

Mrs. Leah Gardner

Disability Advocate

*Interview conducted by
Alexa Bynum
In 2018 in Kaufman, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Born prematurely in Illinois, Leah Gardner moved to Comanche, Texas at three years old. Mrs. Gardner volunteered at the Muscular Dystrophy Association in her teenage years and later went on to pursue a degree in Rehabilitation Science from UT Southwestern. After obtaining her degree, she worked for a variety of companies including the following: The Muscular Dystrophy Association, United Cerebral Palsy, Ability Connection, and HCS (Home and Community Services). Mrs. Gardner has a passion for communication for all individuals and has worked in the field of assistive technology. Mrs. Gardner took this passion and created a business to help match individuals with the correct assistive technology for them. Mrs. Gardner currently resides in Kaufman, Texas as works for two individuals who are non-verbal while running her current business.

Topics Discussed

- Childhood
- College
- Muscular Dystrophy Association Camps
- Work at United Cerebral Palsy
- Work at Ability Connection
- Changes in Assistive Technology
- Proloquo2go demonstration
- Work as an ATP Professional
- Work at HCS
- Creation of Gardner Assistive Technology Consulting
- Current Work
- Foster Son

Gardner

And all of this is yours.

Bynum

Yes, and if you want, I can make copies and send them to you or are you...

Gardner

Mmm, ask me again at the end.

Bynum

Okay and if at any point you want to stop talking it's completely fine just let me know and we'll just turn it off and that's that. If there's a subject, you just don't want to talk about let me know.

Gardner

I'm really an open book, but I keep thinking about my sister listening to it.

Bynum

(Laughs)

I completely understand. Okay, so this is Alexa Bynum interviewing Leah Gardner for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project, today's date is May 3rd and I am at the Kaufman County public library I am here today to talk with Leah about her work in the disability advocacy world, and we will talk about a lot of different topics but we are also going to focus a bit on her work on Augmented and Alternative Communication also known as AAC. Thank you for participating in the University's Oral History Project. First off would you like to tell me a little bit about your early life, your childhood, when you were born, where? All that fun stuff.

Gardner

<topic>Childhood</topic>

Okay, I was born in Illinois and I was actually premature and I was born in July and I didn't come home until October and I was transferred by ambulance to a place that could take care of me better and I had a couple of heart surgeries before I went home for the first time. And I say all of that because I think that that is part of what has given me compassion for working with individuals with disabilities.

Bynum

Okay, did you... You were born in Illinois, when did you end up here in Texas? Did you move here in your childhood or in high school?

Gardner

In my childhood, I started third grade in Commerce, Texas. I grew up in Commerce Texas.

Bynum

Um so, did you go to college?

Gardner

I did.

Bynum

Okay where did you go to school at?

Gardner

<topic>College</topic>

I started out at SMU; I spent a lot of my parent's money.

Bynum

(Laughs)

Gardner

And then I graduated from UT Southwestern from a program that no longer exists. That...I have a Bachelor of Science in rehabilitation science, but it is like through the school of allied health sciences.

Bynum

What made you want to pursue that degree? Was it what you just spoke about or was it something else?

Gardner

I had already been working with people with disabilities for well, I'd been volunteering for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. I had a cousin in Chicago that had muscular dystrophy and I...he was quite a bit older than me and I was always fascinated by my cousin Chucky and we only saw him at Christmas and the occasional other time. But I was always fascinated by him, so he was my original reason to want to work with people with disabilities. I can't remember the question.

Bynum

Oh no, um just how you ended up in that field. But so...

Gardner

I was at SMU and I was not a good match. And I had someone that now I know that that was am mentor, I used another word back then, but she was my mentor. And she had graduated from the same program, and it was a very good fit. Where I left SMU with not passing grades, I graduated UT Southwestern with a 3.85.

Bynum

Oh, that's awesome.

