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**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
MIKE FURNISH
DECEMBER 4, 2013
INTERVIEWER: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS
VIDEOGRAPHER: PEGGY HOLTZ
RECORD ID: 021-DO**

MF: MIKE FURNISH
JHS: JANE HARLAN-SIMMONS
PH: PEGGY HOLTZ

[00:00:10]

MF: Okay, My name is Mike Furnish. I am the president and CEO of Special Olympics Indiana. I work at that state headquarters office, which is located at 96th and Zionsville Road here in Indianapolis.

JHS: How long have you been with Special Olympics?

[00:00:27]

MF: That's a two-part answer. I've been with Special Olympics since 1973, when, as a college student, I was invited to help coach a basketball team for a new program called Special Olympics. In that span of time, since then now, I've volunteered for 16 years. And then in 1990, was hired by Special Olympics when they moved their state headquarters from Indiana State University to Indianapolis, where I've worked ever since.

JHS: You've really been at it since the beginning then.

MF: Almost. I've not -- not since the beginning, but if I stood on my tiptoes, I could see the beginning.

[00:01:05]

JHS: Yeah. All right, well, can you talk about the beginning and the early days of Special Olympics Indiana from what you know about that?

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MF: The first games ever were held, the first Special Olympics games ever were held at Soldier Field in Chicago in 1968. They were considered world games in the sense that people from across the United States, Canada and France all participated in this revolutionary event that was the brainchild of Eunice Kennedy Shriver. Indiana had roughly 100 people who attended that game, mostly coming from state hospitals and other institutions for that first-ever event. There were people at the games in Soldier Field who thought that Special Olympics had a place in the world and wanted Indiana to be one of the first. So in 1969, a volunteer group in Indianapolis organized the first Indiana games that were held on June 5th and 6th, 1969 with track and field being held at Busch Stadium, a baseball field of all things, and then a swimming competition off site at a different location.

JHS: You really have the dates down. That's great. Was Indiana-- how did it rank in terms of, you know, the states that first got involved? Was it one of the first states?

MF: We were one of the first. It was --the call went out from the games at Soldier Field for groups that would be interested to start organizing. And Indiana was truly amongst the first who formed a committee and began planning toward an actual event called Special Olympics. The good part, the happy part of that experience was in 1969 that the event was attended by a couple of professors from Indiana State University, Judy Campbell and Tom Songster. And after they saw the games, saw the spirit and the concept of Special Olympics, they collaborated, they went back to the university, got permission and actually began really Special Olympics Indiana for the first time with organization there on the campus at Indiana State University.

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JHS: I was going to ask who the key people were who got it started. Were there any other people that were key in getting it started?

MF: Well, there were several people, many of whom I don't know who are on that original organizing committee. I do know that John Dickerson from The Arc of Indiana, who is still around, was a member of that group. But I know it that there were several people from Indianapolis, from the Indianapolis area who were primary in making sure that we had the resources necessary to hold the first games.

PH: I was wondering, where did the funding come when started?

[00:03:58]

MF: If I'm not mistaken, there were some preliminary grants that made the first games possible. It was a fairly low-budget affair. I think the stadium was donated by the Indianapolis Indians, and swimming was hosted by a member at his club. So that was of minimal expense. So there were very few costs. The people who participated, there were several hundred people who showed up for the first games. And they essentially attended on the budget of the agency or institution or school from who they represented. So costs were minimal, and stayed in that mode for the first many, several years until 1974 actually when Lilly Endowment provided a grant that paid for the first paid executive director for Special Olympics anywhere in the world. So the organization around the games, the amount of fundraising that

took place to support the effort became centralized and much more focused once there was a full-time paid person on the job.

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JHS: What was that like, do you think, for folks that were coming as patients of mental institutions, for other institutions to Soldier Field to compete in games? What do you think that was like for them?

MF: It's been interesting to talk with people who participated in the first games of those first few years of Special Olympics. To find out that they were happy to be anywhere, it seems to be. There are actually a few of those people who are still around, still actually participating in Special Olympics. They're now in their 60s. My senses from everybody who I've talked with who was there who was involved in the process, this was just remarkable that there was some place to go and have something constructive and meaningful to do where people cheered and I had a chance to do what I wanted to do. So the other way I would think about that, there are pictures of the first games, there are pictures of our athletes standing on award stands. And I would say, as I see those photos, they look confused. They're not quite sure what's going on. I think the opportunity to participate in a public event in a sporting event; it was probably the first time for all of them.

