

Stephanie Thomas

Traveling the world, a disability experience and becoming an Advocate.

*Interview conducted by
Trevor Engel & Sarah Rose
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Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Stephanie Thomas was born to Elizabeth Marshall Thomas and Stephen Thomas in Manhattan 1957. Most of her childhood was spent outside the United States; since her mother was an anthropologist and writer. Great experiences in countries like Nigeria and Uganda; shaped Stephanie Thomas' views. At the age of 17 while helping her grandparents clean out a shed; Thomas fell from a tractor which led to a fracture at a T12- L1.

She attended Harvard University and graduated in 1980. While she was in Harvard, she worked with the university's accessibility consultation board, practiced track and field, and advocated for the accommodations and needs of students with disabilities. She travelled to Fiji and Australia after graduation; and in Fiji she helped a doctor open a Rehab wing in a local hospital.

All of these little experiences and the incredible people she met a long her way, led her in becoming the woman and advocate she is today. She currently works with ADAPT of Texas along with her husband Bob Kafka.

Topics discussed

- Background information.
- Childhood memories.
- Stephanie's mother and her background in writing and anthropology.
- Family roots and going abroad.

- Living experience in Uganda and Nigeria.
- Stephanie's father and his background and political experience.
- Activism and disability experience at a young age.
- Difference between American and other countries views on disability.
- Acquiring her disability.
- Rehabilitation process and experience.
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Interviewer:

Where were you born and when?

Thomas:

>topic< Background information>/topic<.

Born in New York City in Manhattan in 1957.

Interviewer:

Okay. Parents' names?

Thomas:

My parents were Elizabeth Marshall Thomas and Stephen Thomas.

Interviewer:

Okay. Siblings?

Thomas:

Yeah, I have a brother his name is Sibang Singh Khalsa; he converted to being a Sikh and changed his name; he used to be known as John Ramsey Thomas.

Interviewer:

Is he older or younger?

Thomas:

He is younger.

Interviewer:

Can you tell us a little bit of your childhood? And your family?

Thomas:

>topic< Childhood memories>/topic<.

I moved a lot when I was a kid; my mom was a writer and she did anthropology. She took us to, Uganda when I was about four and we were in New York until then. When we came back we moved outside Boston and we lived there for a long time; in the middle of that she went to Nigeria to do some research; so that was like when I was in second grade. We just lived in a lot different places; northern Virginia, and it was just a vagabonding type of childhood.

Interviewer:

Okay good. Was she an academic or popular writer?

Thomas:

>topic< Stephanie's mother background in writing and anthropology>/topic<.

No, the book she wrote before I was born was, "The Harmless People" and it's about the bushmen and the Kalahari, she wrote it when she was really young; she was like twenty-six. It was a really popular book and I think that it is still used today in classes and stuff. From that, she kind of went into more anthropology kind of stuff, but that wasn't really her love. She wanted to be a behavior animal person, but when she was young; that wasn't something women were supposed to do; what she was supposed to was, she had to be writer. She wrote and that led to the anthropology, but then she just got more into doing writing and teaching that kind of thing; teaching and writing.

I don't know; she's written a lot of books, but she's not an academic per say.

But she's done tons of academic stuff for a long time both in the anthropology period of her life and I guess teaching writing and then animal kind of things but from a more popular.

Interviewer:

Did she wind up having some anthropology type of training?

Thomas:

>topic< Family roots and going abroad>/topic<.

Not really, it was weird, but grandfather was very busy during; world war II working on that, so when that ended he wanted to do stuff with his family that was something altogether, because she hadn't spent some time with them during the war years. He decided; that he wanted to do something worthwhile and different, so he actually went to Harvard and said, "What do you need done?" and back then everyone wanted to be like an armchair anthropologist kind of. And they said, "Well we need field work kind of" and he was like, "Well we will go" and so they went. My uncle wound out being a filmmaker, my mom wrote and my grandma wrote.

Interviewer:

Where did they go?

Thomas:

They went actually it's in Namibia; it's in the Kalahari and I actually don't know the name. it's out there it has names but I don't remember what they are, but they are very small little places; people were actually living in the bush. The places were named after waterholes and stuff like that.

Interviewer:

So what was it like being in Uganda and that area?

Thomas:

>topic< Living experience in Uganda and Nigeria>/topic<.

When I was in Uganda we went out to the bush; and we lived in a compound ...I don't remember a lot about it, because I don't remember a lot from my childhood, but they had a brush wall around and we lived in tents and there were a lot of hunters and gathers; not hunters and gathers that wrong that's completely wrong, that's what bushmen are. This were herders of cattle; they were the Dodoth is the name of the people; sort of like the masai they are more commonly known group. My mom went out and actually wrote a book about that too, but I don't really remember a lot about it just a few little things. Like the bush babies and the trees; and there were these missionaries that gave us prayer beads and stuff like that; it's just little kid memories, I was really small when this happened.

Interviewer:

What about Nigeria? Where you older?

Thomas:

I guess I was like eight and that was really interesting too; again I don't have a lot of memories but we went to British school, and that was really intense, because British school is a lot more serious than the American school system. In second grade our head mistress was reading us, the pilgrims progress and we would have to

summarize what she read in the day in one sentence; and that was it. It had to be grammatically correct, and summarized; my brother was in kindergarten and he had to memorize all the multiplication tables, you had to like really (snaps fingers) ... we actually had a tutor for a while to catch up for a while.

Interviewer:

You were behind (laughs).

Thomas:

Not quite up the smutch you know. We live in a little neighborhood called the Konghilayout, there were a lot of houses under constructions and they had monkeys sort of like guard dogs; and they would give you a hard time when you pass by and stuff like that. My dad, went down to Lagos, which was the capital and that time and it's a big port and they have a big market; and I don't know what he was doing in the market but he wound up and getting a monkey for himself, I think it was for my mother, but I don't know... but fell in love with him in the drive back to the town where we lived in which was ubaudghin. He loved my dad, but it was a terror; if they had a party and they didn't clean up the drinks, and like left the glasses out the monkey would drink out from all the glasses and... (laughs) he was an angry drunk; he would harass everybody.

Things were just so different from here, we had a cook and he would kill the chickens out in the back; and I know what a chicken running around without his head looks like and one time; these ants decided to move across the area where we were; and they decided that our house was in the path and my mom didn't want them to move into the house, so she round a bunch of rags and lighting them on fire on a circle around our house to get the ants to go around. There was a British dad and son that lived down the road, the son was a friends of my brother and they used to go running around through the woods with like no shoes on and there were snakes, but he was an idiot... but anyways, he was an adventurous little kid and the son of this guy had some pet rats; and he kept them in this room, and then this mother rat; there were probably like very quickly like thirty in the room.

My brother got to get some, because they couldn't have that many (laughs) so he got some of his own. Eventually I don't know what system of birth control was used; rat separation... I don't know but we didn't want to have thirty of them, but they were terrific pets. They would run around and they were really smart; it was pretty cool. What else... there was a very nice restaurant that was in the roof of this building, and you could look at the city, because it was darker than, there were street lights but there weren't many as here, so you would see lights far away, but it was generally darker place than here. We took a trip to the northern part of the country, we visited some different areas and local... I don't remember what they were called but they were like chiefs and they talked to my folks about the culture.

