points." I always said that I edited vertically. No, the opposite, horizontally. If a professor made five points about a particular topic, I thought, he must think each of those five points is important. So I should use something out of each of those five areas of conversation. I wouldn't use something out of one, two, three and four and just completely leave out five. I would use a little bit less of one, two, three and four, so I would include five. So I always thought of it as cutting horizontally so that something of each of the major points was preserved and the audience had the understanding that, "Okay, there are five things I need to know about inflation and the professor just told me about them."

[01:13:11]

I taught a lot of engineers, some of the editing tricks and the editing techniques. And some of them said that I was the best tape editor teacher that they ever had.

JHS: Yeah, that reminds me, I was going to ask you about mentoring. And did you ever serve as a mentor also for younger people who wanted to become broadcasters or people, you know, with a visual impairment that saw you as a role model?

BS: I did have the pleasure of mentoring, I guess, it was. We always, in later years, after we were putting out too much product and a lot of stuff to do. I usually had a part-time student working for me at the news bureau and they would go out and conduct the interviews after I gave them a crash course in interviewing. And we would work together to edit the tape together. And so I taught them a lot about interviewing and tape editing. I never had occasion to work with a visually impaired student to serve as a role model. I don't know that anyone never knew about me or knew about my work and knew that I was visually impaired and got in anyway inspired or aware of what was possible. I'm not aware if that ever happening.

JHS: So in terms of your colleagues and did you belong to like national associations or statewide groups of broadcasters, something like that?

[01:14:53]

BS: I would not a joiner in college particularly or pretty much all my life. I'm in some organization now. But I did not join any campus, state or national organizations dealing with broadcasting. I knew who they were. I have really never even attended any regular meetings.

JHS: What would say were to be a couple one or two things about your career that you're most proud of?

BS: I guess the three things that I come away with from my career are the two shows I was most proud of and my marriage. The first was a half hour interview show that I did weekly for six and a half years in the 1980s and I had a wonderful interviewing a lot of very interesting folks and sharing that information with radio listeners across Indiana. The last ten years of my professional life, 1996 to 2006, I created and produced a radio program about careers for high school students. We were on 18 high school radio stations during the school year and each week we would profile a career and a professor. In many cases, an IU professor would give information about that career. How much money you should expect to make?

[01:16:33]

What's your work environment would be like? How much education you would need? What skills would be good? So that the listener could say, "Hey, that fits pretty much with what I think and know and believe or, golly, I wouldn't want to do that for a living." So that was called "Job Tracks." And I would like to think that somewhere along the line we've helped some young folks learn about careers to take, would either choose or not choose. And during the last year or so of the half hour radio show, I had a wonderful production engineer and we got to know each other a bit. Not too much because she

was on the other side of the glass. But I still thought she was a very nice person. And then she got a production job and was there at the station full-time. The news bureau always used the studio and engineering facilities of the IU radio and television service.

[01:17:37]

There was no need for us to have a fancy studio and all that. So when I switched from the half hour weekly show to a daily health and fitness feature, we would produce 20 of those every four weeks and mail them out to 30 or 40 stations. So that meant every four weeks I worked with the engineer to record the segments. I was not the on-air talent. I was too busy doing other parts of the program. And so we would work together to get good takes from our talent and then put them all in order and make sure they were the right length and add the background music. Well, inevitable we would chat a bit as we went along and as I-- it's true as I put it, I regularly asked her out socially and she regularly said no. But one Christmas season, her boss had given her tickets to a local school program.

He had kids in the program. And she checked the schedule and God bless her, saw that I was coming in later that week and I did come in and she said, "I got these tickets from my boss, would you be my escort to that program?" Not being stupid, I said yes. So that was our first date and then she volunteered and helped with the theater group I was involved in 'cause she'd had a lot of theater experience before coming to Bloomington. And she took me home a lot of times after rehearsals and we kept seating in her car longer and longer and longer and talking and talking and talking and I thanked the Civil War for us really getting together. Ken Burns produced a wonderful, I think, 11-part series on the Civil War. And my friend had a friend whose father did not have public television in Mississippi and Marilyn [phonetic] wanted a copy of the Civil War series to give to her dad.