And the idea of being able to stand on a stage and have people cheer, to receive an award, it was something they had no point of reference for, and was the beginning of I think those people beginning to develop a sense for how they could fit in the community, how they could be valued as members of society just like anyone else.

[00:06:53]

JHS: That must have been just remarkable to have that kind of transition. Would you say that the public attitude towards those athletes was any different back then than it is today? And if so, how? How would you characterize that?

[00:07:09]

MF: There were a number of very genuinely caring and dedicated people who were involved in Special Olympics from the very beginning. In fact, knowing many of those folks, there were many remarkably talented people who were drawn to Special Olympics because of their concern or caring for people with disabilities combined with their love of sports. There was also, I suspect, and I'm fairly confident of this, some fairly paternalistic attitudes about what took place at Special Olympics, that it was probably perceived as just a nice activity out in the community, not connected with any real important outcomes or benefits, but just something nice to do for people who have been excluded from everyday life. I can say, you know, fast forward 40 years, that some of those attitudes are still prevalent, that the notion that a person with an intellectual disability is challenged to have a fully meaningful life still exists today and still is one of the greatest barriers and one of the greatest challenges for an organization like Special Olympics to overcome.

[00:08:26]

JHS: So presumably, before this all got started, there must have been less physical activity, less emphasis on athletic achievement. How do you think the advent of Special Olympics changed that for people with disabilities?

MF: I think it's an interesting question, why Special Olympics sparked such dramatic interest and has continued to for so many decades. I do think in those residential institutions and the places where Special Olympics athletes came from that physical activity was a big part of their structured daily program, if they had one, that the idea of staying busy, staying active, it was not foreign to the folks that participated in Special Olympics to have the chance to run or to have races or to play games and those types of things. So Special Olympics in some respects probably gave those early competitors, the first joiners, if you will, a chance to do what they've practiced or learned. Special Olympics actually started, the real germ of the idea started in 1963 when Eunice Kennedy Shriver held a camp at her home where they had a variety of activities.

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There was a lot of-- there was an emerging level of interest and excitement to find out what people with intellectual disabilities could do. It was during a time, during an era where people had been shut away, where too many people lived out of the mainstream of society. So there was no certainty what might take place. The best example of that that I could testify to would be at the first games at Soldier Field. They competed in track events and field events, throwing the shot put and the softball and those types of things. But they also had swimming. And they built a temporary pool on the field at Soldier Field for the Special Olympics competition. And as that competition started, there literally was a lifeguard every three steps around the pool to provide for the safety of those people who signed up for swimming. Because people were sure when our athletes jumped in the pool, they'd go straight to the bottom.

They didn't. Our athletes competed successfully in those games. And, you know, today, many train year-round many hours a week and are proficient swimmers, you know, beyond what probably most people might say.

JHS: That is amazing that they built a pool. [Inaudible] [Chuckling] Wow!

PH: Especially back in the 60s.

JHS: What have been some of the proudest moments for Special Olympics Indiana for the time that you've been here?

[00:11:21]

MF: Well, I know some of the proudest moments were the first moments. When people began to gather for the games at Indiana State University on an annual basis, there were important people who attended those games. There were senators and governors, and anybody who might be considered a celebrity in Indiana almost always found their way to Special Olympics. And I know that was proud for everybody who joined. I know for those celebrities or for those top flight people who attended, it meant a lot to

them to be able to support such a cause. But I have to know at the same time, the ability to travel, the ability to stay on a university campus away from home for a few days meant a lot to both the athletes and their families as a testimony to what they could do when given the opportunity. That moment is still recreated annually, multiple times now with the number of events that take place.

