

Texas Disability History Collection, University of Texas at Arlington

Dorothy Hill

Headhunter and Disability Rights Activist

*Interview Conducted by
Trevor Engel and Dr. Sarah Rose
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*Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Dorothy Hill spent most of her life in Ft. Worth. During the 1950s, Hill worked as a headhunter. She worked alongside with other disability rights activists like Anne Harris, Ronald Ballard and Jack Kishpaugh. Hill also established a wheelchair accessible church called the Crusaders Chapel.

Topics Discussed

- Early work as a headhunter
- Desire to graduate from UT Austin
- Working at the Dan Wager building
- Creating an accessible ministry
- Early life with Bertha Gates
- Early life
- Hospitalized for polio
- Returning home
- High school education

- Warm Springs
- Faith
- Family

Rose

So this is Sarah Rose.

Engel

And Trevor Engel.

Rose

Interviewing Dorothy Hill at 4816 Blaxton Dr. in River Oaks at her home on July 6, 2017. And...so you were just telling us how you used to be a headhunter?

Hill

<topic>Early work as a headhunter</topic>

Yes, that was my field of work. My career...I opened my own office in...I was twenty-one. So that was in the early 50s. And it just started out as simple employment service. And as I grew and graduated in other things, I became a headhunter.

Rose

Oh wow.

Hill

And that's...I did that for about 38 years.

Rose

So how'd you get into that? And what position were you looking for?

Hill

Kind of the way, a little bit like I've done everything else. In my missionary work I did, which was a little chapel that we developed... 'Cause back then, all churches had hundreds of steps. And so we built this little church...that's a picture on the wall in my office. And they would...it was not just a building. But was a place for them not just go. But they also served. The pastor used to say whatever he used to say, "They was in a place of service."

Rose

And what was it called?

Hill

Crusaders Chapel. And the building is still there. But as things grew in development, then the churches started to have place for handicapped people. Ramps and everything. So we sold it eventually to another ministry. But at that ministry that I was doing, the missionary work, there was another person there that was cerebral palsy. And she was crying after service one day. And I said, "Pat, what's wrong? Can I help you?"

And she said, "No, I just don't wanna do it."

And I said, "What's happened?"

She said, "I lost my job."

And I said, "Why?"

And she said, "Well the man I worked for had a heart attack. And he's having to sell the business."

I said, "Well, what is it? What did you do?"

And she told me that it was an employment service. And I said, "Well, what do you *do*?"

She said, "Well I just do filing and things like that."

And I didn't even know what one was. I said, "What is an employment service?"

And she told me. And I had been looking for some type of work because in all my search, they liked me, but they had no place for a wheelchair or they had no way for me to go to the bathroom. And so I went home after that service. I told my dad, "You tell me I talk too much." (Laughter) And that's mostly talking, interviewing. "And you said I'm good on the phone. Why couldn't I do that?"

And Dad said, "Well find out where it is, what it is and we'll talk to them."

So my dad told me to talk to them. And so we bought it. And I hired her to also come and be with me as what she did before and to teach me what the others did. And that's how I started.

Rose

Wow, and so you were in your, in your...? You said 1959.

Hill

Twenty-one. It was about 1959. I was about twenty-one.

Rose

Okay, so how did you develop that business? Like how did you start convincing employers to hire you?

Hill

Well, she showed me how they did their filing. And in the files there were certain companies they worked with. And then I learned that you could get a lot of reason. I wonder if you could get books. They gave you...they had that were guides that tell you how big the companies were here. How many employees. They had all that kind of stuff. I got all those type of things. And I studied them. Then I developed a letter that I wanted to send everybody. And one of my fondest memories is John Bennett, who was vice president of human resources with Justin Industries. You know Justin Belts and Boots?

Rose

Oh, oh yeah. Okay, yeah.

Hill

In Ft. Worth. I sent out this massive letter. I think maybe 3,000 people...companies. And John was one of them. And John returned the call. And my name was Harrison at that time. I hadn't married yet. He said, "Are you Dorothy Harrison?"

And I said, "Yes, I am."

"Did you send this letter?"

I said, "I sure did." (Laughter)

And he said...and in the letter, we did all this testing to be sure what they were or who they were and the capabilities. And he said, "Did you take any of these tests?"

And I said, "Yes sir." And I did to make sure I knew what I was doing.

And he said, "Well then how do you spell 'advise'?"

And I had spelled it wrong. And I went, when he said that the way he said that, "How do you spell 'advise'?"

"Uh-ho. What did I do, Mr. Bennett?"

And I knew, I just knew. And he laughed and said, "Well, I suggest you look it up." (Laughter)

And that was...I was young. That was my first experience in like, "You need to know what you're doing before you do it." And we proofed it, but I should have proofed it with someone smarter than we were. But that's how I started. I started doing mailings. Then we followed up with phone calls to get more personally involved. And for some reason, they seemed liked what the way we did it. And I would never send anyone that was not what I said they were. If I got a napkin from...I didn't believe in deception like that. If I told them they did this, this, and this, they did that. Or I didn't send them.

Rose

Did you, I know the outline you sent us that you played for people for quadriplegia in the business. So where was it located?

Hill

Yes, yes. It started out with Pat, which I said to you was cerebral palsy. And it was just she and I. And then as we gradually grew, I had a good, good friend Ronald Ballard. That was...

Rose

Can you spell his name?

Hill

R-O-N-A-L-D B-A-L-L-A-R-D. And he was a big superstar in the University of Houston on the football team. And he had a scholarship for there. And on the way back to Ft. Worth, from a game one night, they topped a hill coming down from the highway. And there was a inebriated person on a horse in the middle of the highway. And the car...the front car hit it going pretty fast. Then when he hit the horse in the back, it hit the horse reared. And it fell on top of the car and fell on top of Ronald. And that's what crushed his neck. And so he was totally paralyzed from the neck down. He couldn't move anything. But could just turn his head a little bit.

