

Dr. Wendell Nedderman
Former President of the
University of Texas at Arlington

Interview conducted by
Kristi Nedderman
in 2014 in Frisco, Texas

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Wendell Nedderman was born in 1921 in Lovilia, Iowa, to Fern Gray Nedderman and Walter Nedderman; a sister followed soon afterwards. He graduated from Lovilia High School and earned a B.S. in Civil Engineering from Iowa State University in 1943. Upon graduation, he joined the Navy and entered the U.S. Naval Academy's Reserve Midshipman's School. During World War II, Nedderman served as an Engineering Officer in the Pacific.

After being discharged from the Navy, Nedderman became an instructor of civil engineering at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, and also obtained his master's degree during this time. In 1947, he met and married Betty Vezey, a graduate of Texas Women's University who was born and raised in College Station.

Taking leave from A&M in 1951, he returned to Iowa State University and obtained his Ph.D. in Civil Engineering. He then resumed his teaching role at Texas A&M. In 1959, the family moved to Arlington, Texas, when Nedderman was selected as the first Dean of Engineering for the University of Texas at Arlington. He held this post from 1959 to 1969.

Between 1967 and 1968, he also served as Vice President for Research and Graduate Affairs, and Graduate School administrator, and as Vice President for Academic Affairs from 1968 to 1972. He became Acting President in 1972 and continued as President from 1974 until 1992. Upon retirement in 1992, he was named president emeritus.

During Nedderman's tenure as UTA president, the value of the university physical plant increased from approximately \$50 million to approximately \$280 million dollars. Physical plant updates in the 1970s included modifications to improve campus and building accessibility for people with disabilities—a policy that was established early in his tenure as president. The Nedderman Administration had a strong relationship with the Office for Students with Disabilities.

After stepping down from the presidency, Nedderman returned to the classroom. He taught the Structure of Materials course in the Civil Engineering department from 1992 to 2004 before fully retiring. Dr. Nedderman currently resides in Frisco, Texas; Betty Nedderman died in early 2015. They have four sons, thirteen grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren.*

*Dr. Nedderman is the grandfather of the interviewer.

Topics discussed

- How Jim Hayes convinced the UT Arlington administration to improve accessibility
- Why UT Arlington received Governor Dolph Briscoe Jr.'s Award for Outstanding State Agency
- Personal impact of watching Movin' Mavs wheelchair basketball
- Impact of UT Arlington's pioneering accessibility work on the UT system and Texas more broadly
- Jim Hayes's 1986 Push from Austin to Arlington to raise funds for the Arlington Handicapped Association
- Lowering of Cooper Street on campus to improve safety and accessibility
- Other people involved in improving accessibility at UT Arlington
- Interactions between Movin' Mavs wheelchair basketball players, other athletes, and other students
- John Dycus's disability activism on campus

Interviewer

This is Kristi Nedderman interviewing Dr. Wendell Nedderman for the UT Arlington Texas Oral [Disability] History Project. Today's date is Monday, September 15, 2014. It is 1:00 p.m., and I am at Dr. Nedderman's home in Frisco, Texas. Dr. Nedderman was president of the University of Texas at Arlington from 1972 to 1992.

I am here today to speak with him about UTA's students with disabilities and his administration's actions on their behalf during his tenure as president.

Thank you for participating in the university's oral history program. Let's start by just giving me a kind of brief history on coming to Arlington in the late fifties and becoming president. Just a brief history so we start with...leading up to 1972.

Nedderman

Well, becoming president is something you really don't plan for. It just kind of happened. That is the case here, but [I] did come to UTA then in September 1, 1959. I became acting dean of the new school of engineering and later vice president for academic affairs and later as the president for twenty years. A lot has happened in almost anything you want to talk about.

Interviewer

Well, that's true. During your tenure at UTA, you effected lots of change. Some folks agreed with, some maybe they didn't, but that's the price of being president. A lot of the positive things were things such as adding seventeen doctoral degrees, twenty-three masters, and twenty bachelors' degrees. You added a school of nursing, architecture, and a center for professional education...professional teacher education. You almost doubled enrollment and just many many positive things.

The physical campus changed markedly, too. You added over 20 buildings or did significant modifications on them. I remember you underwent...the campus underwent a large landscaping project to make it really pretty and attractive and doing the sidewalks in the way they were used instead of maybe the way it made sense to have them. Were any of those changes specifically related to helping any of the students with disabilities?

