

Joseph Rowe

Graduated from UTA in 1970

*Interview conducted by
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in 2016 in Arlington, Texas*

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Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Rowe contracted polio when he was five years old, and spent a lot of his childhood in what now is known as TIRR Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston, Texas. His early schooling was spent using a speakerphone system where he was able to communicate back and forth between his home and the classroom. After graduating from Arlington high school he was eventually accepted at UTA under certain conditions. Rowe completed his undergraduate and graduate degrees with a 4.0. He was involved in early activism on UTA's campus, as well as in a few different Dallas organizations before the passage of the ADA. He worked with a grassroots organization to help Obama's campaign starting in 2006. He is currently pursuing a degree in art and technology at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Topics discussed

- Growing up with polio
 - UTA and accessibility
 - Postgraduate life with polio
 - Accessibility in daily life
 - Activism
 - Caregiving
-

Rose

This is Sarah Rose.

Engel

Trevor Engel.

Rose

<topic>Growing up with polio</topic>

Interviewing Joseph Rowe in Dallas on Thursday, January 14, 2016.

Let's just start with some basic stuff, where you grew up, when you were born.

Rowe

I was born in 1947 in San Antonio. Texas. That's where my early years of childhood were. I contracted polio when I was five years old.

Rose

That was early 50s?

Rowe

Yeah, 1952. I was initially taken to the county hospital there in San Antonio's center. I spent several months there. I was in an iron lung most of the time. I still sleep in an iron lung which is very unusual by the way. There's only a few of us left. Then there was the March of Dimes, was an organization for polio and it was started by Franklin Roosevelt. The March of Dimes the year before I think had finally set up some regional centers for people with pulmonary polio paralysis. One was in Houston, Texas.

Rose

I think Sam Provence also went there, right? But a little later.

Rowe

Pretty much everybody who had respiratory polio in Texas went there. In fact in a number of states went there.

Rose

What was that place called?

Rowe

Southwestern Pulmonary Polio Center or something like that. In fact, a few years ago, my first year that I was at UT Dallas working on this arts and technology degree, I did take a class called virtual environments where you create a virtual world. I chose to re-create that center. You can wander around there and look at everything. I've still got that somewhere. I did it as a historical documentation.

Rose

That'd be really neat actually to have. Was that the same as TIRR? [The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research]

Rowe

It became TIRR. What happened is, the polio vaccine came out the next year, and eventually polio became not such a big problem. Although those of us who had had it continued to go there for treatment. They evolved into handling other disabilities and they became the Institute for Rehabilitation and Research. It was still the place for all of us to go for many years.

I was still in San Antonio, I spent several months again in Houston so it was like a year after I had polio when I finally got back home in San Antonio. They built some ramps so I could get in the house.

Rose

What was it like at the Institute?

Rowe

The Institute was an amazing place, they tried to make it as comfortable as possible for people although it was still a hospital type setting. They had some interesting things. I think I wrote a little bit in the book about the "monster room." I don't know if you got to that chapter yet.

Rose

Yeah, I've read all of it, and Trevor's read through some of it. We want to get, this in some ways would be more accessible.

Rowe

They really didn't know in those days quite what to do for us. First they tried to figure out how to make my hands work and use them, and that was pretty much impossible.

Rose

Was that with heat compresses?

Rowe

Yeah, they put braces and splints and things on my arms and hands. I had so little muscle left it was pretty much useless. I had already started learning to use my feet. Finally about the time I left the hospital they said "He really needs to use his feet." It was pretty much because I couldn't use them that's what happened. When I got back home obviously it was time for me to be in school and there were no programs for people been with disabilities in school.

Rose

You would've had a manual chair at that point?

Rowe

I did have manual chairs for many years up until I was at UTA. My mother went to the local elementary school and talked to them, got a first grade teacher to come out and visit me one time. She came once and then she just gave my mother all the assignments every week and all the weeks. My mother basically educated me for first grade and second grade. Then when I got to third grade we had a neighbor who worked for the telephone company, there was only one telephone company. He was an installer. He said "We've got something new that they just invented called a speakerphone." They wired up a giant box in my house. They installed one at the school in the classroom so I can actually communicate and hear the teacher. That was really my first involvement with a teacher and a little bit with the students.

Rose

Wow. Who pushed that? Was it the neighbor or the school district?

Rowe

My mother. My mother was an amazing woman.

Rose

What was her name?

Rowe

Lola Clara Rowe. From the very beginning she was determined that I would have every opportunity and do everything I could possibly do. She just dedicated her life to that, for the rest of her life. I didn't realize how fortunate I was to have that kind of family, those kind of people helping me and pushing me along.

Rose

What led her to challenge the Orthodox on disability so much?

Rowe

I don't know. She was a strong woman, she was a sweet woman, but she had a lot of determination. She somehow felt that this thing about hiding disabled people away, crippled children, hiding them away was wrong. She was determined that her children weren't going to be that way. In a way she was an early fighter for disability rights.

Rose

Do you think she had people that she knew with disabilities?

Rowe

At the polio center in Houston the parents of the children who were there and got to know each other very very well. In fact I was just five so I wanted my mother around. I was there for many months and my mother actually moved to Houston so she could be there to visit me every day.

Rose

Very much like Joe Provence, the oldest brother, did for Sammy.

Rowe

She and another mother rented a little efficiency apartment that they shared because none of them really had very much money. They lived there close to the hospital and came and visited us. The parents of that group of people became very close. They were from different areas, they weren't all close geographically, but they became kind of a network that encouraged and helped each other.

Rose

That's really... And they stayed in touch after?

