

## **Danny Fik**

**Former member of Movin' Mavs Wheelchair Basketball Team, former member of the U.S. national wheelchair tennis team, member of Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks, and Operations Manager at Per4Max Medical**

*Interview conducted by  
Teresa Pritchett  
In 2016 in Grand Prairie, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor  
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### **Biography**

Danny Fik was born in 1984 in Highland, California. He is the second of three children, all of whom are athletes. He was born with a form of spina bifida called tethered cord syndrome. He walked with some impairment until he underwent corrective surgery at age thirteen. The operation failed and he lost all feeling below his chest as a result. This led him to explore adapted sports, including wheelchair hockey, tennis, and basketball, and eventually receive a full-ride scholarship to the University of Texas at Arlington to play on the Movin' Mavs wheelchair basketball team. He has also been a member of the U.S.A. national team for wheelchair tennis, earning multiple gold medals.

Fik earned his bachelor's degree in public relations at UT Arlington in 2008. He is currently a member of the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks. Fik works as Operations Manager at Per4Max Medical, which manufactures custom wheelchairs.

### **Topics Discussed**

- Basic biography: disability and involvement in adapted sports
- Accessibility at home and on campus
- Jim Hayes' mentorship and influence
- Evolving wheelchair technology
- Community among wheelchair athletes
- Disability-related personal care
- Accessibility during K-12 schooling
- Transition from walking to using a wheelchair and entrance into adapted sports
- Jim Hayes' work and philosophy about disability rights

- Adapted sports at the collegiate level
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**Pritchett**

This is Teresa Pritchett interviewing Danny Fik for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today is March 17, 2016 and I am at Per4Max Inc. I am here to talk with Danny Fik about disability history, Movin' Mavs basketball. Thank you for participating in the oral history interview program.

**Fik**

No problem.

**Pritchett**

<topic>Basic biography: disability and involvement in adapted sports</topic>  
Can we start off with just a little background about you, maybe a short bio?

**Fik**

Absolutely. I was born September 23...1984 in Southern California, where I was born and raised. I was born with tethered cord syndrome—a version of spina bifida—and I could actually walk until I was 13. I had a surgery when I was 13 that... I went in walking and after an eight-hour surgery, I woke up and I couldn't feel from my chest down, so.... But that's the best thing that ever happened to me. I got a full-ride scholarship to the University of Texas at Arlington and completed my bachelor degree in public relations there, graduated 2008.

I am currently a six time national champ for wheelchair basketball, one with UT Arlington in 2006 and five additional with the Dallas Mavericks. I also played wheelchair tennis, representing the U.S. in the Junior Division on three different occasions. I have also been on U.S.A. national teams.... [In] 2011 we went to Guadalajara for the Para Pan Am games and we won a gold medal there. I was on the Under 23 U.S.A. national team where we went to Great Britain, Birmingham, Great Britain, or England, whatever you want to call it, and we won a gold medal there. So I think that's about it.

I'm currently operations manager at Per4Max medical, where we manufacture custom wheelchair sports wheelchairs, where we provide the wheelchairs for UT Arlington Movin' Mavs and other universities around the nation and individuals around the world.

**Pritchett**

<topic>Accessibility at home and on campus</topic>  
Great. One of the things I wanted to talk to you about is access, in K -12, or at work, or your housing, or college. Talk about the kind of issue access is for you, being in a wheelchair.

**Fik**

I don't feel like anything should be given to me or that anyone needs to do anything different, that's just the way my parents raised me. My house, there's nothing done to my house other than a showerhead that's on a hose. So I try to make do with what I have and

deal with what comes at me. I actually mow my yard in my wheelchair, and it's not a riding lawn mower. The only thing that I have modified on my vehicle is I have hand controls. I don't have a lift or anything additional and that.... So, I try and make do with what I have and I don't want to spend a lot of money on stuff that I don't need. Want you to see me and not my wheelchair, not my lift in the truck, and not all that, so...

**Pritchett**

So, access to college campus, there was no hindrance for you?

**Fik**

Absolutely not. I came in 2003, and I did get a disabled apartment. It was great. We lived in Meadow Run and it was fantastic, and the university was great thanks to Jim Hayes back in the day. I played under Jim Hayes actually and we actually won...played our last game together in 2008, and he passed away in July, and I was done with my eligibility in April.

**Pritchett**

Tell me a little bit about Jim Hayes and the program that you were in with him.

**Fik**

<topic>Jim Hayes' mentorship and influence</topic>

He was an amazing man and I'm the man I am today because of him. I'm just grateful for the opportunity that he gave me and many, many others. He was a great man and he started a great program. More than anything I think he was a great role model.

I had my fair share of partying back in the day and he always used to tell me, "Son, you have however many hours in a week. You need to do your school work with it. You're here for your education and not for basketball." So that kind of set me onto the right path of...for the rest of my life, getting my priorities correct. He was a great role model. I miss him. And there's actually—I actually see him every day. There's a picture of him here on my wall in my office.