Nedderman

<topic>How Jim Hayes convinced the UT Arlington administration to improve accessibility</topic>Well, let me say, first of all, Jim Hayes was a master at getting what he wanted, and he's a real diplomat. He decided one day...

Interviewer

Let me interrupt you. Who was Jim Hayes?

Nedderman

Jim Hayes. He was in charge of the disability program, but he's best known for national basketball championships. He's one of the best administrators I've seen in long time at his

age, as a student. He was a real diplomat. He knew how to get what he wanted in the proper way.

He decided one time that the administration needed to be more about...know more about the handicapped problem. He put together...I believe it was [Dr.] Wayne Duke, since he was [Vice President of] Student Life, [Mr.] Dudley Wetsel, since he's the physical plant, and then I think someone else may have been [Dr.] Bill Baker. Jim put each one of us in a wheelchair and took us on a tour of the campus.

That was very enlightening. For the first time, it became clear how the men's restroom is a major major problem. It became clear that a curb, which looks simple to most people, that that was a major problem. There's nothing but problems on the campus as far as accommodating a physically handicapped [person]. This tour that Jim gave us was a real eye-opener, and I think started the real movement toward improving the campus for the handicapped.

That's kind of how the administration got advised and at Jim's behest and why so many of the things took place. Of course Dudley Wetzsel was in charge of Physical Plant; he was a logical one to take on the tour. Wayne Duke was Dean of Student Life and was a direct mentor of Jim Hayes and acting on his behalf. There is where I think the administration got brought up to date.

Interviewer

How did you come to meet with Jim Hayes? Did he just make an appointment with you? How did this original meeting come about?

Nedderman

Well, first of all I became interested in the wheelchair basketball, and I went to a couple of games. Jim Hayes was there.

Interviewer

And these were at UTA? These games were at UTA or elsewhere?

Nedderman

They were at UTA, yes. So we became acquainted and interested and as I say, he was a master diplomat in dealing with people. He quickly swung the administration over to his side for taking a look at the problems that the handicapped faced, of which we had not been aware, really.

Interviewer

That was, I think, in 1974 when you first met him. I have this photo which...of all the photo ops in the position to be for all those years at UTA, I'm sure this picture of you in the men's urinals is not the one you would have ever thought would still exist.

Nedderman

Yes, I've seen that before. I've already referred to that.

Interviewer

I'm holding a picture of Dr. Nedderman on his trip around the campus. The date was March 21, 1974.

[The caption reads] "As administrators experience first-hand many of the problems handicapped students face attending UTA in the 1970s." The photo is of Dr. Nedderman in a wheelchair in the men's restroom. You can see that not an easy thing to...

Nedderman

Well, let's just say it was a real eye-opener.

Interviewer

That eye-opener and then knowing...did you know any of the regents or any of your administration made you aware of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and any of the requirements from that?

Nedderman

<topic>Why UT Arlington received Governor Dolph Briscoe Jr.'s Award for Outstanding State Agency</topic>I'm sure that came to our attention, but let me also say, I think it was 1977, don't hold me to that, we Governor Briscoe's award as the Outstanding State Agency in dealing with the needs of the handicapped.

[1974. Governor Dolph Briscoe Jr.'s Award for Outstanding State Agency awarded to Dr. Nedderman/UTA for removing architectural barriers for people with disabilities.]

Now, when you say outstanding state agency, that doesn't mean just universities; it means the highway department, everything that's associated with highway [state] agency. We were very pleased about this and regarded this as the right step forward that we'd already taken and that Jim Hayes had pushed us into.

Interviewer

That is part of the seventies. Definitely the decade where people with disabilities kind of started taking matters into their own hands and not just leaving it to hospitals or their parents or their churches or whatever. He [Jim Hayes] certainly was working with UTA as a student and then later as an employee on accessibility and other aspects of the campus, as you've mentioned.

During the seventies, this same time, there's a handful of universities in the country that are doing anything with or for their disabled students. There's the University of Illinois, there's Berkeley, and there's a couple of others.

How does UTA end up in this very small group of universities willing to listen and to hear this part of their student population?

Nedderman

<topic>Personal impact of watching Movin' Mavs wheelchair basketball</topic>Let me go back to Jim Hayes again. He certainly had a part in it. He had a part in everything that is associated with the handicapped on campus. But I'll tell you an incident which happened to me which made a powerful impact. I'm not saying I did everything that needed to be done, but I leant a hand because this impact that happened.

