

Larry Johnson

**Radio Broadcaster, Disability Rights Activist, International Speaker,
International Motivational Speaker, Book Author, HR Resource
manager from Southwestern Bell Telephone**

Interview conducted by

Sarah Rose & Trevor Engel

August 14, 2017 in San Antonio, Texas

Disability Studies Minor

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Biography

Larry P. Johnson was born August 28th, 1933 to Theresa Johnson Seaburger and Francis (Frank) Johnson. His mother was a single Mom when he was 6 years old and she raised all four of her children in Chicago, Illinois.. He graduated high school from John Marshall High School. He earned his degree from the School of Speech at the University of Northwestern in Radio and T.V. Broadcasting. From La Universidad de las Americas in Mexico City, he earned his Master's in Economics and Latin America Studies.

Larry met and married Diana in Mexico City where they were both students at Universidad de las Americas. They have six children and 21 grandchildren and a bunch of great grandchildren.

After living and working as a Radio and T.V. Broadcaster in Mexico City, Mr. Johnson and his family moved to the United States. He searched for a job for over two years and finally found employment in San Antonio at Southwestern Bell Telephone as a Human Resource Manager. Mr. Johnson is an athletic and active person who enjoys beep baseball, skiing, bungee jumping, white water rafting, tandem cyclist, and swimming with a dolphin.

Larry started learned about the Disability Rights movement after the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. He is a founding member of the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities and Independent Living Center. He is a supporter of cross-disability cooperation and interdependence. He a served on many city, state, and national

committees including but not limited to President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped, San Antonio Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities, Advisory Committee to the Public Transportation Company, San Antonio Citizens Concerned about Handicapism (SACCH), Ski for Light cross-country ski program, Mobility Incorporated, Mobility International, Texas Commission for the Blind, American Council of the Blind, Sound and Sight Impaired (SASI), Association of the Deaf-blind persons, and Texas Silver Hair Legislature.

Topics discussed

- Diagnosed around 6 months with Infantile Glaucoma and his Mother's wisdom
 - Attended a regular public education schools which mainstreamed Blind and Visually Impaired students
 - Graduate school and living in Mexico City
 - Human Resource Manager at Southwestern Bell Telephone
 - Started a Beep Baseball League in San Antonio, Texas
 - Disability Rights Activist
 - Coalition of Texans with Disabilities (CTD)
 - ADA 1990 and growing San Antonio membership in CTD
 - Current Legislation and Projects
 - President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped with Justin Dart
 - Travel to Japan
 - Bungee jumping, swim with a dolphin, and tandem bicycling
-

Rose

This is Sarah Rose and Trevor Engel interviewing Larry Johnson at his home in San Antonio at 10863 Lake Path Drive on Monday August 14th, 2017. Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood and growing up in Chicago?

Johnson

Ah, you want to start that far back?

Rose

Yes, please. (laughing)

Johnson

(laughing)

Ok, well yes I was born in Chicago.

Rose

and when and where

Johnson

<topic> Diagnosed around 6 months with Infantile Glaucoma and his Mother's wisdom</topic>

1933 in August 28, so in two weeks my birthday. At the age of I think around 6 months, I was diagnosed with Infantile Glaucoma and I was the only child that had any visual impairment in my family. I was the youngest so it was quite traumatic for my mother and father. Nevertheless, my mother never let my blindness be a barrier for me to attempt to do anything. In fact, she told me on more than one occasion that just because your blind does not mean you can't do whatever you want or be whatever you want. And the strange thing is that I believed her and so because of that I've been richly blessed to accomplish so many of my dream goals.

I decided I wanted to be a radio broadcaster and I was able to do that. I decided I wanted to travel to Mexico and I did that. I decided that I wanted to go to Japan. I did that, twice. I decided I wanted to go to Spain; I did that. I decided that I wanted to go bungee jumping. I did that. To swim with a dolphin. I did that. To meet Pope Francis and shake his hand and I was able to do that. So I have really had an incredibly successful life primarily because of my mother's belief in me and my trusting her belief.

Rose

What was her name and your father's name?

Johnson

Her name was, **Theresa** Johnson **Seaburger** and my father was Frank, Francis. My mom raised us four children as a single mom from the time I was 6-years-old and she did so by cleaning other people's houses and washed their floors, and watching their children. And then she would come home and wash our clothes, clean our house, cook our supper, and take care of us. (Chimes ringing in the back ground.)

Rose

Where did you go to school?

Johnson

I'll wait for the chimes finish. We'll have to take a quick break, because my dog eats at 5 o'clock.
--Break--

Rose

So you said your life has had three stages?

Johnson

Yes, really my life has had three phases, my growing up in Chicago and going to school. You asked about school.

Rose

Um hmm

Johnson

<topic> Attended a regular public education schools which mainstreamed Blind and Visually Impaired students</topic>

I was very fortunate, because I was able to go to a regular public school.

Rose

Oh really, even that early?

Johnson

That early, Chicago Board of Education was one on the first to mainstream Blind and Visually Impaired students and my first five years we were in a self-contained classroom with a Special Ed. Teacher who knew braille and insisted that we should also know braille and then separately they had a sight-saving room for those students who had partial vision and able to read large print. They also had another classroom for Hearing Impaired students.

Rose

Oh, OK.

Johnson

What was interesting about this school was there was no bus system, so we had to take the regular public transportation system.

Rose

Oh, Wow.

Johnson

What they did was assign a student from the Hard of Hearing class to be our companion guide to take us back on public transportation. (Rose and Johnson laughing) So very early on I learned about cross disability cooperation and interdependence. It was very educational and very beneficial. After elementary school I went on to high school and there again we were integrated in to the regular classrooms, although we had our own homeroom with a lot of the books in braille and talking book equipment so that we could listen so of the books that we were supposed to be learning and studying. There were three Special Ed. Teachers. The interesting aspect of that school, which was the only high school in Chicago that accommodated blind students.

Rose

What school was it?

Johnson

It was called John Marshall and there were two interesting aspects. Number one was we were transported by taxi cabs. They contracted with taxi cabs and they collectively picked up blind students from around the city and brought us in. Then later they chose to bus us in with students from what they called the “crippled school”, which were students that had physical disabilities. They would pick us up and take us to that school and then from there they would take us to our John Marshall. The other really interesting aspect of it was we had volunteer readers to help us with our assignments. These volunteer readers were other students who would get merit points, just like if they were to be hall monitors, or help in the lunch room, or where ever else had teacher aides. They would come in and volunteer their stay hour time to help us visually impaired students with our assignments, because many of the books that we received were not available in braille or on talking books. We had to have them read to us by someone who is sighted. Well this was a great way in which we could integrate and in fact flirt with a lot of the pretty sighted volunteer readers, so it really promoted a lot of social interaction. From John Marshall High School, I went on to a what they called back then a junior college, now they call them community colleges and I did that for two years. That is when I really began to become interested in radio and theater and Spanish.

