

Donna Anderson

Advocate for people with disabilities and previous Chairperson for Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities.

Interview conducted by

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Biography

Topics discussed

- Getting started with Handitran
 - Handitran funding
 - Awareness for public accommodations
 - Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities
 - The future of accessibility
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Basha

This Mike Basha interviewing Donna Anderson for the UT Arlington Texas Disability History Collection. Today's date is Sunday, November 8, 2015 at 6:20 PM. I'm at Donna's home in Pantego, Texas and I'm here today to speak with her about her personal and professional activities related to the living with a disability.

Donna, thank you for participating and contributing to this project. I want to go ahead and start off by talking about Handitran [Arlington]. I know these are some of the things that you've already discussed in our previous interview with you, but I was wondering how did you get started with Handitran?

Anderson

<topic>Getting started with Handitran</topic>

I got started with Handitran when I was sixteen years old. They were holding public meetings with the city council, the city was looking at "Do we want to fund this?" My mom, my dad, or somebody read it in the paper so I went up there to listen and see what was going on. The gentleman who spoke prior to me felt very different about this than I did, and said "We shouldn't have this. People's families should be able to take care of their needs." I remember getting up and saying "My name is Donna Mack, I'm a sixteen year old senior at Lamar high school, and I would be somebody who would use this service because, you know what? People in my family have lives. If I am... This would be something I would use to be able to get to a job, this would be what I use to get to college classes, or at least to get to school and then walk to my classes. I think it's not very realistic to assume that all of our families would be able to drop what they're doing to take us to whatever we want to do and this would be a nice way for us to actually be able to go out, get jobs, have a way to get to and from work, and to be fully contributing members of society rather than sitting on our butts at home plugged into the television and joining the system."

I was very well received with that. I'm not saying that I was the reason that it passed, but a lot of people were commenting and they weren't people who would've used the system and clearly city council did vote to go on ahead and support Handitran. I was one of its first passengers, then later on starting in about 1996, 1995 maybe? Somewhere in there...I would have to go back and look in my other records... Actually let me backtrack...

In 1993 I went before Handitran, they had a rule that you could take someone and use them as an attendant to help you get you to and from the bus or to help you with packages but they had to be... I don't remember, twelve years old? My daughter was three and she could get me to and from the bus, and she helped me with all kinds of things. She was a very precocious little kid. I took her to the meeting with me and she took me in and out of the room, we went and got her a drink, and she was able to help me, and I helped her. The Handitran advisory board saw that and said that in her instance because she had grown up and that's what she knew to do that she would be able to serve as my attendant.

Now they have a special category for children, but that was a big deal. After that at some point there was an opening on the Handitran advisory board so I applied for that. I had two different stents serving on the Handitran advisory, at one point I was vice chair of the board, and I served my eight years and exited off the board. It was a really good experience. I'm still a passenger.

Basha

When did Handitran exactly start? Was it the early 1990s or was it earlier than that?

Anderson

Oh, no no no. It was 1980 I believe.

Basha

<topic>Handitran funding</topic>

1980? In the 1990s, I was reading back at articles of the previous interview, they had trouble in terms of generating funding. They didn't want to fund it?

Anderson

They did. Basically our federal funding went away because they were trying to assume that cities of a certain size, we'll say 200,000 or 250,000. They just made the assumption that naturally they would had public transits. So we don't need to find door-to-door systems.

Arlington and some other cities, Grand Prairie, Mesquite, and a few other cities in the country fell through the cracks there. They were looking at “Okay, do we limit the number of routine rides that a passenger can have 250 per year?” A routine trip is a trip where you’re going to the same place at the same time more than once a week. A lot of people would take a routine trip to work, if you only get fifty of those a year, what are you going to do? It’s kind of a spot that’s held for you, it’s very helpful to have if you have a work situation.