[01:19:54]

Well, Patsy had a VCR and she had recorded them and she knew I had a VCR. And so she brought her VCR over and being an engineer, she knew how to plug it into my VCR. But that was real time. So once the tapes were rolling, we had six hours to kill. We went to lunch, we went to local yard sales, we walked around downtown Bloomington, we window shopped, we actually shopped and bought things and we managed to get through two of those six hours session without killing each other. So we started dating regularly and the rest as they say is history. We were married in the spring of 1992.

JHS: What a great story. I like that. You put your two VCRs together and symbolically they're--

BS: There we were. [Laughter]

JHS: Oh, cool. Okay, well maybe mentioning the theater is a good time to segue into that.

BS: well, you want to go back and do the whole commercial radio thing?

JHS: Sure

[1:20:59]

BS: About why I didn't work in commercial radio?

[01:21:00]

JHS: Yeah, okay. Did I miss something? Let's do that.

BS: I mean I went in followed up with a career I just left hanging did I –

JHS: That's right you were taking – doing those interviews around the --

BS: Yeah, okay. When I finished going to school full-time at IU in the spring of 1969, I had aspirations of working in commercial radio, specifically radio news. I interviewed with stations in Chicago and St. Louis and San Francisco and the problem was, looking back on it, that the news director that I was interviewing with could not figure out how a blind person could work in their news room because they understood that if we were talking on a Friday afternoon and if they were in a car wreck on Saturday, that they could not come to work on Monday as a visually impaired person and be the news director or anything. It would require months of reeducation, rehabilitation, reorientation, I'd already been through that.

[01:22:20]

I'd been blind since 1951. I'd figured all that stuff out. So I had a good resume. I had good recommendation letters. But they just couldn't quite get it and there was no way for me to assure them of what I could do without coming off at the most egotistical horn blower they ever have come in. We don't need that guy in our newsroom and I'm holding off from the job by one news director and the general manager would not approve the additional staff position. So I never worked in commercial radio but it's my understanding that particularly in news, but in commercial radio at the highest level in the major markets that people in that field have the higher than average rates of alcoholism, suicide and divorce. And I luckily have managed to avoid at least one of those three and I think I would have been vulnerable to all of that so maybe it's just as well that I never worked in commercial radio.

JHS: I'm glad you mentioned that. Any other barriers that you found in your years of employment, either things that you had to deal with that were naturally there or just attitudinal kinds of barriers?

[01:23:46]

BS: I was very lucky in working at a university because it's a community of diversity and I never had a professor turned me down for an interview. And the ones I interviewed regularly always seemed happy to hear from me. "Come on over, I'll talk to you or on the phone." "Sure, I have a minute." I never felt any hesitation on anyone's part. The only thing I usually did in preparing a program and making the arrangements, I would tell the guests before they came that I was a totally blind person. I said, "It didn't matter a whole lot, but just so you know." I was very conscious of making my guest comfortable and I did not want them to spend the first 10 minutes of the show going "Ha, I'm being interviewed by a blind guy and I wonder how he reads and I wonder how he gets round [inaudible]."

[01:24:48]

I want them to think about all that before they came in. Ask me any questions if they had any. I wanted them to stay focused on our topic and I wanted them to be comfortable in talking about their topic and talking to me. So maybe I headed off some things at the pass, I don't know, by doing that but generally I did not feel any bias or any discrimination either-- specifically in my work environment, either you know in my office or on campus.

JHS: I'm glad to hear that. It sounds like-- it's interesting that you felt that the burden was kind of on you to make other people feel comfortable. So that's not really a question. But-- [Laughter].

BS: I know that's why I didn't answer it. [Laughter]

JHS: So should we move on to the theater--

BS: Oh, sure.

JHS: -- or the audio description stuff?

BS: Well, they were really separate issues, if you will.