Rowe

Yes, they stayed in touch for many many years, until they died basically. Also in our neighborhood in San Antonio there was a family who had lost a child to polio, and the mother of that child became close friends with my mother. Actually Art was a Cub Scout den mother. She got me in the Cub Scouts.

Rose

Oh wow! You must've been a real pioneer there!

Rowe

The parents were the key for the children that were successful out of that era. They were the parents....my dad was very supportive also. He built my first wheelchair out of wood until they could get one manufactured from Houston. They were determined that I'd be a little bit mobile. He started buying station wagons and he figured out ways for me to get in and out of the station wagons.

Rose

Wow. How did that work?

Rowe

The first little wheelchair he built was so flat to the ground that he could just roll it in the back of the station wagon. There was one brand of station wagons that had a reclining seat in the front. He'd buy those, they were **Ramblers**. He'd always buy those, and he bought them from the father of another polio survivor who owned auto dealerships in Greenville, Texas. His daughter's name was **Carol Carlsons**, she'd been in the rehab center with us, that little network. I stayed in touch with Carol, she just died two years ago and I was still in touch with her husband. There was this little network of parents that really supported and encouraged each other and came up with ideas for each other.

I just started the fourth grade and my father lost his job in San Antonio and found one in Dallas. We had to move, my mother absolutely hated it because all her relatives and friends were in San Antonio, tons of them. We had big extended family there with friends and relatives. We moved to Dallas and didn't know anyone at all. We rented a house, my father had rented a house **that my mother see it**. It was a rundown little house actually in Highland Park which is exclusive now, but wasn't then. We lived there for about a year and then my parents bought a new house out what was then way out Dallas and Northwest Highway, the outskirts of Dallas then. We lived there until I was twelve. Those were some good years for me. I used the telephone connection to the school, I never actually went to class.

Rose

Did your parents pay for the cost of that?

Rowe

Phone cable street, there was an organization of telephone company employees called "The Pioneers" and they did all this work themselves, and the phone company supplied the equipment and they did all the installations.

Rose

AT&T? Or Southwest Bell?

Rowe

It was called Bell, in those days it was called help Bell telephone company, and they were the telephone company for the entire country. I went to school that way. I have never really had much in the way of

friends that I saw in person very often. When we lived in Dallas and in that house, I made friends with a lot of the neighbor kids. We played outside all the time. It was good years for me.

1960 my father, the company he was working for had an opportunity where he could move to San Antonio so my mother really pushed for that. We moved back to San Antonio and rented a house in and were in the process of buying a house there. My father got transferred back to Dallas. My mother hated it again. We ended up back in Dallas, somewhere near where we used to live. At this point, when I was in San Antonio there were no programs, they didn't want a telephone hooked up school for some reason. I was in ninth grade and my mother went to school and got my books and assignments and turned my tests and all that stuff. Then when we moved back to Dallas they had finally established what they called a "homebound student program." What that consisted of was you had a teacher that came once a week to your house and gave you assignments. Basically it was pretty much it, they didn't really actually teach you anything. During my school years that's what I was doing.

By the time I was becoming a senior, I wanted to graduate and guess what? Dallas schools would not allow me graduate because they said "We require a laboratory science for graduation and we will not allow you to take a laboratory science because it's too dangerous." I had to have chemistry labs in my garage since I was ten years old. They were just adamant about that, my mother fought and went down there many times to talk to the superintendent of Dallas schools. He would not compromise on anything. I didn't know what to do.

I signed up for a correspondence school to try to get up high school, started on that and then... My dad at this point was managing a warehouse for this company in Arlington, actually Grand Prairie. He said "Let's investigate to see if there's some other school district that'll allow you to graduate." Arlington said they would. We moved to Arlington so I could graduate from high school, that's the reason we moved here. It wasn't short of my father's drive but I think he was happy about that. We bought a house in Arlington, moved to Arlington, I finished high school with this homebound teacher. Sammy was another one of the students in Arlington high school with that program. My mother hooked up with his mother and then I went over there a couple of times to visit Sammy so we got to know each other a little bit. I wanted to go to college, he wanted to go to college. Then came time to when...I graduated pretty high in my class at Arlington high school, I had straight A's in high school. I guess I wasn't lazy. I took the SAT exams and I scored very high on that.

Rose

<topic>UTA and accessibility</topic>

Did you have to get accommodation for those or work out?

Rowe

They told me that they would allow me extra time, but I didn't need any extra time. I did it all with my foot.

Rose

They didn't give you any trouble?

Rowe

No. I scored high enough they said I could take some advanced placement exams. I took those so I skipped a semester of freshman English and freshman math. Before all that, I had to be admitted, once I'd taken the test I applied for admission, and you would think they would just make a decision but they didn't. They said "We don't know what to do with you, sir."

Rose

What year was this?

Rowe

1965. What they decided to do was they formed a committee of three Deans who would interview me and decide my fate. I went to this high stress interview with these three Deans. I was in love with science and math my whole life, and I wanted to major in science or engineering. They said "Absolutely not because you would have to take all this laboratory science and it's too dangerous!"

Rose

Was the rationale that you're in a wheelchair?

Rowe

Yeah, and you use your feet, it can't be safe. They said "We'll conditionally admit you but you have to major in liberal arts or business."

Rose

Do you remember the names of those Deans by chance?

Rowe

Nedderman was one, I don't remember the other two. I think it was the Dean of engineering or science.

Rose

That sounds right.