Gardner

Yeah, I'm kind of, I made up for my... it took me and I also say it took me four colleges because I did the work at SMU, but then I went to community college, and to...because they only had like the last two years of your schooling at the UT program. And Texas A&M Commerce or East Texas State University as it was then. I took some classes at home.

Bynum

Okay so you said you started volunteering with the Muscular Dystrophy association and then you ended up working there. Was that right after college, or was there any work in between there that was disability related?

Gardner

<topic>Muscular Dystrophy Association camps</topic>

I...started out running a pledge center in Commerce, Texas during the Labor Day Telethon and then I...As soon as I was old enough, sixteen years at the time I began attending Muscular Dystrophy Association summer camp, and that's truly what changed my life. It gave me something to focus on, something to work towards I say it gave me my career. And I met people that, the volunteers and the campers and the campers were what we called the individuals with muscular dystrophy and giving them a good week was what we dedicated the week to. And had a heck of a good time in other wise.

Bynum

So, do you have any, I guess a particular fond memory from that time or one of those camps, that you would like to share?

Gardner

I have a lot of really good memories. During...I went, I attended ten camps in eight years and I had every position except camper. I was an attendant, I was rookie attendant of the year. I took care of a young lady in a wheelchair and did a lot for her and she was really shy but she had a really good time that year. And then... and we maintained a friendship the rest of her life, and I was unit leader the next year and then they we...other positions like senior counselor was the top position and then I also went to MDA summer camp as an employee of MDA.

Bynum

Okay.

Gardner

And so, just it was...It really formed a lot of who I am, I think from that experience, from those experiences. And now with Facebook, I'm friends with so many of the people that I went to camp with, both the individuals the campers the other attendants. And we all still agree that it was, it gave many of us our careers and helped us to be who we are because we gave that week to those campers.

Bynum

Okay, what kind of work did you do at MDA when you worked there?

Gardner

I was a patient service coordinator, so I coordinated clinics and support groups and camp.

Bynum

Okay, and then you said you went to United Cerebral Palsy in Memphis, so what brought on the move?

Gardner

My husband's job brought us to Memphis and my job kept us there.

Bynum

Okay

Gardner

<topic>Work at United Cerebral Palsy</topic>

And, we moved there nine months' pregnant that's a whole nother thing. But I worked for UCP and that's when I went from a position where I was asking people in more of a charity angle to more of an advocate. Because my job with UCP was to help people with disabilities go to work. And so, we did we worked with our local vocational rehab entity and they funded training programs so we trained people to...Some of the training was just basic computer skills to learn to type, or Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, Publisher. We also had a computer repair program and we had a certified nursing assistant program. And then we would also help people get their GED. Or, finish their high school diploma, so I helped with the basic education, job readiness, type program and then I also ended up being the director of the program which was like the Principal. (Laughs)

And recruited people for the program, and actually it was an inclusive program so it existed originally to help people with disabilities go to work, but then the...UCP evolved to include people that just were

underprivileged in some sort of way to be able to go to work so we helped a lot of people get into the...into work. Whatever challenges they had. So, a lot of advocacy and....

Bynum

So, did y'all...This might be a silly question but was it all kind of...was it like everyone mixed in together or did y'all have like separate programs?

Gardner

Good question. It was one of a mainstreams, I'm trying to remember the word.... inclusive, it was inclusive training program, inclusive training programs. Now we had things to accommodate people, like assistive technology. But we also had people without disabilities, so everybody was together. I have a quick thing to tell you about one of the classes. We had a group of students in our office technology program and the teacher was not there and so he had given everyone an assignment, it was the middle of their class, like it wasn't like the first day so they all had assignments and I walked in and it was a small group. One of the individuals was completely blind and he was using JAWS (Job Accommodations with Speech), and it is a software program that basically reads the computer screen to you screen reading and then the input is with screen keyboard shortcuts as opposed to a mouse. So, I walked in and I was like okay is everybody working y'all doing what you're supposed to do? And I asked the one guy that was blind, I said so your computer's not on, and he goes "Yes, it is, my monitor's not, you don't need to see it cause I can't." (Laughs)

