

Nancy Crowther

Disability Rights Advocates

Interview conducted by Dr. Sarah Rose and Trevor Engel in 2017

Disability Studies Minor

Special Collections and Archives

University of Texas at Arlington

Copyright © 2017 by the University of Texas at Arlington

Biography

Nancy Crowther was born into a military family in Frankford, Germany. She moved to Killeen, Texas at a young age. At 15 months old, Crowther lost her mobility due to spinal meningitis. Crowther played in active role in the Disability Rights Movement prior to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. She applied the skills she learned from ADAPT Texas to Capitol Metro. As of 2017, Crowther lives in Austin, Texas.

Topics Discussed

- Work with Capitol Metro in Austin, Texas
- Work with ADAPT of Texas
- Wheelchair lifts for buses
- Deaf and blind access
- Collaboration with other disability rights organizations
- Work with the Austin Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities
- Buses for senior citizens

Rose

This is Sarah Rose.

Engel

And Trevor Engel.

Rose

<topic>Work with Capitol Metro in Austin, Texas</topic>

Interviewing Nancy Crowther at her home on 2102 Leway Circle on Wednesday August 16th 2017. So where we left off was that you were...had just gotten a job with what became Capitol Transit?

Crowther

Capitol Metro.

Rose

Capitol Metro.

Crowther

Yeah. It was...

Rose

So it was the advisory committee...

Crowther

Oh! The advisory committee...

Rose

Created this job.

Crowther

...created this position at the recommendation of the advisory committee helped staff to put together kind of a job description. What would help the community and Capitol Metro get along. [laughter] How would we best have some continuity and stop conflict 'cause it was constant conflict. Because we want lifts on buses and we will continue to come to your board meetings until you say, "Yes."

And...but they needed someone. And we all agreed with the advisory committee that yeah, Capitol Metro need somebody. But I never realized it would be me. Although because I had that other job...

Rose

Which was?

Crowther

Which was the attendant coordinator over at the Austin Resource Center for Independent Living. And it was a stressful job, it was almost 24/7 and it was...I took time to be a volunteer with the advisory committee, which helped because when the add came out, it might as well have said, "Only Nancy Crowther needs to apply because it was perfect for me."

I just loved it. And my attendant at the time, I remember her going, "Hey! There's a job here in the paper. Listen to this."

And I kept the ad from the paper because, yeah. Exactly.

Rose

Do you still have it today?

Crowther

You bet I do! Yep. And I started in...it was so because Capitol Metro don't think. Which really used to having a staff member in this position. So they kind of...they were going to put me in safety department. We don't know why. We haven't figured that one out to this day. Then they ended up putting me into the communications department 'cause that's where we put a lot of outreach to our community. And that's also where the advisory committee was involved. I went, "Well, okay. That makes sense. I'll go from advisory member to staff member. And yeah. I'll be the person that they wanted."

And so at first, it was reading a lot of literature. A lot of literature on ancient, boring, governmental transportation journals. Ugh! I thought I was going to die. [laughter] I mean, I love them for trying to give me a lot of background. But if I saw elderly and handicapped transportation and just paratransit all the way through the industry...I mean that's all the federal government talked about. That's all the industry talked about. I was just like, "Oh my goodness! There is a lot of..."

The boss brought me a big, ole' stack and I was like, "Okay. Can't wait to get started on something other than reading and researching. But..."

Rose

Bob Kafka was saying that yesterday in 1977 or so the federal government came up with a bus that was very low to the ground. But all of the companies pushed back against it and it just kind of died. Did you know you were coming across that?

Crowther

Yeah, I came across a lot with the industry that did not want to really make a lot of changes to make things accessible. Actually, since I was hired in June of 1989...in July of 1990, the ADA went into effect. So a lot of the work we started with, the lawsuit with UT kind of bled into this history of what was needed under the ADA with transportation 'cause that is the way Austin is. But there was still a lot of fight because a lot of old blood on the board. There was a lot of old industry people in the field. And they're like, "No. No. No. Only people with disabilities can ride paratransit. We don't need...think of the possibilities: 'Oh my gosh! They are taking forever to board.' We will never have the right securement. Oh no. No. No."

Well I got on board. And I was like...I've been out and I've been to Washington D.C. And their metro system is great!

Rose

'Cause that one will be accessible.

Crowther

Yeah! And it was so nice. And I said, "Well I think if Washington D.C. can do it, I think Austin, Texas can."

So I use that a lot with my...I use that a lot with my imagination. Can you stop it?

Rose

Okay.

Crowther

Back to the industry side of it, I was given the responsibility of not only reviewing all the transportation guidelines through the ADA, but getting a plan together for not only paratransit, but for our system. And I thought, "Oh, I've only been here for a year."

But I had a lot of back education from the lawsuit and from trips I have taken. And things working with ADAPT? You know things can work.

Rose

<topic>Work with ADAPT of Texas</topic>

What kind of actions were there in the second half of the '80s? Like after the UT lawsuit, that were pushing capitol transit.

Crowther

The actions primarily were where Austin. We went as ADAPT to all the board meetings. They dreaded seeing us because it was going to be public speaking. And always a chant as we left, loud and disruptive.

Rose

What kind of chant?

Crowther

“We will ride!”

And as we go out slowly, they’re going, “Oh my God.” [laughter]

So it would always be a big deal. And signage, “We will ride!”

