

Jason Nelms

Dallas Wheelchair Maverick and Head Coach of UTA Lady Movin' Mavs

*Interview conducted by
Daniel Eudaly
in 2016 in Arlington, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Jason Nelms was born in 1980, and grew up in Michigan. He became a paraplegic at age three. He graduated from the University of Texas at Arlington with a bachelor's in Criminal Justice in 2007. He has been involved in adapted sports, particularly wheelchair basketball, for most of his life. Nelms played on the United States' Paralympic wheelchair basketball team in 2004, 2008, and 2012, winning the bronze medal in 2012. He is currently a member of the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks and has helped to win national championships in 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2016. Nelms began his collegiate career with the UTA Movin' Mavs in 2000, helping the team win a national championship in 2002. He is currently the Head Coach of the Lady Movin' Mavs, who won their first national championship in 2016.

Topics Discussed

- Biographical information
- Attitudes towards disability in public school
- Introduction to adapted sports
- Accessibility and attitudes towards disability at UTA
- Disability community in the DFW Metroplex
- Experiences in wheelchair basketball
- Accessibility in K-12 school in Michigan
- Nelms' coaching and advocacy for the Lady Movin' Mavs

This is Daniel Eudaly interviewing Jason Nelms for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is May the third, 2016, and I am at the Physical Education Building here today to talk with Jason Nelms about disability history. Thank you very much for participating in the Oral History Program.

Nelms

Thank you.

Eudaly

<topic>Biographical information</topic>

Uhm, why don't we start with some background information...your childhood or something like that?

Nelms

Okay, like when I was disabled? Or...

Eudaly

Sure, sure, yeah.

Nelms

Okay, I got into a car wreck when I was three, so in...'83. I got into a car wreck and became a para-T12...an... that's...that's pretty much it. Got into a lil' car wreck. [A T12 paraplegic typically has full use of the upper body and partial paralysis in the lower body.]

Eudaly

So what was it like being young with a disability?

Nelms

Ahh, I never really thought about it. Where I grew up there were a lot...it was...I don't wanna' say a lot of dirt roads. It was more country, so we didn't... I didn't see a lot of interaction with other people in wheelchairs, so it never really crossed my mind when I was growin' up as far as that...until later on in life.

Eudaly

<topic>Attitudes towards disability in public school</topic>

Yeah. So, there weren't any, like, problems.... You know, issues at school or anything like that? Everyone...was everyone accepting?

Nelms

Yeah, everyone was pretty much accepting. You don't really have...you don't really have a big problem with kids and stuff, I would say. I mean, yeah sure, some kids in school can be kind of...you know, they can say the wrong things here and there, but really you get most of that from, like the parents. Like the parents, when they see you comin' they want to grab their kid and move them out of the way or say, like, "You know that...somethin' bad happened to that person" even though they have no idea. So a lot of time it's parents givin' misinformation, not so much kids that are the ones that are, you know, out there, or the ones that.... I don't wanna' say annoyin' or causing problems for you, but a lot of times it's just the adults not knowing.

Eudaly

<topic>Introduction to adapted sports</topic>

Absolutely, so, when did you start getting interested in adapted sports?

Nelms

I started getting interested in adapted sports probably around tenth grade. In ninth grade, my first time wanting to be athletic and stuff, we started a wrestling team at our high school, and was, you know, "I wanna' go wrestle." So, I first went there and started wrestling—at first the coaches were a little stand-offish, and they were like, "Well, if you can...if you can pass a physical then okay." They were worried about injuries and stuff, so I went and passed a physical, and...and that was great, and then after a year, I went to an event where there was someone who was about 35 pounds heavier than me, but they were also disabled, and their coaches were like, "Well we still want you to wrestle that person." I was like, all right, screw it. I'll do it. So I wrestled that guy. I beat him in like, I don't know, 12 or 15 seconds.

