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**ORAL HISTORY VIDEO INTERVIEW WITH
FRANK EPPERSON, JR.
MARCH 5, 2013
INTERVIEWER: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS
VIDEOGRAPHER: PEGGY HOLTZ
RECORD ID: 018-DO**

FE: FRANK EPPERSON, JR.

JHS: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS

PH: PEGGY HOLTZ

[00:00:10]

JHS: If you could tell us your name, where you live and how long you've lived in Indiana.

[00:00:16]

FE: My name is Frank Epperson. I live in Indianapolis on the south side and I have lived in Indianapolis my entire life.

JHS: You are ADA Employment Consultant for Human Resources at IU. How and – well first of all, since that is going to be edited out. Should have thought – if you could tell us your title and how and when did you get into this line of work.

[00:00:46]

FE: My title for my current position is ADA Employment Consultant, with Indiana University. I have been in this position since '99. I got into this line of work -- I've always been involved in some way working with people with disabilities. And employment just seemed to be a natural fit for me. Before this I was -- what is the PC term now? I was a job coach. I don't know what they call them now. Employment consultant I think they were called or -- I don't know but I was a job coach. I helped people find -- prepare for, find, and keep jobs. Sometimes that meant something as simple as helping someone learn how to interview and to talk about those touchy things that, you know, related to your health that, you know that breaks in employment.

That sort of thing. Sometimes it was that, sometimes it was really in -- not intense, but integral training of persons with developmental disabilities. You know "No Johnny" -- making up a name -- "you don't

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empty a whole bottle of the sanitizer on one tray. You use two squirts or whatever and you wipe it down and then you place it over here." You know, breaking things down as much as is needed. Now telling someone no you can't eat -- "I know it looks good -- but you can't eat food out of the garbage can. I know that person was full and they didn't want the other half but that's not appropriate for the workplace." So, you know, I've always been in some type of employment field.

Whether it be helping that person talking to people about policies and mindsets -- that's basically been my life as far as employment goes.

[00:03:05]

JHS: For your current position how did you learn what you needed to know to do that? Did you have any training?

FE: For my current position some of this was learning how IU wants things done. Some of it was because I'm the first to be in this position learning, you know, how IU wants things done, how the law says things -- you know, not necessarily how the law says things need to be done but what the law says needs to be done and meshing those things in as compatible a way as possible. A lot of times that means educating different people on the fact that no, you don't want to know this person's diagnosis. You don't need that. What you need is how this diagnosis affects that person. Because that's what you're working with. You're not working with the diagnosis. You're working with how it affects that person. For me the -- my position there was an exercise that I had to perform.

I had to give a presentation on what I already knew about the Americans with Disabilities Act and I had two group interviews and then a private interview with the head of the department. And that's how I got my job.

[00:04:33]

JHS: How did you get that knowledgeable about the ADA? How did you -- did you teach yourself or somebody else train you on that?

FE: Well as I said, I've always been in the field. The way I -- let me start that over so I can get your question in there.

JHS: Thank you.

[00:04:51]

FE: You're welcome. How I became knowledgeable of the ADA; I educated myself to a great extent. Always reading -- I find it interesting to read court cases. I know that makes me weird [laughter]. I've always been involved in employment. I've always spoken with politicians and policy makers throughout my life as a person with a disability from the get-go. So it wasn't hard for me to find the people that I needed to talk to learn as much as I could about, you know, about the law. When I was in college talking to political professors, sociology folks, legal folks. Whoever I needed to talk to. And then a crash course in the application, in the actual application of getting the ADA and putting the rubber to the road so to speak. The actual application and putting it to work, into use in different situations.

[00:06:11]

JHS: It sounds like your career has kind of coincided with the inception of the ADA.

FE: It has to a great extent. Mm-hm. Of course before that we had the rehab act. You know, and that's pretty much when I was in college at IUPUI. So -- you know, you learn a lot about it there. You learn a lot about it through vocational rehabilitation counselors. Talking to them. Going through resources that they have, that they shared. Then that's how I -- that's really what prepared me. I mean everything seems to -- everything seemed to point me in the direction of you need to help people with disabilities and employment in some way. Whether that be helping Johnny not to eat out of the trash. Again, a made up name. Or helping someone learn how to dress for an interview. Learning -- helping someone learn how to clock in, when to take breaks, interpersonal communications.

JHS: In your current job do you work mostly with employers, employees, both?

FE: Oh it's -- in my current position you have to work with both. It's -- you have to. Because what you are doing, what I'm doing -- what I -- with what I do is I have to work both with employees and employer. Employer being IU. I've often referred to myself as the ADA guy who works for IU. Because sometimes I make departments do things that they really wish they didn't have to do and sometimes I don't give employees things that they really, really want. You know. "I need this." "No, you need something but you don't necessarily need that." You know we have to find, you know, we have to find what works. It might be exactly what you want but it may not be.

[00:08:25]

JHS: What would you say are the major issues? I mean this is pretty broad the ADA at IU. And employment; that's pretty broad. But it can use...

FE: Well the ADA...

JHS: Can you say [inaudible] issues have been that you've had to deal -- the most common kinds of issues you've had to deal with?

FE: The ADA at IU, I can narrow it down some by stating that I deal with staff. People in administrative positions. I -- I've sometimes consulted on situations with folks in academic setting, in an academic position. But that really -- someone else deals with that. So for me it's all about staff and it's all about allowing them -- not allowing them. That's the wrong choice of words. It's all about assisting them in being a success. And, you know, as far as the major barriers, the major barriers that I think that I have faced here at IU are really rather simple.

[00:09:47]

Most of the time it's people not communicating the way they would -- should effectively communicate. So sometimes I come in and I, you know, I tell the supervisor or the employee; "You know, I don't hear what you think you're hearing from that other person." You know? "You're hearing we hate you and I'm not hearing that. What I'm hearing is you're a valued employee but this isn't working right here. So we

need to figure out some way to change it so that you can again be a valued employee." So a lot of times its communication.

[00:10:27]

JHS: I'm sure that applies to people without disabilities. It would be handy to have somebody like you come in [laughter].

FE: Yeah.

JHS: And translating sometimes.

