

Mr. Steve Brooks

Executive Director Advocates for Special People

Interview conducted by

G. Michael Wisbrock

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Disability Studies Minor

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Biography

Steve Brooks is currently the Executive Director of Advocates for Special People in Arlington, Texas. He has held that position since February of 2014. He has participated in the function of the charitable organization since he and his wife became the guardians of his nephew by marriage. Before that time, Steve worked as a Project Manager for the AT&T Corporation from 1981 until 2013. He has a Bachelor of Applied Science in Human Resources Management from Friends University and is active in both religious and social organizations throughout Arlington.

Topics Discussed

- Early Advocacy
- Relations with Area Public Entities
- Nature of ASP
- Relationships with Government
- The Future of ASP
- Personal Experience
- Day to Day Operations

Wisbrock

This is Mike Wisbrock interviewing Steve Brooks for the University of Texas at Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is the nineteenth of March and I am at the offices of Advocates for Special People. I am here today to talk with Steve Brooks about his associations with advocacy for individuals with disabilities and his history with that branch of our society. Thank you for participating in the Oral History Program, Mr. Brooks.

Brooks

Certainly.

Wisbrock

If we could get started, let me ask you something simple. You are obviously Executive Director of the Advocates for Special People and you've been in this position for quite some time. Was there anything in your life previous to your association with the Advocates that would lead you to this type of position?

Brooks

Interestingly, when I was fourteen years old, I was a youth volunteer at an organization called TARS, it was Teens Aid the Retarded, and of course we don't use that term, anymore (/: Certainly), but I participated with a group of youth that, uh, we volunteered at events, you know, played games, one thing and another. Would never have dreamed at that time that I would have found myself where I am today.

Wisbrock

I think most kids, at least those in service-oriented organizations like your TARS or the Boy Scouts, probably have had some sort of experience with people with special needs in their childhood that affected them one way or the other. Would you say your experience there greatly affected you or was it just something that was stuck in the back of your mind?

Brooks

Probably more stuck in the back of my mind. Never thought about going down this road.

Wisbrock

If I may be so bold, what led you to Advocates for Special People?

Brooks

Eleven and a half years ago my wife's brother died unexpectedly in Colorado. His son was about to turn twenty-one, and *his* mother was in poor health, we'll say, also, and a couple of months after his father passed, we brought my nephew here to live with us in Arlington, or Pantego, and.... He had just turned twenty-one, we didn't know what in the world we were going to do, but we knew he couldn't sit at home every day, and just watch TV and play video games. We quickly set out to find something he could be involved in. Technically he could have gone back to school for a year. He didn't want that, and the school district really didn't want that, and so a gentleman at Arlington Independent School District pointed us to Advocates for Special People. At the time they had one location in a building behind Epworth United Methodist Church, and they were at capacity. And so, my nephew was put on a waiting list, and within three or four weeks they called us and said, "We're going to open a second location, and we want him to be a part of that." So, we quickly got involved and, as we do things... they needed a van, and so.... One of those things, you know, from nowhere, an acquaintance, a good friend, said "We can help you get a van." So, I set out to help Advocates get a van, and when that materialized I soon found myself on the Board (of Directors). So, we jumped in, you know, feet first and got involved.

Wisbrock

Have you or did you go to school to manage organizations like Advocates?

Brooks

(Chuckling) No, I was a mid-level manager for AT&T, so I knew about managing people, not necessarily managing organizations. I was on a non-profit Board (of Directors) at the Wesley Foundation at UTA.... That was probably the extent of my experience dealing with a Board or a non-profit, but I found that I had learned quite a bit that transferred to this position.

Wisbrock

You mentioned earlier that there was a gentleman in the Arlington Independent School District that pointed you in the direction of Advocates for Special People. Do you have much dealings with AISD or the other school districts around the area?

Brooks

Not really a lot. Three or four years ago, kind of in association with Arlington ISD's Eighteen Plus program for Special Needs students that are eighteen and over that are ready to either graduate or age out of school, we had taken some of their students for the summertime. We had capacity at our third location that we had opened, and so as long as we had capacity, we could invite them to let our

members know about our program. We took several on just for the summer; several have come back and are part of our program now.