But he and I were good friends. And the way we got to be friends was he was studying law at home and I wanted to study law 'cause as my dad said that I was always running my mouth too much. But then, believe it or not under evaluation, to try to get funding, they said that I had the IQ, but I didn't have the voice for the pulpit. Volume. So they would not do it.

Rose

And then would they have admitted you with disabilities? Because there isn't a massive amount of surveillance...

Hill

There wasn't disability, physically. It was the voice.

Rose

Really?

Hill

I didn't have the volume for the courtroom. So they couldn't justify...

Rose

And which school is this?

Hill

It wasn't a school. It was...I think was something to do with bar association. That they funded certain people for certain reasons. But that was the thing. I didn't have the voice. So that kind of put that aside. It seemed like I forever tried to get my college education like one day. And I hadn't had it yet. (Laughter) I've haven't got it yet.

Rose

Well can you tell us about some of those experiences?

Hill

Well that was the first one. And then after I started my business, I started to go to every seminar I could. Every one to just learn. And then I went to Austin to do my personal consultants test to be certified. And I did that. Then I approached...I think Austin they also had for business. But I didn't qualify there either because of disabilities at that time. And I don't mean that it was against disability. They were telling the truth. They just weren't set up for it...the barriers. It wasn't type of discrimination; it just wasn't there. And so I didn't make that one. 'Cause I will just try to do business administration to help my business.

Rose

And then you started to do it at UT Austin?

Hill

<topic>Desire to graduate from UT Austin</topic>

Uh-huh, to help my business. 'Cause my dad graduated from there. All my family graduated from there. My dad, my aunt...his sister, my uncles, my cousin. The biggest law firm in Austin is my grandfather's law firm. And he started his tale there.

Rose

What was it called?

Hill

Fowler. You look that up online. And Malcolm, my cousin – my uncle's son – just retired from there a couple of years ago. And so, you know, I just wanted to...I always wanted to have my degree because all my family did. My brother Henry graduated from UT Austin. And I kept saying, "Lord, this is just not fair." (Laughter)

But I just worked and I said, "Well I'll do what I can."

So I just worked.

Rose

So to go back, how did you meet...was it Ronald or Roland?

Hill

Ronald. A lady that knew both of us...a friend...she told me Ronald. She said, "I know this guy that's at least studied law from home."

And she said, "Maybe, you can tell you...advised you."

And she took me over to meet him. And that's how I met Ronald. And then when I got my business going, I highly respected him. Knew he was smart. So he was the first one I called. I said, "Ronald, do you want to get out that bed and go to work?"

And he went, "Huh?"

I said, "I'm not kidding. Do you want to go to work?"

Well, he said, "Well sure. Why?"

I told him, "Because I need help."

I said, "I'm doing good, but I need help. I'm overloaded."

And I told him about it, so he said, "Yeah."

So he worked out with his mom and dad. Bringing piggyback in all that. So we set him up with a board across his chair. And he had sat in the old fashion telephone, you know push button, on his board there. And there was a long, mouse stick. And he did great! And eventually became my partner. As we grew and we need more help. And so we just, he invested, became my partner. And then we hired Anne, who was a quad.

Rose

And what was her last name?

Hill

Anne Harris.

Rose

Okay.

Hill

Her father was a minister. And we hired Anne as a counselor. Then we grew more. Then we hired Jim Gray, who was quad.

Rose

And is that Gray with an A or an E?

Hill

G-R-A-Y. His father was the pastor of First Christian Church down there for forty years. The biggest Christian church I think here. And that's how we met Jim. And then after Jim, we grew and we hired Jack Kishpaugh. And Jack was a retired colonel who at that time of his injury was the Southwest regional manager for Alzheimer's. And he was brilliant. And we hired him.

Rose

And what was his last name again?

Hill

Jack Kishpaugh. K-I-S-H-P-A-U-G-H. So, and there we stopped because we did pretty good. And that was through the years.

Rose

And so where were you located and how did you get an accessible place?

Hill

<topic>Working at the Dan Waggoner building</topic>

The old Dan Waggoner buildings where I started. In downtown Ft. Worth. It's no longer there, but the building manager was wonderful. That's where the office was. And I went there and I asked if I could see the restroom. And he said, "Sure."

So I went and looked and it was the old-timey stalls. Not too big. So I took my dad up there. I asked permission. And at home, I had bars. You know, we put bars up. And I said, "Dad, do you think we can do that with one of these stalls down here?"

And he said, "I don't know why not."

He said, "It's gonna help you."

So yeah, I worked that out. And it was the neatest thing because we asked permission, but the building manager said, "Well, I can't do it on this floor. But two floors up, that floor is pretty vacant. I can let you use one of those stalls to

modify.”

So we modified our stalls. And Esther and Josie were the elevator girls. And I talked to them. And so the elevator girls had to go to the restroom. And I left to go and I'd say, “We'd let them know.”

And Josie would watch both elevators or Esther. Whichever case might be. Probably up the other one because it was a manual wheelchair at that time. They ran me around to the restroom. And then we ran back to the elevator so they wouldn't get in trouble. But it was really neat. They were wonderful. They were.

Rose

So what about the guys? I mean that's a great story.

Hill

Well now the guys, you know they were quads. So they all had no control over their bladders. Can't even inside the...so they had to use bile bags. So the girls we hired for the file clerk, we also hired her like a medical attendant. And so she took care of that. She did the filing. And she was also CP [Cerebral Palsy], but she could use her arms really good.

Rose

And she was...that was Pat?

Hill

No, that was Jeanna Reeves.

Rose

How do you spell her last name?

Hill

R-E-E-V-E-S.

Rose

And her first name?