You put the lifts on, we will ride.

Rose

Do you know who chose that or how that came up?

Crowther

That was ADAPT.

Rose

That was national ADAPT?

Crowther

Yeah. And that was...and all of the national ADAPT folks been going to conferences or transit related. And also to...I remember the poor American Public Transit Association, which was National APTA, which was the national I want to say membership group for all transit authorities. And they were the answer guys. But anyway, they would have a conference every year and ADAPT always showed up and disrupted the conference because they wanted to get the word out, “We will ride! You gotta put lifts on buses.”

It’s only the right thing to do.

Rose

Did you ever go into the national protests like in San Antonio? I think there’s one conference there.

Crowther

They're probably was. But because I was an employee, I couldn't do that. Be disruptive. But I can certainly give information any processes that were going on outside the authority and inside the authority to the outside. 'Cause I wore so many different hats. In the communication field, I worked on a lot of outreach and education to the elderly and the disabled population. And that brought me into contact with a lot of the disability-related organizations, which you know, "Hey! The more we get the word out, the better."

So when the ADA came across the regulations. Trying to put out a plan. I worked with...my boss made sure that I was able to explain it to the Board of Directors that they understood. Now, Capitol Metro by this time had already purchased buses with lifts on them. They were the old ECC...EEO's. That's what they were called. The steps would fold out into a platform and then be like an elevator going up and down. And we called it "The Killer Lift".

Rose

How come?

Crowther

Because many people fell off because it would malfunction and just dump them on the ground. If you can imagine, that was pretty horrid.

Rose

And had that come about with ADAPT's activism?

Crowther

What? The...

Rose

...the purchasing. Like when did the buses get purchased?

Crowther

Yeah. It was definitely part of their activism. And the fact that Capitol Metro just started in '85, they were voted into place.

Rose

When did those buses get purchased?

Crowther

<topic>Wheelchair lifts for buses</topic>

Well in '85, they had already had a fleet of I believe it was 100 buses that didn't have lifts. And then they purchased trolleys that had lifts on them. And then they started purchasing more fleet vehicles in '86 with lifts on them. But those were all the monopoly of the lifts in the industry was EEC. And nobody liked them 'cause it was scary. [laughter] Very scary. And I even had an incident at one festival. I knew all the guides, I was getting on a shuttle bus to go to an event and the lifts started bowing down. And I started doing the old *ahh!* And they ran up and caught me before anything else could happen. And I went, "Thank goodness. That would not look good that we lost one of our own ADA people. [laughter]

Rose

Wow! What about the state of paratransits you'd find often?

Crowther

Well paratransit began in 1976 when the city of Austin, or a group of people with disabilities, filed a suit against the city of Austin under 504 for the paratransit. And they began with five vans, awning lifts on the back. I remember it pretty...like it was yesterday. But I mean a Tommy Lift, just like a freight lift. And the vans were not comfortable nor did they smell good. But that was it. Five.

Rose

In the whole city?

Crowther

Yeah. You know, we don't have that many disabled people in Austin, do we? Well we did.

Rose

How many vans did you had to book in?

Crowther

I wanna say seven days. It was like a week out, so the scheduler can manually, literally manually, figure out who to pick up first, second third from where they were. It was interesting what all they did manually now is covered by computers. So it gradually grew over time because we couldn't ignore it. We didn't want to ignore it and the

public wouldn't let us ignore it. Capitol Metro took over the operation of paratransit from the city. And so we had that and the mainline buses.

Rose

Were they advanced? Like they have the '85 or '90?

Crowther

By '90, where I believe they had started there, had about fifteen. So they've tripled. And it was getting to the point where they were thinking, "Buses are getting to be big business now. And they contracted out a lot of service to the taxi companies because taxis could take care of the ambulatory folks. And we had under our eligibility and our client base, we had about a 75% ambulatory ridership. So we're like, "Okay! Let's try to contract out some of the demand."

But meanwhile, the service area kept growing and growing and growing. And it just became more and more difficult to get from forty miles north to whatever. And it was just...it was shared ride. So you had to ride with someone else, pick up, drop off, door-to-door service. And I think it was \$0.60 or \$0.50. Something to that effect. And then they raised it to \$0.60. And it stayed \$0.60 *forever!* [laughter] I hadn't understand it, but it was like only probably in the...When we started really looking at the stairs after 2000, that...

Rose

Wow!

Crowther

Yeah, so. But paratransit was the community's choice by persons who were visually impaired and not mobile enough to be able to ride a fixed route. So they had some resentment against ADAPT because they were making the board focus more of their energies on lifts. And it's like, "Well it's not all fixed route."

And we're like, "We know. We're working on both of them, but we have to address getting lifts on buses so that we're complying with the law. And we also have to make a paratransit plan with the law. And so there were a lot of things we had to do under the ADA. And the unique thing, which I was so happy I was there to see was the University of Texas was contracting out for shuttle service. And I've heard of this through all my interactions within the transit authority. And I know my boss said, "Do you realize that I was involved in a court case against the university, which we loss. But it had to do with lifts on buses. And we're young enough into the ADA where we go enough buses to fulfill shuttle needs and they are all accessible."

I think we have the...no one else would have lifts on their buses had they bid on it. So that was one of the selling points. And we've been doing it ever since having accessible service on UT campus. And I went, "Yay! I'm glad I got that done."

