

Mr. Mike Alford

Graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington

*Interview conducted by
Daniel Davenport
in 2016 in Red Oak, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Mike Alford was born in 1959 in Dallas, Texas. While in high school in 1975, he broke his neck in a diving accident, acquiring quadraplegia. He completed his last year at Carter High School as a homebound student, graduating in 1976. The Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services paid for his undergraduate and graduate education. Alford completed his first year of college at Eastfield Community College in Mesquite, Texas.

After meeting with Jim Hayes and learning about UT Arlington's high level of accessibility and its attendant care program to enable disabled students to live in the dorms, Alford transferred to UT Arlington. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology in 1980 and a Masters degree in Social Work in 1981. As part of the adapted P.E. classes mandated by Jim Hayes, Alford also took part in an early form of power soccer. During his time as a graduate student at UT Arlington, Alford began working for Cedar Valley College in the Dallas Community College District. After spending 38 years working for Cedar Valley College in a variety of positions, Alford recently retired. He continues to be an avid fisherman—a passion that he shared with Jim Hayes, who helped Alford design adaptive fishing equipment.

Topics discussed

- Alford's diving accident, rehabilitation, and how he chose UT Arlington
- Accessibility at UT Arlington and its attendant care program
- Jim Hayes' expectations for disabled students' lives at UT Arlington
- The disability community at UT Arlington
- Jim Hayes's role in the adapted P.E. program and adapted sports
- Early wheelchair soccer (or power soccer) at UT Arlington
- Campus attitudes about disability
- Family attitudes about Alford's disability
- Publicity about UT Arlington's accessible campus and changes in accessibility during the 1980s
- Mike Duncan and other friends with disabilities on campus
- UT Arlington's wheelchair basketball team

- Memorable moments: dating and driving with a physical disability
 - Alford's career in student services at Cedar Valley College
 - Personal stories about Jim Hayes
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Davenport

This is Daniel Davenport interviewing Mr. Mike Alford for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is March 25, 2016. And I am at Mr. Alford's home at 107 Royal Crest Court in Red Oak, Texas. I am here today to talk with Mike Alford about his time at UTA and how he came there. Thank you for participating in the university's oral history program Mr. Alford.

Alford

No problem.

Davenport

Could you just tell me some background information; where you're from, when you were born, that sort of thing?

Alford

<topic>Alford's diving accident, rehabilitation, and how he chose UT Arlington<topic>
Born Dallas, Texas 1959...never lived more than 20 miles from the location that I'm at right now... When I was young we traveled the US. Been to 46 states, it was all by car. Graduated Carter High School in 1976.... Broke my neck in 1975...did my senior year homebound.

Davenport

Do you mind me asking how you broke your neck?

Alford

Diving in a river.

Davenport

Could you tell me about right after you broke your neck and how you rehabbed and that process you went through?

Alford

Immediately after I broke my neck, there were two guys at the river that just got out of Huntsville. They learned CPR in prison. Pulled me out of the river and did CPR. The ambulance took me to Waxahachie Hospital and they said they couldn't do anything for me so the ambulance took me to Parkland. I was there for two weeks. They never did a laminectomy or neck surgery because the head neurosurgeon there thought that quadriplegics didn't have any decent quality of life and I should be let to pass.

My mother was head nurse of ICU at Methodist Hospital and had me transferred there. And six weeks later I was transferred to Houston to the Institute of Rehabilitation and Research [TIRR]. I was there from mid-August to the day before Christmas. While I was there at the Institute of Rehabilitation and Research I had a representative from TRC, Texas Rehabilitation Commission, which is now DARS [Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services], come visit me.

Since I was a senior in high school, I had enough credits to graduate already. They said they would pay for my education. They said they would pay for five years and it would take me that long to get my bachelor's. I attended my first year at Eastfield Community College in Mesquite, got 23 hours and transferred to UTA in the fall of '77. I graduated with my Bachelors in Sociology with a Social Work emphasis in August of 1980. I got my Masters of Social Work in December of 1981.

Davenport

<topic>Accessibility at UT Arlington and its attendant care program<topic>
Could you tell me a little bit more in detail how you came to UTA? Who brought you there?

