

## **Donna Anderson**

### **Chair for the Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities.**

*Interview conducted by*

*Kristi Nedderman*

*in 2014 in Pantego, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor

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## **Biography**

Donna Mack (formerly Donna Mack Anderson) was born in September 1962 to Harold Mack and Jean Rhodes Mack. She grew up in Arlington, Texas. Born with retinopathy prematurity, Anderson had low vision from birth; when she reached school age, her parents did not want to put her in a special education program. She was mainstreamed in the Arlington Independent School District (AISD) during the 1960s and 1970s. She obtained her primary education at Wimbish Elementary, Nichols Junior High, and Lamar High School, all part of the AISD.

Anderson was one of the first children to benefit from the AISD vision program, an alternative technology program that provided both itinerant teachers who taught her Braille and assistive technology, such as tactile learning objects for learning geometry. Anderson earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish from UT Arlington (UTA) in 1982. She obtained a master's degree in education from the University of North Texas in 1988.

In the mid-1990s, Anderson spearheaded an emergency initiative to preserve the service levels of Arlington's Handitran program after Federal funding was eliminated. Handitran provides door-to-door transportation for people with disabilities and those over 65; because Arlington is the largest public city in the country without public transit, Handitran is a crucial

service for many people with disabilities. Her activism, in addition to others' efforts, including then-U.S. House of Representatives Congressman Martin Frost, resulted in partial restoration of funding for Handitran. She joined the now called Special Transit Advisory Board shortly after this event and served for a total of eight years over two different time periods in the 1990s.

Since 1998, Anderson has been the Chair of Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities; she has been part of the organization since its inception in January 1994. Established as part of the city's effort to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure Arlington's compliance, this organization comprises citizen volunteers dedicated to helping Arlington become fully accessible for all people with disabilities. It collaborates with both city leaders and the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. Furthermore, Anderson runs her own speaking, training, and consulting business called Donna Anderson Speaks. She provides speeches addressing adversity and change and trains businesses on how to meet the unique marketing and service needs of people with disabilities.

Anderson received the Barbara Jordan Media Award in 1999 from the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities for an article she wrote in 1998 for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*: "Take Care When Evaluating the Cost of Handitran."

In 2011, she received the Who's Who Among Blind Texans Award from the American Council of the Blind of Texas, Inc. (ACBT) for her advocacy, awareness, education and volunteer efforts on behalf of Texans with vision impairments. The ACBT promotes and acknowledges positive contributions, made by persons who are blind or visually impaired, to the state of Texas and to local communities in Texas.

Anderson was formerly married to Steve Anderson and has two children, Lindsey and Jordan; Lindsey received her BA in History with minors in Disability Studies and African American Studies from UTA in 2014 and now works in disability rights organizing. Jordan is currently an undergraduate at UTA. The family lives in Pantego, Texas.

## Topics discussed

- Childhood experiences with retinopathy prematurity and low vision
- Parents' own experiences with disability and approach to raising Mack
- Experiences in public school and Arlington ISD (Independent School District)'s Vision Program
- College years at the University of Texas at Arlington
- Disability accommodations and professors' attitudes at UTA
- Advocacy at age sixteen for Handitran paratransit
- Fighting again for Handitran in the 1990s
- Evolving attitudes about having a disability
- Introduction to disability rights, disability community, and cross-disability work
- Service as chair of the Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities

**Nedderman**

This is Kristi Nedderman interviewing Donna Anderson for the UT Arlington Disability Oral History project. Today's date is Friday, March 7, 2014 at 1:00 p.m. I am at Donna's home in Pantego, Texas, and I am here today to speak with her about her personal and professional activities related to living with a disability.

Thank you for participating in our oral history program, and Donna, if you'll start by telling us your name and then just a couple of quick sentences about you. Then we'll start with some more biography information after that.

**Anderson**

My name is Donna Mack Anderson. I am a native Arlingtonite. I am a disability advocate, and I have an independent speaking, training, and consulting business having to do with disability access. I also chair the Arlington Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities currently.

**Nedderman**

Alrighty. Another Arlington-born person like myself. First, tell me specifically if you can...share exactly what disability you deal with.

**Anderson**

<topic>Childhood experiences with retinopathy prematurity and low vision</topic>  
I have a visual impairment. For all practical purposes, at this time, I am blind. I can still see the difference between light and dark in certain situations, but the condition that I have is called retinopathy prematurity, and as it might imply, I had vision issues due to the fact that I was born two and a half months prematurely.

**Nedderman**

You've never had full vision; this is since birth?

**Anderson**

Not full vision, but until I was twelve I could read phone books, newsprint. I could see colors. I wanted to actually be an artist, and I could ride a bike and do most of the things that most kids can do. Just had to do a lot of it from a little bit closer distance. When I was about twelve, my retinas began to detach, and that's kind of inevitable most of the time for people with retinopathy prematurity.

**Nedderman**

Are you the only one in your family that has had this?

**Anderson**

Yes.

**Nedderman**

I'm sure that was tricky for you as a child to kind of know that this might happen, and then maybe for your parents to figure out how to accommodate their home.

**Anderson**

Honestly, it was kind of interesting because I don't think anybody really told us that this was an inevitability until my vision started fading. And then...we didn't really...we didn't know what was causing it at the time. Even some ophthalmologists back in the early 1970s were not able to look at retinas, and they weren't that familiar with retinal conditions. My ophthalmologist took a look at me and said, I'm not sure what's going on, but we want to refer you to a retinal specialist.

At that time, I was faced with...I could either lose my vision immediately, or maybe I could have a surgery, which I didn't really want to have. I have had several of them, but my parents forced me to save whatever little bit of vision I might have left. And that was actually pretty successful. Most people in my situation wouldn't even have the ability to tell light from dark at this point. And so I consider it a blessing.