There was another time where it was a Office Technology Class and we had an individual with significant disabilities and he managed to have perfect attendance and then there were some other people that the reason that they were there may have been more like because of a recovery situation like alcohol, drugs and they were perfectly physically able yet their attendance and their promptness was nowhere near the record that this individual who needed help getting up in the morning and everywhere and that his reliability and dependability were so much better and it was a great example to some of the people who didn't have quite the same excuses.

Bynum

Those are great, so was that when you started working...So did you learn about AAC when you were in college or did you like start using it when you were in kind of this work environment. Like because you said, your work environment kind of changed in what you were doing. Does that make sense?

Gardner

I know we've talked about Augmentative communication, but Assistive technology is really my specialty. That's any kind of technology whether it's off the...buy it off the shelf...It can be Velcro or it can be a wheelchair or it can be a special software program, like I just described JAWS. Maybe not a great way of describing JAWS, but. There's...Dragon naturally speaking is another example of assistive technology that people without disabilities use to speak to the computer and then it receives what they say. Whether it's just dictating a document, but you can also use that software to totally control your computer, if you don't have the physical ability to touch the computer. So that's really my specialty, although my passion is communication, and that's where the AAC comes.

As far back as college and I'll just say I graduated college in 87 that assistive technology was not the same then because we didn't have computers, iPad's, cell phones, but even in the program I graduated from there were individuals with disabilities who had some kind of assistive technology or accommodation. And then when I worked at UCP and actually the program we had was Memphis Works that ...There were people with it was from ninety-three to two thousand and seven that I worked there so there was a big evolution of computers in that time and the fact that some of the individuals needed the assistive technology so I was exposed to it then. And began a bit of a passion for it in my contacts and networking and things like that.

Bynum

Okay. After UCP you came to Ability Connection, so did you move back to Texas for Ability Connection?

Gardner

<topic>Work at ability connection</topic>

We did. This was home we were...my youngest sister and both my stepdaughters were all three expecting their first babies and if that's not a sign from God that it's time to move back home to Texas then I don't know what is. So, we were... we moved back home to Texas and I had, since I was working for United Cerebral Palsy I applied with United Cerebral Palsy and I was hired. The job I got when I...and then United Cerebral Palsy became Ability Connection in my time there, I think it was 2011 that they changed their name. So, through my job there, my job there was Director of Assistive Technology.

They, the state has a technology, assistive technology demonstration program. And they have bestowed a group of assistive technology pieces: computers, software, hardware. In these demonstration labs, there are sixteen throughout the state. And in, at Ability Connection you see there was one of the demo sites and then they hired me to be Director. All the technology that I'm talking about has been bestowed into a non-profit. And usually the non-profit can't hire someone to be, to just do that because the responsibility is just to give people demonstration experience, so in other words there's no money being brought in for that program. So generally, someone has another job and then they also do demonstrations also. I was blessed in that they hired me as Director of Assistive Technology and that was my job. So, we had a group of people that came to the center every day for their day habilitation program and many of those individuals could benefit from assistive technology so while I had people from the outside that would come in I also had projects, people that I was able to help become more independent in the computer lab to use the assistive technology to become more independent and then when people would come into the lab I had people who could demonstrate that technology because they needed it it's one thing for me to demonstrate Dragon Naturally Speaking or a software program for someone who's non-verbal, but if someone who is truly non-verbal uses it, that's quite a different effect, there's a bigger wow factor.

Bynum

When you were working with that...I mean we kind of talked about how the technology changed, but did you...This seems like a silly question, but did you really see how as the technology changed it was just able to help more and more, like starting from one product to kind of a lot of options, or are there options now? Does that make sense?

