

Jeanmarie Ford Bryant

UT Arlington Alumna, former Chemistry Stockroom Manager, and pioneer in chemistry laboratory accessibility

*Interview conducted by
Taylor Long
in 2016 in Arlington, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
Special Collections and Archives
University of Texas at Arlington
Copyright © 2016 by University of Texas at Arlington Libraries

Biography

During the 1990s, Jeanmarie Ford Bryant served as UT Arlington's chemistry stockroom manager. In this role, she worked closely with Jim Hayes and Facilities to make chemistry laboratories accessible to students with a variety of disabilities. Bryant also developed the first known accessibility manual for chemistry laboratories—a manual that received international attention at stockroom manager conferences and which shaped accommodations at a number of other universities.

Bryant started her undergraduate career at UT Arlington in 1986, receiving a BS in Biology in 1993. She returned as a non-degree student in 2014 in order to complete a minor in Disability Studies (finished in 2016). She currently plans to enter a graduate program in Education with the eventual goal of becoming a children's librarian.

Diagnosed with dyslexia while in college in the 1980s as well as with several other disabilities later on, Bryant has observed UT Arlington's efforts to improve accessibility and accommodations over the course of forty years. She is also the parent of a young adult with autism.

Topics discussed

- Getting diagnosed with dyslexia and exploring disability identity
- Navigating accommodations for an invisible disability at UT Arlington
- How accommodations have changed between the 1980s and 2010s; Bryant's own disabilities
- Working with Jim Hayes as a student and as a UT Arlington staff member
- Making UT Arlington chemistry laboratories accessible to disabled students
- Bryant's international impact on disability accommodations in chemistry laboratories
- Jim Hayes's influence on the UT Arlington campus
- Experiences of being a parent of a person with autism
- Family attitudes towards disability

- Further details on making chemistry laboratories accessible to students with disabilities
 - Jim Hayes's Push from Austin to Arlington to raise money for Helping Restore Ability; Hayes's role in making UT Arlington's campus accessible
 - Bryant's time as a student worker in the Department of Chemistry
-

Long

This is Taylor Long interviewing Jeanmarie Ford Bryant for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is March 24th, 2016 and I am here at UT Arlington's campus. I am here today to talk with Jeanmarie Ford Bryant about accessibility at UTA and about the experience of being a person with a disability.

Thank you for participating in the university's oral history program. To get started I wanted to ask you about your experience as a student on campus?

Bryant

<topic>Getting diagnosed with dyslexia and exploring disability identity</topic>

As a student, I started here in the fall of '86, and I had difficulties in English class, and so I just needed more academic help to see why it was so hard for me. I took Socrates literally. Have you read Socrates? Okay. He's not literal. So I went to the career counseling office and went through some testing which took... I had to make another appointment for it, and I came back, and it took, like, I don't know, 45 minutes? And he said I have a learning disability, specifically dyslexia. So that makes me probably nineteen, twenty years old, where I finally find out I have something wrong.

So I worked really hard. I kept going to their office putting in these little cassette tapes to increase my...well, to make it go away. I figured I could fix it if I just worked hard enough and one time they said, "We've never had anybody work so hard after they got a diagnosis," but I was thinking in my head, "Well obviously I have to fix it."

I ended up taking my English classes at the junior college nearby and I remember going in there for testing. You had to do this testing just to get into their program for English, and there were spelling questions and just general English questions, and my counselor.... I told him that I would probably be, like, remedial because I had dyslexia. He told me that he also had dyslexia, and that meant I was very smart because that was part of the coding system for dyslexia and that I would have actually been put in an honors program but I missed four questions. I said, "I'm gonna guess those were the four spelling words because I can't spell," and he's like, "Yeah, they were." Everything else I had gotten right.

So now when I teach, I make sure that I tell that to students who tell me they have dyslexia that the first thing—because they always feel stupid—that I tell them is "Right now, I know that you are obviously smarter than the average person because you have dyslexia," and they sit up taller. It's really cool.

