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**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
ED BELL
NOVEMBER 16, 2009
INTERVIEWER: JENNIE TODD
VIDEOGRAPHER: PEGGY HOLTZ
RECORD ID: 116-DO**

JT: JENNIE TODD

EB: ED BELL

[TITLE CREDITS]

[00:00:10]

EB: My name is Ed Bell. And I'm a farmer from Hagerstown, Indiana. And I wear lots of different hats. I, of course, in addition to my farm, I have work with the Standing Wheelchair company in my off season. I do some consulting for Breaking New Ground, the AgrAbility Project, works with farmers and ranchers with disabilities. And then I do some public speaking, and so on, too. I'm on the ADA Steering Committee and I've been on the Governor's Planning Council. So-- but I joined the disability community in 1983 with spinal cord injury.

JT: OK. So you're quite familiar with the whole process of the ADA coming about since you've been involved with it for a while.

EB: Yes.

JT: I want to talk about Breaking New Ground and the standing wheelchair. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:01:07]

EB: Sure, sure. Breaking New Ground's project based out of Purdue University, works with farmers and ranchers with disabilities. Farming is statistically the most-- one of the most dangerous occupations in the country. We see farmers get all types of disabilities, in addition to what everybody else is exposed to anyway, because of the nature of the business. And farmers are very independent. When a farmer like myself gets a disability, the last thing we really want to do is like, well, not only do you have to adjust to your disability but now you need to sell your farm and move to town. So, we're-- farmers are kind of used to dealing with unfair things in life. You know, prices go up and down, droughts come and

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go, equipment breaks. If you can't buy a new solution then you repair and plow round it, you know. The old adage is if you can't pull the stump in the field, you plow around it, you don't let the whole field go to waste.

[00:02:13]

Farmers typically adapt pretty well but there's no need to reinvent the wheel. You know, we help them with information and technology as to, you know, how can you continue to live and work on your farm and pay your bills and raise your family. So-- And we do that across the country, actually across the world.

JT: So what do you remember about the early days of the ADA? Are you involved in getting the ADA passed and that sort of-- ?

EB: Well, I wasn't really an advocate. I was more of a survivor in my early days. You know, I predate the ADA. I was injured in '83. In fact, this hotel, my whole story, this hotel is-- the first night I was married, I stayed in this hotel and that was before the ADA in 1983. I was using a wheelchair then. So, in those days, the-- it was not an accessible room. I'm not sure they had an "accessible room" in those days. There was no definition. And the problem was my problem, today accessible room is the hotel's problem. So that was the big paradigm shift for what ADA has done for me personally. It shifted the burden. The burden is still there but the pathway continues to get more smooth as time goes on.

JT: What kind of impact do you think the ADA has made?

EB: Yeah. Well, you know, it's-- it can be controversial. There are those who, this is my opinion, abuse it but it has made it more of-- provided more of an opportunity for people to pull their own weight or pull the weight they can. For instance, if you stack too many barriers up in front of someone, the odds are they're going to be literally a burden not only to themselves but to society. For instance, the politically correct word for me in the not for profit world is a consumer. And as a farmer, I always chuckle because I'm not a consumer, I'm a producer. Just ask my employees, ask my customers that buy my strawberries. So, the-- but I mentioned that because I've had some barriers removed.

I have technology that allows me to drive down the road. I get in a van with a wheelchair lift. I have a wheelchair that I can drive, that I can carry a 50-pound bag on my lap. I can stand up and reach things. When I go someplace, I have a level of expectation that I'm going to be able to, A, get in and if I can't get in, they're still going to accommodate their services to me in some capacity. So that helped me be a producer not just a consumer.

JT: Right, yeah. Personally, I've never liked that word.

EB: Yeah. Well, but we-- I am a consumer. When I go to a restaurant, I'm a consuming, I'm paying. When I go to a hotel room, you know, I am a consumer. We're all consumers so-- in that respect. I just bought a new tractor and I am-- from that equipment, you know, I'm a consumer.

[00:05:48]

JT: Right. And I like that word and that term.