<topic>Parents' own experiences with disability and approach to raising Mack</topic>

As far as all that goes, I have a really unique situation in that my—even though nobody else in my family had a visual impairment—my mom was born in rural northeast Texas during the Depression and grew up during the Depression and World War II, and doctors were in very short supply. When she was fifteen years old, she and her brother were goofing around before school. He came up behind her and cupped his hands over her ears over both ears simultaneously. She said she felt like her head was going to explode. She'd had this hearing impairment since she had been born, and when he came up and cupped his hands over her ears, apparently it created some sort of suction...created a vacuum, and her ears started bleeding. She stayed home from school that day, but what she didn't tell anybody for a couple of weeks is that she could hear. For several days, she went to school and heard the things her supposed friends were saying about her behind her back to make fun of her.

She always wondered why she couldn't hear. Then twenty years later when I was born, I think that was probably her answer. She was pretty hardcore. She was kind of a drill instructor sort of parent, (laughs) and I didn't get by with anything that I wouldn't have if I could see. She forced me to do a lot of things that I didn't want to have to do. She made me a fighter, and I think I probably needed to be a fighter. I think it's served me very well. And I think it's kind of a neat legacy to have passed on to me. I hope that makes sense.

**Nedderman**

Sure. She was born with hearing issues?

**Anderson**

She was born with some hearing loss, and at the time, the doctors... Again they were in pretty short supply and I guess they just probably took it as a given, and nobody really looked into

it. Through a fluke, she regained her hearing. Or I guess maybe gained her hearing. I think it's kind of an interesting twist.

**Nedderman**

That is. Did she ever have issues after that? Or that one incident gave her ears back?

**Anderson**

They gave her ears back. She at present is eighty-seven years old, and she, from time to time, does have some hearing issues. What is interesting is she has had an audiologist tell her that basically the anatomy of her ears is such that she can have fluid buildup pretty easily. I don't know if that could have contributed at all as a young person to her hearing loss, but I...All I can speak from is just the experience knowing that that had happened to her, and I think it gave her a really unique perspective with me.

**Nedderman**

I think so. If you're eighty-seven and have a little hearing loss, nobody's going to think twice about it.

**Anderson**

Exactly. Exactly. The TV's up kind of loud these days and...

**Nedderman**

Yes. That's to be expected unfortunately. You definitely had a...she was a parent who maybe wasn't prepared but certainly at least had a little bit more of an insider's view of being different around school and things like that.

**Anderson**

Definitely.

**Nedderman**

When you were little, did you realize, I can't see as well as other people? Or were you just a kid and thought, "This is what I know?"

**Anderson**

I think I always knew that I couldn't see like other people because remember asking my sister...I had to have been less than four years old because I remember what house we were in at the time, and we moved from that house when I was four. I remember asking her because

I only had vision on one side, and I remember asking her what the other side of her nose looked like. What's it like to be able to see both sides? (laughs)

I was the youngest of four kids and the other three were all—I was the “oops” child. The other three were all born when my parents were young and newly married and then ten and one half years later I showed up. So they're all more than a decade older than me.

**Nedderman**

Okay. Okay. Did that provide maybe any protection for you? Did they look after you more maybe? Or?

**Anderson**

Ah, I don't know. My brother was...(telephone rings) Sorry.

**Nedderman**

It's okay; I'll pause it. (telephone rings)  
[pause in recording]

**Nedderman**

Okay, well it's turned back on now. I had asked if your siblings protected you, or were you too much younger?

**Anderson**

I think my sisters did. My brother was the oldest, and he just kind of picked on everyone. He was that kind of brother, and he was the only boy, so I guess he kind of felt like we had it coming. I don't know. I think I was indulged a little bit insomuch as it was kind of neat to have siblings when I was a little kid that could drive. I thought I was really big because they would take me to get a Coke or whatever, and that felt kind of neat. As far as protecting me, I don't think I was ever very sheltered.

When I was, I guess, six months old, my parents took me to some sort of neurologist. I don't have the doctor's name, don't know the doctor's name. At that time, he told my parents that I would be totally blind and a vegetable—that was the term that was used at that point—and that I might learn how to say a few words. I might be able to walk, but that would be about it, that I would never be able, independent. And my mother said, “I don't believe that.”

I don't know that she told the doctor that. When I was little, I was so premature that they gave me like a two percent chance to survive. It's pretty miraculous that I grew up with only one disability and that being my vision as opposed to having a lot of other issues that could've gone pretty wrong.

I know that even my mom, who was not a very educated person, had a few hours of college, and like I said, came from a very rural community and had not been exposed to a lot of things—just out of her gut instinct, she would do things—like she would bring my knees into

my chest, and then she stretched my legs out. She'd do little leg lifts with me. Stuff that a physical therapist might do with a preemie. With my background...I wonder how many neuro-pathways she might have built for me by doing those kind of things. She'd massage me, and again, this is just what a mom did out of her own instinct not because she read a bunch of books.

<topic>Experiences in public school and Arlington ISD (Independent School District)'s Vision Program </topic>

I have to just be really grateful to her for the fact that I turned out to be someone who is pretty socialized. When I was three and one half years old, the experts were telling her to send me to Austin because there was a state school for the blind there, and my mother said, "No, I think she can get a better education at home." And so I went to two years of kindergarten.

I started kindergarten at the age of four. Then I went through another year of kindergarten at the age of five which is when everybody else would've. And I went to first grade. My birthday is in September, so I had a late birthday, and went to private first grade and then in second grade I...she took me to a public school and I was seven about the time that school started, and they accepted me on a six weeks trial basis and said, "We'll see how her grades are."

I made a 100 on a paper, I think, on the first or second day of school. My first grade was 100 and so...I think my mom kept the paper, and so I always went to public school. I was always mainstreamed in class.