Rose

Which college did you go to?

Johnson

Wilber Wright Junior College and I did that for two years. From there I went on to the University of Northwestern. What happened at Northwestern I enrolled in the school of speech and selected my major as

radio and T.V. broadcasting. I was called into the assistant dean's office shortly after registration. He tried to persuade me to change my major because he thought it would be far too difficult for someone who was totally blind to be successful in those fields.

Rose

Wow.

Johnson

Well, I didn't listen to him. I continued my studies and in fact I worked on the universities radio station. I did a couple of shows: an opera show and an interview show. While I was still at the University of Northwestern I was able to get a job at one of the local AM/FM Stations in Evanston. I produced a Spanish language DJ show. I had to go out and of course sell the time, which was ok. I learned about sales and putting together a program that would be interesting and entertaining. As a consequence of my focus on the Spanish language both in college and in doing the program, I made quite a few of friends in the Latin America community. It heightened my interest in wanting travel to Mexico. Well backing up just a step, I did in fact make my first trip to Mexico as a tourist when I was 18.

Rose

I wanted to ask about that.

Johnson

I had a guide dog back then so it was just she and I and we took the train to Mexico City. We go left twice by the train while in Mexico. That was an interesting adventure.

Engel

How long of a train ride was that?

Johnson

Three days

Engel

OK

Johnson

First time it was a little small town in northern Mexico. We got off and I took the leash and harness off of my dog, whose name is Tasha, to let her answer to nature's call. The train left so I had to stay there for twelve hours until the next train came by and we got on that one.

Rose

What was the like in the town?

Johnson

It was very small and I really didn't go anywhere. I stayed in this one little inn with this Mexican family. They didn't understand me very well and I didn't understand them very well so it was a little scary. (Johnson and Rose laughing) However, it turned out very well. -- Break -- So then I got on the train again and got off in San Luis Potosi a major city between the border and Mexico City to pick up my luggage which I had telegraphed to ask them to drop it off the train so that I could catch up to it. Well while I was checking my luggage and had to write a receipt in Spanish that I had received my luggage in good fashion and that nothing was missing, and blah, blah. The train left again. There were two young Mexican men who escorted me to a small hotel a couple of blocks from the train station. I was quite apprehensive about their motives and wondered if this was something that they had previously arranged. I got into my room and I closed the door and they said good-bye and I able to feed my dog and lay down and I began to have these crazy dreams about different things happen and then there is a story in my book about waking up feeling a hand touching my face, but I won't tell you that story or you won't read my book.

Rose

(laughing)

Johnson

<topic>Graduate school and living in Mexico City</topic>

Anyway, I got to Mexico and I had a really very enjoyable time there for three weeks and I decided that I did want to come back. After I graduated from Northwestern and worked a couple of years at the radio station, I arranged to me a second trip back this time with friends. Only problem was this time I had an appendixes attack so I had to have an emergency appendectomy in a small little hospital in Mexico City. That's another exciting adventure, which is also in my book (Johnson and Rose laughing) but it all turned out well. I survived and so I decided somehow somehow I wanted to go to Mexico and spend some time there, because I knew that was the only way I would really learn to speak the language well.

So I began thinking what possible excuse or pretext could I use and I decided I could go to graduate school. That's what you do when you want to do something and I found a college in Mexico City, which was accredited with the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities. It was at that time called Mexico City College since then has changed its name and it is known as Universidad de las Americas.

Rose

Can you say that a little slower for the transcriber?

Johnson

Universidad de las Americas
Is that better?

Rose

Yes

Johnson

OK, the only graduate program they offered was in economics. I said, "Oh, that sounds good. I'll become an economist. It was all a pretext and it took a lot of things happening just right for me to be able to finance my trip down there and my first ... they didn't call them semesters, they were trimesters because they were quarterly program ... so I borrowed money from a friend, worked as a telemarketer, and my mom helped me and I made it down there. After the first three months I was able to secure a scholarship and complete my studies.

Well of course as things happen, I heard there was a radio station that had English language programming five hours a day. I said, "I could do that". I talked my way into being hired as a radio announcer for the station. At first I volunteered to do it without pay. I said, "I don't mind, I'll just come in and do it". After they saw that I could do it, they said OK we'll start paying you with very, very low pay. I think it was like \$2.00 an hour. Back then it was not a lot of money.

Then I met my wife and she was studying English and the university had set up a conversation club and asked for American volunteers who wanted to come in and practice or help these Mexican students practice their English. I thought that is a nice thing to do and I was going to make a few dollars doing it so I volunteered to do that. Each of us Americans had like ten Mexican students, 90% of whom were lovely, lovely señoritas. (Rose laughing) She was one of the lovelier ones and the one that didn't gush or ooze all over. She was pretty poised and coy and so I think this is the one I want to concur. I was successful. We were married a year later.

Rose

What was her name?

Johnson

Diana, as a matter of fact today is her birthday, August 14th. We were married for 47 years and she passes away 10 years ago. We had six children and 21 grandchildren and a bunch of great grandchildren – I forgot how many.

Rose

(laughing) That's great.

Johnson

I worked at the radio station, teaching English as a Second Language, Marketing Research Assistant, and in Advertising. I was an Advertising Manager for an English Language monthly magazine. You did whatever you needed to do in order to raise a family.

Rose

Did you have a guide dog this whole time?

Johnson

No, my dog became ill and passed away so she only went with me on my first trip and that was all.

Rose

Was she your first guide dog?

Johnson

My only

Rose

Oh, OK

Johnson

My one and only. She was a Doberman Pinscher, a black beautiful Doberman. Then after a while I was lucky enough to break into television down there and did the first ever English Language Newscast on television. I was fortunate enough to be invited to be of part of a team of Spanish speaking radio announcers that covered the Lunar Landing in 1969.

Rose

very cool

Johnson

hmmm

Rose

That's very cool.

Johnson

I was also part of the team that anchored locally the 1968 Olympics. I got to interview a lot of visiting recording artist from the United States that came to perform in Mexico in clubs and hotels including Eartha Kitt, Paul Anka, Stevie Wonder, the Lettermen, Sammy Davis Jr., and bunches of folks like that. It was really quite a treat.