[00:12:23]

And I still think the ability to work independently, to show off those skills, to interact freely in a community where you're accepted is still a proud part of every Special Olympics athletes' life. People that go to our summer games, which is that biggest Special Olympics event every year, that really started with the first games in 1969, athletes frequently report how much they enjoyed feeling like a college student, feeling like they kind of own the town on that weekend. Now, over the years, there have been a number of Special Olympics events that have I think given Special Olympics Indiana a personality, some points of reference in history that have made everyone associated with our organization proud. One of the big ones would be in 1987, South Bend University was host to the International Special Olympics games, at which time, I don't know the numbers, but thousands of athletes from all over the world representing many countries congregated at Notre Dame University that summer and competed in a variety of sports.

And it was magical for what that did here in Indiana. It was a highly visible event. It was during a time when ABC Wide World of Sports would set up their broadcasting equipment and actually produce an entire Saturday show on Special Olympics and the international games. What it did for us, what it did for Special Olympics, in the way of creating pride and enthusiasm, is it gave everybody who supported those games a sense of ownership in Special Olympics. A little beyond what could be created just by holding games within the state. And what came of that then were partnerships with groups and organizations that continued to be involved in Special Olympics. People that were there always remember all the experiences that they had in South Bend in the summer of 1987.

[00:14:30]

JHS: Sounds like something we need to find out more about in terms of getting some photos or other information. That's important. Since Special Olympics was started, there have been a lot of changes in terms of philosophy about what's best for people with disabilities. There have been paradigm shifts in services. Kids have been mainstreamed into school classes. Have there been any changes in Special Olympics since it started in terms of more integration with the rest of the community?

[00:15:06]

MF: Special Olympics has been challenged almost from day one to keep up with society. And it is considered, I think within the Special Olympics organization, to be our job to do so. We started in 19-- in the late 60s, the early 70s when public education wasn't guaranteed for kids with special needs. We started with people who were volunteering, who were really stepping way beyond what anyone else had done to be involved in support of this cause. And in this time span since, and really less than 50

years now, we are living in a whole new world with kids going to their home schools, in many cases, sharing classrooms with kids without disabilities. It is uncommon or less common today that people with disabilities work together in a group setting. Everything has changed from the first days. And Special Olympics I think has been, in some respects, a leader in making those things possible.

[00:16:13]

In another respect, certainly paying attention to what the trends are in education, for example, and making changes. An example of that would be in 1988, Indiana was one of the first Special Olympics programs anywhere to volunteer to pilot test a program called Unified Sports. It's a concept where a sports team would be composed of people with and without disabilities on the same team. They would train together; they would compete together against other unified sports teams. Well, that was a revolutionary idea in 1987 for Special Olympics. It was timely in the sense that that had paralleled what was taking place in schools as kids were moving away from special education settings into broader, more general settings. And I don't know if Special Olympics was following or they were leading when they devised and created these mechanisms by which a kid with intellectual disability could be on the same team with a brother or a sister perhaps who didn't have a disability.

I can tell you it revolutionized what took place in Indiana. Unified Sports, since 1988, has become about 1/3 of everything that takes place in the state. Of the 11,000 athletes that compete on an annual basis, today in 2013, there are almost 4,000 people who participate as partners, the persons without disabilities on those bowling teams or golf teams or basketball teams that play alongside our athletes. Probably the biggest, and I can say this today with the excitement of the moment, probably the biggest change, the biggest thing that has taken place with Special Olympics in Indiana is on the verge of happening as we speak. This year, the Indiana High School Athletic Association, the organization that supports and coordinates interscholastic sports amongst high schools throughout Indiana, a rich tradition of the best and the brightest kids competing for championships in all those sports they offer, well, in 2013, the IHSA board approved unanimously to include unified sports as part of their annual regular competition that would be sanctioned and recognized as an IHSA sport.

[00:18:37]

So before this year is up, before 2014 is over, there will be kids with special needs competing on unified sports track teams winning IHSA medals and trophies just like all the other best kids in their schools.

JHS: Do you need a drink of water?

MF: Probably.

JHS: Or catch your breath or anything? [laughter]

[00:19:04]

MF: Oh, I can talk forever.

[00:19:08]

PH: We had John Dickerson in here before.

MF: Well, So I'm still-- I'm batting second here, as far as talkers go. [laughter]

JHS: He's hard to compete with. Oh, you're doing great. Well, you talked about how Indiana kind of stood out in terms of it being one of the first states to do this, the thing that you just described with the Unified Sports and such, are there things today that's making Indiana into a leader or maybe, you know, not so that we're not competing with others, what going on with that?

