

## **Paula Margeson**

### **Executive Director of the Dayle McIntosh Center**

*Interview conducted by*

*Morgan Russell*

*On April 24, 2018 in Arlington, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor

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### **Biography**

Born in Texas, Paula Margeson is the ninth in ten generations of individuals with visual impairments, including her mother, grandmother, daughter, and two grandchildren. Paula spent most of her grade school years at the Texas School for the Blind in Austin, Texas, a boarding school of the type common for people with disabilities at the time. She was able to spend her senior year in Midland before attending Texas Tech with a view towards becoming a teacher.

After being advised by the Dean of Students that, due to her blindness, she would be refused teaching credentials, Paula dropped out of college, got married, and moved to southern California, where she resumed college, ultimately graduating from Cal State Fullerton with a degree in counseling. It was through a college friend that she found herself involved in disability advocacy, starting out in the critically important issue of housing. Her involvement in advocacy snowballed from there, continuing after a return to Texas in 1989.

In Texas, along with raising a visually impaired daughter and doing work in grant and technical writing, Paula found herself diving back into advocacy, sitting on the state rehabilitation and independent living councils, advising state-and-federal bodies, and going to work for Resource Centers on Independent Living (REACH) in Dallas.

Paula returned to California in 2014, where she is currently the Executive Director of the Dayle McIntosh Center for the Disabled, which provides services to people with disabilities and facilitates equal access

and inclusion within the community.

## Topics Discussed

- The Texas School for the Blind, Faculty
  - The Texas School for the Blind, Curriculum and Methods
  - Mainstreaming in the Sixties
  - Pros and Cons of Mainstreaming
  - A Brief Digression on Modern Education and Betsy DeVos
  - Cooking Without Looking
  - Holding Newborns
  - A Grandmother's Clap-Back
  - Parenting While Blind
  - Parent-Child Dynamics and Disabilities
  - Educational Accommodations Before the ADA
  - Segregation
  - Local Resistance and Changes in Culture
  - California vs. Texas, and What Makes Effective Advocacy
  - Looking to the Future
  - Portugal. The Man
- 

### Russell

Okie doke, uh, this is Morgan Russell interviewing Paula Margeson for the UT Arlington Texas Oral History Project. Today's date is April 24th, 2018, and I am at my apartment in Arlington. I am here today to talk with Paula Margeson about her life and times! Thank you for participating in the University's oral history program. Again.

### Margeson

Thanks for asking me. (laughs)

### Russell

We've already talked once, and we covered a whole bunch of things, and I was hoping that this time around we could go into a little more detail about certain things, as well as whatever else happens to pop up along the way. Sound good?

### Margeson

Sounds good!

### Russell

<topic>The Texas School for the Blind, faculty</topic>

Sounds good. Okay, so, last time we talked about, just a reminder to anyone who hasn't listened to the first interview – I don't know why you wouldn't – but, Ms. Margeson here attended school at the Texas School for the Blind in Austin, Texas, before she eventually graduated from high school in Midland. That was a regular high school that you did your senior year at?

**Margeson**

Yes.

**Russell**

Yes. I was wondering if you could tell me, we touched on a bit about the School for the Blind and your early start on advocacy, and I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about what that institution was like? For example, I found myself wondering, were there any people with disabilities working on the staff at this school?

**Margeson**

I believe there may have been one teacher, that taught piano tuning, perhaps

**Russell**

The piano tuning thing again.

**Margeson**

Yes, the piano tuning thing again, because, of course, we did have that on the premises. (laughs)

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

But mostly, no, they were all able-bodied individuals, though one teacher who had the most impact on me... Actually, two teachers, one who had the most negative impact had a daughter who was severely disabled, and the one who had the most positive impact was married to a blind man, so they had some family connections, but all of them were able-bodied.

**Russell**

When you say that one teacher had a positive impact and one teacher had a negative impact-

**Margeson**

Mm-hm.

**Russell**

Would you mind saying what you mean by that?

**Margeson**

Well, the teacher who had a negative impact was a person who was very rigid and not too creative, was really so much about conforming to whatever the rules were, and so, trying to please her was really, really difficult. And then, I think, later on, ironically, she went to UT and became a professor. (laughs)

**Russell**

(chuckles)

**Margeson**

On the day that I had her, she was, you know, teacher there, and then the one who had the most positive impact was just the opposite. Very warm, always had a reason behind what she required us to do, was very skilled at adapting message...this was the person who taught Home Ec[onomics] and taught us to cook and all that kind of stuff. And she was just amazing. I stayed in touch with her until she died actually, because she had such a huge impact on my life. And I think, being away from my home of origin, she was kind of a surrogate mom to me, I felt like a real familial kind of connection to her-

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

She was very clever. Actually she went to the University of Texas and her senior thesis was a braille cookbook called "Cooking without Looking."<sup>1</sup> And she had forty blind homemakers who tested all the

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<sup>1</sup> Available through Amazon. "Cooking without Looking" is also a show that you can find through PBS and YouTube

recipes to make sure that they really were easy for blind people to execute, and that was her project for her senior thesis. And I think that that cookbook is still in publication, and I still have a copy, and it's a very good all-purpose cookbook. But I love her insight about wanting to do that and seeing that project through. So, it's not surprising she was my fav!

**Russell**

(laughs) I can see...she sounds like someone who would've been my fav as well.

**Margeson**

Yeah!