I went over to watch a men's [wheelchair] basketball game. First of all, I was impressed with the vigor that they played. Everybody was out for blood. And if somebody tipped over, too bad. They're going to have to get that wheelchair straightened up and get in that wheelchair by themselves. This was one thing that Jim Hayes pushed was independence and not being dependent on other people.

I noticed one basketball player that really attracted my attention. He was a very muscular young man from the waist up. I mean muscles, and he played like he was having fun. It looked like he had lost nearly both legs. He was just...stubs was all he had. Yet he was happy. He was playing. He was enjoying himself.

I know afterwards I had to walk over to the library, and somehow after witnessing what I saw, it just felt good to walk. We became more aware and aware of what...how fortunate we are, but yet here are these young men who are acting as if...well, having a wonderful time.

As I walked over to the library, that really made an impact on me. I'm not the only one. I think Dudley Wetsel felt the impact. Wayne Duke. Somehow the entire university seemed to be moving in sync.

Interviewer

That's key that your whole administration felt the same way.

Nedderman

Wayne Duke was Dean of Student Life. He was sort of a mentor in a way of Jim Hayes. They worked very close together and talked over problems together. Dudley Wetsel was in a position to work on the physical plant. It all began to kind of come together with everyone.

Interviewer

<topic>Impact of UT Arlington's pioneering accessibility work on the UT system and Texas more broadly</topic>Did you...as you put in your line items for maybe taking down the curbs and making ramps in the buildings or changing the way the restrooms for men and women were designed, did you meet with any push-back from the Regents or the Board or from the people giving the university money? These weren't laws that had to be upheld yet.

Nedderman

The Regents were certainly brought into it. We had an ongoing program of new parking lots, new physical plant, and justifying some of these improvements and modifications, and making presentations to the Regents we naturally talked about why you, were requesting these things. Let me say that in general, the Regents were very receptive to well-thought-out plans for improving the physical plant for the handicapped.

Interviewer

That's good. Did any of the other universities in the system or any other universities in general reach out to find out what UTA did or how they approached things once these laws, in the late '70s, and certainly the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, once that came about?

Nedderman

I think other universities had to hear what we were saying. Noticing the impact of approval that we were getting from the Regents...this did not escape our fellow presidents, for example. So, yes, UTA by example had quite an impact on other people. And that's not to say we didn't watch other universities about good things they did. We weren't above stealing good ideas and more than they were against stealing a good idea.

Interviewer

You only have to make the wheel once. That's good. Since you can see...since the laws weren't fully...you didn't really have to fulfill what the laws said at this point. It's an interesting thing about the Regents, too, that they were receptive, as you said, to providing these funds. Even if you were already redoing a parking lot, redoing the curbs with the architects and engineers, it's still money.

Nedderman

Yeah. You know in 1965, I believe it was, we shifted from the A&M System to the UT System, and there were many people in favor of staying in the A&M System. I frankly didn't know...I thought it [changing systems] would work out. I'll say this: The Board of Regents of the UT System were always receptive to well-thought-out plans in which they were asking to support. That worked out well.

<topic>Jim Hayes's 1986 Push from Austin to Arlington to raise funds for the Arlington Handicapped Association</topic>I would like to refer to another story that tells a lot about Jim Hayes. That was pushing the wheelchair from Austin [Texas] to Maverick Stadium [Approximately 180 miles]. He, of course, had a van along with him, and they would stop to let him sleep and eat, but then they'd take up where they left off. He pushed that wheelchair from Austin to Maverick Stadium.

Interviewer

Why did he do that?

Nedderman

That is a good question. Why would he do that? He believed in setting examples. He preached something; he believed in doing it. He thought this told a lesson to the handicapped that the impossible can really become the possible. This was a prime example of the impossible becoming possible. I know Jim told me that when...he almost gave up late one afternoon. And then he said a couple hours later he could see some lights of Fort Worth. That gave him the spirit to keeping on pumping.

When he got to the Maverick Stadium, I wish we had preserved about this than we did, you never saw such a beat-up, tattered pair of leather gloves in your life. Pushing that thing all that time.

So now, why did Jim do it? He believed in setting the example. Don't say it can't be done; it can be done. That had a tremendous effect on the disabled students. They took great pride in Jim. He was their leader; he was the one getting things. He's the one who was getting concessions from the administration and thus they had great admiration for Jim and were very receptive to his programs and to his way of thinking.