Gardner:

<topic>Changes in assistive technology</topic>

Yeah, the technology that they bestowed, I'm saying that word but they provided the technology for people with hearing impairment, mobility, cognitive, literacy, vision impairment, and then also for people

that are non-verbal. So, it was all these categories and there...I definitely have seen an advancement so to speak and we can get back to Augmentative and Alternative Communication. AAC is referring to if someone can't get their needs met using their natural speech. So, we think about Steven Hawking and the device that he used attached to his wheelchair. Well these devices are like eight to twelve thousand dollars, and so with the invention of the iPad there are now apps that do the same thing. So, Steven Hawking had the access challenge also, he couldn't use his hands to like touch an iPad to be able to use that as his voice, but there are people who also can't get their needs met using their natural speech but they can use an iPad and then so then we're talking about how much is an iPad, plus maybe a three-hundred-dollar communication app.

Bynum

Three hundred dollars?

Gardner

Some of them are up to three hundred dollars. There are some that are way less expensive and some that are free. But you get what you pay for. And then there are alternative ways of accessing an iPad that someone who can't use their hands to access it can also use an iPad.

Bynum

So, how would they?

Gardner

There's a built-in switch control in an iPad. So, you can use the iPad itself as a switch so even if you can't if you don't have the fine motor skills to touch like a button for to say something if you can touch anywhere on the iPad you can then, it's switch and scanning, so it's a different concept. It would go like row by row by row and then you would hit the switch, I'm just going to use that term switch, and we can think about it like the commercial the staples commercial with the easy button, that's what...how I describe switches. And they change lives in people's lives with access.

Bynum

So, this might seem silly too, but is that on every iPad, like you can change the setting to be like that and they are just that accessible for everyone?

Gardner

It can be, yes. But you can also connect a switch a...a mechanical switch just like the staples easy button, you would not, you would Bluetooth it. I have a switch adapter in my car, I don't have a switch.

Bynum

That's so cool, because I mean I can remember when ipod's first came out, and to think like I wouldn't think that would be very accessible. For, I mean maybe for some but not for all, but now that they, it's pretty much you can do a lot with that and you can buy an app. That's so cool.

Gardner

I have some I can demonstrate that for you.

Bynum

Yeah, if you want to.

Gardner

Sure.

Bynum

That's so cool, maybe we should have videotaped our interview.

Gardner

<topic> Proloquo2go demonstration </topic>

The particular communication app I've got lots of them on here, but the one that I kind of use a lot (indistinguishable). This one is called Proloquo2Go and it is, it's, oh I'll help you with that. P-R-O-L-O-Q-U-O the numeral two and then capital G-o.

Bynum

Thank you.

Gardner

And proloquo means talk out loud in Latin. So, it's to talk out loud and then the two go is the portable part.

Bynum

Okay.

Gardner

And, so I can...One of my bosses has used this because he is non-verbal, and so I have some settings on here that are not...that's not how it's designed.

Bynum

This is really cool, there's so much, there's so many options you can have and you can customize it a lot.

Gardner

Oh definitely, but it's built so that you can...it's a core word vocabulary so... I want to be accurate in what I'm telling you, but it's something like eighty percent of what we say is with a small percentage of words. We don't have to say the word table every time we can say it. So, we have pronouns that are orange, and the buttons are different color borders and they represent the different parts of speech. Pronouns are orange, the verbs are pink the little words, prepositions are green borders and then adjectives and adverbs are blue. Nouns are yellow and phrases and question words are black borders so the idea is that I can take...I can go across and do one every color and I can almost get a sentence. That's why it's built that way. And it's research based what they put where and then the other concept here is motor planning so that if I know that I can open up this folder and get to a particular word, that I can learn that motor plan to get there and I'm going to learn.... It's reliable that it's going to be in the same place every time. I'm going to hopefully not talk too loud.

Proloquo2Go

I, Want, That.

Bynum

That's so cool.