Rose

Did you end up doing any of the coverage of the 1968 Paralympics?

Johnson

I'm sorry.

Rose

Did you end up doing any of the coverage of the 1968 Paralympics? I think that was the first year that they were held with the Olympics.

Johnson

Yes, it was. That's when it was African American participants put their fists in the air.

Rose

Yah. I was wondering about the Paralympics, too.

Johnson

Oh the Paralympics, I don't know where they were, we didn't cover those.

Rose

OK, I think they were held separately in 1968 from what I heard.

Johnson

They may have been, but I don't know where they were held though.

Rose

Mexico City actually

Johnson

They didn't apparently get a lot of press.

Rose

Yah

Johnson

I'll tell you this about Mexico during the time that I was there. You didn't see many people with disabilities.

Rose

Yah, I was going to ask.

Johnson

They were kind of shut away. Blind people in Mexico either were message therapist, musicians, or beggars. Those were the three professions pretty much.

Rose

Ok, Trevor just looked up that 1968 was the first time, I forget the name of what became the Paralympics. They were held in Tel Aviv in 1968, but it was the first time is called the Paralympics.

Johnson

OK

Rose

Thanks Trevor. How did you get around Mexico City?

Johnson

I was very lucky, because the first six months that I stayed in Mexico I stayed with a family. The father of whom was totally blind and traveled the city without a cane, without sight, and incredible, incredible confident and very well. He showed me how to get around, what buses to take, how to ask for help, and his example/mentorship was indispensable to me. For feeling totally comfortable traveling around that city, which is huge, a huge city. Of course the public transportation system all though maybe not with the most modern vehicles, but it was very plentiful and there were buses everywhere. If you were blind you didn't pay. You could jump on a bus, jump off a bus, jump on a bus, jump off a bus, and so you got around. We did not venture into the subway although the subway did exist. We never went down to the subway, we all surface traveled.

Rose

How did you link up with this family?

Johnson

What?

Rose

How did you link up with this family?

Johnson

With him

Rose

Yah

Johnson

Well actually, it was through a friend that I made in Chicago. When I told him of my intention to go to Mexico and I was looking for a place to stay. He said you can stay with Raul, he'll let you. So I did. They had two rooms and there were three children, his wife, him, and me. We managed very well.

Rose

When we were talking about getting around, I just wanted to ask in Chicago how did you get around? You said the Hearing Impaired Students were your guides, but how did you get to your elementary school and stuff like that?

Johnson

The fact that I had that early experience as an elementary student of traveling on public transportation gave me a good awareness of the layout of the city and how to get around. When I was in high school I simply continued that, but not to go to school. I used that same skill to meet friends, go out on dates, and so forth because I knew the layout of the city. Chicago is a pretty easy city to get around once you learn the basics, because it's very much squared off.

Rose

Its grid.

Johnson

Very grid, yes. Back then bus drivers and what we called street car drivers were motormen were very helpful. They would announce every stop, EVERY STOP so you memorized a lot of stuff and you knew where you were. It was very easy. I took the elevated and the subway and didn't have any trouble at all. I went from my home, which was northwest Chicago to

Rose

What neighborhood?

Johnson

to Northwestern changing buses then elevated and so forth. Then down town to an organization downtown that provided volunteer readers to college students and so you go down to the loop and go to their facilities. There were volunteer people there that would read your textbooks to you. So yes, I traveled Chicago very freely without ever a concern.

Rose

That's great. What neighborhood did you grow up in?

Johnson

What?

Rose

What neighborhood?

Johnson

It was northwest initially about 4400 north and 5600 west

Rose

OK

Johnson

and then moved to about 3700 west. But even when we live in 5600 west, which is almost at the city limits, my brother and I and our friends we used to walk to places. We would walk miles. For example, to the amusement park which was called Riverview

Rose

I've heard of that.

Johnson

and we would walk there so that we could save our money to spend on the rides rather than on the bus or the street car. From where it was located 3200 north and 2400 west that was a good five – six miles and we thought nothing of that.

Rose

Wow

Johnson

So I'm back in Mexico after 17 years and I decided that it's time to repatriate myself to back to the states and introduce my children to another culture. My three oldest children are fully bilingual and I wanted my youngest ones to also be exposed to living in the United States. I decided I was going to try to get a job in television. I went to California and visited like seven cities in five days and dropped off videos and resumes and nothing happened. (Johnson laughing)

Rose

This was what year?

Johnson

1973. Then a friend of mine moved to San Antonio and he came up with a bright idea that we could establish a Spanish publish company and wanted me to join him and I thought oh that's a good idea. I could do that to promote tourism from Mexico to the United States among the wealthy Mexican population. I contacted channel 12, which is here in San Antonio and again offered to be a commentator or something on their station. They said we like what you look like so come up here and come talk to us. I said ok and I gambled and I relocated my family and we came up here in August 1974. My friend and I started our business, it looked like it had a lot of promise and then there was a double de-evaluation of the Mexican peso and our customer market went.

Rose

It went away.

Johnson

It went away. We went broke.

Rose

Oh jeez

Johnson

I did get the job with the T.V. station so I was on San Antonio television for a little short of a year doing cultural commentaries. A lot of it talking about the people built up Texas, all the different nationalities. We have a wonderful Institute of Texas Cultures here in San Antonio and they were a great resource for me to talk about the Danish Texans, the Czech Texans, the German Texans, and so forth. Then of course I did quite a few commentaries to Mexican culture of Spanish history and so forth. It was a lot of fun and I really enjoyed doing that. But then they changed their format and that went away.

I was kind of struggling looking for some other place to work. Over the course of about two years I think I sent out probably 250 resumes and applications, went on probably 60 interviews in maybe five or six states including Washington D.C., Virginia, and Oklahoma. After two years, a really depressing two years... (Johnson laughing)

Rose

I can imagine.

Johnson

Having to apply for and use food stamps for part of that time. My wife got a job and that helped out. I finally got three job offers in one week.

Rose

Wow!

Johnson

<topic>Human Resource Manager at Southwestern Bell Telephone</topic>

I chose the one that was here in San Antonio which was with Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. I was hired as a Human Resource Manager. The interesting story about that was I had been making acquaintance with a number of people in the telephone company because of my interest in beep baseball.

Rose

Can you explain what beep baseball is?

Johnson

(Johnson with hearty laughter) Well, beep baseball is a sport that was developed actually by the telephone company Pioneers of American in San Francisco and it involves utilizing a 16 inch softball, which is hollowed out and a beeper is put inside. When the pin is pulled, it doesn't explode, but it sets off a beeping sound so that it can be located by someone who is blind or visually impaired.

