

Steve Prenger

Previous chairperson of the Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities

*Interview conducted by
Sarah Rose and Trevor Engel
in 2015 in Arlington, Texas
Transcription by
Nichole Sheridan*

Disability Studies Minor
Special Collections and Archives
University of Texas at Arlington
Copyright © 2016 by University of Texas at Arlington Libraries

Biography

Steve Prenger was born in Missouri in 1939. Prenger got a history degree from the University of Missouri and served in Vietnam toward the middle of his life. After serving in the Air Force, Prenger worked at several different aerospace establishments, as well as a consultant in Arlington, Texas. Later on in life he became involved with the Arlington Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities, as well as Helping Restore Ability with John Dycus.

Topics discussed

- Background
 - Disability rights
-

Rose

This is Sarah Rose.

Engel

And Trevor Engel.

Rose

<topic>Background</topic>

Interviewing Steve Prenger on September 11, 2015 at University Hall at University of Texas at Arlington. The interview is for the Texas Disability History Collection at Special Collections at UTA.

Prenger

My name is Steve Prenger, I was the head of the chairman of the Mayor's Committee of People with Disabilities in Arlington. I am not a native Arlington-ite, most people are. I originally was raised in Missouri, I grew up in Jefferson City. I originally had set out to be an attorney because I grew up around politics and that kind of thing. It was just natural. 1:06 That was all it took.

I went to the University of Missouri for about a year and a half until I decided I didn't want to be an attorney. That was during the draft so I stayed at the University for a semester and got a graduate in history just to get the draft away from the door. When I was confronted with fish-or-bait type of thing, I decided to join the Air Force because I didn't want to crawl across Europe on my belly. I got in the Air Force and at that time I was not disabled at all, I had good vision and all that kind of stuff.

Rose

What year were you born?

Prenger

I was born in 1939, and I'm seventy-eight. I was older than most of the recruits because most of them were eighteen, nineteen years old.

Rose

This is very early in Vietnam?

Prenger

Oh boy, it was so early that they kept it quiet. It was not even known to the other people. I flew to Vietnam and Pan Am One by myself. When I got over there I found out that I was the second command of procurement for all of Vietnam, as far as the Air Force was concerned. I couldn't even spell it. Up to that time I had been working on the space program at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio, which is now Industrial Park. I enjoyed that very much, it was working primary in the area of psychological research, a very little to do with flying or whatever. I was lucky in the sense that I stayed in Vietnam only about four months. I told them from the get-go, I said "Get me on the first plane out of here!"

Rose

What year was that?

Prenger

This was 1965. An interesting part about this, I stayed over there, I'd been married a month and a half. My wife is a registered nurse, she's now retired. She was involved in the surgical unit over at Baylor Hospital in Dallas, she saw the first heart transplant and a number of other things. I settled in Arlington, she was behind me for about a month and a half. I settled in Arlington because I didn't know if she wanted to work in Dallas, Fort Worth, the Mid-cities, or what. At that time Arlington was a town of about 79,000 people, this was just a hole in the wall. It was nothing. 4:40 I was over here, I knew John Dycus.

Rose

How did you know him?

Prenger

I just knew him. This was from the Handicapped Resources.

Rose

You settled in Arlington when?

Prenger

About 1959.

Rose

And then went to school for?

Prenger

When I got out of the Air Force, I came back to Brooks Air Force Base. I left only because the Air Force mainly because the Air Force did not accept my EFC, my specialty code which was medical research procurement officer. 5:55 They had to retrain somebody to take that job. There was no place to go so I just left.

I was hired by ITT Airspace Optical in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that's a lovely place, believe me. My wife and I trucked to Fort Wayne using the theory that we'd be closer to our parents, Mei in Missouri, hers and Wisconsin...but not close enough to check in every Sunday type of thing. We stayed there for about eighteen months there, then I was hired by LTE. They had just gotten the DC-10 contract and they wanted some people who were interested in non-governmental procurement, and I did. The only condition was I had come right now, I could go back and get my clothes and come back. It was 1971.