Starting in probably the third grade, there was a teacher who would come and teach me Braille, which...I didn't really get why I had to learn it. I just thought, Well it's just a perk. There aren't very many perks with having a disability (laughs) and at the time I was reading regular print books just holding them really really close and I had a couple of teachers who would do that and I think that was probably the beginning of what's called the Vision Program in the city of Arlington with the AISD [Arlington Independent School District]. It's a group of teachers who are...they're based out of a home school, but they are itinerant meaning that they will travel to various campuses and work with kids on accommodations that they need for their classes. Those kids can range from pre-K through high school. And that means that if they need their tests in alternate format that they'll do that. These are all kids with visual impairments. If they need something Brailled, they'll Braille it, or if they need something in large print, any kind of alternate format like that, if they need something administered orally. If they need certain teaching aids for, say, a geometry class or an algebra class...something that your average sighted kid might not need. They provide those things.

And that program I think really kicked off officially the year that I was in the sixth grade, so that was, I guess, in 1973? I don't know if that had anything to do with the Rehabilitation Act of 1972 [1973] or not.

**Nedderman**

Sounds like you...seeing as that that was about the time you started losing your sight the most, you really were there at the right time and the right place for being in public education. Do you know after having children of your own how much...do you think that you would've had significant issues with getting an education had you not been there right at that time? Or do you have any way of knowing?

**Anderson**

I think there would have been some classes. I am sitting here thinking. Well, I don't know. My parents might have just hired tutors for me. I'm sitting here thinking about algebra and how I had to have somebody really explain it because a lot of teachers at that time and probably now too I think, the human.... The most natural thing for a human to do is to point to something and say "Okay, if you multiply this (points in air at imaginary number) and then they point to whatever the number is times this (points in air at second imaginary number) and point to another number somewhere else in the equation then you get this," and then they point to the answer. Whenever you're looking at algebra and you say well multiply this times this and then divide this times this that, it can be really pretty confusing.

Yeah. I definitely think that that helped my education. I still think I probably would have gotten an okay education. I never wanted to go to a special school because a lot of socialization is very visual, and I will tell you now that I am probably one of the most visual blind people you will ever meet. I think it's just how I'm wired; again I wanted to be an artist as a kid. I was very good, and I loved pastels and sketching, so I just think if you will that I'm a very visual learner who has had to kind of change gears and be an auditory learner. I do picture things in my head, and I'm very grateful that that program with the ISD [Independent School District] came along when it did.

**Nedderman**

Absolutely. Absolutely. Did that continue with you all the way through high school?

**Anderson**

Yes. There were years that I think I needed more help than others. Geometry was really easy as long as I had somebody there to explain it. A lot of times what my teachers would do is they would illustrate things with raised lines. They had kind of a tool where you could take a pin and put it on a special kind of paper and it would raise the lines and so they could draw angles and show me how to bisect that angle. That was extremely helpful to have that kind of help. I know that your average math teacher in a public school...there's no way those teachers would have those kind of resources.

So, I'm very grateful for having the program, but it just...but I'm also at least as grateful if not maybe a little more grateful for being mainstreamed and for being able to socialize as I was allowed to socialize.

**Nedderman**

Right. Right. Well, nothing wrong with your brain, right? It's just that you can't see! So big deal, right? There's no reason for you to have not been with all the other kids your age. I know you're glad your parents said, No, we're not going to do that.

**Anderson**

Oh definitely. I am definitely grateful.

**Nedderman**



They never really had to fight the district or anything like that, which probably made their lives a lot easier. You hear horror stories about people trying to keep their kids in education.

**Anderson**

I'm sure that there was some advocacy that was done. I know that I had a couple of teachers...I had a few eye surgeries over the years, and I can remember having one teacher who thought I needed to maybe repeat a grade. My grades weren't bad. I had had some excessive absences, and I might have pulled a C in a class that ordinarily I would've pulled an A in, but it would be for a six weeks. Everything else before that six weeks would be A's, A's, A's. To me that was not enough reason to repeat a grade.

**Nedderman**

No. No it doesn't sound like it. Does that program still exist today?

**Anderson**

It does. It does.

**Nedderman**

I bet it's even stronger now with technology and everything.

**Anderson**

It's a lot stronger now, and one of the things they do is try to ensure that students have the technology that they need. At one point they were using some laptops. Now I think they're using more iPads, and the neat thing about Apple products is that all of their adaptive technology is already on board, meaning that if you and I both have an iPhone or if you and I both have an iPad, the technology that I use is available to you if you know how to turn it on. Your iPhone could talk to you, too; your iPad could talk to you, too.

And they just do it as a matter of course; whereas, there are some products where...sometimes it's a wash. You can get a Windows-based computer and then you can buy screen-reading software for it and sometimes that's cheaper than buying a Mac which comes loaded with the screen-reader already on it for everybody. Like I said, you just never wind up activating yours, so why would you need to know it's there?

The program makes sure that the kids have what they need for school and they have the technology they need and it's a really neat program. They familiarize students with that campuses that they're going to be going to. Show them routes to and from classes and just all kinds of stuff.

Occasionally I think they work on some social skills. They have some programs in the summer that maybe attend to that...attend to maybe a little job readiness. Things they didn't do so much when I was in school; although, I did have one vision teacher who taught me how to do

the bump and the hustle back in day when those were the dances that were done. That was totally cool because at least I knew what to do with the dance. I didn't feel like a geek.

**Nedderman**

Absolutely. Absolutely. That's a cool teacher. (laughs)

**Anderson**

She was a really cool teacher.

**Nedderman**

<topic>College years at the University of Texas at Arlington</topic>

So, you graduated from high school. I know you went to UTA. Was that because it was here in Arlington or was it a choice of I'm going here versus here?

**Anderson**

Honestly it was because it was here in Arlington. I graduated high school...I graduated high school in three years rather than four because I had some classes that I wanted to take my senior year, and I had two teachers who refused to accommodate me. At that point, I guess my mom could've probably fought the district. I sort of took that fight on myself, and I don't know if she really knew about that till after the fact. But at that point, it was like, "You know what? I can just...I can take four classes my senior year, which is not what I wanted to do, or I can just take a couple of correspondence courses and just get the heck out of here."