Alford

The TRC counselor at the time said that UTA was the most accessible and had a program for attendant care on campus. I went over there and interviewed with Jim Hayes, was shown the campus, shown the dorms, told about the attendant program, and basically decided that was where I was going to go. I also applied at the University of Houston but their campus wasn't as accessible, and they didn't have the attendant care program that would be on my own.

Davenport

Could you explain the attendant care program a little bit more?

Alford

Basically between TRC and UTA campus, they actually paid a student at minimum wage to be my caregiver. I am a little bit fuzzy on their compensations, because I never asked. But yes, I had a fellow student as a caregiver for my total four years there.

Davenport

So what were your accommodations like on campus as far as your accessibility?

Alford

As far as the dorm goes I stayed in Pachi Hall. The first floor was the only one accessible. There were no elevators. The only other dorm at the time that was accessible was Brazos Hall. They had six rooms in Brazos Hall. It was co-ed so three of the rooms were for female students. Pachi Hall had bathrooms at each end of the hall: community bathrooms. They had little minor ramps going into the bathrooms and a ramp going from the lobby to the first floor, which was a couple of steps. None of them were actually created accessible. I understand that those dorms were built back in the '50's. Nothing was accessible back then. As far as the campus goes I really had no problem getting where I needed to go to.

Davenport

On the subject of accessibility you mentioned that they scheduled classes specifically for you for your accessibility.

Alford

In graduate school in the School of Social Work they did.

Davenport

Could you explain that a bit more please?

Alford

Their building was a three-story building and it did not have elevators. So whatever classes I wanted had to be scheduled on the first floor.

Davenport

How did that process work?

Alford

Basically when I applied for the graduate school of social work in the spring of 1980, and they accepted me. Then I worked with Jim Hayes, who worked with someone from the graduate school of social work to get my classes scheduled on the first floor. I talked with the graduate advisor from the School of Social Work about the classes I needed to complete my program, then I picked my classes, then they scheduled the rooms. They didn't schedule specific classes around me—they scheduled the rooms for the classes they were offering me.

Davenport

Okay. You mentioned working with Jim Hayes. How was that? What was his role as far as you saw it?

Alford

<topic>Jim Hayes' expectations for disabled students' lives at UT Arlington<topic>
He was basically an activity coordinator. He was the dorm director, the room master. He pretty much wore all the hats as far as I'm concerned. He would oversee hiring the other students to be caregivers for the people that were there. He would not let us get away with not taking P.E. classes. It was required for every other student, so it was required for us. So he had an adapted P.E. class and you didn't stop with the four that were required—you had adapted P.E. every semester that you were there.

He would make sure that we were as active and involved in campus that we could be. He greatly encouraged us to go to the athletic events and go to parties or go to fundraisers or go whatever activities were there. He encouraged us all to attend all those. And I say that's all...to the disability population that lived on campus.

Davenport

You talk about the disability community at UTA...the population. What was that like? Especially being involved?

Alford

<topic>The disability community at UT Arlington<topic>

At the time there were only ten or twelve at any given time living on campus. I mean, you would see other people particularly amputees or paraplegics going around campus that I knew didn't live there because I knew the ten or twelve involved. They were, for the most part, pretty close. We didn't really attend all the same social events but we attended a lot of things together. We all had the same P.E. classes. We all had our different majors but we still managed to get together.

Davenport

Were there any events or activities that stick out in your mind as being memorable?

Alford

(smiles) There was one particular campus party where I was helping for the fundraising for the social work club that kind of got a little bit crazy. My dad was in the automotive industry and for the fundraiser we agreed to have a car bash where I had my dad drive a car up there in front of the student union building. And for 3 bucks a piece, the guys could come up and hit it with a sledgehammer and beat the crap out of the car. After I left about midnight, a group of guys got together and turned it over and spun it around and damaged the sidewalk with the car. So that gathering stuck out. It didn't really have anything to do with disabilities. I just participated.

Davenport

It doesn't necessarily have to do anything with disabilities or disability rights but whatever you find memorable or important because, also, what we're trying to capture here. I'm sure you understand. Speaking of memorable social functions, I understand you taught a Donna Anderson how to make margaritas. Is there a story there?

Alford

Donna Anderson. She was the blind student, right?

Davenport

I believe she went by Mack *née*...I'm not sure who she is... It's just from the notes we got.

Alford

Donna Anderson, I believe, was one of the blind students who lived in campus apartments. Yeah, things were interesting. We actually had several blind students living on campus.