Rowe

They said also "We'll have to limit you to nine semester hours and see how you do. After the first semester if you do well we'll revisit and decide whether you can continue." I think I registered for the second half of freshman English, American history, and college algebra. Those were the three classes I registered for. There were only two buildings that were marginally accessible, the old science building and the engineering building which was fairly new.

Rose

Did the engineering building have a ramp? A docking ramp or something? We're trying to piece it together.

Rowe

I think there was a step but somehow they bounced me on the step. They had to relocate some of my classes so that I could take them.

Rose

Did that go okay or was there a fight?

Rowe

It was a little bit of a hassle, but they finally did it. It got messed up a couple times where they had me in the wrong place and I couldn't get in and they had to redo it. The first place in the engineering building they had me on the third floor. Some students carried me up the stairs the first day and I decided "This is not safe." There were no ramps, no handicapped parking for one thing. They finally designated some spot my mother could let me out because we had bought a van so she could drive me to school.

Sammy was really the one who pushed to get an organization started. I would say he was the instigator. I totally agree with everybody and I've been very frustrated with that having to go before the Deans. I almost told them off but my mother kept me from doing it. "It wasn't in my best interest" she said. Sammy pushed saying "We needed organize if we're going to get anything done here." So we did. He and John Dycus and I...I think there was, I can't remember this other person's name, he was an amputee and lost part of his right arm. I think we were the first four members at the first meeting.

Rose

We'll have to check with John about that. We haven't heard about the amputee.

Rowe

I don't remember his name.

Rose

Did Sammy know John before going to UTA?

Rowe

I don't think so. I think they met in school. John was a journalism major and wrote for the Shorthorn. Once we got going he started to write a couple of editorials in the Shorthorn which got us in a whole lot

of trouble. The Dean of student life called me and, Sammy didn't want to be president so they made me president. He should've been president. He's an incredibly determined person, I wasn't that much of a fighter. Sammy had that in him. He had incredible determination to do whatever he wanted to do. Those editorials got things moving a little bit. They threatened to expel us at one point.

Rose

Was that the first year?

Rowe

Yeah, it may have been the second year, first or second year. We were pretty much demanding they spend money and put in ramps and stuff. At that point when some of the students in the Baptist student union and some of the fraternities saw the article, they said "We'll build ramps." They went out and built wooden ramps and put them by all the curbs.

Rose

We're you working for curb ramps, building ramps, everything?

Rowe

We wanted some curb cuts. We needed building ramps too but that couldn't be done without the university. As they built new buildings they started to be more accessible. The library was accessible that was pretty much it. It was brand-new when I first started. Over the years things started to gradually improve. Accessibility still was not great by the time I graduated.

Rose

You graduated and '69 with your BBA?

Rowe

No it took me five years because they wouldn't let me take full loads. I graduated in '70.

Rose

That's June 1970?

Rowe

Yeah. There were a bunch of articles in newspapers all over the country when I graduated.

Rose

We're going to go find those.

Rowe

I should had my daughter get them out. I have a scrapbook of all that stuff.

Rose

Oh, you have a scrapbook? Wow. We'd love to see that.

Rowe

Okay, I'll get it to you somehow.

Rose

This article is actually August 30, 1970. It's about UTA installing concrete ramps. We think there's buildings but we're not sure. Kent Gardner who is Dean, Assistant Dean or Assistant to the Dean of student affairs thought there might've been curb ramps.

Rowe

I think they were curb ramps because we had the wooden ones.

Rose

The thirty ramps suggested it probably wasn't buildings.

Rowe

Yeah, that was curb ramps. That was something we'd been fighting for for a long time.

Rose

This says Alpha Phi Omega had installed the wooden ramps.

Rowe

Yes, in fact I know one of the guys who worked in the fraternity to get that done.

Rose

Really? Is he still around?

Rowe

Yeah, I can get you his email.

Rose

That'd be great! How did the fraternity get involved? Was it just friends?

Rowe

Friends of friends? I don't know exactly how it happened. They got involved and they did most of the work on building those ramps.

Rose

Part of what was really interesting to us is the Texas legislator in late 1969 passed their version of the Architectural Barriers Act, which is the federal law in 1968. It says "Any state entity has to be accessible." It's what was used to some degree at UTA by Jim Hayes and Sam Provence later. It seems like the UT system slowly got word of it.

Rowe

It was a slow battle, and it was that way everywhere, it wasn't just at UTA.

Rose

Do you know if you guys knew about that law? In 1969 or 1970?

Rowe

I don't remember even knowing about it. I do know that when I first started I tried to research which laws there were. The only law that seemed to apply that was a federal law for institutions that received federal money, title something or other.

Rose

The Architectural Barriers Act is the first one in 1968, but that would've been part of it.

Rowe

Maybe that was it. There was really very little help from laws back then. You pretty much had to explain people that. I graduated, I stayed at Arlington to work on a Master's in business. I was a graduate teaching assistant.

Rose

How did you pick business by the way for undergrad?

Rowe

My dad pushed me, he said "Go into business so you can make some money when you graduate." It doesn't really work that way.

Rose

Sammy also did business, right?

Rowe

I think so. That was pretty much one of the few choices we had. I think he liked it better than I did, I didn't really enjoy it. I took computer classes every opportunity. That was something new back then, and turned out to be my career when I graduated.

Rose

What about other students, faculty, administrators? What was the attitude like?

Rowe

It varied so much, it really varied. Most students were very supportive and offered to help all the time. My mother was pushing my wheelchair around back in the early days, before I got a power wheelchair. A power wheelchair actually came from the parents of another polio survivor that had used and then he died when he was about twenty years old. He had gotten a power wheelchair, one of the first ones really. When he died they shipped it to me. I used that for several years.