**Pritchett**

You said he was a great role model. In what way?

**Fik**

Just in life. He never let anything stop him. He was a quadriplegic and he was similar to me. He didn't want anything additional on his car or anything else like that. Just the bare necessities—figuring out there's more to life than partying—just to get your education, that's the most important thing 'cause you're going to have that the rest of your life, even if you never play another game of basketball or practice, that doesn't matter as long as you get your education you'll be good.

**Pritchett**

How competitive are you?

Fik

Very competitive.

Pritchett

Was Jim Hayes competitive?

Fik

Absolutely. He used to mess with me since I was from California, he used to call me "California Fruits and Nuts," but I miss him.

Pritchett

<topic>Evolving wheelchair technology</topic>

What kind of changes in adaptive technology have you seen over the course of your time being in a wheelchair?

Fik

Back when I first started playing basketball in 1998.... I basically first started using a wheelchair in 1998—the chairs have gotten lighter, they've gotten more responsive.

There's just a lot with the chairs, and obviously that's what I do for a living. I'm very observant about people's chairs. I can talk to somebody that I met 20, not 20...10 years ago.... I was talking to someone earlier, and she was like, "Yeah, my first chair was..." and I'm like "It was a Made By Design," and she was like, "How did you know that?" And I'm like, "You got it in 2004." And she's like "How did you know that?" I'm just good with that, and that's kind of why I do what I do, and I love what I do. So I'm trying to increase the accessibility of the wheelchair and the versatility and performance of the wheelchairs.

Pritchett

How many wheelchairs do you have for personal use at this time?

Fik

I have one basketball chair and I actually just got another everyday chair, so I have two everyday chairs right now.

Pritchett

<topic>Community among wheelchair athletes</topic>

Tell me about the disabled community that you were in with basketball or that you work with.

Fik

I actually still play basketball. I'm currently playing for the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks, which....we're going to Louisville, Kentucky [for the national championships] in about three

weeks. So the Dallas Mavericks are my extended family. We got back from Las Vegas this past weekend, and it's just a great group of guys. They would do anything for you. You go out there and you just go and fight for each other and for the name Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks.

We all know the struggles that we've gone through because they've probably gone through the same struggles. And what I love about it is most people don't expect to be treated different, they don't want to be treated different just because you're in a wheelchair. It doesn't matter. You're still a person. You want to be treated just as everyone else, and you don't want to be entitled to things that some think you should be, able-bodied or not.

**Pritchett**

<topic>Disability-related personal care</topic>

Okay, you used the word "struggles." What kind of struggles?

**Fik**

Just medical things, catheterizing yourself, pressure sores. Just medical things. Stuff like that.

**Pritchett**

And that affects you on a daily basis.

**Fik**

Absolutely. Yeah, I mean I'm comfortable with it all now at this point because I've been doing it for, how...I don't even know how many years. I think I've been catheterizing myself since I was seven. So, I'm 31 now, so quite a while. But just...we all go through the same struggles and the same adversities at one point or another.

**Pritchett**

<topic>Accessibility during K-12 schooling</topic>

Okay, you said you were walking until you were 13 and then you started using a wheelchair. Did you go back to the school you were attending?

**Fik**

Absolutely.

**Pritchett**

So there was access.

**Fik**

There was actually a classroom upstairs and that teacher would actually move downstairs for my class because we didn't have an elevator. It was a small private school in Redlands, California. They didn't really do much other than make it accessible for me the best they could, and move the teachers around instead of moving me upstairs every day.

Pritchett

What kinds of interactions did you have with other students?

Fik

In regards to...

Pritchett

When you got into a wheelchair? Did that change anything about the interpersonal dynamic?

Fik

Absolutely not. I mean, I went to school my whole life with these people (*unintelligible*) to seventh grade probably, So these were my best friends. They saw me for me and not for my wheelchair. They would like to ride in my wheelchair because they thought it was fun but that was about it.

Pritchett

<topic>Transition from walking to using a wheelchair and entrance into adapted sports</topic>

What kind of adjustment did you go through going from walking to a wheelchair? At first, was it difficult? Was it hard to get used to? Did you have a "Why me?" moment?

Fik

I had a "Why me?" moment before I ended up in a wheelchair. I had a couple of `em. I could walk, but I couldn't walk good because of my spina bifida, so I kind of waddled. I couldn't run. I tried to do...I tried to compete in sports the best I could. I was a goalie in soccer, I was a catcher in baseball, just trying to be normal.

And then when I was thirteen. I was in the hospital for about a month, and initially it was like "Why me?" again.

And then the day after I got out of the hospital, I went to an abilities expo which, they have sport...they show off sport, showcase, rather, showcase sports, showcase wheelchairs, vehicles, so it kind of opened my eyes to get into sports. I play[ed] wheelchair hockey. I was thirteen, fourteen years old going up against 35-year-olds and just knocking the snot out of `em and it was a blast.

