

Dr. Darlene Hunter

Member of U.S. Women's Wheelchair Basketball National Team, Director of the Women's Division of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association

*Interview conducted by
Nathan Cross
in 2016 in Arlington, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Darlene Hunter was born in 1982 in Southfield, Michigan, to Donald Hunter and Julie Sisko. She graduated from Lake Western High School in Walled Lake, Michigan, earned a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Arizona in 2004, a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2006, and a Ph.D. in Family Studies from Texas Woman's University in 2009. Upon completing her Ph.D., she started a curriculum development firm that designs online education programs for educational institutions.

As a child, Hunter competed in adapted track and road racing events, and gained acceptance to the University of Arizona on a track scholarship. While a student at Arizona, Hunter competed for the adapted track team and was also a founding member of the university's women's wheelchair basketball team.

After graduating from the University of Arizona, Hunter moved to Arlington, Texas, to continue her education and to further develop her basketball skills. While a graduate student at UTA, Hunter competed for various club basketball teams in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. After completing her MSW at UTA and Ph.D. at TWU, Hunter was selected for the U.S. women's wheelchair basketball national team for the first time in 2010.

As a member of the U.S. team, Hunter has won gold medals at the 2010 International Wheelchair Basketball Federation (IWBF) World Championships, the 2011 Parapan American Games, and the 2015 Parapan American Games. She served as team co-captain at the 2015 Parapan American Games, and was also a member of the 2012 Paralympic team that came in fourth place. Hunter has also been selected for the 2016 Paralympic Games, set to take place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in September 2016.

Hunter has also been involved in a variety of community service activities. She currently works as a volunteer coach for the Dallas Junior Wheelchair Mavericks, for which she coaches a developmental team consisting of players aged thirteen to nineteen. Hunter also serves as the Chair of the Women's Division of the National

Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA), and as a Regional Coordinator for veterans' and community programs at Texas Regional Paralympic Sport.

Topics discussed

- Hunter's childhood and introduction to adapted sports
 - Experiences with mainstreaming and attitudes about disability
 - Positive effects of adapted sports on children's lives
 - College experience at the University of Arizona
 - Experiences at UT Arlington and with Jim Hayes
 - Training for the national women's wheelchair basketball team
 - Ph.D. at Texas Woman's University and training for Paralympics
 - Attitudes about Paralympics and adapted sports in the U.S. and abroad
 - Leadership roles on the women's national wheelchair basketball team
 - Coaching and mentoring in adapted sports
 - Leadership roles in NWBA Women's Division and Texas Regional Paralympic Sports
 - Professional career
 - Dissertation research on adapted sports and equal opportunities
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Cross

This is Nathan Cross interviewing Dr. Darlene Hunter for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is March 15, 2016 and I am in the UTA library. I'm here today to talk with Dr. Hunter about her experiences as a student at UTA, as an adapted sports athlete and coach, and her volunteer work. So thank you Dr. Hunter for participating in the university's oral history project.

I thought maybe we could start off by you giving a little bit about your background—about your childhood and early experiences with sports.

Hunter

<topic>Hunter's childhood and introduction to adapted sports</topic>

So I'm from Michigan, and the great thing about Michigan in the 1980s—late '80s, early '90s—was they had already kind of adopted sports for disabilities. They were one of the bigger programs in the nation at that time that really supported individuals with disabilities.

I was an able-bodied kid. At the age of four I got run over by a road grader, which is like a bulldozer—it grades dirt roads and has a grade underneath it. I was in it, and we hit a bump in the road and I fell out of it into a smoking pile of leaves and then the back two wheels ran me over. My dad was the driver at the time, so he tried to shut off the road grader and it wouldn't shut off, so he jumped off of it and picked me up and then ran with me about half a mile home. At that time my parents put me in the car and drove me to the nearest hospital.

When I got to that hospital they didn't have a children's unit, so they put me in an ambulance and took me to another hospital that did have a children's unit. Then they stopped the initial internal bleeding, because I was kind of squished from the weight of the tires. So they had emergency surgery to stop internal bleeding, and then, um, it left me a T10 complete paraplegic, which means I'm paralyzed from the belly button down—I don't have spasms, I don't know where my legs are in space, I don't have hot and cold, they're just there. The spinal cord controls four different things, so if it's completely severed, you have nothing, if it's a little bit then that's why some people have movement, or have hot and cold, some can pick their legs up, but I don't have any of it.

At the time, they called me the textbook case because they didn't really understand why I couldn't walk. For the first four hours that I was in the hospital—first four or six hours—I kicked and screamed, and then all of a sudden my legs just stopped working. The doctors looked at my mom and said, "Hey, she's just tired" and my mom was like "She just got ran over by a road grader, she's not tired, there's something wrong." They think that my spinal cord got—kids are really flexible—so they think that my spinal cord might have gotten stretched, so the nerves got stretched in a weird way, and then came back together; or maybe the blood circulation got cut off, and that deadened the nerves, and that's why they don't work. But there's really no straight lesion line across.

After that, they put me in U of M [University of Michigan] and I did rehab for three months. I got hurt November 8th, 1986, so I'm coming up on my thirty-year anniversary here shortly. (laughs) And then I went to Switzerland, at the age of five, and had this treatment done where they inject you with fetuses—lamb fetuses. It's comparative to stem cell research now, I guess they called it the youth treatment back then. There's no way to say what I would've been had I not had it, or if that helped, but I haven't had a lot of the spinal cord problems that most people have—like I don't have pressure points or sores, I have atrophy but I kept a lot of the mass in my legs, not muscle mass but fat. So I've been really lucky that I haven't had a lot of health problems throughout my life.

