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**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
NANCY GRIFFIN
NOVEMBER 16, 2009
INTERVIEWER: PHIL STAFFORD
VIDEOGRAPHER: PEGGY HOLTZ
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PS: PHIL STAFFORD
NG: NANCY GRIFFIN
JT: JENNIE TODD

[TITLE CREDITS]

[00:00:10]

NG: Okay. My name is Nancy Griffin and I'm a private consultant right now and a full time volunteer with a number of organizations including our local area agency on aging for whom I do housing access consulting. We go into the homes of older homeowners and basically look at whether or not they need additional safety like grab bars or handrails or if they need real access with bathroom modifications or ramps or other kinds of additions. We do this with grant funds and it's very exciting because sometimes, with just a very little bit of effort, we can make people feel much safer and much more confident they can stay in their homes. And, it's been remarkable the folks that we've met in the course of doing this over the last three years.

PS: You see some real concrete results in that kind of work.

NG: Absolutely, absolutely.

PS: Because that's a far field from some of the policy work that you've done.

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NG: Well, that's true. But, we got into this whole thing, relationship with the area agency because we recognize that folks who, older folks who own their homes and who've aged in place, often have access and safety issues and in fact don't know how to address them or just don't have the resources to do it anymore. So, we came out of a housing policy discussion that we got into this. I've been involved with the Disability Rights movement since 1976 when I took a day off of work from my state employment in Springfield, Illinois and drove up to Chicago because I heard about this new federal law about education for children with disabilities. And, I wanted to see since one of the six federally held field hearings was

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going to be in Chicago, who came and what they had to say. So, my boss gave me the day off and I go up to Chicago, this great big hotel and asked where the hearing was and was directed down a long hallway like we see here, and finally got to this huge room that was packed, standing room only, with parents and children with disabilities and adults with disabilities and dogs and big wheelchairs and walkers, and you know, we all come with lots of equipment.

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And, there was a big center aisle in the room and a stage up front. And there was as stenographer sitting on the stage just taking down dictation and a microphone at the front of the center aisle. And, there were people lined up all the way to the back of the ballroom and out the door waiting to speak. And, I worked my way around to the back side of the room and finally found a seat and sat there. I had gotten there at 9:30 in the morning and it started at 9. I sat there until 4 in the afternoon when I got up, and I went back into the hotel to try to find a payphone because I had to call my boss to tell him that I was not coming home until this was over and it obviously was going to go on another day and it ended up going on three days. And, I heard some of the most powerful stories that I've ever heard in my life. And, it touched me so deeply, because, when I was a little girl and had to have a series of surgeries, my school superintendent told my parents that children like Nancy don't go to school. So, I missed 3 1/2 years of grade school just because I was in a cast.

And, even though my school was accessible. So, that really touched me. I went back to Springfield, got on the horn, called every member of the Illinois delegation to congress, and said you must pass this law. And, by golly they did. And I was hooked.

PS: That's a remarkable story.

NG: It was a remarkable experience.

PS: And how long did it take before you changed careers?

NG: Well, I actually was, at that time, employed by the Department of Commerce but on loan to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation as a consultant. And I was already doing work in the field. I was assisting local community agencies to connect, voc rehab, special education, and community colleges to get kids with disabilities into advanced education and not just falling off a cliff at the end of high school. So, I was developing grant programs around the state. In fact, that year, I wrote, successfully wrote \$4 million in community grants that served kids with disabilities. And, we created what was, then, the very first, can't think now what the term is, the reverse employment opportunity where you go in and divide up a job to meet the abilities of the person you're trying to hire and then sort the rest of that job around to other people and bring other folks in.

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But, it was, it was like supported employment today but it wasn't supported the employers were paying for it. So, it was a pretty exciting time to be involved.

[00:05:07]

PS: So you were really working on systems at that point.

NG: Yes.

PS: You already systems perspective on things [inaudible].