Rose

We'll double check with you.

Prenger

I went there right away, came down here and that's when I started shopping around for my wife. She was working at the VA, she had to quit and give them notice, that was back when you gave two weeks minimum. The only apartments that were around were the 8:13 around E. Park Rd. right at 360.

I joined the Arlington JZs which was a men's group. One of the guys who belonged to there was the manager of 8:50 he talked me into living down there. We lived there for under ten months, something like that and then we bought a house out here on the south of town. Every day that I was here when I'd got off to work I would see what towns were around, 9:14 Euless, Bedford. There were wide spots on the road, that was it.

Arlington was starting to move because of Tommy Vandergriff who was mayor at that time for twenty-six years. It became obvious that if they were to be any growth in the city, I was interested because I was an executive at that time working on contracting. If I were going to consult I was going to have to get someplace where I had market. From LTE I had a down period where I worked in utilities, then I went over to Boeing, they were in operation over in Las Colinas. I went to work for Boeing and I was head of production with that. I left Boeing after eighteen months, then it was called Henderson Consulting. We got tired of having to explain that it was Henderson Accounting because of the business on Wall Street, so we changed the name from Henderson Consulting to 10:55.

Then I had my stroke in 1957. I was on a business trip for Henderson Consulting. 11:49 in Nashville, Tennessee. When I first went to Nashville, I had no info. I didn't know doctors, didn't know the hospital, unable to speak, I'm unable to write.

Rose

What Donna Anderson had said that you were in a hotel room and that you woke up in the hospital?

Prenger

I was in my motel room and there was the country music awards or something on TV, I was getting ready to go down to eat, and take a nap. I knew something was wrong, something's not right, I got dizzy. I got on the phone and I called the hotel operator. She was a chatty Cathy, she wanted to visit with me the whole day, I said, "Look lady, I'm having a stroke, I need help and I need it right away."

13:18 Luckily he had a bottle of oxygen. They called an ambulance and the ambulance people came and they looked a bit like they came from the biker bar, they had on leather jackets and 13:42 there was a little girl hauling along behind. The main guy says, "Well, we're going to Donelson hospital." I didn't know where Donelson hospital was, but I was lucky in the sense that that's where they maintained the triage unit for the 14:08 whole national Airport. As a result I get very best care. They called over neurologist, who's a real nice guy.

The type of stroke that I had was a brain stem stroke, that's why I can walk, drive a car and all that stuff. 14:30 One thing in particular was my sense of balance, I'm very very conscious of balance as far as when I stand up. I have to stand there for a while until I get my bearings, then I can walk. I didn't like

crowds before I had a stroke, and I damn sure don't like them now, because if someone bumps up against me I'm in trouble. If I fall down it's very hard for me to get up. I have to crawl over to something and crawl up like a pole or a wall. Sometimes people help me.

I study things terribly, I analyze them. I fell down at Time Warner's office down on Matlock, and I tried to use an able-bodied shortcut, 16:09 to show you the difference on the way people talk, the way people think, the way people were raised, all the older white people walked right by me without looking. Sometimes they looked, but none of them offered to help me up or "Can I give a hand?" or whatever. A little Muslim woman came through there, grabbed me, helped me get up, said "Are you all right? Do you need me to call somebody?" 16:54

Rose

That's cool.

Prenger

To me it was a real winner to see. You have all these people parading around 17:07 I thought that rather interesting. I told my wife at the time I said "I just got turned on and I'll be darned if I get turned off." I had every intention of going back to work, but I couldn't. As a consultant 17:40 I couldn't set at the airports and all. I was gonna discuss the meeting up there. 18:52 Henderson I got together to agree to disagree and I left.

As far as the AF comes in how I was treating medically, appointments take forever and a day. I'm also covered under group insurance under Medicare. As a result I have civilian doctors I go to, but I get my drug from the VA because they are free.