Okay, so I guess I'd been here probably a year or half year when I had the dyslexia diagnosis, so you have to learn to identify of having a disability. Which made a lot of sense for some of the things I did in high school. I had to do an oral report on the effects of alcohol at the time of conception. We were studying genetics and I thought it was the effects of alcohol at the time of consumption. Two C-words but two very different papers. I found out after I had given my oral report that I gave it on the wrong thing. So there were obvious highlights for my teachers along the years that no one ever noticed. But...it just surprises me.

<topic>Navigating accommodations for an invisible disability at UT Arlington</topic>

So academically it was really hard because in the back of my head I always thought I was stupid. So even when you try to work...and then you would have to go to Jim [Hayes, disability coordinator] and get your letter. And the letter meant that your faculty is gonna talk louder

because obviously you have a hearing problem, because you have a letter with a disability. Or they talk really slow. It was very embarrassing and a lot of times I didn't even show the letter because I didn't...I just didn't want to go through the embarrassment. So my GPA is actually very low because I just didn't want the help.

I finally found DARS [Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services, which administers programs that help Texans with disabilities find jobs through vocational rehabilitation, ensure that Texans with disabilities live independently in their communities, and assists families] to help me out financially...which the best thing about DARS. It took me down to...a full-time [course load] is twelve hours but my full-time is nine hours because of my learning disability. And something else, I don't even have a learning disability on DARS now, because I didn't have paperwork that said I had a learning disability. That's so stressful. Can you see the stress in me?

Long

(laughs) Yes, yes.

Bryant

I am so stressed out thinking about this. So yeah I had a teacher once tell me I was cheesy or cheeky? And he had one arm! And I'm like the one-armed asshole! It was bizarre because I thought the one person who would understand disability was the one who didn't understand disability. I guess he thought it wasn't physical, so it didn't matter. I did meet a faculty member who also has dyslexia and was the chair of his department eventually, and he was a fabulous teacher. And when I turned in...and he would actually sit and talk with me and I turned in a test to him one time. I was like the second one and I asked him, "Did I miss the point of this test or was this incredibly easy?" and he goes, "Nope, it was easy." So if you came to class, and took your notes, and listened, and studied it was an easy test so I got like a 90-something. And I did well in his class because I didn't feel stupid.

Long

<topic>How accommodations have changed between the 1980s and 2010s; Bryant's own disabilities</topic>

And have you noticed that any accommodations are different now?

Bryant

I got furniture!

Long

(laughs) Yeah.

Bryant

I couldn't believe it! Which I didn't realize how uncomfortable the chairs are because I have.... Do you want me to list the disabilities?

Long

If you would like to.

Bryant

Because there's like a bunch. I don't even remember them all the time because you don't know something's a disability. So I have lupus, or multi-connective tissue [mixed connective tissue disease].... And in the '80s, you didn't say you have a connective tissue...you don't say you have an auto-immune problem because then they automatically assumed you have AIDS.

Long

Right.

Bryant

When I go to the doctor, I never wait in the waiting room because that's where sick people are, I just go straight back to the doctor's office. I have lupus. Well, I call it lupus, it's the closest I can get. When I was about eighteen months old I was sprayed with Agent Orange in Puerto Rico. My dad was stationed in Vietnam. So what they would do is the sirens would go off and then they would spray Agent Orange, and you had to go inside, and I was independent. I know you're shocked. Mom thought I was inside because the sirens went off. I wasn't done playing apparently in the bushes. So I hid in the bushes and I then got sprayed with Agent Orange. So I'm the only one in my house with a multi-connective tissue disorder.

So then with that I also have depression, which I had in college the first time, and I didn't realize it. It probably went hand-in-hand with the learning disability of trying to cope and trying to be normal with everybody else, and I have asthma and.... I don't know. I have them in my phone because I can't remember them. Because you don't realize they're a disability. When DARS was looking at my medication list they were like "Well, you have asthma too." Yeah. How did that get to be a disability? I don't know. Okay, I diverged, put me back on track.

Long

You're fine. So how would you say that accommodations have changed since you were a student?

Bryant

Oh, well before you would just notice people with wheelchairs or people that were blind. And I don't know if it's just because I'm older and I'm used to seeing a lot more different things but I think people talk about it more now. And the accommodation letters you can just click some buttons now, and you don't even have to go into the office you can just print it out. Whatever your modifications are...are already prelisted. You don't have to tell them what you need. You used to have to tell them what you needed, like special approval to have a dictionary. That was weird.