FE: Sometimes that's what it is, sometimes. And, you know, sometimes it's -- and, you know sometimes, with some conditions I think people subconsciously expect the worst, to hear the worst and I know that people with or without disabilities sometimes hear what they want to hear or don't hear what they don't want to hear. Whether it's been said or not been said. You know, we have our preconceived knowledge -- beliefs of okay, this is what I'm going to face. And that may not be exactly what the deal is. So sometimes it's showing that person, "you know, now you -- you really do need to make a 100 widgets. 50 widgets isn't going to make it." You know. I'm just making things up there but.

JHS: How many people -- what kind of percentage of the staff at IU do have disabilities?

[00:11:36]

FE: You know that -- that's not something that -- that's not a figure I can give because I never know about someone with a disability until they come to me. You know, they have to self-identify. The affirmative action office may know how many -- what the percentage is of employees with disabilities. I don't really know what the percentage is of persons with disabilities here on the campus or here within the IU system because they have to self-identify. I can tell you that -- what I can tell you is that a good majority of -- and I mean a high majority of the accommodations that have been asked cost nothing. Absolutely zero. It -- it's -- it may be the way things are done. It may be a change in the order in which things are done, or how things are done, when things are done, or it may be something as simple as allowing someone to take -- the idea -- the thing that comes into my head is we had -- we've dealt with folks who've needed breaks at a different time.

So let's say an idea might be three 10 minute breaks instead of two 15 minute breaks. It doesn't cost anybody anything. And as long as the works getting done who cares.

JHS: Does the person who's coming to you usually know what kind of accommodation they need or do they just present a problem and then you have to figure out what the accommodation might be for them?

[00:13:30]

FE: Usually when a person comes to me the person has some idea of what the problem is and how to fix it. It may not be -- they may not have been able to think it all the way through but it's a kernel of an idea. And being, you know -- being that it's the ADA Title I is an interactive process anyway it's sometimes better to have an idea of how to fix something as to have a preconceived notion of this is what we're

going to do. Because we don't know that that's what we're going to do until we all sit down and we figure out okay, how can we make this work? Sometimes it's as simple as a big screen TV -- not a big screen TV but a big screen monitor, you know, for your computer. Sometimes it's as simple as an ergonomic issue in which I'll have someone from -- I'll ask someone from our department of environmental health and safety to go over and do an ergonomic assessment.

Yeah. Sometimes it's as simple as the purchase of an extendable duster for someone in housekeeping.

[00:15:02]

JHS: Have you encountered a lot of fears and misconceptions on the employer's side and how have you dealt with that?

FE: I've encountered some fears on the employees -- on the employer's side. But many times it's a fear of well this is the way we've always done it. How can we do it any other way? We've always done it this way. So it's not -- it's not unsurmountable. It's well you've always done it this way just because that's the way the first person did it. That doesn't mean that it has to stay that way. What if we used a hand truck to move this equipment from this place to this place instead of, picking it up and moving it from this place to this place. I'm again using a simple example because we've actually done that. Or maybe it's purchasing a phone that you can actually read as you're talking on the phone.

That -- I didn't think that would work. Well, that's what I'm here for.

[00:16:18]

JHS: It sounds like for example the hand truck; some of these might be things that would benefit other employees who don't have disabilities. Have you encountered situations like that?

FE: I've encountered situations where what affects the person with the disability has also affected those without disabilities in that department -- in a department in a positive way. The -- let's see if I can think of an example. I know I've encountered these things. Getting assignments in written form. That way there's no confusion as to who's doing what, when they're doing it, how they're doing it. Well not necessarily how they're doing it. Sometimes, you know just to make sure everything is clear. That way there's no misunderstandings. Everybody is on the same page. That helps people without disabilities. Because sometimes we can get so involved in what we're doing that we can sometimes forget these other things and get things out of order, think someone else has handled something.

Yeah. Whereas if there's a clear, you know, line of communication much less problems.

JHS: Just having somebody come in and kind of look at things from an external perspective I think would be helpful. It might be disruptive to some people but...

[00:17:50]

FE: Disruptive to a small point. You know. Sometimes it's really funny because sometimes it's something as simple as, you know, one person saying, "You know it would really help if you would" -- oh, I don't know, "if you would use the same hand motions when you tell me to do something. I want you to go over

there, clear off that table, clean it up, put new stuff on it, and then go to the next table." You know. Sometimes it's as simple as that. Using the same hand signals for everything.

[00:18:38]

JHS: And some people even gesticulate that much anyway.

FE: Exactly. Exactly. And so, you know, it's the whole -- now I'm not the expert in learning. I don't claim to be. But, you know, my experience has taught me that if you can give someone both a visual and an auditory queue they're going to learn much faster.

JHS: So how have things changed over the 10 -- what is it now -- 14 years that you've been...

FE: Almost 14 years. Yeah. How have things changed in the 14 years that I've been here? I no longer get calls for hotel rooms. Because I am not the accommodations specialist anymore. That's been a nice change.

People know they can call me and it doesn't -- they don't have to necessarily have a disability. They can call -- they know they can call me and we can talk about things. And unless they're requesting something, or unless I know there is a problem -- yeah, that, you know, I need to bring to the supervisor's attention everything stays with me. Yeah, and of course if I need to bring something to the supervisor's attention the employee is going to know. Because I'm going to -- you know, I'm Mr. No Secrets when it comes to that.

[00:20:13]

When an employee comes to me and I ask them to gather some information about their health condition, for example, the information that I'm looking for I give them a copy of what I ask them to give to their healthcare provider. So that there are no secrets. They know exactly what it is I'm asking for.

JHS: Have there been any changes in the way the ADA has been implemented and particularly at IU over the time you've been there?

FE: Changes -- have there been any changes in the way the ADA has been implemented? Oh gosh. That's a hard question to answer. We've of course changed things as the law has changed. You know, what we ask for, how we do things, what we look at. But I would say at the core IU has always been about making that employment situation a success. And because that's always been the focus everything else has been kind of secondary. For example, if the person has an obvious disability -- me for example. I'm a wheelchair user.

You know, the fact that I might need some boards to raise my desk up. You don't need any documentation for that. Let's just do it. You know. So it's all about trying to make things a success.

[00:22:07]

JHS: Okay. So there haven't been trends that you've noticed -- I mean you've mentioned people are trusting of you and have a better idea of what you do. I assume the accommodations thing is because they just misunderstood your title [laughter].