Proloquo2go

I want that.

Bynum

It does it one by one and then you can do the whole sentence.

Gardner

Yes.

Bynum

That's so cool.

Gardner

Yes, yes and it is customizable, but you can do a lot without doing a lot of customizing. And I have it in a man's voice because most recently a man has used it. But I use this iPad and app for demonstrating and assessing individuals and then also I'm a trainer for proloquo2go. I've done sixty-six proloquo2go workshops in like five years...? I wish I knew the exact number of years, but I know I have done sixty-six proloquo2go workshops. And I've...all over the north Texas area, but also in...throughout Texas and in Oklahoma, and in New Mexico. And my next appointment is in Montana.

Bynum

Wow, branching out geographically

Gardner

Kinda cool! Yeah so, I teach primarily like the therapists and the teachers and some end users and some family members how to use the app and some customizing but also sort of I say what's possible with the app, and then they can make the decision about what's most appropriate for their individual user.

Bynum

So how did you get involved in training with that?

Gardner

Because McKinney ISD called me one time and said can you possibly teach us about proloquo2go and I was like hm yes, and so I kind of got myself in gear and learned how to do it. And they used to have a training program that the company that makes proloquo2go is called AssistiveWare and they are located in Amsterdam. No, I have not been to Amsterdam.

Bynum

(Laughs) Someday.

Gardner

Exactly. They used to have a training program that if you watch all of their videos and take a quiz and you pass the quiz then you can be named a trainer and listed on their website, and so we can blame it on McKinney ISD that they got me started.

Bynum

That sounds very good. I'm going to kind of bring us back to... I got us down a little bit of a rabbit trail.

Gardner

Well I did too, because it's a passion.

Bynum

No, that was really good. So, after Ability Connection you went to a for profit company that worked with Durable Medical Equipment, so that sounds a little bit different were you still doing kind of that same role there or were you on a new...?

Gardner

<topic?Work as an ATP Professional</topic>

Well while I was at Ability Connection, I got a certification called Assistive Technology Professional (ATP) certified. And most ATP's are the people that do the measuring of wheelchairs and matching of people with wheelchairs and fitting, because you know you can see a wheelchair that is at the...at Wal-Mart that you can sit in and use. But many many users have to have something customized. And so that's what my certification says I can do. But that particular non-profit they also do home modifications so widening doors, and ramps and what's something else that they do... Making a bathroom accessible like roll in shower and grab bars and things like that.

Trapeze so that...that's not really what the word is but for someone that can't, that doesn't really have mobility a trapeze can be hanging above the bed and then they can reach up and then that allows them to sit up and then they can possibly independently transfer to their wheelchair and then be independent. So, that company does that and then they also sell assistive technology so they hired me as their Director of assistive technology with that specialty and I travelled all over the state of Texas assessing individuals for what would be a good solution for their needs. So, it might include measuring someone for a wheelchair it might include measuring a bathroom to make modification and then also assessing for what assistive technology solutions in this realm or communication or for computer access. Just to help that individual be more independent. So, I did that for a while, I loved the people I worked with but it was serving the entire state and that was not conducive to my life at this point.

Bynum

So, after that, the next thing I had down was you were working as a Service Coordinator for HCS?

Gardner

<topic>Work at HCS</topic>

Yes. HCS is a Medicaid waiver program. HCS stands for Home and Community based Services and that is a program that is probably in many states, but we're talking about a Texas Medicaid waiver program. There are many Medicaid waiver programs, HCS requires that the individual have onset off disability, diagnosis prior to the age of eighteen of a disability that includes intellectual challenges. We don't say mental retardation any more we say intellectual developmental disability and so that's the population that I was serving and so people that are on HCS have to have their services monitored. Make sure that they are receiving the services, they are a very vulnerable population. And so, I would be required to visit my case load of approximately fifty people every month, and in Kaufman and Rockwall counties and visit everyone and follow up in making sure that there receiving their services. And I was, while I was a service coordinator at the HCS program I worked for Lakes Regional which is the entity that monitors that for the state. Hopefully that's not too confusing.