At age seven I got into road racing. My parents got divorced, and my stepdad—who was a quadriplegic, Jimbo Boyd—is the one who started us in track. He dove off the roof of his house into his swimming pool and broke his neck, and he's really well known for racing now. So he got me started, and then after my parents divorced they ended up marrying. Jimbo Boyd being the quad, and me being a para at the same time, he lived with us for four and a half years until they got divorced. But I had that wheelchair user living in my house, so I got to see how he adapted to life, and how he made his way through society and it wasn't a big deal. He had limited use of his hands, and his arms were weakened, but he was able to do it so he kind of showed me the ropes and I was able to adapt.

And kids adapt quicker anyways. The difference I think between my mom and family and most people is that my mom never babied me. We lived in a tri-level house when I got hurt, when you walked in the front door you had to go upstairs or downstairs, so I had to crawl. She never lowered any dishes in the house or put my bedroom downstairs so I was always crawling around. (laughs) Some people think that was the meanest thing my mom could ever do, but at that time it made me independent, it made me figure out how to get through life. But yeah, my house was completely normal, I would be in the backyard climbing on things and people would be like "what are you letting your kid do?" But my mom would say, "well she's got to figure it out."

I did track until I was twenty-one. I'm the youngest female ever to do Bloomsday and Peachtree Road Races. Peachtree is in Atlanta, Georgia, it's a 10K, it's the largest 10K, and I'm the youngest to do it. And I'm the youngest to do Bloomsday out in Spokane, Washington, I think it's 12K or 13K. So I was really, at that time, a pretty decent

junior and woman athlete. I made the 2001 World Championship team for the marathon, so I went to Lille, France, as part of the national team for track. That was fun, I did the marathon there. In '99, I made the World team and got to go to New Zealand, and I did—that was so long ago—I did the 800 and the 400 I think at that time. So I competed in track, and I was on the '97, '99, and 2001 junior teams, and we went to Australia three times for that. That was kind of my track era, I was top three in the world at one time in my division as a 53 female. ["53" refers to the T53 disability classification used in disability athletics] I was an alternate for Sydney Paralympics in track, so I didn't get to go to Paralympics for track but I was always right there on the cusp.

When I went to college to the University of Arizona I went for track initially. The University of Arizona has five adapted sports programs there, with track and road racing being one of them. So that is a little bit about the childhood, do you want more?

Cross

That's pretty good, thank you. So it sounds like your stepdad, Jimbo Boyd, was kind of an early role model in your childhood, were there any others?

Hunter

In track in Michigan, we had something called the Muscle Series, and it was done by a bunch of adult road racers, it was like a club that we would join and then you would do these races and you would get points. It's kind of like what triathletes do now. In that I had a lot of role models, because it was this disabled community that they had created themselves. We traveled together, and there were always adults. Pat Ford—she was like the woman of the state, she won everything—so I was always like "How do I keep up with her?" She kind of took me under her wing. There was also George Linderman, he was the one who headed the Muscle Series, and he was a really great guy.

And then growing up, my peers—Jessica Galli, she's married now so it's Jessica Galli Cloy, and LeAnn Shannon, she's now a doctor—all the peers that I grew up with were all over-achievers so to keep up with my peer group I had to do big things. And the way to keep up with what the adults and parents expected of you was to always do well. So I was really lucky to have good role models of people with disabilities who were successful in life—they didn't sit around, they had full-time jobs and did sports and pushed the envelope.

Duncan Wyeth—when I was in high school I did the Michigan Leadership Summit, it's for individuals with disabilities. Advocates come in and teach the high school generation, we have one in Texas as well. [They teach] the laws, the ADA, disabilities, what are your rights going forward as an adult. Duncan Wyeth was one of the fundamental people, he had cerebral palsy back in the '60s and '70s, and he pushed the envelope. So I learned a lot from him in my high school years about advocating and the laws.

Tony Filippis—he was a double amputee, and owned Wright & Filippis, which is a medical supply company. He was run over by a train when he was little, so he missed both of his legs. He was a phenomenal man, who pushed the envelope—he walked on wooden legs even when prosthetics were more advanced, he was just like "I just kind of like this, this is how I grew up." So the history that he helped was amazing.

And then of course, Jim Hayes from here—the reason I ended up in Texas was because of Jim Hayes. He had done track, and my coach was in Las Vegas, so I first met Jim in Las Vegas because he was dating my coach. We would spend time together, and he would train me, and when I'd come here, he'd take me out to the UTA track when I was sixteen, seventeen years old and coach me and say "Okay let's do wind sprints" or whatever. So I've known Jim since I was fourteen, sixteen years old, he took care of me and took me under his wing when I came here, so he was really one of the driving forces that got me here.

Cross

It sounds like, even in childhood, this adapted sports community, you could call it, was a tight-knit group.

Hunter

<topic>Experiences with mainstreaming and attitudes about disability</topic>
Yeah, absolutely.

Cross

Could you maybe talk a little bit about what that meant as a kid—maybe providing a sense of belonging, or...

Hunter

Yeah, when I was in elementary school, I was kind of shipped out of my school district. They didn't have physical therapy, and occupational therapy, and that kind of therapy within my school system at the time. There was a system in Farmington Hills that had a program, so it got all of the kids with disabilities in the county into that one school. I was mainstreamed, so I would go to school with my normal AB [able-bodied] peers throughout the day but they would pull me out for an hour or two to do physical therapy.