The idea is to hit the ball and the fielders try to locate the ball, they rarely will catch it or knock it down and pick it up. If they are able to do that before the runner gets to the base, then it is called an out. If the runner gets to the base, then it is a run. Now you don't run all the way around the bases, because that might actually cause some collisions out in the field so you only run to one base.

The base is a pylon made out of plastic, which also has been electronically equipped with a buzzer. When the batter hits the ball the umpire turns on the base, so that the batter will run to the base and not in the middle of the field. They will either turn to first base or third base so you don't know so you have to be alert. They have either five or six players on each team.

Initially they started off with the batter hitting the ball off with a tee, but then it became a little more sophisticated and decided that they could pitch the ball to the batter so they included a sighted pitcher and a sighted catcher who is on the same team as the batter. So the idea was not to strike the batter out, but rather to put the ball where he was swinging. He would let you know he was releasing the ball with a verbal announcement of "ready- PITCH" and then the batter would time his swing, hopefully, so that it would coincide with the arrival of the ball to the plate.

Rose

The ball was beeping?

Johnson

<topic>Start a Beep Baseball League in San Antonio, Texas</topic>

The ball was beeping, but you really didn't have that much of a help from the ball because was coming through the air. It was more like the pitcher has to throw the ball at the spot where he believes the batter is going to swing. That's what we played and I brought the game.

Then it was introduced in Minnesota and Arizona and a few other places. I went up to Minnesota in 1975 to attend a ski competition involving cross-country skiing, which I had never done before. That was fun. I met some beep baseball players and they said you really need to start a beep baseball team in Texas because you got the weather for it. I said, "OK". I went back and contacted Telephone Pioneers and told them about this game and told them why it was important for them to sponsor a team in San Antonio, which they did. Eventually we had three teams in San Antonio and were able take a couple of these teams to national competitions.

Rose

Wow, where did it start?

Johnson

Hmmm

Rose

Where did beep baseball start?

Johnson

Well, it began in San Francisco and then it was picked up in other states like Arizona, Chicago, and Minnesota.

Rose

OK, so Texas was pretty early?

Johnson

Texas jumped in pretty early, yes. As a result of my contacts there I met quite a few people in the telephone company. I sort of built that relationship and I was becoming more interested in and active in the Disability Rights Movement. It came to me the idea that they need to have someone in the phone company who was basically a knowledgeable person about disability and could help them do a better job of answering the needs of their customers with disabilities as well as their employees with disabilities. I brazenly wrote up a job description and justification for that job description of a person that they needed to create a job for and hire to do this job in their public relations department.

Rose

This was before you were hired, right?

Johnson

Yes

Rose

Do you still have a copy of that?

Johnson

Maybe, somewhere, I'll need to look.

Rose

I would be need to see.

Johnson

I presented this and then I was brazen enough to attach my resume and I was the perfect person for this job. (Johnson and Rose giggling) Well they did not create the job and they didn't hire me for that, but it caught their interest enough so when I indicated that I was looking a job and that I would really like to work for them. They offered me a job in their human resources department. I said, "that's fine". I accepted.

Rose

How did you get interested in Disability Rights before this?

Johnson

OK, I didn't really know anything about Disability Rights or 1973 Rehab Act – any of that until I came to the states in 1974. In 1975 when I went to Minnesota to attend this ski program, they call Ski for Light cross-country skiing opportunity for ... and it was the first Ski for Light program was ever offered and it has been offered every year since and people get to go and ski with competent skiers learn how to do cross-country skiing. It's a lot of fun and very strenuous. I will tell you that.

Rose

I can believe that.

Johnson

<topic>Disability Rights Activist</topic>

In Minnesota I met a friend of mine that I had known when I was in college in Chicago and she was a blind lady that was now working in New York City in the Mayor's office. Her job was Disability Coordinator for the city of New York. She got hold of my ear and said you need to get involved in Disability Rights. I said what is it all about. She basically mentored me and convinced me that this was a worthwhile endeavor and that I need to put some energy in to it. I didn't have anything better to do, since I didn't have job. (hearty laughter from Johnson)

I came back along with the beep baseball and contacting different people with disabilities and different groups. I organized a visit by **Unis Feureto 42:37** to come down to San Antonio and I set up several meeting about cross disabilities, representatives, and agencies people of the city of San Antonio and we talked about the importance of the Rehabilitation Act and complying with it. It kind of grew from there. The more I learned about it, the more interested I became in it. I began reading different books. Frank Bowe's book, that I recommend to you, which is really a powerful, powerful statement of advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities. (This book is titled, *Handicapping America: Barriers to disabled people.*)

I started doing public talks for the company even though I was a job interviewer for Southwestern Bell. They allowed me also to speak about the issues of disability. I was able to do some internal training, sensitivity

training among departmental managers. I was put on a task force to figure out ways the company could be more open to hiring people with disabilities. It kind of kept growing from there.

Rose

Did you start seeing an impact?

Johnson

Pardon me

Rose

Did you start seeing an impact in the company?

Johnson

Did I encounter (confused)

Rose

Like, did they start hiring people with disabilities?

Johnson

They didn't really do as much as I thought they should, but at least they became a little more accommodating for those who did have disabilities that were in the company. That was important. I also noticed that they were becoming more sensitive to the needs of customers with disabilities and responding to those requests. A friend of mine told me who worked for the phone company, you know our company is like a giant dinosaur. I said, "what do you mean?" Well you kick them in the tail and five years later it turns its head. I think that is generally true for a lot of society, a lot of corporations, and our Federal Government. It takes time from the initial verbal understanding of what should happen to actual policy implementation.

Rose

Definitely

Johnson

Yeah, a lot of course what drove us was 1973 Rehabilitation Act, which did have an employment clause in it, Title I. Even though affirmative action was primarily a voluntary initiative by companies that had contracts with

the Federal Government They were sensitive to it and would make a few motion in that direction. I did a lot of public talks and some of them are in that book I gave you through Mayor's Committees and in different parts of Texas, EEOC (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), other agencies and organizations. I was part of our own San Antonio Mayor's Committee. I was eventually part of setting up a job bank for persons with disabilities.

Rose

Wow and when was that committee founded?

Johnson

I'm not sure when it was founded because it existed prior to my joining it, but it has vanished since then. It no longer exists.

Rose

You joined in when?

Johnson

I joined Southwestern Bell in 1979.

Rose

And the San Antonio Mayor's Committee when did you join that?

Johnson

I was in the Mayor's Committee about 1977.