Wisbrock

Let me ask you more specifically, previous to our interview you had mentioned that you had had some contact recently with a gentleman who, for all intents and purposes, did not have the use of one of his arms. So, Advocates for Special People, I take by that information, is not strictly people with physical disabilities or people with mental disabilities, but people that are otherwise abled that run the spectrum, is that correct?

Brooks

That's true. All of our clients have intellectual or developmental disabilities, IDD, if you will, but with that oftentimes comes other physical impairments. The young man you're talking about actually plays softball, well, he plays every sport we have, that we offer, we have a group of teams that go by Arlington Eagles, and we participate in Special Olympics events. We play softball, basketball, volleyball, sometimes soccer, track & field, aquatics in the summertime. The young man I was talking about has limited use of one arm, so he catches and throws with one hand, one arm, swings the bat, awesome batter, just a general all-around good athlete. He plays basketball, he plays volleyball, and that obvious impairment does not limit his abilities at all. He's a very admirable individual. But we have others that... On one of our volleyball teams, some of the players have limited mobility as far as walking or standing. Our folks mostly all walk. We have one young lady that's in a wheelchair. She can transfer into a restroom or in a van. She can walk short distances. She has been with the program before Advocates ran the program. Advocates took over a program that the City of Arlington started. Many of our members, then, were that program, and at one point in 2002-2003, the City then approached Advocates about taking over the program. While initially reluctant, because they had never run a program like this, like that, they did it, and I wouldn't be involved unless I thought they did it very well.

Wisbrock

That's interesting to note. Do you know, did the city start this program as a result of the Americans with Disabilities Act? We've done a lot of studies on the ADA in class, and it would be interesting to know if they started before or after the ADA was enacted.

Brooks

You know, I don't know the answer to that question. Our founding President, he was part of the original founding group, was very motivated and very determined and very good at encouraging others' participation with us. I believe that the City had a, it was just a summer program, and they had, Lawrence Odom had encouraged them to make it year-round, and I think part of that encouragement to make it year-round is what catapulted them to have us do it ourselves. I'm not sure exactly, you know, if the chicken or the egg. Lawrence may very well have been part of getting that summer program started.

I know he was instrumental in Tarrant County College starting a program, First Choice program that many of our members started out in also, going to TCC. And... Now I want to know.

Wisbrock

Going to have to do some research on my own, I think, it's an interesting question. With Arlington having started the program, is it safe to assume that Arlington has been fairly receptive to any of the needs that you have had since the takeover as an organization?

Brooks

I would say so, we've always had friends on City Council and they've always liked our program. We have gotten a Community Development Block Grant every year since we've started the program. I think, initially, there may have been a whole lot of hand-holding, helping us along the way on what needed to be done to meet the guidelines and the requirements. That CDBG grant is considered an outcomes-based program, which, with that comes a good detail of documentation, every month on a consistent basis. The demographics are all there, so we have to maintain, as we add clients, the documentation. In conjunction with the City we do an intake form when anybody starts. We have a whole intake process that we go through before they begin their first day at the day habilitation programs. The requirements to meet that CDBG grant, I think, for a large part, are what have guided us, in a lot of ways, to be as good as we are as far as documentation and rule-following, if that makes sense.

Wisbrock

I understand completely where you're coming from. Charter Schools do the same thing. Does your contact with government, is it restricted to the municipal government, or do you have contact with county or state governments, as well? Do you get any benefit from contact with county or state governments?

Brooks

Some is more in the form of just encouragement. By design we can't get involved in political activities, but we have friends at county and state levels that are often a resource to go to. I should say that, when you're talking about on the state level, most of our clients receive Medicaid waiver funding, or, I should say, we receive Medicaid waiver funding to cover them. We accept whatever the state designates or authorizes for day habilitation, and so we have a contract with MHMR of Tarrant County, and probably about a quarter of our clients are on the General Revenue Fund at MHMR. So, we have an annual contracting with them. I don't know even how to describe MHMR, they're kind of a quasi-governmental/non-governmental agency that administers that funding that oversees not just the funding and the billing but the management and the operations. We have to meet certain guidelines. Probably sixty to sixty-five percent of our clients get funding that's called Home- and Community- Based Services, which is truly a Medicaid waiver that, by design, they have to have a third-party provider that pays us and sets their goals that we have to meet, then, you know, there are certain things, typically socialization, that have to be met for us to get paid. That is actually administered by, it was DADS, the

Department of Aging and Disability Services, which has rolled up into Health and Human Services, now. So, we have kind of an arm's length relationship with those folks.