Hill

Jeanna. J-E-A-N-N-A.

Rose

Wow! So were you talking to employers about hiring people with disabilities too?

Hill

Oh, sure! Not all employers I worked with, the gentleman that was the head of Texas Ramps Association at that time, Mr. Holder...William Holder...and I was to speak at the retirement dinner. But I worked through him. And I told him whenever we had a person that he felt was ready for the working day world. That comment would seem to get him in the working day world. And so we worked together on that. I usually approach that case-by-case 'cause they're all so different. You have to approach it that way.

Rose

Did you find that certain employees were particularly willing...?

Hill

Yeah. Sure, sure.

Rose

...or have hired people?

Hill

You know they were. And sometimes when they found out about me or me and Ronald or any of us. They loved to come to our office. We had the most fun office. And I've learned, I think that this...and you probably know this...disabled people have a great sense of humor toward each other. We can pick on each other unmercifully. And...the employers loved to come to our office because it was fun. They'd come down, have a cup of coffee, and discuss business and just enjoy the visit. But, I don't know what to say about that. I think it was just a fun thing.

Rose

Well so it seems like you were meeting a lot of people...

Hill

I did.

Rose

...with mobility impairments and who needed attendance. And even early on, how were you meeting all these people?

Hill

Which ones?

Rose

Like the people you were working with and people who needed the church. Who was working?

Hill

<topic> Creating an accessible ministry</topic>

Well, it actually stemmed from God's work. Russ started the chapel. Because through all those people, I worked with...we worked with every church in the city of Ft. Worth. In other words, if they were anywhere out there and they were not having the opportunity to go to church because of lack of transportation, that somebody couldn't lift them, whatever. We provided that. And we had volunteers from every church. We went to every church to speak to them. We had volunteers, "Would be our drivers on this side? Would you volunteer to drive once a month or once every other month?"

I had a list of drivers for every law and I had a list of people. If somebody need a ride, I'd call that area. I mean it was a constant 24-hour job. You had to get ready for church, but be sure they had a ride and what their needs were. If they needed to be picked up, a wheelchair, whatever. Get 'em there and get 'em home. So I met a lot of people that really stemmed from the missionary work I did.

Rose

And from doing the outreach?

Hill

Yeah.

Rose

...through these mission work? Wow. How did you decide that was necessary in the first place?

Hill

What? The mission?

Rose

Yeah.

Hill

Ronald. That was Ronald's vision. He was like I said an athlete. So here is this big, ole' 6ft, 3in guy, about 300 lbs in bed, that loved the Lord, wanted to go to church. And when his mom and dad did get him to go up to church, he went to St. Mario Baptist Church. He was uncomfortable because the side of the chair in, when he sat now which is where he sat he had to sit back then. There was no aisle left and he was just not comfortable that way. And he talked to me one day. And he said, "Dorothy, you know I love it."

We used to study on the phone together. Different things in the Bible we'd study. He said, "I love to go to church." He said, "I just hate having to sit in the middle of the aisle and be a blockade to everybody else."

And I said, "I know."

And he said, "I just wish...there was a place where we could go and just not have to be that way. And we're if I wanted to teach a Sunday school class, I could. Not be [inaudible] in any way. And so I said, "Welp, why don't we start one?"

He said, "You think we could?"

I said, "I don't know. We can try."

I said, "Talk to Brother Swank. He and Brother Swank and Elizabeth, the pastor's wife, and say that we are very close. Especially Elizabeth. And so Elizabeth said, and she was funny, she said, "We'll I'll just tell Fred to do it." (Laughter) So Fred did it. They got us out in a recreation building. And they got some chairs. And that's where we started. We used a recreation building. And we started with these maybe ten people we knew about that same feelings. And it just grew from there.

Rose

How big did it get?

Hill

At its biggest point, probably a hundred. At the biggest point. I've got a picture on the wall. I'll show it to you in my office.

Rose

Great! I'm curious...I assumed it was segregated at that time being the '50s? Did you reach out to African-Americans?

Hill

Segregate in which way?

Rose

Racially segregated?

Hill

No.

Rose

Oh wow!

Hill

Oh no.

Rose

So you were working with other sects of churches?

Hill

Well in the disabled world...medical, I don't care what it is, you're all there. In all my rehab stuff, if I went somewhere, we were all there. So, I think it's different in the medical world. You look at the color of the house they live in. You look at what their needs are and how we can help this, which I think is a good thing.

Rose

I was curious because I know at least up 'till the '30s in Texas, some of the asylums were segregated. It was state rule.

Hill

Yeah. It was a state rule. Yeah.

Rose

Yeah.

Hill

But when I think it comes to private stuff, we didn't care.

Rose

That's great.

Hill

We didn't care. And I was raised differently.

Rose

What do you mean?

Hill

<topic>Early life with Bertha Gates</topic>

Well my mom and dad both worked. And when I was a baby, and Mother could sew beautifully. She worked for Dickies and made those powerful jeans and stuff. But somebody had to keep me. And she didn't want to just leave me with anybody. My dad was a real estate developer and he was up close to Denton talking to somebody. And they had a cotton field. And he went out to look, he loved farming. He went out to look at the cotton field. And Bertha Gates, this black lady was out there picking cotton with her baby on her back. And Dad said that she was just dripping with perspiration. And he said, but he really...I heard him say, "How would you like to get out of this hot sun and come and work for me?"

And she said, "I'd like that."

So he took her from the cotton field and brought her home. And she had a little house over here. Ft. Worth, I don't even remember the street. And she worked because her husband was blind. So she had to do the work. And so anyway, we just kind of...Dad just took her under his wing. And she was with me from the time I was a baby until I went to see her in the hospital before she died.

Rose

Wow!