Rose

OK

Johnson

Out of that Mayor's Committee we were able to establish a (ringing chimes) lot of things started happening all at once as you may recall.

Rose

Yeah

Johnson

The 1973 Rehab Act did not get implemented and regulations did not actually happen for a number of years

Rose

Yeah

Johnson

until 1978. There was a lot of demonstrations and uproar and a lot of activity around all that. It was an exciting time to be involved, because people with disabilities were finding their voice. They were finding that they had a value, they had a reason to demand what they were demanding, and it was an interesting coming together of people prior to that the different groups sort of struggled on their own. The blind group worked on their issues. The Deaf group on their issues. The paralyzed veterans on their issues. Each group was kind of doing its own thing.

Then little by little we began to realize that we have a common cause here. We can be more vociferous. We can be more successful if we join together. One of the big fights here was transportation and the transportation issues was important for all of us, for people with physical disabilities as well as people who were blind. Maybe not so much for the Deaf, but we said to them that this is kind of a single point of focus where we are going to change the establishments of our power, our importance, of our need of equality.

Many of us joined an Advisory Committee to the Public Transportation Company here in town and they refused to acknowledge that accessible transportation meant that they had to provide regular buses that were accessible. In the early stages they there were lawsuits filed by certain members of the disability community. There were three young women particularly: one was quadriplegic, one was paraplegic, and other I think was also paraplegic and they brought law suits.

Rose

Do you remember their names?

Johnson

Barbara Neff was one of them. Rachel, I don't remember what Rachel's last name was. I may be able to find that out.

Rose

OK

Johnson

Around 1978 San Antonio began to provide limited paratransit service through Good Will Industries. There were I think five vans that provided transportation for those who needed paratransit service. Then they switched over to what is called Via Metropolitan Company, a transit company, and they took over the paratransit vehicles from Good Will and added a few more. But, they still were resistant to the idea that their regular buses should also become accessible.

We began attending their advisory committee, which they had to set up under federal law. They had to have an Advisory Committee of Citizens with Disabilities. We got fed up with this token advisory committee which they did not listen too. We would have these meetings and we would give our recommendation and they would be ignored (Johnson laughing) so we went in there with a bunch more people. They didn't have any kind of official membership so anyone who showed up was accepted as a member. They just wanted to show that they had numbers. One of my good friends who worked for the Education Service Center Region 20 brought in his video camera and we made a motion to abolish the advisory committee and we voted it out of existence. (Johnson hearty laughter)

Rose

Wow (laughing)

Johnson

Well now, needless to say

Rose

What was the rational here?

Johnson

<topic>Coalition of Texans with Disabilities</topic>

It wasn't doing anything so get rid of it. The executive director for the transportation company was absolutely furious with us, because it took away their veil of purpose of existing that they had this input from the disability community and they were doing their part. Well they didn't, so any way. It kind of brought things to a head and we were able to eventually get them to pay a little more attention, but it was that very incredible period in 1978-1979 that when CTD (Coalition of Texans with Disabilities) came into being

Rose

Tell us about that.

Johnson

Well, Ok. Somehow somebody created a list of leaders with in the disability community and invited them to come to Houston for an organizational meeting and we didn't know each other. I don't really know who made the selection, but Pat Pound, Bob Guyer, Bobby Simpson, Jerry Hassle, Don Caulwell, Bob Kafka, my buddy Freedmen from Houston those are the ones I remember were members of this initial gathering. **Spelling of highlighted names 55:30**

Rose

Was their anyone there from North Texas?

Johnson

Probably but I don't remember a name. Pat may remember those names. She was one of those invited and she eventually became the first president of CTD (Center of Texans with Disabilities). We were all brought together, oh I almost forgot Larry Evans the Deaf man who at that time lived in San Antonio. The funny story about Larry Evans and I we were travel companions, although he is totally Deaf was totally verbal. He was to be my travel guide and resented it very much, because Deaf people don't like helping blind people. We were introduced at the airport (Johnson laughing) and our mutual friend was Bill Johnson. (Chimes playing for a phone call) Johnson apologizes.

Rose

No worries

Johnson

Larry and I met at the airport and all I knew at the time was finger spelling. I didn't know how to sign. I'm trying to be the good guy. We get on the plane and he picks up a newspaper and starts reading it so I finger spell, "what are you reading?" You know. He says, the news and turns back. (hearty laughter from Johnson) Johnson said, "so what's new?" Evans said, "not much". (Johnson still laughing) Johnson says I'm getting nowhere with my communication skills here. I'm still wanting to be helpful. Well then there is an announcement. Johnson mimics to overhead announcer voice stating, "Our plane is going to be delayed for 20 minutes please remain in your seats." Then I have information he doesn't know. So I get to finger spell to him "plane delayed". Larry says, "WHAT DO YOU MEAN THE PLANE IS DELAY? WHY, WHAT IS HAPPENING" (Johnson and Rose laughing). Johnson finger spells "I don't know". Johnson again relays the message from the announcer "the plane will be delayed further and we have to wait for a part to be brought to us from Houston".

Rose

Oh jeeze

Johnson

Yah, this is Labor Day Weekend, something like that. It was a holiday weekend. I'm not sure if it was Labor Day, President's Day, something. Anyway, I'm communicating this to him and he is now paying real close attention to whatever I have to say. Then they say if anyone would like a drink there will be free drinks at the galley. I said, "Ok". I finger spelled to Larry, "what do you like to drink?" Larry said, "what?" I said, "what drink do you like?" He said, "I like scotch". I said, "Ok, wait here". Johnson goes up to the galley and gets two drinks and I give Larry his drink. Larry signed, "How did you do that? Did you pay for that". Johnson spelled, "no, free". Larry signed, "free, how come it's free?". Johnson said, "because we are waiting it's free". Larry says, "OK". Johnson says he and Larry drink their drinks. Johnson finger spells, "do you want another one?" Larry says, "yeah". They both go up to the galley together to get another drink. Somehow the flight attendants leave the plane and the galley is empty. The bar is right there so I say, "Larry, go behind the bar, go". So I turn around and say the passengers, "what would you like?, what would you like?" So Larry and I become the bartenders and were serving drinks to everybody in the plane.

Rose

and your finger spelling?

Johnson

And I'm finger spelling. We became the best of friends.

Rose

(laughing) That's a great story.

Johnson

That is how CTD (Coalition of Texans with Disabilities) started. (Johnson and Rose laughing heartily) What we learned was we could be of mutual help to one another and it was, I don't know how to put it into words Sarah, but it was a revelation to realize that we had so much in common in terms of our frustration and our desire to be recognized for our abilities and not discriminated against because of our disabilities.