So that was very, very timely. It was a success for Capitol Metro because that got our foot into the door of a university system where we were able to do a lot of partnering, which was way cool. So that was good. I had a

lot of outreach and education to do. We had a lot of public meetings on what we were doing for our bus service and for paratransit over the years. I think we've finished up our whole decade. I felt like near 2006 with the reports...okay with the federal government with our plans implementing the ADA where we were.

Rose

So it took about sixteen years? Sixteen or seventeen years?

Crowther

Yeah. It was a lot. But as far as the transit was concerned, we were 100% lift equipped one way or another. Lift equipped by 1993, which is way cool! I love it.

Rose

What was the size of the mainline fleet?

Crowther

I want to say it was like 300 buses at that time. Yeah, so imagine that. And it was so nice to be able to say that because we were the first transit authority in the state of Texas to be 100% as early as 1993, which really was a few years after the signing of the ADA. And we're like, "Yay!"

Rose

Was that a year after it went into effect? Or when the regulations were...?

Crowther

It made life so much easier for us. Now here is the ugly side of the industry that I started seeing was that a lot of transit authorities went ahead before the ADA got their deadline going. Anyway, the bus that was purchased after 1990 had to have a lift on it. And so in '91, they all would purchase buses without lifts on them. And I thought, "Oh my God! This is awful. How dare you. This is really gonna hurt your business 'cause the life of a bus is twelve years. Yeah. Twelve years.

Rose

So it was '93?

Crowther

Yeah. So then you think, "Okay by the year 2003, then the whole nation of transits should be wheelchair accessible. One way or another."

It wasn't so because of however people knew, they would run their fleet longer or whatever. But they also learned that without lifts on their buses, and see this was part of our information too, is that we were able to document ridership for people with disabilities every time the lifts were used because they would...The operators had to call them in to radio. The radio would type everything up and then it daily, we got reports from the radio room. And I was the one that flipped through and just started recording in '89. All the boardings, and it was little. I think we had 2,000 the first year total. And then the next...I mean it just kept going up and up and up and up and up. And I think when we hit, well we stated automating thankfully enough. Otherwise, a forest would be gone, all the paper I had to look through. But the highlight of my life in the industry and in my work was to see the day we had over 100,000 boardings in a year.

Rose

Wow!

Crowther

I know! And I was so excited. I said, "Guys, I'm not the only one riding...anymore." [laughter]

Rose

What about other cities? Early on, were other cities tracking boardings that way?

Crowther

Not as much as we would have liked because some of them put off their lifts. Now most of them focused on paratransit eligibility and things like that. So they weren't focused on the fixed route, but it was nice when APTA and the community transit association and groups got together to talk about the accessibility, how good it was to be able to say, "Well Capitol Metro, we've been counting numbers in ridership. And our ridership has gone up as a percent just because we've done the word out. We got the lips. We had the man power. And..."

Rose

And the maintenance too.

Crowther

And the maintenance. And frankly they will ride.

Rose

And when was that? Do you know?

Crowther

Dallas I know. And in '95, '96...

Rose

And so it was only six years. You've gone from a few thousand...?

Crowther

It was just *boom!* And I have to give some a caveat or two because one: the operators may or may not call it in. Or they may have exaggerated the boardings to say, "Oh poor me. That's why I'm always so late because I had 4,000 wheelchairs boarding. And we know that's not even possible because I looked at the figures. We have a planning department that...I worked in almost every department to get the numbers, get the facts. I worked with maintenance on securement. I worked with **pecurment** on the bus orders. We worked on a lot of things. So I was able to work and collaborate with every department. And it went really, really...made it viable for that position to have that level of clearance toward...I just said, "Don't put me in finance 'cause I'm not a numbers person. [laughter] So, but I did training. They set me up to Grand Forks, Minnesota. On time in March, the year that Fargo, North Dakota? There was a blizzard there and something caught on fire. I think it was a newspaper factory or whatever it was caught on fire and burned down part of Fargo. I remember I was part...I was in that snowstorm at a bus manufacturing place testing out ramps. And yeah. I was like, "Don't be sending me out in that snow like that. I'm from Texas."

But they felt confident. And I was with one of the quality control people from maintenance that helped to design our buses and what we wanted. [cooed at pet] So it was always good. It was always a collaboration. And it was always...they treated me like I was [cooed at pet]. They treated me as if I were the queen of some accessibility, which I thought it was funny 'cause it was like, "I'm just a regular Joe and I like to ride buses and I like to learn things about mechanical stuff and I have a tape measure. I am supposed to know how wide it's supposed to be and how long it's supposed to be. But yeah. And that was the first time we had tried ramps and it was the best thing you could have done., Those lifts were horrible.

Rose

So ramps, were they for low-rise buses?

Crowther

They weren't the low buses, but they could kneel.

Rose

Okay, so you could ride around.

Crowther

And they...no. They would fold up and out. They used to have the kind that would shoot out. We used those in paratransit, but kept bottoming-out when we go to door-to-door, through a parking lot and had to go over a speed bump. [snickers] Not good. Not good. The we went through those EEC lifts and then we got a couple of other lifts that the industry by that time...the wheelchair manufacturers were not talking to the bus designers and then vice versa. Which really makes your job hard because you've got to try to design a universal securement system that one: won't take forever, but will be secure for the person and their mobility device and a system to keep them secure. Lap belt, whatever. But it all had to be quick. You can't slack on fixed route. I think my best time is 45 seconds. Getting on, getting in the area and the driver getting securement on it and get back in his seat.