MF: I think, I think it would be fair to say that Special Olympics Indiana has been a forerunner in the Special Olympics movement, perhaps even in the movement of those activities and programs for people with disabilities. We look for opportunities to stretch what people think is likely impossible, and continue to do so and look for those opportunities, just like with the IHSAA. The examples I can think of immediately would be we, as Indiana was the first state anywhere to hold ballroom dancing competition as a Special Olympics sport. We invented flag football as a special Olympics sport. As I mentioned earlier, Unified Sports actually was first held in, you know, here in Indiana, as that program was developed within the International Special Olympics Organization. And then in addition to that, Indiana has been a forerunner in a program called Athlete Leadership. We have now for over 10 years, since actually the late 90s, have developed a program that guides and gives opportunities to athletes who want to do something other than compete at a place in Special Olympics.

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And in doing so, we have regular university setting training weekends where our athletes can show up and learn how to speak in public, can learn how to participate on a committee or on a management team or a board of directors. They can even show up and learn how to coach, officiate games and the such. And what we have discovered in doing that is that we are recruiting brand new volunteers to the cause. People who understand what Special Olympics does, its benefits, the challenge that are associated. And we now are finding that we have many of our athletes who are becoming some of the best leaders in our organization, members of our state level board of directors and members of virtually every management team or volunteer group that we have in operation throughout the state.

JHS: People have other gifts besides their athletic ability that you're tapping into.

[00:21:53]

MF: Special Olympics actually was built and founded-- it started growing immediately from the small idea of a track and field competition, and maybe a swimming competition, to offering training and sporting events in a variety of sports. I think globally now, there may be as many as 40 different sports where athletes compete. The whole premise is that no two people are alike in their interests or abilities. And the only way to provide the kinds of services, the kinds of opportunities that folks deserve are, you know, to create these many varied ways of being involved in special Olympics.

[00:22:33]

PH: Are there winter activity?

MF: Special Olympics, part of our mission statement is we're year-round sports training and competition. And that's literally how Special Olympics works. There is never an off-season. If we were setting here today in the middle of basketball season with our big state tournament coming up in a month, we would do so knowing that the day that the tournament is done, that this is the first day of training for a whole new series of sports during the summer. So our athletes are rarely not engaged. And those sports include both summer sports, as well as winter sports. We have winter games on an annual basis where we have downhill skiers and ice skaters, and even snowboarders.

PH: Where do they do that?

MF: Perfect North Slopes in Lawrenceburg serves as the host for our winter games. We have gone to their facilities for the past three years for winter games. Prior to that, French Lick was the host for the annual Special Olympics winter games for probably two decades.

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JHS: Have there been any changes in terms of the types of disabilities of the athletes that Special Olympics has involved?

MF: There has. There are some dynamics that I think we are generally aware of. We don't do diagnostic work within Special Olympics. We are not actively involved in the developing and eligibility determination for a person interested in Special Olympics. So most of that, most of our sense for the changes in people who participate in Special Olympics is based just on general observation. I can say as we started in the early decades, Special Olympics involved a fairly broad spectrum of people, that there are people who back in the day were considered to be educably mentally retarded, who had very mild disabilities, and, in many cases, blended into regular situations pretty easily. But we also then had a wide range of people with fairly severe disabilities who also participated in Special Olympics. I can say over the years that both extremes have narrowed, if you will.

[00:24:50]

People with mild disabilities now tend not to be included in the group that thinks of participating in Special Olympics. And while they're probably the largest number of people who would be considered eligible, they tend to be the least represented in our program. There also are changes, you know, in the past decade or so I would think in terms of what might be considered closely related developmental disability, groups that participate in Special Olympics. Here in 2013, obviously we're seeing a dramatic increase in the number of people with autism who come to our events and participate in Special Olympics. But I do think there are changes that probably have been reflective of the disability community in general that have obviously manifested themselves in the way Special Olympics participants are numbered.

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JHS: Is there any relationship between Special Olympics and the Paralympics?