But when I was in fourth grade, they had said "You're done, you can continue with physical and occupational therapy but you don't need it every day." So they sent me back to my school district, and when they sent me back I was the only kid with a disability in my school. So I didn't even have anyone else in a wheelchair, I didn't see anybody else.

I had two really great middle school track coaches who allowed me to be on the track team, so I could stay after, and that's where I started getting a sense of belonging from them, but I had already done track through the adapted sports community. But to get mainstreamed, it was these two coaches who were phenomenal—Jeff Penrod and Bob Millyer, who today I am still in contact with, and I'm like "You changed my life in middle school, because you gave me this sense of belonging in a school."

Then when I got to high school, the school was like "No, you can't do track on our team." So it only lasted through middle school, but the adapted sports community taught me everything I needed. They taught me how to do escalators, they taught me how to jump curbs, they taught me how to live in a society that doesn't adapt to individuals with disabilities.

We have Americans with Disabilities laws, but it doesn't change people's mental responses to you. Some people—I remember when I first got hurt, my mom took me

for pictures, and I was looking at a baby in a stroller, just looking, and the mom turned the stroller around because she was afraid that I was contagious and that her baby would be disabled if I touched him or got close enough. So society has these things...like they think that you can't talk or articulate, so they would talk to my mom to see what I wanted to order for food. Or they think that you have some mental challenges because you're in a wheelchair. So we as a society, with the way that we think about individuals with disabilities, we don't really give them a fair shake and say "Well, maybe it's just a physical disability," or with intellectual disabilities still it should be "What can you do?" We just have this concept.

<topic>Positive effects of adapted sports on children's lives</topic>

And in the United States, people with disabilities—in order to get health insurance and be able just to take care of themselves, it's easier for them just to go on the government system than get a full-time job and be productive members of society because our insurance is so high—because we're an at-risk or high-risk community, insurance is astronomical for us. And until recently, if we had a pre-existing condition they wouldn't even cover us. So if I had a bladder infection, instead of being like a normal person who had a bladder infection, it was due to my spinal condition. And you know, not necessarily—normal people, able-bodied people get bladder infections. So having to navigate those challenges, the adapted sports community has changed me. Because it's not just about you going and competing in sport, it's about seeing individuals with disabilities be successful, and figuring out higher self-esteem, confidence, learning independence—like "What kind of wheelchair should you be sitting in? What kind of cushion should you be sitting on? What kind of surgeries do you need stay away from, or have you had them?"

When I was sixteen, I had rods put in my back to straighten me out because I had scoliosis. So I had two rods in my back, then I broke them, had a bone infection, and had to re-do the surgery when I was twenty-two. Now I have two rods in my back with twelve screws, and a cage in the front with six screws to hold them to make sure they don't break. But through that time, [the adapted sports community assisted with] the recommendation of doctors in the community.

So adapted sports is not just about sports, it's about changing attitudes and lives, and giving...I wrote my dissertation on parents' perspectives on what disabled sports did for their kids with disabilities. The kids were—before they found sport—they were suicidal, they didn't have belonging, they didn't want to be in a wheelchair, they hated their life. Once they found sports and the community, they now don't care that they're in a wheelchair, they would rather have this community than walk again.

And the opportunities that I've gotten from being in the community are huge. I would never have been an Olympian, probably, if I had not gotten hurt and been in a wheelchair. I would not have gotten my Ph.D., there's so many things that probably would not have fallen into place had I not gotten hurt. Are there days that it sucks? Absolutely. Are there days when it's rough? Yeah, when I was laying in the hospital bed for a month not able to move because I had rod surgery again, that was the pits. But everybody has their own challenges; able-bodied people have different ways of challenging themselves. Yes, ours sometimes is just getting up and finding the right outfit to wear that's not a pain to put on or whatever, shoes sometimes don't want to go on right, but overall it's what life hands to you, and what do you make of it?

Cross

Thank you. Can you talk a little bit about the transition with going to college at the University of Arizona? Maybe about what the experience was like, having to go live on your own, far from home?

Hunter

<topic>College experience at the University of Arizona</topic>

Well, there was no snow and ice so that was really fun. (laughs) At the time I went to college—in 2000 was when I graduated and had to make the transition from high school to college—there weren't very many opportunities to play sports in the college atmosphere. We've grown so much in the sixteen years since then. And I didn't play basketball. So if you're going for track there's only two colleges to go to, and it's the University of Illinois and the University of Arizona at the time. Those were your only two options if you wanted to continue doing sports. I was still really big into track at the time, and I was still running with the national team, so this was an opportunity for me to train every day with people that did the same thing I did, so we could learn technique and stuff.

The first day I moved in, my dorm was not done being built yet, so we lived in a hotel for the first month of school. (laughs) So it was really fun, because you got people to do your beds and make them, and clean your room, so that was pretty awesome. But unfortunately, it also meant that my mom and dad couldn't move me into the dorms. So after they said "Hey your dorms are done and you can move all your stuff in" you had to find someone to help you move all the big stuff into your dorm. I was lucky enough to have the adapted sports community there, they just rallied and we found people and they moved my stuff in. But unfortunately, the problem at the time was that my mom didn't really get to settle me, and we had to move the stuff.

In Arizona, the first year I just did track, and the practices were at six o'clock in the morning, and we pushed about twenty miles a day, six days a week. Because Arizona gets really hot, so you had to be done pretty early in the morning. And then I did sixteen credit hours a semester and weightlifting, so a normal student-athlete was what I was, disability didn't matter at that time.