There are sometimes the day that if you don’t have a routine trip, it’s really next to impossible to get a ride at eight o’clock in the morning for medical trips and that kind of thing. They were just saying “Do we limit the number of routine trips or just any kind of trip that people can take?” I’m thinking “People will get fired from their jobs if you do that.” Some people aren’t going to have an alternative, at least I’m ambulatory, for some people they are not ambulatory and they are not going to be able to drive. Handitran is my main alternative, but it’s not my only alternative. Some people are really going to be in a bind. A number of us made our concerns known to then **Congressman Martin Frost**. He able to appropriate a piece of legislation which included Handitran and some of these other cities funding for these. It came through at the eleventh hour and it passed. We were able to have funding restored to Handitran.

Basha

I was wondering about that in a sense that your story that you’ve told me that all this helps a lot of people and a lot of them rely on Handitran...you’d think that there’s city leaders or federal government--Maybe ignorance about how important accessibility is for a lot of people or was it simply just funding issues? That they were more worried about penny-pinching than anything else?

Anderson

What I think is that it’s a little bit twofold, but I think they wouldn’t be so worried about the penny-pinching issues, if they stopped to think that in this life we all acquired disability unless we die first. That’s just how it is, we’re all going to acquire a disability unless we die first. For them, disability is something that happens to other people, it’s not just politicians, it’s really everybody. People don’t stop to think “Oh my God, it’s going to happen to me.” Even older people, a lot of them look and say “I’m just getting old.”

You can’t walk a quarter of a mile anymore, to me it kinda looks like you have a disability, but they don’t want to reframe it like that. They don’t look at it in terms of accessibility, and I think if we can change how people think and they can be more open to the fact that disability is just a predictable part of the continuum of the human experience. Then I think they might look at it differently, and you know what? Maybe baby boomers will do that because they’re going to be too many of us facing the same issues at the same time. I wish I could remember the name of the movie but the line “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take any more.”

Basha

Network?

Anderson

Yeah, that one! Exactly. The line “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore.” I can see that being the mantra of the baby boomer generation.

Basha

Yeah. To that point I was wondering when you worked with Handitran, has there been a lot of advocacy in terms of getting the word out there that this is what Arlington needs for the community? That it would be beneficial? Looking

back at news articles, there's a lot of news articles that popped up online back in the 1990s about Handitran, and about funding. That's when it generated the most in terms of amount of articles there were. Further into the 1990s there was less articles, and in the early 2000s there was much less articles being generated. Is there just a drop off now because people are not paying attention to it anymore?

Anderson

I think part of it had to do with our funding being pulled and the other part of it is back when Handitran-- I hope I have my facts straight here... I'm just telling you this is what I'm thinking, you may need to talk to Handitran management about this, solidified this -- I think for Handitran, this may get into federal dollars, they have a cap on the number of vehicles that they can operate at any given time. It's something like, we'll say fifteen. They can't have more than ten buses on the road at any time, or any fifteen buses on the road at any given time. They have more than that in their fleet, but they can't operate more than that. That number has been constant since Handitran came into existence, which is just crazy. I will tell you that there are times that I try to schedule an appointment two weeks out, ten days out, and it's so booked that I can't get an appointment.

Basha

Oh really?

Anderson

Yeah, it's not cool. You have an eight o'clock doctor's appointments and you can't get it. Or if you have ten o'clock appointment for whatever, haircut, to meet a friend, a business meeting, and sometimes ten days, two weeks out it's booked. There's no availability.

Basha

Like you were saying before, people need to think in terms in realizing that people with disabilities, this is everybody. At some point in your life you're going to acquire, whether or not you die first or not.

Anderson

Exactly. Sometimes if you want to do two or three days in advance, or the day of, you are just out of luck.

Basha

<topic>Awareness for public accommodations</topic>

Yeah. In terms of getting more for Handitran, and more for services like Handitran, what sort of public awareness would we need? What would be the best way of going about getting the word out there? A lot of people if they realize this, if they listen to this interview or read more about it, they would be outraged. It's surprising to me that there's not more outrage about it right now.

Anderson

It's that and it's if we actually had public transportation to take some of the load off Handitran... There are a lot of situations where I wouldn't need public transit, I could use a bus. There are still some situations where it would probably be easier, more beneficial to certain ones of us to still use Handitran in certain settings. Oh my gosh, just to have any kind of alternative. People just don't get it and I don't know other than to have more interviews like this, to

have the media maybe be a little bit more friendly to covering some human interest stories just to see how things affect people's lives.