Rose

That makes sense.

Johnson

So we had people at the first meeting that had a history of mental illness. Don Callwell, I don't know if Don Callwell is still alive but he lived there in San Antonio. He founded an organization call Reclamation, which was for persons that had experienced mental illness

Rose

Wow

Johnson

Lee Kitchens, theirs another one.

Rose

I teach about him actually

Johnson

Yeah, Lee of course a little person and Jerry Hassell was another Deaf person from Austin. I think Jerry passed away

Rose

Is Lee Kitchens still alive?

Johnson

I don't know. I really don't know. He lived in Sugarland, I believe.

Rose

OK

Johnson

I believe that's where he lived. You know I've lost contact with all of these people. I don't know, Larry Evans last I heard he had moved to Austin. I don't know if he is still there or not. But many of the founding fathers have passed on because you know we're old coots. That was the beginning of CTD and then we elected Pat as our first president. Bobby Simpson was our second president. I was the third president and Marshall, what was Marshall's name..gosh.. he was from Amarillo (chimes announcing another phone call) So the regulations passed in 1978 allowed there to be creations for independent living, which was a unique idea of an agency or an organization that would be governed by people with disabilities and would employ people with disabilities to

provide services to people with disabilities. So the concept of peer counselling and peer support introduced in the CIL and of course it came out of Berkley, California, obviously. Other organizations sprang up around the country. The first one in Texas was Houston, and then Austin, Dallas, San Antonio..I'm trying to remember there's five of them

Rose

El Paso

Johnson

Maybe it was El Paso. Anyway five centers for independent living and they pretty much all started around 1980. This was a dynamic change in philosophy and attitude that people with disabilities could actually manage and operate an organization to serve their needs. Of course the whole thrust of that was we know best how to address the needs of people who are experiencing disabilities. The concept was all of these centers for independent living would be governed by people with disabilities, well this didn't quite turn out to be true in all cases. Some of the Cerebral Palsy Agencies and Good Will Agencies and other began to move in and you found and today you have agencies and centers of independent living which are actually headed by non-disabled people. We could go into a lot of discussion about why that is the case.

Rose

Yeah

Johnson

<topic>ADA 1990 and growing San Antonio membership in CTD</topic>

And about how it has been a really big disappointment. (somber tone) Nevertheless, back in the early 1980s there was this excitement and this positivity among people with disabilities. We are in charge. We are doing things for ourselves and for our brothers and sisters and so there was a tremendous degree of enthusiasm, and excitement, and a possibility. This continued through the 1980s as it built toward the eventual passage of ADA in 1990, which was the homerun. It was what we all were fighting for and struggling for and believing in. When ADA was passed in 1990 and there was this huge feeling of accomplishment, relief, and in a way a letdown because we did it, now what, now what.

Rose

That makes sense

Johnson

I think the disability community hasn't quite recovered from that. There isn't the urgency, there isn't the intensity that existed in the 1970s and 1980s.

Rose

That does make sense. Could you talk a little more about your relationship about CTD as it got going after the meeting in Houston?

Johnson

What can I say is that we worked extremely hard to build membership. The concept was not so much to have individuals as members but to have organizations as members and we meant organization of people with disabilities and for people with disabilities. At one point I think we had 13 organizational members from San Antonio.

Rose

Wow

Johnson

We had the ARC, Good Will, United Cerebral Palsy, Alamo Council of the Blind, the Northeast Association of the Deaf, Reclamation (Don's group). We just went out and recruited everybody and anybody and we said "we want you as part of this – your voice matters".

Rose

So you were basically one of the key people bringing organizations of San Antonio into CTD?

Johnson

I tried to be

Rose

OK

Johnson

CTD had its meetings in different cities so we would try to build that momentum and enthusiasm in every city we went and as I mentioned to you my proudest moment when I was president for one year was to have our organizational membership reach 92 state wide.

Rose

Wow

Johnson

There was a feeling of partnership and comradery. We accomplished so much in those early years that report tells you. We were able to get things done at the state level. Of course we had a democratic governor at that time, Mark White. So we had some support for our initiatives at the state level and at the city level too. The city of San Antonio hired a woman, Judy Babbitt, who became their Disability Access Office Manager and Judy was a ferocious advocate and she made a lot of changes within the city to benefit those people with disabilities.

Rose

What kind of changes?

Johnson

Well access to buildings, city buildings, curb ramps, the kinds of things that were tangible positive changes. We began realizing instillation of accessible pedestrian signals. There was a lot that needed to be done and it took a long time, but at this point in time I think San Antonio has more accessible pedestrian signals than any other city in Texas.

Rose

Wow

Johnson

Close to a 100.

Rose

That's great

Johnson

Yeah

Rose

Do you remember when she was hired?

Johnson

She actually passed away about a year and a half ago.

Rose

OK, when was she hired by San Antonio?

Johnson

She was hired probably thirty years she worked for them. Let's track back (thinking) no almost 40 years she work for them so in the 1970s was when she

Rose

So San Antonio was really early?

Johnson

We really were at the for front of Disability Awareness.

Rose

Why was that the case in San Antonio?

Johnson

I don't know. Why it was, was maybe the right people there. People were receptive to the idea. We created a cross-disability organization, which many other groups also did Houston and Austin, notably. We had again people from all types of disabilities participating that organization has since vanished.

Rose

What was it?

Johnson

It was called (thinking) It had a terrible name. (thinking) SACCH – San Antonio Citizens Concerned about Handicapism. Isn't that an awful name?

Rose

Wow (Rose and Johnson laughing)

Johnson

I didn't matter what its name was. It was very, very vocal particularly in regard to the transportation issue but also with regard to other issues and again we had people from all disabilities represented.

Rose

Wow, that's very cool. Do you know when it was founded?

Johnson

I wish I could tell you for sure Sarah, but it was in the mid-1970s. That's all I can tell you.

Rose

That's fine. Do you remember some of the other people involved?

Johnson

Uhhh yes, (thinking) many of them are now passed away, but (thinking) Joyce Jenks, my memory is not as good as it used to be...

Rose

That's fine. Well, if you think of other names afterwards you can email them to me.

Johnson

I may. Dennis Dilley was another one. Dr Dennis Dilley from Region 20. He actually did have a disability. He had a heart condition and high blood pressure but basically listed himself as non-disabled. (Johnson laughing)

Rose

Interesting. So what about some of the CTD state level accomplishments that you were particularly proud of?