JHS: Which would you like to do first?

BS: Well, we're going to tackle the theater first.

JHS: All right.

BS: I was married to a lovely woman from Iowa from 1973 until 1980 and in the mid-'70s, we were watching Saturday Night Live a lot. And I forgot on whether it was Stevie Wonder or Ray Charles was on and we were talking and we said, you know, the way to really educate people about blindness in particular and disabilities in general would be to have a theater group and do sketches and illustrate strange situations and here's how you really shouldn't interact with a blind person or a hearing impaired person. Probably never did anything about this, this was just strictly a conversational thing and we never followed up on it. In 1984, Beth Elliot a special projects staff person in the Bloomington Parks and Recreation Department and I don't remember how we knew each.

[01:26:59]

But anyway Beth had me come in and talk to her and she said, "A guy came in and talked to her about establishing a speaker's bureau where a person with a disability would go and talk especially to elementary or junior high classes." And I said, "Well, that-- you know, that sounds good, that sounds fine." But you know what that reminds me of and she said, "What?" I said, "That reminds me of this idea that my ex and I had about a theater group." And she said, "Oh." She just perked right up. And under her auspices, we established that theater group in 1984 and 1985. And that group existed really for more or less 25 years. I did not stay with it the whole time. I was busy doing the other things like getting married and having a career and whatnot. But we did what we said we were going to do. We used sketches and comedy and a little bit of drama.

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We never did full plays. Well, we did one, which I wrote. But that's another story. We did a lot of performances for classes, for students, for several classes would come together in their school gym and we would do our thing. Lot of church performances where the-- all the Christian ed classes would come together and that was very rewarding. We had lots of fun. We did some -- our fair share of public performances. That was how that worked as that particular theater group.

JHS: What was the name of it?

BS: The group had various name, we started as HIT. I know that was a nice name for a theater group, to have a HIT. And that stood for Handicapped Improvisational Theatre. Because we didn't do much improve instantly, but we had developed the sketches by doing improvisations and brainstorming on how we would say-- what we would say and how we would present it and so forth. So, you know, loosely enough but close enough that we could hear that name. And then, for a very short time, it was the Handicapable Improvisational Theatre. You know, I was in Washington at a conference and I got nailed. Some friends in the disability movement said, "You've got to be kidding that is way too cute. If you keep that name we're going to kill you." So, we dropped that. In later years, the artistic director and the overall producer director of the group, Audrey Heller and her husband came up with Diversity Theatre, because for one, the group got with a lot more than disability issues.

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I always called it the -isms, racism, sexism, ageism, and we get skits and sketches in those areas. And in some cases I think we were preaching to the choir, but maybe in some cases maybe some members in the audience learned a thing or two along the way about interacting with people with disabilities. The group, as an active theater group, really ended its existence in about 2010, I think they still sponsor a film festival but they no longer sponsor or present theatrical performances.

JHS: Okay.

BS: Okay, now, audio description?

JHS: Yeah, we're just checking them right off. [Inaudible Remark]

[01:30:54]

BS: Audio description is a service that helps visually impaired folks enjoy live theatre. As my wife calls it, it's play-by-play for live theatre. An audio describer takes care of the key visual elements and usually that's done in a pre-show, what the set looks like. What the main characters are going to look like, both as a person and in their costumes, et cetera. When the show is on, the audio describer describes the onstage action. She's pulling a gun out of her purse. He is a grabbing a hammer, he is putting out a cigarette, she is taking a drink, but the trick is, that they have to do this in between lines of dialogue because the theatre goer wants hear what the actors have to say.

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So I've done in a very telegraphic manner. I gave example of-- she pulled a gun out of her purse. That's not what the describer would say. She has a gun. That way when a gunshot goes off, the visually impaired person knows that's likely going to happen, just as the sighted theatregoer who saw her pull the gun out of her purse realizes there may be some gunshots and some bloodshed. The movement oddly enough started on both coasts in about the same time in the late 1970s, in Washington, DC primarily, and in San Francisco. It's somewhat of a national movement but there are pockets of it that are very strong, for example. And a lot of it in Ohio, a lot of it New York City, a lot of it in Washington, not much in Indiana, folks. The Indiana Repertory Theatre has a long standing commitment to audio description and they continue that commitment.