Handitran is there for seniors too. It's like divorce or cancer, a lot of things like that people think "Oh, it's never going to happen in my family. It's never going to happen to me." All of a sudden you wake up one morning and you're one of us. I'm not saying that it's a horrible life. I think I have a great quality of life, but it still sucks to have a disability. It's very inconvenient at times, it has its advantages. Would life be easier if I could see? If I didn't have a disability? Oh yeah! Yeah, that's a no-brainer.

Basha

I was just in New York recently, this past month. I actually took the subway and I was thinking to myself "This is not accessible at all for people. This is for able-bodied people. There's no ramps, there's all stairs, there's no way of helping." I was wondering, at least in Arlington's case, is it that the way the city was built that they just didn't take into consideration that the way Arlington is set up is in between Dallas and Fort Worth. They didn't think that it'd be as good idea to have public transport for anybody whether they had disabilities are not, or elderly?

Anderson

Some of it is how the city is set up. I think I even probably remember at that city council meeting back when I was sixteen, the topic of public transit for years and years, it's been brought up. "It's going to bring a sort of element to Arlington." Well, oh my God! Guess what? Every city everywhere has that "element." There are people living paycheck to paycheck, there are poor people, there are homeless people everywhere. All it takes is one tragic thing to happen in your life and in any of our lives, we could be there too.

I don't know, I think... I don't know, I think that we, as a society, it really bothers me. Sorry, I'm going off on a tangent. This is a political statement, it's a cultural statement, a religious statement, a statement about race, or ethnicity, or gender, or anything. Can we quit being so freaking polarized? Maybe the color you like most is blue and the color I like most is red. Oh my God, really? Are we going to argue about that? Can we quit looking at the differences between us and look at the commonalities. Quit defining people who are different from us by the one thing about them that's different from us. There's more to them than the one thing about them that... I am not a walking disability. I happen to be straight, and maybe somebody who is gay, they're just not a walking different sexual preference than me. They're a human being, they're somebody's father, mother, brother, sister, friend, boss, coach, classmate, whatever.

There's all kinds of different aspects to all of us. I feel like I just went on a tangent. I think that until people's mindset changes, it's probably gonna stay that way. I know that in the early 2000's we tried to bring Proposition One before the voters and we were trying to bring public transit here. I worked on that campaign, it failed. One of the things that bothered me very much about that campaign is that we had someone who was a consultant who was supposed to be working with us to help get materials out. That person was also working for someone on the city council who was very much against transportation. I looked at that and said "That's a conflict of interest." For whatever reason that person stayed with us and I had to even say "I need this to go out so that I can. People with disabilities need to know ...A lot of people with disabilities didn't realize that Handitran could take them to vote as long as they have the capacity. They could ride Handitran to vote. I think they thought "That's something Handitran can't do." I was trying to get some fact sheets that that would work with the constituency that I represented, which was people with disabilities. I had asked this consultant to help me produce this. It didn't happen. Then I found out that she is also working for this person and honestly, I think that's a lot of why the election failed. I truly--that's my own opinion, but that's a lot of why I think it failed because... I don't know, it didn't feel right. She wasn't doing her job.

Basha

Yeah. Back to your earlier point, your tangent was perfectly in line with a lot of the ignorance, in terms of not understanding and like you said, people have a tendency to inflate the differences between each other, as opposed to just looking at the commonalities and accepting we're all people here. I was wondering has there been any hostility in that regard? Obviously from the federal government in terms of money, but has there been any public hostility from every day people? Have you come across that when trying to get support for Handitran, more support for accessibility at all?

Anderson

The only thing I've really seen, you hear the thing about the dollars, and sometimes I look at and go "That's BS." The city is going to afford what the city chooses to afford. We have been advocating for a standalone ADA coordinator for the city, not that the person who has the job is not doing—they're doing a great job, but they're also a director of a department.