That was an interesting project to say the least. I didn't think he'd ever make it to Maverick Stadium, frankly. But he did. And he set an example.

Interviewer

That's a feat. This relationship had pretty good impact on the campus and the administration and the students but you personally as well. UTA really changed as a result of his relationship with you and Doctors Duke and Wetsel and all those others.

Nedderman

They certainly did. I would say this. I think there was always an atmosphere of acceptability or friendship or support on the campus of the University of Texas Arlington. I always took pride in that. The fact that there was an acceptance of the physically handicapped.

Interviewer

<topic>Lowering of Cooper Street on campus to improve safety and accessibility</topic>
In the late '80s, you underwent a huge change in the campus by lowering the street and adding the walkways, lowering Cooper. You would have had to have gotten the Texas Department of Transportation and Arlington to buy in. How did that...I know that a lot of that was just help people just get across the street whether they were handicapped or not because that was a very busy street. How did that come about for making things easier to get from the east side to the west side?

Nedderman

Lowering Cooper Street was one of the most discussed items in the history of UTA, I think. Over a long period of time. I know I...whenever I met with a student advisory council the first thing I'd do is start blasting UTA because that beat them to the punch. Everybody was very serious about it. There was...years before I became president that this was discussed. They discussed detouring, which didn't work out. We discussed a total depression, which we didn't have the funding. So finally I got the architecture graduate students' class to come up with a plan with what you think it should look like.

They came up with a plan. They would like to have had more money, but who wouldn't have on a project like that? The physical plant people of the UT System, they adopted this program, and I always looked with pride up on the results of the school of architecture. This thing of doing something about crossing Cooper had to be done. We tried early in the game of putting up signal lights. You wanted to cross, you pushed a button, in a wheelchair or not. Students would pay no attention to that. They'd charge across the street, against the red light rather than wait on the red light to happen. Then we decided that the depression was the only answer. Talking about money.

We then had a problem. If you're going to depress Cooper Street, you had to satisfy the Texas Highway Department, you had to satisfy the Board of Regents. You had to satisfy the Arlington City Council. All those people were involved any time you talked about depression. The highway department; they would pay for a third of the depression if we would add another lane to access it.

Finally, with everybody not totally happy but as happy as they could get under the circumstances, Cooper Street was depressed with three lanes put in.

Interviewer

The City of Arlington benefited by it whether they realized it or not. It certainly made life easier for getting across campus however you did it.

Nedderman

We put in the elevated elevators to accommodate the handicapped.

Interviewer

<topic>Other people involved in improving accessibility at UT Arlington</topic>
Jim Hayes had the biggest impact. Are there any other players at this time? Any other students or people working with Jim Hayes in the disabilities department that made their own impact with the administration or the campus?

Nedderman

Well there were certainly people with the administration that had a very close relationship with Jim Hayes. And there were student groups. For example, the President's Student Advisory Council, some twenty students, who are on this monthly luncheon by virtue of their office. This included the fraternities, the cadet colonel, students who wanted...students want to be cut in, and they want their ideas to be heard, whether they are approved or not. If they have an opportunity to say what they think and are listened to, then they can participate. Yes, there were student groups who had their ideas of what it would be like with a [street] depression.

I've still got to go back to Dudley Wetsel as Chief Business Officer who had prime responsibility for physical plant development.

Interviewer

By the time President Bush signs the ADA 1990, UTA is far ahead of the game on physical access.

Nedderman

I'm proud to say I think they were way ahead of the game. I believe it was the 1977 Governor's Award [that] spurred us on to continue being at the head of the game.

Interviewer

You were ten-to-fifteen years ahead of other governmental or non-governmental agencies for accessibility.

Nedderman

I don't think there's any doubt about that. We got ahead of the game there due to the efforts of a lot of people, including Jim Hayes.

Interviewer

Back to Jim Hayes. I know they were originally called the Free Wheelers. How did they become the Movin' Mavs? Do you remember?

Nedderman

I think Jim Hayes came up with the idea. And the Vice President of Student Affairs went along with it. I forget who all we had to have approval from, I'm sure there were some, to have that name.

Interviewer

I read in a UTA history book written by Dr. Saxon that actually it was [Bob] Snake LeGrand who came up with that name. Snake LeGrand, the men's basketball coach. I read that he's the one who actually suggested to Jim Hayes to change to be the Movin' Mavs.