NG: The thing that -- the thing that we discovered was that, even though it had local VR offices scattered all over the state and we had special ed districts and we had community colleges at that time in Illinois that were fairly new but were established, none of them were talking about people with disabilities. None of them were working together or doing anything about folks with disabilities and employment, so, and advanced education. So, we had great opportunities.

PS: And what did that lead to? How did you come to Indiana?

NG: Well, I took a rather indirect route. I married a man who was hired as the Executive Director of the Center for Independent Living in Tulsa, Oklahoma. So, I went to Oklahoma first. I spent five years there before I came back to the Midwest to help my brother start a little business here in Indianapolis. But, while I was in Tulsa, I had the opportunity to work with some of the first ADAPT organizers in the country. And we did everything we could to get the mayor and the city to do something about public transportation being inaccessible and had quite a bit of difficulty. So, we ended up creating our first bus roping opportunity.

PS: What?

NG: Bus roping.

PS: Bus Roping.

NG: Um hum.

PS: Who will have to explain that to me.

[00:06:32]

NG: It's an old ADAPT technique, when you want some media attention or they won't pay any attention to those poor helpless cripples over there. You wait till a bus gets to a stop, when, you know, they're going to be there for a little bit and then you get a half a dozen folks in wheelchairs and somebody goes up to the door of the bus and says, "Excuse me Mr. Driver, but you and your bus are taken and your passengers are welcome to leave, if they want to call another bus to let them go on their way, that's fine." But, while you're having this conversations, the driver's going what in the hell are you talking about, the other people are chaining themselves to the bumpers on the front and the back of the bus with titanium bicycle chains so you can't just, you know, snip them, cut them. And, it's amazing, the police come, the media comes, you're on camera, you get to tell your story. Pretty soon, the bus driver's on your side. Do that all over town, get good at it, get a lot of press.

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Do it in all kinds of weather with people with very significant disabilities. And, pretty soon the city council begins to listen because they're embarrassed. And, the group from the Center for Independent Living that led that effort, which I was a volunteer, made the Tulsa Public Transit System, which is a very extensive bus system fully accessible by 1986, four years before the ADA even passed, and it was a result of a group of people with disabilities expressing their power in the best way that we knew how. And, we did a lot of things that way, had a lot of fun. In the meantime, I was serving on an advisory panel with the U.S. Department of Education. So, I was going out to Washington for meetings three and four times a year. And, I had gotten to know some of the folks from DREDF, the Disability Rights Education Defense Fund because they had called on us in Oklahoma, across the states to work on something called the Civil Rights Restoration Act.

This preceded the ADA by a number of years. And, it was a remarkable coalition that passed this because the supremes had basically very much restricted the protections of the Civil Rights Act through some negative decisions. And the strongest leaders on that effort were the African American churches and their ministers. So, I was involved, was one of four people in a wheelchair who was on a three mile march in January of that year, which was not so bad in Tulsa but still wasn't grand in support of passage of the Civil Rights Act, I'm sorry the Civil Rights Restoration Act. When we got to the church at the end of the march where we were all going to congregate, three big white limos pulled up. Everybody's kind of who's that, who's that? We didn't know. Well, the four of us in chairs couldn't really get in the church because it was just blocked with people. So, we were sort of out there on the street.

After the limo sat there for about ten minutes, one of the backdoors opened and this guy hopped out and went around to the other side and opened the other door and out stepped Jessie Jackson. And, as it turned out I had worked with Jessie in a, a mayor campaign in Chicago about three years before. He saw me, he came over, and he got down on his knees and he said, "Nancy how are you. What are you doing here?" So, we had an opportunity again to work with the press to talk about why people with disabilities were concerned about this legislation and to work on our congressional delegation through the media, so we had lots of different ways of doing things.

PS: So, direct action and systems change, and work through the media.