In 2002, we ended up having five girls—maybe there were six of us—who were interested in basketball. They already had a men's basketball team, they wanted to do a women's basketball team, so they were like "Hey, will you help us do this?" Well, when I was growing up we had a great basketball program in Michigan and I was always like "No, I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it." So now years later, the Michigan crew always says "You could have been really helpful with us in Michigan, why did you do it in college?"

So I was a late bloomer to the basketball world, and I helped create the women's basketball team at the University of Arizona, that was '01-'02 we started it. I was dual-sporting it, I was doing track in the morning, doing weightlifting, then doing basketball after six o'clock at night. So it was a rough three years, it was fun, but it was also no sleep, lots of training, trying to keep calories in your body, and keep up with schoolwork.

I graduated from the University of Arizona with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, and a double minor in political science and special education. I had worked in the Ronald McDonald House and at the hospitals, and with the Aurora Project, which was all with disabilities, while I was in Arizona, trying to build that community and have a sense of where I belonged in that community. The University of Arizona's faculty was phenomenal, I had to miss like two and a half weeks for a competition and they worked with me, all the faculty did. I missed two weeks of French class, and that was unheard of, that you'd pass if you missed that much of a foreign language. So I was really lucky. The campus is super accessible, they made sure that you could get in everywhere—if there was a place that you couldn't get into they would fix it fairly quickly.

So the University of Arizona was a phenomenal experience, I loved it, the weather was perfect, it was never at the extremes, we didn't have a lot of rain, so with the chair it was an awesome thing, you could train year-round. And the faculty were so supportive of what you did, like at basketball games we would go in at halftime shows, and we would play the able-bodied guys, we would put the able-bodied guys in a chair and play against them in wheelchairs. So the community knew about us, they were doing a great job out there with that—with the community building. They had tennis, rugby, wheelchair basketball, track and field, and goalball for the blind, that was the five sports when I went there that they offered. So we had a pretty big disabled community, and I've been one of the people who have always sought out that community—it's a family, and I've known them since I was seven.

People who see me now are like "Oh I remember you when you were so little and now you're an adult and it's so weird to see you now and what you've become." And I'm like "yeah I know." (laughs) And sometimes they just forget that you're an adult now and still treat you like you're seven, but overall, any time you have a need they're there. Like if I ever went to the hospital—and I think I went one time because I got sick—everybody shows up and makes sure that everything's taken care of.

When you're at college—I was far away from my family but I had another family there. I think parents feel better about sending their kids to a place where there's a disabled community because we already know doctors, and we know what life is going to face. So it was a great experience. Unfortunately I had some differences with some coaches at the time so that's why I didn't stay there, but I don't have anything negative to say about my experience there because it was awesome.

Cross

Cool. So you got your Masters in Social Work at UTA...

Hunter

<topic>Experiences at UT Arlington and with Jim Hayes</topic>

I did, I came to UTA because of Jim Hayes, he was the driving force there. No one tells you when you get a psychology degree, a bachelors, that you can do nothing with it. So it was a challenge when I graduated, I was like "Okay, so where can I work?" And everybody said "Well, with a psychology degree you need a Ph.D. basically to do anything with it." I said "Oh, now that means I have to do something else in order to be employable in this country." So social work is a great one, because it's like a five-tier—you can work in the community, you can work in schools, you can work in hospitals, there's all these different places. And if you have a Masters, once you do so many hours you can open your own private practice, so you didn't really need a Ph.D. So I was like "Great! That's the one for me."

So I went here—University of Texas at Arlington—and there's a local community women's wheelchair basketball team, it's the Dallas Lady Mavs. I played with them, so I had some basketball, but then I always had access to this gym here at UTA with the Movin' Mavs—at the time it was just the men's team—I was able to practice, do whatever I needed to do. I graduated in '06 from UTA. And Hayes was like a dad to me, so anytime I had a problem or needed anything I could just go wheel over to his office on campus and be like "Hey, here's my problem for the day." He knew the city, and he knew the campus, so it was just a good fit at the time, it was just the place to go. So yeah, he was a driving force, and then he coached me in track while I was here. Some days he'd go down to the track and be like "Okay"—because I was still playing around in track, I wasn't serious about it, but I was like "Oh, every once in a while." So he'd say "Okay, well let's go."

Because Jim started the [Movin' Mavs adapted sports] program here at UTA, in a track chair, pushing from Austin, Texas—which is where our capital is—to the front steps of UTA, to bring the awareness of disabled sports, and to bring the basketball program to UTA [Hayes' 1986 "Push" was intended to raise funds for the Handicapped Resource Association's independent living program]. So everybody knew him, when you talked about Hayes on campus at that time, everybody knew who he was, and the Movin' Mavs winning national championships was awesome. He was the person who looked out for me. I didn't really know where I was going to go after Arizona, I didn't have anywhere where I was grounded, and I wasn't going back to Michigan, because it was snow and ice and cold. (laughs) Trying to plow your driveway as an adult is different than with your parents, who would go out and do it for you and make sure the ramp was ready to go. And sidewalks at work, are they really going to be plowed or not? So it was just easier to stay south.

Cross

<topic>Training for the national women's wheelchair basketball team</topic>
Yeah, so you obviously stayed pretty active when you were at UTA, did you always have a goal in mind—that you wanted to play basketball for the national team or something?

Hunter

Yeah, I tried out seven times before I made the national team in basketball, which is a completely different thing than track. Because in track, I grew up in it, so as I got older, I was making times and I just kind of folded in at the appropriate age—because you can't make a national team before you're fourteen—so even if you're fast at ten or eleven and making the times, it doesn't matter, it's the Olympic law that you can't make a team before you're fourteen.