So I graduated when I was sixteen. I studied. I went and CLEPped [college level examination program] out of thirty hours of college. It was easier to go to UTA because it was close, and I think that my parents had some concerns about me having a lot of change right away. I was probably like any high school student; I kind of wanted to go somewhere out of state because it sounded glamorous. (laughs) Don't we all want to go to school in, I don't know, California or NY or somewhere far off at seventeen or eighteen?

But considering what UTA had the time...they had the Office for Students with Disabilities, and Jim Hayes was in charge of that at the time. Jim has done probably more than anybody in the history of that university to make it accessible. Even now, he has been gone now for...six years will be in May and UTA still has one of the...it's been renowned for years for being one of the most physically accessible campuses in the country. It's a great school for access and for people being pretty savvy to disability and accommodation as evidenced by the Disability Studies Minor.

**Nedderman**

Right. The basketball team is...

**Anderson**

Yes, Seven times national champions, and they may be eight times national champions here in a couple of days. We'll see.

**Nedderman**

That'll be great. I remember going to see them as a little kid with my grandparents. That was eye-opening; they're cool. As a little kid, you want to get in a chair and zoom around with a basketball.

**Anderson**

Yeah you do! My kids always did. (both laugh)

**Nedderman**

Did you live on campus, or did you...

**Anderson**

I lived right off of campus. I lived in an apartment. For the first year I lived at home, then I felt like it would be in my best interest to get out of the house as far as I felt like it would help me with my independence and make me have to depend on me rather than my parents or anybody else. Who doesn't want to get out from under your parents' wing?

**Nedderman**

From what you say, your mom really set you up to be more independent.

**Anderson**

She did, but then there have been times when she created her own monster (laughs), but with my own kids I see that too.

I think that that's just a little bit of a stage in life, but it had been her job for a lot of years, and I was pulling away. Hey, who doesn't do that at that age?

I lived close enough to walk to school, so it wasn't a big deal. I lived off of Cooper and Abram, so it was really pretty close and walked to school every day and if it was rainy.... We had a really good community of student friends that lived there—just a bunch of us neighbors got to be really good friends. So I'd bum a ride with a friend if it was rainy or just extremely cold, but most of the time, I'd walk.

**Nedderman**

At this time...have you used a cane? Or what have you used?

**Anderson**

Yeah, yeah. Always.

**Nedderman**

<topic>Disability accommodations and professors' attitudes at UTA</topic>

Were your classes... Did they give you audio versions or Braille? How was UTA accommodating?

**Anderson**

UTA...typically what would happen, back in the day (laughs) before we had cell phones, before people had personal computers, I would take a tape recorder to class, and I would record the lectures. As long as I was pretty astute, I could edit out some of the extraneous information. But if I got really bored, it was kind of nice because I could just zone out and then go home, and I would Braille my notes so I could review whatever I needed to review. Every once in a while, I would turn in an assignment on tape, but most of the time I would type my assignments.

I remember one time I had a paper that was due on a particular day by 5:00 p.m. Again, this is back in the day when we used typewriters, and I had typed this paper. I had worked my rear end off on this particular paper, stayed up late. Of course, I hadn't, like, started it, like, two weeks in advance or anything, so I'm typing away, get finished with the paper, and for some reason I'm talking to a friend who looks down and goes, "Donna, there's nothing on here."

My ink cartridge on my typewriter had run out! I had recorded the paper, but I had to call and leave my professor a voice mail—because this was also in day when professors actually had voicemails and phones. I had to call him and leave my professor a message and say, "I'm really sorry. Can I please have an extension? I will come up and give it to you at 7:00 tonight, but I'm not going to have time to go get a printer cartridge at the...or typewriter cartridge at the bookstore and have this done to you by five. I will even give you what I have because you could even hold it up to the light and see that there was typing on it."

**Nedderman**

That's a pretty good story. (laughs) You have pretty good friends to say...to not just let you turn that in.

**Anderson**

Oh man, well because I think what I was doing is...I was bumming a ride with somebody up there to turn it in. They went, Donna, there's nothing on this.

**Nedderman**

(laughs) Oh no!

**Anderson**

I did have one professor who initially told me, "No, you can't use a tape recorder in my class." I just think he wasn't real observant and thought I was asking to record him, and he had an issue with that. He didn't want everybody recording him. But that's pretty much what I did.

**Nedderman**

You mentioned typing it in Braille. So you had a Braille typewriter? Tell me about that...

**Anderson**

Okay, I have two things that I did. One, I have a machine that only creates Braille. Braille is made up.... Every letter in the Braille alphabet is made up of a combination of anywhere from one to six dots in a cell, and those cells are three dots high and two dots wide. That would be only for my own personal notes. Now my typewriter was a regular typewriter, and I just touch typed. Occasionally I'd make a typo, and unfortunately back then since we didn't have word processors I wouldn't always catch it, and there'd be the occasional typo, but nobody was really grading me on my typing. Thank God.

**Nedderman**

How did you learn to type then? Did you just know...somebody taught you where the letters were and you just memorized?

**Anderson**

Right.

**Nedderman**

That wasn't really any different from your other friends? (both laugh) That's what most people do!

**Anderson**

Exactly. That was back when they really had to teach keyboarding and you didn't have three...year olds that can keyboard. You know my kids can type a lot faster than me.

**Nedderman**

Did you at least have a Selectric?

**Anderson**

I did. I did.

**Nedderman**

Excitement! Back in the day!

**Anderson**

It was. (both laugh)

**Nedderman**

At least that one...I can remember my grandmother typing on her manual one until really not that long ago, so the Selectric was pretty exciting.

**Anderson**

The Selectric was way cool.