Wisbrock

It is interesting that your relationships go as far as the state level, to some extent. I was particularly interested, if I may branch off of the political and governmental stuff, for a second, in researching the interview, today, I took a look at the Advocates webpage, certainly, and found the reference to your interview with Mansfield Magazine. Very good interview, by the way, you came across really well, but there was an interesting, how do I put this... There is an interesting mention that you had in that interview, something about a twenty-four/seven care facility for people lacking in ability, something along the lines of the place across the way for old people. Is that something that is common in Disability Advocacy now, or is it something you have come up with here, at Advocates, on your own, or is it something you're even exploring, anymore?

Brooks

Still are. To explain, my vision if for a cross between assisted and independent living. Envision a senior facility today, there's some that have some assistance, there are others that, you have to be fully independent to go live there. I see a cross between having as much assistance as one may need being right outside the door while encouraging as much independence as an individual can handle and accept, maintain jobs elsewhere if you are able, perhaps jobs on site. So, really, along the lines of a retirement home, you know, with an activities director, much like what we do with day habilitation. You know, we're going bowling, we're going to the movies, we're going to the mall, we're going to the museum. We're out in the public, we're integrating into the public every day. Take that twenty-four/seven and provide it round the clock. Our parents, our families are aging, and are concerned about what happens to my child, my niece, my nephew, my loved one when I'm not able to be everything.

Brooks

I've got to tell you, that dream and that vision, today, would not meld with the HCS, the Home- and Community-Based Services, because the focus of that is Home, and Home is typically, preferably, in somebody's...with a parent or sibling or family member, with a guardian of some sort, or Group Homes. Not intended to disparage Group Homes whatsoever, there's good ones and there's bad ones, but, you're taking your loved one, then, and putting them in a house under the responsibility of, I'm not saying Minimum Wage, but a minimally paid individual who now takes care of your loved one and, you know, it's not the same. And, in that house, there's not a whole lot of oversight. Most group homes are owned by for-profit agencies that, you know, have bought a house and, you know, they may or may not maintain the yard and the aesthetics. In my mind, rather than integrating them [the disabled individuals] into the neighborhood, more oftentimes than not, we have isolated them in a house next door to you or me or anyone else that doesn't necessarily understand or want that house next door. And in our vision, it would be to create community with peers that understand and accept each other. And all the while, it could be a Mecca for volunteerism, you know, for churches and schools. Perhaps companion rooms, where an aging mother could go live with her son or daughter in her twilight years or his twilight years and have her say "This place is so good that I don't mind living there myself, and look what I have to gain, and at the same time offer." Just the presence.

I would want the facility to be above reproach. Somewhere that everyone's safe and wouldn't have to worry about what's going on next door. There are models for renting an apartment, and we even have a

client or two that live in an apartment by themselves. Thank God they are able to do that...but...it's...I can't help but feel that sometimes that's also a lonely position, and the sense of community that could be provided in the same type of setting that we provide for seniors, for any age, you know, IDD, Special Needs Adult.... So anyway, yeah, we still have that vision.

Wisbrock

It sounds like a wonderful facility, to hear you describe it. It's certainly leaps and bounds from, oh, for instance, from anything Robert Kennedy saw. With the place up in Pennsylvania, the nightmare up there, compared to what you are talking about here, sounds just light years beyond where things are going, I have to say, speaking as someone that is removed from the community the way that I am. Have you run into any difficulty from people in power when you tell them about this dream of yours? Is there any push-back from people in municipal government, say, or just people in the neighborhood when they hear about this? Have you heard of any push-back from them about this dream?

Brooks

We are actually in the five-year plan for the City of Arlington, not by name but by the element of caring for special needs adults. I think that five-year plan is probably near five years old. We don't have the money to go buy ten acres. Most foundations that donate money to organizations like ourselves, they may donate money for bricks and mortar, but not for a piece of property. So, somehow, you've got to come up with the piece of property in the first place.