[00:05:50]

EB: Exactly, yeah. As an adjective, not a noun.

JT: OK. So you've seen a lot of impact of the ADA with your personal life. So you kept your farm, you're still working on your farm.

EB: Sure.

JT: So what sort of things-- what sort of changes that you made on your farm that would have to do with the ADA [inaudible]?

EB: Well, ADA on a typical farm probably doesn't really apply much because it's a private entity. My farm, I am open to the public and I have retail. So I'm bringing public into my farm to pick my strawberries, buy my strawberries. So, as a business owner, I'm like any other business owners thinking how can I accommodate people with special needs, you know. I struggle with the same thing in a different capacity but some of the same issues that this hotel would. If someone comes with a pet to my farm, they're not allowed to take them out into the fields because if a pet defecates in a strawberry field, that's an unhealthy thing. But if somebody comes with a service dog, how can I make a reasonable accommodation for that?

JT: That's good. All right. So, how did you learn about the ADA and how do you help other people learn about the ADA?

EB: Yeah. Well, I'm older than dirt so predate the ADA. At least a spinal cord injury ought to get like dog years, you know, four or five years credit for every year you survive. I do predate the ADA. I remember when it was-- when it came about as the new law. And that was really kind of exciting because it was going to-- you know, wow, there's an actual civil rights law that's going to create a standard of expectation. Prior to ADA, you know, you would call somebody up and say, do you have an accessible hotel room or can I get in your movie theater? Yeah, I think so. And you know it was-- the definition of expectation was whoever did the carpentry work that day. And now there's fundamental level of what you can expect. And the level of awareness continues to increase as time goes on.

Yeah.

JT: Yeah. And that's what-- one of the things that we hear from people is, OK, a hotel might be accessible but then the restrooms aren't. You know, they say they're accessible but I had a woman in here earlier said they weren't big enough.

EB: Yeah.

JT: For her to be comfortable in there, she had to leave her chair outside.

EB: Sure.

[00:08:32]

JT: So she said it's really kind of confusing when you go prepare to have it be accessible and it is not.

[00:08:38]

EB: Yeah. One of the great things about it-- you know, I can critique things but one of the great things about it is when the law requires that the pathway is smoothed out for a person like me. It makes it easier for everybody coming behind me. And as a business person, I understand, people are like water. They take the path of least resistance. As a businessman, why would I want to create barriers for my customers? Can we all say duh huh now?

JT: Right because, you know, like we talked about too is that other people that benefit, you know. Young mothers with strollers and toddlers.

EB: Exactly.

JT: You know, they're going to follow the path that you just talked about.

EB: Exactly.

JT: OK. And so, you were talking about the ADA and the day that it was signed. Do you remember where you were or do you remember that day in particular?

EB: Nope. I'm sure I was trying to survive. You know, even though 1990 was the implementation, it was really hard to stay on top of the game. You know, when I – one, just yourself for-- in dealing with the disability. I mean, you go-- for me, I acquired my disability at age 21. So I didn't grow up with my disability. I had to accommodate my mind to it and my body to it. That's a big jump in life. And then once you kind of plateau off and figure that out or at least stabilize, I have the same issues you do which is what am I going to do in life, how am I going to pay the bills, how do I keep my mortgage, you know, from my house being foreclosed. And in my case, it's a business and a farm. So, I was trying to survive. This is something that came along that made my survival easier.

JT: Have you educated other farmers or other people in your line of work about ADA and would you like everyone--

EB: Sure, sure.

JT: What do you tell them?

EB: Breaking New Ground's-- I've played an important role there being a consultant with Breaking Ground. For instance, we've gone in Indiana to every county courthouse, every library, in rural counties anyway. Every fair grounds, every cooperative extension service. We've had workshops for even churches which technically are exempt from the ADA, but when I first started with Breaking New Ground, you drive around Indiana and all these churches with old steps and now you drive around, even though they're exempt, most every church at least has a ramp if not an accessible entrance. I think, yeah, we really facilitated change there.

[00:11:32]

JT: Fantastic.

[00:11:33]

EB: Yeah.