Rose

You had one way before Sammy did, right?

Rowe

Yes, I had one before he did.

Rose

That was fairly late in the 70s.

Rowe

Yeah. I lost track of what all Sammy did after I graduated. We kept in touch a little bit, not a whole lot. I know he did a tremendous amount of stuff in Arlington, both at the University and starting the Association there.

Rose

Definitely. What about faculty?

Rowe

Faculty, they varied. In fact, the first semester I had signed up for the math class, turned out they had put the room down in the basement where I couldn't get to it. My mother went the first day to ask for it, they said they would move it. My mother went down the first day to ask the professor for my assignments, he was disabled himself, he had one arm. He was a veteran with one arm. He refused to have me in his class because of my disability. I had to transfer to a different math teacher who was fine. I had some really wonderful professors, my English professor and my history professor were inspiring.

Rose

Can you tell us about them?

Rowe

Yeah. Dr. Wolfskill, you probably heard of. He was part of the early professors in the history program there. He was an amazing teacher. I had him in one of those big lecture halls with tons of students for American history. It was probably the first time I've taken history that I really felt interested in it because of the way he talked. He took great interest in me and encouraged me and says...through the years he kept grabbing me by the **lapel** every time he'd see me and tell me "You need to go to law school and be a lawyer." I didn't really like law so I didn't do it.

Then I had an English professor Dr. **Birds** who was also very inspiring. It was interesting...most of the professors, my mother was bringing me to class, so most of them said "You can just sit right there." He said "You'll have to leave, I'll help him with whatever he needs." Because he wanted his students to feel comfortable, that there were no parents around. That worked out great. It turned out that I liked him so much I took three more classes from him through the years. **John Birds** was his name.

Rose

Did you take your own notes? Did you have other people?

Rowe

I took my own notes with my foot, wrote little notes. I had a slanting stand that would hold my books and papers that my dad helped engineer a lot of stuff for me through the years. He had built these things and my mother lugged them around the school and we put one in each classroom. That's what I used to write on, it would hold papers and books for me. I did well, academically for years there.

Went to graduate school, then it was time to get a job. That's where things got difficult. I had graduated with a 4.0, both undergraduate and graduate. I thought "I ought to be able to get a job" because I did so well academically! When I was doing my graduate work, my thesis, I did a research project where I surveyed the biggest 200 companies in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. I had all these addresses so I sent resumes and cover letters to all 200. I only got one interview and that was with **EDS** [Electronic Data Systems] which was **Ross Perot's company**. The reason I got invited to an interview there was my brother worked there and a good friend of my daughters worked there. I had a little bit of a connection. I'm convinced that's why I got in there.

Rose

<topic>Postgraduate life with polio</topic>
Did you have stuff in the letter about?

Rowe

I had said I was disabled, which might've been a mistake back then.

Rose

Might be a mistake now.

Rowe

It can be. In fact we had a conference at UT Dallas last spring where we were discussing with people in industry and students about the issue of when do you disclose, which is a tough decision for a lot of people. I thought my disabilities were so obvious I pretty much better tell people. I got an interview there, got a job there, worked there for twenty-seven years.

Rose

Wow. What were you doing?

Rowe

It was mostly programming and quite a bit of management in the later years.

Rose

What was the attitude like of people there?

Rowe

They were very supportive. It was a different culture. I had essentially gone through life without a whole lot of interaction with people other than my family. Me in the work environment all day with a bunch of other people was a revelation to me. My social skills started to blossom a little bit more. They were very supportive. The culture those days in EDS, I would say ninety or ninety-five percent of the employees were Vietnam veterans, military officers basically. There was this “gung ho military” culture there. They accepted me as part of that.

Rose

Were there other people with disabilities who've had them from Vietnam?

Rowe

Very few. When I started they did have one blind programmer. In those days input and output computers were punch cards was the way you wrote programs. The output was these big fan folded printouts that came off of giant printers. They had installed some special quickchange on one of the printers so they could print his stuff in braille. He read his programs in braille, and his output in braille. Then he would use the keypunch machine and punch in his parameters. He had a seeing-eye dog who layed played under his desk all day long. He was the only other disabled person I knew for many years, quite a few years there.

Later it started to be more and more. There was never a ton of people, certainly not considering the percentage of people that have disabilities. It was a company that was...it had a culture that was all about ability and what you could do and prove you could do. That was a good environment for people with disabilities because people were judged of the results that were not on anything else. It was a good environment, and I have to credit them for pushing that environment.

Rose

Did you interact with him at all?

Rowe

A little bit off and on, he knew who I was. I got in trouble one day because I couldn't find a parking spot one day for my van. I parked in his parking spot. I got a call from a security to move my van.

Rose

How did you wind up getting a van?

Rowe

That was a big deal for me as far as obtaining a little bit of independence. Transportation is a huge issue for people with physical disabilities. Being able to go where you want to go when you want to go without

having to ask anybody or depend on somebody is a big deal. I worked trying to find a way for years, and I finally did. My mother was against it for once, she thought it was too dangerous. I finally worked it out, learned to drive. That was a big accomplishment for me. I was thirty years old I started driving.

Rose

How did you actually get the van? Who did you get it from?

Rowe

I had tried several other places and it didn't work out, but John Dycus had found a man who equipped him with a man to drive. He was an aerospace engineer, worked at building fighter aircraft. He equipped this van with a joystick to drive the van around, just like an airplane. He connected me with that man and that man built me a van.

Rose

You had a joystick?