Rose

How did you qualify under the VA?

Prenger

AARP has a program called Secure License and I said "I'll take some of that." 18:42 I see doctors here in town, I go to neurologists. I'm diabetic and 19:00 there are some GPs that can handle some diabetes and some of them are CBA's. I get my insulin and all the stuff from the VA.

Rose

<topic>Disability rights</topic>

How did you get into disability rights?

Prenger

I made it like a bandit. I enjoy the freedom of being able to roll over and go back to sleep. 19:23 Traffic jams,. I got to meeting a number of people like John Dycus who was all wrapped up with the Handicapped Resource Association.

Rose

How did you guys meet?

Prenger

I really don't remember a formal meeting. It must've been some meeting or something we were at.

Rose

Were you interested in disability rights before meeting him?

Prenger

No.

Rose

How did you get involved in disability rights?

Prenger

Before the mayor's committee there was a group and this is where you come in, because you guys are interested in this. Sammy Provence came in, I didn't know him, he's dead by the time I got involved. I knew his mother, Mildred Provence, 20:34 she pranced around with. They were faithful members of the mayor's committee in August time. I looked around. 20:53

Most of the people who were involved in dealing with the disabled were people who had to have known them as a specific illness. 900 disabilities, why in the world? Fixing one isn't going to do dilly. Not unless it's something like cancer that has a wide audience. They're all wrapped up in an aunt, child, grandmother, best friend has an illness, then naturally they're gonna be designated to that particular one. I was looking at some outfit that could service all of them. About that time the mayor's committee was just at the thinking stage.

About this time Dycus showed up and he said "Hey, I need you on the Board of Directors of Handicap Resources Association." At that time Handicapped Resource Association did nothing.

Rose

Do you know about when that was?

Prenger

This would've had to been in the late '50s, early '60s.

Rose

Late '50s and '60s or '80s?

Prenger

Somewhere in there, very early in the game. I'm a little bit critical of this, the Handicapped Resource Association which was formed to specifically service UTA. Provence went after the saying something to make it possible for students to pursue an education out here. At that time people who had a disability were expendable.

My mother had a friend who was a **23:22** busybody best friend, she had a son who I assume had cerebral palsy or something like that. I grew up in Missouri as I said which had **23:46** Victorian rule, it was your responsibility as a relative of that person to get them out of sight. They never were in good society. They were all set aside. I've been in the house I don't know how many times, never played there, we played outside. I could hear the sound, but I never saw the kid, I don't know anything about it. I didn't know when he died or whatever. What I'm getting at is, I knew there were a lot of unfortunate people, either partially handicapped, handicap, isolated by their inability to drive or get transportation, and they were being taken care of by the church informally. "We'll stop by, run to the grocery store for you." I wanted to take people who had a single interest type of involvement of disabled and try to bind them together through the commonality of the organizations. **25:11** Their particular disability that they had all the answers in the whole. If you got screwed, it wasn't just you, it was me too.

The first meeting, at that time there was a gal named **Cindy Counts** it was with the governor's committee and she was the honcho of the local organizations. The executive director of Handicap Resources Association was a **Glenda Mimms**, who's now deceased. She and I got to talking, **26:09** other than John Dycus, which was probably done to keep the certification of the nonprofit status. **Glenda Mimms** and I talked about the need for an overarching overall organization. She and I were cofounders of this mayor's committee and what we did was we got everybody together who was involved with individuals, and then there were the few people from United Way, Goodwill, ARC, covers a lot of ground. These were people who were generally interested in struggles with mental problems, they didn't dig much deeper than that. If there was a need for sheltered workshop they'd provide it. I worked with Goodwill for a while. I was on one of their committees, I don't even remember what it was called.