MF: There is. Special Olympics and the Paralympics operate really as separately driven organizations. We both work in the Olympic model, if you will. But there's a really significant distinction that really has led to the fact that our two organizations work together very infrequently. The Paralympics is an organization that targets folks of all types of disabilities. And their focus is really Olympic in style. Whenever they gather and compete, they are looking within each one of their disability categories, if you will, for the fastest. That is their orientation. Special Olympics, from its beginning, has been geared for people with intellectual disabilities, or as would have been said in its founding years, mental retardation. We were founded that way, and that's been our mission for 45 years as a result of the influence of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the founder of Special Olympics, who's sister Rosemary had an intellectual disability.

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In many respects, Special Olympics was Mrs. Shriver's response to the type of treatment and life that her sister experienced growing up in one of the most famous families in the world. Consequently, our organization has a narrower range of people who participate. And we also have adopted a significantly different philosophy to what we do to what Paralympics offers. We feel like it's our job for all people who come to our program to see that a person, regardless of ability, has a place to compete at a level where they're competing with folks of similar ability. So while Paralympics tends to focus on the fastest and the most furious of their competitors, we value athletes regardless of their ability. And actually, one of the first things people notice whenever they come to Special Olympics is that the person who finishes in eighth place often gets cheered for as loud or louder than the person who finishes first.

JHS: That's a very clear explanation of that. Maybe-- well, before I move on to talking to you about your time at Noble, are there other things that you want to tell us about Special Olympics Indiana that I didn't ask you?

[00:28:36]

MF: You've asked questions that have given me a lot of leeway to say all the important things. I would say that Special Olympics, one thing that characterizes our organization today is that we really are an organization of volunteers, that there is a small staff of people who work for Special Olympics, who coordinate all of the events that take place. In Indiana, we average having seven Special Olympics events a day, that our folks are involved year-round and on literally a daily basis and having chances to compete locally or travel to area or sectional competitions in addition to those big events that Special Olympics is known for. I will say, though, that as we do all of that, that's all done by people who volunteer. Now, in most sports organizations, when you think in terms of how does this get done, the work is always done by parents. You go to a local Little League field or a youth soccer field, and the coaches and the people running the concession stands and all the people, it's all a giant organization of moms and dads who are making sure their son or daughter have something productive to do with their life through sports.

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Well, Special Olympics isn't that way. We have great families that are involved. We have families that continue to provide leadership within our organization. But by our last research, over half the people who are involved in Special Olympics have no real connected reason for being involved other than the fact that they're driven by the mission and they have developed or cultivated a love for the people who participate in our sports. That distinguishes us now from virtually every other organization in the State of Indiana. We have 11,000 people who compete. They do so at the goodwill and encouragement of people who don't have to support them. Most of our folks, when they leave Special Olympics, spend the rest of their lives with their family or with people who are paid to be with them. And at least for those few hours every week when I'm involved in Special Olympics, I'm with people who want to be with me just because. And I will testify that that is a fundamental characteristic of Special Olympics that keeps us relevant and keeps us continuing to figure out how to make it better on an annual and strategic planned basis.

JHS: Excellent. That does remind me of one other question. What do you see as the future trends for athletes with intellectual disabilities and for Special Olympics?

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MF: I will tell you that there are a few things that will take place in the future with Special Olympics that are really fundamental to us continuing to be the kind of organization that we should. The first is focus on health. You have to be at least eight years of age to start competing in Special Olympics. But there is no upper age limit. So, for example, at our biggest event last year, we had an 86-year-old person playing Bocce in our competition. We find that it's common that when people join Special Olympics, they never leave. While it would be our fondest hope that people would grow through adulthood and have the kinds of relationship opportunities and fun opportunities that anybody might have, but our experience is that Special Olympics tends to be where my friends go, and so that's where I stay involved. So it has put us in a position of watching people with intellectual disabilities age.

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And one of the things that is impossible to ignore is the fact that they tend to not age gracefully. They are highly underserved by the medical profession. They are challenged in ways that are very noteworthy. Special Olympics athletes tend to have a 40% greater likelihood of having a preventable health problem. We find when we have done health screenings at our events, that 7 out of 10 of our athletes have an acute medical problem on the day they're there. To translate that, that is to say 70% of our athletes are in pain when they show up at Special Olympics. We're not a medical organization. We're not a health-based organization. But we can't ignore such a great dynamic. Half of our athletes are obese. And what we have begun to do, work that's actually been now in operation for nearly a decade, is to develop a better understanding of what makes that happen and what we can do to fix it.