Rose

So did you have issues of buses or just driving past people?

Crowther

Yes.

Rose

We just talk a minute? Because that's notorious for that.

Crowther

We've had that more than once, more than twice. We were successful in tracking down who was who. Our allies with ADAPT would help to document. And I was like, "Give 'em to me. Give 'em to me. We've got to do this quick. They're a labor union. We got deadlines or I think 72 hours between an event and a complaint that we had to get to the driver.

Rose

Wow! So you really needed people out there in the community and the tie?

Crowther

Yeah. It was like, "Bus, get a bus number and a description and a time and a place and we will find out who is driving that bus."

And we developed in the operation's division. Progressive discipline for not only passing up people at stops, for calling out stops...

Rose

Yeah, I was going to ask you about deaf and blind access.

Crowther

<topic>Deaf and blind access</topic>

Yeah, it was calling out stops, which was real hard. And also we had Braille and raised lettering on the bus stop poles. And they even developed a toll-free number for people to call a 1-800 number who could not read the frequency information at the bus stop in the day that we had payphones so that people who were visibly impaired could call, find out what time the bus will be there. And there were so many creative things we would thought of. But the Deaf population was harder because we didn't have any at that time, LED signage or anything. So it was a little bit tough, but I went out a lot to The School for the Deaf and did a lot of training and showed them how to read the maps and how to read the schedules and stuff like that. So I was able to give them the basics, but they had to learn landmarks, how to light up the stop requested and things like that. How much to pay. So when technology came around where the signs were a little more LED or even the dots I think they had, then the inside had the trailing signs that would say, "Stop requested" and then "Next stop" information. So it was helpful.

Rose

What about...were you working on blind access at the time of the lifts?

Crowther

Oh yeah! Yeah, it was a circle of blind, visually impaired, low vision, Deaf...whatever we could do.

Rose

Being able to reach or identify the stop requested?

Crowther

Yeah. I took the bus out to many a place, primarily School for the Blind and just let them have at it. It was like, "Feel you way around. You can figure out the driver's area. The horn. They love honking the horn. But they got to feel and understand the layout of the bus instead of going to a bus stop and being surprised, "I don't know which way to turn."

So they did that and I kept calling it my 40 foot calling card 'cause they allowed me to take a bus out anywhere

I want it to to teach people how to ride. That's all it took was, "Here's a bus. Get on. Let's talk about some of the rules. Let's go around the block. What do you think about that?"

And then they were like, "Sweet! Is this your only bus?" [laughter]

But that was really a landmark there because I don't know if anybody else had put in so much effort and just the community's actions and involvement to try to educate people on. Because I told Capitol Metro, "It would be like having something that you've never had before, or you've seen it but never ridden it or ridden on it. You got to learn how to do that. Everybody has to."

But this is something people had been denied all their lives. So we have to do the outreach, we have to educate, we need buses at every event to show people, "Get on and check it out."

And so it worked very well because I don't think I can talk my way through the experience of what those students needed and what they got on that bus. So it was very gratifying to see how much that really they remembered it. I'd see them years later and I'd go, "Oh yeah! You are the lady that brought the bus?"

And I'd go, "Yeah, that's me. I still have my bus with me."

Rose

That's really cool.

Crowther

It is.

Rose

<topic>Collaboration with other disability rights organizations</topic>

Were you talking to the people in other cities? Is there an equivalence of you?

Crowther

Yes. We were talking...well I talked to quite a few peer cities. Definitely Denver, Colorado 'cause that was like the home of ADAPT. The beginning was there. So I talked to them. I talked to Portland and Seattle a lot. Dallas and Houston and El Paso because they had established transit authority. San Antonio had a lot more infrastructure issues than we've ever seen in my life, but it's an older city. It's historic. And the transit authority didn't put much into the amenities, like the benches and the sidewalks and stuff.

So their hardship was the eligibility programs for paratransit. And that's what they did a lot of. So I was able to go to national conferences and talk about the marketing of communications and training. And everything else that we've done to promote ridership and I would be on a panel with some of my peers I had talked to. And it was just wonderful to have people in the field that had seen and what we've done. And we were emulating what we've done. So that was so wonderful.

Rose

Would you say Austin was pretty far ahead of most cities you remember or sort of the bunch of cities? Like who was...?

Crowther

Well we're #1. No. [laughter]

Rose

Also, who was emulating you?

Crowther

We were the first in the state, so we use that a lot. But I think Denver was first and Seattle and King County, they were very well ahead of the game. And that's why we looked to them 'cause like, "Okay, we're almost there, but what did you do on this? What kind of security you were using? How are you dealing with this? How are you dealing with that?"

So it was wonderful. But they had different terrain, different weather...We didn't have to shovel snow. So the bus stops were always accessible. So we just had to develop programs to put into the infrastructures for the sidewalks because if you build it, they will ride. 'Cause that was my theme 'cause I kept saying, "If you build sidewalks and a good bus stop, they'll ride. They'll continue to ride."

Rose

I was wondering how much this related to street issues. 'Cause I mean, there are streets today that don't have sidewalks enlisted. And curb cuts.