**Nedderman**

Really, your college experience wasn't really any different from anybody else's. You did some audio tapes, and you had to make a few changes for yourself, but going to your class, that sort of thing...

**Anderson**

And the books, the books were already available through a couple of different agencies that do recordings, textbook records. I think now it's called Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic. It may be called something else at this stage of the game.

But sometimes there were books that were not yet available, and through Vocational Rehab there was funding available to pay people to read for me. Typically what I would do is I'd pay somebody minimum wage. I would try to solicit people from my class because they had to read the stuff anyway. Minimum wage isn't great, but if you have got to read it anyway.... A lot of people really liked reading it. I would try to just give them a tape, and if they had a tape recorder, and have them record it because that was better than trying to...they could do it on their own time that way. And a lot of people said that just the act of reading it out loud helped to solidify the information for them too, so it helped them study, gave them a little extra cash. Who else is going to be making money while they study for the most part and it helped me.

**Nedderman**

That's great thinking. You're right, if you have to read it anyway, might as well...

**Anderson**

I would get with the profs, as soon as I knew who I had for the semester for the first day of class, I would get with the prof and say, "Would you let me make an announcement to the class and solicit some readers?" I really don't think I ran into a lot of problems with that. There were a few professors who could've been maybe a little nicer, but most all of them were really great. Even the ones that could've been nicer, once you explained the situation, once they really understood what was going on, they were okay.

**Nedderman**

Certainly UTA's physical facilities have the reputation for being very accommodating with ramps and things like that. Sounds like the professors for the most part understood all that as well.

**Anderson**

Yeah. The one or two that were just kind of stubborn and probably weren't anybody's favorite professor anyway. Those are the ones that sometimes unfortunately stick out.

**Nedderman**

What did degree did you study for?

**Anderson**

(laughs) Okay. Oh gosh. Okay. I started off as a music major. And when I started off as a music major, I...before I ever enrolled in a class, I went and spoke with the person who was then the head of the department and asked that person about accommodations. I also said, "Here's my problem. I have not learned Braille music." This individual said it shouldn't be a problem. I had theory class where I had to compose songs. What I did was...I was a vocalist, and what I did is I had a board that looked like a bulletin board. It had staff lines like you could make a music staff out of. You could put a treble clef or a bass clef there, you could put rests and sharps and notes and notes with different values and notes with flats and everything there.

I would visually create a composition on this board. It was all made up of notes and rests things with little push pins in them. If that makes any sense?

For me it was tactile, but it would be visual for you. And somehow...my professors were all great and I did this for a couple of semesters, made all A's and Bs. Beginning my third semester, the chair comes into one of my classes and says, "The curriculum is going to become too difficult now. I'm going to take you out of class, and I'm going to teach you myself."

And what I didn't like about that is all of the sudden I'm being expected to play a bunch of things. I was taking a functional piano class at the time. I'm being expected to play some things that I... It was a little bit beyond my comfort zone. And it was a matter of just kind of changing horses in midstream. That's not the approach we had taken initially, if that makes any sense.

And what I found was that this person was very difficult to deal with and he would say things to me like...and this happened on more than one occasion.... "We all wish you didn't have this problem. But you do, and I'm not being paid any extra to work with you."

**Nedderman**

Wow!

**Anderson**

Yeah, that was really nice wasn't it? How can you not at some point feel resentful about that? And I would try to practice, and I would hear that voice in my head, and it really did not make me want to practice.

And at some point I had to have...in music you have what you call juries at the end of the semester. Those are like music performance finals. Okay, so I had to have a pre-jury hearing. All my professors from my theory class, my sigh-singing class, my piano class, they all came to hear me play all this stuff, these different chord progressions. I was really nervous. At one point, I was just like...I could not remember what chord I was on. I just blanked out. I couldn't think of where I was or where I needed to go, and what he said to me was...what he said to them was, "I think it's obvious that she hasn't practiced and her work is not up to par."

Then he asked if they had any comments, and they all said no. He asked me if I had any comments, and I said, "I guess not, but, honest to God, I have done my best to practice, and I just have done my best."

And at that point I didn't mean to, but I started to cry, and the more I tried not to cry, the harder I cried. This was your typical band hall-looking room where there are music stands all over the place, and it's kind of in disarray. I really wanted to be able to just say, "Take your class and your piano and stick it!" But I was so upset that I was afraid that I was going to be disoriented and not be able to look cool finding the door. (laughs)

A day or so later, I guess it was the next day, I saw my old theory teacher in the hall, and he said hi to me, and I said, "Hi. I am so sorry." And he said, "What are you apologizing for? I'm sorry. I was so embarrassed. I didn't mean to make you guys uncomfortable, and I wish I hadn't lost it." He said, "We were all embarrassed for you. I don't know what his problem is! He's been acting like a jerk. He's been just nasty all semester. He had no right to take that out on you."

And basically what he had said was that...what the then chair said was he wanted me to play again for them in, like, a month. Well, I played for them again in a month. What he told me was, I think she has improved somewhat, but, you know, it's still not where I want it to be. If you choose to stay a music major, I'll give you an incomplete, and you can repeat it. If you choose to change your major, I'll give you a D to get rid of you.

I spoke with Jim Hayes who was at the time the Director for the Office for Students with Disabilities because he was in charge of accommodations for the whole campus. Jim and I went and met with this person, and what Jim basically said is, "Donna, if you can find another major, just do it, because he's not going to change. He's not...no matter what I say to him, he's not going to change."



I had a bunch of hours in Spanish, and that's what I majored in. I did find out, probably ten years later, after really not liking this person at all, who was not nice to me accommodation-wise. I found out ten years later that he had been kind of forced out of his position a couple of years after I got out of the music department. Basically what they found out later was that he had Alzheimer's.