So as I progressed in age, and muscle, and grew up, with track the national team was there. With basketball, I had to work a lot harder because, A, all the other people I was competing against had been playing since they were kids, since junior world, and then I'm an adult trying to figure out this game. And they were just established already, I wasn't really in a great—U of A, at the time, we were building the program, so it wasn't like we had the kids who had already played for years and knew what they were doing.

So when I came here they called Dallas the mecca of wheelchair basketball. Because currently today we have eight teams, which means we have a team in every division. So we have a prep, a JV, varsity, men and women's college, men and women's championship, and then a Division Three-level team. We're the only city in the nation that has a wheelchair basketball team in every division of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association. And there's just a strong history of Paralympians here—so when you play here, you have those people who have played in Paralympics who are willing to teach you, and work with you, and get you to where you want to go.

So here I worked with Lorraine Gonzalez a lot, she's a Paralympian. She trained me here, but I would also play with the Dallas Wheelchair Mavs, or go to UTA and get some time in, and they would coach me. So, you know, you want to make the Paralympics, and I was an alternate for 2000, so it was like so close, and I just didn't make it. And then my back surgery kind of set me back in track, so then I was like "Well, basketball's my outlet to do it." So I made my first national team in 2010 for wheelchair basketball, and I've been on it since, but I got rejected seven times, and I was an alternate for 2008 too, so I was like "Can I not be an alternate any more?" (laughs) So that was really the goal, to not be an alternate for a year.

Cross

So after UTA—after you finished your Masters—you went on and got a Ph.D. in Family Studies from Texas Woman’s University.

Hunter

Yeah.

Cross

Could you describe your motivations for picking Social Work and Family Studies, and how you hoped to use them in your career?

Hunter

<topic>Ph.D. at Texas Woman’s University and training for Paralympics</topic>
So to be completely honest, it was not that significant or sophisticated a decision—I needed emergency back surgery! So in ‘06, I was finishing my Masters, in my last semester of my Masters here at UTA, which was the summer semester. I laid on the floor of my classroom, because I had broken my rods—I had broken them three years earlier but I had a bone infection that no one knew I had, so it ate away at my vertebra. And so I literally woke up one morning and the vertebra was gone, and because the rods were broken, the top of my spine was now floating and the bottom of my spine was anchored into my hips. It was very dangerous. So I had to have emergency surgery. So I had two weeks [until the end of the semester], so I was like “Okay.” They said “If your rod pops out of the back of your back, here’s my business card, call me and we’ll take you to the hospital and we’ll do emergency surgery. If not, here’s some Vicodin for the next two weeks.” It was two weeks until the end of my final semester for my Masters program, so I laid on the floor and took the rest of my classes here. Actually, it wasn’t my final semester, I had one more, but I had missed the first six weeks. UTA worked really well with me, because I missed the first six weeks in ‘06 to finish my Masters because I had back surgery.

And so I still needed health insurance, because I was not sure what was happening. In the United States, if you were under the age of twenty-six at the time and continued to go to school, you could stay on your family’s health insurance. I was under twenty-six at the time. (laughs) I graduated when I was 26 with my Ph.D. So I went back and got a Ph.D. so I had health insurance from my dad. Somebody recommended Texas Woman’s University—I had never thought about going to get a Ph.D., Masters was done for me, but I was in that situation. Is it a good decision today? Absolutely. At the time, was it a good decision as to why I was getting a Ph.D.? No.

But Family Studies was kind of that niche that fit with social work. Texas Woman’s University has nothing to do with sports, although they do have a really good adapted sports program for Masters and Ph.D. led by Ron Davis, who’s really well known in our community. The students there knew of adapted sports, and the faculty knew of it, because he—through the education of those students—hosted intramural wheelchair basketball programs, and so the campus was used to having disability on the campus. So it wasn’t a stretch for me to go there. It’s a really small campus, they let me do a lot of sports there and miss school, because it was just smaller.

I had two really good faculty members: Mary Bold and Lillian Chenoweth, who made sure that—they were super supportive of Paralympics and made sure that any competition or anything that I had to do to get there, they were flexible in my studies.

But they also retired as soon as I did my final semester of course work, and they were the chairs of my committee, so I had to hurry and get my dissertation done before they retired. So that put a little stress on it. But they made it so I could do the Paralympics.

Without supportive faculty, without supportive college programs, without supportive people who were understanding—like currently, in the next six months I'm going to have to miss sixty-six days to go and do USA basketball competitions or training camps. So as an adult, trying to get a full-time job, and you go into your business and say "Hey in six months I'm going to miss sixty-six days"—people are not very understanding at times. But the college system lets you be understanding, and as long as faculty is willing to support that, and understand that the Paralympics are as big as the Olympics are—in reaching that achievement.

And sometimes, for people with disabilities, it's one of the most important things because it changes their lives. So I was really lucky that Arizona, and UTA, and Texas Woman's University were always very supportive of disabled sports, they were always wanting the best and to push the limits and they would provide me the avenues to do it. And they would work with me to make sure I could still pass the classes. I was responsible for the work—but they were flexible with the timeframe. And I know other colleges are not, sometimes.

Cross

Just to clarify, you said that while you were at Texas Woman's you were competing in the Paralympics?

Hunter

I graduated in '09, so the next year, but I was doing...

Cross

You were training?

Hunter

Yeah, training, and I was missing for development training camps and stuff.

Cross

<topic>Attitudes about Paralympics and adapted sports in the U.S. and abroad</topic>

Okay, got it. Then you said you started playing for the U.S. national team—the basketball team—in 2010.

Hunter

Um-hm, World Championships in Birmingham, England.

Cross

Nice.