**Russell**

Sounds like a good teacher.

**Margeson**

It was an advocacy for her, not just a job-

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

She took it seriously. And I'm a really good cook because of that, I think, because she gave me that start, so...

**Russell**

So, overall, what would be your opinion of your time at the School for the Blind? Of the school, of the way things were done?

**Margeson**

<topic>The Texas School for the Blind, curriculum and methods</topic>

You know, I actually liked my time there. I felt like I had a good education, and that's one reason why I was able to mainstream myself my senior year. It was a little bit hard to be so regimented, that would be my biggest complaint, but, all in all, I really think...I probably said this in the prior interview, but it seems

to me, just looking at blind people throughout my life, how they function in society, how they're able to manage their lives, that those who went to schools for the blind seemed to have a little edge over those who were mainstreamed.

Probably because there was a lot more attention directed to their education, a lot more one-on-one, a lot more adapting of teaching methods and teaching aids, you know like, I remember we had something called a "number frame" to do Math. And it kind of looked like a wooden frame with little squares in it, sort of like, envision a wooden waffle. And then, in those little squares, we had lead type that had numbers on it, so you could literally set up multiplication, division, addition problems and move the type around and be able to do Math manually that paralleled how sighted people do Math on paper.

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

So that was the kind of thing that was available there that you didn't see so much...my daughter, for example, when she was mainstreamed never had a number frame, so...and there was just an assumption that we would be taught to do things that would serve us well throughout life. So I learned how to use a slate and stylus to right braille which is a manual technique that's very, very portable-

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

You can just keep this little device in your purse or whatever, your pocket, and whip it out and write braille anytime you want to, whereas the kids of today, they're all taught electronically, so they don't...and I guess that's portable to some extent but, not nearly so much as it was with the more primitive device! (laughs)

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

So, I think, just having school where things were really set up to cater to people who were blind was a true advantage, and made us a lot more rounded for going out into the big, bad, sighted world, as it were, and, so, while it was hard to be isolated and away from family, educationally, I think it served me well. I can at least say that.

**Russell**

Cool! (laughs)

**Margeson**

Yeah!

**Russell**

Very...because you read, I was reading about how they had the kind-of segregated school systems for people with disabilities-

**Margeson**

Mm-hm.

**Russell**

And some states did not support these schools very well, and some of them were, especially for people with mental impairments, were...the less said the better.

**Margeson**

Yeah, they were more like asylums, yeah.

**Russell**

But it's good to hear that at least Texas did something right. (laughs)

**Margeson**

Yeah, they did!

**Russell**

For a change!

**Margeson**

You know, and the school still stands today, still has students, and they're refurbishing, they just recently tore down – well, it hasn't been lived in in the past ten years – they tore down the initial school building where more of the classes were, not the very beginning grades, but probably, I'm gonna say from grade three to twelve. And all the administrative offices and all that, they've just replaced all of that building, so they're still keeping the facilities up, and I don't feel like we ever had to deal with a state of decay and any of that it was a very healthy, safe and well-maintained environment for growing up.

**Russell**

I'm glad to hear that!

**Margeson**

Yeah! (laughs)

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

Me, too!

**Russell**

So, but why did you ultimately decide to mainstream yourself, as it were, into public high school in Midland?

**Margeson**

<topic>Mainstreaming in the Sixties</topic>

I think, the older I got, the harder it was to go away from my family, it just felt somehow un-normal, I don't wanna say "abnormal" because there's a different connotation to that, it was just not the way everybody lived their lives, and I wanted to be more like other people. I want to go to school every day and come home at night and... The School for the Blind, maybe it had a hundred students, from first through twelfth grade, so it was a very small pool of people and your experiences were more limited. And I guess I also wanted to test my independence and my ability to make it out in the world, so, all of that just kind of drew me, and for some weird reason, which was unlike them, my parents decided to support that. And, so we got, found a connection to get my books in braille, then the local high school was really open to having my come and supported me. The one class I had difficulty in was biology because I couldn't dissect little piglets and things. (laughs)



**Russell**

(laughs) As someone who's dissected a fetal pig, you didn't miss anything. (laughs)

**Margeson**

Yeah! (laughs) I was kind of grateful that I got a pass on that! But they were very open to coming up with alternative projects that I could do, and just looking back that was very innovative, it was so unusual that, I think that they would've been that open. Nobody questioned my right to do it, either! Nobody said, "Well, you can't go to school here, you're supposed to go to school in Austin," they just didn't! They just said, "Okay, you wanna do this? Well, let's just make this work!"

**Russell**

And around what year was this?

**Margeson**

(nervous laughter) '64-'65. I graduated Class of '65.

**Russell**

'Cause I was just thinking-

**Margeson**

Which was

**Russell**

Go on.

**Margeson**

Which was way before PL 9492 passed, so, hats off to them for being willing to give that a shot.

**Russell**

Because I was just thinking, flash forward to your daughter, and you having to sit there and fight with the school-

**Margeson**

Mm-hm.

**Russell**

To teach her in braille-

**Margeson**

Yeah!

**Russell**

And that was in, I wanna say, probably... '90's?

**Margeson**

No, it was in the mid-'70's.

**Russell**

Mid-70's.

