

Willie Hernandez

Owner, C.E.O. and Lead Engineer for Per4Max Medical Industries in Grand Prairie, Texas and former member of the University of Texas at Arlington Movin' Mavs Wheelchair Basketball Team

Interview conducted by

Wes Wettengel

In 2016 in Grand Prairie, Texas

Disability Studies Minor

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Biography

William Hernandez was born in San Salvador, El Salvador in 1970. At the age of three months he contracted polio and in 1977 his mother moved the family to California seeking better treatment. Mr. Hernandez attended Salvin Elementary, Whitney Junior High and Fairview High Schools. During these years Mr. Hernandez appeared as a Poster Child for Easter Seals and was featured in television advertisements for the McDonalds restaurant chain. He also performed cameo appearances in several popular television series.

In junior high, Mr. Hernandez was introduced to wheelchair basketball by Les Hayes, which led to the first full athletic scholarship to a student with disabilities awarded in the United States at the University of Texas at Arlington. During his career with the U.T.A. Movin' Mavs the team won three consecutive National Wheelchair Basketball Championships and Mr. Hernandez graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Mechanical Engineering.

After college, Mr. Hernandez founded Per4Max Industries, a manufacturer of high performance sports wheelchairs. In 2014, he was awarded the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities' Lex Frieden Employment Award.

Mr. Hernandez earned a spot on the United States National Men's Wheelchair Basketball Team and has represented the country in regional and international games. In 2000, the team won a Bronze Medal at the Sydney, Australia Paralympics and in 2002 brought home a Gold Medal from the Kitakyushu, Japan Paralympics.

Mr. Hernandez continues to play for the semi-professional Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks, winning twelve national titles and sponsors many disabled individuals and teams in the sports world.

Topics Discussed

- Background
- Learning English
- Learning Wheelchair Basketball
- Sports Wheelchairs
- Opportunities through Adaptive Sports
- Fairfax High School
- Cal-Games
- Steven Welch
- University of Illinois Urbana- Champaign
- Jesus Alamillo
- Fear of Failure
- Easter Seals
- David Kiley
- Arriving in Texas
- Jim Hayes
- Freshman Year
- Scholarships
- Mechanical Engineering
- Per4Max
- Stephen Kugle
- U.S. Men's National Wheelchair Basketball Team
- Sponsorships
- Accommodations at U.T.A
- First Job
- Raul Ortega
- Recognition for Movin' Mavs
- Giving Back to the Sport
- Putting in the Work

[Mr. Hernandez was attending his three year old son this day. The pauses occur when his son comes in to check on his father.]

[This interview was conducted in Mr. Hernandez's office during business hours. There are frequent conversations in the background between Per4Max staff and clients.]

Wes Wettengel

This is Wes Wettengel interviewing Mr. Willie Hernandez for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is April 22nd, 2016 and I am at the headquarters of Per4Max Medical Industries in Grand Prairie, Texas to talk with Mr. Hernandez about his experiences with the University of Texas at Arlington.

Thank you for participating in the university's oral history program.

Willie Hernandez

Thank you.

Wettengel

Ah, if you don't mind, go ahead and get started with your background, when and where you were born.

Hernandez

<topic>Background</topic>

Well, I was actually born in El Salvador, San Salvador, the city, the capitol, in 1970. Actually grew up in San Salvador probably until the age of six until my mom decided to move to the United States. What happened was since I had contracted polio at the age of three (3) months old—ahhh, she was, she thought, you know being naive to what it was, thought that maybe there was a cure in the United States. So she decided, "Well, I'm gonna go out and scout it." So she left us probably about six months and came to the United States to scout it out and see if she could find a job before she made the big move. Of course I'm sure she was very scared of the fact that she moved to a different country that she could not even speak the language. Of course she found out that it was something better for us.

At the time our country, um, was in distress. You saw a few things that were changing in the government and it eventually it became, became this, where there was a guerilla warfare, and the government, and the public, or I guess they— others that felt like the government should change and then it became a battle and in 1978 was when it all hit. Anyways we left in 1977, just a year before all that happened. And— it was good just because in the end it went into a path because we were at that age when they were recruiting in 1980-81. They were recruiting some of these kids after they turned ten years old or eleven they were recruited to be part either of the guerillas or become part of the army to fight against each other. And they were recruiting these kids at that age. And it was awful, where my brothers easily would have been recruited. Of course, myself, being having polio probably would have suffered from all that just because I wouldn't have been able to move around, or, as well, I guess with all the havoc that was being caused.