He had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and he was getting forgetful and stuff. So they replaced him, and I really think that at point...because his behavior was just so just so unkind. Like I said, I'd already gone to him and talked to him, and then he totally changed his character and saying some of the things that he did. It's kind of abusive to say to someone, "We all wish you didn't have this problem, but you do, and I'm not being paid extra to work with you." It's like, "Hey, I didn't ask you!"

**Nedderman**

You wish you didn't have it, too, right?

**Anderson**

Yeah. I mean, and it's like, I didn't ask him to work with me. Nobody asked him to; he took that on himself. I really think in retrospect, and I wish the whole thing had never happened, but I really do think in retrospect that that was the beginning of his disease, and he didn't know.

**Nedderman**

Well, Alzheimer's was not as known back then.

**Anderson**

Oh exactly.

**Nedderman**

That still doesn't make you have your music degree.

**Anderson**

No, no it doesn't, but you know what? It's okay because honestly I'm...right now I'm doing what I think I probably always kind of wanted to do. I wanted at one point to get an RTVF degree...Radio, TV, and Film. At the time, one of the requirements was that you had to spend time behind the camera, and I thought, "Sure I could have spent time behind the camera, but I might have focused on the wall or the floor or the bulletin board or whatever instead of a person." I was told by somebody in that department that, "No, we can't give you that...you can't have that degree. You can't earn that degree."

There are a lot more accommodations that have come forth as a result. Between high school and college and not getting accommodations, piece of—now, I'm not saying it was a piece of

cake to get my master's, but—as far as any accommodations, that was not a problem by that point.

**Nedderman**

Again at UTA?

**Anderson**

No. At University of North Texas. But I'm not saying that I feel like UNT did any better job than UTA did; I just think it was the times. Honestly if that director...if that department head had not had the disease that he had, I might have had a better experience at UTA, too. So what are you going to do?

**Nedderman**

Right. Right. Do you wish you didn't know that, or are you glad you do about that professor?

**Anderson**

I'm really glad I know that because I kind of felt angry and hurt, but I just sort of thought, "Why did he just turn on me like that. "That had not been...well maybe before then I would've said he was a little bit quirky or a little bit of an introvert, but whatever, quirky is great. Sometimes quirky is charming. But he was just...

**Nedderman**

Mean is mean!

**Anderson**

...mean. Exactly. Anyway mean is mean. I am very glad to know that. I wish it hadn't happened. I remember how the hurt felt for sure, and I hated that situation, but now I don't really harbor a lot of resentment towards him. I resent the situation. But he probably was totally unaware that he was doing that.

I would bet that the him from five years earlier would not have done that.

**Nedderman**

Was this in any way part you becoming more of a self-advocate? Sounds like you didn't really have any choice of what he said.

**Anderson**

I didn't. And I really didn't. (both laugh) It was just...if nothing else, I think it just made me want to self-preserve and get the heck out. At the time, it was...at the time it felt really horrible, and like I said, "I just wanted to get the heck out." I still got out of college in three years and a semester with a change of major because I had gotten out of that first year of college through CLEP tests. I graduated from college with a bachelor's degree at the age of twenty.

### Nedderman

Yeah, so even if that professor...his being mean was also your age, too. Being mean to a twenty-two year old is different from being eighteen or nineteen.

### Anderson

Yeah. Yeah. Looking at it, it's like, I don't know. From the standpoint of a parent, if I had it to do over again, I don't know, if I had it to do over again, I would have let my adult self say something to the teachers in high school that failed to accommodate me. I would've done the same thing in college, but that didn't happen. I think that people around me didn't know how or what to do. And there have still been sometimes I have advocated for myself or other people that it didn't work, too. Sometimes it's just not.... You can fight all you want but sometimes what is.... It is what it is.

In high school, the situation there for me was that I wanted to take a creative writing class. In order to do that, I had to take an advanced grammar class, which involved diagramming sentences. You had to take a prerequisite test before that to be sure that you knew English.

I took that; I made a great grade on it. No problem. Advanced grammar teacher did want not to have to grade.... She wanted to be able to look at a sentence diagram. She didn't want to grade a tape, so she said no.

I did a lot of solos. In my choir class...I always had gigs on the weekends and did a lot of solo work in the area. Stuff that was not choir related. I was the only sophomore in the highest...the only sophomore girl, in the highest choir. I remember asking the choir teacher about auditioning for the show choir which was reserved for upper classmen. Not a problem. They had choreography. I told her I would work late on choreography.

She had known this for a year. The day before my audition, she went into the show choir and said, "What would you guys think if Donna got into show choir?"

Two kids threatened to quit because they said I would hold the group back. And I found out about this on the day of my audition. The day that I auditioned my audition was fine. I was upset going in to my audition but it's like, "I'll show them." I went and auditioned and my teacher said, "Well I would like for you to prepare a routine and come and do it for the show choir." I said, "I don't see why. You know what? I'm every bit as coordinated as some of these klutzy guys you have on this team, and as far as I'm concerned a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and you've got some pretty darn weak ones in here. Just never mind. I'm not going to do that. I don't have to do that. I would do that if you were requiring everybody else to do that, but you only want me to do that?" That's not fair that's wrong.

So in order for me to have taken choir...I just didn't...my little bruised heart...I won't say ego; it was ego, but it was more than ego. I didn't want to have to walk back in to that class the next year knowing that I could've been in show choir because I was good enough to be in show

choir. And knowing that the teacher, who should have set her boundaries and not ever asked the class squat, just didn't have the cojones to just make an adult decision.

That's why I got out of high school early. You may wind up needing to edit this at some point and splice it and put it together chronologically appropriately.

**Nedderman**

No, this is fine. In all of this, how much were your parents involved with you in high school and college as far doing any advocacy for yourself?

**Anderson**

<topic>Advocacy at age sixteen for Handitran paratransit</topic>

It was pretty much me. Part of it is that I don't know that I let them know everything. I cannot remember. I'm sure my mother would've gone in and really fought, but I kind of felt like it's my responsibility.... It's my business; it's my class. But I don't know that I was really trying to sweep anything under the rug and hide it. I just think it just seemed like the thing to do.