The idea was that my mom would write about the culture and my dad about politics, we visited them; and there was a comet we got see because it was so much darker. I remember the sky a lot because it was just so intense... what else...

Interviewer:

What did your dad do?

Thomas:

>topic< Stephanie's father background and political experience >/topic<.

He was a history teacher for a while and he was really interested in politics; actually what happened was that while we were there; there was this big military coup, and it was funny because the military took over the

school yard. They had their tanks parked there and the British families just kept sending their kids to school and the American families said, "We are not sending our kids to school, with that going on" that was kind of funny. It got pretty scary and my dad had some really good friends that were newspaper journalists and I guess also one military guy ... because he came and told us that, that is was getting to be really scary, and that we have to practice running out into the bush and I remember saying "I don't want to be part of this; this is way too scary for me" but what do you do when you're just a little kid.

Finally, my mom took us home and my dad stayed there for a while and when he came home; he got into politics, but he was really into arms control and worked for an organization called 'The Council for a Livable World' and what they do is that they work on congressional races in which people vote for arms control, he was really involved in that and he also got involved in some campaigns. Politics became his big thing.

Interviewer:

So were you moving partly because of his jobs?

Thomas:

No actually he wasn't around much, when he was out on the campaigns we would go visit him, but we wouldn't go to all the places he would live or stayed for a while. When he worked for the council we lived in northern Virginia outside DC.

Interviewer:

Anything else that stand out from your childhood?

Thomas:

>topic< Activism and Disability experience at a young age>/topic<.

Well I went to a Quaker school when I was living in outside of Boston. It was called the Cambridge Friends school and they were very influential to me because; there was a lot of social activism and thinking within the faculty and the families of the kids that were there. It was during the civil rights time and I war movement** rectify 15.40 I don't know that we really did that much yet we were exposed to some things; we went on some marches and stuff like that. One time when I was little, these women took over a building on Harvard, cause they didn't have a day care center and they occupied it for like days, we wouldn't occupy it but we brought them food... (interrupts)

As a support.

Yeah and just to hang out, and all those little things influenced towards a much activist stuff in disability; even though at the beginning I didn't know that's what I wanted to be. The other thing that I remember about living in Nigeria is that there was a lot of disabled people living there; I wasn't disabled but I had a SCI when I was seventeen but they'd be at the parking lot of the supermarket or whatever begging. I remember a blind woman that would be with her grandchild and they would go through the cars; and just be collecting donations. At the parking lots they would sort of had their spots and it would be sort of a hierarchy most seniors... I don't how the hierarchy worked but one guy, would get the best spot, the lowest in the totem would be out in the worst areas, no shade, nobody parked there.

Interviewer:

Was that by age, type of disability or just gender?

Thomas:

>topic< Difference between America and other countries views on disability>/topic<.

A lot of the people that I saw begging in the parking lots were people with physical disabilities; there were mostly men and that woman in the traffic, she was blind and I think age, was part of it, but it took a whole of it, I don't know if they were doing it to raise their families I didn't have that aversion to begging, but a lot of people...I just remember some things when we were in ADAPT that came up; we are too good for what half of the world does, related to disability? I think that in a lot of places, maybe not so much today, I don't know but I wouldn't be surprised that's all there is for people and that's all they do...

Interviewer:

That's work.

Thomas:

Yeah right and to look down on people that do that is wrong; I don't think that's the way people should get their living. I don't think that we should be thinking that we are better than that; and I think that happens a lot in the disability community.

Interviewer:

Basically it is a way of making a living.

Thomas:

Right and for some people; that's it.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Thomas:

Yeah. So, I think it showed me a lot of different cultures, even though I don't remember a lot about it, it kind of broaden my horizons in a lot of ways, that was a pretty cool thing that happened.

Interviewer:

Yeah, you said you had a spinal cord injury when you were seventeen.

Thomas:

Yeah. I was working for my uncle.

Interviewer:

Where were you living?

Thomas:

>topic< Acquiring her disability>/topic<.

I was living in New Hampshire; we were actually working ... my grandparents there were some old sheds there rotting, so we were tearing them down. We had to go get the floor boards up; they had lie store on them... really rotting, so you can't really pick them up. So we were going there and he was driving a tractor; and he was like, "if you guys want to ride, in the bucket we will just take you over" so we were riding; and I don't even

know what happened. So I fell off it, and I was in the front end and I got caught underneath so that's how I had my accident and that was when I was seventeen.

Interviewer:

What level?

Thomas:

T12-L1 around there. It's odd because when I go the spinal cord doctor now they say T10, I'm like, so how does it move around... c'mon.

Interviewer:

(Laughs).

Thomas:

You would think it would be finite, but whatever it doesn't seem to be apparently.

Interviewer:

So what happened after that; were you in rural New Hampshire?

Thomas:

>topic< Rehabilitation process and experience>/topic<.

They drove me to the hospital; it was extremely painful ride in an ambulance and then I went to Boston university. I first went to the Deaconess Hospital, they did a limbectomy and surgery, and they tried stopping it but there was not really much that could be done at that time. A week after my injury there happen to be an opening at Boston University's Hospital and the rehab was run by a doctor; whose name I can't think of right now; he was a good doctor and he was a guy who had polio...

Interviewer:

Oh.

Thomas:

I think that now, and the time I didn't get it; at the time that led him to be much more proactive about getting people back into doing things, and also realistic about what was going on, because I had a physical therapist; she was hot, she was great; you know fun person she understood I didn't want orthopedic shoes and she helped me get earth shoes made into for my braces and stuff like that. She was really oriented in getting me walking again and she had some friends that were para, but were walking again, so she was really into that.

I did that for a long time but it was very impractical because I couldn't carry anything and I was not that great of getting off a curve, so I was limited were I went and stuff like that. It was great exercise I would say that, when I left there... back in those day I wasn't there for like six months, I think it wasn't that much terrible, because psychological time to adjust and to learn from other people that were there. People would come in, they would have a problem later and they would come back to be reassessed or whatever so you would get to meet old people that had, had their injuries for longer and other people that were new so you had a little socialization thing.

But people that I met who were peer counselor type told me that when they got hurt there was nothing and that nobody knew anything, and that they were sent home with a catheter and with no training on how to use it;

you used figure out how to change it yourself, I guess. It freaked me out; that's how it was but a couple different people told me that. But that's what I mean with that doctor, he I think he was pretty instrumental in getting people that would help had peer counselor and that kind of thing. The attitude of the place was, you'll get out there and go into life, that's just going to be what happens.

Interviewer:

That's pretty unique; especially for that era.

Thomas:

It was really great and they said it was a good rehab. That why we got on it so quickly something that was really pushed by everybody; it will be good if you get in there, and there was an opening.

Interviewer:

What about the gender breakdown?

Thomas:

>topic< Gender and Disability>/topic<.

