

Chase Bearden

Director of Advocacy for the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities

*Interview conducted by
Trevor Engel & Sarah Rose
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Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Born July 21st, 1977 in Santa Rosa, Texas to Pat and Steve Bearden. Family owned a commercial farm that grew cotton and sugar cane. Chases' father became involved in politics and decided to move the family to Austin, Texas; when Chase was in eighth grade. Bearden practiced gymnastics for a long time, but at the age of seventeen; he suffered an accident in which he broke his neck at C5- C6, leaving him paralyzed from the neck down. He spent months in rehab at St. David's medical center under the wing of Mike Haynes.

From there, he finished high school and went to Austin Community College, Texas A& M, and Concordia University, where he earned his BA in Business. Mike Haynes offered him a job at St. David's where worked for a couple of years and from there he went to AmeriCorps to his present service at the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities.

Topics discussed

- Events that led to the family's move to Austin.
- Acquiring his disability and passion for gymnastics.
- Rehabilitation process at St. David's
- Bearden's gratitude towards Mike Haynes.
- Beginning of college education.
- Applying to Concordia University.
- Fighting for a manual wheelchair.
- Support and relationship with close friends.

- Meeting Frances Key and their friendship.
- Bearden and Key's mischievousness.
- Bearden's mother advocates for campus accessibility.
- Journey to Texas A & M.
- Learning to drive, choosing the correct car model, and striving for independence.
- Ordeal behind customizing and adapting a vehicle in the 90s.
- Learning how to transfer in and out of car.
- Adjusting to change; everywhere.
- Not knowing how to ask for accommodations and lack of resources for students with disabilities.
- Journey to self-discovery.
- Working, learning to advocate, and raising awareness.
- Lack of awareness among teachers and personal experience.
- St. David's shift and journey to the Coalition of Texans with disabilities.
- Playing adapted sports.
- Who is James Gumbert and getting involved with wheelchair rugby.
- What wheelchair rugby taught him.
- Working with Physical Therapy students at St. David's.
- Breaking the rules for a continuous education.
- Facing unemployment difficulties.
- Physical activities after leaving wheelchair rugby.
- Beginnings for CTD and the recession in 2008.
- State of Texas gets sued.
- What happened after the lawsuit.
- Experience at CTD.
- Appointed to the Texas Board of Architects.

Interviewer:

Let's start by where did you grew up, where were you born... childhood.

Bearden:

>topic< Events that led to the family's move to Austin >/topic<.

I grew up on a farm in Santa Rosa, Texas down in the Rio Grande Valley. July 21st, 1977. Most of my life was spent down there at that time I think that it was a ten-thousand-acre commercial farm, so it was a big farm. My dad ended up working in politics and at that time he was actually working with Rick Perry when he was running for land commissioner and that is how we ended up moving up here. That was one of the connections, they sold the farm moved up here and spent (interviewer interrupts).

Interviewer:

What were your parents' names?

Bearden:

Oh... Pat and Steve Bearden. I have a sister Carry.

Interviewer:

Older?

Bearden:

Yeah, for about two years. Most of the time we spent was growing cotton and sugar cane; it was a different life living down there. Spending time on the beach growing up, hunting, and fishing. Then moving to Austin seeing a movie theatre that was bigger, two screens and a mall that was much more than just one story; it was moving to the big town when we got here.

Interviewer:

How old were you?

Bearden:

>topic< Acquiring his disability and passion for gymnastics>/topic<.

At that time, it was my eight grade year, so I was starting high school when we moved up here. We moved to Round rock around that time from there after a couple of years I ended up getting injured as a gymnast, I broke my neck at 17, so...

Interviewer:

Were you a very serious gymnast?

Bearden:

Say again?

Interviewer:

Were you a very serious gymnast?

Bearden:

Yeah. I mean I was training five to six hours a day, six days a week. I had started when I lived in the valley, I had competed on teams for years and it was something I loved and I'd go right back to. It's just one of those freak accidents that happens, you never know when it's going to hit you and I think that was something that kind of changed my perspective. Because I really didn't know anybody with a disability and then all of the sudden I went from being able to go rock climbing and doing anything to that point paralyzed completely from the neck down.

Interviewer:

Which event did that happen on?

Bearden:

It was on doing timers into a vaulting pit of a mini tramp, I was doing two flips, laid out the ceiling and the wall were basically the same color and I got lost in rotation; hit face first and my back kind of came around it bent all the way over and basically broke my neck at C5- C6. Paralyzed like I said, all the way from the neck down; I spent those first few weeks all those muscles in my neck were torn and whiplashed, having to go through rehab. Spent three months going to rehab at St. David's (interviewer interrupts).

Interviewer:

And where is St. David's?

Bearden:

>topic< Rehabilitation process at St. David's >/topic<.

St. David's is in Austin and it was one of the three main rehabs at the time, so I started off with a week at *** **inaudible** the main trauma clinic here in a hospital here in Austin and at that time my parents were basically approached by representatives from the three major places, one in Houston, San Antonio, and St. David's at Austin. And what sold my parents on it was that Austin's at that time had a wheelchair sports program attached to it. It had adapted sports, it had a completely accessible gym and the main people that were running were both in chairs.

Interviewer:

Oh wow.

Bearden:

So they chose at that time for me to go to St. David's and I had no idea that any of that was being discussed and within a few days we were going over there, Mike Haynes was the main person who came up and he was in a chair (interviewer interrupts) ...

Interviewer:

Can you spell out that name, please.

Bearden:

M-I-K-E-H-A-Y-N-E-S.

He was running St. David's wheelchair fitness center; he also had come from the valley earlier on and I had no idea for a few years. He was the guy that kind of rolled in the room, bigger than life and suddenly said, "Your life is not over", "You have to relearn some things" he was the first person I saw in a really cool wheelchair. At that point I really couldn't even roll over, I couldn't do anything, so that was kind of like giving some hope back. You were about to go through something and you have to re-educate yourself and he was kind of like that first mentor person that really sat the foundations for where I think I am today.

Because he pushed me hard, whenever my parents had questions, he was one of those people that would always answer it any room he walked into; everyone knew who he was. He made more things accessible than anyone really knows in Austin, he was always getting the chairs, always making sure

people had what they needed, but also never seen as the type of person to seek recognition for it. He just did it because that's what you're supposed to do and he changed a lot of people's lives over the long haul some of the programs are still going...