There's a lot more work that could be done and that really needs to be done that this person simply... Until they legalize cloning, that person's not going to be able to address everything that our mayor's committee would like to see addressed. We would like a little money in the budget for that. That didn't work this year, we jumped in on it a little later, but let me tell you, the city manager will be getting a phone call from me in January.

We're starting earlier and we're going to wave our flag louder and prouder. Hopefully we'll get a little farther this year, but I think it's because again, there are just things that people don't look at it as it's going to happen to them. That's not really hostility, it's just ignorance. With the campaign, they're not always nice, but the opposition, what they did is they put out propaganda a couple of days before the election and they targeted seniors especially because seniors tend to vote more sometimes than younger people. They targeted the seniors and they would say "If you vote for Prop One--if you vote to pass public transit in Arlington then Handitran will cease to exist. Handitran will go away."

Basha

Really?

Anderson

Yeah, it was a piece of the truth, but it was a really twisted piece of the truth. If they voted for Prop One, all that meant was that for people who were more mobile that could ride public transit, they would be able to do that. For somebody who is more fragile, whether that somebody who might have intellectual issues whether they're young or older, they might not be somebody that you could leave anywhere without supervision. They would be somebody that they would really benefit from door-to-door service like Handitran as opposed to--For some people in that situation if they have memory issues or are dealing with an intellectual disability, public transit is not really going to care. They're going to drop them on the corner, it doesn't matter if their caregivers there or not. If they can't walk very far they're not going to take them door-to-door like Handitran. It's not going to be customized service so it would free up more Handitran buses for the people who needed it the most. Yeah, Handitran as we know it would have changed, it would've morphed but it wasn't going to go away. It was just going to be a little bit different so that it could serve more people who really didn't have any choice but to use the system.

Basha

It's funny you say that. I'm guilty of it too. Driving over here I noticed there's a lot of areas in Arlington, even around the school, there is no sidewalks. It just blew my mind that the city would be like this. They don't want to spend the money, either that or it's not a service provided by the city, they didn't want to comply with Title II of the ADA. It was crazy.

Anderson

It's amazing because there are some other things that I would do. There are other places I would go if there were sidewalks. Just because there are sidewalks doesn't mean they're good sidewalks. Sometimes they can be really crappy, broken up, narrow, really awful sidewalks too. Whether you're in a wheelchair or you use a service dog, those aren't always the best.

It's amazing how... Or the one I really hate is when you have a curb cut, you have a ramp at the corner and then-- this is typical for residential areas, maybe every once in a while you see it in an older area that's a business area. You go up the sidewalk a little ways and then all the sudden you're at a driveway, but the driveway has shoulders so you can't cross the driveway. You're just stuck. That's always helpful too [sarcastic]. If you're in a wheelchair or if you can't see—I just don't mind walking in the edge of the street.

For the listeners, I use a guide dog. There are parts of my street that doesn't have sidewalks all the way down, but it's a residential area and it's not heavily traveled. Just for the half a block I have to walk without a sidewalk it's not terrible, but you feel a little bit more vulnerable. The other thing people don't think about is--people in wheelchairs, people want to bitch about "How many accessible parking spaces do you need? I'm only going to be there for a minute." Twelve percent of the population has a mobility impairment. If you're in a wheelchair, you're not really at eye level a lot of times. People are not looking for somebody...people that need those parking spaces need them because they are either low or slow, or a little of both. If you are stuck having to park way out in the north, south, east, west forty, and you don't get an accessible space, then you really are taking your life into your own hands. It's pretty scary.

Basha

<topic>Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities </topic>

Shifting gears here, I know you are the chair on the Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities, still, correct?

Anderson

Yes.

Basha

A two-part question. What is your role as chair, what does the committee do? Secondly, how do you see the future in terms of access for cities like Arlington and other cities in the Southwest? Do you see a positive future? I think we all do, but...