Hill

It was just before I married and I wanted so much for her to be there when I got married. She didn't make it, but I was raised with her and her children. So my dad was construction...they let everybody work. I don't care what color. So I was just raised a little differently. And in school, even high school, I couldn't understand why there was so much trouble with all of this stuff. Why segregate by...what is all this and why? I never understood. I don't understand it now. Why? 'Cause I wasn't raised that way. So, I guess I'm just kind of odd maybe. (Laughter)

Rose

Could you tell us a little bit more about your parents, like their names?

Hill

Mother was Nelly Rae Grant Harris after she married my dad. And Nelly Rae Grant...she is one of the descendants of Ulysses S. Grant. He's my...can't remember. My nephew did a search thing. I don't remember. But, we're descendants of

him. My dad, Henry Jeremiah Sr...and he's, let's just say they were from Carolina, but most of their lives were in Austin after they got a little older. And they were mostly lawyers. My mother's dad...parents were farmers. Her mother was an orphan and she passed away very early in Mother's life. Grandpa's farm, believe it or not, is what is now Lockheed out here. The government took my grandfather's farm. You know how they do that. They don't give you a choice.

And two weeks later, after they did that, my grandfather died of a broken heart. They found him that morning just dead in bed. But the government can do those things I'm told. But anyway, they were farmers. But they did leave the street named after him, Grant's Lane. So it's still there.

Rose

So you were raised in Ft. Worth?

Hill

Yes, right here actually.

Rose

This house?

Hill

No, but almost. Three houses down...one, two. They call them in the next room.

(Phone rings)

Rose

Excuse me.

Engel

Let's change the battery and...

Hill

I'm sorry.

Hill

<topic>Early life</topic>

Where do you want to pick up where we left off? About where we live? When I was born, we lived three houses down. My house here, the corner of the next corner of the next house was where I was born. So I'm a world traveler. I went from that house, down that street, to the corner of my street to the corner of where my dad built us a beautiful home

and married and moved here. So that's my little triangle! (Laughter) And River Oaks just knows me like...it's funny 'cause the mayor. They tease me. My best friend, that we've been friends since third grade, Jodie is one of the city counsel people. And she and Herman the mayor, they know things that I like and don't like and they just tease me and say, "You think we need to go talk to Dorothy first?" (Laughter)

This is a joke, of course. I'm just like a fixture.

Rose

That's great. So what kind of things were you into as a child?

Hill

I was very athletic. My doctor said that's why I lived through the polio I had because I had it so severely. But I was an athlete. I was, as time grew, in school. I was on the baseball team. It was softball team. I was in gymnastics team. I was a swimmer. I was doing my...I had just passed my intermediate swimming test to become a lifeguard at twelve. And I was...my mother had me in dancing. Tap, ballet until I was three years old. She put me in piano. I played the piano. She kept me busy 'cause she knew I'd be in trouble if I wasn't.

I've always been curious. Terribly curious. And I think that's just why she just kept me busy. And then I got into ice skating. And that's what I really liked. I had hoped to become a star of course. And I had passed some test, what they called Preliminaries, here at the Ft. Worth Figure Skating Club I was in. Hoping to move on up into the Jr. Olympics. But I had polio shortly after that, so I didn't get very far. But I passed Preliminaries here, I did do good.

Rose

So can you tell us about when you caught polio...?

Hill

<topic>Hospitalized for polio</topic>

1949. And I was a Rainbow Girl. You know what those are? You know the Eastern Star? It's a lodge. Well my mother had been the Eastern Star. And the rainbow girls are like the children of the daughters of that. And then like the DeMolay Boys. You know the Shriner's. The DeMolay Boys...it was the DeMolay Boys and the Rainbow Girls. And...so there was a convention they were having in Houston and I was getting ready to go. And the evening after we got there, there was a big banquet dance. Everything. My mother made me a gorgeous dress. And I was trying to get ready to go, but I didn't feel well. And my mother adviser...we all said [Moms were named "mother advisers"]. And Ponder Lee Brown. And I said, "I just don't feel well."

And she said, "You want to lay down?"

I said, "Yes."

And so that's when it started. And it just went so fast. I got sicker. It was like terrible flu or something. I got sicker all over. I hurt, started massive headache and nauseous. It was just awful. And she called the hotel doctor and he called my parents and said "You know, we either you need to get her to Ft. Worth quick or I need to hospitalize her here."

So my mother flew there and got upon a train. By the time she got there, I couldn't sit up that fast. And they got a

train to lay me down to bring me home. And our doctor, family doctor. Back then, they were friends as well as doctors. He went and meet us at the station. And he said, "Take her straight to the hospital."

They got me into the emergency room and he had two others. Two doctors waiting there that he suspected polio, but they were the big ones in polio at that time. Dr. Sealand Blanche Terrell, the husband and wife team. And then when they saw me and he said, "Take her straight to the third floor."

That was the polio ward.

Rose

And which hospital?

Hill

City County. Or what used to be City County. Um-hmm. That's the only place that would allow him. 'Cause of insolation. So there I was and by night time, I was in an iron lung. It went that fast.

Rose

Was that all the same day?

Hill

Um-hmm. Two days. Twenty-four hours. It started one day at night in the iron lung. Pretty fast. But I told my kids. I said, "You know, you see those little fish that eat the flesh off your bones? Do you see how fast...they eat? It's like crazy. Well it's kind of how the polio virus works. Only it gets into your horn cells that activate your muscles from the nerve. And that goes activate those cells and it's just is fast. When it stops? You don't know.

Rose

So were there a lot of other people there? It was during an epidemic?