**Margeson**

So, she started school in '76, the latter part of '76 she started kindergarten. But she had already, by that time, I don't think they had Early Childhood Intervention yet, so she didn't...now my grandkids, when they got into the school system they did have Early Childhood Intervention. But my daughter was able to go to pre-school because of a program that the Braille Institute had, where they would actually provide and pay for a one-to-one aide so she could go into a regular pre-school classroom with an aide, so she attended pre-school at United Methodist Church in Garden Grove, because we were in California by that time.

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

People were thinking outside the box before the legislation passed for mainstreaming, which is pretty cool.

**Russell**

It is pretty cool.

**Margeson**

Yeah!

**Russell**

It wasn't all bad. (laughs)

**Margeson**

<topic>Pros and cons of mainstreaming</topic>

No, no, it definitely wasn't, definitely wasn't. And it's funny because, my husband just said to me, probably two days ago, "You know, it's odd that I've noticed you and your mother and your grandmother have better table manners and the ability to eat discretely than most blind people I've seen, why do you think that is?" And I said, "Probably because we went to the School for the Blind, and people were monitoring us, and if we were doing something inappropriate they were right there saying, 'Hey, don't do it that way, do it this way, that's not correct.'" So, it's just, you wouldn't see that happen in a public school, in a mainstream situation.

So I think we just got a lot of one-on-one attention that...and there were also assumptions that we were expected to do everything like, our beds had to be made before breakfast, they did drawer inspections to make sure our belongings were neat and orderly, and if we didn't they would dump them out and say, "Fix it!" So, they had high expectations that we would function pretty normally, and they kept at us 'til we did! Whereas I think in mainstream situations, there's not enough preparation of school faculty to let them know what to look for and how to provide the best instruction, so they're just trying to get by, you know.

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

And that yields a different kind of person. So, that just all goes to say, and I think I've said this before, there's pros and cons to both methods-

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

And you're just never gonna get "the perfect life," so...

**Russell**

(laughs) You did it again! You anticipated my question!

**Margeson**

Oh, sorry! (laughs)

**Russell**

(laughs) Because I was literally about to say, "So, would you say that there are upsides, but also downsides, to mainstreaming people with disabilities into the public education school system?"

**Margeson**

Absolutely.

**Russell**

(chuckles)

**Margeson**

And I guess I come from a unique perspective in that, because I'm older, I've experienced both, one as the student and one as the parent of a student, and so I have that dual perspective of being able to compare the two approaches to education. And probably not many people can say that.

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

It would be ideal, in my mind, if young people – children – had a focused education like I did in their primary years, when they were in elementary school and they became very grounded, and then were

mainstreamed, then they might get the best of both worlds. But, it all comes down to cost and whether that would even be feasible, and also the case that's made for not removing a child from its home environment and that stuff, but, just to really think about people acquiring the skills they need to carry them through life, I think that would be the best approach. It'll never happen but that's still what I think.

**Russell**

<topic>A brief digression on modern education and Betsy DeVos</topic>

No, this country barely funds the school system it has, much less a better school system.

**Margeson**

Yeah, that's true.

**Russell**

That's a rant I could go on. (chuckles) For quite a while. (sigh)

**Margeson**

I'm sure.

**Russell**

It's...it's not fun.

**Margeson**

So could I! So I guess we'll just avoid that one!

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

Especially in the current political environment.

**Russell**

Mm.

**Margeson**

I don't know that education is a priority.

**Russell**

Well...education is a priority, just not the education that will benefit the largest number of people. Because this voucher thing is...I'm not a fan of it. It's one of those things that sounds like a good idea when you hear about it. Like, "Oh, some people can go to whatever school they want to go, and the money will follow them." But, how it works out is it's basically a slap in the face to poor people.

**Margeson**

Yeah.

**Russell**

Poor people and people who have both parents working-

**Margeson**

Right.

**Russell**

That's how it works out, and in Texas, poor people are overwhelmingly not white, so there's another...but I don't want to take over your interview! (laughs) I just saw Betsy DeVos's face in my eyes and I saw red for a minute. (laughs) Sorry!

**Margeson**

Well, and I agree with your assessment of that as well, that's what I've observed, too.

**Russell**

Now, getting back on track-

**Margeson**

Okay.

**Russell**

You mentioned the skills you learned, and I found myself really wanting to ask, how do you cook while blind?

**Margeson**

<topic>Cooking without looking</topic>

Well, that's some different techniques to it. Some of it has to do with actually using your ears to listen to food that's cooking. Of course, your sense of touch, absolutely, and then having different kinds of tools and techniques that are very simple, it doesn't have to be something elaborate. Just for example, you know measuring cups, most sighted people use the kind that have the markings on the side, but that doesn't work for blind people, so using the nested type where each measurement is separate. So, there's a fourth-cup and a third-cup and a half-cup, and that allows you to measure without having to look at a marking on the side of one cup that fits all those sizes. A technique that I could explain is, let's just say you were making hamburgers on the stove-

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

What would be risky for you would be to take the spatula and flip the hamburger because you might cause some grease or oil to splatter up onto yourself, so the technique would be that you would put the patties in the pan and cook them on one side, and then remove them and maybe put them on a paper towel and flip them over and then put them back in the pan, so you're not trying to do something that's potentially a little dangerous. That's just an example of the kinds of skills that I was taught so that I could be an efficient ---? cook, and I think that for all cooks you have to like to do it-

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

Want to do it. (laughs) So, there's always that element, too.

**Russell**

I would agree with that!

**Margeson**

A lot of people don't have an interest in it anymore. But for me, it's a way to be creative.