There was no gender breakdown; it was me and a bunch of guys. That was it. There were some weird moments about that; some of the nurses were guys, and there would be this jokes; you know about catheter's. It was meant in good fun, but you know.

Interviewer:

At 17.

Thomas:

You can't move, it was a little strange.

Interviewer:

What about gender identity. We have a number of interviews already of somebody focusing on women's experience on rehabilitation.

Thomas:

Aha.

Interviewer:

How did that shape your identity in terms of gender, sexuality, and things like that?

Thomas:

I ...

Interviewer:

There was certainly a male experience.

Thomas:

A counter balance to that was, that most of the nurses, PT's and OT's were women it wasn't a male dominated place, but you were kind of one of the guys that was the way I kind of thought of it, and I was kind of a tomboy anyway so it wasn't uncomfortable to me in any way; there was like how much weight you could

bench press and stuff like that and I got into that too, even though it was a bit different; and there was another woman for a little while.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Thomas:

I don't know we just didn't spend so much time together. Anyway it felt like a family more than anything else.

Interviewer:

That's good. What about like in Nigeria, how much experience did you have with disability or people that used wheelchair and crutches?

Thomas:

>topic< Disability experience in Nigeria>/topic<.

Not really, there was somebody that was related to guy that was like my grandfather and he had epilepsy. My brother and I were with him alone on the living room, and he had a seizure right there, and it was pretty intense because we were just little kids back then, so that was one. I had a lot of people with substance abuse issues in my family, so that disability was well represented in my world. In terms of other kinds like using wheelchair or stuff like there wasn't a lot of people that I knew; I just took the word of this people when they said you're just gonna going to go on and then I really had thought to myself, like okay you're just going to take this and go with it.

Interviewer:

How did your family react?

Thomas:

>topic< Thomas' support system>/topic<.

They were very, very, supportive; my mom moved up so she would come see me.

Interviewer:

Where were they living?

Thomas:

They were living in Northern Virginia, but she rented an apartment in Cambridge and my dad came almost every day. My dad, he was gone so much; it was weird that he did that, but it was wonderful too. I got it when I really didn't have any people around, because I had a lot of supportive friends and family that they would visit, but it soon got to be too much at a hospital you don't have things to tell people like "what's going on" and he kind of kept it abbey.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Thomas:

>topic< Medical Model of Disability, focus of the impairment not the individual>/topic<.

Another big thing to me was, that one day we were walking down the hall and he just took my hand and I was just rolling along and holding his hand. The first time I had my surgery, the doctors came in and said, “You’ ll never be able to walk again, but you’ ll have a baby”. And I had a boyfriend, but it wasn’ t that serious and it wasn’ t like I was planning in getting pregnant any time soon; thanks a lot, but I was like what am I baby maker machine, not very impressed by that. But when my dad did that it kind of gave me the feeling that I would be able to have just relationships with people and that there would be ways of working that out, even though I wouldn’ t know what it would be or how it would happen. They were really cool… they were great.

Interviewer:

So you got out… when did your accident happen?

Thomas:

1975.

Interviewer:

You got out.

Thomas:

>topic< Attending Harvard University>/topic<.

I got out, I had been accepted to Harvard before my accident so I went there; and it was really wild. It was when section 504 was beginning to be enforced, and they were quite concern they would be target of lawsuits, because they had maybe like 11 people with disabilities, or who identified with disabilities over all the classes. They asked us to help with stuff like, figuring how to make the buildings accessible and things like that. It was cool in that way.

Interviewer:

Oh wow.

Even though the 504 regulations hadn’ t been issued?

Thomas:

I think they had been issued but they weren’ t really enforced.

Interviewer:

Finalized.

Thomas:

People were starting to put attention to them. Let’ s put it that way.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Thomas:

>topic< Harvard’ s inaccessibility and efforts for a change>/topic<.

I think they had just been issued now that you say that. There wasn't a lot of access; you would go to a building and go through this basement, and skewest routes for this collections of this and that; it was kind of cool because you saw part of the buildings nobody ever saw. For me, I kind liked that museum type of thing; there were a lot of museumy weird stuff in the basements of these buildings. I enjoyed that part of it, but it was the skewedness' routes, elevators were like the kind the door would open, you'd go in and you'd have pull the gates, the gates would come down and meet in the middle and you'd had to pull the string to shut, you'd hit the button and then it would Grrh... (imitates elevator sound) and it would slowly move up, and then you'd had to get the gates to open and then you'd go out; it was some physical activity to get to some of the places.

That was kind of fun, but I kept thinking this is not going to work for everyone on campus, and they had shuttle buses but just wasn't accessible and they got a van and the guy drove it; and there was this van and this one guy; that if two different people needed to be at different places at the same time, you just had to... it didn't work out that great. The guy was a nice guy; but I mean he could only be at one place at one time.

Interviewer:

You said the trans*** verify 33.36 wasn't accessible.

Thomas:

Oh no, none of that.

Interviewer:

At all

Thomas:

>topic< Learning how to drive>/topic<.

None, nothing the trans wasn't accessible whatsoever.

I wasn't interested in learning how to drive, but I didn't have any other way of getting around, so I did finally. I had been learning, but that was another thing, I had lessons and then this one drive ed teacher he was my age, and I don't know what he thought, like if it was a date or some kind of thing; sliding his hand over my leg while I was driving, and I'm like ... I told my mom, and she was like, "this is not gonna happen again" and that was the end for that driver. (All laugh)

Then I got another teacher who was very; just by the book, appropriate and he didn't smell that great, but he was a great teacher. It made me appreciate people for who they are and how they are. So anyway; the transit wasn't accessible, a lot of the buildings; for one class I had to get carried three flights of stairs, a super nice student Marco Williams he would carry me up and somebody else would take my chair up, and that was the only for that class because that teacher didn't want to move it.

Interviewer:

Did you ask or did they...?

Thomas:

I asked and they said, it was a groovy space were the class was, up in the attic part of the building, but it would've been nice if I was able just to go to class; he didn't want to move it, so it didn't get moved.

Interviewers:

Did other classes get moved?

Thomas:

>topic< Lack of interest and accommodation towards students with disabilities >/topic<.

I think sometimes they did. A lot of the time it was the bizarre routes, that was a lot of them. A few of us got together and we wanted to start a disabled student group for more access and support each other. The thing was that the university wanted to do things up to a point, but if you wanted something beyond that point, you were out of luck; they didn't want to listen to you. There was another guy there that was quad and he and I and another few students; we started this group and I mean but we were tiny and it was better than nothing. There was a woman who was deaf, but was fluent in eight languages and she wanted to be a language major and they wouldn't allow her to do the language lab. If you've ever done a language lab, you put earphones on and you repeat the person says over; and for a deaf person that is useless, and they wouldn't accommodate her in any way and we wanted her to fight and everything; and she got so beat down by that, that she just decided to do comparative literature and that was one thing, that really radicalized my attitude about other stuff (interrupts).

Interviewer:

How come?