Hill

Oh yeah, this was the epidemic. That's why they were allowed on that floor 'cause it was an epidemic. It was just rampant here. It was after the flood, the big flood here in Ft. Worth that went thirteenth floor through the Montgomery building on seventh street. And it was really huge. And it was after that, you know they still don't know what causes polio. Everybody's got the virus. It's in the foot on your spinal collar. The virus is there. But what activates it, nobody knows. They always thought it was something ingested. I don't know. But after the flood, we kids played in the ditches, kind of kids do. We had fun in all that dirty water the ditches playing, so it maybe something ingested 'cause it was a bad epidemic.

Rose

So how long did you at?

Hill

It was nearly two years. Can't see your family. I saw them through a window down on the sidewalk. They had a mirror on the iron lung I could look at them and see them. But I see my mom and dad. But literally, they had isolation robes, hats, and everything...come see me. But my brother and everybody else, I had to look through the window and everybody else on the sidewalk.

Rose

So was that in the during the full two years?

Hill

Um-hum. Yeah. Nobody allowed that isolation unit.

Rose

So did you get to know some of the other people?

Hill

Oh yeah. I got a picture. We had fun really. It was a fun thing. Nurses were great. Therapists were great. You know, they did all kinds of crazy stuff. My cat I had to leave at home, Kinsey cat. I know I talked about my cat. And so the nurse I remember, Bea, she said, tell my mother, she said, "Bring me my fellow."

Mother said, "You want me to get in trouble?"

So they went down stairs with a big, paper sack, put Kinsey in the sack, and brought him upstairs! (Laughter) They choked my cat. And they were fun. We had a lot of fun. They were really cool.

Rose

What kind of things...?

Hill

Oh, well they would bring up music. I remember one girl was partially paralyzed. But they were getting her up to walk. They brought music. And I remember one of the therapists said, "Lock your arms around my neck."

Locked her long-legged braces, put their feet on his, and they were just dancing all over the floor. I mean it was really fun in areas. Of course, it's painful. You know that. The therapy was very painful 'cause you're like ripping shredded threads of muscle apart that were what's left 'cause they bind up and tighten up. Then you got to tear them all apart again. It's very pain...

Rose

Did they use heat treatment and stuff too?

Hill

That's the only thing they did. Was the old-timey heat cloths.

Rose

So did you wind up staying in touch with some of the people you met?

Hill

Uh yeah. For a while. But I'm the only one left now. There's one, not the person, but Clyde Lustey, his wife Doris, they were very young. Much younger than me. But they married later on. And he passed away couple of years ago. I think I'm the only one left...I think. Who knows.

Rose

I'm curious 'cause we've run into Joseph Roe and Sam Province both were down in Houston at the Pulmonary Polio facility there. It seems like there some was kind of some networking family facility that helped drive them.

Hill

Sam was a friend of mine. Yes, I knew him.

Rose

Did you know Joe as well?

Hill

No.

Rose

He still has his iron lung.

Hill

I knew of him. I didn't know him.

Rose

We actually saw his iron lung.

Hill

Did you?

Rose

He still sleeps in it.

Hill

Do you know Paul Alexander?

Rose

No.

Hill

Well Paul's a fabulous person too. And Paul is still in his iron lung.

Rose

And where was he?

Hill

And he's a lawyer. He's in Dallas, but he's cool.

Rose

Okay.

Hill

He did go to the University of Texas and he did graduate, which I do not like him for. (Laughter)

Rose

He went to UT Austin?

Hill

Uh-hmm. And he graduated there. That's where he got his law degree.

Rose

Do you know about when he graduated?

Hill

Uhm-nm. I don't know.

Rose

Okay. So we've just been curious about the fact that Ed Roberts lived in California, Sam Province, Joe Roe, and you knew a lot of people who had pulmonary polio who wind up becoming activists.

Hill

What amazes me is that we're still here a lot of us. And we had it so much more severely than others. Why is that? And I thought about it. I know my parents were extremely cautious with me in everything I did. They didn't want me to get sick 'cause of the breathing issue. Because when you can't breathe, you get a little snuffle. You can choke to death trying to cough. And I know Paul said his parents were very watchful and careful about everything. But I thought about that and thought, "Why is it that? That we're here and the others that didn't have it nearly as severely, they're gone?"

Rose

So why are so many of you activists?

Hill

Activist, yes. Paul is...

Rose

Because it is notable that many people...

Hill

Uh-huh, I know. Paul is too. He was very big in what's that club? Not the Moose Club.

Rose

Elk's Lodge?

Hill

Something Lodge.

Rose

One of the...

Hill

Yeah, they raised a lot of money because they did a lot of good work for like my parents. My dad was a Shriner and my mother, oh my goodness. She had sewing things at my house...our house. And make those little blankets for the children's hospital, Shriner's Childrens Hospital. I guess...I don't know. I think it comes naturally to us. Probably to Sam and there are others too. Probably think there's one that was in Houston. Can't remember his name.

Rose

You can always e-mail us...

Hill

Dr. Jackie. You know, Dr. Jackson in Houston. He's not a disabled person, but he used to be the person that traveled the areas for about iron lungs. I mean, Sam knew him, Paul knows him. He's retired now, but...

Rose

So he's basically an iron lung provider?

Hill

Yes. He was head of the place in Houston that provided all of the iron lungs.

Rose

I heard that it's now here.

Hill

Uh-mm. Yeah, but that was the only one there who used to. It had all of the equipment. Respiratory wise.

Rose

And what was his first name? Oh, but you said something...

Hill

I don't know. We just always called him Dr. Jackson.

Rose

Dr. Jackson?

Hill

Yeah. And we all know him because they came to your house, changed your iron lung, everything. Every three months.

Rose

Wow. So who wind up paying for all of this care...?

Hill

<topic>Returning home</topic>

Well, the parents did the care. Like I say, Bertha was with us. The black lady I told you about. And I was not the baby. That was my...I was not the baby. And she...and I called her "Momma Bertha" because she was so good. And oh my goodness, if she thought they would happen me, she would die. My mother had my mattress renovated while I was out

for the day. And she got somebody to bring her to work from her house. And my bed had no mattress, no nothing. And mother and I gone to the store. And we came in and Bertha was sitting on my stool on my vanity in my room just crying, "Oh no, oh no."