<topic>Learning English</topic>

So anyhow when we moved to the United States, the fear with me really was just the language barrier. I was always active. I was always really outgoing. I always loved doing different things and one thing that I picked up was basketball— on my crutches. I didn't know anything about wheelchair basketball. I would go out there and I would drop one of the crutches and I would bounce the ball and I would play

one-on-one against some of my buddies and hobble around with my other crutch on my left side. And so, anyhow, in the end, I found that I was excelling in many different sports that I would pick up and I was just very athletic. I was very competitive, especially with my brothers, you know, I wanted to be the strongest one. I would always want to beat my older brother in arm wrestling, so, and different things like that.

<topic>Learning Wheelchair Basketball</topic>

And so we heard, we had heard that— ah, as my senior year, or what you call senior year, sixth grade, that there was a sport called wheelchair basketball. Somebody called up a coach from Whitney High School and his name was Les Hayes. He came out and visited us and he said that he had heard somebody was interested in playing wheelchair basketball.

Of course he generalized it to everyone else and told everyone in the class were like “Yeah” and of course we grabbed some of these hospital chairs, cause at the time, they were just these stainless steel, E & J hospital chairs [Everest & Jennings], and we got in them and we took off all the arm rests so they wouldn't impede our push and we went out there and we played wheelchair basketball. We didn't know what the rules were, we just sort of like, whatever. We could at least get—get an idea of how the sport was played in the chair.

After I graduated from Salvin; [Sophia T. Salvin Special Education Center Los Angeles, California Salvin was the elementary school I went to. After I graduated from Salvin I went on to Whitney High, Whitney Jr. High. I had told my mom that I wanted to go to that school because they have wheelchair basketball.

<topic>Learning English</topic>

She didn't know anything— I don't really think she knew enough to say, but she was always very supportive of some of the things that I would always tell her just because I knew how to speak English. I ended up actually learning how to speak English a lot faster than my brothers. At the time, when we came, we didn't know a lick of English at all. As a matter of fact, just one year into it, everything sounded like gibberish to me, but I thought “Wow, am I ever gonna learn this language?”

At that age, I was like seven or eight years old and so it's kind of weird that I still remember that moment. I'm looking out into the distance and kind of thinking about the language barrier and how I don't understand my friends it all sounds like a bunch of gibberish. And so what I would do, whenever they would speak to me I would speak, back to them and like mimic what they were saying and I would— (Laughs) I picked-up a few words here and there. But in the end I was able to pick-up the language and communicate and in the end, of course, it really helped me perfect the language, where I was able to at least pronounce it properly and different things like that. I was always one to be a perfectionist with it, but anyhow...

<topic>Learning Wheelchair Basketball</topic>

As I went on to Whitney Jr. High I picked up the sport of wheelchair basketball. I was taught to play wheelchair basketball amongst many other friends that I met and that's where I met Jesus Alamillo. He also was just barely coming into this country. I think it was age ten or eleven. And he picked up the sport. He excelled in it as well. We would go out and do exhibitions for high schools and teach them how to play wheelchair basketball. Of course they're teaching us as well, because we didn't even know how to play the sport (Laughs). But, since we kinda had an idea on how to use the chair, and at the time I was in crutches. Jesus was actually polio as well and he walked. So we really were not acclimated to this, to the chair, to the chairs at the time. Since they were hospital chairs, no one really wanted to be in 'em.

<topic>Sports Wheelchairs</topic>

Until one time, there was this one individual that was at the school, of course this was a little older individual that was on the men's team, which was more of the varsity team level of wheelchair basketball. He came up with this chair that was built by someone that was called the "Quadra" [First lightweight aluminum wheelchair developed by Jeff Minnebraker in 1985] and it was an aluminum frame which was very light, very adjustable and of course I wanted to get in it. When he was not around I would get in it and speed around the halls. Try to be one of the fastest guys out there.

<topic> Opportunities with Adaptive Sports</topic>

That's when we saw that the sport was just giving a lot to us and allowing us to meet people and seeing... people were seeing us as athletes, and so we were learning how to play tennis, basketball, doing also track, table tennis. And so, all these sports, we all excelled in 'em because we were introduced to them. Some of us were good at some, but some of us were really good at a multitude of sports. We would go attend some of these games and we would compete against other junior kids around California and they were called the "Cal-Games." We did a lot of competitions throughout the year and we did track, basketball and tennis. And all those sports, that's why I was able to kinda capture and excel in a lot of those sports just because we were always practicing different sports throughout the season. It was just making us stronger, better, mentally as well.