And I think that's just kind of how I'm wired. The first time I really remember advocating for anything disability-related was when I was sixteen.

The city was wondering whether or not they should pass an ordinance for special transit to create a special transit system for the city. Which became Handitran, which is currently the city's special transit provider and the only real transit provider right now because the MAX Express [Metro Arlington Express] is...that's still a pilot. So. But I can remember going and advocating for that at sixteen. Speaking to the city council and just saying, "This will give people like me some independence where we don't have to ask our family, where we can actually go and be employed and have you guys take us to jobs and inconvenience other people."

**Nedderman**

You are one of the very first people involved with that, right? How did that come about in Arlington? At sixteen...

**Anderson**

There were other people who I think introduced the idea, and I think and I'm not sure, so somebody else's oral history may prove me wrong, but I think that probably Jim Hayes, the late Jim Hayes, and the late Sammy Provence were probably two people who were, I don't know, ten to twelve years older than me. So they were a very integral part of getting that passed because they were adults. All I knew is that this was something that was coming up for discussion, it was coming up...going before the city council for a vote. And I remember some guy who spoke right before me saying something about how charity...basically churches and charities and families just needed to look out for people. And it's like, "Are you kidding me, dude?"

I was very glad to go after him because I addressed some of his points and just said, "We don't want to have to be dependent on our families. This is just not what we want to do."

It passed, and I was really grateful that it passed.

**Nedderman**

Yeah. And it's still going today.

**Anderson**

Yeah, it is.

**Nedderman**

<topic>Fighting again for Handitran in the 1990s</topic>

I read in some '90s Arlington newspapers about issues where they were having discussions with funding and things like that. One of the discussions that I read involved some quotes from you, but the topic was managing routine pickups, like if you had a doctor's appointment every week at the same time or getting to your job or whatever. Did that ever get resolved?

**Anderson**

Oh it absolutely got resolved. What they wanted to do what the city wanted to do well, I can't say the city, what someone with the city had suggested was, okay...what had happened was federal funding had been cut to Handitran. Handitran [Arlington] was a city with a population of greater than, say, 200,000. I am having to draw on my memory bank here. I think what the issue was is that Handitran was one of only a handful, at most two to four something like that, of cities in the country that had a population greater than two hundred thousand that did not have public transit. The government was trying to eliminate duplication of services.

**Nedderman**

The city or the state?

**Anderson**

No I'm sorry; the federal government was trying to eliminate duplication of services, and what they were saying was, "Okay. Public transit should serve people in this situation." And they were thinking that everybody with a population of over 200,000 was going to have public transit. We didn't have it. We just had Handitran. So like I said, we and just a handful of other communities got axed on some of our funding. The city council was trying to scramble and say how can we make up for this shortfall? And what somebody had proposed is to limit routine trips to something, like, fifty a year.

I remember going to a meeting where I wasn't supposed to speak. I was on the Handitran advisory board, and we weren't supposed to speak. Somebody on council said...I mean I was having to squelch myself, let me tell you. Somebody on the city council had said, "Well I don't see why it's going to hurt to limit those trips to, like, fifty a year." I had stifled myself as long as I could! I said, "Because people will get fired! People are going to lose their jobs." And I was called down. (laughs)

It's like, hello. This was not a public meeting, so at least I only embarrassed myself privately, but people were going to lose their jobs. What wound up happening is Martin Frost, and I don't remember who else was on that bill, but some other legislators came up with the Omnibus Appropriations bill. Basically, they just tacked Handitran and some other...I think maybe Mesquite had some transit that was like that, too, where they were able to restore, or at least partially restore, some funding to Handitran. Nobody ever really got limited to routine trips, thank God.

**Nedderman**

That's good. I couldn't...I never saw the final result on the articles I looked through.

We've gone about an hour, so...

**Anderson**

I'm sorry. I know I jumped all over the place.

**Nedderman**

No. No. You led me, and I led you, and this has been great. I have plenty more to talk about for our next interview, but to wrap up today, if you can maybe just summarize some things you wish had gone differently that we haven't already talked about maybe with education, or, I don't know, some things maybe that you wish you would have done perhaps, and maybe just the start of when you finally said, "Okay, I'm going to do something about this part of my life."

**Anderson**

Okay. Okay. For anything I wish had gone differently. (laughs)

**Nedderman**

Is that too open a question? (laughs)

**Anderson**

<topic>Evolving attitudes about having a disability</topic>

It's pretty open, but that's okay. I wish, like anybody who is middle-aged looking back on their teenage and young adult self, that I not been so stinking hard on myself. I wish that I had really seen myself for who I was and not felt quite so much like I stuck out like a sore thumb. I know people...I know that there were people who stared. I know that there were people who were maybe not kind, but the one thing that I did decide early on when I was losing my vision is I...in the process of losing my vision, I saw people who had been very familiar, and all the sudden, their mode of communicating with me changed. And what changes that I couldn't see. So I decided at that point; I decided to be more outgoing.

Prior to that, I think I was kind of a shy kid in elementary school. I did not want to stick out. I wanted to blend in. I didn't want to do anything different. I wanted to be like everybody else. And I decided that I would satisfy my adolescent shyness and insecurity and have enough of a personality that...where I could initiate conversation. Where I would not be so socially isolated. Because I knew I was going to have no life if I didn't learn how to be outgoing and help people be comfortable with who I am. I decided that even if I had to fake it till I made it that I would be comfortable with who I was. Even though there were times it felt really awkward.

## Nedderman

People probably didn't always know how to respond.

## Anderson

No, they didn't. Yeah, and it got old being the one to always initiate and say, "Hey do you want to go do such and so."

But there were a lot of people who didn't know if I would go to a football game in high school. I really didn't care anything about football, but there are a lot of people who went to football games in high school that didn't care about football (laughs) just because it was the social thing to do. And there are a lot of people who love football. Sorry football fans!