Rowe

I didn't have a joystick, he fixed me some foot pedals that I drove the van with. As years evolved I learned that I could get by with something simpler, use hand controls on a steering wheel. I drove until about six years ago. I decided to quit driving. Now I use the paratransit here in Dallas which is not very good. Arlington has none as far as I hear, or at least they used to not.

Rose

They have it set sort of by Sam Provence, Handitran, but it's been a fight repeatedly to keep it.

Rowe

When we get into talk about my activities after I went to work over here in Dallas for disability rights, a big chunk of that was transportation issues.

Rose

Okay, great. Before we go do that let's go back and pick up some other things. How did you breathe during the day?

Rowe

I used to be able to breathe a little better than I do now. I always needed a ventilator. I used one with the mouthpiece.

Rose

One of the turtle ones?

Rowe

One very much like this, but the ventilator itself was a bigger box that fit under my wheelchair.

Rose

You didn't have the compression one right?

Rowe

I had a wheelchair with batteries underneath and a ventilator underneath. My dad rigged all that up too. I could breathe sometime without it for periods of time, like between classes. I didn't have batteries all the time to run it, batteries ran down quickly. When I got to the classroom my mother would plug the thing in the wall. Then when I left she'd roll up the cord and I'd take off again to the next class.

Rose

Wow. Were you frog breathing then?

Rowe

Yeah, I did that when I wasn't using this. Frog breathing they called it.

Rose

You said you were in Cub Scouts?

Rowe

Yeah. I think that was just for about a year. They pretty much had the meetings at my house. It wasn't a big deal, I stayed in it for a little while and got a few merit badges.

Rose

You said you played a lot with the kids on the street?

Rowe

Yeah when we were in Dallas I did. In fact I was in manual wheelchairs. They had the wheelchairs custom-made for me so they were very low to the ground and my feet could reach the ground. They had no foot rest down here or I could move the foot rest. I could push myself around by putting my feet on the ground. We had this huge concrete area in front of our garage and my friends and I would play baseball out there. I would run around the bases in my little wheelchair.

Rose

That's awesome. What were other interactions socially when you were growing up? What were attitudes like?

Rowe

It varied a lot. Some children were a little bit standoffish, but most children were pretty open and accepting of me. I think it was more adults that were the issue than children. In general though, I would say I had mostly good experiences with people.

Rose

One thing that Sammy Provence's sibling said was that he really hadn't have the speakerphone system in school, other than family and church didn't have a lot of social interaction.

Rowe

I didn't either. It was a struggle for me in college, I never had a date in college or anything.

Rose

Then it was really exciting for him when he went to UTA and started meeting other students.

Rowe

It was, it was for me too. I had been isolated mostly around adults and my family, their friends my whole life. That was good in some ways for me intellectually, maybe attitude and maturity wise. I didn't have a lot of social skills. The handicapped student organization was the first organization I was ever in. I started to learn how to interact with people a little better. Then when I got a full-time job I developed good close friendships there. In fact, one of those people still my best friend.

Rose

Oh wow. What's her name?

Rowe

Ann Curt, she's in Morocco right now.

Rose

How did you guys start developing a disability rights consciousness?

Rowe

It was very self-centered. We wanted stuff that we needed for us personally, like ramps. Then I started, I don't know exactly how to say it happened. When people had attitudes that fought that, it makes you angry. There was a little bit of an anger devoted to it. We'll say "Well if this is happening to me it's happening to other people." Then you start to develop a consciousness that "This is bigger than me." I actually got much more active after I left UTA.

Rose

We definitely want to hear about that. One of the things we've been trying to figure out, we've done a lot of archival research... You wouldn't have crossed paths with Wayne Duke? He came after your time?

Rowe

He was after.

Rose

He worked really closely with Jim Hayes, Kent Gardner, and some other people. It's how much UTA was homegrown versus connected to some of the other programs.

Rowe

I think it was mostly homegrown, that's what I think. A lot of that happened after I left.

Rose

Yeah. It's clear that you guys made a huge contribution early on in raising awareness.

Rowe

We got the word started.

Rose

Were you ever in touch with Ed Roberts in California who was doing similar work at Berkeley, also a polio survivor.

Rowe

I did after I was at UTA, not while I was at UTA.

Rose

Okay. I know you have a story in your book about graduation in Texas Hall? Can you tell us that?

Rowe

All these people, they wanted me to do what **my wife and I**, I had no idea. I was very fortunate that I had a number of professors that really wanted to be my mentor. Wanted me to follow in their footsteps, and I didn't always want to follow in their footsteps. That was interesting. The graduation was kind of a circus thing because I think it was really the University that felt like "We can get some good publicity out of this because I had a 4.0." I was the first one to visit the school. Initially they said they wanted me to have a press conference and my mother shot that down. I don't know. She thought it would be too stressful for me. It probably would've been because I certainly wasn't accustomed to public speaking. The ceremony was a big deal for me, a milestone in my life.

Rose

You couldn't get up to the stage of Texas Hall, right?

Rowe

Yeah, I had to come up to the back, one of the loading docks to get on stage. The seating was accessible. I find that in many auditoriums they don't really plan for people with disabilities to be on the stage.

Rose

Funny thing about that, we actually have a class that we're offering for the first time this semester.

Rowe

At UT Dallas the building I'm in was built the year I started there, three years ago now, and the big auditorium has a ramp right up on the stage.

Rose

What about your interests outside of school? You said you were really into chemistry?

Rowe

I have many hobbies through the years. I was very interested in science growing up. I did a lot of science experiments and labs.

Rose

Like in your garage?