Nedderman

That may be. I'd forgotten that.

Interviewer

<topic>Interactions between Movin' Mavs wheelchair basketball players, other athletes, and other students</topic>How much interaction do you know would've occurred between the

wheelchair teams and the non-wheelchair teams? Regular basketball or tennis or whatever teams.

Nedderman

Well, they're two different games. I can't say there was a close relationship between the Jim Hayes crowd and the regular crowd. There's certainly some of the regular basketball players would go to wheelchair basketball games. I'm sure of that. There was a tolerance of one another, maybe putting it a little strongly, but an appreciation for one another.

The regular basketball players certainly understood what was happening in other...in the handicapped basketball team.

Interviewer

UTA started...they also had full scholarships for people with disabilities in wheelchairs, things like that. How difficult was that...I guess I shouldn't say difficult...How did that come about that these scholarships were presented?

Nedderman

I wish I could say I knew the details on that, but I don't. I strongly suspect that the Vice President of Student Affairs was involved in it as he was in most everything with the wheelchair group, but the actual details, I can't say.

Interviewer

Do you have any other stories you would care to tell us?

Nedderman

I think I've already used up my good ones. Of course, the Jim Hayes story, Austin to Maverick Stadium, I wish we had recorded more of that. We were so busy during this era and later doing things that we kind of lost sight of recording it in history. This was...it was doing this. We should have recorded a little better some of the other things that were happening, but we were busy.

Interviewer

I think that's what these oral history projects are trying to do. Make up a little bit of that lost information before it's lost totally.

Nedderman

The wheelchair students were really appreciated on campus. I've always said I think UTA as a campus that accepted certain acceptabilities [capabilities?].

For example, we get off the course just a little bit, the Vietnam War. In many institutions, they kicked ROTC [Reserved Officer Training Corps] off the campus or even Dropped it totally. At UTA, we had an atmosphere of acceptability, for example ROTC students. This was sort of the way UTA lived.

We didn't try to disagree with the world. We did the things that we thought were right and then did them. A degree of tolerance. *Tolerance* was the word I think UTA was known for, and we were proud of that.

Interviewer

Right. With good reason. That really ends the questions and thoughts that I had about your participation and role with the disability, physical plant, and students at UTA. Are there are any closing thoughts you might have?

Nedderman

We wish this professor [Dr. Sarah Rose] goodwill and good luck putting this whole picture together. I think she will be doing the university a favor and putting this picture together. We'll look forward to seeing how it all turns out.

Interviewer

Thank you very much for your time today, Dr. Nedderman.

Nedderman

I was delighted to do it. I daresay you'll come up with a good report.

Interviewer

Thank you.

[Track 1 ends; track 2 begins.]

Interviewer

<topic>John Dycus's disability activism on campus</topic>Okay, we have one more quick little topic to discuss. Dr. Nedderman, you mentioned John Dycus. Tell me about him.

Nedderman

I'm interested in John because I consider him a personal friend and that would take a while to talk about how that developed. But here's a man who had this extreme physical handicap, yet, as associate editor of the *Shorthorn*, he was superb. He did a great job.

I remember when the [Dorothy] Estes went on a year's leave to Indonesia, I believe it was, and John Dycus was left in charge of the *Shorthorn* [Mrs. Dorothy Estes was Student Publications Director of the *Shorthorn* for twenty-six years.]

Interviewer

As a student?

Nedderman

Yes. And did a superb job. And I don't think we missed a beat while he was in charge. He was level-headed, and he set a great example also of what a physical handicap...how it can be overcome. I was always a great admirer of John Dycus. For one thing, when I retired as president, he sent me a real nice letter of congratulations and so forth.

Another example of inspiration to someone who is physically handicapped and these are the kinds of people, John for example, can have a tremendous impact on physically handicapped people because of the example he sets. He does a wonderful job despite his handicap and does it well. John is another one of those heroes.

Interviewer

I think that's the main goal...that a lot of folks just want everyone to know is that just because I'm in in a wheelchair doesn't mean I'm not able to do everything else. My brain still works just fine; I'm just as smart as you.

I think he's still active in Arlington and know he's part of this oral history program.

Nedderman

He was a great one.

Interviewer

Can you think of anybody else?

Nedderman

I've discussed my two best examples.

Interviewer

Ok, well those are two good examples. I will close this for good then.

Thank you once again.