Interviewer:

Is he still around?

Bearden:

>topic< Bearden's gratitude towards Mike Haynes >/topic<.

He is, he is. He has three kids; still an amazing person. He works also at Lone Star Paralysis Foundation running it and has brought it research money, doctors to study spinal cord injuries and work towards finding cures at the same time he is the type of person who said, "You can hope for those things too, but let's work on today, let's focus on what you need to be doing today; don't focus just on I'm going to walk again". That kind of clicked too because a lot of people tend to from the moment it happens, their family and then they will get on the internet all night and that's the only focus and they aren't thinking about what do I need to do tomorrow. So he was that kind of guide through all of that; still really probably the person that got me to where I am today.

Interviewer:

Wow.

So you went through a*** **inaudible**. What was the community like there?

Bearden:

I think that was something everyone needed; it was all kinds of different physical disabilities, the community could come down stairs even when you left and for years it was down in the basement of St. David's, right below the pool, it was always leaking and they had programs like snow skiing, taking people scuba diving, sports, and I think that it was just being in that little tiny room all crammed in with all that equipment that people talking about the issues they ran in and how they solved it and everyone learned from each other. And as you started getting more comfortable you decide to go on some of those trips like snow skiing, were they would set it up and we would go up to rake and rage and all of this was before everything was that accessible.

There would be a handful of them; my dad and I came to the second week that they were there having no idea what to expect and here are all these guys in the lodge drinking; there is beer out in the snow as we come up to the front door, there are guys sleeping all over the place and it kind of open my eyes to that we could do a lot, but it was a really tightly group and they continued on and worked, always focused around kids; especially with kids with physical disabilities because they weren't many programs out there.

Interviewer:

Was it just males, or mixed genders?

Bearden:

It was mixed. There was a lot of focus on spinal cord injuries and you tend to have more males but there were a lot of females that came through too, still some long term friends who run different programs of their own. It created a lot of stability for people that would've never had it, and there's tons of stories of traveling down to San Padre to do tennis tournaments, taking kids flying, having all of these pilots flying and half of them being in chairs, working with school's like Texas State , bringing in Rec therapists and having the chance to spend time with kids and then all of the sudden you have the pilot jump out to their chair and freak them out , so those were kind of the moments that really made a difference. From there I ended up trying to figure out what to do with school.

Interviewer:

Where you on your junior or senior year?

Bearden:

I was a week before my senior year in high school, and I think that I should go back, kind of to go through that. At that time, one of my best friend's mom actually ran the Special Ed department at Round rock and I was not the best student beforehand; I had no idea really on what I was going to do. I really don't think that I really didn't even plan to go to college, I was going to be good being a gymnastics coach or a skiing instructor.

Interviewer:

So you had skid also?

Bearden:

Yeah. I had no plans at that point, and it was after my injury that I was like, "Oh gosh, I'm going to have to find how to do something" but it was august right before my senior year, so basically she sat down and they looked at the rules and they said, " Well you don't have all the credits you need but we could put you in the Special Ed program and you wouldn't need as many credits, all you would really need to do is take your senior English and then we could see what you could do with that" and that was it. The English teacher came out and basically I ended up listening to the book Frankenstein in tape and I wrote a one-page report on it and then I graduated.

Interviewer:

Wow. In December that year?

Bearden:

Yeah, with everyone else.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Bearden:

>topic< Beginning of college education>/topic<.

Which was great, at that time I thought this is awesome then I decided to go to college. And I learned real quick that; my first three years of high school and my lack of preparing and doing anything that I was supposed to do, I really did wait until last minute to do everything and I would calculate what is the bare minimum grade that I need to pass, so that I could spend more time outside doing things I wanted to do... I had a lot of catching up to do.

So, I started here in Austin, I tried getting in ACC (Austin Community College) and then there was Concordia University which was at that time right across the street from St. David's rehab.

Interviewer:

Did ACC admit you?

Bearden:

At that time... I'm trying to remember. I went and took a test and I failed the remedial stuff but it was hard to get the accommodations at that time to do the test, so I kind of struggled through that.

Interviewer:

Okay. What year would that have been?

Bearden:

Oh God.

Interviewer:

So you were born on 77.

Bearden:

1995.

Interviewer:

Okay, so they hadn't really made any accommodations yet.

Bearden:

Yeah. I forgot where we were.

Interviewer:

Okay Austin accommodations, remedial test.

Bearden:

>topic< Applying to Concordia University>/topic<.

So, when we did all of that and prior to that it had been that I hadn't taken the ACT or SAT, back then it wasn't as much prep; my counselors back in high school would look at me and say, "We don't need to

worry about this” but it was my mom talking to a family member or one of our good friends actually, my old principal when I grew up in the valley he said, “Go talk to Concordia and go see if they can work something out”. So they set it up so I could take the ACT and when I explained to them at that point that I couldn’t do the writing they were like, “Uh, I guess we could get someone to do it for you” so they really had never dealt with accommodations either and they did the bubbling which is a struggle when you’re having to do all that and having to tell someone; it was a real struggle.

When I did the remedial part back at ACC one of the problems I ran into while I was there is that any of the math classes that I was taking; one of their rules was they would get me someone to do the writing but it had to be someone from the school that hadn’t taken that level of math, which makes it really difficult when you are trying to explain to someone, cause I couldn’t write at that time what $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ where do the numbers go and they write it out so you can use a very simple formula , but when you are timed and you are trying to go through that and at that point sitting all day wasn’t easy, it got really difficult.

Interviewer:

So did you take some classes at ACC?

Bearden:

I took some classes at ACC and they went ahead and accepted me; I will have to go back and see when, it’s all gotten so fuzzy, it’s been so long. But Concordia did let me in, and it was a really old campus back then so we got my schedule and my mom and I went to take a walk around campus and the building they had me in; the ramp on the side was basically one of those old ramps used to take in a dolly so it was really steep. I got to the door and I could not open the door either, it was really heavy doors so we got in and went in there; the bathroom, there was no way of getting in the bathroom, but I could get into the classrooms.

Interviewer:

So you didn’t use a power chair... it was manual?

Bearden:

>topic< Fighting for a manual wheelchair>/topic<.