Rowe

Yeah, in my garage. I wanted to build rockets, I blew up a couple. I did a little bit of art, I like to draw and stuff. I did a little bit of art but never got totally into it. I enjoyed it as a hobby. I did some painting.

Later as an adult I evolved through a series of hobbies. I got into robotics. I built a number of robots with my feet, pretty sophisticated ones, more than you around now. Then my friend Ann's daughter was like seven or eight at the time. I said "I think we ought to make her a dollhouse." I got all in the dollhouse and miniature things was like a huge hobby also. Started going to conferences and classes for making furniture and stuff for dollhouses. I went back to **rocketry** a couple times over the years. In present day I still get involved with electronics and things, classes where we made artistic projects with inventive electronics that interactive projects. I've always like to read, I read a lot. Occasionally go to movies, not every week like some people, but I like good movies. I love the **theater musicals** so I go to.

Rose

This is going back to UTA. How did you handle things like toilet access and stuff? There weren't any accessible bathrooms on campus.

Rowe

There were some that were manageable. There were a few, we had to find them. That's what we had to do.

Rose

I know Jim Hayes took administrators and Nedderman couldn't get in the stall and use a urinal. That's later.

Rowe

Over time when the ADA came around everything changed drastically.

Rose

<topic>Accessibility in daily life</topic>

Did your parents have to retrofit the house or the various houses for you?

Rowe

The only thing that they really did was ramps.

Rose

So the garage and in and out?

Rowe

Right. Those were the main adaptations they did.

Rose

What about accommodating the iron lung?

Rowe

You have to very carefully choose your house so you can get an iron lung in there.

Rose

They're very heavy, right?

Rowe

They're heavy, but they're on wheels. You have to have a wide door, you can't turn sharp corners with it because it's long. You can't have a bedroom that's off of a side of the hallway. They carefully picked the houses.

Rose

Were there any other administrators that you talked with? Names we might want to check out?

Rowe

I don't really remember the administrator's names.

Rose

Definitely Nedderman. He was aware of you early on. You lived in a duplex with your parents?

Rowe

In Dallas that was the house I lived in. My parents and I bought it together. They put a down payment and I made all the payments basically the way it worked.

Rose

That's how you figured out living somewhat independently.

Rowe

Yeah. I insisted on that. My mother wasn't crazy about it. It worked out well.

Rose

Tell us about your activism after UTA!

Rowe

<topic>Activism</topic>

I'm trying to remember how this started, I think I actually got a phone call from a guy named **DH Howell**. I think his name was **Dion**. He was really into activism.

Rose

When would this have been about?

Rowe

This was about mid-70s. He wanted to get an organization going, I don't know how he got my name, where he got it from, I don't really recall. He contacted me and I said "Sure, I may be interested in participating."

Rose

What kind of disability did he have?

Rowe

I don't know the name of it, but he had some kind of genetic bone disease. His body was a little bit deformed and he had severe arthritis. He had to walk with crutches. He was a little bit on the small size, a little bit short. I don't know what the name of it was. He was pretty limited in his mobility, but he could drive. He worked for the city of Dallas.

Rose

Doing what kind of things?

Rowe

I don't really know, he worked for the city of Dallas for many years. He was the driving force of...he knew a lot of disabled people. The first organization we put together was called ADD, Association for the Disabled of Dallas. It probably lasted about two years. We had a number of meetings but the organization never really got any focus of what they wanted to do. It just fizzled away. We ran that as an open democracy kind of thing. Everybody wanted to do something different. After that fell through DH and I and a couple of others said "We really needed to do something because we need to work with the city, and we need to work on Dallas transit" which was the bus company.

Rose

Was this in between the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 passing and getting Section 504 enforced?

Rowe

Yes. They were starting to be laws but not much action.

Rose

No regulations.

Rowe

Right, regulation. We formed another organization called Association for Individuals with Disabilities. It was structured a little bit differently we said "We gotta keep this organization focused on actually doing things." I can't remember his name, it was an old attorney who was helping us organize and drafted the constitution, you know there's a lot to be said from **malevolent despotism**. We organized it where the board pretty much ran things. It was a small board. That organization turned out to be quite effective. I can't recall, we started to push Dallas Transit Authority, which ran the bus system of Dallas to get accessible buses. We met with their board a couple of times and we were getting nowhere. We actually picketed their headquarters one time. About this time the idea for DART came along. We saw that as a huge opportunity and we worked like heck to make sure that when DART was created that accessible transportation was part of that charter.

Rose

Was it?

Rowe

It was. They reluctantly agreed. They said "Well it's going to take...we're not going to replace all our buses immediately, but as we buy new buses we'll make sure they're accessible."

Rose

At this point did you have connections to Bob Kaufman in Austin, Fred Fay in DC?

Rowe

They weren't formal connections, different ones of us knew different people in different places. Some of us were on Governors Council for employment, handicap whatever it was called back then. Occasionally there were meetings where we'd meet people from Austin or other places. It was a pretty interesting time. I had to take off work sometimes to go to these things. Fortunately my boss I had worked with the board and we become friends, he had a young child with muscular dystrophy. She was pretty accommodating to me. We worked on this stuff.

We got quite a bit done. One of the things that we did not get done that we wanted to get done was housing. That is still a huge gap, independent living housing, housing for independent living. Something there is a very very little of still. DH, bless his heart, came up with two or three different plans for starting to build independent living complexes, but none of them ever came to full admission because of the money.

Rose

I think they got one going for a while in Arlington, but it was really hard to keep it.