Johnson

Well I refer you to that report. That does list pretty much list the accomplishments. We were able to get some state funding for the Centers for Independent Living. We were able to extend the VISTA program (Volunteers in Service to America) for another year, which were really important for an extension of CTD network around the state.

Rose

Ok, this report will be really helpful. You said, you were president for one year?

Johnson

Right

Rose

And then you were part of CTD as part of one of these organizations?

Johnson

I stayed involved with CTD for about ten years and then kind of stepped aside to allow other people to be involved. This was also true with the Independent Living Center, which I helped found in 1980 and I was the first chairman of its board. It was an outgrowth of SACCH. SACCH was the disability organization that had to be the sponsoring group of establishment of the Center of Independent Living.

Rose

Oh, OK.

Johnson

So we established it in 1980 and I served as chair and was off and on the board for eight or nine years. Then stepped aside for others to take over.

Rose

What was your roll in addition of president for one year with CTD for those ten years you were involved?

Johnson

I was on the board, a board member, vice president one year, board member the other years. A lot of my efforts were in the area of public relations and media. That is why you have some of the newsletters that I kind of co-authored.

Rose

Oh Ok, things are coming together now. What was Governor Mark White's relationship with you like?

Johnson

He was very sympathetic to our cause unfortunately he only lasted one term. (Johnson laughing) Then we began to encounter some resistance to some of our initiatives and it still is a struggle. Dennis can probably tell you about that

Rose

Yeah (laughing)

Johnson

<topic>Current Legislation and Projects</topic>

Every year you are facing a challenge. I will tell you that I was very, very pleased at this last session that two particular pieces of legislation that I strongly advocated for were successful and did get signed. One of them was a state wide ban on Texting While Driving. We had been advocating for that for ten years. When I say we I am talking about CTD, American Council of the Blind for Texas, and the Texas Silver Hair Legislature. I also have been a member of which is basically an advocacy group of on behalf of seniors. I joined them four years ago to try to help direct some of their initiative toward seniors with disabilities. The other piece of legislation was really something near and dear to my heart and that is "seniors who lose their vision" because there is really a woeful lack of services for persons who lose their vision as seniors.

Rose

Oh Yeah

Johnson

I felt it was really important to put a spot light on that and I was successful to persuading Senator Eddy Lucio from Brownsville to author Bill 1693, which has in essence put the challenge on a committee that had existed before but not with this focus. They are called the Aging Texas Well Committee is a committee, which serves under HHSC (Texas Health and Human Services) and they now have the undertaking to do a complete study of

the situation of seniors who lose their vision. What services are available to them? What could be some additional services to them?

Funding and training of adequate personnel to provide those services and how most importantly how to involve in a collaborative manor the private sector in addressing this issue. We recognize that it will not get more state funding so you got to figure out how to attract the interest of say health insurance companies, the city and state senior centers, AAA, the RSVP, AARP, and all of these other organizations that are out their providing services to seniors in the main stream situation or ambient, but have not addressed the special needs of persons who are seniors who are losing their vision.

Rose

That is a huge group.

Johnson

Huh?

Rose

That is a huge group

Johnson

It is. If we could get some of those resources focused on addressing the needs of seniors who lose their vision this might take up some of the slack. The total number of seniors last year vision impaired who received services was less than 10,000. While the total number of seniors who were classified as legally blind in Texas was 440,000. So that is where the disparity exists.

Rose

Wow, that is huge.

Johnson

I'm very pleased that we got that started. It is still a long road to travel.

Rose

<topic>President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped with Justin Dart</topic>

Yeah, I wanted to ask you about some of the other committees and organizations you have been involved with like the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped. Let's start there.

Johnson

Well yes, I was part of that but I didn't find it particularly meaningful but I did serve on that committee. I've served on the governor committee that was called Governor's Committee on the Handicapped. I got them to change that name when Justin Dart was a member and he was chairing it. I challenged him to change the name and they did. I was a member of that. I currently serve on Bexar County Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities we were trying to wake up the county to doing things. I've been on the cities Advisory Committee, a number of national committees, American Council of the Blind.

Rose

Yeah

Johnson

I was also very active during the 1980s again with a Deaf-blind Group in fact went to a convention at Gallaudet and another one in Colorado national convention of the Association of the of Deaf-blind persons. I became skilled enough that I was able to be an interpreter for some Deaf-blind folks. It really was a great, great experience to be involved with and work with other disabled people.

Rose

That is really neat. Did that come out of working with Larry Evans originally?

Johnson

Yeah well no actually because of my friend Dennis Bildey. He pioneered some really exciting work programs for Deaf-blind people in San Antonio. He got me turned on to that. There was a one point a Texas Association of Deaf-blind and I went to some of those camps and I worked with Dennis on some of that. He got me to go with him to a couple of national conventions; so I did that as well. I've always believed in the cross-disability concepts even though I've been a member of the American Council of the Blind many, many, many years. I have always felt we should not isolate ourselves, that we need to be reaching out. In fact, now that I am a member of the American Council of the Blind there's a committee or task force that they call themselves SASI, Sound and Sight Impaired. They invited me to be part of their leadership team. We just recently got back from a national convention in Reno and was on one of their panel discussions about social isolation for Deaf-blind people.

Rose

Oh, OK

Johnson

I keep my finger in the pie.

Rose

What about the Texas Commission for the Blind?

Johnson

Well, of course it doesn't exist anymore. I was on its board for a number of years and that was very frustrating because we had an executive director who did not want to listen to blind people's opinions

Rose

Oh, WOW

Johnson

We tried to get him fired and eventually he did resign. The Texas Commission for the Blind was dissolved and integrated in to Disability (thinking) DARS

Rose

Oh, which now has split up

Johnson

Again has been integrated into Texas Workforce Solutions, I believe is what they are calling themselves.

Rose

Yeah and I think some of it is under HHS type.

Johnson

Yeah

Rose

<topic>Travel to Japan</topic>

What about your trip to Japan?

Johnson

My trip to Japan that was an interesting trip. I won a contest, an essay writing contest that was sponsored by a magazine, which was circulated in braille to blind persons around the world. It was a week-long convention on blind people and organizations in Japan and nearby Asian countries. I was invited after I won to speak to a couple of groups over there. One of the Lighthouses for the Blind and at the conference itself befriended the editor of the magazine himself. He came and visited us here. A couple of years later there's a group out in Oregon they are Mobility Incorporated, I think

Rose

Oh yeah I think I've heard of them.

Johnson

Yeah

Rose

Is that how you went bungee jumping and white water rafting?