[00:22:21]

FE: They -- yes [laughter]. I -- well you're the accommodations specialist. I need accommodations for a hotel. Yes ma'am or yes sir. I understand that. However, that is not what I do and I let them know what I do. A lot of it has been word of mouth. You know when employees -- I have a great working relationship with the unions here on campus. I love working with the unions. They're another head to bring in to help figure things out sometimes. So they will sometimes encourage and that's been a big change since I started. As I'm thinking -- it's been a huge change. They will often times suggest to their members -- you know, their members who, you know, are having difficulty. "Have you spoken to Frank?"

"I don't think I have a disability." "Well, you may not have a disability -- but you may. But what if you just went and talked to him about the situation and see what he had to say." So that's been a good thing. Yeah. Any time we can keep those lines of communication open I find that things can be solved much quicker, much easier, and in a more human way if that makes any sense.

[00:23:56]

JHS: Okay. Well, you know this is a history project and we may -- our ultimate audience may also not know too much about the ADA. You know, that that's reality there. So, maybe you could make sure that, you know, you explain those things when you're talking about it. And what was -- what were things like for you and for people with disabilities -- but I guess you could speak specifically for you -- before the ADA was enacted, had made the change. Particularly in employment.

FE: Before the ADA was enacted, we really only had the Rehab Act. And the Rehabilitation Act. And the Rehabilitation Act really only affected folk -- people -- employers excuse me, that received federal funding. So employment for people with disabilities was really incredibly limited. Incredibly limited so much that if you didn't work for the federal government when I was growing up -- if you didn't work for the federal government you were either on social security, or you worked in a sheltered workshop. Getting piece -- getting piece rate. That's what my memories serve, as well. With the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act Title I -- which is the employment title, it opened up the world of employment to people with disabilities and virtually any employer.

There is a minimum number of employees that fall under the act but pretty much any -- a large number of employers now, you know, really have to take persons with disabilities seriously as far as employment goes and possible employees. I have found that since the enactment and -- it's grown exponentially. There's still a problem but the misgivings of, you know, what happens when you hire someone with a disability are fading. I find that they're fading. They're -- as I said they're still around. They're not gone. And on a personal note I don't expect them to ever be gone. I don't expect racism to ever be gone. We can lower it, you know, but there are always going to be people out there.

[00:26:44]

Because people are people. But yeah, there is going to be people out there that feel that way. So what I have seen is, you know, John Doe and Jane Smith who at first couldn't find a job, you know -- much less a job in what they really wanted to do. Now that world has opened up to them. Often times it means

that a person with a disability has to sell themselves more than a person without a disability. But I think that's natural. I think to a certain extent women have that, as well. Not to -- I don't believe it's to as great of an extent but still have to sell yourselves more so than the average -- you know than -- I won't say -- I was going to say the average person but someone who isn't a lady or someone who isn't a person with a disability.

[00:27:47]

Yeah. Because there are still those questions out there and a lot of times those questions aren't answered because they aren't asked. People are afraid to talk. Whereas if we can -- again, it goes back to communication. If we can get those lines of communication open and make people unafraid to talk and unafraid to ask questions and to really to get into people or people that'll help out a whole lot.

JHS: That's great. Thank you.

FE: Sorry if that was too much.

JHS: No, no. That was good. I -- you know just talking about the Rehab Act and, you know, as I say there's going to be people watching these videos that won't necessarily know that history. So that's really helpful. You mentioned that you would like to talk a little bit about views of coworkers towards people with disabilities in the workplace and how that's changed.

[00:28:45]

FE: Yeah, I can remember watching adults when I was a child. Adults with disabilities who were working. Their coworkers would come up and of course being a person who is a wheelchair user I really looked at people who were other wheelchair users. And the -- rephrase that so that I can get it into the...

JHS: Okay, sure.

FE: Well not rephrase it. Just say it again.

JHS: From your experience how have views of coworkers towards people with disabilities in the workplace changed and why.

FE: Okay. I don't remember if I got that into the answer or not. So I'm going to start again.

JHS: You're doing great.

[00:29:35]

FE: The way I've seen the attitudes toward -- of coworkers towards persons with disabilities -- coworkers without disabilities towards, you know, peop- -- employees, coworkers with disabilities is much less patronizing. You don't have as many token people with disabilities. Either they are able to do their job or they're not. I can remember as a child, you know, because being a wheelchair user I watched a lot of other people who are wheelchair users -- I watched them at work a lot. And I can remember their coworkers oftentimes, you know, patting them patronizingly on the shoulder. Often talking to them as if they weren't adults.

[00:30:41]

I didn't really understand because I had a child's mentality. But I just knew that it was different. They weren't speaking to that person, to that adult in the same tone that they were speaking to that adult. I couldn't put my finger as to what the difference was. But I see a lot less of that. I see a lot more of people going to someone because well you know that's their subject matter. Not because they have a disability but because that's what they know about. And hey, I almost said Jane. I guess I could still use Jane. Hey Judy what can you tell me about this situation in the Middle East? Because that's what you studied. You know, I need to know this. I'm making this up.

But and a lot less of well let's give John this right here because this is easy stuff and we know John can do this. Yeah. Sometimes you have to push people. Sometimes people have to be pushed in order to grow. A muscle is -- doesn't strengthen unless you use it and you stress it. Not that any of us want stress in our work life but we all need to be pushed occasionally. Including myself. It's too easy to become lackadaisical.

JHS: What do you think has contributed to that change in attitudes over the years?

[00:32:31]

FE: I think what has contributed to the change in attitudes towards persons with disabilities as coworkers is multifaceted. I think part of it is the effect that those of us with disabilities have had in the workforce. I think it is when our coworkers have brought their kids in and they see hey, there's this person in a wheelchair where dad or mom works and they were doing the same stuff. You know? And so what do you know. Then that child grows up believing that there's really not that much of a difference. His legs don't work but his mind works. You know, her arms don't work but she can type using, you know, a voice and a microphone.

You know. And I think that it's also of course those persons with disabilities who handle themselves professionally in given situations when sometimes we really want to scream at people. That's the best way to put it. Sometimes you can get so frustrated at someone's non-thinking ways that you want to scream at them. But not handling it in that way. You know, handling it as a teacher would a student. You know? Of course you're not going to blatantly do that because you don't want to insult that person. But you still need to educate people. And I find that that's the case. I find that if we can get -- if we can continue the change that I've seen the way -- in the way that people with disabilities are portrayed in the media when I was growing up people in the media with disabilities were portrayed either as superheroes to be inspired -- inspiring of others I mean.