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

I love, in particular, to bake. So, when I make pies, and I make my own pie dough, I'm doing that totally by a sense of touch, and I can tell when the dough's tender, like I need it to be, because I'm working with my hands.

**Russell**

You must have tough fingertips.

**Margeson**

I have a pretty keen sense of touch, but that's something that the School for the Blind really helped to develop in us so that we would realize that basically our fingers were substituting for our eyes in a lot of instances. That's how we would identify our reality, through touch, pretty much.

**Russell**

(genuinely impressed) Cool. I could listen to that story, just how you do things, because I'm an average cook and I can see what I'm doing... (laughs)

**Margeson**

(laughs)

**Russell**

And...I'm not sure I'd say I'm that good. I'm not very imaginative, I'm not very creative, I very much go off of what I see on TV sometimes. (laughs)



**Margeson**

Well, you know, I use recipes and, in fact, my husband and I both cook, and we've even done some catering, in fact we catered an event recently. We've been talking about one of our retirement projects will be to do a cookbook that we can leave for our family members and our close friends because, they'll be asking us, "Well, how did you make your minestrone soup or this or that?" That way we can make a braille copy and a print copy for the members of the family that can't see, they'll be able to read it, too. But we both enjoy it, so it'll be a fun project. We have a "recipe file box" and we have to laugh because, you know they sell the little file boxes? Well, ours is, the cards are like five-by-eight, because for me to make them in braille I have to have much bigger cards, our recipe box is serious.

**Russell**

Right. You are not planning on slowing down in retirement at all.

**Margeson**

Heck no!

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

Maybe I'll finally have some time to do some fun things, that I have to keep putting off.

**Russell**

You'll find something-

**Margeson**

I will!

**Russell**

I have no doubt about that.

**Margeson**

<topic>Holding newborns</topic>

You know, ironically, the thing I wanna do most is to be one of the people that goes to the hospital and holds newborns, that would be my dream retirement job. And I plan to pursue that, but I anticipate that I'm going to have to struggle because I think most hospitals are going to be weirded out by the fact that I'm blind and they're gonna feel like parents would freak if they knew that a blind person was holding their babies.

**Russell**

Well, I wouldn't.

**Margeson**

I anticipate a struggle in that regard, but I did raise three children!

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

From birth! So, it's not like I don't have a track record in this regard. But I have been around parents who have been very nervous about the thought of me holding their baby. It's just ironic, but...

**Russell**

I would think that the fact that you've had three children would...but I guess some people get weird when it's their kid, I suppose, I dunno.

**Margeson**

I bond with babies really well because, I think, I am so not afraid to hold them, and, in fact, to be really close with them, and it's all about touch because that's how I convey to them the love and emotion that I'm feeling, and I think they know that. I think they sense that. So, I have pretty good results with getting babies to just relax into me, but I think it's all a tactile thing.

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

They just kind of read my body movements and motions and, kind of, my self-confidence comes across to them and they feel comfortable. But somehow people think you need sight to do that, which is ironic, you don't need sight to do a lot of things. You know, I don't need sight to put on my make-up-

**Russell**

No.

**Margeson**

<topic>A grandmother's clap-back</topic>

People think I do, but I don't. Somebody asked my grandmother once how does she eat, like anybody can see their mouth! They can't, right?

**Russell**

Yeah, it's-

**Margeson**

People just think you need sight to do so many things that you don't really need sight to do.

**Russell**

Well, for example, when eating, you don't watch your food go into your mouth-

**Margeson**

No, you don't.

**Russell**

You just have a reasonable expectation that you can get it in there.

**Margeson**

Exactly.

**Russell**

And I can see and even I miss sometimes, so... (laughs)

**Margeson**

My grandmother was very ornery and she told this person, "Well, you know, there's a little peg by my plate, and there's a string tied to it, and the other end of the string has a loop on it, and that goes around my eye tooth and I follow the string up to my mouth!" (laughs)

**Russell**

(almost hysterical laughter) I like your grandma already! (continues laughing)

**Margeson**

(laughing) Oh, she was something else, she didn't let people get by with much.

**Russell**

But on the subject, because we tried to talk about this last time, and it was at this point that my son had crashed the party and decided that we weren't allowed to have any serious conversations- (laughs)

**Margeson**

(chuckles)

**Russell**

But, he was super cute about it, though!

**Margeson**

Yes, he was.

**Russell**

<topic>Parenting while blind</topic>

We were talking about just now, and we tried to talk about it last time, about parenting while blind.

**Margeson**

Yes.

**Russell**

And you had started mentioning, for example, trying to keep track of your kids and your attempt to put bells on their shoes-

**Margeson**

Mm-hm.

**Russell**

Which I thought sounded like a good idea whether the parent has a visual impairment or not...

**Margeson**

Those little babies, they can figure out how to get those shoes off (laughs), and they will do it! So, I learned early on that that wasn't probably gonna work, you know? It sounded good in theory...

**Russell**

It does! It sounds like a good idea. (laughs)

**Margeson**

They don't keep their shoes on!

**Russell**

It is a trial to get my son to put shoes on. So, how did you eventually solve the problem of keeping track of where they were?

**Margeson**

You know, I had to limit where they could go so that I could keep my ear on them. So, I solved it by putting those little portable baby gates up.