It was something crazy, and I was like, "You know what? I want to...I want to beat people up more on my own level, kind of in a way." So after that, I was wheelin' down a street, and another disabled individual from the community happened to be headed towards basketball practice, and he saw me and that was...he asked me if I was interested in goin' and playin' basketball. And I was like, "Yeah, sure. Why not? You know, I'm not doin' anything else." And that was my first taste of seein' really anybody else that was really disabled as a...like a disabled organization, you know, like wrestlin' the one person was just that one thing, but it was nice to see an actual sport in a community.

Eudaly

<topic>Accessibility and attitudes towards disability at UTA</topic>

So... What was it like at UTA—of course, you were here fairly recently, but—everything was very accessible at that point...?

Nelms

Yeah, UTA's great. The only negative part is, you know, some of the elevators goin' over the bridges. Those tend to break down a lot, and you get stuck in those. Sometimes you're late for one class 'cause you have to—all of a sudden you have to go all the way down and find another path and get over across the street, but other than that, I mean, UTA is great. I mean everything is pretty much...everything is accessible. You know, everything is out there, the people that have blazed the path before us have done an amazing job, and UTA's done an amazing job.

Eudaly

That's great, so, is it safe to say that attitudes when you first came here are pretty much where they are now, or have they changed at all?

Nelms

Yeah, I would say they're pretty...pretty much where they are. I mean, if I was gonna give one complaint since I've been here since 2000, and 16 years later...parking. (laughs) I think you're gonna have that on any university, though, but I've noticed that they've taken down a few handicapped spots, especially in the back area, and they haven't put up any more. So that would probably be my only concern, but other than that, I mean, everything here is really, is really great, so there's not a lot to complain about. I came here in 2000, and I never left. 'Cause I liked it so much.

Eudaly

<topic>Disability community in the DFW Metroplex</topic>

That's great... What has the community been like among athletes and even just people in general with disabilities at UTA?

Nelms

Ah, I mean the community is awesome! The DFW area and UTA included in that has such a huge impact on the wheelchair basketball side of things that I don't even know if they even really notice what they have here, but they have the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks, they have the Dallas Lady Mavericks, they have the men and the women here at UTA now, they have a prep, a JV, and a varsity junior wheelchair basketball team that's here in the area, so I mean, you're already lookin' at seven, seven teams right there that are in the area, let alone all the guys that have come up and either have gone through UTA or played on the Dallas Mavericks that are all still here, and that support system is huge around UTA.

Eudaly

<topic>Experiences in wheelchair basketball</topic>

So, talk a little bit more about your experiences in wheelchair basketball.

Nelms

They've been great. I got dis.... Like I said, I got disabled when I was three. No real idea where my life would have gone if I wasn't disabled, but with it bein' disabled, I mean, I've gone to three Paralympics. I've seen, probably over 40 countries and got to experience all their cultures, and that's somethin' that probably never would've happened without...without athletics on the disability side. If that wasn't there, then—adapted athletics if that's the way you wanna' say it—but if that wasn't there then I don't know if any of those avenues ever would've opened up. 'Cause they didn't start until I got here at UTA in 2000, and that's when the first door opened up as far as international competition. So without... Without UTA even in that picture, I mean, yeah. Probably none of that would have ever happened, so, you know, that's pretty much put me on a life path to where, you know, I'm involved in a wheelchair company now, and I'm able to coach the women's team here and just stay in that community. It's been awesome.

Eudaly

So for people, not necessarily in UTA, but just sort of the public at large, what has their perception of wheelchair basketball been like? Has that, you know, changed? Has interest grown over time that you've noticed?

Nelms

Well, I wouldn't s.... I would would love to say that interest has grown. I would love to say that, you know there...we're sellin' out more than when I first got here, but that really isn't the case. If I have to put a reason on it, I would almost come to the marketing ability of it, or how much it has been marketed. I think when [Jim] Hayes was here, Hayes did an unbelievable job, and I think we've all been trying to pick up all the pieces since he left, and I think maybe we've kinda let certain things slack a little bit as far as, especially bein' out in the public eye a little bit more and bein', you know, bigger on UTA campus, so I think that that is starting to come back now. I think we lost it for a few years. We had some lows here, especially performance-wise, and I think we lost that, but I think it's startin' to come back.