No, no. That was a big fight between me and the doctors for years at the beginning because I didn’t want to be in a power chair, it was just me being stubborn and even though they were like, “it’s going to take you forever” so they wouldn’t let me go home with a manual chair because they were afraid of insurance. What if I bought a manual chair from insurance they were not going to buy me a power chair later if I couldn’t do it and at that time I really couldn’t push at all. I just didn’t. My dad kind of said, “But what if I can get the insurance pay for both?” they were like “Okay we will sign off but you have to get the power chair first”.

I think he ended up paying for the manual chair and not telling me, for years but insurance bought the power chair we got it, I got in it, and I drove it around and then I put it in the garage. I got my manual chair at the same time and that’s the one I stayed in and it took me forever to learn how to push. I spent hours every day like getting across the house was a long task and it would wear me out but when it

rained and it got muddy, my buddies would put me in the power chair and we would go drive in the mud in the backyard, had fun with it put it back in the garage, which is what they also did in rehab. What partly got me through it was, they slept on the floor and stayed with me all the time when they...

Interviewer:

Where these gymnastic buddies?

Bearden:

>topic< Support and relationship with close friends>/topic<.

No, one of them was. Randy would come by when he could but the two main people was a good friend Josh Barden and my friend Matt Sanderson; they would just sleep on the floor, we were all in that age of causing trouble and they would take the power chair at night and one of the manual chairs, cause they were all up there and they would have fun; cause they are fun when you are not pushing around and they would stay up late and I would go to sleep and they would get down to the basement, be flying around the corners. One was holding to the back of it and as they were going around the corner; he clipped the edge and he was on the manual chair and went flying out of the chair, while the whole time security is watching all of this on the cameras and throws his arms up and says, "I've been healed" runs back and gets in the chair.

Interviewer:

(Laughs).

Bearden:

At that point security was running down and they ended up tracking them back to our room and yelling at the charge nurse that they had to go and she ended up arguing back with him saying, "No, they are the best thing for him right now; we are not kicking them out" so that was kind of discontinual process and at the same time Frances Key...

Interviewer:

Oh yeah.

Bearden:

>topic< Meeting Frances Key and their friendship>/topic<.

Frances and I were in rehab together at the same time; that's how we met originally.

Interviewer:

Oh, and did he go to UT Arlington?

Bearden:

I think so. I can't remember now.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Bearden:

I can't remember.

Interviewer:

We've been trying to verify that.

Bearden:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Cause people think he did.

Bearden:

I think he played... maybe he did. It was perfect at that time because as you've known he is a big guy, I'm a small guy; I was a high level quad and he's a para so he is in this giant turtle shell basically it is to stabilize your back and move those first few months and it looks like a giant plaster; they are much nicer now and it looked like a turtle shell. He was sitting there trying to push his chair with that on, and at that time I couldn't push much I had my neck in a brace and not moving and being the same age there was like four of us on the floor, but he and I kind of connected.

One night our Rec. therapist came in and threw a tent on the floor and said, "Ya'll will figure out how to put it together" and to tease that I was the brains and he was the laborer to put it together, but we hit it off; late at night we would do things, like go around since there was also the traumatic brain injury floor and they had all the bracelets on in case they tried to escape, the alarm would go on. We would get one from the nurse's station and creep around the corners, set them off and go in one of the rooms, and watch the nurses run to try and find the person escaping.

Interviewer:

(Laughs).

Bearden:

>topic< Bearden and Key's mischievousness >/topic<.

You had to find things to do... then one of our favorite nurses was always extremely flamboyant; like one of the best people that ever took care of us, we would mess with him, so at that time you just don't end up paralyzed, your bladder doesn't work anymore, so they had a catheter tube in on mine that would run to a big night bag on the side of the bed and the nurses would always come by and the doctors would be like, "How much did they drink, how much did they peed?, you need to drink more " the whole thing and we got a box of cranberry juice and filled it up, so that when the nurse came in the blanket would be over it, France would be like, "He's not filling good" and I would be there moaning and they would lift that up and it was all blood in there, he would freak out and Frances and I would start laughing.

Interviewer:

(Laughs).

Bearden:

It was good because that place we had; we had people our age and they let us do that. The nurses; you became really close with that kind of core group of nurses; they became family by the end. I still run into some of them every now and then, but it's also who your family also falls back on and the guys did.

Interviewer:

Well the fact that, they let you do all that stuff it was really cool.

Bearden:

Yeah, that's what made that place a little different at the time, now a days it's a little harder to get hospitals, it was a nonprofit then; the rehab center was and then they went for profit and things change; before I went off tangent where I was?

Interviewer:

We were talking about Concordia and you.

Bearden:

Aha. Yes.

Interviewer:

You really couldn't get in the building.

Bearden:

>topic< Bearden's mother advocates for on campus accessibility>/topic<.

I got in there and realized that I wouldn't be able to get down the ramp, because the ramp was too steep so what would happen was that I would hit the end of the ramp and my front wheels would stop and tip over. We knew what would happen so, my mom says come on, she takes me and knocks at the door of the president and goes in their office and says, "I want to talk to him" and the lady is like "you have to make a meeting" and she was like "No, No, No" she ended up dragging him there and says "This ramp won't work" he says, "Well you know we can have someone, it will be okay" she goes, "Let me show you". She basically pushes me up, turn me around and has me go down and I hit and I go flying out and he catches me half way and pushes me back in, the guy was like, "Oh God". They end up saying they will have it fix before I get back to school in two weeks. That part got fixed, but I always had troubles with the door going in and out; I would have to wait for someone coming to open the door, going out wasn't that big of a deal...

Interviewer:

Did they move any of your classes?

Bearden:

>topic< What it meant to move around campus>/topic<.

No, cause the rest of the campus was probably worse than that. There was one other building that was more accessible; and it was one of the newest. I mean this was an old campus; very flat campus but very old. One of the main buildings that they had housed all the arched stuff, I could still get in it, but the doors were so heavy that I had to end up waiting for someone. To get there I would have to find my little route around there but it wasn't that big of a campus.

Interviewer:

What about bathrooms?

Bearden:

>topic< Journey to Texas A &M >/topic<.

In that one building in the back I could get in though, so that worked. It was definitely a chore, I actually find at some points that it was easier to get to my car and use the bathroom there than too... not in the car but use the catheter into a bag then to get into some of the bathrooms. That campus is no longer there anymore, they actually sold it and bought a brand new campus out towards round rock and it is more accessible, but I finished. I left there about year later or so, once I had enough hours to transfer and I went to A & M, where my best friends were.