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

So that they would be in the room with me or the room next to the room that I was in so that I could hear them at all times, and that way I knew that they were safe and also not getting into trouble. Sometimes, it would just be that you could close the bathroom door or something of that nature if you didn't want them to go in that room, but I definitely had to confine their location so that it was manageable for me to be able to monitor what they were doing, what they were up to.

**Russell**

And only one of your daughters is blind, right?

**Margeson**

Yes. And my two grandgirls, they spend a lot of time at my house as children, too, so I felt like I got to be a little bit part of their upbringing, so to speak.

**Russell**

Well, what grandma doesn't like doing that?

**Margeson**

(laughs)

**Russell**

On the subject of parenting with a disability, and parenting a child with a disability, part of the reason I wanted to talk to you, and this is a little bit about me, is that my little brother has ocular albinism, which runs in my mom's family. You know what that is?

**Margeson**

Yes.

**Russell**

And so he's not blind, but he is severely visually impaired, and him as a baby was often an exercise in heart attacks, because he often couldn't see where he was going.

**Margeson**

Mm-hm.

**Russell**

So he was covered in bruises from the time he learned how to walk until he was about four or five, because little kids run into things anyways, my son's got a big bruise on his head right now, and I remember my poor mother, part of the reason she says she went grey early was running after him. So, did that introduce any extra challenges or wrinkles to the fabric of your parenting? Or were you like, "I know this, I got this handled."

**Margeson**

<topic>Parent-child dynamics and disabilities</topic>

Hmm...I did know, probably, more exactly what they were capable of than, say, someone who was sighted could who had not been around blindness, that's for sure. But I think all parents are a little overprotective, and even more so if you child has something that could make them more vulnerable to the environment. And so, I still worried... Now, here's the irony: My sighted children worried about me.

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

Because they knew I was blind. And I remember, the oldest one said that, when she would leave to walk to school, she always kept looking back at the house to make sure there was no smoke coming from the house because she worried, because I was home with her little sister who was blind, and she worried that there would be a fire or something that would mean that we were in danger. And the youngest one, when she was gonna start school, she said, "I can't go to school because, what if a bad guy comes in, you know, and he tries to hurt you with a knife or something?" She saw herself as my protector rather than me protecting her.

**Russell**

That's sweet.

**Margeson**

Which kind of made me sad, I mean, I hated that my sighted children felt burdened with that. So I said to her, "Well, that's why we have our dog because she would let me know if someone was coming and we could run and hide." You know, something that would get down on her level so that she could feel at ease about leaving me at home alone, but that's a whole different perspective between an able-bodied child and a disabled parent. I don't know if a lot of research has been done about that, not that I've been able to read, but I think it really is different, even than an able-bodied parent with a disabled child.

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

It's kind of a different dynamic.

**Russell**

I could see that. I hadn't even thought of that dynamic.

**Margeson**

Yeah.

**Russell**

Which, shame on me for not thinking that it would go both ways.

**Margeson**

Yeah. I hadn't given it a lot of thought either. Now in retrospect, sometimes I talk to them as adults about how they viewed their childhood, that's how I hear some things I wasn't aware. Because I try to be really careful not to burden them with feeling that they were the caregivers, because I didn't see them that way, anyway, but you know they took that role on for themselves.

**Russell**

Well, they are your kids. Any child of yours isn't gonna wait around and say, "Well, maybe someone will tell me what to do at some point."



**Margeson**

(laughs) Probably not.

**Russell**

(laughs) Which must've been fun.

**Margeson**

It was fun, but I was also involved in finishing my education and going to work and all that kind of stuff, too, like the typical parent of today I was juggling a lot of balls to try to make my life work.

**Russell**

The more things change, the more things stay the same.

**Margeson**

True.

**Russell**

Well, you mentioned finishing your education, and you did that at Cal State Fullerton, right?

**Margeson**

Yes!

**Russell**

(mishearing) Go ahead.

**Margeson**

That's all I have to say, yes! (laughs)

**Russell**

<topic>Educational accommodations before the ADA</topic>

(laughs) Because, I was looking into various things and thinking about all the things we talked about, and I had a girlfriend when I was in college who was completely blind. And she relied heavily on the accommodations that the school was required by law to give her, and to always be able to provide her with braille materials and the page reader, the name is escaping me, the software that reads your computer screen to you, uh...

**Margeson**

Mine is Jaws but there's several versions, I'm not sure which one she was using.

**Russell**

The name for that particular kind of software deleted itself from my brain just now. So, when you were in college, first at Texas Tech and then, ultimately, Cal State Fullerton-

**Margeson**

Mm-hm.

**Russell**

Did the school provide you with anything or did you have to do all that by yourself?

**Margeson**

I pretty much did that on my own, but the Department of Rehabilitation was in existence by then, so they provided some assistance, like they provided funding for a reader to read the print textbooks to me, for example. So, there were workarounds even back then. And then, we were just beginning to get what they called back then "handicapped student services," which of course has a better name now, on college campuses.

That was one of my early advocacy endeavors at Cal State Fullerton. We went together as a group, the students with disabilities, to the president's office to advocate for continued funding for disability student services, because it was fledgling program and I guess its budget was on the chopping block, and we wanted to make sure he understood how important it was to all of us. You know, I remember early on, I think I was still at Texas Tech, I wrote an entire term paper and the type writer was on stencil, and I just was mortified because, you know how term projects are, they take forever.