Hunter

Yeah.

Cross

And you got a gold medal there, right? In 2010?

Hunter

Yeah, we broke the streak. Before that, the girls had won gold at the Olympics in '04 and '08 but they hadn't had a matching World Championship so that was the year that we had it. And I played a total of—so for the two weeks that we were in Birmingham, in game time my first rookie year—I think I played a total of two minutes, like total for the whole Games. So I was a rookie that year, I learned a lot sitting on the bench. (laughs)

Cross

(laughs) What was it like traveling internationally with the team? Did you see a different attitude towards adapted athletes overseas or anything?

Hunter

It depends what country you go to. England is amazing. And England's amazing because that's where the movement started. Paralympics started back in England at Stoke Mandeville. So they have the strongest history, and know it. We didn't feel it so much in 2010, but when we went back for London 2012, they had twenty-four hour news coverage of the Paralympics, and it was the first time ever that the media coverage had been that phenomenal. We were on the cover of tabloids for the Paralympics...magazines, newspaper articles—everywhere you looked while we were doing Paralympics it was in your face.

In the United States, we came back with a gold medal from Parapan, no one even knows that we were there and did it. The United States just doesn't know about Paralympics very much. They're getting better, but at that time no one knew it. So you go to London, for instance, and everyone knows what you did and it was awesome, and they're congratulating you, and watched your game on TV. Like when I was in subways, they would know your number, like "Oh you're number five on the USA team" and you're like "How do you know that?" And they're like "Oh yeah we watched you play." In the United States, you walk in and say "Hey I just got a gold medal at Parapan" and they're like "What are you talking about? what do you mean?" So it has been kind of a downer when you come back, because it's not as an achievement as it is in other countries.

[In] Canada, the federal government pays you to be a Paralympic athlete, and there are some other—a lot of foreign countries pay you to be a Paralympic athlete so it turns into a full-time job. In the United States, we don't get paid. Team USA—able-bodied or Paralympic side of it, it doesn't matter—everybody lives on sponsorships because we're a non-profit. The United States does not have the Olympics or Paralympics as a federal government—like, they don't fund it like other countries do.

So we're competing against people who have stipends monthly to pay their mortgage on their house and their health insurance, and food on the table, and we are working full-time jobs and getting up in the wee early hours of the morning or at night to train for ours.

So in some ways we're kind of behind the eight ball, because we're always working. It's been an interesting experience being a Paralympic athlete in the United States, it's getting a lot better—like people at least know what the word "Paralympics" means now. We still don't have very much news coverage. We went to Germany, their girls won gold in 2012, and people know about it. So when you walk the streets, it's "Oh cool you do that? That's awesome!" And here it's kind of like "What do you do?"

Cross

So you've seen a change in attitude just from 2010 to today? Or maybe a change in awareness, in the United States?

Hunter

Absolutely. Dick's Sporting Goods right now has an excellent commercial called "The Contenders :60," and they have a Paralympic athlete—it's Desiree Miller, she's on our national team currently for wheelchair basketball—and it's awesome to finally see that Paralympics are finally getting into commercials, because for the longest time it was just the Olympic athletes. So now they're mixing us in, and that's the contract that we have with media—if you pick up the Olympics you have to pick up the Paralympics too, it's joint, you don't just get to say "I sponsor the Olympics," you have to sponsor both. So we're working on it in the United States, we're trying. (laughs) It's just a slow process.

Cross

<topic>Leadership roles on the women's national wheelchair basketball team</topic>
Some of your other achievements you kind of mentioned—you guys won the gold medal at the 2011 and 2015 Parapan Am Games. In 2015 you were co-captain of the team, can you talk a little bit about what that meant to you to be named a captain?

Hunter

I was shocked. Because I'm not—being a captain usually is like you're the scorer on the team or you are one of the athletes that everybody talks about in news stories and stuff—and for our team I'm not that, I don't score a lot of points, my job is to play really good defense, pick-n-roll, hit my layups and free throws. My job is to get all the bigger—the taller—players in, the more functioning players in. Desi and I were co-captains, and it's a pretty awesome feeling to know that you're the leader of the team, or that you're the one that tries to keep everybody calm before the big storm, or keep the even mind and make sure that everybody has what they need to compete, and keep everybody sound. People on the team do things differently, some people want to talk and are like I just have to get these anxious nerves out of my system. And other people just want to sit in their room and relax, and be quiet.

The biggest responsibility for my job, of being the captain of the team, was just to make sure everybody was prepared, we were calm, and we were together. They call me the mom of the team, because I'm always like "Do you need that?" or "What do we need? how we do we get this done?" I'm kind of the worrier for everybody, and so I think that that's why I was the captain. Desi's more of the leader on the floor when

we play in games, and I'm more of the leader off the floor. So when we did it together, we're a good fit for each other. But it's an honor that not very many people get, so it's been a pretty cool experience to have had it. We haven't done captains this year because we just made the team and are figuring it out, so I don't know who will be the captain this year. We had some veterans come back so it wouldn't surprise me if it's changed. But I was the captain for two or three years—seasons—so it was pretty fun, I liked it.

Cross

And then obviously you guys now are preparing for the 2016 Paralympics in Rio, can you describe a little bit your training schedule or your preparation for that?