So I left for A & M, a big part of that was being young and needing to leave; I needed to get out on my own at that point I could not take care of myself either, but my best friends were there and we rented a small apartment. I got accepted, don't know how, and got up there. I remember my parents dropping off, this was my first time I was living away.

Interviewer:

Where your parents helping you at home?

Bearden:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Bearden:

At that time; we are talking two hours in the morning getting up, while at home they were making all the meals and I was never doing that. I had never had an attendant ...

Interviewer:

Were you driving?

Bearden:

>topic< Driving, choosing the correct car model, and striving for independence >/topic<.

Yes, that took me quite a while to get to. I went through multiple vehicles at that time, trying to figure out what would work, my dad and I had gone all over; I was willing to drive anything, I didn't care if it was small, nice, big. I had wanted a truck really bad, and I got that all decked out not realizing and I should've ... I can't get in this but in my mind it was like "yeah no problem, you'll be able to get on that". Three months after I get out of here, it just hadn't sunk it at that point, so my buddies would actually pick me up and put me in it and we would drive around and go big mug bottles. That's where I learned to drive in the middle of fields and which took forever to get that truck converted.

Cause at that time it wasn't as easy just as going down to the mobility dealer; we had to take it to Houston and it was there for like three months as they figured out all the adaptations; DARS helped paid for it, back then it was the Texas Rehab Commission. I struggled trying to get in it, but I did finally learn how to get in and out of it, so my friends would help me get in and I would drive to their homes and my parents would help me get in and I would drive to their house and I would get out and hang out with them and then drive home. Which that alone, that independence of being alone was something huge from there we finally decided I had to find a car I could actually get into...

Interviewer:

That you could transfer to.

Bearden:

Yeah, but it was very straight across and because I don't have triceps, I couldn't really expand any gaps, so I was going to use a sliding board. Even then it was, a very weak transfer. I guess my parents always said yes, what do you want to drive, do you want to find a car that works they didn't question. They kind of figured that it was going to take me awhile, so we went and we started looking at cars. I needed one with a power seat, I really needed something with leather because I couldn't scoop on fabric, it had to be automatic, buttons I could push, it had to be low enough, and not standard and at that time it was virtually impossible to find anything that would fit; it had to be a two door because four doors are too narrow that I couldn't, because there is not enough room to get the door open and transfer. We were at the last place that we were going to look and it was a Nissan dealership, and we had look at everything so we were pretty much convinced that we would have to buy a van eventually. We are talking to the guy and he's showing us little eclipses, there's no automatics but the spider or you can only get those with leather and standard, but there's maybe one thing that would work; it's in the show room. We went in there and it was this big beautiful sports car it was a 300zx.

Interviewer:

(Laughs)

Bearden:

>topic< Ordeal behind customizing and adapting a vehicle in the 90s>/topic<.

And I go "Uhu" and my dad is like, "Oh God no", and they open up the door and everything was perfect. It was all theoretically in the right spots, but it was way more money, than I should've been spending at that time. They were like let's figure out and they called and the guy got hit which I couldn't believe they

were like yeah; insurance basically didn't want to insure me at all at that point especially probably after he told them I was in a wheelchair. We ended up going to the mobility dealer and the guy; this was back when they would customize everything, now a days they don't customize everything they are afraid of liability and the guy was like, "How are you going to transfer?"

I don't know, I need that gap to transfer, I'm afraid I'll fall in it. So they cut a hole on the door and built up this big extra arm rest I could rest onto and then they made it so I wouldn't fall into any space, my brakes were locked. Then they made me this sliding board with Velcro so when I would move to get back out I couldn't shifted we got in it and I was like, "Crap how am I going to do the shifter" because I couldn't push the button in and they are like, "Oh, we can put a serval in there and it will always be locked so you don't have to push the button, you just have to open the ash tray and there will be two red buttons one for its way down and one that will make it go back" so they rigged up all this stuff. They had a cord like hanging on the door so I could reach it and shut it; they get it all done.

>topic< Learning how to transfer in the car>/topic<.

The first day we got it, I couldn't get in it, so we took it home and my dad put an ac unit in the garage it used to be like a little workshop and turned it around and I would spend hours out there, and they would sit out there for hours until I learned how to get in it. Slowly start to learn how to take my chair apart and if we couldn't figure out a thing, he would rig it up and fix it; make the chair work and start to take things apart...

Interviewer:

Wow.

Bearden:

They were so patient about it; and my buddies would do the same

Interviewer:

That's really cool.

Bearden:

Yeah and overtime, I started learning and I still remember... I'd get in the car but I couldn't; it was easier to get in but getting out at that time, it was hard. My mom would follow me up, I would drive to Concordia; she'd follow me every morning, I'd get out; she'd help me get out and then leave, go home, and I'd go to class then come back out. I'd get in my car, and I would take the chair apart; it would take a while and then I would drive home and she would be home and help me get out; overtime I learned how to do it all; got passed it. Now the inside of that car looked pretty bad, by the time I was done with it; pulling the chair across, throwing everything in the back seat; it worked perfect.

Interviewer:

It drove well?

Bearden:

>topic< Adjusting to change; everywhere>/topic<.

It drove really well; until a friend of mine was in the back that ended up driving him home after he had been drinking too much, grabbed the wheel and we go flying, but it got fixed and I drove it for a long time after that, but I took that up to school. Got there, and I actually went by the duplex the other is a fourplex, a while back when I was at A & M this last year and it still looks the exact same; dirty, dark, foil on the windows cause the ac really didn't work and they made a little concrete ramp so I could get in, never locked the door cause I couldn't unlock it, so we just left the door unlocked all the time.

I never locked my car door, because I always struggled to get it unlocked without dropping the keys and somehow it never got stolen, but that first day; my two buddies were sitting around the table after my parents left and they were like, "We'll be right back" so they walked across the street and came back with a six pack of beer and we were way under age at this time; and they put a bottle right in front of me and both opened up a bottle. We were just sitting there and they were just like, "Are you going to open it? I'm not your mom; you're going to have to learn to open your beer; if you ever plan on drinking in college" and I was like "Oh". That was the start of my education of taking care of myself.