**Russell**

They take forever, and you're stressed the entire time and you just want it to be over and done with.

**Margeson**

Yes. The way I would have to do it would be to make a braille draft, and then translate to the type, so my hands would have to go back-and-forth between the braille and the type writer. So somehow in that process I got the typewriter flipped onto stencil, so I basically handed in a blank term paper. (laughs)

**Russell**

And how did that go?

**Margeson**

Well luckily, she was understanding. She could tell that I had typed it, because you know how, well you probably don't know this, but when the keys would strike the paper they would make a little indentation so if you turned the paper over you could see the lines of print where the little hammer keys had struck the paper and left their indentations. So she could see that I had actually done the work, so she gave me a chance to go back and re-do it, gave me extra time to do that, you know.

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

But I'll never forget because I was like, "Oh my goodness, tell me that's not true!"

**Russell**

My heart drops just thinking about it! (laughs)

**Margeson**

(laughs) Yeah, mine pretty much did, too!

**Russell**

Just you telling me the story makes me go, "Ahhh!"

**Margeson**

And then I had another professor that, I think I did an independent study with him, and the whole point of it was to come up with creative ways to teach different concepts to blind people.

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

One of them was facial expression and how to teach...and so I did a Velcro face, a face with Velcro features that could change, so the eye shapes and mouth shapes could change to show the different expressions. You could just pull of the eyes and replace them with big round surprise eyes, but I still have to say facial expressions is kind of an enigma to blind people. Just helping to get that concept across that was one of the things I was really interested in, so that was one thing this professor and I worked on. And then another one was about ways to teach the mean and the median and all of those terms and how to show that with an actual tool?

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

That could be maneuvered, you know? So, I got to do some kind of creative, fun stuff, but college wasn't...I did go to a prep school for a summer, and it was something that the Lion's Clubs of America funded. It was in Little Rock, Arkansas, and it was kind of a prep school for blind people who were getting ready to go to college so they learned some techniques, you know that...All I can remember is note taking and kind of get a feel for how the college day flowed and how you would manage your coursework and what things you might need to approach with a professor, you know?

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

That kind of stuff.

**Russell**

<topic>Segregation</topic>

Before moving on, because we've gone through schooling, college, parenting, I wrote this down earlier

and I went back-and-forth, but were these schools you attended, were they segregated at the time? Do you know?

**Margeson**

The universities?

**Russell**

Well, I'm sure Cal State Fullerton wasn't, but for example there was the Texas School for the Blind, was it segregated?

**Margeson**

You know, I remember Hispanic people being there, but I don't remember any African-American people being there. Because I'm pretty sure that there was a separate school. And then maybe later on toward the end of my being there, then some black students came. Maybe.

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

But I know in the early/mid years there were not black students. But there were Hispanic and of course there were no Asian students, that would've been totally an anomaly.

**Russell**

That would've stood out in Texas in the '60's.

**Margeson**

Yes, yes.

**Russell**

But it just occurred to me, "I should ask," I almost didn't ask, but you know, let's go ahead and put it on the record-

**Margeson**

Sure.

**Russell**

Because I found my brain coming back to it a lot. But props to you! I was doing a tour for a History class in college of an old orphanage-

**Margeson**

Mm-hm.

**Russell**

And I asked the woman who was giving us a tour, she asked, "Do you have any questions?" And I asked, "Was this orphanage segregated or was it integrated?" And she gave me this whole, long, roundabout answer basically came back to, "Don't ask me that." I'm like, "Well, this is Sherman, Texas, and you're talking about a place that was open in the 1800's, so if it was, it wouldn't be unusual!"

**Margeson**

That's true. I'm almost positive, in fact I'm sure that there was a separate school, and it might've been for both blind and deaf students, the name of it's right on the verge of my memory, who were African-American, black, or whatever term they were using, "colored folk," back in those days.

**Russell**

Yeah...

**Margeson**

So they had them segregated, but then they started to move away from that.

**Russell**

Fortunately.

**Margeson**

Yes!

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

Fortunately.

**Russell**

Oh! It was the Texas Blind, Deaf, and Orphan School.

**Margeson**

Oh! There you go! See?

**Russell**

And it was in Austin, Texas, as well.

**Margeson**

Yeah, it was really close to...I think it was the forerunner of the Texas School for the Blind, and they split off and made just a blind school, but initially that's how the blind and deaf kids went there.

**Russell**

So, a lot of schools were for blind and deaf students, typically.

**Margeson**

Eh, I don't know that that's true, but I know that in Texas it began that way. It was typical for all states to have a school for the blind and a school for the deaf, and, you know, they still do. Texas still does, California still does. But, as far as the blind schools are concerned, they've become more multi-disabled. You have students there who are blind, but also have other disabilities as well. Not so much for the deaf schools, though, and I think the reason deaf schools have continued is that it all comes down to the communication factor, and the students get to have really open communication amongst themselves and the faculty, and so they're not just...if you're relying on the interpreter, you're only gonna be able to

communicate when that interpreter's around, and facilitate the conversation, unless the other person you're talking to knows sign language like you do. Which even today is not extremely pervasive in society. I know this because one of the services we offer here at the center where I work is sign language interpreter service, so...

**Russell**

I feel so bad because I have a list of things from my professor, like, "I want you to hit these things," so-

**Margeson**

Okay.