Rowe

Yeah. It's a difficult thing to do. That never worked for them. The best thing that we accomplished was that organization started what was called the Dallas Center for Independent living. It was chartered as a separate organization.

Rose

That became REACH?

Rowe

That became REACH eventually, REACH Incorporated. REACH started in Fort Worth, somewhere else and didn't...They merged.

Rose

Independent living was popping up as a concept in multiple places, Berkeley.

Rowe

There were some pretty active organizations in Houston. We tried to copy what they were doing.

Rose

Lex Frieden and company?

Rowe

Yes. A lot of them were people that came out of the TIRR that really got things going on there. They had housing complexes and everything. TIRR had tons of people with disabilities. They were all over the place. We tried to copy what they did. We felt that getting the independent living center, just to get people information was a key thing. It was a struggle getting it started because it takes money. We went begging all over town, we got a small donation out of the **Perl foundation**, a very small one, \$1000. The Communities Foundation of Dallas which is, really funds a lot of things in Dallas gave us the big grant that allowed us to get going.

Rose

Was this primarily people with mobility impairments or what? What was the group?

Rowe

It was basically the same people that were on the board, the organization became the board of the Dallas Center for Independent living. I remember us trying to hire a director to get it started and we interviewed a bunch of people and hired the first director. It was a struggle because we had a very limited amount of money to get it going. I'm amazed that it kept going when it did.

Rose

Do you remember the names of some of the other people that were involved early on?

Rowe

Frankly, no.

Rose

We'll look in the Dallas Morning News.

Rowe

I'm sure there are some other people that may have some records that will help with that.

Rose

I think we've had someone interview Charlotte Stewart.

Rowe

She was one of the people involved. She was involved very early on.

Rose

Where did you move after doing the Dallas CIL?

Rowe

I retired. I was a little bit burned out of being active all the time. I just wasn't active in the organization, I obviously kept up with things. Occasionally you met people from out of town that were in town on conferences and stuff, I can't remember, somebody came from Washington right before the ADA got passed. We were fighting for the ADA passage for a number of years. That was the last thing I was involved with was trying to help push the ADA.

Rose

I want to hear more about that, but going back to 504, we know there was a sit-in in Dallas in 1977 in conjunction with the sit-ins around the country. We know Sam Provence went, we found one article.

Rowe

I think I was there. I remember a lot about it. I got on the local news a couple of times out there protesting.

Rose

Okay. We're going to be doing some searching for you. What about the fight for the ADA? What was involved there?

Rowe

It was more just lobbying your politicians, it came down to that.

Rose

To visiting local Congress people?

Rowe

Yeah, to make sure that they supported it. Of course **Bob Noel** was the author and the guy who got that pushed through. That was a huge step, a lot of us felt it didn't quite go far enough in some areas. It was

a tremendous help because it made things were before was just like, the kind of regulations people may or may not follow become a law. It was especially a big deal with business, because businesses stood up and took notice when it was the law you had to follow.

Rose

The group of activists in Dallas, was it racially diverse? Gender diverse?

Rowe

It was racially diverse, gender diverse, it was diverse in every way you could think of.

Rose

That's something historians are thinking about a lot more, the standard narrative is often white men. It's not really accurate.

Rowe

One of our early members, **Tom Morrison**. Tom Morrison had cerebral palsy and he was the executive director of Dallas Cerebral Palsy of Dallas for a number of years. He had a great sense of humor and he says, "You know, this is the only disability that anybody can join?"

Rose

The only minority? What about types of impairments?

Rowe

We had people with physical impairments, we had blind, seeing impaired, we had hearing impaired. We decided that we would separate out the mental disabilities because there were already several organizations supporting them in Dallas.

Rose

What about chronic illnesses?

Rowe

We had some chronic illnesses, we did. Arthritis, people with neurological chronic kidney disease, all kinds of them.

Rose

Is that true early on too?

Rowe

Yeah. We decided to be very open. We had people with everything you can think of.

Rose

We know you were really involved in the Obama campaign too, right?

Rowe

Oh yeah, I was in 2008, very involved. I started in 2006 actually. That was a big effort for me, that wasn't a disability rights activism, but that was still an activism of some sort. Probably the only one I've done later in life where I really got heavily involved.

Rose

I know in your book you talk a lot about trying to get to the convention, to get access?

Rowe

Yeah, there were some obstacles there. The biggest obstacles were the local conventions, the Dallas Democratic, the Vice Senatorial District in Texas, the local political conventions. The one they had was in Moody Coliseum at SMU [Southern Methodist University]. It was at least at that time very inaccessible. There were just some challenges of getting to things. The state convention was in the Austin Convention Center and it was pretty accessible. Things were pretty accessible in Denver except that they put up so much security that the security became obstacles. "You can't go that way where the ramp is, that's not one of the ways you can go."

Rose

What attracted you to the Obama campaign?

Rowe

I had heard his speech at the 2004 convention on TV. I just liked his message, his enthusiasm for a lot of things I believed in. It really attracted me to his campaign.

Rose

He was one of the first candidates to have a disability rights plank that had a lot of enforcement.

Rowe

He was. He had a lot of firsts in the way he ran his campaign. I was part of the grassroots organization here in Dallas. We were very involved from very early on and that was totally separate from the official campaign organization which has paid employees. That's a totally different thing. They made great use of the grassroots organizations and they used the internet amazingly well, which nobody else was doing.... To communicate and coordinate and get information to people and they established some groups for people with disabilities, groups for different minorities, groups for people of faith. They had a lot of different organizations that helped. We were very involved in developing the platform. I had a whole series of house meetings at my house, inviting people from all over the neighborhood and other people I knew. We helped provided a lot of input to the Democratic platform.