Crowther

Yeah, we have state, county and city. And I think Capitol Metro's involved in all of them. But we had dedicated funding just to sidewalks. And we started kind of by popular demand. We could see the ridership on a certain route was pretty high. So we start over there and start making sidewalks and curb ramps and making big pads. Because we had over 3,000 stops. And the world wasn't created accessible in like one day. So you have to imagine that between Capitol Metro and the city of Austin, we had to develop funding, we had to develop plans and we had to overlap a lot of what's the city was doing because their sidewalk may go to point x and then the bus stops over here. So we are going to put the bus stop and bring a sidewalk that makes it connect. It was so much work, but it was so much better when we got everything computerized and we have layers of routes with bus stops and we can get to the point where we were doing a lot. ADAPT helped us with a lot of inventory of bus stops, which was very helpful. Because of manpower, we just didn't have it to go out and...We tried, but it

didn't work well. But ADAPT helped us with a lot of that. They would continuously call in stops that weren't accessible. They'd get put on the list. But fortunately, today we're finally catching up I think. I think Linda Watson, who's the current chief executive officer president, announced not long ago that the last two areas of bus stops were gonna be completed for access this year. And I just went, "Wow! This year? Wow, that was a long time ago."

Twenty-seven years.

Rose

Were there any major lawsuits where they access a point where you and the disability community come to close?

Crowther

It wasn't necessarily me 'cause I was the peace keeper. But yeah, there was certainly lawsuits. There were lawsuits over everything that were out of my control. But I worked as hard as I could with both sides to try to alleviate it. But hey, it was becoming lawsuits and that's okay. If it helps to engage the authority a little bit more importantly, then yeah. It helped. There was a lawsuit against the city of Austin for lack of sidewalks and access to...again, motivate (legally) to get a plan together, get the community together, get a plan together and that's really what DOJ wanted everyone to do. Get a plan in place at least so we can see that you have progress on the horizon coming and you have funding on the horizon coming and we wouldn't have to litigate so much. So that's what we ended up doing. And we worked very closely with the city of Austin like I said. And we were doing a lot of connections. We had an ADA sidewalk task force, which I think still needs to this day with the city. And it's okay. We have a master sidewalk list, we've got priorities. How we developed priorities was communicating with the community. Everything we did, we did with the community because once you shut someone out, that's the worst thing you can do. So we learned.

Rose

So...so was the 2016-2017 Reports...what were those? You said the final reports that you sent in were in 2006-2007 or so. What were those reports?

Crowther

To the Department of Transportation is where our final paratransit reports on our compliance.

Rose

Mainline compliance.

Crowther

Mainline and paratransit because I wouldn't do one without the other.

Rose

Yes. And does Austin still has both today?

Crowther

Yes, and the fleet's grown, technology has gotten so much better. They are staying with the ramps because the bus is lower. But if you put it down on the sidewalk, it's just like, "Whoop!" Sliding right in. We have many, many, many opportunities to work together on finding just the right kind of device. It used to have back in the '80s, the wheelchair wheels were large. They were like 18" maybe. In diameter. They were pretty big, but they had this clamp. I'll never forget it. That the industry put these clamps so you could drive into it and you can lock your wheels in place. Well sometimes it didn't unlock. People get stuck. And that's what's part of that. Keeping up with maintenance clause. And so we have that issue. We reported to the advisory committee. They recommended that we just get them off the buses, use belts with the hooks if possible, and we started using what we call "Y-Belts". They were built...they were basically built. They came out of the end. You could just clip them together whatever. Part of the chair, the wheels, the frame. Somewhere to keep is stabilized. And they were inertia belts, so they would tighten up as the vehicle went. However, those started getting stuck. And...I think I made a point when I came back to the shop, dragging one behind me, and went, "Uhhh...I need to report that on this bus, we had to cut the belt off so I could get off of it. It's still on my chair. Could you take it off?" [laughter]

So we had some interesting things like that. And that's how I got to work with a lot of the people 'cause they were like, "Nancy's real. She knows what's going on."

So it was really exciting to work in such a diverse way. I mean it wasn't just focusing on one thing, but accessibility goes everywhere. So even in the marketing, we worked on the accessibility symbols. The large print, the Braille...we did all these things for all of the public meetings. We had interpreters. We didn't used to. And so it was just a new era to access.

Rose

What do you think the impact's been on the community of Austin, various disability communities having accessible transit?

Crowther

I think that a lot of people who I have talkened to said, "I moved because of the transit."

And I went, "Wow! That's quite the complement."

But yeah. When we have over 100,000 boardings in a year, somebody's riding. It's not just me. And so I'm excited to hear that. I'm excited to see it. I see people out in the community a lot more, which was the hole in

tenth at the ADA was integration into the community. And every time I'd see someone at a bus stop in a wheelchair, I'd go secretly. I'd given myself a little cheer because it was like, "Yay! Someone else is riding the bus."

It was such an integrated scene and people aren't used to it. So now, this has become old hat and the weather is...like we said. We don't have to shovel anything. It's hot yeah, but the buses have air condition. But we have sunshine about 360 days a year. [laughter] So for the most part, we're getting there on the access. And if you can't get there on the sidewalks, you can always take a bus and make your way there.