**Russell**

<topic>Local resistance and changes in culture</topic>

It's not how I wanted to do it! I feel weird. But! There is one thing, it is from the first independent living center that you were going to construct in Texas, not Texas, California, the one for which your signature is on about four-hundred pages of loan documents, and that you ended up having to move from one piece of land to another. And you mentioned that there was a huge amount of pushback from the local community

**Margeson**

Right.

**Russell**

And I was curious as to, do you know why they were so angry about it, and you mentioned that you were personally threatened?

**Margeson**

Yes. Okay, so, I wanna be sure this is really clear-

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

I was working for the same independent living center where I'm now the director, and we decided...Independent living centers by regulation cannot own or operate housing, but we wanted to



build some housing. So, we formed a spinoff corporation so that we could do that, legally. And then the spinoff corporation applied to the Department of Housing and Urban Development to get construction financing, which we got. Then we had to find a location for this housing. The neighbors in the first location that we found, the first piece of land, were very much against a project that was, number one, HUD funded, because everybody knows that that's the "projects," quote-unquote. Nobody wants a HUD funded project.

**Russell**

(resigned sigh)

**Margeson**

In their neighborhood. And especially one where all the residents are gonna be people with disabilities. "Those people will be out running around the neighborhood and giving the neighborhood a black eye." So, they opposed, primarily because they felt it would adversely affect their property value, and in California, especially Orange County where I am, property value has always been at the top of the scale. Right now, I just heard this on the news, the median price for a home in Orange County is \$850,000.

**Russell**

Good Lord!

**Margeson**

So even back in the day, housing was at a premium, so they don't want anything to affect that. That's why they showed up and opposed us, and since I was the spokesperson for the project, I think that's why I was personally threatened.

**Russell**

So people were really angry about this?

**Margeson**

They were! Yeah. There were probably close to five hundred of them showed up at the city council meeting. I mean, it was amazing. You see things like that in movies and you read about them in books, but you kind of don't think that they really happen, but they do really happen, so... (chuckles)

**Russell**

Do you still encounter that kind of local resistance for independent living projects?

**Margeson**

Well, I haven't tried to build any housing projects in the past few years, but we still do encounter discrimination, and has it improved? Yes, immensely it has improved. But, people have their biases, and for you to change sort of what's ingrained in them, that's a big undertaking. It doesn't just happen overnight, because you're altering their values, as they see them. So, luckily, with a lot of input, they might change, but just because they watched something on TV or they had one positive experience doesn't mean that they let go of those prejudices or those misconceptions, or so many things that are fear-based when it comes to disability that people hold within themselves. We are definitely in a more enlightened time, but

**Russell**

We still have H.R. 620.

**Margeson**

Yes, we do!

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

Yes, we do. And that, driven by the business lobbyists, that's a strong force to come up against when your primary argument is civil rights and doing what is humane. It's funny. We're capitalistic here and making the money, it really gets top billing.

**Russell**

Yeah...especially right now.

**Margeson**

Yeah.

**Russell**

So, my babysitter, my mom, she needs to head back to work pretty soon here.

**Margeson**

Okay.

**Russell**

So, there are two more things I do wanna ask, though.

**Margeson**

Okay.

**Russell**

One, I didn't get to ask last time, and the other because I always want to make sure these interviews end on a positive note.

**Margeson**

Okay.

**Russell**

<topic>California vs. Texas, and what makes effective advocacy</topic>

The first is, because you've lived and done advocacy in both California and in Texas. Have you noticed any differences between the two?

**Margeson**

Oh my goodness, Morgan!

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

(laughs) Yes!

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

(continues laughing) Absolutely I've noticed a difference.

**Russell**

(still laughing)

**Margeson**

(still laughing) But, I think advocacy works best face-to-face, and trying to get to know people, knowing politicians, knowing the leaders, the lawmakers the decision makers trying to get to know them so they don't see you as just a disgruntled mouth. They see that you're really a human being. And, I think that if you're able to do that and make that approach, it has a better chance of working whether you're in Texas or in California.

**Russell**

Right.

**Margeson**

But. All of that being said, there is a structure, and if the majority is more in favor of civil rights, or they're more forward-thinking, then you'll have an easier road as far as advocacy is concerned. But if not? They're kind of set in their ways, and then it's gonna be harder. So it's harder in Texas to bring about systemic change than I think it is in California. That's my personal experience. Not saying that it can't be done, not saying that there's not some really good, caring people in Texas, because there are.

**Russell**

But there's...it's a mindset.

**Margeson**

It is.

**Russell**

That can be difficult.

**Margeson**

Yeah.

**Russell**

And, last but not least, I have had so much fun talking to you, and I've learned so much, and I'd love nothing more than to have another hour to sit here and learn from you and listen to your stories. But, my last question to you, potentially, would be: You have so much passion, and so much verve, if you will, what is something that is, maybe, a development in the disabled community or a development in the country that you're the most excited about? To see where it goes?

**Margeson**

Ooh, that's a big question.

**Russell**

(chuckles)

**Margeson**

Hmm...

**Russell**

You can break it down as much as you need to. Because we've talked about bad bills and resistance and struggle, but what's something that gets you excited? Looking forward, that's happening.

**Margeson**

<topic>Looking to the future<?topic>

Well...I am a person who believes in the goodness of human beings, and I encounter it a lot out in public. People are, for the most part, they want to help, they're compassionate, think they almost have to learn another way, and that's encouraging to me, so see that re-enacted. I travel a lot, I see it when I'm out in the community. So, that's always an encouragement to me, to see people's levels of kindness and concern.