And one of the things...I don't specifically recall the margarita incident... But we did have one person who was employed in the P.E. classes. Her name was Deena. She was a physical therapy major so part of her education was going to and assisting the adapted P.E. class. She

was going through the phase where she had to actually spend a day with the different disabilities. I mean as a disabled person. So she spent a day with her hands bound up and in a wheelchair. So she was a quadriplegic. She spent a day as a deaf person with the earphones. She spent a day as a blind person with a blackout blindfold. That day her next door neighbor who was blind led her around campus with a seeing-eye dog. She said she'd never been so scared crossing Cooper Street in her life. Cooper Street didn't have the overhead walkways at the time.

That day she also agreed she was to cook a lasagna dinner blindfolded. So we went up the street to what was then Skaggs-Alpha Beta [store], it turned to Albertsons eventually, and we bought the stuff and went back to her apartment. Her apartment was pretty messed up. And we had some pretty good lasagna.

Davenport

<topic>Jim Hayes's role in the adapted P.E. program and adapted sports</topic>

You talked about how Jim Hayes ensured there was an adapted P.E. program. How did that work? How was that different than the regular P.E. program especially for you and the people you knew?

Alford

Well, he had one specific room. I forget that name of the building but it was where the pool was at the time...the indoor pool...that room had a different Marcy gym. It didn't have the basic, attached, bolted-in seating. Those were missing and you could pull your chair in there and lift weights. Or they had different ropes and pulleys so you could sit in your chair and work your arms and shoulders...and standing tables which we could use the chair and transfer onto and stand up to work your circulation.

There was different equipment that was just for disabled [people] to use, and meant for that, and designed for that. Basically I didn't see any other reason to have that set but for disabled people to work out. So that was a big part of his program.

<topic>Early wheelchair soccer (or power soccer) at UT Arlington</topic>

And he organized the wheelchair soccer and wheelchair basketball program, which was quite then, and still is, quite a success.

Davenport

Was that going there at the same time you were there...the sports programs?

Alford

Yes.

Davenport

Did you see any changes in these programs while you were there? And if so, could you describe them?

Alford

Well, I was a quadriplegic not a paraplegic. So I didn't really participate in the wheelchair basketball program other than as fan. But that program just got better and better, it seemed

like, every year. The soccer was really, more or less, a part of the P.E. class. It wasn't really an intramural sport or an intercollegiate sport. It was just us.

Davenport

How did soccer work as part of the P.E. class? What was the response to that?

Alford

Basically we would just run around in our chairs and run into the ball or hit the ball with our hands and get it to one end of the basketball court or another. It was, more or less, just no rules as far as your hands go. But you're moving the ball and getting out there and being active.

Davenport

Seems like you had fun.

Alford

It was.

Davenport

<topic>Campus attitudes about disability<topic>

What were the attitudes on campus at the time you were there about the disabled students? What did you see there?

Alford

I never really encountered any problems about attitudes or expectations of other students or staff. Nobody really went out of their way to make you uncomfortable. It didn't seem that attitudes were that different at the time.

Davenport

Did anyone go out of their way to help you in any way, other than Jim Hayes, that you can recall? And if so, who and why?

Alford

Nothing really particular sticks out. A couple of times...the power chairs weren't what they are now...and I ran out of juice a few times and campus security would push me back to the dorm. That was pre-cell phone days so there were sometimes only one wandering around campus. But other than that nothing really sticks out.

Davenport

<topic>Family attitudes about Alford's disability<topic>

What were your family's attitudes about your going back to college? And how college was being adapted and accessible for you?

Alford

As I said, my dad was in the automotive industry and before I was injured he didn't really care one way or the other. My mom was an RN and for me college wasn't an option when I was in a wheelchair, or before I was in a wheelchair. It was a requirement. She started her nursing education the year I started kindergarten. She went through the three-year RN program at Methodist Hospital, worked for a few years, and went and got her bachelor's at TWU. Started a master's program the year I started a master's program at UTA. And I beat her to get my master's.

Davenport

You mentioned that UTA was the only accessible campus. Could you expand on how you found that out? What sort of publicity did the accessibility have at UTA?