I wish I would've kept records but I didn't. I just did, whenever something was needed, I did it. On a Friday afternoon, as I recall it was Memorial Day, Dycus called me and at that time the Handicapped Resource Association was headquartered up on New York Ave next to the fire station. I don't even know if the building is still there. It was a large modern building that was occupied by the Girl's Club. The Girl's Club ED **28:28** men's got along, but they had gotten into a big fight, and the head of the Girl's Club who was a landlord threw his butt out. At that time Handicapped Resource Association had a whole bunch of physical education equipment, **lots a lot of boxes**. We gathered together every pickup, everything that would carry something and we moved off of the curve, down to a building which **Arnold Patsy** loaned us, which was his old office which was behind a biker bar. It was a lovely location. The Handicapped Resource Association was there for years, lasted quite a while.

29:42 Accepted a position somewhere and then there or somewhere out West. We went to the then the mayor who was Richard Greene, writes for the Star-Telegram now I noticed, always kind of a social climber. **30:10** Linda Freeman who was the mayor's secretary had gotten involved. I don't remember how she got involved other than she knew me from a different Association. She was really pretty key as far as keeping records. She made it possible for us to have an appointment with the mayor. His reaction was, "Well if you want to do it, go ahead and do it, but no I'm not going to back you."

Rose

Which mayor was this?

Prenger

Richard Greene. 31:08 We didn't really get a whole lot of help in the city other than Linda the secretary, she fulfilled their part. The Council chambers, the Council informed the mayor office.

I think the whole, people need to realize, people that are working in the healthcare, minor people who could lead the charge, need to understand that they are disabled too, all of them are. There's something in each person that works, they can't do. There's something that they're clumsy at, and it comes as rather a surprise. People exempt themselves from our community. Disabled people are fine, they're humans, but they haven't had a share of everybody. You can imagine the situation I found myself in in Nashville where I couldn't speak, I couldn't write. I saw something that I was funny but I couldn't share with anybody, and it just tore you up. Inside you're laughing your buns off, but you can't say it to anybody.

When I got back to Arlington I had started to regain just a little bit, unnecessary stuff I could hack, but anything elaborate I was SOL. I crossed a registered speech therapist at the hospital that's right up there on Matlock Road. She was young enough...that was one of the problems I had run across with other speech therapists, I found them unable to relate to the layers I was trying to learn which had been in the business community. In normal society it would do for me to be able to recite "Jack and Jill went up the hill," I could give a crap whether he makes it up or not. This gal was young enough that she could see that. It was enjoyable to go to one of the class sessions because that's the type of thing we were talking about. That's how I regained normal speech. Other than this allergy bit down here, which causes my voice to sound kind of girlish, I can do okay now. Writing, I was able to write, however, I can't write now. I can't write cursive, my wife writes everything. On the computer I'm a wiz, I have to do it with one hand. I input my stuff on ordinary computer one-handed. 35:13 That some of the self-defense mechanism that I began to develop out of Baylor

Engel

When you were on the mayor's committee, I know fighting for Handitran was one of the big first issues....

Prenger

I was chairman of the Handitran committee, so I can tell you about that. In a separate funding from the city bus, those are two different branches. They regulated how many buses Handitran can have, and it's hard to find drivers. We had weird incidents, one driver, ran out of gas so he left disabled people sitting in his car on the highway carrying a can so he could put gas in the car. It was admirable that he walked to get some gas, however what would happen if one of the disabled people had a reaction to the disability at that time and there was nobody around to help?

We have constantly been on end trying to cut down the amount of funding they have. 37:11 All the relationships between the government and us, this when the Social Security office moved from out here they moved over to Grand Prairie. That ideally is outside of our service area, the federal government said "That won't work." This is not my time, it was another person. They said "Okay, we'll expand your service

area by about ten percent by expanding all of the area around Arlington by so many miles or so many feet." What they did as a result doubled all the area of the Handitran service. If they have a person out by the lake, 38:25 that's a long way from the Social Security office. They would only be able to service one person as a result then it would tie them up for the better part of the afternoon. Yes it can be a problem, and it is. What we really need in my opinion, and it's been voted on several times, is fixed route bus service. If it affects route bus service, then you use Handitran. Now the question is "How do we melt the two together?" How do we get that lazy punch in Washington to push it all together? It can be a very complicated deal. Then finding people who are qualified to handle this thing too.