Anderson

Arlington Mayor's Committee is made up of citizen volunteers and our mission is to make Arlington more accessible for all people with disabilities. Honestly, gosh, what does the chair do? I write agendas... (Laughs) I preside at meetings. We try to get programming that is, we want to be an information referral service or information referral network for people either who have disabilities or who have family members that have disabilities or for service providers also. We just want to be an information referral network or place that people can go to exchange ideas about accessibility. We do that through either hosting disability awareness events, our meetings are free and open to the public, at least at the time of this recording. For a number of years now we meet on the final Friday of each month in City Hall from noon to one. Our November and December meetings are usually a little different because of the holidays. We're not gonna meet the day after Thanksgiving. We usually scoot the November meeting up a week and then the first couple of weeks of December we have a meeting that is just pretty social. We meet for an hour and a half at that meeting instead of our normal hour and people bring sides. We provide meat.

It's just a chance for people to network with one another. That's always really valuable, but typically our meetings are informational and we have speakers like-- this month for example we're having an officer talking about accessible parking in Arlington. We, at one time had an accessible parking program and it went by the wayside and so we're trying to look at what can we do to number one, bring it into the twenty-first century because it was that long ago that was first started and two, what can we do to raise awareness. I think legally it's one or two percent of the parking spaces that have to be accessible but twelve percent of the population has an orthopedic or mobility impairment. As of 2015 about twenty percent of the general population has some form of disability, but by 2030 that figure will rise to thirty percent of the population. That means eighteen percent of the population is going to have a mobility impairment and we're stuck with one or two percent of accessible spaces. Really?

Basha

Yeah.

Anderson

We're there to raise awareness and to help point folks in the right direction or connect them with people who can help them or that they can serve.

Basha

<topic>The future of accessibility</topic>

Yeah. In that regard do you see the future hopefully being as a positive for access?

Anderson

I do. Honestly I think a lot of it, because the baby boomers, is again, in the movie Network we talked about, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" I really think that's how I see the baby boomers coming out. "Oh my God, it might've been fine for my parents but I'm not gonna take this!" Now that it happens to you, "Whew!" All of a sudden life's changes. That's how we are as people. There are so many things in my life, as a parent, as a married person, whatever, things that I swore my little darlings would never do until they grew up and did whatever it was that I used to think "Oh my kids will never do that. I can't believe they let their child do that." That's just how life is. Whether it's disability or your kids. You think "It's never going to happen to me. When I hit middle-aged I'm going to look thirty and I'm never going to gain weight." Yeah right. (Laughs)

Basha

That's true. It's one of those things you don't think about it until it happens to you.

Anderson

Exactly and then it's "Oh God, why didn't they tell me was to be this hard?" Yeah.

Basha

In terms of the future though, what do you think needs to be done? If you could have a perfect world, not a perfect world, but ideally what would you like to see happen for Handitran or public access? Public awareness? What would you like to see happen? More acceptance?

Anderson

Yeah. I think more people being really aware that it can happen to them. Until we have this big chunk of our population going through that... I'm a consultant and right now I'm working on some videos to post to YouTube and hopefully somebody will watch them. Hopefully some able-bodied people will actually watch them because I want to target some of them to specific industries. I think it's just people being out there and taking a stand, but to be educational because most people, they're just not aware. It's amazing since I have been trying to post things on social media, I have subjects-- every month I pick a topic and every day I will post a disability awareness fact on a particular topic. October, of course, was National Disability Employment Awareness so I would post a disability employment fact. I've had so many people go "Oh my gosh, I'm learning so much from your facts!" It stuff that the average able-bodied person doesn't think about because they haven't had to encounter it.

Basha

Exactly. That was me before I even took this class, there was so much I wasn't aware of. It never crossed my mind. What struck me is that these things...it's everyday life and never dawned on me until this class. I know too you have--I want to talk about is Donna Anderson Speaks, you consult with businesses, in terms of getting people...

Anderson

In terms of trying to get their businesses more accessible, but also in terms of... What I do is I help people reframe. Whether that's with disability or change in their companies or whatever, let's put a different spin on it because acquiring my own disability I could've looked at it as "Okay, I'm not going to have a life." Well, "No, I'm just going to become more outgoing. I'm going to be comfortable enough in my own skin that people forget and that I'm going to learn how to initiate conversations so that people are comfortable. When they can drop their guard then they are going to see me and they're not going to see what I can't do." It's funny.