Alford

<topic>Publicity about UT Arlington's accessible campus and changes in accessibility during the 1980s<topic>

Not much really. I was told by the TRC/DARS counselor that there were three main campuses that I needed to check out: UTA, University of Houston, and TCU...and TCU wasn't really at all at the time. University of Houston didn't have the attendant program at the time and UTA was a lot closer to home, had the attendant program, and was very accessible at the time.

Davenport

Did you see any change in the publicity about UTA being accessible over the time you were there?

Alford

Not at all. It was like it was just a secret. They weren't really pushing it at the time that I know of.

Davenport

While you were there was there any change in making the campus more accessible than it already was? And what were those changes if you saw any?

Alford

They did add a few more curb cuts so that you could get around campus easier. During my time there, when I first got there, you could get where you needed to go but you might have to go down a few blocks to get to the curb cuts and come back. And they pretty much fixed all of that. Other than that there were not any real changes.

Davenport

Could you tell me who were some of your friends and any stories that you might have about UTA? Maybe some of the other individuals who were disabled that were there that just stick out in your mind?

Alford

<topic>Mike Duncan and other friends with disabilities on campus<topic>
When I first got there was a guy named Mike Duncan, and he was the oldest person that I ever knew who had muscular dystrophy. And they pretty much agreed to pay for his education until he passed away because muscular dystrophy life expectancy at the time was early teens (tears up). He was like 22 when he passed away with it, and he was my best friend there at the time.

There are some people who I'm still friends with who went there with cerebral palsy. I don't know any, haven't kept up with anybody that was in the chair at the time. We just went our separate ways. When Facebook and things started coming into play we just never really caught up.

Davenport

I see. You mentioned there were disabled individuals who lived off-campus.

Alford

Mmhmm.

Davenport

Was accessibility more of an issue for them because they lived off campus? Could you explain that a bit more?

Alford

<topic>UT Arlington's wheelchair basketball team<topic>
Most of the ones that I was familiar with and lived off-campus were members of the basketball team and were all paraplegics who pushed their own chairs. There was nobody in power chairs at the time that I know of that lived off-campus. And the basketball team didn't attend the disability P.E. class because they had their team as their P.E. credit. So I didn't really get to know a whole bunch of them that well. There was one in particular named Shorty Powers who was a double amputee and is running still today a program for outdoor hunting-fishing activity for disabled people. I think he's based out of Denton.

Davenport

What are some of your most memorable moments at UTA, for you personally, if you don't mind me asking?

Alford

<topic>Memorable moments: dating and driving with a physical disability<topic>
First date after I was in a chair...of course graduations... I don't know there's a lot. Something that happened during my time at UTA, but doesn't really have to do with UTA was learning to drive and getting my driver's license again. That kind of opened up the world again... being able to take myself wherever I needed to go at the time. Like I said, that didn't have anything to do with UTA but was during my time there.

Davenport

If you don't mind expanding on any of these stories that would really great for the interview. It doesn't necessarily have to be about UTA specifically, but you personally are important to this history.

Alford

(smiles) Well, first semester at UTA I was sitting in front of Texas Hall just reading and I met a young lady named Peggy. And we dated for like three years. That's a very good memory for me of UTA. I had not really dated much before I was in the chair so, you know, that was a learning experience too.

When I first started, I had no idea that I might be able to drive again. And my dad had a friend on the used car lot who got a Ford van on a trade that TRC had paid to put the lift in. It was for a "little person" who traded it in on a car. So my first van came equipped with a lift in it that had 7,000 miles on it and it was \$7,000. And we took it over to RightWay in Mesquite and they put a little elevator to roll me down the floor so I could sit right under the steering wheel. And TRC [Texas Rehabilitation Commission] sent me to Warm Springs Rehab down in Luling, Texas, for my driver's ed. Behind our house at the time there was a 600 acre field that used to be Camp Paul Airport that was defunct but I had trails all over that field. So when I got the driver's ed classes, they just said, "Show me what you can do," so I just drove. Then, before I left there, I drove to San Marcos and passed the driving test and came home with my license. That was when I was 19.

And so 48, no 38 years, and I've never had a wreck or a ticket. That was a big one for me. Oh, I did get my bachelor's degree when I was 21 and got my master's straight through before I turned 23.

Davenport

So it appears that you exceeded and broke the expectation that it would take you five years?