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We obviously can't provide or solve medical problems, but we do provide an avenue by which people who are involved in our program can live healthier lifestyles. Special Olympics is motivating for people who are involved in our organization. And through that motivation, we are finding athletes do take the opportunity to be more thoughtful about how they eat, that they are more motivated to train more often. And over the next decade, over the next decades, it's going to be, continue to be a great focus for us to train volunteers and to orchestrate our program to support better health, more healthy activity, more healthy eating, and then see what we can do to create the right connections with medical service providers to see that our athletes are on the outside. It's a complicated thing for a person in our program to live a healthy life. It's not simple to see that they have the supports and the doctor who will spend the time and the support person who will make sure that their history and their medical, you know, prescription information, all of that kind of stuff is made to be part of the way that person grows up.

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So it's a big challenge for us. It will continue to be a focus. I think the other big focus for us going forward, and we are just, again, at the threshold of this challenge, will be to reach people when they're younger. We have a brand new program called Young Athletes, which targets kids age 2 to 7. Now, that's not for competition with us. But we are actively looking for ways to bring kids at that age together in an active setting where they learn how to cooperate with each other, they begin to develop those fine motor and gross motor skills that are so predictive of how successful a person will be physically as they get older. It's great stuff for sports, but it's great stuff for life when a person at that age begins to learn how to maintain their balance and do some of the basic things that sometimes just are ignored because people think they can't.

JHS: I'm glad I asked about that. And to clarify, when you're talking about the health problems that your athletes have and the percentages and such, that's in comparison-- in other words, the people that don't come to Special Olympics that have disabilities could probably be said to have an even greater health problem because they aren't getting the exercise and such. So if anything, these folks are in better shape than the other folks that aren't.

[00:36:05]

MF: We do know from research that people who participate in Special Olympics are twice as likely to be employed as people who are not in Special Olympics with an intellectual disability. I think we can make the same assumptions that people who are involved in Special Olympics, albeit they have serious health challenges as they age, are in better shape than their peers who are at home eating potato chips and watching TV or not living an active lifestyle. It is a challenge within our organization, within the people who are involved to get them to be more health-conscious. And it's a great problem for us to solve that. But it's a great problem in part because it's a great cultural problem. This is not a phenomenon. We're not experiencing things that are unique just to people in Special Olympics. Our country right now suffers dramatically from the health problems that go along with not eating right, without staying active. So we're fighting two battles, if you may.

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And it will become, I suspect, an ongoing and permanent part of the way Special Olympics has to think about its work.

JHS: Great. Let me just check in with you on the time and see if we have any time-- yeah, how much time?

MF: 15 minutes.

JHS: Okay, let's spend just a little bit of time on Noble. Tell us about your years working at noble of Indiana and what your role was and what was happening in services at that time.

MF: I started my engagement with Noble, which is actually where my involvement with Special Olympics started in 1973. It's kind of a fun story because I was working my way through college, and the person who worked next to me out of the blue one day said, "what are you doing Tuesday night?" And it was easy for me back when I was 19 years old to say, "I'm available. What's up?" He goes, "well, I'll pick you up at 6:00. Bring your swimming suit." And I heard that invitation and thought party, you know, we're going out someplace swimming, and this could be great fun. Well, what I didn't know is that my friend was the lifeguard in a recreation program at Noble Center, and he needed volunteers in the swimming pool. I went along. I joined in the party, if you will, in the swimming pool with several people that worked at Noble Centers who were enjoying a night out of recreation.

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It was almost, to not sound too corny, a baptism for me. Within 20 minutes, I was 100% engaged by the people who were in that swimming pool. They were friendly, they were excited, they enjoyed when we played games, they seemed to have the capacity to learn more if we played more. And while I had zero interest, zero background when I got into the pool that night, I literally drove home with Phil that night thinking, this might be something I'd enjoy doing. Within a month, people at Noble Center came to me with a sheet of paper saying, what would you think about being the coach of the Special Olympics basketball team? They're just starting a tournament, and we understand that you played basketball when you were in high school and some in college, and you'd make a great coach if you'd be interested. And I worked for 16 years then at Noble Centers following that invitation to coach their team. The first few as a volunteer, and then for several years, over a decade, as a paid staff person there.