I've done that several times because I know the terrain and I'd say, "I don't want to have to crawl across X intersection. So I'm just going to get on the bus here, cross that nasty, little intersection and get off on the other side 'cause that was just going to be my destination anyway."

Rose

So what about for you personally? The impact.

Crowther

Aw man, talk about dream come true! I would have never thought when I was going to the university that I would be involved in the bus industry. But I was one of very few in my position in the industry. And I think the industry started recognizing the need for a person like me within their own industry. So I set a good example, I certainly did the right thing, and I wanted to make sure that the community was involved. And we weren't the David versus Goliath. We were the, "Can we work together on this instead of fighting?"

And it was so nice. I'm personally gratified that I can now, as I'm retired from Capitol Metro that I can go out and ride any bus anywhere I want to and they're all accessible. Drivers get up out of their seats. They help you, they secure you, you got announcements. It's wonderful. I love it! [laughter]

Rose

That's really cool. What about retiring? When did you retire?

Crowther

Well this story...I retired by accident. Literally. I was on my way to a meeting downtown at our downtown office and it was raining. I got off the bus because I always demonstrated to the staff, "You can ride the bus downtown."

And I got off the bus and it was raining, so I clipped it really quick. And what I didn't see was a major squared off area where there was a tree supposed to be planted there, but it wasn't and it was full of water. And so my front left tire clipped the corner in that, which kind of threw me forward, which threw the chair forward. And I hyperextended both legs and fractured my tibias all within seconds. That hurt! It shocked everybody, 'cause they were like, "Nancy? Oh! Oh my God!"

So literally by accident, the recovering and everything from an injury like that pretty much took away a lot of stamina, a lot of strength for me. So I ended up going ahead. And after I recovered, going ahead and retiring. I've put in 25 years. I put in enough time. I really felt that we were at the foundation it was already set and it would be a good time anyway, but I didn't want to go out that way.

Rose

And that was what year?

Crowther

2010. Yeah. All the time that I was working with Capitol Metro, I was also volunteering at different places. I was on the board for a couple other things. Like I was on the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities for about ten years. And then I worked with the city of Austin's ADA coordinator.

Rose

When did Austin even get an ADA coordinator?

Crowther

In 1992, when they were supposed to. [laughter]

Rose

Arlington doesn't have on yet.

Crowther

Oh.

Rose

Fort Worth just started an internship for this.

Crowther

Oh, I'm sorry. Well, I'd gotten lucky. But I was also working with Capitol Metro...not Capitol Metro. ADAPT of Texas. In the end, also with PACT because attendant care, if you can't get out of bed, you ain't gonna ride the buses. You're not gonna do anything in the community. So I started working with Cathy not long after I retired.

So I did some time with her two or three years in getting the program going and up.

Rose

So what did that mean in terms of that?

Crowther

Getting it going? A lot of work, a lot of...I know. It was like, "What was I thinking? I thought I retired." [laughter]

Rose

And that was what year...?

Crowther

It was in 2011.

Rose

Okay. And you've done attendant work or attendant coordination in the '80s, right?

Crowther

All along, I would do working and volunteering with ADAPT on my own time beyond Capitol Metro. So we know each other like family. So PACT was the Personal Coalition Texas. And we developed that. We got an icon for it or a symbol. And we got meetings going and we got some data. And because we are in the seat of the Legislature at the Capitol. We were able to advocate for our attendants at the legislative end, but we also tried to motivate the attendants. But they were so busy. I'm thinking that we couldn't get a lot of people out. We had to be the voice for them.

Rose

What did you guys see as the key issues?

Crowther

Wages.

Rose

Why?

Crowther

Why? Because the state and Medicaid just didn't cut the needs. They always kept it at minimum wage. Well that's a lot of work for a person whose taking care of someone in the community. However, over the years and through our roles at the Capitol, we finally...this past time, went back and said, "Hey, let us show you how much you are saving by helping us in the community, pay our attendants and yes...I think you can afford a livable wage for our attendants. But they are still getting minimum wage. And it's a sad, sad statement. And I don't know what to do about it because we've tried everything short of I don't know...robbing banks. But nobody can afford to pay the real going price for an attendant. So, it's hard. Yeah, the attendant issues were finding of course that the populations aging out of the attendants.

Rose

Oh really?

Crowther

Yes. The average age is 51 of our attendant pools. We've gotten statistics on 275,000 people in the state that are attendants. And getting numbers and facts and figures and working with HHSC. It was...we became involved on committees through the HHSC and lots of things happen. Programs were developed for community care that weren't just personal attendant service. But for me, for example, I'm in the community. I mean the Consumer Manage Personal Attendant Services, which means I have a responsibility. And I can supervise my own attendant and I can do timesheets. And I don't need anyone 24/7. I just need a few hours here and there. And once you get me going, I become a productive citizen in the community. And that's the way things are. And certainly, if it weren't for attendants, there would be no school...no schooling, no life. And it's still just a struggle. And I can't understand. But aside from the money aspects...but I can't understand why our legislature doesn't understand the value of the community attendants. I mean the realities there...

Rose

It's much cheaper.

Crowther

You...It's so much cheaper. Granted, they probably make more money than the average Medicaid person and maybe they can afford their own attendants at \$15.00 an hour. But it's hard to recruit people today.

Rose

Yeah. Or retain.