Alford

Well, they didn't keep real good track of me so they came to me at the end of five years and said "When are you going to get your bachelor's?" and I said "Nine months ago. I'm three months away from my master's." And they said "Oh, okay. Well, you're so close we'll just pay for that too." So they did a very unprecedented thing and paid for a master's degree for a student—three-quarters of it unwillingly, or unknowingly. But I got to UTA and was taking.... My first two semesters at Eastfield I took ten hours and thirteen hours so I ended up my freshman year with 23 hours. Got to UTA and was eighteen hours a semester, 21 hours a semester. Never attended summer school, but I had a full load all the time.

Davenport

Would you have been able to have done a full load, do you think, or maybe even more than you did if the campus was more accessible or less accessible?

Alford

<topic>Alford's career in student services at Cedar Valley College<topic>

I don't think that would have anything to do with it. Eighteen to 21 hours was all I could have done anyway. I did attend Cedar Valley College my senior year because I needed seven hours

to graduate, and UTA for some odd reason required eleven hours of science rather than the eight hours of most of the bachelor's programs. So I got approval to go get my last seven hours at Cedar Valley College where I took philosophy, which was required and I didn't have, and a biology class so I could get my last hours of science. While I was there I worked with their disability services and became a tutor. When I finished my bachelor's I worked there part-time during graduate school and I spent the next 38 years working at Cedar Valley College. I retired from there in October of 2014.

Davenport

What did you do for Cedar Valley College?

Alford

I started out as a tutor and then I was a tutor coordinator for basically the entire tutoring program. I worked in a testing center for a short time. I was an instructional associate. I was a counseling associate. I did teach and develop classes part-time. And I ended up the last fifteen years as a coordinator of career services. So I was all over their student services department.

Davenport

While you were at UTA did you know anyone who was active in the disability rights movement?

Alford

Not that I can think of.

Davenport

Okay. Is there anything else memorable or important that you can think of regarding either your time at UTA or your life?

Alford

<topic>Personal stories about Jim Hayes<topic>

I'll just always be grateful for Jim Hayes and his fighting for, pushing for, the disabled students and the attendant care program there on campus that made my higher education so much easier than it would have been at U of H or any other campus.

Davenport

Did you spend much time with Jim Hayes?

Alford

A couple of hours a week, but that was part of the adapted P.E. class because he was the leader of that. We didn't really socialize that much. It was all just a part of campus life.

Davenport

What was the time you did spend with him like...for you...and how was that? Any stories that you can think of right off hand or are memorable?

Alford

(pauses and stares thoughtfully off to side) He was always so active, active, active. He was a quadriplegic and couldn't actually feel his hands but he could work them very well. And he did marathons, and he did the wheelchair basketball, and he did basically any physical activity he could do in a chair. And he pushed everyone else that he dealt with to be as active as he could.

It was just his encouragement that I remember most. He would sometimes come to the P.E. class, and his hands were really torn up from running the marathon. He couldn't feel them so sometimes the palms of his hands would look like hamburger. He almost lost a finger and did lose several fingernails during one race. I don't know what happened during that race but he showed up, and he was still out there working out. Fingers all bandaged up. He'd come in one of those wounded warrior lines, but he's still doing it or was at the time. So, yeah. A lot of encouragement. A lot of pushing....

Dana Williams was the physical therapy student's name. I run into her every now and then in Waxahachie because she lives down there. She worked with adaptive P.E. for about three years. That was the thing. He always managed to find good people to work as attendants or with the P.E. classes. I'm not sure what his criteria was or how he actually hunted those people down. But he did it and he did well....

One of the things that he and I did do together that I still do now is.... You can see my hands are non-functional. My fingers are non-functional. But he actually helped me design a strap, a brace, that holds my fishing pole. (smiles) So I still go fishing quite often. Every chance I get. I still have three of those we made today. He worked with me. I have a varmint rest that I can put on my table and I can hunt today.... We didn't have to make anything for that. We just had to find the right tool that was out of there. But the fishing brace. That's from scratch. Not much to it but something that I didn't think of. He did. I don't think he ever took any credit for it either.... Not much of a storyteller, am I?

Davenport

Oh, the stories that I'm hearing are very good. Anything that you can remember.... is helpful.

Alford

That's about it. It's been forty something years.

Davenport

Okay. Well, thank you very much.