Hunter

We have a training camp once a month. We're not like the other countries right now, because of the situation where we all have work, or we have two girls on the team who have children, so there's moms as well. So we're not living in a compound together, there are some countries that are training together for a month, and then they go home for a few weeks, and then they come back for a month. Because of our limited resources financially we just can't afford to do that, our funding is probably like an eighth of what everybody else we're competing against has, so we don't get to travel very much. We have some friendly competitions to prepare us, and then we have training camps, so we'll be together about every three weeks for four to five days. We leave at the end of this month to go to Canada to have a competition against the Netherlands, Great Britain, Canada, and ourselves in Toronto. So the end of this month is the competition, but then we'll go and do two more training camps and then another competition. So that's what we're doing as a team, and then it's everybody's responsibility to train individually or with their team at home.

That's why this year I'm on—in addition to the USA team—I'm on three other teams, I want to be able to have as much game experience before we go into Rio as I possibly can. For some of them it's playing with men's teams, and then I'm playing with a club team in Canada so I fly up to Canada and I play with them, and then my community Lady Mavericks team here, and then I'm playing with the D3 [NWBA Division III] FreeWheeler team. The FreeWheelers are actually named for the original UTA team—when Coach Jim Hayes started the team here they were called the Freewheelers [*sic*] before they were named the Movin' Mavs. So in honor of Hayes, we're the D3 Free Wheelers.

Cross

<topic>Coaching and mentoring in adapted sports</topic>

Okay, cool. Let's see, getting into your current volunteer work, one thing you do is you coach a developmental team for the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks, for thirteen to nineteen-year-olds.

Hunter

Yeah, the way the NWBA works—which is the National Wheelchair Basketball Association—there's a ten-foot division [refers to height of the basket], so in Dallas because we have about fifty kids in the program, there's some prep kids, which are under-fourteen now, and then we have this big group of kids that are nineteen and under and we break them into two teams. So I have what we call the JV team, which is preparing them to get to the varsity team, which is our competitive team. Currently

we have about twelve to fifteen kids that show up on a regular basis, and it's wheelchair basketball once a week. We play games so we travel around the state of Texas and Oklahoma, and we went to Nebraska this year with them.

We teach them the sport, and are preparing them hopefully to go to college and play ball and get scholarships, and national teams for those that want to do [that]. But some come in and just want to play rec ball, they just want to be there with their peers and their friends and get to play, and we do that as well. In the summer, sometimes we let them play against their parents or siblings and throw them in chairs just so everyone kind of gets that experience. It's really fun, I do it every Saturday, we have a two-hour practice, and prepare them.

I hope to be a mentor to them about what people mentored me—it's not just about basketball, it's important that you get good grades. We have a no pass-no play, so if they don't pass their grades [classes] at school they don't get to play basketball with us. Because we want them—a lot of times with kids with disabilities teachers just pass them because they have a disability and don't hold them to the same standards, but when they get to adulthood they fail because they weren't held to standards in school. So by us instilling this like "You have to do this"—most of the coaches in our program, except for one, have some sort of disability. So the kids can see us as adults going out and being productive members and they know that we have the same expectations of them.

So it's kind of this give-back, people gave back and believed in you and taught you, so in our community because it's so close-knit you have to give back to the next generation and make sure that they understand that life happens and you're going to be successful and you can do this. And we hold you to these standards, and accountabilities, and sometimes it's changing their parents' perspectives in how they see them as kids. I always say to them "You make your four-year-old put their shoes on every day before they leave the house, why don't you make your fifteen-year-old do the same thing?" "Well, it's hard for them." Of course, it was hard for your four-year-old to tie his shoes too, that's—until he practices enough, then it will become easy. So it's more than just a sports program, it's daily life skills.

Cross

And can you see the difference that you're making in these kids' lives, from working with them over time?

Hunter

Yeah, I've been really lucky that some of these kids have been in the program for nine years—six to nine years—so you get to see them as little itty-bitties and now they're going off to college. And you get to see some of them graduating, having gone to college, and you can see their growth and where they came from, and they'll even come back and say "Thank you for being hard on me" or "Thank you for saying that, because when I went to college, I knew how to do my own laundry, I knew how to get through the day." And we still have able-bodied parents that baby their kids too much, and they get to college and they're like "I don't know how to do a load of laundry." So it's the same thing, but we just have to do different life skills with them.

Cross

<topic>Leadership roles in NWBA Women's Division and Texas Regional Paralympic Sports</topic>

You're also the director of the NWBA Women's Division. Can you talk a little bit about your role and what you've done there?

Hunter

My role is to make sure the teams are competing every year, to try to recruit new teams—we're always trying to recruit a new women's program and keep that team alive. And then making sure we're all following the rules, this weekend we'll go and do nationals in Seattle, Washington so we'll be competing there. So it's just really to make sure that the league is running smoothly, and the women's division, and that we're growing. Any problems that come about during the year our board gets together and settles them for the women's division. We've seen a growth in the last two years, so we're pretty excited to see where it will go in the future.

Cross

Okay. You're also the Regional Coordinator for the Texas Regional Paralympic Sport...

Hunter

Yeah, that's one of my favorite jobs because the UIL of Texas—which is our high school association for sports—passed a pilot program that allows high school athletes with disabilities to compete on their able-bodied track and field team. We work with veterans who have gotten hurt—that was how this program got started with Texas Regional Paralympic Sports was with our veterans. Mission—and getting veterans because we have Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, so that's the first place all the injured people come back to. There's another one in Virginia, but for the most part they come here first.