Brooks

So, we've had this vision of a piece of property at Green Oaks and Eastchase, or Green Oaks and Pioneer, I guess Green Oaks goes on, and Arlington ISD owns eighty-two acres that, at one time, they were going to build a high school, and I don't believe that high school's ever going to be built. At one time they, the leadership of AISD acted very interested in our plan, in our proposal, and we had talked about the possibility of leasing, you know, long term lease for ten of those eighty-two acres. While initially it raised eyebrows and sounded interesting, once they got the six hundred and sixty-three-million-dollar bond package, the response changed to "We can't speculate on the future availability of that property." When I heard that (I think the last piece of the bond to be announced was that) they had bought the old Eastern Star Home on East Division, or the property where it was, to put their new Performing Arts Center. So, I called and said, "Has that position changed?" and, no, it hasn't changed. I did send an e-mail last week, while I know it was Spring Break, to the current President of the Board of Trustees and asked, "Where are we on that piece of property?", and sent a copy of our planned proposal, in case he hadn't seen it, because they've changed two or three times since we were in discussions. Haven't heard back. That's kind of where that's at as far as that piece of property.

I've approached a couple of other philanthropists and even the Masons, who have quite a bit of property at the Masonic Home, on Division and Fielder, and suggested partnering with us, and the Masons own the ground and we build a facility for special needs adults which, I've suggested, wouldn't be so far from their model, from their mission. Anyway, haven't gotten anywhere there yet, either.

Wisbrock

The reason I ask, obviously, with the whole ADA, back in the eighties, previously there had been all kinds of push-back from society in general, maybe not active push-back, but a lack of concern, let's say, for people with physical disabilities that prevented them from doing things. One of the big scenes that is memorable from that time period is people with mobile disabilities, people restricted to wheelchairs, actually climbing up the steps of the United States Capital Building. Everybody who is involved in this type of advocacy has seen something like that. I was wondering, particularly, if you, in your work with Advocates for Special People or as the Executive Director, have seen any of that push-back, that lack of concern, from society in general?

Brooks

United Cerebral Palsy does a publication every year called 'Case for Inclusion', have you ever heard of that? (I: I have heard of it, yes.) In "Case for Inclusion", the State of Texas ranks fifty out of fifty-one, only behind the State of Mississippi, or, only ahead of the State of Mississippi. In 2013, I think, they slipped ahead of Arkansas for a year, and then slipped back to fifty. I haven't looked in the last year or so, but, you know, based on the care of special needs adults, that's dismal.

I have pointed some of our legislators to that document. I know, at one time, it was sitting on (US Rep.) Joe Barton's desk. His staff from Washington called me and told me, "It's here, it's on his desk, we'll make sure he sees it." And, meh (non-committal shrug). But our legislators need to understand that they are representing and, sometimes, encouraging that back-shelf thinking to the point that...

I've talked about HCS and Home- and Community-Based Services. It depends on which numbers you look at, but there's over a hundred thousand on the waiting list. There's probably eighty thousand on the HCS waiting list but some of them are on multiple waiting lists, and there's some duplication, I'm not exactly sure, goes up to, like, a hundred and thirty thousand. My nephew, at last call, is around ten thousand on that list, and he's been on the list for right at eleven years. When we got him on the list we were told that it was around seven years, and then it got to seven to ten years, and, now, I would say it's twelve to fifteen years for that HCS waiting list.

I talked to a lady this morning. Her son has four more years in school, but she's looking for a summer program. We work with eighteen and above. I gave her a couple of directions (to go), and, it's Accumulating Resources with the IDD Council of Tarrant County, I said "You might check with them and see what they know about resources." She said "He's too old for daycare. What do I do? I work. What do I do during the summer? I can't really afford a private baby-sitter. What programs are out there?" I said, "I've got to tell you, I don't really know what to tell you." But I asked her in the course of this, I said, "He is on the HCA Waiting list, right?" and she said, "Yes he is. He's twenty thousand down." You know, he's got four years to get out of school, but the last legislative session didn't provide at all for the reduction of the waiting list. So, we're now to the session next year without anyone coming off that list, so it only grows. So, without them acknowledging this issue, it just grows and compounds.