Thomas:

Cause it was so unfair of what they did to her. Another thing was that she was in this dorm; and there was a fire and she also had seizures... and a fire alarm with flash and it would set up her seizures and the head of the dorm, or tutor whatever it was; he didn't want to go back and get her. She was just frozen of seizures and they wouldn't help her, some students we helped her out. It was totally unfair the way she was treated just because of her disability, so that was another kind of intense thing for us.

Another thing, there was a guy who was the head of disabled student services, so it was really weird; disabled student services was disconnected from like the people that get you readers if you were blind, schedule the van they had; I really don't know what the difference was. Anyway the disabled student services guy he wanted to be in the office of dean of students which was an inaccessible building, so you couldn't go to his office... just too bad...

Interviewer:

How did you reach him?

Thomas:

You just didn't do much with him; he was kind of useless anyway, but if you wanted to reach him I guess you could call him; I mean he was an asshole, I had no interest in talking to this guy. It was so infuriating that he did that, that was another thing... but there was a lot of stuff like that would get you really angry; I wasn't really sure about what do, our group we would get together and we would talk about it; but we mostly advised.

Interviewer:

Who were you working with in Harvard?

Thomas:

You mean like...

Interviewer:

When they asked for your advice.

Thomas:

>topic< Working for Harvard's accessibility consultation>/topic<.

A lot of the physical plan people and some architects; they were the ones interested in our input and so forth and then there was a guy who ran services offices and he was pretty cool, but he wasn't high on picking order of things in the university. Another thing is that I was a focal org major *** rectify 40.24 I didn't want to do what my mom did, so I went far away and chose focal org major. I was interested in mythology at the time but that building wasn't accessible and they would do things and I couldn't go them; so I missed out on those things that weren't really there for me. They were nice to me, but I wasn't considering of what people did really, you just had to make your way along.

I had to write a thesis for that major and I had this advisor and I talked to her about what I was going to do and she said great, and I wrote it and everything like that and they told me they were thinking of not accepting it because I only had a limited number of sources from the library. I said, "Well that's all there is, I read everything you have, and I'm sorry there's no more people and my advisor said it was okay" they were like, "oh okay" but they did wind up taking it, but I feel that if I would've been for the building I'd probably had more exposure to more people that would've had more ideas and what to say. You could feel it all the time the discrimination.

Interviewer:

Did you have any connection with the Boston CIL?

Thomas:

I don't even know if was there then.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Thomas:

>topic< Practicing Track and Field>/topic<.

Probably, it was maybe starting. I had no connections, I didn't even know about it or independent living. I knew about nothing; the only thing I knew about disability was sports, because they got me hooked up some people that were doing track racing and stuff like that; so I did some of that. I had a really good friend we'd go running at the track 6 miles a day, I actually had a big crush on him and he would go; he was really into really marathoning and stuff like that. He would go and I would go with him.

Interviewer:

And that was your regular chair.

Thomas:

>topic< Modifying her race chair>/topic<.

Well I modified my regular chair. I put washers on the front so it would dump the seat a little bit and then after a while; I got one with cambered wheels.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Was the cambered wheels just like a... was that chair from a manufacturer?

Thomas:

My ever first chair was an Everson Jennings and I got rid of the arm rest and got rid of all the extraneous stuff once I figured out I could do that. Somehow I got one that was lower down, and it had what it calls it dumper here at your knees and it had the cambered wheels. I would go around on that one all the time... I'm trying to remember exactly how that went, but anyway I modified it; through my friend that was a runner he taught me about a lot of stuff, so he showed me about this other chair... by today's standards (interrupts)

Interviewer:

Able bodied runner?

Thomas:

No, no, he was in a chair he was a quad.

Interviewer:

Oh okay.

Thomas:

By today standards they probably weight 30 pounds instead of 60 pounds.

Interviewer:

That's a big difference.

Thomas:

It was a big difference and it was much better; it what still very limbering compare to today. That was where I knew most other people with disabilities from. I would see people from this group called the disabled people's liberation front out in the streets and stuff like that. They were always collecting money for wheelchairs sports and there was this big question whether it was really for wheelchair sports or not they invited me to come to some stuff in the community, but it seemed like it was to rad... like I was still ... not (interrupts)

Interviewer:

You were not ready.

Thomas:

>topic< Early thoughts of protest>/topic<.

I wasn't really ready; it seemed way too radical for me at the time, but they would do this things... it was kind of weird, there was this movie theatre that wasn't accessible; there were lots of movie theatres that weren't accessible, but there was one they targeted and they went every Friday night for like a year and it was too predictable. What they were doing was so... now when I look at it, you need to change up what you are doing. They targeted that theater initially because if you know the movie 'Coming Home'; it's about a disabled veteran and they show that movie in that inaccessible theatre and it raised the ayre** rectify of the disabled community and so they started to go after this theatre. To me protesting and stuff like that; I wasn't there yet, I supported their ideas and everything 100%, but I wasn't ready to go do that.

Interviewer:

What about the dorms, where you lived?

Thomas:

>Topic< Living on campus>/topic<.

That was interesting, I was in regular dorms, my first one I was in the first floor and they built a ramp so I could get in. There was this huge room for five of us; but we each had, four of us had each a room and there was a big living room and a bathroom so we shared that; that was great and it was in the middle of everything. After your freshman year you would go to what they called the houses; many dorms of their own; so I went to this one and it was accessible and I think that's why I was sent to that one and they converted another room I think to make a single floor for me; there were a lot of rooms, there was a living room on the upper level and you can go up or down the stairs and there were the bedrooms, so obviously that was not going to work so I had this room. Then I had a boyfriend at the time and I broke up with him; and he was seeing somebody else in that same dorm, so I asked if I could get moved and as I moved they were making more dorms accessible.

Interviewer:

(Laughs).

Thomas:

They were kind of, "Okay" and they moved me to another dorm; that one was kind of a weird situation, they would have two rooms and you would share a bathroom; with a college adjunct bathroom. Well there was a guy in the other side, but I couldn't get in the bathroom anyway and I didn't really care; I would go out the hall and use the bathroom in the hall and he used the one in the room because I wasn't going to get in there anyway, so it worked out pretty good for him anyways.

The last year, I moved off campus and lived with some friends in an apartment.

Interviewer:

An accessible apartment?

Thomas:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Wow, what made you find one for the time. *** rectify 49.19-21

Thomas:

I was kind of amazed myself, in fact I think that they might've built a ramp; I don't know. I cannot believe, I cannot believe, that there was a ramp in that building just by itself; I think something got built in there.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

At this point where you using crutches at all? Braces?

Thomas:

>topic< Transition of type of mobilization>/topic<.

I used braces and crutches, but once I started going to school; I pretty much used the chair, because it was so slow the other way and I was just not going to get anywhere; I didn't have time.

Interviewer:

You would use up all your energy.

Thomas:

Exactly, it was exhausting.

Interviewer:

Before we do *** rectify 50.08-50.10

Okay so you graduated.

Thomas:

So I graduated...

Interviewer:

That was 79?

Thomas:

80.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Thomas:

I must've gone back in 76; I'm sure I did.

Interviewer:

So you started college in 76?

Thomas:

>topic< Adventure after her college graduation>/topic<.