Bynum

No, no that's all good.

Gardner

And I know you're in Tarrant County so it would be...the entity there is Tarrant County

Bynum

Okay so after that, let me move to my other notes I took in the car earlier. (Laughs)

Gardner

Sure.

Bynum

So, you said that you have a company the Gardner Assistive Technology Consulting?

Gardner

Yes.

Bynum

So, is that what you do now? Did you start that while you were working other places, or did you? I guess first question was HCS your last stop before opening a business, or was it...?

Gardner

<topic>Creation of Gardner Assistive Technology Consulting</topic>

I have another full-time job now. But while I was working for Lakes Regional, I opened my own business because I was very much missing the assistive technology piece. To just go see the individuals for fifteen minutes didn't allow me to help anyone get a voice. So, I was...I still continue to do some presentations, and to have my hand in assistive technology a little bit. But I needed something other than to keep giving out my social security number so I could get paid. So, I developed...I opened a company and I have my own EIN so I have my own company and I can do like assessments and the presentations and that's what I'm comfortable with and that's what I like to do. And then, so I started that business last year and I continue to do that, but when I left Lakes Regional I left to go to be...to do direct care for some individuals in the HCS program.

(pause)

Gardner

<topic> Current Work </topic>

It's some people that live in their own home and live independently but they have attendants who take care... to do the physical work. We are their hands and feet they are, I consider them my intellectual equals they both are non-verbal and it's not a group home it's their own home and then they have this team of people who are taking care of them but they have their own lives, it's not like oh I'm going to go to the library come with me, it's they are going to go to Wal-Mart to do their grocery shopping and I'm just the driver. And they have communication they are non-verbal and have a method to communicate, a communication device an iPad with proloquo2go but the spelling part not the word part.

The one person he uses the iOS keyboard and spells and uses the word prediction to speak. And he's pretty good with it. And he uses a stylus attached to the side of his glasses. Because, he can use his hands some to do it but he's not as precise, and maybe not as reliable with his hand versus the stylus.

Then the other person uses a switch and a dedicated communication device so she's hitting a switch and it begins to scan through choices like the letters row by row by row and she spells out also with word prediction and I feel like my job there is to facilitate their independence that they have very wonderful quality life. They're very involved in their church and so part of my job is to take the to church Wednesday night and we have potluck. And so, I made a quiche for the very first time yesterday to take to the breakfast potluck at their church, but they were involved in the choices of what to bring and right there with me guiding me to how they wanted their quiche prepared.

Bynum

Did you meet them through, did you meet them when you were a service coordinator at HCS? Or did you meet them after?

Gardner

No, I met them at Ability Connection. I've know them for a long time.

Bynum

Oh, okay so you've known them for a very long time. So, did they...This might be a weird question, but did they approach you... or did you approach them, or how did that work?

Gardner

Well, this may not be what you're asking for, but I had been praying for God to open a door for what I was going to be doing next in my life and I trusted that he was going to open a door and her Dad called me and said "I know you work with a lot of people that do care taking maybe you know someone who wants to do some care taking and I was very much looking to move on. I've not really felt like being a service coordinator was what God had really for me. So, I thought about it for a little while and my husband, who is a big supporter, but he too was kind of tired of the other job. He said, "You need to call her Dad back and find out more about this job." Cause he had called me when I was in the parking lot of a dayhab so it wasn't like... and my time was being logged a lot so I didn't have time to get all the details so my husband called me...