But now you can have things like...I thought this was a wheelchair table (motions to table she is sitting at), but if you need a special chair [you can]... Because I have arthritis in my spine, I used to have to take a nap after class because the pain was so intense in my spine, and then usually it's still intense that night. I was just always in pain. I had no idea sitting in a chair with support made all the difference in the world. Now I can read the volume that Dr. Rose

puts out—the volume of reading material. And I'm not in as much pain. So I'm always in pain but it's like a one or a two, which is probably most people's five or six.

Long

<topic>Working with Jim Hayes as a student and as a UT Arlington staff member</topic>
Right. Okay. And you mentioned Jim Hayes earlier just briefly. Do you want to talk about how you knew Jim?

Bryant

Um, Jim was...when I was a student that was the office I went to...I guess I didn't get advised there. After I went to the advisor then I would go to Jim's office which was in the basement at the UC [University Center—the student center]. You'd go through the doors and then there would be...actually the lawyer's office was there. Jim was back this way, so his secretary and then his room was just down the hall actually. So I mostly worked with the secretary.

But from time to time I would go see Jim about something. And I remember one time I was telling him about the basketball game we had gone to because my son had only been to wheelchair basketball. I was telling Jim about an instance and I caught myself in the wording of wheelchair basketball or normal basketball and in my head I'm thinking "I can't believe I'm stuck with wording talking to Jim!"

He had a rocker in his room, in his office. He had an office chair but then he had a rocker over here, and I didn't know.... I always thought people in wheelchairs stayed in wheelchairs. A lot of times in the afternoon he would get in his rocking chair. I thought that was pretty cool.

Long

Yeah.

Bryant

He told me a story one time about he liked kids because he was at the grocery store one day and people usually don't want to talk about his disability or acknowledge that he's in a chair but a child will come up and talk to him about it and then he'll get to talk about his chair or something else and then they leave each other with this good feeling instead of that awkward feeling. So I thought that was kind of cool.

But I worked with him as a student. And you could say "Hi" to Jim across campus, ya know just walking around or something. Because I was just so painfully shy at that time. So that was kind of cool.

<topic>Making UT Arlington chemistry laboratories accessible to disabled students</topic>
But I really got to know Jim later when I was a staff member in the chemistry department. And I would have a student in a wheelchair that was going to take a chemistry lab, so I needed to find what modifications I needed to do, so they could do the work without stumbling over, I guess, antiquated ideas of what a lab should look like. And the first time, well the first two times he came over, we would just go through the labs and go through exactly what I needed to do and, like.... Did you ever take a chemistry lab?

Long

No.

Bryant

No? Okay, first you would have your locker, and you could just pull it out and they could access everything. Some lockers had a top and a bottom and to actually get down, and that's where I learned that depending on where your injury is for being in a wheelchair, you [can] lose the abdominal control the longer you've been in your wheelchair. So they might be able to come down like this (bends at the waist as if to pick something off the floor), but they won't be able to lift up whatever they're picking up.

So the classrooms that had two lockers.... First of all, if it only had one drawer, it had to be a top drawer. So I had to make sure at least every lab had a top drawer on the key board back when we had keys. And then the drawers like that that had two, I just found out from Jim what I needed, and then I talked to the carpenters about what I needed and then they would do the imagination of how to do it. They would talk to me about it beforehand, and then I would say "Okay, this or this." But [for instance] you have a rollout drawer like on some of the fancy kitchens like for heavy pots and pans? That's what they would do. So they could actually roll it out so they could see everything that they would have access to before they picked it up so they didn't have to get on the floor and way down into a drawer.

Also the...when you get your chemicals, the vapors can be toxic or deadly so those are in a hood, and the hood will have a sash, which is a glass door that comes down. And I thought I was doing good until I learned about the sash that my kids in a wheelchair would have to put their arm on that hood (extends arm as if laying it on an imaginary table). Well it has drops of chemicals all over it so they're gonna lose the sleeve, and they're gonna put little burn marks on their arm. It made me so mad. So what I did for those...he told me you have to roll into the hood. So it would be like this desk, you have to roll in. So first of all I have to cut out underneath my hood and it has to be wide enough for a wheelchair to fit in. So we measured under the hood and how much my little doors had to be for underneath the hood so they could get in there and pour their waste, pick up their chemicals.