NG: And, as I mentioned, Pat Wright and some of the other folks at the Disability Rights Education Defense Fund out of California were then lobbying on Health Care Access Act, and the Civil Rights Restoration Act, and I'm trying to think, there were several other bills that we were working on. When, I would go out for those meetings with the Department of Education, Pat would say, "Why don't you stick around for a week?" So, I would follow Pat around congress and work the delegations wherever she needed me to go and had a lot of great experiences going in and out congressional offices.

[00:10:55]

PS: So, in your own mind, it sounds as if you've early on framed this as a Civil Rights issue, that that's probably the way you think about these things.

[00:11:05]

NG: Very much so, very much so. Because I always thought it was terribly unfair because I wasn't allowed to go to school. I love school. And I, I was crushed when I was told that I couldn't go and especially for that length of time. It really, I never felt the same about school again. And I always felt like I had been unfairly denied the opportunity that my brother and that all the other children in my neighborhood had. So, when I saw all of those families and children at that hearing, it just really, you know, reignited that fire. And, I began to see so many other things where people with disabilities were denied opportunities and access. And, just decided to get into the fight.

PS: And how did this, sort of patchwork of laws begin to coalesce around the notion of an ADA?

NG: Well the National Council on Disability, at that time led by Lex Frieden, was looking at all of these different issues and how we were having to just basically put the finger in the dike to try to fix one here and one there and came out with a report whose name escapes me at the moment, but I'm sure you would know what it is. In 1988, that basically was a call to action across a broad array of issues. But, it was focused on Civil Rights as this is what this is. These are Civil Rights issues. And, the next year they generated another report. But, at that time, the chairman of the council was an incredible man who wore a soft, dove colored gray hat, and I'm blanking, Justin Dart. And, Justin took that first document and got in his little red pickup truck with his wife and took off and drove across this country and visited people with disabilities in every single state, on his personal dime, in their own time.

And I got to be in one of those meetings in Oklahoma. He took that document with him and he said is this it, are we on the right track? And, of course, they were. So, the next year, the National Council published what was the precursor of the ADA, it was a call for legislation. And Lex and Justin and the good folks there really sat down and started writing what would become the ADA. And then Justin and his wife Yoshiko took off in their little red pickup truck again and did another 50 state tour and went around meeting with folks with disabilities and family members all over this country and selling us on we can do this. We have power. We can change the way our lives are. We can do this. And he was so compelling. And, you just couldn't say no to Justin.

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So, he engaged tens of thousands of people with disabilities through his personal travels. It was an army of people who went to work on passage of this bill, once it was introduced. Another thing about Justin that I learned during this whole process was that he, he was determined that he was going to find a way to get to the president on this, the first President Bush, and he didn't have the right connections to do that because he was a Democrat. But, he knew the man who became the president's chief of staff personally. And so, Justin thought maybe if I can get to him, I can get to the president. So, this started way back even before the legislation was introduced, he was obviously already working on it. He started asking him to go to dinner with him to discuss various issues effecting people with disabilities and he would purposely take him to some nice place in Washington somewhere and it wouldn't be acceptable, Justin used a wheelchair.

So, this giant of a man would have to lift Justin and carry him into the restaurant and then go back and get his wheelchair and carry it into the restaurant. Justin managed never to find an accessible restaurant in Washington, DC and they had dinner at least once a month for a year and a half. So, it finally got down to crunch time and the ADA was really about to go to the president's desk. Justin went back and said, "Do we have to have dinner again?" The chief of staff said, "No, the president will sign the bill." And, if you'll remember, President Bush had said he would sign it before it came to his desk. Yes. And that's why, at least that is why I think is why, yeah. One other story that I know about because I know Pat Wright from DREDF so well and Liz Savage was involved in this too, our speaker tomorrow morning, when it came time to define what is a place of public accommodation under the law, the bill just said places of covered accommodation, it didn't say what that was.