I mean my husband encouraged me to call him and then we, my husband and I had talked about it and I attended a church women's retreat and everything was focused on that is the door that's being opened and so I called back and said "Well I did find someone at the church retreat. Would you consider interviewing me?" and he's known me for a long time and he said "Who?!" (Laughs) and he said "could we really get you, could you really do this?" And so, I've only been there for two months, but it's totally been, God has totally been in the situation and I've not been happier in my job in years, they seem happy with me. They're happy that I get it, that I get it that this is their life that I'm helping to facilitate. I've had to learn how to do certain things, they're not easy to feed, they're not easy to give a drink to sometimes they get a bath of tea. (Laughs)

Bynum

It's all a learning experience.

Gardner

It is. But they are patient with me and as the man had said "Well at least you know us." And they've shared with me some negative experiences that they've had with attendants and some of those have included the fact that the other caretakers have just really not understood that they are adults, things like clapping when they do something that's good. Which is insulting and asking them to play hide and seek. That's so insulting. That would be like if you were asked. So. But we have a great team, and I'm proud that everybody on the team is a Christian and it's okay to express our faith on the job. That isn't essential to me, but it certainly is a relief and something I can feel really good about being a part of.

Bynum

It sounds like you found a perfect fit for you, that's awesome. It sounds like you like the kind of one on one interaction and being able to really help and be able to help an individual as much as you can, and then you can bring in the expertise you go with your certification.

Gardner

It's a good match, it's a really good match. And I'm thankful every day and I'm thankful my husband is supportive of this job and it's really wonderful and then I consider not only are these people my bosses, they're also my friends. And the team all the team members are my friends.

Bynum

Okay so when we were chatting earlier you spoke about your son; would you like to speak about your son?

Gardner

Sure, we can.

Bynum

So, you mentioned that your son is, I'm so sorry 35?

Gardner

<topic>Foster Son</topic>

Yes. He is, we refer to him as our foster son it's not traditional foster care. He is an individual with a disability also in the HCS program. Who lives at our house? His situation is that his parents have disability as well and they actually are both in nursing homes right now. They live in...we're glad they live in the same nursing home. They've not been able to care for him for quite some time but he does go to see them and he has a Grandmother that he goes and spends the night with and he has blessed us with living with us for six years at the end of this month. He is... he also happens to have cerebral palsy and he is verbal, and he is ambulatory. He has had a lot of growth in our home.

For example, when he first moved in, he got himself up and got himself dressed and got himself ready to go and said, "Okay I'm ready." And I'm like okay every drawer you opened to get dressed is still open the

hangers are on the floor and your bed is not made and you are capable of taking care of all of that so he since has lived up to those expectations and definitely more. We've had to...He's had a lot done for him throughout his life that there have been...there haven't always been expectations that he can. We have expectations that he can so I...we've had to revisit "Tell me why you can't throw your own napkin away." "Tell me why you can't put your dishes in the sink." And then he does it and he's, the neat thing is he's proud of the independence that he's gained and that...that he's part of the family he isn't just someone that we just take care of. That he lives his own life, he has his own room, he has his own possessions, he can spend his own money and go on his own outings we just help facilitate that and give him some guidance and with him we have to give some expectations and also some boundaries and things like that. But he's done very well in our home and we're happy that he's with us.

Bynum

That's amazing. So, did you know his parents through HCS and that's how y'all ended up...Did you know them before they were in the nursing home?

Gardner

I met him at Ability Connection. He's part of the dayhab at Ability Connection and he...When I was running what they call the "Computer Room" the assistive technology lab, he thought of himself as a helper. And he's very able, and so he would help people with things like turning on the computer, turning off the computer reading some things for somebody if they need a little help he has some reading skills that he can help someone. He can go get help if somebody needs help if somebody is not getting along with someone else, he can go get help. So, he...he's. That's his... I met him at Ability Connection when I worked there, and actually my husband worked there for part of the time that I worked there and it was the time that my husband was working there that we were asked if we might be the next place because life was changing for the person he was living with.