They were the ones that pushed me to do things I had never tried on my own. It was like, "You're going to have to do some of this", so every time I started picking up more and more; and I spent like about two years there. I had struggled with some of the classes; partly because I wasn't prepared fully to be at a university like that, but really a lot of it was just getting around.

Interviewer:

It's a huge campus right?

Bearden:

>topic< Not knowing how to ask for accommodations and lack of resources for student with disabilities>/topic<.

Yeah. And not understanding the services that I could've gotten like being able to go to... I go to register early, but nobody told be, maybe try to get your classes near each other. The whole reason you get to register early, so I randomly picked my classes and I had an hour between or fifteen minutes, but it was all the way across campus, so it would take me a while to load into the car to even drive over there; so I had to start pushing, so at that point getting up curve cuts that was hard. So I had to that first semester I had like 12 hours and of course I had to drop down, but at A &M you only get a few drops. You don't get to have that; then having to learn how to take notes; I couldn't do it, I struggled there. Finally asking for that accommodation, having someone to do it; it was back then when they did it on the carbon paper so it was dependent on someone that had to do it in the class and you got what they did.

So I had to kind of re learn all of the that, one of the couple of the classes it was a struggle because I was in there; and this is when I was trying to take a statistics class, and the guy is giving stats about A Students, B students, where they normally sit, " My first few rows are A's , next are your B's, C- D, then my F's" well the way the room was set up the accessible seating in this one room it was a gigantic auditorium is in the very back and I can't get down to the front and I was still like 6 rows from the F's, so I was way up there and I was like, "Oh great, I'm screwed, I'm not going to be able to do this" and I ended up using a *** **inaudible** 38.52 sitting that far back, not being engaged I couldn't learn it.

>topic< Journey to self-discovery>/topic<.

Finally, the school it was too big of a school at that time, I had also moved up there, because one of the girls I had been dating here had moved out there and she was living with one of my friends. She and I got married and came back, but it was one of those things my family went to talk to Mike and he was like, "stopping me because I was too young, no, you get out of the way because if you do, you won't talk to him in a long time" and it was one of those relationships were I didn't know who I was and it didn't last. Then we came back to Austin, at that time I had been living here for two years. At that time is when I met her cousin, who he and I became best friends, we lived together for years after the divorce and we still talk all the time even though he lives now in North Carolina; he was that next step of people that really pushed me. We were brothers at that point, we knew each other so well never questioned anything, still is one of those people that can influence anyone around him; he ran some of the wheelchair sports programs I did. He would unload my truck every day and I would have thirteen chairs in the back of it...

Interviewer:

Wow, so were you doing sports?

Bearden:

Yeah, in between that, yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Bearden:

>topic< Working, learning to advocate, and raising awareness>/topic<.

When I was at St. David's I was also doing there, when I wasn't in Austin doing the wheelchair sports, they would do Saturday programs and I kept showing up so much that Mike, after I came back offered me a job, and that's how I started working at St. David's, basically there was three of us: Larry Turner who was huge in wheelchair basketball for years and he was our able bodied guy; he coached forever, Mike Haynes who was my boss. The two of them were just, always doing something and after a few years, I ended taking up on some of those roles and running programs and taking kids out. Howling chairs, I had like thirteen chairs in the back of my truck and we'd go to the schools, classes, and universities; it was just doing this classes...

Interviewer:

Teaching them that this exists.

Bearden:

Yeah, and also how not to break your neck; don't dive into a pool at first; jump in feet first because we can actually fix a broken leg and then letting them get in a chair because it was also to get kids that didn't know anybody with a disability, used to hang out with people on chairs. Some of the kids we worked in our programs, their parents would be like, "Hey can you come to our school?" and we would go to their schools that way all of their friends could get in a chair in a day, we would do like wheelchair basketball; and stuff, we would just change the dynamic.

Interviewer:

That's pretty cool.

Bearden:

>topic< Lack of awareness among teachers and personal experience>/topic<.

And also the teachers, you know a lot of times they are all hands off. adaptive sports were starting then; when I went to ACC I had a ... I tried to take a class one of those that you only sign up one day a week and you were supposed to go to the gym and work out; you were supposed to sign in at ACC's gym and work out, there equipment was accessible and I asked can I come to the class once a week here and then go to the gym I work at because its fully accessible? And have my boss whose certified trainer and sign off on it and she was like, "Oh, no, no; you know let me talk to the school, I think I can work it out so you can exempt take any PE" and I was like, "what? I want to take it", she was like, "we can probably work into getting you into an English class or something" I was like, "I don't want to... I hate writing, I don't want English; I want a class were I can...". It took really persuading her and at the end she had never worked with anybody on a chair and that was a start for the college to kind of do something, so we got to try a lot of things that way.

At that point, I was running a lot of programs.

Interviewer:

What years was this?

Bearden:

Ugh... I'd had to go back, because where I volunteered, which I was just participating it was before I went off to school.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Bearden:

And when I got back from A & M; kind of end 90s.

Interviewer:

Mid- late 90s.

Bearden:

>topic< St. David's shift and journey to the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities>/topic<.

Yeah. Beginning of 2000s when I started working at St. David's, and then they started a nonprofit; Austin adapted sports, it was just all about doing adapted sports. That's when St. David's went from non- profit to for- profit and we started to feel a squeeze, later on. That's how I ended up leaving and going to CTD (Coalition of Texans with Disabilities), but in that period before that, all those years of adapted sports; we

were running big summer camps, out there for a week for kids, it would be there first time away. We were working for a long time since they were young and now I'm seeing them having families and growing up.

That experience changed for me a lot, because I kept seeing how people dealing with things. One of the problems I kept hearing from parents was, hearing from parents because I ran the track program was, how they were just always running into school issues. That later translated into when I looked at that job with CTD and wanting to do it, because I figured I got a lot of opportunities that people put my way and I couldn't find any work and that one was a job, so I took it, but...

Interviewer:

And what was your title at CTD?

Bearden:

At that time, I was a visitive volunteer for the AMERICORPS program.

Interviewer:

Oh okay.

Bearden:

Yeah, making peanuts.

Interviewer:

Where you living at home again?

Bearden:

No I was actually living with my buddy Jim at that time; splitting the rent.

Interviewer:

Was he the one that went to North Carolina?

Bearden:

Yeah, but all those years, it was just not making much money, playing sports, and working for the hospital.