[00:34:55]

Or some sort of a villain, or someone to be pitied. Sure those people are out there but there are also people like me who are none of the above, I'm just trying to make it day to day like everybody else. What do you know?

[00:35:14]

JHS: Can you give us an example of one of those portrayals?

FE: Well, a classic portrayal would be as the villain or as someone to be pitied. A classic portrayal would be the hunchback of Norte Dame. Yeah. As far as inspiration goes -- who was it? Cuba Gooding Jr. was in a movie -- "Radio" I think it's called.

JHS: Can't help you out [inaudible].

PH: Yeah, he was in a movie called "Radio".

FE: Yeah. And yeah I believe he played a person with a developmental disability. And it was a feel good movie. And those movies never feel good to me. Yeah. As far as a villain goes, I can't really think of anything right now.

JHS: What about examples of current portrayals that you think are right on.

[00:36:23]

FE: Well there's a guy who has a TV show on the travel channel. Or it's coming on the travel channel. Armed and something. He was born without legs. And it just shows him doing the things that he wants to do. There's also -- what's that show about the little people? The Littlest Couple in America I think it's called. She's a doctor, he's a business owner. Sold his business, you know. The fact that they happen to be little people makes no difference, you know. They do what they do. Yeah. And then there's that family -- there's a show on TV or used to be a whole family of little people. Well mom and dad are little people, one of the sons was a little person and then the other son and the daughter were of average height.

But it just -- I liked it because these are the things that happened in life. You know, they were not necessarily super courageous. Yeah, this is all I've ever known. I don't think I'm inspirational. If I'm anything what I do is I make people re-examine their perceived limitations. That's what I do. Inspiring? I don't know. I think if you put me up on that pedestal as soon as you realize I'm human and I have flaws, then I'm going to fall off and we're both going to get hurt.

JHS: When you say examine their own limitations can you clarify what you mean by that? Their own attitudinal limitations or the fact that they too have...

FE: I think...

JHS: ...limitations that are not labeled as disabilities?

[00:38:23]

FE: I think when I say -- when I say I think I make people re-examine their own limitations -- or their perceived limitations is figuring out the difference between the two. There are obviously things that I'm not going to do in this chair. I'm not going to get up and climb a set of stairs on my feet. But that doesn't mean that I can't get up those stairs eventually in some way. It does put a -- you know at the

same time the fact that I am in the wheelchair doesn't mean I can't hold a job. And I know people who have been told, "Well you're in a wheel chair. You can't work." I've actually heard people say that. And my head always snaps around when I hear that. I nearly give myself whiplash more times than I can count. So perceived disability or perceived limitations; it's not just about disability.

[00:39:26:]

It's -- you think you can't do something. Have you tried? Regardless of whether you have a disability or not; have you tried that? Do you know that you can't do it? If you've not tried it then you -- I don't care who you are. You don't know. I mean unless we're looking at something like I said myself, -- "I'm not going to climb a set of stairs on my feet." Okay. But, you know, as far as limitations go I'm talking about anybody and everybody. Whether that person be a person with a disability or not. Makes no difference. We all have limitations and we all have perceived limitations including myself.

JHS: Thank you. That was helpful to explain that.

FE: Sure.

JHS: All right, Well I might switch over to a different topic unless is there anything else about your job, or employment, or the ADA, you know -- we can always go back later but is there anything at this point that you'd like to tell us about?

[00:40:36]

FE: Always keep an open -- what I would like to say about employment and people with disabilities is the ADA, my job is always keep an open mind as to what will work and what won't work. Always be thinking about what needs to be done and not necessarily how or when it needs to be done. That's -- that would be my last phrase I guess. Like my closing comment on employment.

JHS: All right. Do you need some water or can we get you something to put the water on, or is that okay to...

FE: I'm good.

JHS: I'm sure [Inaudible] side tables here I guess.

FE: As long as you don't mind me dipping down every so often [laughter].

JHS: Not at all. All right, well I thought maybe we'd talk next about your athletic career. Tell us about your experiences as a wheelchair athlete and how did you get into wheelchair racing and such.

[00:41:43]

FE: How I got into wheelchair racing; that's a funny story. And if -- people who know me know I like to tell stories. Sometimes I call lunch "Story Time with Your Uncle Frank". How I got into racing was I hit the boys' dean in middle school because I was late for a class. And I had to write that I will not race in the hallway. And I don't remember how many times but my parents had to sign it. And it was basically a situation where okay, we got to get all this energy out of this kid. And so I did the Terry Fox 5K up in

Lafayette. Don't know if it still exists or not. And I also did the -- we used to have the Indy Wheelchair Games. Which was track and field, weightlifting, a bunch of different events.

[00:42:48]

But my first 5K I did it in an hour 55 minutes and 5 seconds. When I -- the last time I went up there basically the year before I retired, I did the same race in less than 15 minutes. You know, technology of the equipment, having the equipment instead of pushing a 70-pound hospital wheelchair you know. Training, maturity of my body, you know. I've been in two Paralympics. I was in Seoul Korea in '88. I was in Barcelona in '92. I was in the Windsor Indoor Classic championships and I want to say that was '86. I was in Stoke Mandeville Games World Championships in '87. And I was in Assen, Holland for the Holland -- Assen, Holland World Championships in 1990.

When I retired I had the national record in the 100, 200 and 400. I was four one hundredths of a second off the world record in the 100 meter. I hit 21 miles an hour. I had a body weight of 115 pounds. God I wish I still had that. Anyway, and I could bench press 305 pounds. I got to train with some of the -- what I'm going to call the founding fathers of wheelchair racing; Jim Knaub and -- can I mention other people in this?

JHS: Oh yeah.

[00:44:28]

FE: Okay. Jim Knaub, Chris Peterson, with George Murray. Chris Peterson wasn't actually -- it was George Murray that was in a wheelchair. But I used their racing chair, the one that they built.

JHS: Where were those people located?