This was Les Hayes that was pretty much taking us all over the place. I mean we used to go all the way to Las Vegas [Nevada] and play against some of the older gentlemen that had been playing for years in wheelchair basketball. And of course, we would get beat by over fifty points. But the thing is just a learning lesson that eventually of course we would end up beating some of these teams as we got older. Initially it's more of a learning— a learning game for us to be able to at least— I guess you pay the price I guess as an athlete initially and eventually you're able to overcome and beat your masters, right, sort of thing like that? We had— we use to play against some of the local women's teams and of course we were taught a lesson then too. (Laughs)

<topic>Fairfax High School</topic>

As we went on I graduated from Whitney High— Whitney Jr. High and went on to high school, to Fairfax High School [Los Angeles, CA.] I was mainstreamed. What happened with that was that the schools were changing where you had disabled individuals and then you had mentally disabled individuals. They were wanting to separate that, whereas those individuals that really had no issue other than not able to ambulate and do that sort of thing, that's ...

[Pause]

Wettengel

Alright, so we were talking about Lake—your high school.

Hernandez

Yeah. So we were mainstreamed and I went on to Fairfax High School. That didn't even have a wheelchair basketball team. So that was one downfall about the school. But, what Les Hayes did—which I played for the Wheelchair Kodiaks [Los Angeles, CA.] That's what they were called, the L.A. Kodiaks. Then—what he did was he ended up coming to this school and was teaching adaptive P.E. [Physical Education] so we had a little bit of wheelchair basketball, but after class we had negotiated with the bus driver—we told them to drop us off at Whitney for practice. So it all kind of turned out really well. So I

was going to Fairfax High School, attending there and I— and on practice days they would drive us and drop us off at the school and my mom would pick me up from there and go home.

<topic>Rosa Benetiz</topic>

At the time also, things had changed with where I lived. I no longer lived in Los Angeles. We moved to Long Beach, California. So the commute was probably about thirty or forty minutes away. And of course with traffic it made it two hours. (Laughs) So L.A. traffic was awful, but the fact that my mom gave— was able to—be accepting of the fact that “Yeah, I have to go and pick up my son from basketball and then drive ‘em after work home.” It’s like she—it was not even a hiccup in her radar.

Which was awesome when you look back nowadays and some of the things that she did—a lot of sacrifices, you know. She was a very strong woman when it came to that, just because—to be able to pick up your bags and come to a foreign country that you can’t even speak the language. You don’t even know the rules or anything. You’re just plotting yourself in hopes that you make a better life than you had previously. That is fantastic.

<topic>Cal-Games</topic>

Anyhow, yeah, I feel that—high school—would have been the downfall of the love that I had to the sport, but it wasn’t. The fact that Les Hayes came to teach the adaptive class, we still feel connected. It’s—a lot of times we all kind of lose our connections with long lost friends from college. Because we just don’t converse—we don’t have that common thing anymore. And that, I think, left that common lat... common lat (Laughs) I can’t even say it, that common ground between the two. Anyways, my thing was at least with that it opened up other doors. This is what I did. I still continued doing tennis, track, and basketball. At the Cal-Games, I ended up going—I was ranked number one in juniors in track at the time.

<topic> Steven Welch</topic>

I came in for that meet and I meet up with one of my good friends, still today, he was a Movin’ Mavs [University of Texas at Arlington men’s wheelchair basketball team] as well named Steve Welch. All of us were competitors. He was from Texas. He played on the “Hotwheels” [TIRR Memorial Hermann Junior Hotwheels Basketball, Houston, Texas] here. He mentioned to me that Jim Hayes had a program that was starting at the University of Texas at Arlington and that I should come and play at the school. If we do—if we all get together—we all got the right group together that we would win a few championships because of it. And I said “Sounds fantastic. I’m going to college, why not? That there’s a full scholarship offered as well.