Crowther

Or retain. Yeah. When you have McDonald's, Dairy Queen at 12, you are competing with fast food.

Rose

Why do you think the attendance population is aging so much?

Crowther

Because they have been in the field, their dedicated people. We found attendants at just...they had the heart for it. And that's all they want to do. They can work one-on-one with people and they love it. And they're a valuable asset to the community, but you wouldn't know it by the wage. But you know it by the community. Their appreciation for them. So we went...Cathy Cranson has been doing a lot of development of this project. And right now we have another project called the Texas Attendant Project where we have linked up with some independent living centers around the state. And some other agencies to help get the word out to their attendants. Like, "Come on! Let's rally for Medicare...Medicaid rather."

And we had to rally for everything. We had to fight for Medicaid. I've never seen this in my life. I was pleased a couple sessions ago when we actually *ooh* got them up to \$0.50 extra an hour. Whoa! Hold me back! We're talking millions of dollars across the state. And I just don't see the benefit. So there was a very good report done by the Coalition for Texas with Disabilities. And I think you have that.

Rose

It was, "We will make sure we have it."

Crowther

Oh okay. We did that and we also did another. We did some video cards called, "An Indecent Affair" or an "An Indecent Proposal". Whatever the opposite movie was. But where we talked about attendant care services. Little **videttes**. I can send that you.

Rose

Yeah, that will be great.

Crowther

Yeah, it was really cool because we burned those on CDs, took 'em to the Capitol, we gave it to them and still nothing!

Rose

Both were just class...but then also the archive.

Crowther

Yeah, definitely. We've done a lot of things. We've done...it's unbelievable how much work we put into it. And we're still getting very little. And now with the population of the dedicated attendants aging out. We're not having the same amount of people coming into the field. When they're young too, they don't want to have to do this type of work. Rather flip hamburgers for \$12.00 an hour than clean someone up for \$8.00 an hour.

Unfortunately, that's been the way of the world. And we are trying to brainstorm across the state, "What can we do? 'Cause this is a problem all over."

Rose

Yeah, definitely. What about your Mayor's Committee work?

Crowther

Oh I love my Mayor's Committee work. I was a secretary for I think nine of the ten years what's on there. Because I was a secretary of every board was on. I don't know why, but I loved it because I got to work closely with the city of Austin's ADA coordinator. And we're fast friends. But I also...Ron Lucey, who's with the Governor's Committee was the chairman of that committee. So I got to work with him a lot. We did the ten-year anniversary of the ADA. We arranged the torch that went across the United States and came to Austin on the tenth anniversary.

Rose

So what years were you the secretary?

Crowther

I have to think 'cause it was quite a while.

Rose

You can get back to us.

Crowther

Yeah, I will probably have to get some resumes. 'Cause I was really involved in a lot of different groups.

Rose

Actually, if the archivist does not know those names, it be pretty interesting. We have Sam Province's.

Crowther

Yeah, good deal. So...

Rose

<topic>Work with the Austin Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities</topic>
Austin Mayor's Committee.

Crowther

The Austin Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities. We had a lot of employment related issues that we worked with. A lot of access issues we worked with.

Rose

You had employment issues?

Crowther

We recognized once a year during October, recognized employment award ceremonies. And we'd recognized not only employees with disabilities. We would recognize businesses that hired people with disabilities, not as token or anything, but out of genuine desire to get that population employed. 'Cause you got a 76% unemployment rate. And also a lot of the businesses, we also recognized media for their positive portrayal of people with disabilities.

Rose

Was this the Governor's Committee or the Mayor's Committee?

Crowther

Both.

Rose

Were you on both?

Crowther

I wasn't on the Governor's Committee, but the Governor's Committee did the Barbara-Jordan Awards. And through Capitol Metro, we won two of the Barbara-Jordan Awards.

Rose

Oh, because of the communication outreach.

Crowther

Yeah.

Rose

That's really cool.

Crowther

Aww man, I'd tell ya I got so many things that going on...that happened. And they all dovetailed into each other.

Rose

And then Austin was also doing similar awards?

Crowther

Umhm. Yep.

Rose

...

Crowther

Primarily on the employment end and for the media portraying people with disabilities positively and stories that local media have done. So those were always fun. And of course, we had to introduce the speakers and all this jazz. That was fun. So those were good events and we a lot. I know we were very involved in the tenth anniversary of the ADA and the torch run, they called it. But it was more of a torch march, I want to say.

Rose

Or roll.

Crowther

Or roll. Or stumble. I don't know. But we...oh I'll never forget it. I can put my finger on. Ron and I, the Ada coordinator...it was back when I could drive. So we were trying to drive the route. And he had pancakes for breakfast and we were having to do a lot of turns and back. And he started getting motion sick. Poor baby! Because, "I think my silver-dollar pancakes are about to come up."

"Okay, let me just pull over and let's stop this for a while."

But we were trying to figure out without getting to involved in taking the route. And so we did pretty good. Got some pictures of those too. And the headline. It was just a wonderful, wonderful event. Turned out really good. And I think every couple of years after that, or every year after that, we'd have some kind of celebration. But none like that torch. Oh my gosh. That was "The Event" that made me really proud of what we've done. And that was only ten years into the ADA. So I started off the torch track, or trek. I started off with Michael Winters, who was with the Federal Transit Administration.

Rose

I did not know that part.