And we went and she jumped up, "I thought something done happened to you! I thought you done died. Where's your mattress?"

And I had good care. She was wonderful. And I think somebody took care of Paul. His mom. My mom. We all worked together. You know, we just took care of our own.

Rose

How about getting an iron lung and what kind of wheelchair?

Hill

From the iron lung to the wheelchair?

Rose

Say what?

Hill

From an iron lung to a wheelchair? Well, I went from the iron lung to a bed. I still couldn't get up for a while...rocking bed. I still got it in my room.

Rose

What's a rocking bed?

Hill

Well, it was designed during WWII by Colonel Burns to actually do circulation for wounded soldiers before they could get to them. And it was to keep them going until they could get their turn for care. And they accidentally discovered that it was a respiratory aid because when...it worked like a see-saw. And then when the head went down, the body weight pushed the entire lungs, but when the head went up, it stretched your rib cavity cage, stretched the diaphragm, and it helped you inhale. And then they just learned accidentally that it was a good respiratory aid.

And then they developed it according to design where you can set it through the breath rate, how deep it needed to go down the head, how deep the foot, and put it on a bar. And that's how they developed the Respire Head. I went from the iron lung to the rocking bed.

Rose

So when was that?

Hill

1951 I think.

Rose

So when about when you came home? So did you have an iron lung in your house?

Hill

Um-nmh. Came home to the rocking bed.

Rose

And then when did you get your first wheelchair?

Hill

It was probably...well the first year, it was the old wooden chair where I could lay down 'cause I couldn't even sit up. I've got pictures of that somewhere. I'm trying to remember when that was. Not too long after I came home. It was the old wooden you that you could lay in way back. And it was probably about the same time, maybe about six months ago after I came home.

Rose

Wow. Do you know where your parents got it?

Hill

I have no idea.

Rose

What about your first power chair?

Hill

Oh my.... that was after I married. My husband said the worst things that's ever happened was that he didn't knew

where I was anymore. (Laughter) But it was really neat. But it's been like...oh my. Maybe in the '70s. Late '70s.

Rose

Well, so what about like school and...

Hill

<topic>High school education</topic>

I was in high school. My first year of high school, I had polio as a sophomore. I was...what do you call it? I wasn't a majorette. My girlfriend Margaret, ended up being my sister-in-law, was the majorette. And I was training under her. And I filled in.

So the instrument I played in the band was like a skill because you have to play something that you are not needed to be a majorette. I really wasn't needed anywhere. I wasn't in majorettes yet. My lighting skills wasn't that needed. But I was there. And I was a part of a lot of activities. But I was a mid-semester person. In other words, I went from junior high mid-term to high school. So it's kind of off-beat there. But I was fourteen and after that first., it had I started to feel ill in June. That was when I had polio. Just before school was out. The school was...I went to Northside High School and my first thought when I woke up in the iron lung was, "Mother, we need to get me out of here because high school starts and I got to get back to school. And I have to go early to practice for band and majorette stuff."

'Cause I just thought I was sick. You can't see yourself in an iron lung. But I thought they had me sedated or something like it. I couldn't move. I said, "They need to do something about me being here. Because I got to get out of here."

And so they tried to explain to me. The doctor who told me said, "I don't think May will be going back to school just yet."

But when I did go back, after I was home, the high school here was not here. But teachers from this school district came to my home and tutored me. And then I went through Northside. Mr. Sellers was the school principal and Ms. Hooper was the girls' counselor. They helped me, the teachers from there. Then there was the things I had to go over and be present for, like if you were supposed to speak or say something or speech or whatever. They'd come and get me and help me go. And it was upstairs. That was a wonderful treat because the football boys would carry my chair up the stairs. So I kind of liked that, but that's just kind of the way we did it. We just, whatever you have to do, you have to do. And then I graduated from Northside in 1954. And I was a National Honors Society graduate. Still, I had scholarship opportunities. Still didn't get into college. Too many steps. So, like I've said, that's been my heart's desire and I haven't made it yet. I'm 82. My grandson, he's so cute. He works like a Trojan and goes to school online 'cause he wants his college too. And I used to tease him and say, "Well I'm 71 and still I haven't got my college education." And now he's starting, "Well, now I'm 23 and I haven't got my education yet." But he's trying to work, trying to do it all. And he's doing good. He's got straight As. So he's doing good. Any time I try to complain about my job, my work, anything, or anything where going forward was going to be rough, all you heard was, "If President Roosevelt could run a country, why do you think you can't do this little thing?"

I hated that. We had no excuse.

Rose

That's really interesting because there's been a lot of scholarship on Roosevelt. Read a book written by polio-survivor Hugh Gallagher in the '80s called *FDR's Splendid Deception*. A lot of people, sort of the general population, apparently

thought that he didn't have much paralysis at all. They kind of knew he had polio, but...

Hill

But he did.

Rose

Yeah was it... 'cause your dad was a lot more clued in than most people.

Hill

Yeah, oh my dad was being a lawyer I guess. He was in the firm and was in politics a lot.

Rose

So they knew that behind the scenes, it was a lot of management of access.

Hill

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Rose

Did you go to Warm Springs?

Hill

<topic>Warm Springs</topic>

Yes, I was there a year...because of FDR and my dad. No, when I got to the point for good rehab, I went from high school. I told my parents, "I think you just want to get rid of me."