And the nice thing about working with Jim is once I figured out what I needed physically, I would find out if there was a student with a wheelchair...well at that time Jim would tell me so we were just, you know, "Hey Jeanmarie," I'm thinking (laughs), "Yeah, this is Jim." So he would call me, and he knew if he had a student in a wheelchair that they could go through lab because I would make it happen. And so he would tell me who it was, and then he would tell me their hand mobility. So do I need one of the flat knobs because they have a low dexterity? Or can they actually turn the knob? So to work on what I needed to get in the lab.

At one time I had a student with a visual problem. I was talking to some people, and I think it was one of the computer guys told me, "Well, they have fiber optic cables now," and I'm like, "Oh, you could hook that to a microscope or this and this and this." And I'm like, "Okay, so we got that person in."

And somebody had trembles, probably something wrong with their arm [so] that they would hit it out every once and a while. So, I found these rubber cone things, and I would put that on an Erlenmeyer flask, and they could pour because it wasn't going to move. So I made a lot of...I learned a lot getting a lot more kids in labs. And most everybody said, "No, they can't be in labs."

<topic>Bryant's international impact on disability accommodations in chemistry laboratories</topic>

So after doing that work, stockroom managers that wanted to went to stockroom manager meetings all over the world. It was the United States and Korea and then we'd meet somewhere once a year. And at first I thought, "What in the world could we possibly talk about?" "I have this test tube, you have that test tube."

But they actually do a lot, and one of the papers I produced was "The ADA in the Chemistry Laboratory." And at that time it was the late '90s, so a lot of us were getting new buildings.

And it was the beginning of the internet so we would talk on the internet. And we were getting new buildings so most of the time when you go to a seminar or symposium you'll get like a three or four page pamphlet about what they're going to talk about. I didn't realize how huge that topic was, with the ADA in the chemistry laboratory and how much I had learned until I started to write it down and my book was like 30 or 40 pages. It became a manual. And you had to get them all made and send them to the place that the conference was at. And I don't have any more copies...

Long

The manual, you mean?

Bryant

Yeah! Because you couldn't carry it on the flight—limited baggage or whatever. And that was before you could do the flip thing zip things whatever? So I had to borrow a laptop, which were so rare, from the safety office and have my presentation on there, which PowerPoint was there, it was new, on the laptop that I borrowed and signed out from a different department because I'm a staff member and not a faculty.

Long

So were you pretty unique in bringing these things to these conferences? The manual?

Bryant

Oh yeah, yeah. Because I didn't realize how—I was like in my mid-twenties or so—and I didn't realize how this topic...nobody knew anything about it. And they were all building these buildings. So I had like, I don't know, forty or so copies because I didn't know how many people would attend and all the copies were gone. My class had a whole bunch of people in it and they were like, "Could you do this topic again?" I had no idea. I had no idea how big this topic was and how much people had no clue of what was going on. So actually when I was typing [talking], and people would ask questions I was like, "Oh, I know that answer, and this is how I did it" and they're like "You had fiber optics in your chemistry laboratory?" and I'm like, "Yeah, I just do this or this." Yeah, I had no idea I was a pioneer.

Long

Yeah!

Bryant

I was the only one.

Long

That's awesome. So you singlehandedly influenced probably many accommodations on many campuses.

Bryant

Oh yeah, yeah.

Long

That's great. So most of the accommodations from the manual, were they physical accommodations? So taking out from underneath of the hood?

Bryant

Yes but it was also hardware, because you have a gas knob. There were also water knobs and.... I didn't have to modify glassware. I could add weights to them depending on your pouring technique. One time we were gonna have a blind student in there, and I said for that you're going to have to have an aide with you just to talk you through what's happening, but I was going to find a way to make it work.

Long

And did you meet opposition when you were making these changes, or were they pretty easy to make?

Bryant

No, I just did it.

Long

(laughs) Oh, okay.