As far as the community, though, it's great. I mean, there's so many times that I'll go out, and I'll stop at a restaurant and I'll be stopped by someone and they'll say, "Hey play with the Movin' Mavs?" or "Do you know this person?" You know, there was one time we were flyin' through Chicago, and a teammate of mine, one of his friends happened to walk in through the airport. He didn't know us or know that we were with UTA, but he just started talking about wheelchair basketball, and he was like, yeah, you know oh, you say UTA. I think my friend, I think that's where he went. I was like, yeah. Yeah, your friend went here. So the knowledge base is out there.... It's...it's getting bigger... We've gotta' get our fan base bigger, though, especially at UTA.

But.... It's huge, especially if you look at media. I mean, I think Heineken, is it Heineken that has the commercial out where they take four guys that aren't in wheelchairs and they go play with their friend in wheelchair? Um, Desiree Miller [was on the American women's Paralympic team in 2012] just did...just did one for the Paralympics an' Olympics gettin' ready to go. Matt Scott [three time American wheelchair basketball paralympian] did huge ones for Nike back in the day. I think in the public eye that's becoming more, more aware and more out there.

Eudaly

Talk a little bit about the Paralympics.

Nelms

Yeah, I mean, an unbelievable experience, really. You get to go out there, and it's...it's two great things really. One is the competition, you get to play against people and compete against, you know, what you want to go against. And the other one is bein' able to go and see the cultures and experience different countries, and that, honestly, is probably one of the most rewarding things that.... It's great to go there and represent your country and hopefully, you have the privilege of hearin' your anthem and stuff played, but if you don't you still have to take away from the experience of bein' able to go out there and every time we've gone, I mean, we go and do different demos at the schools, and you just get to interact with the young up-and-coming children. It's an unbelievable experience, so none of that's possible without adapted athletics.

Eudaly

<topics>Accessibility in K-12 school in Michigan</topics>

Going back in time a little bit, before college, where were you in high school, and how was accessibility there?

Nelms

Oh, I was in Michigan, and it wasn't the greatest. I went through all of middle school with making sure that I could only take one teacher that had to pretty much teach me everything. `Cause the library was on the second floor, and three out of the four teachers that taught my grade were on the second floor. So I had a lot of middle school not having any of those interactions, so coming to UTA where everything is accessible is completely eye-opening, especially after bein' up in the North dealin' with two feet of snow here and there on different times and tryin' to get through that, I mean that's...that's its own problem, but I mean, other than that, like, the university here does such great things that it's incomparable at the high school level, it really is. I mean, they're just trying to get by with little funds they...to take care of you, but here it's, it's completely different.

Eudaly

<topic>Nelms' coaching and advocacy for the Lady Movin' Mavs</topic>

What has it been like working with the Lady Mav...the Lady Movin' Mavs?

Nelms

It's actually been the most rewarding experience ever. The first year we started we only had one girl actually here at school. We had four that their goal for the first season was to keep progressin' whether or not they were doin' community college, finishin' up high school classes, GED, whatever they needed to get done to try to get into college the next year was what they

were supposed to be doin', and it was really tough in the beginning because we, like I said, we only had one girl here on campus. We were tryin' to get all the other ones to come in, and run practices, but takin' that one girl and then a couple of the other ones that stuck it out, too, and watching them progress and become better at their sport...and their educational level it's just been so rewarding that it's been...it's probably been the best thing ever. It's even higher than going to the Paralympics right now, I believe.

Eudaly

What other...what other... experiences, if any, can you think of that should go in the archive?