And I played tennis. I lost my first match ever in the U.S. and the rest of my junior career in the states I didn't lose a match. So it was an advantage for me to be in a wheelchair, `cause I could go faster, I could play basketball more competitively as opposed to everyone going "Ph, just go sit in the corner and we'll give you the ball" kind of thing. When I...the day...we went to the abilities expo and they actually let me borrow, a wheelchair company let me borrow a wheelchair for the night, just `cause mine hadn't come in yet, and we went to a concert that night. And my dad was up above the concert, and I was just going everywhere, I was "Pew pew pew pew," just flying everywhere. He always tells that story still to this day. It's made me who I am and given me the experiences and the friends that I

have. So I'm...I wouldn't change it.

**Pritchett**

Family attitudes. How did your family come to terms with the change from...

**Fik**

I have probably the most supportive family ever, so whatever they had to do, they spent probably thousands of dollars on me to travel to these tennis tournaments. They would, I mean we would eat macaroni and cheese at night so that I could go to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to play in a tennis tournament. They would refinance the house, etcetera, etcetera. They would sacrifice so that I could excel. And because of that is why I was able to receive a five-year full-ride to UT Arlington because of the sacrifices they made. My dad used to drive me an hour every week or a couple of times a week. We used to drive an hour to practice, one way. And we didn't...a lot of times we didn't get home until midnight. And I was doing homework on the way there in the truck, and on the way back.

**Pritchett**

Did you have siblings?

**Fik**

I did. I had an older brother. He's two...a little over two years older than me. And then I had a sister who is about five years younger than me. My sister always used to.... I used to wake up, and she'd be in my wheelchair doing wheelies watching TV and it always used to upset me 'cause, like, "That's mine! Stop taking mine!" But they were supportive. They were great athletes as well. My brother, baseball, football, soccer. My sister actually went to Concordia University in Irvine for...on a scholarship for softball. She played soccer as well. My family's always been very active and just very loving and supportive.

**Pritchett**

Have you participated in any disability rights activities?

**Fik**

I have not.

**Pritchett**

<topic>Jim Hayes' work and philosophy about disability rights</topic>

Was disability rights and disability access something that was important to Jim Hayes?

**Fik**

Absolutely. The University of Texas at Arlington is one of the most accessible universities, I think, in the world because of Jim Hayes. I know the bridges on Cooper are because of Jim Hayes. He fought for those because he had some of his athletes...were hit by vehicles and he wasn't going to stand for it. He fought the presidents or whoever he needed to of the

university to get us what we needed. Not myself only, but everybody that...whether they had CP [cerebral palsy] or they were amputees, or spina bifida, or anything else like that. Even scholarship-wise, we were the first university to give scholarships, full-ride scholarships and that was because of him. He wanted disabled people, or anybody to have the same opportunities that Joe off the street would have. So he didn't care about disabilities. He wanted everyone to be looked at the same.

**Pritchett**

<topic>Adapted sports at the collegiate level</topic>  
Adaptive sports. You said you played hockey, tennis, and...

**Fik**

Basketball.

**Pritchett**

Basketball.

**Fik**

Yep.

**Pritchett**

You played professionally and in college.

**Fik**

I played tennis my first two years at UT Arlington. My freshman year I actually won a national championship in tennis for singles. I played that my second year. I didn't really have the time to dedicate to it, so I think I lost in the semi-finals that following year. But basketball is.... I love the comradery and the team, just going out and having a good time. I've been playing basketball since 1998.

**Pritchett**

And how widespread is college wheelchair basketball? If you played in college then obviously you played against other teams.

**Fik**

Yeah. There's multiple universities and there's more that are picking up programs. This year, actually, the University of Arizona State, or Arizona State University just started a program this year. Auburn University just started a program a couple of years ago. I never played against those teams 'cause I graduated eight years ago. But back when I was there it was the University of Illinois, University of Missouri, University of Edinburgh, Pennsylvania, and University of Alabama, University of Whitewater, Wisconsin, University of Southwest Minnesota State, I think that's about it.



**Pritchett**

Do you do any volunteer work or assist with the younger people in any way?

**Fik**

I do a little bit. I'll go and help out, measure some kids, and stuff like that, but I'm pretty busy as it is. I have friends that run the junior programs and stuff like that. I don't really have time to be doing that. Not that I don't want to, or it doesn't appeal to me. I just don't have the time.

**Pritchett**

The person you are today, if you could talk to your 13-year-old self, what would you tell you?

**Fik**

It's all going to be okay. This is going to make you who you are. It's going to define you for the better, not for the worse.

**Pritchett**

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

**Fik**

No, I'm just grateful for all the opportunities that I've been given, and all the sacrifices. I've had many great coaches over the years, and my family, like I said, they sacrificed so much for me to get where I am today. So I'm just thankful for every opportunity that I was given, and everything else.

**Pritchett**

Wonderful. I thank you for your time today.

**Fik**

Not a problem.