<topic> University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign</topic>

Well in the same time I had gone to—previously before that conversation I had gone to the University of Illinois. The University of Illinois had already attempted to recruit me as well because I had won a few scholarships to attend their camps during the summer. So they—all expenses paid, so you’re talkin’ about the flight and then camp expenses and meals and everything was all paid for. Brad Hedrick [1981-1995 Supervisor of Recreation & Athletics, Disability and Educational Resources, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign] also expressed interest in me coming over and playing for the University of Illinois. Of course they were offering a half scholarship and with my mom—and not being able to really meet the needs of those types of—of that type of tuition. She— you know, I felt that the right move was the University of Texas at Arlington because of the full scholarship that was being offered. But I was scared, I was scared, I was really like, “Huh, I’m not sure what I want to do.” But it was—I committed, I said “Yes I’ll take it, why not?”

<topic>Rosa Benetiz</topic>

But, something happened that summer as well. My mom had gotten a—I guess they detected—because she had been having headaches, they detected that she had gotten a tumor from past, probably, maybe from an accident that she had had. They weren't sure exactly how it was caused. So we heard that in August—just I—that month—that week that I was leaving to the university, that she was gonna have an operation. So, it was kind of hard on me. Seems like, "Oh, I was leaving," at the wrong time. Sure enough, when I left, my brothers could only tell me the stories of what they went through. How she could not recognize who they were and all these other different things, it was just awful. And for me—when I came back for the holidays just to see her. She was weaker, and that strong woman that she was, all of a sudden looked vulnerable. Those are some of the things that I remember.

I just felt really bad that I had left right at that moment. But, at the same time when I was in the first semester in college...my fear was to come to college and do awful, and come back and tell her the story that, "Hey look, I tried and here I am." So I was so in fear of that—that I did so well. (Laughs) My classes that year— I was in honors class, four point. Or was honored by the Dean I guess that semester. But I also remember being sick as well after I finished ... [Knock on door]

[Pause]

Hernandez

So where'd I leave off?

Wettengel

Ah, let's see, you were talking about your mother. Ah, ah getting the tumor—and coming to ...

Hernandez

<topic>Fear of Failure</topic>

Okay, yeah. Oh yeah, that I was afraid of failing, (Laughs) and coming back home. (Laughs) So, so well anyways I got sick. Literally this is a strange story, because I got sick right at the end of finals and I—my flight that I had booked. It was probably a week after finals was over and I had gotten the flu. The harsh weathers in Texas versus California that year was so cold that it was just unbelievable. I think the only times I experienced that was when we went to Minnesota. We used to go to Minnesota and play against some of the teams out there and it was at the Junior National Tournament—and below zero and of course it's just—it was hard (Laughs) for us guys to just walk around with our type of clothing we would wear in California versus Minnesota, so probably our only jacket that we owned and that sort of thing, but anyhow. I got sick—one problem that I had during the time I was growing up was my tonsils. They're always flaring up and I was always getting infections. So I was getting sick a lot. I got sick so bad that I didn't have my mom. I didn't have anyone other than just friends and then my roommate left and that was Jesus.

<topic>Jesus Alamillo</topic>

By the way I didn't say this, and Jesus—I actually— because I was kinda in fear just moving and all that I asked him because he was already in college. He had already one year in college before me because he was older. I asked him if he was interested in coming to Texas, to be a part of this team, this team that we were going to create to win some national championships. And he said "Yeah." Of course I told Jim [Jim Hayes] and he said "Yeah, you know, I'll get—I'll see if I can get another scholarship." And he came

on board as well. Jesus also joined me. And then we were roommates. And so his flight was a lot earlier and he took off and I was really sick.

<topic>Fear of Failure/topic>

The reason why I wanted to tell you this story— because I was having these dreams and I call them nightmares, because I had a dream that I failed all my courses (Laughs) and it was just awful. It was the worst thing. And I was going back home to tell my mom. I woke up and of course the semester was over and I did well, but I still I like a 103 fever and one of the guys came and took me to the hospital and of course that's how I know that I was doing so well. When I got home I felt once again that family support, Not that there wasn't, but they are so far away and you were so used to being together. My dad really— when we left our country he never came with us, my mom were pretty much just separated from him and then she was on her own. So she really struggled, making ends meet.

<topic>Opportunities through Adaptive Sports</topic>

Fortunate for me, I got the opportunity during those times to be able to support some of the expenses. I ended up getting a break where Les was approached by some people that were looking for individuals in chairs that can do a—that would be able to do some little tricks here and there for McDonalds [world's leading global food service retailer] commercial. Sure enough, there was a group of us that went out there and auditioned. And of course I excelled in it just because I did these little different tricks that the others couldn't do. And they said "Oh yeah, we want that kid right there." And of course I had that personality. I was very outgoing and stuff like that. So I ended up doing that and wow.