Interviewer:

What kind of sports did you play?

Bearden:

>topic< Playing Adapted Sports >/topic<.

At that time, it was just mainly doing the stuff there; weekend things like going and playing field hockey with the kids or ice hockey when we got stuff, I didn't start playing rugby until later on, but I did work at the adapted gym, so the guys would always come in and say come out, and I would be like, "I don't have time, am not doing that's crazy... "I'm not going to get out there and bang myself up like that". A ballot, as the years went on I needed something again, something competitive, but I was always at the basketball practices that was not so much for a quad **** inaudible 47.00

Finally, Gumby tucked me into coming out. James Gumbert

Interviewer:

And who is he?

Bearden:

>topic< Who is James Gumbert and getting involved with wheelchair rugby>/topic<.

He is the head coach right now for the US Paralympic Team. He was the head coach of the Texas Stampede here in Austin and this was kind of right before murder ball was starting to come out and the Olympics was going on and I kind of got sucked in. one of my other buddies were Milo Andrews, also came out and that was just a whole other era of my life; those guys taught me how to be more independent.

There is nothing like getting on a plane with a bunch of quads, a bunch of gear, and one or two able bodied people and heading off to the wild blue. And it worked well, because at that time I was working at the CTD and as the vista I could be gone; I would only have to work several days a week, all I was doing wasn't a big salary job that needed to be there forty plus hours a week and Dennis gave me a lot of flexibility. I got to travel all over the US and some of the years I was there; they won one of the national titles.

Interviewer:

And this is Texas Stampede?

Bearden:

Yes, and it was amazing, because at that time most of the top guys were playing; I would get a few minutes at the end of the game, and that point it was just I got to be in one of the; walk in and learn from some of the best people in the sport at that time, and still some of the most decorated and it was one of those amazing moments for me that taught me a lot...

Interviewer:

What kind of stuff?

Bearden:

>topic< What wheelchair rugby taught him>/topic<.

More independence; traveling to hotels by yourself, just that team commodore and stuff after games; going out drinking, having fun just building that confidence that it kind of lost and all the years of them

playing rugby; was getting up going to practices on Friday get there like at 7 o'clock and you play until midnight. Head to an elementary school and back down; then drive to Texas state on a Saturday morning play there for hours, go out that night, wake up Sunday play.

Those first few months; it was so exhausting, they trained like real elite athletes and that was something that I had been missing for me. Getting to borrow equipment, just learning, showing up to their place; out there barbecuing. Just a bunch of quads, never a good thing, when you get a bunch of quads playing with hot barbecues, it can turn into a bad scene, but you learn how to do all these things at that point, just learning to date again. And all those who there is so many... everyone runs into issues; you had those conversations were people fall back on they had been through the same things.

That was a lot of and I got to travel a lot; going through the airports, when you show up the main door to load and everyone sitting going, "Oh my gosh, it's just not one wheelchair guy there's like ten of them and they all have two chairs" we are going, "we are not going to make it to our connecting flight" it was like to science we could load it way before they could even get started and just the years of that. Going from there, I think that kind of gave me the confidence to do more.

Interviewer:

So when did you start playing for Texas Stampede do you think?

Bearden:

Oh God. I think that it was around 2002 – 2003 somewhere in there...

Interviewer:

You can always follow up.

Bearden:

Yeah, I'll have to look back.

Interviewer:

And how many years did you play for them?

Bearden:

It was five or six if I remember right; and that's how I actually ended up meeting Bethany.

>topic< Working with Physical Therapy students at St. David's >/topic<.

So, part of what we would do and it was part of working at St. David's. Gumby our head coach was married to one of the PT's that used to work at St. David's and we used to do this kind of like... this university would show up with all their PT students; and they would come in and do a panel; questions and answers. You get a bunch of rugby guys were really quickly ask us anything, and you could see all the PT's sitting over there wanting to ask about, what's it like and everyone dives into dating all of it, ya'll need to know this because you're going to get asked this. The first question out of most of spinal cord injuries; guys once they can ask, "will I ever have sex again?" and a PT is going, "Uhh, I don't know who to talk to about this" we would do all those kinds of classes, trainings. At the time Bethany was actually a

TA for one of the professors that I had worked with doing different trainings and even for CTD and he had come down to talk to their class about advocacy, so that's kind of how we met.

She was also doing a lot of the stuff for rugby and opening the gyms for us every morning and doing all of that stuff, so from there just kind of life moved forward. And I stopped working for St. David's, they cut our hours back and at that time I started working with Dennis, and it was about... I did miracle visitor for three years and the max amount of years and at that point I was like , " What am I going to do now" and gosh, somewhere back in that point before I left St. David's; Mike had told me basically, "I'm never going to be able to pay you more than eight dollars an hour, you need to go back to school" and that's when I started hunting around and found out Concordia had a night program, so I started going at night and about that time I had transferred over to working at CTD.

>topic< Breaking the rules for a continuous education>/topic<.

The whole time I was there; we were breaking the rules cause AmeriCorps back then you could not go to school, they had really strange rules and you had to be available twenty-four hours a day seven days a week even if they called you to come anywhere they needed you. They had a one-week orientation, that I had to go to, it was actually at a hotel that was less than a mile away from my house, but it was like pulling teeth because they wanted me to stay there. And when I asked them about the wheelchair accessible rooms and all of that, they were like, "well you have to stay there" you realize quads can't probably get in or out of that bed. I have everything set up in my house, right down the street and we got to the point where I finally had to tell them, "okay, ya'll get the room and I'm just not going to stay there at night" and that's what they ended up doing.

Interviewer:

Wow.

They were very hard about their rules and strict. One of the main things they told us was, "You cannot go to school", what's the whole point of AmeriCorps besides volunteering, it also to give you a chance to get experience; move out of poverty because pretty much I was living in poverty at that time with how much money I was making. we were in the middle of a meeting and AmeriCorps came to check, and Dennis and Jody were sitting there; they asked some questions, he basically made the comment, "well yeah you know on that day he gets off to go to class" he didn't realize it and Jody kicked him in the shin under the table and basically it got found out and I was like, "Uhh, I kind of have to go to school" and they finally agreed overtime; they let it slide...

Interviewer:

Wow.