JT: OK. So, what would you say in the 20 years of the ADA with their coming on their anniversary next year, what would be some of the greatest accomplishments?

EB: Greatest accomplishments?

JT: Of the ADA?

EB: Well, I had a little advantage in my community growing up. My town was a one factory town. And Ralph Teetor was the man who owned the factory. Ralph Teetor was a blind man. And he invented the cruise control which is on every car. So if you have a car with a cruise control, every car does today, it was invented by a blind man in Hagerstown, Indiana, my little town. So I had an attitude edge in my community. When it came to a disability, when I got my disability, people thought it was tragic, it was unfortunate, but they had an attitude of, and so what are you going to do with your life now? You know, ultimately, most everybody's boss in the town directly or indirectly was a person with a disability in the town that I grew up in.

The ADA has elevated the attitude in the nation slowly over time and it still gets better all the time, where people don't look at someone where -- when I first got hurt, if I'd lived in another town, they would have considered me in-valid. In others words, *invalid*, you know. I no longer have a worth since I'm broken, that wasn't true in my old town. The ADA has changed the attitude of people to where people with disabilities are looked upon less and less and less as in-valid or *invalid* and they have worth and you can do things and you can go places. I look forward to the day where we're looked at as more employers and less employees.

JT: That looks great. So, that's the greatest accomplishment. What would you say the ADA still faces as a challenge and what would be some of the things you'd like to see them really pursue in the next 10 years?

EB: Wow, that's a-- OK, you're asking my opinion. I can say my opinion.

JT: Your opinion.

EB: One is people with disabilities can be their own worst enemies. We need clear definitions and not allow abuse of a great law and a civil right to hinder those who really need it. And I'll leave it at that.

JT: Yeah, I was going to ask you to elaborate but--

[00:14:21]

EB: OK. Well, I can. I'm-- We don't need profiteers. We don't need people who make excuses to create a negative attitude. Let me go this way. I raise dogs. I love dogs. My dogs aren't service dogs. I would

not think a thing of bringing one of my dogs into this hotel. However because I use a wheelchair, I could probably pull it off and that would be wrong because my dogs are not service dogs as an example. Now, I'm not picking on people with service dogs, that could be said with wheelchairs, scooters, you know, on and on, we-- that we can be our-- it's human nature. We can be our own worst enemy. That's not all. Repeat your question I guess.

[00:15:20]

JT: My question is, so looking forward to the next 10 years, what would you like to see the ADA do?

EB: OK.

JT: But still needs to be worked on.

EB: You know, I've traveled the country-- the blessing of traveling to country being an advocate and a consultant, I've made a big difference but I feel like, yet my own post office in my little town, 47346, is not accessible. Tell me why, tell me why? OK. It's still-- now, they provide me service through my mailbox but grandmas and grandpas in my old town can't walk up the steps, you know. It's not just about Ed in his wheelchair, it's about architecture. You know, attitude, architecture, those are-- and communication, those are really the three barriers that the ADA needs to keep, keep chipping away at.

JT: What would you like them to do in terms of communication?

EB: Communication, you know, it's vision, it's hearing, spoken word, it's intellect. Technology changes those things everyday. The ADA can't just be a piece of dead policy that lets technology pass it on by. The ADA is going to have to keep up with technology. As technology changes, the ADA is going to need to look at technology on how it can improve the elimination of barriers with peoples with communication problems, and then to another extent, people with architectural barriers as technology changes. I mean, my grandpa would never have believed those glass elevators climbing up that wall right now. It's unbelievable, you know. He wouldn't just want-- he wouldn't want to listen to you. He'd want to stand there and watch that all day because that engineering wasn't available in my grandpa's day. But when the old wooden churches I talked about with the wooden steps, it wasn't their fault, they designed the church that way, people like me didn't survive.

We had a place in their church. It was buried behind it. So they made room in the community for people like me, we just didn't survive. Now, we're in the community, make room for us or bear our burden because if you don't bear our burden or if we don't allow us to carry our own weight or pull what weight we can, you're going to have to bear our burden.

[00:17:55]

[END OF INTERVIEW]