Nelms

I think a big fight, and we... I try to tell the girls, you know, "Hey you're...at least the first squad that came through here," and we tell the girls that we're recruiting too, "You know, you girls are pioneers. You're doin' somethin' that hasn't been done at UTA even though it's been done from the men's side with the Movin' Mavs, and you can look around here and see that. It hasn't been done from the women's side. And the same thing on the women's disabled athletics." So havin' them here and getting that point across to them has been a huge thing to try and grow that program—make it equal here on campus. I think that's, you know, we've gone through a disability fight, and now this is the exact same thing with just a little slight different turn on it, and I think that's where our focus is now is getting the girls everything they need—that they're equal up here with the men. So that's really where the focus is now.

Eudaly

Could you give some details about that?

Nelms

Yeah, some details? Yeah. I mean, I would... I couldn't give you numbers. There's some people that you would have to ask for those things, but I know travel budget was a huge thing. I know there were places the girls couldn't go 'cause they didn't have travel. We currently have one girl on scholarship. We have twelve on the roster. That doesn't equal out. We have a locker room back here. If you go and take a look at it, it is a pieced-together closet, where the men actually have a carpeted locker room, their chair fits in it. They have storage areas. They have all that. The girls, a couple of guys built them some shelves. That was really nice of the guys that were here on the team, but they did that on their own. It wasn't that, oh here's something here for the girls. It was like, you know what, we need somethin'. These guys went out there and created it for them.

So even though it's great, I try to tell the girls all the time to embrace...to embrace the adversary if you wanna call it, pretty much anything that's not for them to focus on basketball right now is somethin' that they need to just embrace goin' through all of this 'cause their struggle will lead to the next person comin' through. There'll be great things for them. Even though right now they're not getting' a lot of what they do need, they're stayin' together as a team, and that's helpin' tremendously, but there...there is a lot of things that they do need.

Eudaly

That is very interesting to hear about with some of the recent Title IX controversies that have... [Title IX is a section of the United States Education Amendments of 1972 that stipulate that any education program or activity that receives federal financial assistance cannot discriminate on the basis of sex.]

Nelms

It's...it's very interesting. We've had a couple of people try to fight it. The university, like I said, they've been great to me. They've been great to everybody. This is just another...another little, you know, fight along the way. Especially for the women's side of it. But right now, there's not a lot comin' back to `em. They keep tellin' us we're Title IX compliant. Whether we are or not, that's somethin' probably for lawyers to decide later on. I couldn't...couldn't answer that question, but if I gave my personal opinion I would say I don't think we are. I really don't. Especially when you look at what the guys' side has and what little the girls' side has, and what they're given...what their opportunities are. It's not equal. At least in my eyes right now, I don't think it is—but I think that's something that the university is striving to make equal in the future. So every year is a step in the right direction so far.

Eudaly

So in your advocacy for the Lady Movin' Mavs, who's worked with you? Who have been some of your allies?

Nelms

I mean, Doug [Douglas Garner is the Head Coach of the Movin' Mavs and the Assistant Director of Adapted Sports & Campus Recreation]. Doug has been fightin' with us the whole time. You know, tryin' to put his name on the line and get us what we need. We have a lot of outside support from people who have gone through the program. They're all part of the round tables. The students at UTA have been amazing. You have to go to them for a lot of stuff that we need, and they've always supported the program. So that's been—they have been some of our biggest allies. I think one of the things that we need to get a hold of, and maybe, hopefully in twenty or thirty years we can do another interview and we have an answer to it, but eventually the Movin' Mavs and the Lady Movin' Mavs need to be under Athletics. And there's no reason why in this university that they're not. Especially when we talk about inclusion and about everything the university does to make it equal—they're still at the very end steppin' a little away from that side of it, and I think that they need to go out there and just accept it and make them part of it. So I think that's what, you know, they're slowly.... There's little fights that go on all the time, and I think the Movin' Mavs, and like I said, as the men and the women as a whole—I think that is kind of a fight that we all need to...we need to win, actually. We need to be a part of Athletics. Every university should have their disabled program as part of Athletics and not just stuck on to the side under something else.

Eudaly

That's very interesting. I honestly didn't know that it wasn't under the umbrella of Athletics.