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My way in to work at Noble Center was to work in the residential program. So while I supported the recreation activity, I coached on a volunteer basis for Special Olympics. I was also the weekend supervisor at a group home for eight teenage boys who were considered delinquent or pre-delinquent. So it was a fairly challenging group of young men. And at age 20, I was ready to try about anything. And I learned a lot. I actually learned all the most important things I needed to know about my work and my career from those boys living with them over the span of several years, you know, ultimately being the manager of that group home. It was natural as I became more involved to get more involved in community activities. And while Special Olympics provided an avenue for that, we found that the

people who worked at Noble could respond to a lot of different opportunities; opportunities to travel, opportunities to go into the community for a lot of-- in 1970, '73, '74, that was fairly cutting edge stuff.

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And it was just great fun to have these friends that I could take places and do things with that ultimately led to us working with the Indianapolis Parks Department, writing a federal grant, of all things, to fund a recreation program that would exist in the community, where people didn't then come to Noble Centers for their basketball or swimming or arts and crafts or games, but they would actually go to a community center on their side of town. And that transformed all of the extracurricular activities, you might say, for the people who worked at Nobles Center. So they had great community ways to stay involved and have good outside of work life. My work there continued in that vein for almost, you know, like I say, 15 years, and led directly to the opportunity that came my way through Special Olympics.

JHS: Any other highlights from your time at Noble that you would like to share with us?

MF: Yeah, I have a story. I'll tell you a story. Are you allowed to tell stories on these?

PH: Oh, yeah.

[00:42:11]

JHS: Stories are good. This is the Story Tent

MF: Okay, well, I'll tell you a story. This is a turning point story for me in that that was early on when I was asked to volunteer to coach a basketball team at Noble Center's first night of practice. The athletes all showed up on the appointed hour. And the first thing that I did traditionally would be to walk around the gym and introduce myself to people who I didn't know. Came up to one young man, held out my hand to say "hi, I'm Mike Furnish." And before I could finish that sentence, he says, "I know who you are. You're Mike Furnish. You went to Speedway High School. You graduated in 1970. You and Tom Gilberts were the captains of the basketball team, and Speedway won the County Tourney in 1969." And I looked at him, and I have no idea how somebody would know that. And before I could ask him how he knew it, he says, "well, I went to Speedway too, but you wouldn't know me because I was in Special Education."

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Well, it comes out that I was shaking hands with maybe the best Special Olympics basketball player I ever coached. He was tremendous. I learned more as he and I became friends and continue to be friends to this day. He's old, however, now. That he was as involved and as motivated by participation and sports as I ever was. And I would have told you on that day no one could have enjoyed sports more than I. But I find out that when I go to Meadowood Park to play with all the guys on the team and to play against the best competition, Chuck would go to the other park in Speedway, a place called Leonard Park. The courts weren't as nice. The nets weren't up all the time. And he'd play against anybody who would show up. But the more and more I talked with people about Chuck, they'd say, "yeah, we know Chuck. Chuck was always over at Leonard Park. He was always somebody who was ready to play if we

needed him." There was no doubt in my mind, and I'm a kid at this time, but there's no doubt in my mind that there's injustice in the fact that somebody like Chuck who loved to participate in sports for all of the best reasons, you know, that by a little accident of birth or by whatever it is that was the difference between he and I, that he would never get a chance to play sports until that day when I held my hand out to him just wasn't right.

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That I know that through Chuck, there are hundreds, thousands, probably in this world millions of people who would embrace the opportunity if they're invited to be on the team. And it really isn't that complicated. That has become, if you will, the guiding force in my life and my career with Special Olympics. But I think it's that thing that causes everybody who ever gets involved and thinks about it to be so dedicated and to be willing to make a difference even though it doesn't involve pay and it doesn't involve glory very often.

JHS: That was a nice story. Well, that's a great place to end unless there's something else that you want to add.

MF: If you're happy with that, I am too. Yeah, yeah.

JHS: Good, good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]