Bynum

Alright. So, do you have anything else work related or... Anything else you would like to talk about? I think we covered most of what you've worked on. Do you have anything we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

Gardner

If it hasn't come across, I'd like people to know that people with disabilities are the same as everybody else. They have the same wants and desires as everyone else. In the relationship both friendship and maybe we could call it more a little bit romantic, however you want to say it. And that I think people should assume...there's a thing in the disability community called presumed competence. So, I think it's important to presume that someone is competent and then work down if you have to. But assume people understand you and talk with them as if they are your intellectual equal and then let the relationship develop or change if needed, but you know no one would want to be insulted by being talked down to.

It isn't always comfortable to approach someone even I who I feel like I'm in this field by choice and I am comfortable. If I meet a stranger in the store and I want to reach out and say, "Wow your wheelchair is really cool." That I'm comfortable doing that, but it's always a stepping outside of my comfort zone to do it. And you don't always know how you're going to be received. But 100 percent of the time that I've done it, I'm glad I did. That's what I feel like could happen more in this world, that people just step out

of their comfort zone to smile or say hello, don't ignore. Like children who are curious most people with disabilities are used to that curiosity and welcome it and they would much rather that you encourage the child to say hello rather than scurry them off someplace else. Someone with a disability is okay with you asking, "Why are you in a wheelchair." Or "What's up with you?". Rather than pretend they don't exist or look away. So, and assume that someone can where I believe that adults work of course not everyone is work material and that's not what everyone wants. There are many people, that's a very...the population with disability is...more unemployed. I'm not saying it right. It's an underemployed.

Bynum

Like underutilized?

Gardner

It's an underutilized resource. Underutilized population group. I think people being open minded to hiring a person with a disability you don't have to figure out how they're going to do that job. Let them tell you or ask someone like me with this assistive technology let's find out how it can happen. So, those are...that reflects some of what I believe. I would never...And starting as early as possible in instilling the independence in the individual as well as communication. We've talked a little bit about the AAC piece and communication for people who can't get their needs met using their natural speech.

I think it's important that communication is introduced some means of reliable communication and I say that because sometimes a family might say "Oh well I can understand the individual." But I want them to be able to be understood by the world at large so that they can work if they want to work. While I sign, I interpret...I have interpreted for the deaf. Not everyone knows sign language, so if you've got an individual that maybe has down syndrome and they are...they're speech is a challenge to understand everyone in their "World" understand s them but they can't be understood reliably by the world at large that we need to give them a way to do that. And the earlier the better. So, I say...I believe adults work and I would hate for communication to be that barrier by the time you get to an employment age that you don't have a reliable way to communicate with the world. If you don't have a way to call 9-1-1 in an emergency than that might preclude you from being able to live independently so these are some things that are important to have considered and to allow. And to think about.

Bynum

Okay, so I think the last question I have, and if you have anything more let me know. Would be if you have any suggestions for other people we should interview. So, I know you said you know Julie, I don't think we've interviewed Julie I'm not 100 percent sure. But Julie would be a starting... do you have any others you think would be interested or...?

Gardner

I think both my bosses would be interested and the individual who lives in my house might be interested.

Bynum

Would you mind giving me their names?

Gardner

Not on this.

Bynum

Okay, alright.

Gardner

Because I don't fully have permission.

Bynum

Yeah, if you get permission from them just email them to me and then I'll send them on to my professor. And then he can add them...so I don't know if they do this every semester, but it might be like next year around this time where people would be doing interviews. We just have like a big document that we're working off of.

Gardner

Okay, oh yeah, I can definitely hook you up with people who would be good advocates. I mean you're wanting someone with a disability who would be...possibly with a disability who would be a good advocate. Yes, I can definitely connect you.

Bynum

Okay, well if you have any of those send them to me and I will pass them along.

Gardner

Sure.

Bynum

Thank you so much for meeting with me on such short notice.

Gardner

Well, anything to put off paperwork.

Bynum

(Laughs)

I understand. Okay, let's see if I can turn this thing off last time I did not.

End of Interview