Johnson

No, that was another story. (Johnson laughing) The Mobility International created a team of persons with diverse disabilities to go and meet with a group of Japanese people with disabilities and hold a joint conference and share their ideas and philosophies related to independent living. I applied and was selected to be one of the people. There were two of us. One other blind lady from New York and other folks with other types of disabilities. I think there were seven or eight of us that went from the U.S. and spent the week there and actually got to live with a Japanese doctor for a couple of days.

Rose

Oh wow. What year was this?

Johnson

That would have been 1998. I was a very moving experience and I really enjoyed the Japanese culture. I enjoyed it extremely. 1995 was when I went first to Japan, on that trip my wife went with me. We went to Nagoya from there we were able to travel Kyoto. I was fortunate that I had befriended a young girl when I was

in Mexico City. She was a fan of my radio show. She loved the Beatles and she was like 18 or 17 at the time. She then went back to Japan and we stayed in touch by correspondence and Christmas Cards each year and when I told her I was going to visit Japan with Diana for this conference she volunteered to be our interpreter for the whole week. We were very privileged to have her and the knowledge of the culture, where to eat and what to eat (Johnson laughing) and all that. I was a fantastic experience. That was my Japanese adventure.

Rose

Bungee jumping?

Johnson

I did actually take rather prodigious notes on that. I may publish that.

Rose

Wow, that would be great. What about bungee jumping and white water rafting?

Johnson

<topic>Bungee jumping, swim with a dolphin, and tandem bicycle</topic>

Bungee jumping and white water rafting was in Oregon and that was not too many years ago when I went to a camp, which was for blind people in Portland. They had these opportunities and experiences and I said, sure I want to do these, so I did. I loved it. It was a little scary at first high up there thinking how do I do this. I had this big thing tied around you well what if it doesn't hold me and become scrambled egg (Rose laughing) rocks below but it did.

Rose

That's good. (laughing)

Johnson

Then two years ago in November I got to swim with a dolphin, which had always been my ambition. It almost didn't happen because I didn't exactly know how to grab hold of the dolphin's fins and they were not able to explain it me very well the first time so we missed the couple of first attempts. I thought OK I'm done and then the trainer said well let's try with one more dolphin – do you want to try again. I said, "Yes, Yes!, but wait before we do let's pretend you're the dolphin and tell me how it would be". He was able to show me how a dolphin would come up to me and where to find his/her fins

Rose

Ohhh OK

Johnson

What happens is your hand out with your hand turned backward and the dolphin swims up and puts his fins in one of your hands. They know to do that and then the other fin because he showed me the distance they were apart, I was able to reach over and grab the other fin and then having both fins like this. I just flipped over on top of him and then he swam like a bullet through the water and I'm on top of him and he's swimming and I'm thinking, "and how will this end?"

Rose

(laughing)

Johnson

Do we crash into the wall? What happens? All of a sudden he STOPS. I mean dead stop in the water and I'm thinking where am I and what do I do next? Of course I have a life preserver on still I don't know where I am so I's still holding on. He wants me to know it's time to let go so he dives. (Rose and Johnson heartily laughing) I think I'll let GO.

Rose

That's really funny

Johnson

It was an awesome experience! They are such incredible animals, truly incredible so intuitive, so relevant to humans. That was two years ago.

Rose

That was cool.

Johnson

Have you ever done that?

Rose

No, I haven't.

Johnson

You need to do it.

Rose

It sounds pretty neat. Do you think there are any questions that we should have asked that you'd like to cover?

Johnson

I used to be an avid Tandem bicycle rider. I still have my Tandem but I have kind of put it up because I've lost my captain and he doesn't want to bike anymore. Tandem bike you have to have someone else to bike with. I started biking maybe twenty-five years ago. I really, really enjoyed it.

My greatest adventure was to bike along the Mississippi with a group of blind and sighted bikers. This was organized by a university out of Bemidji, Minnesota. We biked along the Mississippi for about a 130 miles over a week and we camped out every night in tents and so forth. It was a wonderful experience. The mosquitos are humongously large in Minnesota, I can tell you that. It was really a very good experience. I enjoyed the comradery of that as well.

I had my first and only biking accident about three blocks from home when a dog ran out between a couple of parked cars. We hit the dog going about 15 miles per hour and I flew off the bike, because I was totally unprepared. I flew off the bike and I landed on the asphalt and smashed my hip and my collar bone. I had to have a hip replacement so I am now part bionic. That was in 1999 so that means I was 66 at that time. It kind of disabled me for a few months and I got back on the bike and again we continued riding. That is the only accident I only had.

Rose

Wow, that's pretty good.

Johnson

What else to I want to tell you? I don't know I've told you so much.

Rose

You've done a great job.

Johnson

You know couple of interesting things is even though my wife lived with me and observed many of my accomplishments over the years she was frank enough to tell me at one point that if she ever lost her sight she wouldn't want to live.

Rose

Interesting

Johnson

That is an attitude that so many people have the fear – the absolute fear – for becoming blind is almost worse than the fear of death. Imagine for people who have been sighted all of their lives and suddenly at the age of 60 or so there given the news by their ophthalmologist of I'm sorry there is nothing more I can do, you're going blind. The panic, the helplessness, the trauma, that they must experience as a result of that has to be overwhelming. That is why I am so committed to the need for us to find a way for us to reach out to this population and help them.

Rose

That makes a lot of sense.

Johnson

I guess the other thing that I can tell you that I think is significant is how you can have the opportunity to educate so many people by word and by example. You probably know or maybe you don't I write a column for the newspaper twice a month

Rose

Yeah, we say that.

Johnson

I don't always talk about disability, but sometimes I do. I'm really pleased that many people will come up to me in the supermarket or wherever I may be and say I really enjoyed your column. That means something. It also means that I have at my disposal a microphone that I can use and I can share some of my ideas and thoughts and hopefully plant some seeds of understanding. Not just about disability but about stereotypes, which was my last article about having to deal with diversity. How important it is to not only realize that not only do people of different ethnicities or religious beliefs have a right to voice their opinion and offer their contribution, but we as a society and as individuals are so much richer for it.

I really welcome the opportunity to speak in public, to teach workshops, to hopefully spread words of encouragement that optimism and understanding both to people with disabilities and those without disabilities. I can honestly say that I've made six ambassadors from among my children and they take it so naturally and so normally and my grandchildren as well. I remember one comment my daughter shared with me when she was in her teens maybe 13 or 14 and she told me that a couple of her girlfriends asked her LouAnna what is it like to have a father whose blind? She said I don't know I've never had any other kind. That meant so much to me, so much to me.