And now I'm seeing it on two fronts, not only because I'm blind but also because I'm an older person, and people look out for older people, too, so, it's kind of cool, and just kind of restores my faith in mankind. Because, I know that I've experienced people reaching out and offering help. I think technology excites me, because it bridges the gap between people with disabilities and people without. And just this past weekend, my husband's birthday was this weekend, so we rented a convertible, and we drove up the Coast Highway, all along the Pacific Ocean, and it was just absolutely amazing. And I got someone to take a picture of me behind the wheel and put a hashtag that said, "Driverless car?" (laughs)

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

But I long for the day when driverless cars are gonna be on the road. I mean, that really excites me. I hope I live to see the time when I can just, jump in the car and go where I wanna go like other people do. That would be a pivotal high for me, and something I've advocated about, I think we might have talked about that last time, because of regulations that they're trying to place on that. But technology definitely, just the inventions and the advancements mitigate a lot of the effects of disability, so people are able to do things that they couldn't do in the past, and that is very exciting. And I'm excited about the disability pride movement.

**Russell**

Mm-hm.

**Margeson**

I'm excited that people are starting to say, "You know what? I'm disabled and I'm proud of it, because I'm fine just the way I am and I'm accomplishing some amazing things and I feel good about myself." I think that's very encouraging.

**Russell**

You're not gonna hide in the attic anymore.

**Margeson**

No. And we're not gonna long to be changed or cured or fixed or treated, we're just gonna be good with who we are. And that really is very meaningful to me. (dog loudly scratching self in background) That's how I've felt for the majority of my life. I'm happy with who I am and grateful for the doors my blindness has opened as far as interpersonal relationships. People open up to me and I think I'm able to touch their lives in ways I might not have been able to had I been sighted, and that's very meaningful. When you

look at your life, "What is my life purpose and why was I here?" You want to feel like you left a mark somewhere, that people met you and they didn't forget, that you had something of worth to leave them with, so that's part of what's given my life purpose. I don't think I'd wanna change that.

**Russell**

I can't imagine who would.

**Margeson**

Yeah, exactly.

**Russell**

That's pretty inspiring...forget inspiring, it's pretty inspiring, it's a pretty good life.

**Margeson**

And I know it kinda sounds to a lot of people a little, I don't know, hokey, but we really do all struggle for meaning, we want to know our lives meant something. And I haven't had that struggle very much because I feel like I already know what my purpose is, and I think a lot has to do with bridging that gap between people with disabilities and those without and being able to say, "We're all part of the human race, and disability is part of the human experience and you don't have to be afraid of it, you don't have to feel pity, you can just feel camaraderie, because we're all humans." So, that's a pretty big purpose and it's very fulfilling when you feel like you're able to do that.

**Russell**

Amen. (laughs)

**Margeson**

(laughs)

**Russell**

That's all I gotta say! Amen!

**Margeson**

(laughs)

**Russell**

'Cause someone can say, "Oh, she's blind," and I can say, "Yeah, but she's done more with her life than ten different people I know, combined." So!

**Margeson**

And you know what? Life is to be lived. Someone said, let's see, "If you treat life right, it'll treat you right." That's why we would do something like rent a convertible and drive up the coast even though we're senior citizens because that's a memory to make. And it's gonna be one of my favorite memories because I just love blasting my music and saying, "Alright all you rappers, you're gonna have to listen to the old people's music now!"

**Russell**

(laughs)

**Margeson**

(laughs) It is totally fun! I would do it again in a heartbeat.

**Russell**

Man, I wonder what the kids are gonna be listening to when I'm driving down the road.

**Margeson**

Oh my gosh, there's no telling. There's no telling!

**Russell**

I'm sure I'll hate it.

**Margeson**

<topic>Portugal. The Man</topic>

There's no telling what they'll be listening to. You know what I love? That "Feel it Still" song?<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> By the band Portugal. The Man



**Russell**

Which one?

**Margeson**

You know, *I'm a rebel just for kicks now/Been that way since 1956.*

**Russell**

Ah.

**Margeson**

You know that song?

**Russell**

Yeah, I know that song.

**Margeson**

Okay, so, that band, one of their members uses a wheelchair, so all the band sits when they perform so that he doesn't stand out in the crowd. I think that is so awesome! I would support them just for that alone, but they actually are a really good sound. At least I know that song has caught on!

**Russell**

(laughs) Alright, well, as much as I hate to go, my mom's leaning in, I'm sitting in my bedroom and she's leaning in, tapping her watch, so... (laughs)

**Margeson**

(laughs) Okay! Thank you, Morgan.

**Russell**

Thank you.

**Margeson**

I would love to keep tabs on the project, so let me know how it unfolds and if it becomes accessible to the public so I can kinda check it out.

**Russell**

Absolutely!

**Margeson**

Okay! Cool!

**Russell**

And I hope you enjoyed this as much as I did.

**Margeson**

I did! I loved it.

**Russell**

Thank you very much!

**Margeson**

Kiss the baby boy for me!

**Russell**

Absolutely!

**Margeson**

(laughs) Okay!

**Russell**

Bye!

**Margeson**

Bye!

**Russell**

(hangs up phone) Alright, I just ended the call, and it's time to get started on the fun part. Here we go!  
(ends recording)

*End of Interview*