Wisbrock

That's got to be disheartening for somebody in your position, to deal with that on a daily basis.

Brooks

So, right now, MHMR has frozen authorizations for new clients for us. Now, I can get them if they've already got HCS or some other, Texas Home Living or CLAS (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate

Services, a branch of the Dept. of Health and Human Services), but, on the General Revenue Fund, it's frozen.

We had an interview for a new client in December, and the mother came in and told us that we no longer had a contract. That's what her Service Coordinator from MHMR had told her. I immediately got on the phone and called my Contract Monitor's office, and said "What are we talking about, here?" She said "I don't know what you're talking about. You have a contract. We're fine." As we talked, she said "Oooh, I know what they're talking about. The allotments are frozen." Do you know how that sounds when your employees are telling people "You don't have a contract?" As opposed to "You're [MHMR] not funding..." Something needs to be done about the message that's being sent to these parents, to the families, to the public. That I don't have a contract anymore (?) that makes it sound like I *lost* my contract rather than, "Oh! You guys don't have the funding to pay for new clients."

So, all I can assume is that's part of that lack of support, you know, (from) the last legislative session. You know, now the money's dried up. So, all they can see to do, it sounds like, to me, is just maintain the ones we've got.

Wisbrock

So, it sounds like the issues that are facing the otherwise-abled community in at least this municipality, right now, are issues that are not active discrimination but very much passive discrimination.

Brooks

Yeah, I couldn't disagree with that.

Wisbrock

One would think that that (condition) wouldn't sit well with some self-respecting citizen of the United States.

Brooks

You would think not.

Wisbrock

Maybe that's a bit too much to say. The only response one really has to that (statement) is "Wow."

Brooks

Yeah. So, we still have Service Coordinators calling us from MHMR and asking us about if we still have any openings, and I said "Oh, yeah, we have openings, do you have money?" And, not to get into, you know, how much money we're talking about, but MHMR pays us, and its public record, but twenty dollars and eighty-seven cents a day for day habilitation. A day (I: That's not a lot.) And we've created a program we're pretty proud of with minimal funding. HCS pays, typically, twenty-five to twenty-eight dollars a day. And, our three programs, we target twenty-five enrolled, we actually run the enrollment up twenty-seven, twenty-eight sometimes, to get twenty-five there on a given day, and we staff at a five-to-one ratio, so with a full program we've got five staff. What we call fulltime is a six-hour day from nine to three. They (the clients) have to be there five hours for us to get the day habilitation rate, or, the full day rate. So, you can do the math. You know, we kind of get by sometimes on a shoestring.

We've forged good partnerships with a couple of churches, and Special Connection Three is actually inside the (City of Arlington) Hugh Smith Recreation Center, so, I should say, friends at the City. Well, you know, we rent that space, but it's an affordable amount. It's not like renting a storefront.

Wisbrock

So, it sounds like, where you're going with this, disability advocacy, at least in your case, is relying more and more on charitable interests from people outside governmental offices.

Brooks

Oh, absolutely. And as Executive Director, and I'm the first Executive Director of this organization I'm also the Grant Writer and HR and IT and Fleet Management. I mentioned that I helped us get our first van. We have eight vehicles, now. And they cost money to run.

Wisbrock

You have to meet those emissions standards. That's pretty impressive, that you all have been able to do so much for the disabled community in Arlington on such a small amount of support from the government. The only thing that comes to mind is how much governmental advocacy has changed since the days of Robert Kennedy, for instance. According to the histories that everyone is familiar with, it was Robert Kennedy that got (modern) disability advocacy movement started, and, at least in governmental history, it culminates in the ADA. According to the record, there has been some push-back in recent years, limiting the scope of the ADA. Have you seen any of that yourself, have you noticed anything like that, in your position?

Brooks

I read something just today from the Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities, I attend their monthly meetings fairly regularly, wanting us to contact our legislators about that very thing, about proposed decreases in, not disincentivizing, exactly, but a changing of the rules of ADA. So, yeah, I do see...

Wisbrock

That is something that is occurring, from your position?

Brooks

I think so.

Wisbrock

Just checking. That's fairly disheartening, as well.

Interview concludes with personal reminisces and small talk

End of Interview