So we do that, we do competitions, getting veterans back into daily life, and now our newest is the UIL initiative. Currently we have forty-six high school athletes in the state of Texas competing and it's our third season. Next year we hope to do swimming, and then two years from now, tennis. So our goal is to get more inclusion in the high schools, and hopefully middle schools eventually. These kids with disabilities will be able to get their letter jackets and be as competitive—and have it just be a normal part of the day, that everybody gets to compete on one team and we don't have to keep sending kids away in the community. Because it's such a great learning experience for able-bodied kids, too, to see what individuals with disabilities are overcoming. Texas stepped up this year and gave Tobi [Fawehinmi] a Division I track scholarship, and they're the only school in the nation who have put a physically disabled athlete on scholarship. Tobi is a Paralympian, and he's here at UTA. It's slowly coming up the pipeline.

Cross

Tobi, do you have his last name?

Hunter

It's f-a-w.... It's a really hard name to spell. I can email it to you, but he's on the track and field team here. [As of March 2016, Tobi Fawehinmi is a Junior on the track and field team at UTA with two varsity letters competing in the long jump and triple jump]

Cross

<topic>Professional career</topic>

And then currently you work for a firm called HCB Digital...

Hunter

Yeah, it's with the chairs of my dissertation from my Ph.D. We've worked together in colleges; I was an associate dean and worked with them as well. So we've started our own company building online courses and training resources and working with "higher-ed" education, K-12. We work with organizations and ask what kind of training they need and we write it, and we will facilitate it. Or we will just write it, or we will just deploy it, so whatever they ask. It's just an online building of resources, helping with accreditation, so it's just kind of a hodge-podge of higher-ed stuff because of our experiences. It allows me the flexibility with the Paralympics, because I don't have to go into an office. I can work anywhere online.

I worked after I graduated for a couple of years with sexually abused kids through Tarrant County Alliance for Children, so I did that for a little bit. But once I got really deep into Paralympics, missing work is really hard. And kids—especially the sexually abused—need stability. So it was just not fair to them, and so then with my Ph.D. I got to work online, and then I didn't have to miss work because anywhere in the world has internet for the most part. So I just worked on trips, we'd go and do our training and compete in games or whatever, and that at night I'd be on my computer in a corner doing work. The time would be flipped, but as long as I got it done. So I just tried to find jobs that I could work online to do Paralympics, because it allowed the flexibility.

Cross

Do you get any opportunities in your work to use your background in the disability community to find ways to advocate or something?

Hunter

Yeah, with accreditation—when we do accreditations like HLC, or TEAC, or CAEP [Higher Learning Commission, Teacher Education Accreditation Council, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation] now, with whatever accreditations, they always have to say how are you as a university providing for individuals with disabilities? So I'm always on that committee, because everybody's always like "Well, what do we do?" Or for online—what you have to do for the reader for blind individuals. So I do that kind of more "techy" stuff. But everyone that I work with knows that I'm on a Paralympic team, so at the offices when I'm playing—if the games are live-streamed they'll have watch parties. So even though I'm not shoving it down their throat, they all know from my life. Like at my last job as an associate dean, the vice president of the college goes "Oh my kids carry their iPads around with them every time you're playing a basketball game, they're all just carrying them and glued to it, it's so cool." So it hasn't not been my mission, but it hasn't been "Oh I'm going to go and change your mind about this." But it has—just through my life experiences—changed people's perspective. And the opportunity to share what I do—like I have a group in Seattle that I just know from work, but they're going to come down and watch us play just because they want to see it. So it's really fun.

Cross

<topic>Dissertation research on adapted sports and equal opportunities</topic>
It sounds like it. And then you mentioned earlier that you did your dissertation on adapted sports in kids' lives. Could you describe that briefly, what you found?

Hunter

It was—I did twenty-four interviews, and it was a qualitative study using systems theory by Bronfenbrenner. It was throughout the United States, so it wasn't just like a regional—I opened it up to everybody and said "Hey, if you're willing for me to interview you," and because I was in the sport community people knew me so they were willing to help me out. And that's what's great about the community, is everybody—especially when it comes to research—is willing to jump in say "Okay here, this is my life experience." Because there's not much out there, so research becomes a little bit easier if you're in the community because you have all the subjects that are willing to help you. Like I was saying earlier, what we found was that self-confidence, self-esteem, and independence increased after kids started participating in sports. Their sense of belonging, their drive for having a future education, and more of those students who did sports went on to be college athletes and then get a full-time job. Because we know what sports do for anybody, it gives you a sense of discipline, expectations, and having to overcome stuff. And so it's the same thing we're seeing with able-bodied athletes, we're seeing with disabled individuals.

The problem has been in that as our society is set up, it's not easy for individuals with disabilities to succeed because of health insurance, or making their bills, or the cost of wheelchairs. Especially this year, I think the insurance policy just changed and now they don't cover as much for wheelchairs. The cushion I sit on cost \$500, and the chair I sit in cost \$2500, so for \$3000.... Anytime I have to go to the bathroom, just medical supplies is like two to three dollars for every time I go to the bathroom, which able-bodied people don't have to pay for. To be able to just live day in and day out, the cost of insurance per month can be anywhere between \$700-\$900, because we're a high risk. So it's easier to just go on government health insurance, because then all their needs are taken care of, but now they're sitting in their house, putting on weight, getting depressed because they're not getting out, because of this vicious circle that we have created. We're getting better, but we're finding that through sports, people are just more active and want more out of their lives, and have the tools and education of how to succeed.

Cross

Okay, thank you. Just to wrap up, is there anything else you think is important that you'd like to talk about?

Hunter

No, I think you covered everything.

Cross

All right, do you have any other contacts for people that you think we should interview for this project?

Hunter

I think you've already contacted all the people I've given you guys. (laughs) So yeah, that's it, I know you interviewed a lot of people that I've given you contacts for. I'm the last one on the totem pole.

Cross

All right, thank you very much for your time.

Hunter

Oh, no problem.