FE: Those folks; well Jim Knaub was in California and -- when I met him he was in California. And George Murray was in Florida at the time. I met people from Illinois. I've met people from I don't know how many countries. And I don't know how many states. Another funny story. A friend of mine was teasing me saying, "Frank you know everybody." I'm like, "I don't know everybody." He says, "I'm going to California and I would almost bet that I'm going to meet somebody there who knows you." Well, I get there -- or he gets there and he does what he has to do for work, and he happens to be done with that and he's out at a boat dock. A bunch of yachts and stuff. And he sees a guy in a racing wheelchair. Bobbie Gibson. Good friend of mine.

He was a good guy. Don't know if he's still around. Anyway, he said, "You know a friend of mine races those." And Bobbie goes, "Really, who? What's his name?" He said, "Oh, you won't know him. I'm from Indiana. His name is Frank Epperson." Bobbie he says, "Oh yeah. I know Frank. He and I used to race together." Blah, blah, blah. You know. So it was funny.

[00:46:10]

JHS: [Inaudible].

[00:46:11]

FE: Yeah. It was funny. A friend of mine made a small movie and -- here in Bloomington. And Jenilee Harrison was in the movie. She was one of the stars of the movie. So I think -- I want to say she was the female lead. And I went up to get the poster, the movie poster autographed by her. And she says -- you know, she's very nice. We talk a little bit and she says, "So you -- that looks like a racing chair." I said, "No, it's not a racing chair. You know, I had it made this way because I do ballroom dancing as a hobby now. And -- but I used to race." And she says, "Oh, do you know Jim Knaub? I used to date him." I said, "Yeah, I know Jim." So and the lady I took to the premiere, she turns around to a lady who used to be a coworker of mine and says, " He knows everybody."

So...

PH: Did you have sponsorships to go around and [inaudible]?

FE: You know I couldn't have done -- I'm glad you asked that. I didn't really have sponsorships to go around. It was my parents. I have the most supportive family anybody could ask for. Bar none. My mom's been to every country that I've been to. My dad, he doesn't fly so he went to Canada. But before I was able to get a racing chair which my parents purchased, my dad built a racing chair. Yeah. They've been incredibly supportive. I could not be here today if my parents weren't the people that they are. I could not of succeeded if my parents cajoled me or -- is that the word I'm looking for here? If my parents didn't -- treat me as they treated me. If -- you know, if they tried to baby me I would never be able to do the things I do now. Yeah. Because the world's not a nice place.

[00:48:26]

JHS: And were you asking about corporate sponsorships?

PH: Someone to help sponsor and help pay for your...

FE: Yeah, yeah.

PH: ... [inaudible] wheelchair and all that.

FE: I did have a short run of a corporate sponsor; Triple A Waterbed Service. But that was very short. I became friends with the guys. I met them out one night when some friends and I were out and we got to talking and, you know, I think I was out on the dance floor doing wheelies and just acting -- I don't know, what you do when you're in your 20's. You know, act like a fool. And we hit it off and started talking and they did purchase a chair for me. Yeah, I thought -- I think they purchased it. I know they helped me get to Barcelona. So it was a very short, you know, a very short term sponsorship thing.

[00:49:33]

JHS: Did you have to use your own funds then to pay for the expenses to compete?

[00:49:36]

FE: Yeah. That's why I say if it weren't for my parents, it wouldn't have happened. Yeah. They backed me 100%. Now there was a time when I was on the developmental team. The subsidy team. When -- you know, my coach Judy Einbinder, she would say, "Hey, I need you here. I'm going to give you -- you know, you're going to get a ticket." I don't know where she got the money. I never asked. You know. Just, okay here we go. I'm going there. Bob and Tom were huge in helping me get to Barcelona and Seoul Korea. Mostly Barcelona. The south side of Indianapolis while it has changed as the rest of the world has changed it's still a pretty darn good place to live.

And since I've lived there my entire life all the small businesses, they helped out. But to try and say I had a sponsorship I can't really say that. It was a community thing. You know. I'll never forget coming back from I think Barcelona. We got pulled over. I looked at my dad and I said, "Were you speeding?" And my dad was trying to play dumb. He's like, "Well I don't think so." Well it was a Southport policeman and he says, "Is that Frank Epperson in that van?" And of course my dad says, "Yes." He says, "We want to give him a police escort home." And so I get home and then my neighbors were all there and there's a big banner and maybe that was -- that was Seoul Korea in '88. When I got back from Barcelona in '92 that's when people met me at the airport.

And that was a lot of fun. Yeah.

[00:51:45]

JHS: That's great.

FE: I never -- I -- to this day I never know what to say when someone says, "Hey I saw you on TV." "Right on." I don't know what to say. "Did you like it?" "Yeah." I don't know what to say.

JHS: Well that's really exciting. Is there anything that I'm not asking you about wheelchair racing? Because I confess to be not terribly knowledgeable about [laughter] this. So am I missing out on any aspects of that that people might want to know about?

FE: When I raced it was my job. That was basically, that was my job. I was a college student so I went to college and I trained. That's what I did. My dad went with me. I used the track at IUPUI and that's where I did most of my training. I used the track for a short time at my old high school. Perry Meridian High School. But eventually I went to IUPUI, and he was always there for that. And then of course, you know, you get blisters and stuff and mom's always there for that. You know. But no, I think we've pretty much covered that.

[00:53:09]

JHS: Did you have peers that -- in -- you know, in Indiana that were doing this or were anywhere near the level you were in that?

[00:53:17]

FE: When I started racing I was really the only one. Then a guy named Butch Martin came around. We are really at opposite ends meaning he was a distance guy, I was a sprinter. For me -- I did the mini marathon every year from -- I want to say '85 to '92, '94 something like that. For him that was his baby. For me it was a long distance training day and I got to say hi to people, you know, on the side of the road and you know make -- encourage folks, "Hey come on. Get out here with me." You know. Sometimes I would wheel up to somebody who was really struggling. You know I'd say, "Come on, one foot in front of the other. Let's make it up this hill. Then I'll see you at the finish line because I'm going to take advantage of the downhill." And you know, make people forget for a second all the pain that they're going through, make them laugh a little bit. Yeah.

JHS: I imagine there's a lot of upper body strength and endurance involved with it. Are there other skills that are required to do the racing?