Bearden:

And they made some changes afterword's cause we had to go back and explain to them, "You are running your program and you came to us to help ya'll get more people with disabilities because your stipend doesn't affect Medicaid it doesn't count as income, so you get to keep a little money and at that time that was the only insurance. I didn't have insurance before that and that gave me some, it wasn't a great insurance, but it was more than anything else I could get.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Bearden:

>topic< Facing unemployment difficulties >/topic<.

I wasn't on Medicaid, so it worked for me at that point and I did that for about three years and that's when my term was up and Dennis didn't have money at that time or a position, so I went six months after that trying to figure out what to do. I couldn't get hired anywhere I was turning in applications...

Interviewer:

People just left you to ... (gestures).

Bearden:

Yeah. Talk to them over the phone and show up afterwards and they were like, "Uhh". You could see the hesitation and kept trying to figure it out; and a friend said apply and take the LSAT, it was Keene carter. Become a lawyer and I'll train you; he was like, "any time someone takes the LSAT anyway you get a job offer, so I applied to go take the Capline go through the courses and after the first week sitting there I was going like, "I'm not going to be able to right like this, so I just bought a bunch of books and I'm not going to do this" and about that time Dennis called, "Can I come over?".

Jody had decided to leave and that's how he offered me that position, so I took it and at that time is kind of how I ended up winding down playing rugby because I felt like I couldn't be gone like I was, because we would leave Thursday night and wouldn't get home until Sunday at midnight and then I would be exhausted Monday and not doing much on Tuesday by the time I would recover on Wednesday, I would have to leave again on Thursday , so I decided to take a salary and health insurance over playing rugby. At that time, it was okay because my level, 0.5 weren't getting much playing time, because you need to have a big attitude and balance out the numbers. I had a blast and I had learned a lot, but I was ready to move on at that point. I miss it though; I'd go right back to it.

Interviewer:

Do you do any kind of sports now?

Bearden:

Yes, sitting at my desk all day long; it already seems like...

Interviewer:

Running late to the sessions (laughs).

Bearden:

>topic< Physical Activities after leaving wheelchair rugby>/topic<.

Yeah. I mean no; we hike, we go out bushing and stuff like that, but now I feel it. Back then I could transfer on and off from anything, I was so much stronger and in such better shape than now. Looking at the couch going like, "huh that's a big transfer" I'll stay in my chair a little bit longer before hopping over. And then I go through my spurts of going to the gym and working out, but finding one accessible enough when St. David's used to be right in the middle of the town; it was easy to get to now it's all the way out by Easter seals. They moved out all the equipment when they shut down St. David's, looking out for Eastern seals, its way east. Way down there up north, so those days of going to the gym don't happen so much anymore, but mostly just the regularly; I need to get back to it, I miss it, but finding the time...

Interviewer:

Wow. Yeah. So now you're the director of advocacy for CTD?

Bearden:

You know it's grown; now we have eleven people.

Interviewer:

How many people were there when you started?

Bearden:

>topic< Beginnings for CTD and the recession in 2008>/topic<.

Four. Yeah. Yeah. And then it backdrop to three at some point. That was kind of mine... we kept doing AmeriCorps when I came back and it was about that time when everything went down the drain; the economy and we had people applying that had doctorate degrees to do this stuff and we were like, "Hum do you realize how much this pays?" they were like, "yeah" and we were like "oh no", this isn't good part of it you had to make that commitment to stay. A couple of times we had to hire people, they would get up to the day of and they wouldn't want to do it; so we would miss the window of having someone to do it, so it was really hard. We really pushed people, to make that commitment, but that whole period was difficult; not having enough money, there were times when most of us working there we hadn't realized that Dennis wasn't taking home a salary, he was paying all of us.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Bearden:

We went through times...

Interviewer:

How was he making it?

Bearden:

I guess off his savings.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Bearden:

Yeah, I don't think a lot of people noticed; when they see a disabled guy, they don't know actually... not many people do that.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Bearden:

>topic< State of Texas gets sued >/topic<.

And it was the constant struggle to keeping that place a float and it wasn't until, one day he saw on the newspaper that the state was being sued for the accessible placards; they had been charging ten dollars for each accessible placard for years. They had finally... the state had tried to use sovereign unity; we can do this, you can't charge for accessibility and the other states had just given the placards out. They finally lost, it had gone to all its rounds for millions of dollars.

Interviewer:

How recent was that?

Bearden:

>topic<What happened after the lawsuit>/topic<.

(Sighs) I'll have to look back; it kind of runs together. It's when all of the seals got of influx of money and basically they had interviewed the lawyer and said that, "they are going to have to refund" and I'll have to check in with the numbers, I'll just say, "30 million dollars" because they had collected so much money over time and basically anybody that had proof they had a placard with certain dates could apply to get five or ten dollars back. Usually in that type of case, very few do, so they set the money aside and then they tried to give it out to advocacy groups that would defend the rights and fight for people with disabilities and at that time our current governor was part of that and the attorney general was doing that and it is kind of why we still fight over sovereign unity and it didn't work.

But it was one of the few cases, were they had made a mistake and the judge finally said no. you can't use it this time, and the lawyers and I guess the judge decides which groups get the money, and I remember this big long list of groups that were going to get some money and Dennis kind of cold gutted the guy and said, "Hey, here is what I do at CTD, here is what we do, I saw about the money and there is a bunch of other disability organizations that do independent living, advocacy ... can you all get them on the list?". They started a conversation back and forth and next thing we know; they end up giving some of that money along to the independent living centers...

Interviewer:

Wow.

Bearden:

And there were some restrictions on how to use it and we you could use it, but that was kind of like a turning point. I think that it was kind of like an evening grace to us; because we were at that point of not being financially stable. There wasn't a lot of money out there, not enough grants, and Dennis was kind of moving away from that kind of stuff anyway, but it kind of gave us that buffer to do the things we needed to do to get back in our feet and a lot of the independent living centers gave them the money to buy buildings that are now housed in, to do different programs, and for some of them to actually have a savings and use. That ended up benefiting a lot of people, and no one ever really knew how and where did the money came from, which kind of got us in the right path. That let us built, because when you're going pay check to pay check; even just the stress on Dennis kept on going and at that doing almost all the advocacy work; it was a lot.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Bearden:

Just physically it pulled a lot on everyone and it kind of put on that path to grow; and as we've gotten bigger now it's a lot of *** **inaudible 1.06.40** separate even some of those few first sessions I worked; blending in physically, we both loosed weight, exhausted, we were up there until two or three in the morning on some nights and then at seven or eight the next day, because there was no one else was going to show up. It will be adapt us and a few others, but still not many people can ... not many non-profits actually not non- profit but disability organizations accept so many federal funds or getting funding from a school can go in and say, "No you're wrong, we need to do it this way" or gave us the opportunity to speak up how we wanted, without being worried of losing money.