Right. I was going to take off a year anyway, and spend it in rehab so. In 1980 I graduated and I have relatives in Australia, so my grandmother offered me to send me to visit them as a present for graduating; it was a really great present, but what was also cool about it is that it's one of those things you can stop on your way. One of my professors he studied healing in anthropology and he had studied in Fiji; so he said, on your way stop at Fiji or on your way back and see my friends there, we did. His friends introduced us (interrupts).

Interviewer:

Who's the we?

Thomas:

>topic< Living, working, and the experience at the Rehab in Fiji>/topic<.

Oh my mom went with me. They introduced us to this really weird woman who was a doctor and was from Australia and she was trying to start a rehab unit in Fiji in this hospital; the only place they gave her was in this TB hospital, so a wing of this hospital was a rehab. It was really fascinating, after meeting her for a while she said, "Do you want to... would you like to help me; since you've been through rehab and everything? It would be really great" and there so many things about it that were fascinating, especially in a retrospect.

I was young, knew very little, but I did had gone through rehab and knew how it worked but it was so different over there ; and everybody didn't even have a wheelchair like some of the people that were older people... there was this guy who had a stroke and he had a commode chair that he pushed around backwards with his foot; there were some younger people that were there, and there was a woman that got possessed by degei he's like demigod and she was possessed by him and got dengue fever and she was talking in tongues and when I had been in rehab , there was this guy that talked in tongues and he was from Puerto Rico and he fell off a pear tree and he used to in lunch all the time go with the tongues , but anyways different tongues, she was possessed and did a thing to encourage degei to get out of her but he's deaf blind; degei is.

Interviewer:

Oh!! Can you spell that for the transcriber?

Thomas:

I think it's D-E-N-G-I (correct spelling Degei for the demigod) but if you look it up it's a disease (spelling for the disease is D-E-N-G-U-E) dengue fever.

Interviewer:

The disease its D-E-N-G-U-E, I think.

Thomas:

It's the same thing. It's really the same god.

Interviewer:

So it's an explanation for the fever?

Thomas:

>topic< Differences amongst the Fijian disabled community>/topic<.

Yes, it's the same... they are related.

So that was another wild thing. There was another woman there but she was an amputee and she sold eggs and made quilts and sold them in the rehab. A lot of the people that were in the rehab didn't want to go out in the community they were to embarrassed by their disability or whatever. What was weird about it was, that there was another group of people with disabilities that had gone to the crippled children school; that was run by somebody or some aid organization in Fiji. They were much more out in community, doing things, they were the go getter types and they had really cool like vehicles and stuff.

The switch of operator hospital was a guy that I think had polio and he was in some type of ... probably a manual chair, but he used to tell me, "Don't spend your time with those people at the rehab they're all losers, they don't want to go and do anything" and the people in the rehab were kind of torn, because some of them were like, "You just don't know anything, you are just as young, and you're just white and you think you know everything" and you know anything.

There were other people that were there, they took me for granted that I wanted to help, but this doctor that I worked for... she was wild, I mean this woman she had, had a spinal cord injury in her neck, she was a quadriplegic but she walked, but she also had been walking down the street and stood on a man hole cover that wasn't on tightly and she had fallen into a hole and then that man hole cover had hit her in the head, so she had a brain injury too and she would self-prescribe the most unbelievable cocktails of drugs and she just... I mean she was just really intense and she would go after you and yell. I lived in the rehab unit because I didn't have anywhere else to live, it was just six months but it was very wild.

Interviewer:

How long is this trip to Fiji and Australia?

Thomas:

I don't know, it was many months. I was in Fiji for six months and that was in the way back. My mother didn't stay with me for that. When we were traveling around; we went to see my relatives, my cousin and my aunt who were over there; they took us to a bunch of places but it was just a couple of months.

Interviewer:

Oh okay, in Australia.

Thomas:

It was less than a year, but it was a big deal.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Thomas:

>topic< Disability experience in Australia>/topic<.

And I ran into tons of disabled people; I ran into a guy who was a surfer and he had just had an accident, and had a spinal cord injury, but by any reason he got covered by the Public Australian Health; and they didn't want to give me a visa because I was a disabled person and they didn't want me to come and be a bomb of their public health.

Interviewer:

*** inaudible 58.20-58.22

Thomas:

It took forever to get that visa, but we did get it. When I was in Fiji, that was the year of the international disabled person, they did try to do some stuff and this doctor she was very aggressive. We pushed really hard and we ended up doing a march, disability pride march. I actually have a poster of that somewhere; there were a lot of young people that really wanted to do something. One of the nicest guys there, that was interested in doing stuff, he had bed sores that were so bad; that you could stick your head into one of them, they were huge.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Thomas:

There was no air conditioning and it was just very humid; I mean the doctor just medically tried to do everything; I don't think she was a bad doctor despite her medical self-diagnosing activities, but there was just so much you could do. once you got a sore, it's just a matter of time and he did eventually die from this sores; which was horrible.

Interviewer:

Wow. They were abscess basically.

Thomas:

He was a thin person, he was a quad so he also had the quad thinness too and then (interrupts)

Interviewer:

What do you mean by quad thinness?

Thomas:

Well, several spinal cord injuries a very thin and then there's others...

Interviewer:

Oh okay, I was just curious.

Thomas:

He was real thin like that, so it was very hard for him to get a sore. I think it's easier for you to get a sore if you are very thin I think, because you don't have much flesh in you... anyway whatever the reality is of that. Once you get a sore, it's really, really hard to get rid of them and it's a big, big, problem. There was a young woman there and she was a quad and her name was Colletta, she was kind of the *** inaudible 1.01.09 of the place and there was this little girl and she was a nasty little girl; she hated me and she would do anything in her power to make my life miserable.

I found it really interesting working with that doctor, because you spend your time kind of trying to say, "I know she is kind of hard but what she is trying to promote is good, so she's a little difficult" it's not a bad message, that whole thing was but wild. After my six-month visa was up, I decided it was time to go.

Interviewer:

I want to hear about Australia but first I just want to go back; did you work in college, or worked during the summers? What was that like?

Thomas:

I worked during the summers, I had one job I was a research assistant for a professor; it was more of a private arrangement. Then another summer I worked in a political consulting firm and they did surveys and we would tabulate the surveys so there we just different jobs like that.

Interviewer:

I was curious about the access in the jobs.

Thomas:

>topic< Accessibility in Massachusetts in the 70s>/topic<

Nothing was really accessible back then; there were no curb cuts you would have to go to the drive ways and get off and side walking; you would end up roiling in the streets all the time and the traffic you just had to tough it out, there was no transit.

Interviewer:

What about restaurants? What about your social life?

Thomas:

You know, there were some that were; you'd go to those and then there were others you never went to and that was that. It was better than you might think, sometimes people would help you too; there was this guy that would invite everyone to his dorm to watch Mary Hartman at ten or eleven something like that; it was big social thing, and all the football players would carry me up the stairs to watch that; they were super nice about it, they had no problem, they were really great.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Thomas:

Actually one time there was a bomb scare at our dorm and the only person that came back for me in the bomb scare was this ... cause they shut down the elevator, and I was up in the floor, was this blind student; in my dorm, he came back to find me and he got some football players and they were like, "We'll get you down", so that was cool.