Bryant

I learned if I asked questions, if I asked my momma questions, a lot of times she would just say "No." So I've spend most of my life just doing stuff, and after the fact they go, "Shouldn't've done that," or "Wow, that was a great idea!"

Long

And I'm sure that's what you were usually met with, was....

Bryant

And also I was the chemistry stockroom manager, and I am [was] the only one at this university. Now biology had some and physics had but they were really in charge of stock, not really chemicals. So I've always been the only one. I'm a girl in science, I was born in '68, so there weren't a lot of us interested in science. When I went to Catholic.... Because I didn't go the school, we went to this thing, CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, a religious education program of the Catholic Church] is what they would call it, on Wednesday, I was the only girl. I'm used to being the only one that does something, so there's like nothing to compare it to. The closest peer I had was the safety office. So here I am, returning student, already degreed, and I'm still the only one of my kind.

Long

Right, wow, that's awesome.

Bryant

Sometimes.

Long

Can you see a lot of those changes now, still in the chemistry labs?

Bryant

No, I only went back one time to look and some of the modifications are there, some aren't, but I think part of the problem is the manual is probably not still there and somebody hasn't come around to say, "Hey, this isn't accurate," or "This isn't accurate." I don't know because I have not gone back to the chemistry labs.

Long

And your modifications, they made it so a lot of your students could take chemistry that had not.

Bryant

<topic>Jim Hayes's influence on the UT Arlington campus</topic>

Oh, yeah! It opened up a lot of kids with mainly wheelchairs or different disabilities. Jim and I just worked hand in hand on that: "Okay, I've got this kid coming through" or [he would call me] to give me a heads up. The nice thing about if you needed to turn in a work order, it could take two weeks, six months, to get that one thing done. But if it was school starts next week and you used Jim Hayes' name on an order for a modification for a lab, they were there that afternoon. I loved it.

Long

That's awesome. So it helped a lot to work directly with Jim.

Bryant

Oh yeah, a modification with Jim's approval, it's done. I actually loved calling them in just because, they were on their way.

Long

<topic>Experiences of being a parent of a person with autism</topic>

That's great. And you mentioned your kids before and you're a parent of a child with a disability?

Bryant

Mmhmm. With autism.

Long

Okay. And how has that influenced how you navigate schools for both your child and for...how old is your child now?

Bryant

My oldest is the one with autism and he is 23.

Long

Twenty-three. Is he going to school?

Bryant

Um. (sigh) No. It totally navigated my life because I've spent eighteen years getting him through school and to where he could fit in and be a peer. And actually he's...most people think he's just like everyone else.

Long

Good.

Bryant

Yeah.

Long

And have you had...how have you navigated being the parent of a person with a disability as far as independence goes and issues of care goes?

Bryant

His independence? Or mine?

Long

Well, his. But yours as well, I suppose probably plays in there.

Bryant

You know I think the backbone of teaching him is...well, I've had to teach him everything. Why did Katie Couric make a sad face when she talked about autism? You have to explain it to

him. Every little thing. So we had developmental toys, we had sign language. Well I would talk to him in public in sign language because one, he didn't want to talk to other people, and I guess hear his voice? I don't know why. So we would sign or he needed to be redirected so instead of yelling his name out over the playground—and by doing that everybody—so if I would holler out "Taylor, don't do this," or "Taylor, don't do that" or "Taylor, don't touch that,".... So I could sign to him across the playground, and then he would know he was being too rough or just.... I call that redirecting. Guiding his behavior. Which was priceless. It worked well. Because you end up hating the kid that has their name called out all the time.

Long

<topic>Family attitudes towards disability</topic>

Have you noticed within your family changes of attitude toward disability? Both...you said your disabilities, you've had some become apparent later in life and with a child with a disability as well.

Bryant

What was the last question you asked? Because I had something I wanted to say.

Long

About family? Or previous to that?

Bryant

Our family is very open to being who you are. Oh, I know. I focus on telling him with a disability or whatever your abilities are, you will have to work harder to observe what the situation is socially to fit in. I think the hardest part about our family is working with extended family. They would tell me I should do this or I should do that. Then when he got a diagnosis, they would pity him. My dad was a colonel in the army. So my son would take the cereal box and set it on my dad's head and walk away. He would've beat us with a belt if we did that but instead he goes "Oh! Doug needs cereal!" So I would tell my dad "No. He needs to physically ask you for cereal. He can hand it to your hand but he cannot stick it on your head."