Rose

That's pretty exciting. Did you have other disability rights work that you did after the passage of the ADA? Or were you focusing on other things then?

Rowe

I was focusing on other things, mostly on my career, trying to survive. I was very involved with my church for many years in a number of things. My church has a lot of programs to help people with mental disabilities.

Rose

What church is it?

Rowe

Lutheran Church in Arlington, and Garland. **Arkham Dallas** meets in our building. His organization in North Dallas, Richardson, **group homes** and our church built, bought, and converted a whole thing of group homes. I was a little bit involved in some of those things.

Rose

What about state policy and disability? Did you ever get involved in some of that?

Rowe

Not really, with Texas policies I figure that's hopeless.

Rose

You've used a whole lot of assistive technology over the years, haven't you?

Rowe

Oh yes.

Rose

Some that you and your dad were developing? Can you tell us about some of the ones that have been the most important or that you're proud of?

Rowe

Wheelchairs were customized, my dad helped customize some of the stuff on my wheelchair. I use this mouthpiece saying and there's always the question of "What's gonna hold it right there?" When I first started using these things there was nothing, so I had to invent something. We made something out of a curtain rod, I believe. I got down to TIRR for one of my annual check and there was amazing man down there called [tries to pronounce his name]. He was a roboticist. He is from Sweden as you can tell. He was brilliant, he has been there since the early days with the polio hospital. That man can invent and make anything you can think of. So I went down there one summer for a checkup. He says "What's this you got on your chair over here? That's a neat idea, I think we can make something a little bit better." So he made me one out of stainless steel instead of a curtain rod. I've used that for like thirty years. As far as my driving, I pretty much had to tell people how I wanted it to work. Minor adaptations for wheelchairs too, how to carry things, tools to eat with, tools for this and that and the other thing.

Rose

<topic>Caregiving</topic>

What about figuring out care? Particularly after your parents died, your mom cared for you mostly?

Rowe

My mom cared for me most of my life, she died twelve years ago at the age of eighty-eight. When she got to her 70s I decided that this is too much for her. I started to hire caregivers and I found a young lady who became a live-in caregiver for me. She was from Mexico and was going working on a graduate degree here in Dallas. She lived with me for a number of years, and then she got married and got her own home, she still came and helped me. She helped me for twelve years. Really until she had to move out of Texas, she lives in Florida and...I'm trying to think of her title....Something like she's a senior engineer **for the** Americas.

Rose

Oh wow. Was she doing that career all while she was living with you?

Rowe

Yeah, she had a degree in mechanical engineering when she came here, went to UT Dallas and got a graduate degree in micro biology. She wanted to be in the food industry. She was a very smart person. I had some other caregivers toward the end of my mother's life who came and went. One of them lived with me off and on for a couple of years, and she had a young lady stay with her who was seventeen years old. **Natasha Georgia**. Natasha started helping me. Natasha is her name. Natasha has now been

helping me for thirteen years. Last July I adopted Natasha, she is my daughter and she's actually asleep in there right now.

Rose

Oh wow! That's really cool!

Rowe

So I have my daughter and two grandchildren here living with me. They keep me really busy.

Rose

Congratulations! That's really cool. What about post-polio syndrome?

Rowe

Yeah, I've had off and on some problems with that. I had retired in 1999 and after mother died I decided it was time to go back to work and start making some money again. I was having a difficult time finding a job, finally **foster** made a connection and help me get back to EDS. I went back to work there, and I worked there for a little over two years, but during that time I started to have some troubles with post-polio syndrome. I got really fatigued, extremely fatigued. I had to go on disability for a while. I'd just come back off disability when they decided to shut down my department and laid everybody off.

Rose

Wow. And is that how you wound up going to UTD?

Rowe

Well, there were a few years in between where I just tried to live on Social Security and my little retirement. When I turned sixty-seven, my **return** actually went down because of one of the options I had taken when I was first took it out. I decided I needed to get a little bit more income in so I thought "I'll just go back to school and get some student loans" so that's what I've been doing. That is not only paying for my education, it's helping me live a little bit.

Rose

What's the degree you're doing?

Rowe

Master of arts in arts and technology which is hard to explain to everybody, it really covers a number of different disciplines. It's basically the interaction of how the new technologies can be used in the arts and how art can impact those technologies. There's different groups. We have gamers who are into creating

digital games, we've got digital artists who, we've got animators that make animated movies. Then we've got people like me that like to do a little bit of everything and don't want to focus on one particular thing. I'm focusing on interactive things that educate, both physical objects and virtual environments through the computer.

I'm doing my final project this semester and it's an interactive art museum. As you go through the museum, the things you look at closely and that you like, as you go through the museum there will be more things similar to that to show up. It adapts the museum to you. That's what I'm working on right now. I'll finish that and continue going on to work on the doctrine.

Rose

Also in the same area? That's really cool! Are there other people you think we should be talking to in your network? You can always send names by email too.

Rowe

I'll try to think of some others other than the ones that I've given you.

Rose

Do you know if **DH Howell** is still alive?

Rowe

I don't think so, but I'm not sure. I lost contact with him many years ago. Unfortunately they tell me I make fifteen dollars a month too much to get Medicaid, or home health aide assistance.

Rose

Wow. So how do you work around that?

Rowe

Tasha is my caregiver. I do have a **health issue**, Medicare and my family cover a week. It gives her tiny bit of income. Fortunately she just wants to take care of me. Basically she's doing it for nothing.