Interviewer:

That's cool.
So, Australia.

Thomas:

>topic< Trip to Australia>/topic<.

I didn't do a lot of disability stuff there. I visited this surfer to tell him that his life could go on after his injury like one time or something like that; because somebody new that I was there and they asked me to come. It wasn't terribly accessible either, but I was a lot more mobile back then too; we went all over, we went to Sydney and a lot of times cities are worst, because they have curbs and all of that. More rural areas, there wasn't really anything, not necessarily even a road, because we drove up...

We went to Sydney and then we went to down to Melbourne and we went to this place called Kangaroo island; if you do a trip to Australia you have to go to kangaroo island; it's unbelievable nature and then we went to Adelaide which is actually where my aunt was living. Then we drove to the outback went up to the northern territories and I think we went to Darwin am not sure; we went to this little mining town called Coober Pedy, it was pretty neat. That was me and my mom; we went hiking to some of the parks and stuff like that and they were all amazed that someone in a wheelchair would be out there in the middle of nowhere; if you got to see something you got to go! (Everybody laughs).

Interviewer:

What about flying?

Thomas:

>topic< Inaccessibility with airplanes and buses>/topic<.

Actually that trip was okay. Another time, when I got back I got a job as a consultant for a cable TV that was trying to bid on a contract and I made a ton of money in that job, so I went to Italy and I was going to fly on Alitalia, and then they found out I was in a wheelchair when I got to the airport and they said, “We won’t take you” and I wasn’t going to be able to fly and go at all and I was like, “What” and then it was really… I didn’t know if they were going to refund my money back, but it was really just kind of go to hell kind of thing, luckily we made such a stink about that, they made an arrangement with American airlines about it; and American airlines flew me.

Another time I was flying with American and I was going to visit my brother in San Francisco and they broke my wheelchair, and they wouldn’t let me take one from the airport, get me a chair; I went with my boyfriend and I had to be piggy back by him or my brother while we were there and when we were at house I had to be in the floor and that was for a week and they didn’t care at all, they just didn’t care a flip. It was very different back then, and we took greyhound another time, and we were on the greyhound and it wasn’t accessible; I got in a fight with this guy, boyfriend at the time and went and sat somewhere else; and I had this drunk sitting next to me, who decided he was going to take advantage of the situation.

So I was sitting there going, “I wish you could take your hands off me, if I could move and walk, I would’ve changed my seat but I can’t walk” but my point was really not that guy, but get someone else in the bus to help, and I hoped my boyfriend would get up his ass and help, but he was just a jerk. He was a sleep or something else, but anyways this man, came and grabbed me from under my arms and he lifted me up and carried me to this other seat where he was seating and left me where he was seating and he went to where I was seating; but it was just luck that he did that. It was too narrow of the space for me to get out of there.

Interviewer:

Wow, so you worked for a cable company and how did you end up in Denver?

Thomas:

I never went to Denver.

Interviewer:

What, Atlantis?

Thomas:

Yeah I never went to it, but I did go to Denver for a conference. What happen was that, after the cable job ended, I was trying to get a job in disability. In the cable job, my job had been to try to cultivate programming for people with disabilities and make pries with disability organizations in the community to hopefully promote the bid of this company, so when the contract… we had lots of cool ideas, doing independent living classes online, and online banking they were talking about that even back then just a lot of very neat stuff.

Interviewer:

How did you wind up getting these ideas and cause in college you weren’t really connected with independent living?

Thomas:

>topic< Getting ideas without any involvement>/topic<.

I don't know. The classes online; I don't think we called them independent living classes we just thought of, you can have a cooking class, money management, the things you wanted to end up doing and I mean you could've done all of that, but they ended up pinning another company; and that never happened, but it was very eye opening to me about possibilities and things. Some of the community groups brought these ideas up, but I was trying to get a job in disability, when I came back, but there wasn't any...

I didn't know nothing about what was out there; I'd never heard of independent living, the only thing I knew was about the president's committee of the handicap. Somehow I went and I talked to somebody and they suggested... I don't know if you remember, "What color is your parachute" how to find a job and then figure who you want to be an all that; and it's actually a really good book. It tells you to go interview people about their jobs (interrupts)...

Interviewer:

Okay, like informational interviews

Thomas:

>topic< Justin Dart and moving to Texas >/topic<.

Yeah, well I was trying to do that, trying to find out about disability, so I went to the president's committee and somebody there told me about Justin Dart and he was in Texas at the time, so I got in touch with him... Oh I know!! I don't know how I found out about it, but I did wind up volunteering at the independent center of northern Virginia; I was a volunteer there and they were really great. I was really impressed by them, they knew what they were doing, but they didn't have any paying jobs so then I wind up going to the president's committee and they told me about Justin.

And I asked Justin about jobs; I was trying to get to New Mexico, cause I thought it was really cool but nobody had any connections with that; he said, "Well here in Texas we have a merit system in which you can apply to jobs with the state, and you get different points and all that" but he also said that independent living there were like four or five centers. I asked about Houston and they had just gone through this huge reduction of staff they went from like; I don't know thirty employees down to like five (interrupts)...

Interviewer:

Is this like when their grants; their big \$200,000-dollar grant (interrupts)...

Thomas:

>topic< Dreams and Hopes at El Paso >/topic<.

Yeah they must've all ran out and all those people left and only five were left they weren't going to hire anybody else for their rest of their lives, so I had no hope there and the others weren't interested but the El Paso one wrote me back and said we are interested in talking to you, so I did this telephone interview and they said one of our board members in coming to DC for something and they will interview you. He was actually like gnat fly and I never met with that guy; they just decided that even though I hadn't met them they were still going to hire me.

So they hired me and I drove to El Paso and I thought I was maybe going to be able to do something cross cultural cause right there by the border and all that, but once I got there; just the independent living stuff and

also they were really interested in advocating. And I wanted to advocate too, so it was great we kind of got things going together and it was really excellence, it was a good experience, but I met Bob about a week after, I got to El Paso.

Interviewer:

Oh really.

Thomas:

>topic< Attending the CTD conference >/topic<.

Everybody said, maybe it was a month. There's this conference you got to go, it's the state wide conference of the coalition, called the Coalition of Texans with disabilities it's the BL and ENDOL thing in Texas, you need to go because you need to meet more advocates from around the state and all that. Amazingly even though I was a new person on the totem pole; they let me go with some other people out there, there's not so much that happened. When you get the chance of going to some conferences and stuff like that, they are pretty open to people going, so I went and met Bob.

I mean I loved my job, but I just didn't ... if you in El Paso, and at least my experience at the time; if you were not military, old, white, family long stand; everybody did stuff with their families so there where sort of the White families' society, the Hispanic families' society, the Mexican American families' society, and then there was the military ; if you didn't fit into one of those categories, I mean my friends did stuff with me but they had to go do stuff with their families but I never felt quite like I fit in right. Meanwhile Bob and I, were getting serious...

Interviewer:

Long distance?