My wife became both an audio describer and a trainer of audio describers. We went to a theatre conference in Boston in 1993. Or was it '92? And one of the topics on the lineup of seminars or workshops was about theatre for the visually impaired or whatever they called it. And we stayed up almost the whole night before I went, "Wait a minute, what's that going to be about?" And she goes, "I'm a broadcaster, I'm a writer, I have a good voice, I'm married to a visually impaired person, this sounds like my thing." So we attended that workshop or that session, and it was just what we thought it was. It was telling us what we know as audio description. So afterwards we talked to Deb Lewis who was the leader of that session or a co-leader, and Patsy said, "I'd like to be an audio describer."

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And here what I'm think are my qualifications." And Deb said, "Yes, I think you are qualified. And Patsy said, "Well, when could I get training? And she said, "Well darn, we're having training in Atlanta two months from now, but the class is full." And we said, "What if we contributed 100 dollars." "You know, I think an opening just came." So we went to Atlanta and stayed with Deb and her husband and went through the all day, audio describer training session the next day. And I served as a critic. I'll don't understand the scene you just described. I have no idea what's going on. Or, ah, I have a perfect picture in my mind of what just happened there on stage. So I was a critic and Patsy just paid attention and went through the exercises. It's a learned skill.

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Even people who are very observant can't figure out how to say it in very short words. And people who are very good with tight language can't figure out whether it's steamboat or a rowboat. So you have to have the visual perception. And as Patsy says, "You're a director, movie directors pick the shot." They can't show the movie viewer everything in every scene. So they pick the thing that they want you to see and want you to pay attention to. A theater director does the same thing and audio describer did the same thing. You can't tell what everybody is doing every minute on the stage, but if it's important that she's running for the door then you tell me that. And I know that, you know, that argument is going to be when the women just bashed out the door. So, Patsy, pretty much has retired except for a few audio description gigs with IRT. She usually does one or two shows a year, and we usually attend four or five shows a year.

[01:36:09]

And we of course attend the performances that have audio description. I seldom now will go to a theater performance if it does not have audio description. Sometimes I will especially if it is a show I've seen before. But I don't go very often when audio description is not being offered and since it's not being offered very often I don't go to theater very often.

JHS: Great, just one more question on that. Some people may not know how the description is actually delivered--

BS: Oh, of course, of course, I missed that completely. [Inaudible Remark] The way that the visually impaired theatre goer hears the audio describer is through a receiver, an ear bud. The receiver is about the size of a pack of cards. We used to say a pack of cigarettes. And a single ear bud that leaves them with the audio describer's voice in one ear and the rest of that ear, and all of the other ear for the on-stage action and dialog. The audio describer sits ideally in a booth with a microphone and an FM transmitter and the receiver of course receives the signal. And since it's regarded as one-to-one private communication this way there's no problem with copyright or whatever, because of course the material for the describer is original, because they have written their notes and they aren't using the playwright's material. So that's the way that the visually impaired theatre goer finds out what's going on.

[01:38:08]

JHS: It's exactly, what we needed. Thank you. Okay, what do you see some of the most significant trends or have you seen changes over the years in services and supports that are available for people with visual impairments, since this is a history project, putting a sense of what changed if anything and especially in regard to Indiana?

BS: I can only judge from my experience, and since I did not have career counseling and such from the state, but I did have a lot of the support from the Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation Service. For example, the state paid most, if not all, of my IU tuition. And it worked. I became a fully employed taxpaying citizen. So they got their money back because I did not have to accept government support, economically after I once joined the working fraternity. So that was the one thing they did. I know that they had and still have visiting teachers who particularly for adults who lose their sight can help them with home living skills, how to cook, how to sew, how to organize clothes, et cetera.