FE: You have to have some core -- the other skills that are required to wheelchair race are really just strength and endurance. You have to have coordination as well. Especially when you're going around turns on the track. At least when I ever did it on the international level you weren't allowed to use what we call the compensator which you can set to turn you to go into the turn. And then you could hit it again to make you go straight. So you had to what we call tip it. You had to move your body in such a way to pick up your front wheel and set it down in between strokes. And as a sprinter there was a lot of just straight out technique because you had different strokes. You had your starting stroke and then you had the stroke that you were going to use the rest of the time. And even within your starting stroke your first three strokes are different than the rest of your starting strokes until you can get your speed up to go into your next form of pushing.

[00:55:43]

At least that the way I did things. So I had one day a week where all I did was starts and corners. Just to work on those skills.

JHS: And that's something that I and I'm sure a lot of other people have absolutely no idea about. So that's really interesting.

FE: And, you know, if weren't an interview, I would actually act it out. So but...

JHS: [Inaudible].

FE: Yeah, I don't think it would really work [laughter].

[00:56:10]

JHS: Is there some -- you talked about being on TV. You know, are there -- this is something that you probably talk to Gary Byrnett about but are there some video recordings or anything of the races that...

[00:56:25]

FE: Oh, I'm sure there are video recordings of the races. I used to be on a first name basis with people at the different stations. Chanel 6, Channel 8, Channel 13. I used to go in there pretty regularly for interviews. You know, to do sound checks. There was one time I wore a mic for an event. I don't remember what it was. I've been in a few commercials. Fortunately, for the camera my face wasn't showing in most of them. So, you know, there was no breaking the camera. I can't believe this camera has lasted as long as it has without breaking.

JHS: That would...

PH: It's brand new.

FE: Brand -- there we go [laughter]. I just took 10 years off it.

JHS: We can talk about this off camera but it would be really helpful for a project I think to have some footage of some of those races. You know -- if there's anything of you in one of those international races that would be kind of neat.

FE: International racing? I don't know. You really need to talk to the European version of ESPN.

[00:57:34]

JHS: [Laughter].

FE: Because I know I was filmed for that.

PH: Maybe just pictures. Some -- you parents have -- you must have pictures.

FE: I'm sure they do. Yeah. Yeah.

PH: Just pictures would be helpful.

FE: [Laughter] The Adaptive Educational Services Office at IUPUI; if you go to their mission statement that's a picture of me from -- I want to say '92. They -- I think they reversed it though because I'm on the track the opposite way of the way you're supposed to be on the track. So they must have reversed it. I have a wheelchair and a picture on exhibit at the Indiana State Museum. It's part of the -- I guess the revolving Hoosiers with -- Hoosier Athletes or something. Which is a kind of a funny story because, I was in college at the time and they wanted to know if I had anything they could borrow for this sort of an exhibit. I said, "No, but I got a chair you can have." "Oh, well we don't want to keep it."

[00:58:46]

"Well, then you can't have it. Because I don't want it back." And long story short I was a little evil. I had a friend of mine -- we went there and "Yeah, my name is Frank Epperson. You guys wanted a chair. All right, here you go." "Oh great." Then we just left. And I don't know, a year after that one of my cousins I guess got into an argument at school when she was a little girl because she said, "That's my cousin."

And her classmates didn't believe that, you know, someone had a cousin -- someone in their class had a cousin who was famous. You know.

[00:59:27]

JHS: That's good. Well they may have some resources that we can look into then for this.

FE: Yeah. Mm-hm.

JHS: All right. Anything else about wheelchair racing before we move onto the next topic?

FE: It is, isn't it?

JHS: [Inaudible]. [laughter].

FE: No, I can't really think of anything.

JHS: That's pretty exciting stuff. Well let's move on to ballroom dancing. How did you get into this?

[00:59:58]

FE: I got in -- yeah, I got into ballroom dancing; I was dating a lady at the time and we were out on a dance floor and she said, "You know, I'd really like to know how to dance." I said, "Well I'm enjoying dancing with you. I think you do just fine." She says, "You know what I mean. I mean to actually know steps and things like that." So I want to say, November -- September of '99. I went into an Arthur Murray and I said, "I want to take some ballroom dancing lessons." And they were like, "Um, um, um." And I got all kinds of run around. And finally I just looked at the person and I said, "Are you denying me services based upon my disability?" "Oh no. Oh, we just don't know what's possible." "I don't either so let's explore it."

And outside of a two year -- two and a half year break I've been doing it ever since. I am now with Five Star Dance studio. A little family run studio. They have three studios. It's not part of a huge chain or anything. I've performed tangos, paso dobles, waltzes, swings, rhumbas. A samba or a salsa. I can't remember which. More swing, more triple time swings than I can remember. Is that all? Tango, waltz. Oh, I'm getting ready to be in a fundraiser and I'm going to be raising money for Riley Hospital because I was a Riley baby.

[01:02:00]

And this is going to be like a *Dancing with the Stars* type thing. Where I'll be dancing a swing, a waltz, a tango and a rhumba and I'm doing it with a young lady who I've never danced with before and she's never danced with someone in a wheelchair before. So I'm teaching her how to work with someone in a wheelchair. At least with my particular level of impairment. And she has all sorts of new ideas on choreography. It's going to be taped. It's going to be on TV. And I'm also working on a tango, and in this tango I'm actually going to be able to -- we've -- my current partner and I Natalie; she and I are -- we've actually figured out how to put elements of the Argentine tango in our tango. And that's always been a goal of mine. Is I want to do Argentine tango and I want to do a Viennese waltz.

[01:03:04]

Because I think they're just both incredible dances. Oh, I've also done a merengue. Which is a fun little dance. I've danced with -- I've done shows with one, two, three, four, five ladies. Yeah. Five ladies. And it just -- I've been having a blast. It's exploration for both me and them. In '07 I went to Chicago for an international competition, ballroom dancing competition. I was the only person in a chair there. And it was so cool because I would have people say, "Hey, can you come to Texas? Because I have a client." You know -- no that didn't happen, but we were able -- my partner and I were able to give them things to work on.

You know, things and some -- be able -- we were able to inform them of some pitfalls. Some things that you don't want to try and do. You know at least if they had the same situation. You know? I'm also working on a workshop right now. I'll be giving a workshop; the 18th of this month at Ball State University; 40 people in various mobility devices with some people from the IU ballroom dancing group, some people from the Ball State ballroom dancing group, and some of my previous partners. And that'll be fun. I -- the interesting thing is when you can get the song and the music and everything just right to touch people emotionally. It doesn't matter if you have a disability or not. If you can touch people emotionally then you're a success in dance.