If you looked at me and I was sitting down and you didn't see the cane, you wouldn't know I was disabled. You would probably think "He probably had too many martinis for lunch." That's one of the problems that I run into, there were people who would come to the mayor's committee meeting that didn't have outwardly had no signs of a disability, but were in fact disabled. You can't tell I'm diabetic unless you observe me dealing with the diabetes. 40:20 There are a number of things and ideas that were a perfect opportunity in my opinion. Donna is good at this, she was one of the original members of the mayors committee. She didn't have a seeing-eye dog at that time. We would gather for a meeting and she would be late because of the Handitran. 40:06 In my opinion she is contributing as much or more 41:23. She is very observant. I don't believe in a formal plan. In other words to go on to the mayors committee and say "I like this and this and this." Why? One reason is because she may fail, like the community has not responded as I would like for them to do. 42:09 the churches have never approached us to provide

There's a group called 42:29 Arlington Association. I know because I helped form the group. It has nothing to do with the search per se, yet they always provide a meeting place. It involves the connection that's there. Should there have a resource they have control over, not embarrassed at all to go "I have some part." There is no mother and father organization, like Richard Green said, "If you're gonna do it, do it." As far as actual immigration is concerned. We did have a representative from the city, there have been varies people from various apartments have been involved. If we had to come up with the goal loosely we're not commissioning the work.

One other thing I'd like to point out while I'm talking, I've had an awful time.... I would talk to a businessman or whatever, they don't go for the "real nice type thing" to do, social twitter type of happiness or whatever, 44:44 he had writes back in the pocketbook. He ran a gas station and he was always pissing and moaning because he had to set aside a handicap sign. I told him, "I look, that's my reserved spot right in front of this place of business because if I can't park, I can't spend my money. I can't come into your establishment." I don't buy a whole lot of stuff, but I would stop to get cokes, lottery tickets, or things I needed and I had a couple friends that were clerks. I pointed out to him, a lot of those people stop on their way home from work. If they can't park, they ain't gonna be there.

The guy with the ramp that I was talking with you about, that darn thing was like mountain Licinius. You're not gonna be a little drive a wheelchair up that thing. At the top of it had a turn that was impossible for a person in a wheelchair to make. The point is that most of the refinements that make the place accessible, people don't know how to use it. That curb is high as the Alpine's, it's like climbing a mountain. You ask a number of people driving around in wheelchairs on Pioneer Parkway 47 They want McDonald's, they would zip down on their wheelchair and get it. They wouldn't never do that before, first of all they couldn't do it wouldn't be able to do it. 47:18, there's probably a curb between them. You'll notice that now the people from UPS drivers and the mothers with baby carriages using ramps, or using curb cuts.

What I'm trying to get across is we are making contact with the normal society. 47:51 you still have the white folks that I talked about in front of the cable. They're as old as I am or older, they lived in the Victorian society and they didn't change, but that little Muslim girl did change because she could see it going on around here. She didn't think it was that new. I often find people will hold the door if they

learned in school, they're learning it in their schooling. However, people who miss that when we were "out of sight out of mind" they are worried about time changing the way of doing things. There were some things that you asked about...

Engel

One in particular, I know you mentioned you knew John Dycus, but you didn't know Sammy Provence before he passed.

Prenger

I think that his disability must be related to his birth. It must be genetic?

Rose

Sammy Provence had polio, John Dycus's was congenital.