[01:39:38]

Technology has played a major part in changing the life of the visually impaired. While there are limits but there are lot plusses. There are lot of gadgets that make it possible for the visually impaired to move around, to obtain information, to do things in a work environment. Technology has made all the difference in the world. There are many occupations that are now available to the visually impaired that were not before. However, I will say that the alarming fact is that of the working age population of disabled people in general and also the visual impaired who want to work and could probably work in some profession or another, 70 percent unemployed.

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And that is a loss for everyone. That is a loss for the person who could be working. It's a loss to the government for the tax revenue they don't have. It's a loss to the employer of a talented person who could come and contribute to their operation. It's a loss to society to have that segment of the population to be that unemployed. Okay, can I get off my soap box now, is that all right? [Inaudible Remarks] . But I'm always --

And people are alarmed when I hit them with that figure, and it hasn't changed, that 70 percent. I'm not sure I should say this.

JHS: Yeah, why won't you say that?

BS: The 70 percent unemployment range had been pretty much that rate for a long time, and doesn't seem to go down. So there's a lot of progress yet to be made in the employment of people with disabilities.

JHS: It's 3:15. So I think one thing I would like you to ask you about was advocacy. You've been involved with the council here in Bloomington and any other advocacy organizations that you've work with. We don't want to miss out on that.

[01:42:00]

BS: Okay. I don't consider myself a leader or real assertive person in disability movement. But through the progress of circumstances I had been pretty involved in Bloomington. In 1989 or 1980, the mayor of that time brought together a task force to look at transportation issues for people with disabilities. And we decided there was more to look at than just that. So that task force turned into a working group, which now exists as the CCA, the Council for Community Accessibility. I have served as chair of that council. I'm now this currently co-chairing the activities and events committee. Do the health issues, I didn't attend a lot in 2012, but I certainly I'm back, doing a lot more with the group in 2013.

That's been by primarily activity in a way of advocacy or involvement. I am a member of ACBI, American Council of the Blind of Indiana. And I'm a dues-paying member, but I just haven't found the time to be really active in that group. I was on the board for a couple of years. But that's been five or six year ago. And I just had not had the opportunity to be deeply involved with the newly formed chapter in Bloomington or the state organization. I guess my other-- only other involvement is with National Braille Press. It's a nonprofit out of Boston that provides a lot of braille material, books for kids, books for adults, magazines, current literature, that kind of thing.

And I support them by taking some of their products and we support them financially with contributions. So I guess in that way we're sort of loosely connected as advocates.

JHS: Okay.

[01:44:18]

BS: It's not much there, Jane, but that's all there is.

[01:44:21]

JHS: No, that's good. I mean, I don't I think there's sort of the sense that if you have a disability that, you know, you should be an advocate. You know, nobody should be anything. [laughter] You can choose to do what you want. So, I don't know if you have anything to say about that?

BS: Well, I don't feel a real burden to be a super achiever. I've always considering myself a pretty average person. Now some people have come to me and have been, I don't know, open enough to say, "I admire you," or "I think you're brave," or "I think you're courageous." And if they've been open enough to say that kind of thing to me, here's what I usually tell them, "Okay, I'm blind. Okay, I think I need some education, all right. I think I need to figure out a career or a job. I think I need to figure out what I want to have in a way of relationships. I think I need to maybe come to terms or at least decide what terms I want in terms of religion practice.

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And I'm going to do that. I'm going to get an education. I'm going to have a career. I'm going to get married. I'm going to be an active Christian. What else would I do? I am not going to be center of the universe. I am not going to be cared for, for the rest of my life by my parents who are going to die before I do anyhow. No one owes me anything like that. Yes, there are government programs, and yes there is government support for various aspects of my life and the life of people who are visually impaired particularly. But I don't have the ego or the interest in having the ego that says 'do this, and do this, and do this, and do this for me.' It's totally unnecessary. I'll try to care myself in the best I know how, and nobody else needs to do that for me."

[END OF INTERVIEW]