I have used a cane since junior high, and I just got my guide dog, my very first guide dog a year and a half ago. Little things like I never used to use the accessible stall in the bathroom because somebody would need it and my thought was "I'm not going to be that person." Now, if the regular stalls are too small, I'm going to have to use the accessible stall because I have a dog with me. Not for the reason that some other people have to use them. It's just interesting how we all go through changes and some of our needs change. Now I'm more aware of things like accessible bathrooms and widths of doorways so that we can both fit through comfortably. Things like that that chair users are used to looking at that I haven't had to for my own accessibility. It's interesting how life does that for all of us, even for those of us that are pretty disability and accessibility aware.

Basha

Exactly. Before the interview started we were talking about Dallas and how--maybe you can refresh my memory on it, how Dallas and their issue with transportation in terms of having access?

Anderson

I think it's very interesting because the current Dallas Mayor's Committee-- I think it's been this way for years and years. A long time ago their ADA coordinator when ADA first started was someone who had a disability. Now I don't think that person has a disability and they are someone who happens to be in the HR department. That's fine, they deal a lot with employment, but they don't deal with a lot of other issues. I'm sure they have to deal some with program accessibility, but clearly their strength is gonna be employment. Their mayor's committee happens to be the Dallas Mayor's committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities, and they're an amazing community. It's made up solely of employers, which is more like something called the Business Leadership Network. It's a whole different business leadership now made up of some employers who are trying to increase the recruitment

employment and retention and promotion of qualified applicants and employees with disabilities. That's what the Dallas Mayor's committee does.

Our committee and most mayor's committee on disability deal with a lot of different things, not just employment. It's interesting with Dallas, they do have public transit, but I wonder about some of their programs and stuff. Arlington, sadly we just don't have the transit issue. People just thought "Well, Arlington is just a little place." Arlington is not a little place anymore, we've just been dwarfed by Dallas and Fort Worth for so long that we've been viewed as "You don't need that."

Basha

Yeah. This is getting close to the end of the interview and I just wanted to ask you have you had any kind of remaining thoughts that you wanted to express about Arlington and the future of Arlington? Anything that you needed to say that wasn't already said about it in terms of access and awareness and stuff?

Anderson

Just that the late Jim Hayes did an incredible job with making Arlington, making UTA, the campus there, just super accessible to students with disabilities. If he hadn't been there to do that, and I know that Sam Provence was also very influential in that as well... But if those two hadn't there to do that we wouldn't have the level of accessibility in this town that we do.

I think it's very interesting that the Christopher and Dana Reeve foundation voted Arlington one of the most top twenty accessible cities of like 2014 or something. I'm sorry, it's gets the eye roll from me because we're still the largest city on the freaking planet without public transportation, which to me is, as a disability advocate, living in a city this size is really kind of embarrassing. I feel the need to apologize for that because it's just embarrassing. It's not progressive at all. The only way I can think of that we made it there to that list was because of Jim Hayes' efforts and Sammy Provence's efforts.

As far as what I'd like to see, I would just like to see more the...bar raised as far as awareness goes, also not just awareness of the need, but awareness that employers, business owners-- there are sometimes for businesses of certain sizes tax incentives that can be taken advantage of when you're talking about restriping parking lots or renovating a bathroom to make your place of business or place of employment accessible. There is help out there to be had and I think a lot of businesses go "Oh my God, I can't afford that." There needs to be more education about that. People looking at it thinking "Oh my gosh, I'm going to be there one day. How do I want my future look? What do I still want to be able to enjoy when I am eighty-five?" I don't really know what else to say, I'm hoping that awareness will increase and we can reach across the table see what we have in common.

Basha

I agree. After all the research that I've done, I have to agree with that. It'd be nice to see that we all to come to an understanding that we're all in this together. That could be the best future that we can hope for that we all come to that realization.

Donna, that wraps up our interview. I want to say thank you for participating in this and taking time out of your day for another interview. Hopefully in due time, we'll be able to have this available at the UTA library for you.

Anderson

Sounds awesome!

Basha

Thank you!

Anderson

Thank you!