Thomas:

Yeah. Eventually when the job came open to work at the ARCIL, I applied for that and I did get it. El Paso was another learning experience for me; just so many people with such... it was so much more, in the east coast it had been set up, it was set, there was a book of how you did everything and out there it was like, we are just going to make it work one or another and I really liked that. Also Jim Parker was there, if you can ever talk to him, he's in...

Interviewer:

Santa Fe.

Thomas:

Santa Fe, he runs a radio show now, but you have to talk to him.

Interviewer:

So we were told.

Thomas:

>topic< Jim Parker's influence >/topic<.

He got injured like he was 16 here in Texas; and he was a walking quad until recently, real character and he can tell you about how it was in the old way Texas disability wise. He was working there at that time, this is how I remember okay; I got this brochure in the mail and it was a picture and it was called the last questionnaire and it was a picture of a bus sticking out of a toilet and it said, "Don't flush, organize" lack of accessible transportation was a huge deal to me, because of when I was in college and all of it, it just made me angry and I really wanted to see accessible transportation. So when I saw this about buses, I was like, "Wow this is really interesting" and it was so weird I mean it was all hand done and who sees a bus going down the toilet, you don't see that every day.

Interviewer:

Do you still have it?

Thomas:

I have a picture of one and I might have one somewhere. So I couldn't go but Jim went the first time and he came back and he was like you guys have to go, this is really, really, great. And the next time Bob went, and I think Jim went too and the next time after that they came to San Antonio for a regional conference and that's when I went.

Interviewer:

So did you get to the national training; or when did you go to national training, sort of Olympic style training?

Thomas:

I didn't ever, there wasn't no training like that back then.

Interviewer:

Cause Bob mentioned a DC one.

Thomas:

>topic< Beginnings of ADAPT >/topic<.

Those were an action; they called them trainings but what you would do is that you'd go, he sure did some training that's true at the beginning. When ADAPT started they had this thing called the ACCESS Institute and they started ADAPT; then they realized they wanted to have more people in different places being involved, so they started this thing the ACCESS Institute to train more people on how to do the organizing but that's what Shell Trapp was involved with everything. At the beginning there was another guy involved in it named Richard Mail (interrupts)

Interviewer:

Can you spell his last name.

Thomas:

I think it's M-A-I-L.

I'm really not sure and (interrupts).

Interviewer:

And is Trapp with 2 p's or 1?

Thomas:

>Topic< Big influences in her life >/topic<.

Two p's. He was my mentor I loved Shell, he was the greatest guy; he's no longer with us but he's fabulous, but anyway they had this access institute and they would have people come, the first day they did was a training or something like that. They would immediately throw you into an action, so in the training the one Bob went to, they went to a church and they had this training. Now we have the head of the federal transit administration I don't know; he's coming to meet with us, so he went; the FDA guy and everyone surrounded his car and you blocked it and stuff like.

You would go from zero to one hundred, really very in your face kind of thing. When I went there wasn't really a training, you went straight to the action. When I went I was like, "Oh my God this is what I've wanting" it was so in your face, very family, it was like a community, there were people with all kinds of disabilities; everybody was equally respected. Actually I had gone from El Paso to a conference in Denver called, "*Beyond Survival*" and I had met some of the people from Atlantis at that conference because they had this table, were they had... it was really weird things they had things made of straws and little pieces of wood; it was like a little kids thing. When you stick the straw at the spokes thing coming out of the... I really didn't know what the hell the table was about but it was kooky, they were there with that table I think Wade was there and I know George Roberts was there; I don't remember everybody that was there.

Interviewer:

Who was George Roberts?

Thomas:

>topic< Who was George Roberts and Action meeting in San Antonio >/topic<.

He was an ADAPT member from Denver, so I kind of met them there; and they had a panel for transportation and for some reason I spoke at that panel I don't know why that was but I did. It was really a great conference; I had never been to many things before, getting to be with other people with disabilities talking about stuff was excellent. I just when I met the people at the action in San Antonio it was really; the real thing. It was funny because all these guys came and you know how back then everyone smoked and they were all out there smoking; so I came up because I wasn't able to go and just stay there the whole time; that was what Bob did, but I working at the time so I was going back and forth. These guys were giving me the political rap; I knew what they were doing to show off but at the same time it was just great to hear people vent into everything and talking about stuff from that angle and discrimination.

Fighting back and civil disobedience; I wasn't necessarily super excited about the arrest part of it; but I loved the idea about fighting back and organizing all of that part of it from the beginning. Back then there wasn't many people; probably thirty or forty people in the whole ADAPT, so we actually stated this convent down in San Antonio and I don't think the nuns like this very well; but they would have this meeting at night; and everyone would meet at night, and it was hours of conversations of like, "is it going to be better if we do it this way or that way" or the political ramifications of this and that. Everybody got to talk it was really different from how it is now, it was very educational and it felt real freeing to be in a group of people that were political aware and everything; it was just liberating.

That is why I want to have this stuff up in the walls, so people can come in and think; it's not just... You know those books about disability, I fell off, I got in car crash and its kind of like my personal story and I thank God for my wife she helped take care of me and blah, blah. I'm a wife that takes care of somebody and I can tell you

damn better” Be grateful” but on the other hand there is so much more to it than that; and it bugs me that it gets reduced to that level all the time. This is your disability experience, that is definitely a disability experience and it is a person’s real life but it’s like there’s a little bit more to it than just that. Like I used to meet these people and they were common doing anthropology studies when I was in northern Virginia volunteering at that center, asked one woman was named Donna Yeager, she didn’t have any arms or legs and this student was doing like a study of her; and it was weird because the whole thesis was like Donna’s life and I just felt like that was kind of weak.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Thomas:

Donna’s life I’m sure it was really interesting, because in the short time I knew her, she had many fascinating experiences discrimination up the Wazu at the same time it’s weird, so it was cool to really get in with a group of people that were...

Interviewer:

Active.

Thomas:

Active and so committed. that was the other thing they were so committed, they were willing to do whatever.

Interviewer:

Just to go back, what was your job precisely at El Paso?

Thomas:

>topic< Job experience at El Paso >/topic<.

In El Paso I was the independent living coordinator; that was a catch all, like whatever everybody needed; you did it. I had to try and teach this one woman how to drive and that was a bad idea, I told her,” You need to get a regular driver instructor” I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to teach you how to drive (interviewers laugh).

There is, one time somebody got a motorized wheelchair, and I had never been in a motorized wheelchair and it was my job to show him how to drive his chair, so before he got in it, I got in it and I tried, I mean I realized I was way out of my depth too (laughs). This other woman, didn’t know how to count change so we kept track of her money, so I helped her with that; that was a long slugging job, but you know we did that. Just whatever came up that was the job.

Interviewer:

Wow, that’s pretty...