(laughs) There were those kind of things, and knowing I had to explain to people how I needed help and how help me and that it's okay to say words like "see" or "watch" and things like that around somebody who can't see or watch just like it's okay to say "walk" and "hear" around people who can't do those things, too.

I would have been much nicer to myself. I would have recognized...okay...growing up with a disability, I think a lot of us feel like—and it is probably very true—well, nobody's fantasy person has a disability. I think it's very very easy to view people with disabilities as not being maybe as sexual as people without disabilities, and I think I probably dressed kind of like a hooch as a teenager and young adult more so than I might have if I'd been able to see—maybe not—just to prove that I do actually have some kind of sexuality. So I would have let myself know that it's okay. You don't have to prove yourself to anybody. You are who you are.

Again, this is a middle-age person looking back on—a lot of us might have done the same thing, but I think maybe in different areas. Those are the things that I would have changed. I am really sad that it felt like my undergrad degree and my high school...in both of those, I had some pressures that I really wish I hadn't had, but I did what I had control over. I made the lemonade I knew how to make. Unfortunately, the lemons were just there. I couldn't control their behavior. I would've liked to have graduated with my own class from high school.

I felt I took the best choice I could take because all the choices before me were going to be bad.

<topic>Introduction to disability rights, disability community, and cross-disability work</topic>

And as far as when did this...when did I start noticing that I probably wanted to do something like this? Oh wow. I never wanted to work with people with disabilities because I think growing up, I was afraid it was going to push too many buttons for me. It was mostly because people would assume that I would want to work with people who are blind. I don't have anything really against blind people, but I really love cross-disability work because it absolutely shows you what interdependence is.

When I was at UTA, I wound up being friends with some different students who had different kinds of disabilities. I had one female friend who had cerebral palsy. I had a couple of guy friends, three to four guy friends who were in wheelchairs and just people with various and sundry disabilities and it was pretty cool. I had met other kids with other disabilities, and that didn't bother me as much as only being around kids with blindness because of this neat interdependence that happens. When everybody has something they can do and something they can't do. I love that about the disability community. I guess I kind of started seeing it a little bit in college, but where I really started seeing it was—somebody asking me if I wanted to—somebody saying, "We're forming a Mayor's Committee for people with disabilities, and would you like to...are you interested in coming to an initial meeting to learn more?"

And I thought, "Wow? Why would they want to ask me that?" I thought that was extremely cool. I had been involved in a group that wanted to build an accessible park probably before that, and that was cool. I think it was with the Mayor's Committee that I thought, "This is something I really really want to do." It was a pretty big leap for me. I didn't think anybody would take me seriously enough to ask me to be involved in something with the city. That seemed like a very lofty thing at the time. Now I look at it and kind of chuckle to myself because I've chaired this committee for a long time.

**Nedderman**

<topic>Service as chair of the Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities</topic>

You've been on it since about 1998?

**Anderson**

That's how long I've chaired it. And that was kind of a...somebody else resigned, and we had a state-wide conference that we were going to host, like, two months later. I was the vice chair, and it just made the most sense that I would step up. There was a lot that was undone at that time because the person had been having some health issues. I thought that there was maybe a little more that had been completed. That was okay. We just stepped it up, and everybody pitched in. The group is wonderful. The group has always been really good, very cohesive group.

Fortunately, now my predecessor, her health is better. She comes back, and she helps with the group when she can. I've had two good predecessors and hopefully will have a really good successor at some point. We've got a wonderful board. I think that's what really made me think, I like this. I like cross-disability [work].

And I do have to say that my first maybe my first inkling of that was even before [the] Mayor's Committee. It probably was in college looking back on it. I had a friend [Mike Alford] who was a quadriplegic—who had quadriplegia—and he...I mixed my first drink with his help. I made him a margarita! He was like...he showed me...he had to direct me to where the tequila was (laughs) and where the margarita mix was, and he was like, "Okay, when you start pouring, count to three."

He was giving me all the instructions on how to mix up this margarita. And at that point, that was my first real intro to cross-disability and, like I said, that really neat interdependence that I think that we have in cross-disability culture. All cultures have [it], but it's so apparent in cross-disability.



I love it because I have to ask for help pretty much every day with something, and nobody likes to have to ask for help. Because of that, if there's somebody that can't reach, and I can reach, I'm going to be all about volunteering about what I can volunteer to help with and there is no judgment. There is no judgment in that community because we all know. We've all been there, and it makes us feel good to volunteer, to be able to do what we're able to do in that situation.

**Nedderman**

It sounds like it's a community that knows by heart that what all those ropes classes in corporate America teach you about for depending on people and communicating better. I love that margarita story! He's got the eyes to see what you need to do. (laughs)

**Anderson**

Oh, it was great! I had another friend who has juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, and she's in a wheelchair. She has very little mobility. She and I were going to go to a conference together. I was showering getting ready to go to this conference, and I thought, "You know what, this friend can't shave her own legs."

At the time, her boyfriend was shaving her legs for her. I thought, I'm going to take a fresh razor and I'm going to offer so that when she gets home, she can surprise her boyfriend. Which is what I told her: "If you're willing to trust your body to a blind woman with a sharp object, I'll help you shave your legs. (laughs) And I did." (laughs)

I wouldn't do that for very many people, but I knew that this person could not do that. You're not going to ask someone to do something that personal! That's why I'm not sharing this person's name. But most people would never, you know what I mean, most people would not feel comfortable asking somebody, but if they needed the help they would say yes if they felt comfortable with the person. We had known each other for a long time, and we were very good friends. There's nobody in my life right now that I would do that for. You might want to edit that out. (laughs)

**Nedderman**

No. No. Actually that's a great story, a great topic to end on for today. And we will pick it back up in a couple weeks.

**Anderson**

Sounds good. Thanks.  
[end of interview]