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And, nobody had really had time to sit down and figure out well how do we define this so we know that we get as broad a coverage as possible. And Pat and Liz and one other person, I can't think who that was, were outside the house in a cloak room and they saw a stack of yellow pages in the corner. And they sat down on the floor of the cloak room and went through the yellow pages of Washington, DC looking at the categories of businesses. And, if you look at what's in the ADA, it follows the yellow pages. [laughter] That's how they came up with what is a place of public accommodations, that is as broad as we could possibly make it. Pat told me that story herself.

PS: Sweet.

NG: It's brilliant.

PS: Yeah. So, were you actually in Oklahoma in 1990?

NG: No, I was here in Indiana. I came here in '88.

PS: Where were you on the day the bill was signed?

NG: I was here. I was here. I had been injured in an accident, had lost the ability to walk perhaps for the rest of my life at that point in time, and had lost my business because I couldn't walk and I couldn't get around and I was living in an inaccessible apartment. And, I spent hours a day on the phone to Washington calling and calling and calling. Obviously, I couldn't go for the signing. But, I knew several people who did who took lots of pictures for me. And, it was an incredibly powerful moment.

PS: Well then the work didn't end.

NG: Yeah.

PS: How were you involved in [inaudible] post ADA movement?

[00:18:14]

NG: Well, I went to the Governor's Council for People with Disabilities and said we're going to have to train people on how to do this. And, I didn't have an organization behind me at the time. I was doing private

consulting like I am now. And so, one of the members of the council, a gentleman by the name of Costa N Miller agreed with me hardily and agreed that his organization and some of its members would sponsor a program to train people on this new legislation if the council would support it. So, I wrote a grant application to the Governor's Council and seven months later the ADA Training Network was established in Indiana. We had offices in north, central, and southern Indiana. We had expert staff who were trained by DREDF National Training program which I also got the opportunity to participate in. And, we went forth and trained anyone who would listen on what the ADA said and what the requirements were and how to meet those.

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And, to its credit, the Council continued the funding of that program for six years which is much longer than typical Council funding. But, we actually were invited to do training nationally because the folks that we had were so good. And, in fact, we trained the entire Civil Rights Staff of the U.S. Department of Transportation and Housing at a seminar that we put together for a week long training in Washington, DC. So, we were heavily involved in implementation but, well, were, basically, being sure that folks with disabilities knew what their new rights were, but also that businesses and town halls and whoever, schools, understood what their obligations were under the law.

PS: Well, there's never enough time for these particularly when you've got so much experience. I do have one more question at least, what work remains to be done around the ADA [inaudible]?

NG: Well, the new law that passed last year that really puts much of the -- really critical definitions back into place and the regulations that are coming out now to implement that, we really have to do the same thing again. We have to get out and train people so that we understand what the requirements are now so that folks with disabilities who have been denied protections because of court decisions now have those protections back. And be sure that people with disabilities know what their rights are and how to exercise those.

JT: We got a lot of good stuff. You want to ask about the greatest impact or do you think we got that?

[Multiple voices]

PS: Well obviously the ADA is looking for employment and public access, and access to information.

NG: State and local government.

PS: State and local, state. What do you think was the greatest impact that the ADA [inaudible]?

NG: Empowerment of people with disabilities.

PS: Maybe say that again because maybe I overrode it.

[00:21:30]

NG: I think the greatest impact of the ADA is the empowerment of people with disabilities in this country. The fact that now people with disabilities can view themselves as full participating citizens much more

so than ever before. There's been a huge impact in terms of just physical access to our communities. But, we've still got a long ways to go there. We're doing much better in terms of providing government programmatic access. But, we're still trying to figure that out. And, I think we've got an opportunity today because of technological advances to do a much better job of that. [coughing] Excuse me. But truly, I think the difference in the lives of people with disabilities is the biggest impact.

JT: That's great, thank you.

[00:22:20]

PS: Yeah, that was wonderful

[END OF INTERVIEW]