Because they loved me dearly. They would do anything for me. But I went from high school straight to Warm Springs. And it was one of the hardest things I ever did because I went all by myself. My mother went with me, but she had to turn around and come home 'cause they didn't have the money to stay. And, number one, I actually in rehab then, they didn't want anybody to be around. They didn't want parents, anybody really. So either I was in Georgia and everybody here. And my dad put me on the airplane and I started to cry and said, "Dad, please don't make me do this. Please don't send me away."

And he just reached over and hugged me and patted me and kissed my forehead and said, "Honey, I really believe this is going to be the best thing you've ever did."

And it was. 'Cause I had to take care of myself. I had to be at that conference table with all the doctors, therapists. When the time came, for discussions on my own. I mean, it was, it was. I learned really how to be independent.

Rose

What kind of skills did you learn there? Besides...

Hill

I learned management. You've got to learn to manage everything. And at nineteen, you had that dropped on you completely all of a sudden. But I did. I learned how to manage everything. All my business, my money. My parents sent me so much each month that they could afford and I learned how to manage everything: my care, limitations...that's what they teach you...You have to know your limitations to go forward on your abilities. When you know your limitations, then you can just grow your abilities every way you can. And I think that was one of the greatest things they taught me. Just do what you can do, but do it good.

Rose

What about like physical skills...?

Hill

Oh we had a lot of physical therapy and the day of the standing court, when they had me in long leg races. I can't use my arms. They put some splint-type crutches things and I fell backward on the standing court out there and hurt my head. I got a little concussion, but that was one of those conference table things. Then we have the meeting and we sit there and the main doctor said, "Dorothy, we need to talk about the standing thing."

Of course my parents' dream in my mind was I was going there in a wheelchair, but when I came home, I'd be walking. And we had this conference and he said, "I think you need to understand that whatever you planned to do with your life, what direction you planned to go, we need to start now."

Thinking about that. We need to think about it from a wheelchair point-of-view. And so that was that was that. I said, "Well, Mother and Dad aren't going to like this." (Laughter)

Rose

What was that like for you?

Hill

I think that was just my outcome 'cause I was very disappointed. But it's one of those things that you accept or don't accept. And I just accepted it so that started to teach me little things that you know, like sewing. Using a sewing machine. To learn mobility, because you can get hurt with those thin needles. You can't use your arm here. You can use these fingers, but you can't use the hand. But if you lay this here, just teaching me how to manipulate papers and anything that might be in front of me that you can't reach out. It's got to be right here and just for function, daily function.

Rose

Have you learned some of that stuff before, like when you were in high school? How were you writing?

Hill

My dad made me a big board and put it on my chair and it slid on with clamps. And I had my books there and I'd study them, write, do all my work.

Rose

And you said you can use your legs some...?

Hill

Yeah, I can a little bit. Little bits here or there, which is nice.

Rose

So what was like the community at Warm Springs?

Hill

It was fun. At first, maybe three weeks, I thought I was going to die. But after about three weeks, I met a lot of people, had a great roommate, we became good friends. Her name was Sarah N. Arnold. Her boyfriend at that time was Bob. And Bob was in college to become a doctor. And Sarah was my roommate. And it was Sarah N. Maxwell was her maiden name. So we called her Sam. S-A-M. (Laughter) But Sam, we became very good friends. And she was taken to the hospital with polio on her wedding day. They froze the cake. They froze everything. And one year later, they had the wedding.

But...and he did become a doctor. Became an administrator at one of the hospitals. But it was fun. We had fun. And of course we were always...it's kind of like a college campus. And we did things we shouldn't do to get away stuff. We'd sneak out at night. Bob would bring a fan and we would go over...drive over into Atlanta to look around and get in after hours and get in trouble...after curfew. We were just kids. But it was okay. It's kind of like a college campus.

Rose

What was...like what did they teach you about disability, navigating the world outside?

Hill

Well, to be honest with you, the thing...the neatest thing they taught me was how to go to the bathroom. That may sound weird, but we are totally paralyzed. The main thing you think about is parents lifting you as you get older and bigger and you not wanting to hurt them. And so the method they taught to go to the bathroom. I was just amazed and my parents when I came home. They thought it was just wonderful, but they taught you the sliding, 'cause I can't even transfer and Mother has had to pick me up. So they teach you, whether girl or boy, you sit in front of the

commode...facing the commode...And you had the commode modified. Being the same height as your wheelchair. And then all they do is slide you on there. After you're on there, they help you with your clothing. Kept bars on both sides that are functional for you to either lean on the bar, lean this way or that way, and where they can handle your clothes. And then same thing for coming...get your clothes straightened up. Just grab the belt...you know where they put the gate belt. They're gonna put you back in the chair. No lifting on Mom, which is good and I always thought that it was just the most wonderful thing because it saved my mom.

Rose

Yeah, that's pretty impressive.

Hill

It was. That's very important.

Rose

Yeah. Makes it a lot more feasible.

Hill

Um-hum. So we still do that here today.

Rose

What about how encountering discrimination or access issues? What did Warm Springs? How did they approach that?

Hill

They just taught me never to be bothered about asking for help. Oh, never let that bother you. And that never did and I never, after I came home, after I went to work, the building right there. It didn't have doors for handicapped people. But I never, I don't think encountered one time. I remember that I said, "Would you please help me with this door?" or "Would you please open the door for me?" I was ever not responded to in a good way. I can't remember a time.

Rose

Wow, and did that building help direct doors, like were there any stairs?

Hill

The door went straight to the elevator. She has a schedule too. Would it be a problem to make it another time?

Rose

No.