Can we pause?

(recorder paused)

Long

<topic>Further details on making chemistry laboratories accessible to students with disabilities</topic>

So will you talk more about working with students and making things accessible in the labs?

Bryant

I remember one time we had... I never saw an accommodation letter, so I would just talk with the students. I had a young man in a wheelchair, and he was just a really large man. And I talked to him about getting down the stairs if for some reason if our elevator was down, and our elevator was down a lot. That's before we were attached to the chemistry research building. And he told me not to worry because he would get down the stairs and just to have somebody bring his chair down for him. So I learned to assign three students to take his chair

down, and that way if somebody's missing for some reason, that there's a fall behind. Because once that emergency happens, no one's gonna think about what they need to do.

And also so I started in the fall of '86. I was actually typing this paper on this new thing called a Macintosh. And it was the kind that had the...we weren't using 5.25 [inch disks], we were using 3.5-inch. And it was in my machine. That's how cool my machine was. It was the Mac that the screen was this big, a 9-inch square? And I type my paper in there, and the power goes down because they're making the Cooper Street [bridge to connect UTA and protect students crossing Cooper Street]. They had to dig down to make it lower and they were building it at the time so they hit a power line, and my computer was out and the library was out. The door openers wouldn't work because the electricity was shut down. So that's been a few years ago.

<topic>Jim Hayes's Push from Austin to Arlington to raise money for Helping Restore Ability; Hayes's role in making UT Arlington's campus accessible</topic>

But it was Jim Hayes. The university was already pretty accessible because of Jim Hayes. He would go all over. It was just amazing.

Then at one time he was raising money for something. You'd see him in the paper all the time. I think he was riding [pushing] a [wheelchair] from here to Austin or back or something. I think he even had like a red, white, and blue flag headband on or something. But he'd be in the news every once in a while and you'd go "Oh, there's Jim, I know him." But there were a lot of different organizations starting at that...there were a lot starting. So you didn't know what was real and what was not and one of them was called Helping Habitat or Helping Ability [Helping Restore Ability] or something. I just went to a presentation, and they're celebrating thirty years, and I thought, "Oh, I didn't join that, but I was on the original e-mail...or excuse me, mailing list." There was no e-mail.

But it was because of Jim that so much stuff happened. You would go up to a building, and the doors opened. If they didn't open, I would call when I was a...well actually, I was a student worker, and then as a student worker, I got to be a staff member. So being a student worker, I knew you could just call a certain number and say, "Okay, the doors aren't opening." "The handicapped doors" is what they were called, "...aren't opening right here." So you would just call it in and have them come fix it. Because it really made me mad if I came up to a door that was supposed to automatically open, and I had to walk around the building. Because I had the ability to walk around the building, but I knew somebody else was going to have to roll around the building in the rain. So I usually called that stuff in.

Long

<topic>Bryant's time as a student worker in the Department of Chemistry</topic>

What kind of work did you do as a student worker? So calling in doors that weren't opening?

Bryant

Oh, I worked at the Chemistry Department as a student, and I balanced...what do you call them? Well, I worked on accounts for a faculty member. So he would get grant money, and I would balance those grants.

Long

Okay. Cool, great.

Bryant

And that was actually part of that time was at the beginning of affirmative action and there was this one lady that worked in our department, and I got called in because we had an extra \$500 that she found. She couldn't do simple adding and subtracting, and I came in because if I made a mistake, I needed to know about it. And she's like "oh, you don't need to come in." Yeah I do! And I came in, and I'm like, "She's not qualified for her job."

Long

As a student?

Bryant

As a student I knew she wasn't qualified. Yeah, so I was getting a degree in biology and I was short a class of chemistry and dance. Yeah, there aren't a lot of us out there. Dance, chemistry, and biology.

Long

Dance, chemistry, and biology. Wow. Okay, so I think we're about out of time.

Bryant

Okay

Long

I'm just gonna turn it off.