Thomas:

It was pretty intense, there were people there; there was this one guy, so smart his family were like his attendants but he wanted to like how to dress himself so I told him of how I did things, and he would go home and do it, I mean I didn’t even show him, I just told him and I told him about adaptive equipment, that I had seen and stuff like that; and he would go home and make it. Stuff to put your shoes on with or whatever, he was really just a cool guy and he was a disc jockey that’s what he did to make some pocket change.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Thomas:

People would be working at goodwill, and they would make less money working at goodwill than what it cost them to get to goodwill with the paratransit; that's how crappy the wages were. I mean this one woman I think she would get twenty-five cents an hour and the job was picking up trash at a stadium; at El Paso in the summer it's really hot there and I now it's a dry heat but tis not that great, it was just abusive work; it was very intense being there and doing that job.

Interviewer:

And so what years were you there?

Thomas:

I was there for one year.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Thomas:

I guess either 82 or 83. I really can't remember this exactly.

Interviewer:

Do you have a resume?

Thomas:

I probably do somewhere.

Interviewer:

Yeah, that would be helpful.

Thomas:

I've been with ADAPT so long that I ...

Interviewer:

(Laughs)

I know, I know.

Then ARCIL, what was your position there?

Thomas:

>topic< Working with ARCIL and the dynamic in Austin>/topic<.

Then I applied for the job at ARCIL and I got it and that was community outreach. That was a different set up catch and catching; it was advocating, doing presentations, going to events, I did the newsletter just kind of lots of different stuff.

Interviewer:

What was the dynamic like at Austin, when you arrived? So you arrived?

Thomas:

83 -84. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Cause there was a lot going on then.

Thomas:

So there was MIGHT and I was involved with MIGHT, but they were starting to go down the hill a little bit, but I mean I was still involved and being supportive, I have to tell you that I am in awe of how CTD was with their elections and everything. The people that started CTD started MIGHT a lot of them were the same, it was about people having ... there were jobs people had to do; they were supposed to do and they did them, they would have speakers come in and stuff like that. That was all really good, what happened really quickly was, we were trying to promote regular buses being accessible, and other people were really into the paratransit and the paratransit was run by a guy that was friends with a lot of the MIGHT people and it got really ugly, really ugly. So that was one whole set of things, we were working on trying to get housing, they opened St. George's court, when I came that was my first newsletter that I wrote it was like some type of tax credit assistant housing.

Interviewer:

Accessible housing.

Thomas:

Accessible housing, integrated, and affordable.

Interviewer:

Where is it in Austin.

Thomas:

It's off by Cameron road up north near Reagan high school.

Interviewer:

Is that where Jean Rogers lives?

Thomas:

No, that's Gaston place, that's regular housing.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Thomas:

This was like... you know how there is public housing and housing that gets federal assistance, but its privately owned. It was a project like that, it was ran by a church I think; St. Georges Court I think so.

Interviewer:

Okay.

I think I've seen the name somewhere.

Thomas:

It's a little north from where George lives.

Interviewer:

Jean?

Thomas:

Yeah Jean I mean.

Interviewer:

Is this ADAPT you are talking about or ARCIL? Or both?

Thomas:

ARCIL. ADAPT was completely focused on transit, that's all adaptive.

Interviewer:

That's what it thought... I just wanted to make sure things were clear.

Thomas:

>topic< The trio and ADAPT>/topic<.

When I first started there wasn't any ADAPT. Jim, I, and Bob kind of started it when Bob came back from DC. People were working on access but there wasn't any really much laws and so it was very uphill, people's minds were really that... they knew things, but really... ADAPT changed, I know that for me but for the disability community the possibilities really opened up; it wasn't just ADAPT but also the laws that were coming in, and some of the other movements that were going around that time. It kind of was like flowering and before that it was much more quiet.

I don't remember all the different things that we were working on, but there were a lot... we went to the capital sometimes, and we thought it was terrible back then, but compared to today it was so much better it was really... Even the republicans they might've been more tight fist with the dollars but they wanted to see things happen for people. The other thing was really cool back then, this wasn't just that first year, but it went on for a while... quite a while, the state agencies had citizen boards and you could go and lobby the boards and change, go testify, they listened to you and they wanted to make changes. I mean it was a really different kind of world.

Interviewer:

Wow. I want to finish up with that story that you told us earlier, when there was a lot of noise, about the Moncrieff and the surveys that you made.

Thomas:

OH. Moncrieff wasn't involved with the surveys; but...

Interviewer:

Sort of that.

People were getting out from the *** inaudible 1.37.22

Thomas:

They had gotten out; in fact, when JT got out he moved into this house ARCIL had that was a transitional facility, and people would move there for six months to a year; they weren't allowed to stay longer. They would go there to learn independent living skills, and they would go from the Hurding housing and people would help

them find an apartment, attendant and all that stuff. Jennifer went there, she was in her office and a lot of ADAPT people where in Hurding housing.

Interviewer:

JT was in which school?

Thomas:

He was in Austin state school, but when he got out of there I don't know exactly what happened. He says he thought ARCIL didn't support him, going into the community, but that's not right because I remember we supported him, we might've not been as effective as we should've been. There was a lot of support about that, and problems with the administration of the state school and they really didn't want him going out on the community, so he ended up going back into the state school and then he moved out to an MHMR community program shortly after that; maybe a year after that.

Interviewer:

Do you know probably when that was?

Thomas:

Probably around 84 or something like that.

Interviewer:

Okay so when all of this was going on.

And you said that you met Candace and... *** rectify 1.38.58-59

Thomas:

Karen they met both a little bit later met; not quite a bit later few years later, it all seems further apart at the time.

Interviewer:

Inaudible*** 1.39.114-16

Thomas:

We used to go to the capitol and we were advocating so people could live in the community, we were advocating for more community based services, we were advocating for the closure of state schools, we were advocating for people to get out of nursing homes and into the community.

Interviewer:

So this was after the ADA was passed and ADAPT'S focus?

Thomas:

>topic< Joining's of People with Disabilities >/topic<.

We went before that, but we didn't go for the transportation stuff. Even though the legislative stuff was after, and they were two dedicated people in fact, they were two of us in office organizers back we used to have offices at Mary Lee Foundation and it was horrible there. They would go several times a week to his office and among other legislators; he was in human services and finance; all our work at the capitol has been focused on the money, because if there is no money for the programs it really doesn't matter what programs you have.

They would go to his office and talk that and had a lot of respect for them; big supporter of them and all of us in ADAPT but more with them.

So when they decided they wanted to get married or be joined, because we used to do joining's as you call them at ADAPT and Wade was a minister, so different people would have joining's, we couldn't call them weddings because social security was going to take away from people. They would do this joining's in Austin, they had lots of friends that weren't in ADAPT too so they asked Mike Moncrieff to officiate at this so he said yes. He actually wanted them to really get married, he really did work to get that change; but with the social security having so many over people you can't... I know you couldn't change the programs...

Interviewer:

The SSI

Thomas:

The SSDI I don't know. They were both or whatever it was; it was either SSI or SSDI or both. Anyway whatever it was you can't, when you get married your amounts go down, so he wanted to change that, but the objection was that there were too many people, and it couldn't be afforded blah, blah, blah. It has never been changed it still that way up to now, but he tried for a while. He agreed to officiate; his officiating was so like a political statement; it was funny but it was in keeping with our little community of ADAPT that he would do that.