It doesn't matter what you're doing. I received a standing ovations for -- particularly for this one waltz that I've done. I've performed it -- I think six, seven times and I receive a standing ovation each time I do it. No matter who I do it with. And I believe that it's because the choreography fits with the music and the words and the story we're telling. It awesome.

[01:05:36]

JHS: Well I have so many questions and [inaudible] [laughter].

FE: Sorry.

JHS: [Laughter] No, no. That's fine. It's a topic of particular interest to me. When you were competing in that international event in Chicago how did you manage to do that? Did you encounter some red tape and some resistance to being a competitor in a wheelchair?

[01:06:01]

FE: I don't know if I got any red tape because the studio that I was at, at the time was like, "Frank this is what we want to do." And so me I'm like, "Okay. One; I don't have the money so if you can raise the money all right. Two; I worked with, you know, if it fits within my time off then I can do this." Well, did I -- okay, well you worry about the work part, we'll worry about the money part. And long story short I get there and we -- when my partner and I get there -- I'm currently back with the woman I did this with in '07. We get there and she gets out of the taxi and immediately this guy comes up to her and he says, "Is this the guy in the wheelchair that's going to be doing the ballroom dancing?"

And she says, "Yes, this is the guy." And so I get out of the back of the taxi, you know, and people are like, "Oh, so great. I can't wait to see you dance." Blah, blah, blah, blah. You know. I'm like, "Thank

you. Thank you. Thank you." And I'm trying to say thank you to a lot of people at once because, you know, we kind of got inundated a little bit with people wanting to say hi and everything. We get there and we get out on the

[01:07:34]

floor and -- well, we get to the floor and what do you know. My concern always is I understand that the first time someone sees me on the dance floor, the first time I'm in a new place their perception of every other person in a wheelchair that's on the dance floor is going to be based somewhat on their first impression with me.

Rightly or wrongly that's the way it's going to be. So I am incredibly paranoid about hitting someone else, you know, with my chair. Because you can ask my partners. If I've clipped their ankles it hurts. You know. And I -- before I went there I said -- I told them this is my concern. Because I don't want anybody to get a bad taste in their mouth from me being out on the floor. Well, what they decided to do was I was on the biggest dance floor I've ever been on outside of the Indiana Roof Ballroom. And they cut the floor in half with judges. There are judges all the way around. And they didn't just do it for me. This is the way they did it. You know, ballroom A, ballroom B. Same floor just cut in half with judges. And judges all around the edges. When they would call me up I was the only one on this side.

[01:09:06]

Which was awesome because I had the entire floor. I didn't have to worry about running into anybody. And I'm a showoff. So, you know, there are dances like merengue where I can do pretty much whatever I want to do and put my partner, you know, where I want her to be, where she wants to be. You know, where the choreography fits the song -- whatever song we happen to be dancing to at that time. I actually had a judge come up to me and say, "You know, you led the best swivels I have seen here today." I'm like, "Well thank you very much." You know. And then later on my partner comes to me and she goes, "This judge wants to know if he can have dinner with us tonight." I'm like, "Sure, I don't care." You know. And she's just like, "Sure you don't care?" I'm like, "I don't really know who he is." So, you know, I don't -- you know, it's not like someone said the President wants to have lunch -- you know, dinner with you. That you know what to be excited about [laughter]. You know.

JHS: Do you feel that you do more of that kind of creative choreographing than people that dance without chairs do?

[01:10:22]

FE: Oh without a doubt. There are so many times. And I have to tell you I have been incredibly blessed in the partners that I've had. My current partner is incredibly creative. Other people have fed off that. And when you dance with me you have to translate as a -- as my instructor and as a choreographer. You have to look at different ways to lead. You have to look at translating the step from a step to what do I do with my wheels? And of course there are some steps where it's going to be different, it has to be different because you can't make a wheelchair go sideways. Wheelchairs go forward and backward. So there's -- you know, you have to do things -- it means you may have to curve it instead of going this way. You may have to curve it.

[01:11:15]

JHS: So how did you -- other than figuring these things out yourself and teaching yourself did you have any role model...

FE: No, that was it.

JHS: ...teachers? Anything?

FE: There was a man named Jacques Debeve. Good guy. He said, "We will figure this out. I don't know what I'm doing here, but I'm not afraid to admit that. So we're going to try things and some things aren't going to work. And then some things are going to work and we're going to build on the things that work." And then he told me a story about I believe in purple frogs and how his teachers took the crayon from him and said, "Don't you know there's no such things as purple frogs?" This is before we found the black and purple frogs in the Amazon basin. I think it's the Amazon. What do you know? There's such things as purple frogs. Yeah. And that's the whole point. What do you know. Such things as purple frogs. You know and that mindset.

JHS: I think -- I guess you couldn't like look at YouTube videos or something...

FE: No.

[01:12:22]

JHS: ...but there wasn't anything out there that you could look or...

FE: Not that we could find.

Not that we could find. I'm not saying that it wasn't out there. I'm not saying I'm the first. Because I'm sure I'm not. But we couldn't find anything. You know. I'm not trying to say "Oh, the great and awesome Frank Epperson." Because I'm not great and awesome. Yeah, I'm just me. And I can't do anything without my partners. It's dance. You have a partner. Yeah, it's ballroom dance. Now you'll never see me do international standard ballroom dance because international standard ballroom dance is maintain frame the entire time. Okay? You know what that translates to? Pull the fat guy in a wheelchair around. Not going to happen. I will not be pulled around on the dance floor. I will lead the dance. That's my role. Also, if it screws up it's because it's my fault. Because I'm the one who's supposed to be leading [laughter]. You know, if I get the timing wrong then that's my fault. I'm sorry.

JHS: No, I'm sorry [laughter]. You mentioned pitfalls. What are some of the pitfalls?

[01:13:40]

FE: Some of the pitfalls of ballroom dance. There are some dances I can't figure out how to do. The Viennese Waltz is one of them. If you love music at all you love some songs that are Viennese Waltz. Beethoven. Is it Moonlight Sonata or Midnight Sonata? Moonlight Sonata. Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata; beautiful Viennese Waltz. And because of that song I want to do Viennese Waltz. I want to do the Viennese Waltz to that song. Because it's a gorgeous song.