Interviewer:

What do you think has been one of your biggest success while being at CTD?

Bearden:

>topic< Experience at CTD>/topic<.

I think, the whole time we were there we looked back; sadly, going back to our original meeting notes, and reading that about a year ago and realizing that a lot of the issues we are still working on. We still continually every year work towards getting them done and stamped why these things matter and I think we've made some ground in that. Problem being that you have legislators constantly rotating in and out the political environment. I think we've created enough of a standing there, and then we have legislators that depend on what we say, to move forth; so we have created more presence there.

And that has taken a long time because, they won't always trust you upfront and you have to do a lot for them over time to get them to do that and I think it's a lot of to move pieces of legislation that were dead or things that are going to happen that are bad, getting some of the budget cuts at last minute put back in. Of all of the things we have tallied and worked on going back, I think that we went back to the point where twelve years back there was something around 3 billion dollars' worth of services that we have touched and influenced over the process.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Bearden:

And I don't mean that we were the only ones that did it; there is a lot of groups that did, but in having that we helped it move more in that we have helped people; otherwise if they don't know they'll move that money somewhere else and I think it's been there to be a consistent voice, trying to fight for those same things; sadly, it will take forever and there always has to be people there. There needs to be a mix, because as I get older; others as young generations need I may not know. They need to be fighting early on, because it takes time to develop those relationships...

Interviewer:

Is this way you did to raise your voice?

Bearden:

Yeah, I want to see us move also towards more politics, I don't think we can stay out of it, we need to move towards getting people elected as leaders who are in the disability community who aren't just fighting champions but finding people who will lift it and who can then fight for it, cause it's like any other situation. You got to train someone to play there since the beginning, cause it's really a giant chess game. You can't just step in and say, "I want you to do this" so we need to develop from young on how to go through those circles, you have to do it from, use your disability and find it to advantages to be able to do that and we are all learning how to do it. I think that will be... if we can get to the point, I'll feel like, "Success" when we can get there.

Interviewer:

So you're saying to your connection with Rick Perry?

Bearden:

>topic< Appointed to the Texas Board of Architects >/topic<.

Yeah, since my dad was one of his assisting commissioners after I was injured; I ended up going to work for CTD, not realizing that Dennis had actually worked with Rick Perry when he was a democrat doing firefighter bills. Dennis before he was working for CTD he was lobbying for the volunteer firefighter's association. So he had access in a way that others didn't and we would get a meeting every now and then and when I started working there; between the two of us it helped us to be able to negotiate things sometimes, and after one of those meetings, I got offered a position... not a position, but an appointment to the Texas board of architects, they needed someone to fill one of those spots and our state is very unique in that appointment is the only actually has three public members on the board and there is four architects; one landscape architect, one interior designer, and the public members rounded out; is that ours actually has that one of the requirements its actually someone with a physical disability and it all started back when the ADA was rolling out but when they started doing all the standards...

Texas Accessibility Standards from what I've been told its mostly the disability community entrust the architects, so they wanted someone on that board and they had a hard time, filling some mirrors and

they ended up; the guy was coming off and they needed someone to take it. I kind of always laughed because at that I hadn't even finish college, so when I filled out the application all I put in there is that I had a high school degree and here I am now on a board that regulates three licensed professions in the state and ended up staying there. There's six year terms at that point, he didn't reappoint, so I stayed on for like another year and that's about the time Abbott ended up taking it.

And I was kind of at that point ready to say "okay", it is extra work and its free, but there was a benefit of being on that it gave me access and a voice at a level that no one else had. When there was accessibility issues , I could say, "yes, we need to do this" it also kind of elevated my experience with house agencies and how they run, which was useful for the job and we went through a sunset process while I was there, so I learned a lot but at the end of that I was like, "okay, Abbotts coming in, and they are going to reappoint, my terms up, so were two other of the guys and they called me back, "We can't find anybody, are you sure you want to leave?" finally I said, " you know " cause I felt like there was something still we are going to be able to do; to make accessibility better and being there would make a difference .

Though I was like, "if you can't find anyone else, call back and I will do it again, so they quickly called back and they were like, "No, we can't" so I got reappointed. Recently from there I got appointed to the national incarb which is kind of all of the regulatory boards for all the states and I got appointed to one of their committees, so it's built from that; it was because we added a personal connection that we were able to have this conversation. No matter what side of the aisle you're on, if you're going to do advocacy work you have to be able to work on both sides, and that sometimes doesn't matter who you are; really what you need more than anything is for both sides to ease and reason for it and why it's so important because if you just go with the group empower you are constantly going to be fighting for something and watching for when the power shift changes; are you going to be able to keep it?

That was a big benefit for us, that we had an open door at that time, it's not always that easy now, but you do what you can and it's just about building those relationships. When we meet new and young people, we never know how their family, is connected to a city council member who might has never dealt with disability; then that person talks to someone at the federal level or the national level. I think that its taking all of our groups and colliding them.

Interviewer:

I'm just curious and it's better for the record now, what do you think is the difference between the Perry's administration and the Abbott administration, in terms of disability?

Bearden:

Perry really wanted to help the disability community, I don't think that Abbott has fully engaged at that point. a lot of times someone doesn't want to be a champion for a group and the problem is that, I'm not worried about him being a champion in the disability community I just want him to be a governor for everyone. And he follows that, I just think that he needs to step up just not for the far group and be more open to looking at some of these issues, he'll be there for a few more years and we will keep working on it to see what we can do, but I think that goes with any legislators or party any is affiliated you have to hold all of them accountable not just on what side they are. You have to make sure they, look at it and do it; and I think he needs to work on it.

Interviewer:

Are there any questions you think we should've covered and we didn't?

Bearden:

I can't think of any right now, but I'm sure that tons will pop up. Gosh I'm just trying to remember all the dates...

Interviewer:

I'll just deal with the translator.

Bearden:

It's all fuzzy now.