Hill

<topic>Faith</topic>

Are you sure? Things came from ministry like I told you. And I really became a Christian when I was a child. I wanted the Lord in my life. But when I had polio is when I really became to know the Lord because the iron lung next to me...it was an iron lung.... Remember it was the two rows of iron lungs on both sides of a big, long room. Like eight to twelve iron lungs. And the one next to me, they brought a young woman in, put her in that iron lung, and her name was Peggy Maxon. And Peggy and her husband Jack were missionaries in Africa. And she was pregnant when she got polio in Africa. And immediately, she wanted to get here because her family is here. And so they started in the United States, had to stop in Britain for her to have this baby, and then she had the baby in Britain. And then brought to the United States and placed her in the iron lung next to me. And I really didn't not know the closeness that you can have with your Father in Heaven until Jack and Peggy because I remember that every day and many times. And very quietly, other than the iron lung. They would pray together. You know, it was the first time I really saw what they call that sweet, sweet Spirit between people. And that's what it was. And it was so sweet and so loving as I watched them every day, it just affected me. And I was...felt differently after that. When I was approached by Ronald about this, but Elizabeth said, "Okay, we'll do it." Then he called me and said, "Would you help me?"

And I said, "Yeah, I think I'd like to do that."

So, but that's really where it all started. My desire to give back, give back.

Rose

I think I have something I want to ask you about. What kind of expectations for your adult life did the hospital or Warm Springs or your parents have? How did you adjust?

Hill

Like I say, I think my greatest disappointment was I had these thoughts and ideas about going to college. I worked hard through high school. Like I said, I graduated with the top ten and I had scholarship. I wanted to go to college, I wanted to be a lawyer, and my parents would have loved that too, especially my dad. And it's just like things just kept sending me in other directions. And I always learned that when you are sent down another pathway, you just have to make the best of the pathway. So that's what I did all through the years.

Rose

What about...?

Hill

And I really had a good career. I ended up, the last six years of my working days, the elected president of my industry.

Rose

What was the association you were president of?

Hill

The Fort Worth–Dallas Private Employee Association.

Rose

What about...getting married? Not...

Hill

<topic>Family</topic>

That wasn't my plan either. And I let him know that right away. (Laughter) No, he was the sweetest thing and we were just very good friends. We liked musicals. We liked musicals.

Rose

How'd you meet?

Hill

I was the president, but we used to call it the Fort Worth Handicapped Association. It was a little thing we organized. It was at the Botanical Garden. We met in a room where they could come and just social outlet. We played dominos, games, and we had punch and cookies.

Rose

When did you start?

Hill

Well Ronald and I started that too. I don't remember when, but it was just one of those things where it's something you would like to do and there's no way that you can do it. And you knew others who would like to do it. And there's just no way to do it. So why don't we just find a way to do it. And that's what we did. And then we started to organize a little group. We organized a little program and a little club we called the Fort Worth Handicapped Club.

Rose

Do you remember about how many people were in that club?

Hill

Probably twenty or thirty.

Rose

Fifties and sixties?

Hill

Um-hmm. And anyways, that's where I met Louis. My husband and Charles, his best friend in high school, was a cerebral palsy victim. And Charles came to meetings. And Louis, they lived...they were neighbors. And Louis was going out one evening and saw Charles by his car with a hood up. And he stopped and said, "Sir, what's wrong. Do you need help?"

"I don't know. This thing won't start."

And he said, "Where you going?"

"I want to go to this meeting."

And he told them about it. And he couldn't start the car and said, "Well come on. I'll take you."

So that's how I met him. He brought Charles.

Rose

And you haven't planned on getting married at all?

Hill

Oh no.

Rose

Was that something you were told to expect?

Hill

I was still thinking that I need to go to school. I forever thought I need to go to school. But now, I hadn't thought about it. I really thought it would probably not be a part of my life. So I didn't think about it.

Rose

How come?

Hill

I don't know, except I was busy. And I thought...it really didn't enter my mind. I had lots of boyfriends before I had polio. And my mother used to write my love letters while I was in my iron lung. (Laughter) All the guys I was involved with. And my mother was so funny. And she said, "You really want to tell him that?"

"Yeah." (Laughter)

She was wonderful, my mom was.

Rose

So when did you get married?

Hill

We dated about a good...forever. 'Cause I never even thought that would be a part of me. But we married in 1970. And then we married at the chapel because Louis became involved in that work too after we met. And he worked. He loved the kids. I did all the children ministries. And I loved the children ministries. And he worked with it too with me.

Rose

And so you weren't expecting to have kids either?

Hill

No, but we had her. We went we adopted her. And she's wonderful too.

Rose

What's her name?

Hill

Judy. Judith Dina Louise...Judith Dina Louise Hill. All those names. 'Cause she wanted to keep one of her original names. But we asked her, "Do you want this name?"

And Louis's name is Louis Edward Hill. So I thought...she thought, "Maybe I'll be Louise Dina."

I said, "You really want that?"

So she ended wanting Judith Dina Louise Hill because Judy was her original name. Judith.

Rose

How old was she?

Hill

Three. We kept her for a long time before we adopted her.

Rose

Foster care?

Hill

No. Louis's mother was her babysitter and the mom was...I don't know. I really can't say. I didn't know the lady. But she would leave Judy and was supposed to be back by ten o'clock. And she made it back three days later. So what happened was Mom would need to do things, shop or whatever. And she'd go say, "Could y'all watch her while I do this with her?"

So we're really kind of babysitters. And then some things happened with the mom. When they did, we went to court just for temporary custody to take care of here. And we got it. And later we just adopted her.

She's a neat kid. Smart Aleck. She's too smart. She really is. She can do anything. She can. Creative. Oh my...she can take a house apart and put it back together and make it look like a mansion. She put a transmission in her own car. I mean Louis was trying to make a boy out of her. And I put ruffles all over her to dress her. Poor child. But she can...she can do...I don't care if it's flower arranging, decorating a house, putting a transmission in the car. She can do it. She can. She's a mess!

Rose

And she is...she had some grandkids?

Hill

Um-hmm. This is one of them. And then the other grandson I told you about that's working and going to school. That's her two boys.

Rose

That's great.