[01:14:20]

JHS: Well if anybody can figure it out I'm sure you can [laughter].

FE: It won't be me. It'll be us [laughter]. Me and whoever I'm with at the time. Because I don't do this by myself. I didn't race by myself. It's not about me. It's about me and the other people that come into my life.

JHS: That's great. Well I was going to ask a bunch of other questions but I won't because of time here.

PH: [Inaudible] a few more if you want.

JHS: Oh, on ballroom...

PH: I was going to [Inaudible].

JHS: Well the only other things I had on my little list here are you mentioned wanting to talk about dating or maybe I asked you -- because you mentioned you were single and, you know.

[01:15:07]

FE: Yeah. I'm single ladies. [Laughter].

FE: Don't edit that out please [laughter]. Dating. I can tell you that dating has changed from when I was in high school. I had a really good girlfriend in high school and, you know, being sometimes we make mistakes. We make mistakes and we mature, and we grow. But I can remember asking one girl out, her saying yes and then her saying -- or then without me -- without her knowing it I heard her friend say, "You're going to go out with a guy in a wheelchair? That's not a real guy." That doesn't really happen now. You know. Especially now that I can, you know, say that I'm employed and, you know, I've done these other things.

You know. The barrier now for me any way is the same barrier I think other people have time. That's the big thing. But I can remember, you know, the stigma. I was very proud to have the girlfriend that I had in high school because guess what? I was the first guy in high school who was in a wheelchair who had a girlfriend who was not in a wheelchair. That was a huge status thing. To break that glass ceiling, that wall. You know. Now it's not really that big a deal. Which is awesome. You know. I wish it would have happened a little bit sooner [laughter]. But, you know, I can remember -- and this doesn't happen anymore. I'd say probably 10, 15 years ago I was out with a lady and our server made the mistake of asking her what I wanted to eat.

[01:17:22]

Yeah. Yeah. That was -- that did not end well for the server. I was a little embarrassed too because she went a little -- anyway. Anyway. You don't have that much anymore. You know. And as, you know, people with disabilities get out more into society where we should be with everybody else, you know, you don't have the fopa I guess of someone as they go to seat you say, "Here you go." We'll how do you know I want you to move that chair? How do you know that I want you to move the chair? Maybe I want to transfer. You know. And that's an educational process. I can actually tell you that there's a

particular restaurant that I go to a lot, and I have seen servers go from that restaurant to other restaurants and I can

[01:18:20]

tell before I ever see them because the hosts or hostess or what -- you know the people that seat you will say which chair would you like for me to move?

Or would you like for me to move a chair? Yeah. And it's like I know where you got that. I don't say it but I'm thinking I know where you got that. And sure enough sooner or later I'll see a server go by that used to work at this other place. Or I'll see a host or a hostess that used to work at this other place that works there. So that's awesome. Yeah.

JHS: So things have improved but are -- you still feel there are barriers as far as dating goes for people who are using a wheelchair.

FE: There are still barriers. And again, is there -- there is a common theme in what I say -- when we talk about barriers you're going to hear me say that the barrier is communication. People being afraid to talk. People being afraid to be open and say, "Hey I don't know about this but you're kind of cute, and do you want to go out sometime?" You know. Or, "No, you're weird. Get away from me." [Laughter] I don't know. But it's about communication again. That's the big barrier. I don't think -- I think the younger folks today -- I was going to say young folks but that makes me sound too old. I don't think the younger folks of today have as much of a problem because their parents didn't see it like my -- not my parents but people of my parents' generation saw it.

[01:20:09]

Saw disability. So it's getting better. It's still there though. Funny story. I picked up a young lady from home and we had spoken and myself -- well, her mother knew that I was going to pick her up. When I got there I was going to honk the horn; not because I was being disrespectful but because they had six steps up to the front step. Up to the front door. Well, I honked the horn, nobody comes. I honk the horn, nobody comes. I go to honk the horn again, and all of a sudden this door fly's open and her dad comes out. I had never met her dad. "You listen to me. You will not be honking for my daughter [noises]." And I just, "Sorry sir." You know. Da, da, da, da, da. And he says, "You'll come up to my daughter." Well me being the evil person that I am didn't bother to mention that I was in a chair.

I said, "Yes sir." I got in my chair and at the time I had a full size van that had, you know, the [noises] the slow door and the slow lift and all this. And he turned white. He went back up into the house, she came out. And her mom came out. And she says, "I am so sorry that I forgot to mention that to my husband." I'm like, "No big deal."

[01:21:42]

JHS: That's a good story.

[01:21:42]

FE: And we hit it off after that. Yeah. We hit it off after that. We sat in the garage and ate ribs and drank coke and joked.

JHS: It sounds like a fun date. Well, we're just about out of time. Are there things that you want to add that we haven't touched upon? Anything else that you'd like to talk about or parting words?

FE: Parting words? Are there any parting words? Study history, know what you have and know why you have it. Know where people come from. And I don't mean geographically [laughter]. But know where people come from attitude wise, and know that whether you're a person with disability or not we're all educators about who we are, and where we come from, and what we do. And if we don't communicate we're doomed to repeat the stupid stuff.

PH: Excellent. That's part of the reason we're doing this.

[01:23:01]

FE: Exactly.

PH: So people don't repeat it.

FE: Exactly. Yeah. And that's what I was thinking about when -- yeah. My last words. Okay. This is about history. People need to read -- I mean so many people want to bury the Holocaust for example. You can't bury the Holocaust. I'm not saying we throw it in people's faces but we can't forget about it. You know? It's too easy. Yeah. It's too easy for people to throw under the carpet the fact that people with disabilities were forcefully sterilized. Forcibly sterilized? It's too easy to throw under the carpet that, you know, when Hitler was perfecting the way he killed people well he worked on people with disabilities first because they were less than human. Yeah. We can't forget those things. Again, I'm not saying we -- that's not a flag that we wave; look at my people. No, they're not my people. I'm a person with disability, so are you. You know?

[01:24:02]

We're separate. We're part of the same community but -- and it's not a flag that we wave it's something that we just have to constantly educate people on. That's the difference between the two in my opinion.

[END OF INTERVIEW]