Prenger

Most of the illnesses or disabilities that you come across have been genetic. However, he was like myself or others, he needed to be invited to participate, in other words they have to know that they are going to be welcome, and that they're not gonna be further excluded. Because normal society as it goes along wants to exclude them. There's no such thing, there's one thing I learned as I go along, 50:15 one of which is you don't use "handicap." You handicap horses, you don't handicap people. If somebody uses that around you, you need to straighten them out right quick. Second thing that I found, is you don't say, "I can't do that." What I say is, "I don't do that right now, but let me work on it, I'll get back with you." It may be very elaborate, it may be some simple thing, but once you start that stuff then you learn that the people who say, "I'm disabled take care of me." You're no different than anybody else, their challenges. Now you say, "I can't, or I won't?" There's a hell of a difference, you'll get a lot more "won'ts" than you get "can'ts." 51:31 That is very hard to sell. There are lots of things that's part of the saying "I can't do it." My wife will get up and get something and I'll tell her "Get me a..." She'll tell me "Get up and get it yourself." 52:12

Engel

You mentioned you had some opinions on how HRA evolved?

Prenger

52:27 It's hard to say, they are primarily interested in somebody who needs help as part of their "I can'ts" they take care of a lot of elderly people who can't dress themselves. I have arthritis in the shoulder, I can't raise my arm higher than a certain amount without it hurting like heck. Stuff like that, it's serious enough that they can't do things for themselves or can't move certain things. if you asked me to change a lightbulb, I'll say "I'm truly sorry I can't help you right now because I can't get above the plane." Now somebody else I can hold the latter for them, it's a compromise. If it's above a certain height, I'm out of the game. I think one thing that will really help both of you, your disability studies is to get a disabled person and just watch for a while, who is not embarrassed by answering questions.

Rose

Most of the people teaching and in the minor have disabilities.

Prenger:

That's good. One thing I learned in college is 54:23 which may go back to the ancient Greeks is the ability to share. Now I think is key is a societal change. That's a real thing. Somebody comes out of a disability class and thinks they know the whole thing, because it's a continual learning experience. Many times I said "I never dealt with that before. Let me look into it, I'll get back with you."

Rose

We're really tried to privilege experiences with people with disabilities and their families throughout the classes, particularly historically....

Prenger

One other thing too, disability, have you ever thought about or introducing a new concept into whatever they're talking about. Yes, I did serve a number of different committees. Most of them were informal, a lot of them were informal. I was involved with a committee of Goodwill, Goodwill dealt with primarily with helping people in employment situations to fit in. Sometimes they tried to put Square back into a round hole. 56:30 We're disabled, we did have a harder time doing it. I probably couldn't exist because I have to eat at certain times, otherwise I'm no good. I just don't have the stamina that I used to have.

I was involved in Medicare patrol. I did watching for people who are getting screwed on Medicare and Medicaid which happens quite frequently and fortunately. 57:10 That was for Tarrant County. State wise, I was planning agency and independent committee which is a statewide organization at that time dealt with a generalized disability. The only reason I joined, I was appointed by George Bush.

Rose

Were you involved with REACH as well? The Center for Independent living?

Prenger

Actually, what we did was form a disability plan with the TRC to apply to the whole state of Texas. It was really an impossible situation because Texas is a big place and a lot of different situations. 58:35 You got people in the easy care have a lot of stuff, cowboys out West. The Governor's committee now with Barbara Jordan awards. I met Barbara Jordan at one of the first ones they had. 59:30 One of the people that worked in disability, there are people that just don't mind getting their hands dirty. Not the people who show up all dressed in nice. There are people that really get up and go, they're hard to uncover but the secret is keeping your eyes peeled, your observation on. 1:00:10 Give them the reigns and let them go for it, think it through.

As far as the Provence family, I think that's a good idea. The program specifically for HRA was put together for UTA. He didn't realize that he is that way, by choosing a small group like he did or when UTA was a small organization, it was probably easier to do than if he got a big campus and tried to impose it on that. First of all, you're gonna have different thoughts, different people thinking different things.

1:01:27

Rose

Are there any questions you think we should've asked that we didn't?

Prenger

No, not really.