Nelms

Uhh, no. It's probably under O.S.D.—Office for Students with Disabilities—and maybe a little bit under Recreation, Campus Recreation [both the Movin' Mavs and Lady Movin' Mavs have historically been under Campus Recreation and, like the O.S.D., under Student Affairs rather than Athletics]. But it has no bearing under Athletics. And I think that that's a huge... I think if there's one flaw with the program, I think that's our flaw. And I think that's somethin' where we want to be at the forefront out there, and the movement. And we've been for years. I mean, it started back in the '70s that they were just...that UTA was makin' leaps and bounds over everybody else. We've kind of slowed down and other universities are catchin' us and passin' us now. And I think it's a matter of time before our university gets back up there and they become the forefront again.

Eudaly

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Nelms

Nah. I just really—I hope that, you know, like I said in twenty or thirty years can go back and listen hopefully that some things have changed hopefully that, you know, the girls are on equal standing point—they have a locker room that is a locker room, and not just—I mean, I've got one girl living in a closet in our locker room. They've just taken the doors off the closet, and that is her locker. So I mean, that's a little...that's a little... I don't tell it to the girls. I don't talk about it to them. I don't let them know that I think that's disrespectful, but I kinda do think it is.

But I just always try to let them see the positives in it, but I think it goes all the way down the line when you talk about scholarships, and just everything that they're able to get. I mean half the time we have stuff that doesn't even fit them. Their first year they had to wear hand-me-down jerseys from the previous able-bodied women's team that were just covered in things, and it was like this is not how you should be treated as an athlete. So I know the program's early, and I know it's just starting, but that will be our fight for the next twenty, thirty years—however long the program's here, is to make sure that it's equal and that the girls are getting treated as equal athletes and not just kind of pushed to the side. Especially what they bring back to the university. I mean already in three years the recognition they have coming back here is unbelievable for the university, so hopefully the university realizes that, so I'm sure there's people already. I've already heard from a few that are takin' steps to make things better for the girls, and while they're doin' things behind the scenes, we really, really thank those people, but we're ready to take on a little bit more of the fight and get the girls what they need.

So hopefully in thirty years we could come in here and they're not playin'—and while we all love this gym in here, the PEB [Physical Education Building], they shouldn't be playin' in it. They should be playin' all their games in College Park. They should have locker rooms in College Park. They should be allowed to use the Athletics...all their academic side. You know, they have their own computer labs. Our people aren't allowed in 'em. They have, just, all their resources are not granted to our side, and it really should be. So hopefully we come back here in the future and that's something that's changed.

Eudaly

Absolutely, and I honestly, a lot of these things that you're saying I didn't realize. I'm sure a lot of people don't realize that.

Nelms

Yeah, I mean, and since this is something goin' in the archive it's a little more easy to talk about not so much like a news article that's goin' out right away. Like I said, Doug's put his name out there, and he's been fighting for a long time. The late, great Jim Hayes that used to be here, that's kind of somethin' that he taught. When I came here was not to compromise if you think something's wrong. You keep fighting for it no matter what. So you know, we might ruffle some people the wrong way while we're trying to get it, but it's for the right reasons, and the girls need a lot, and even on the men's side—they need that equal—they need it too.

You know, there's no reason—I've gone through College Park. I've seen the computer labs. I've seen five people out of a hundred computers, and I'm like this is a joke. Why is this not? Why is this resource not being shared with the other people that you wanna consider athletes over here. Just because they're not a hundred percent with their bodies does not mean that they're not athletes as well, and they're student-athletes at this campus, you know. They're bringin' huge recognition back for it, and they should be treated as such. So while those girls are told and those guys are told, you know, everything's great and not to try to make too much of a fuss about it... Well there really should be more a fuss about it. It really should be equal, and like I said, that will be our fight for the next 20, 30 years. However long it's gonna take

Eudaly

Well, thank you very much for doing this interview.

Nelms

Oh, thank you very much! It was a pleasure.