Crowther

He was a good friend to me and to the city because he knew a lot of us and admired our work with the community. But he was really a lifesaver in some of our tougher issues because it was like, "*Mike*. Help!"

So he and I started the trek with the torch.

Rose

Oh wait, **did you mean** the whole nation?

Crowther

No, here in Austin.

Rose

...so he was Austin-based?

Crowther

He was...he came.

Rose

Oh, I see.

Crowther

And it was like, "Sweet!"

Rose

That's really cool.

Crowther

So I'm in the picture alongside with Michael and it was just wonderful then. That's just something that will go down in my memory forever because he was such a good ally in the Federal Transit Administration until he lost them.

Rose

And he was also a director for Independent Living Center at one point, right?

Crowther

Yeah, I think way prior to that.

Rose

So I know Ramps, like the Capitol Steps Crawl, he was the director of them. And then after that, he went into the Federal Transit.

Crowther

Yeah, but he was in Civil Rights with the Federal Transit Administration. So he got all of the complaints. So I would get to him before they got to him. [laughter] I'd say, "Hey, we're having a problem here." [laughter] So Michael was one of a kind. He had a lot of energy, lot of knowledge and a lot of influence. And so we were really glad to have him as a friend and a colleague.

Rose

Yeah, he seemed pretty incredible from what I just seen. So what about the ADA coordinator?

Crowther

ADA coordinators were my best friends. Dolores Gonzales, she came from El Paso.

Rose

Is she still [here] today?

Crowther

She's still here, but she retired. You see, I've started this trend. [laughter] All my friends started retiring after I did, but we have put in the years of good, solid work. We've developed the foundations for a lot of programs that people can build on. She and I had the same type of position, which her's were a lot bigger. It was the city. And then we had a very good working relationship with very good friendship. They benchmarked her position with my position as far as employment and salary and everything. So we were equals in respect to what we had to do 'cause we were both responsible to the federal government. [laughter] So yeah. And we were both knee-deep in every project. We knew everybody. She knew all of the departments and everybody who was an ADA coordinator in each department.

Rose

Wow! That's really cool.

Crowther

She retired not too long ago. I think it was two years ago. And so there's a new person. And I'll think of his name, but it's not Dolores. [laughter]

Rose

Let's go back. We can look back. I was curious just thinking about city stuff which I was going to ask earlier. One of the things that other people have talked a bit about is how much, say someone who's getting...or is developing disabilities because of aging that they are not necessarily taught to use the new tech that would make things a lot easier. Like a wheelchair instead of a walker. And I was wondering in your outreach, you were doing so much outreach if you kind of wanted to address the elderly population who didn't see themselves as having a disability, but can definitely benefit.

Crowther

<topic>Buses for senior citizens</topic>

The senior population was kind of my charge to of course 'cause eventually, we are going to need some assistants in transportation. And we used to, in the beginning of your transit, they used to say, "Seventy and older, you're eligible for paratransit."

Well when the ADA came out, we had the, "Oh come take that away."

And that really didn't help the relationships with seniors. I heard you were going to take that away. The federal government...point it all to the feds all the time. They made us, but I will tell you that we made arrangements that seniors can ride on the bus free. We had an Easy Rider program whereby during off-peak hours, we would send a bus out to a group, whether they would be at a senior center or a neighborhood or whatever. It had to be a group of twenty or more to make it worthwhile. And we would take them wherever they needed to go, like to a symphony, to a movie, to wherever. This was a very popular program. I also got the thrill of setting those up and talking to seniors in that respect. Again, that program went for sixteen years. I know it did because when we had to shut it down because of federal regulations, it was deemed a charter service, I had to talk to the seniors about it and ...I know it hurt. But anyway, along with my outreach to people with disabilities, it was seniors. I wanted to promote using the bus as much as possible. And I think my proudest moment was a gentleman who always loved to ride the bus. He said, "But Nancy, it's just getting harder and harder to walk up that hill to get to the bus stop. I said, "Well, I can understand that."

He goes, "Well, what do you recommend?"

I said, "I'll get a scooter."

He goes, "Oh I never thought of that."

I said, "You don't have to use it all the time, but you can use it on those rough hills. You can get on the bus with it."

"I can?!"

This man was 77. And he wanted to continue his independence. And he realized the scooter was adaptive equipment for him. And so I was able to convince him of the benefit of having that piece of equipment. And he wrote me the nicest letter about how much we opened the door to his freedom, government independence. He didn't become dependent on that scooter until later as much. But was just a really nice event that happened. One of those earmark programs...or events.

Rose

Are there any other topics you would like to talk about or questions we should have asked?

Crowther

I'm just pleased to be a part of the transition. And also that I had a part in it. My finger prints are on it. They laid the foundation for making our community with the ADA intended it to be. And I am really excited about that. I had numerous projects I'm making. Signage accessible. Everything that I could do, I did. And if I didn't know how to do it. I'd learn real quick. But everybody looked to me for any type of disability issue that was needed or needed help with, which I don't mind. 'Cause part of my social work skills was to help people so that's what I was involved with. And that's what I just loved. And now I get to ride the buses and go wherever I want to. As the bumper sticker once said, "To boldly go where everyone else has gone before."

That's riding a bus.

Rose

Yeah. That's a big deal. Yeah and we did ride. We will ride and we did ride. And we continue to ride.