Low and behold—I didn't expect—I thought that I was going to get free burgers you know and in getting these pay checks that I won in school. Two thousand, three thousand dollars and it was fantastic. Of course as a child you don't, you don't need all that money, but my mom did, my mom did. It really helped her out. So we were able to buy a vehicle. Of course, to move me around (Laughs) wherever I had an audition. Since she would take me out and do that and it really helped our family. Those days we were really struggling. Trying to—at least put some food on the table. I'm sure she went there and at least got a bit of that money and was able to do that.

Wettengel

You were involved with Easter Seals too, weren't you?

Hernandez

<topic>Easter Seals</topic>

That is correct. During that time—this is what happened—from—there was an individual that I met, because I was a part of the Boy Scouts. It's really weird how a lot of these things that I got into—got involved always lead to somethin'. Like I was in the Boy Scouts and that started in Salvin and there was a staff member by the name of Mike Kovac. He kind of took me under his wing and he saw a cute kid, you know, and he thought "We could use him." And he was working for the Easter Seals. So they had Easter Seals Poster Child throughout the year and of course they choose me. So I was taken to different softball events and different things, and fund raisers and stuff like that. One of 'em that was really neat to do—and that's how it all kinda started out We did a photo shoot for Abby Reynolds (Former Medical Supply Company in California) and that was part of the Easter Seals and everything else.

<topic>David Kiley</topic>

And I met David Kiley [regarded as one of the greatest wheelchair basketball players of all time]. David Kiley is really an icon in wheelchair basketball. And during that time he was one of the best players. It's like saying... like saying Michael Jordan or LeBron James nowadays. Dave Kiley... I had met him... and of course they had put me in this electric wheelchair. And of course he's in his basketball chair. And it was plugged in at the time (Laughs) so I went all over the place, out of control. Eventually they unplugged it. (Laughs) Because I couldn't stand still.

But when I met a superstar in the sport of wheelchair basketball, as a matter of fact I remember watching a game that they were televising—I think it was part of the Paralympics at the time and how I was telling my brothers "Like wow, check it out. Look how he's able to pick up the ball with his wheel. Like he goes down court and he presses that ball [Demonstrates motion of capturing the ball against his right wheel and holding it as the wheel carries the ball up the backside of the wheel to the front] right against his wheel as his wheel is rolling and it comes right up to his hip and picks it up. These guys are fast and how fast they are. Anyways, I was just mesmerized by watching some of these guys and how they did things.

<topic>Opportunities through Adaptive Sports</topic>

Anyways, I went on—Easter Seals was the initial start of some of the things that I did, you know modeling, to commercials, and some of the film series. At first I came out on "St. Elsewhere" [Popular hospital based television series from 1982-1988] and a few other things I don't remember.

<topic>Rosa Benetiz</topic>

It was just great. It was just what we needed to be able to do. At least have some sort of income to help at least my mom with whatever struggles she had. I didn't know I was nine or ten in Nevada and I thought my mom was fine and she was doing fantastic. Things were not that bad. I probably realized as I got older that she was always struggling to make ends meet. And I'm glad that these things, these opportunities came around for me.

Wettengel

So now you're at U.T.A. What was the environment like at U.T.A. when you got here?

Hernandez

<topic>Arriving in Texas</topic>

You know, initially when I came to U.T.A. I didn't know what to expect. As a matter of fact I—we interviewed a few individuals as we were flying to land in Dallas and I was asking 'em about— "What exactly am I expecting?" And they would tell me about the weather, about how people, how friendly they were and things like that. Of course I remember getting out of the plane and thinking "Wow! That—those engines are hot." When I got out, really got out of the—outside, where we were waiting for someone to pick us up, I noticed it was the weather (Laughs) not the engine of the plane. (Laughs) I had never experienced that hot. (Laughs) Anyhow I learned really fast in Texas you're not goin' to be hangin' out outside as much as I did in California.

<topic>Jim Hayes</topic>

But, no, the people were really welcoming. Jim Hayes was awesome, very welcoming, very accommodating, all the promises he—he pretty much—he attended to I feel that—he surpassed it. I feel that, yeah, there were moments that I think as a coach and players you butt heads. But there were

reasons—the only reason you have that is because they care and he saw a lot of potential in a lot of us. That's why he wanted us to be the best. And if you were not being challenged then you were satisfied. He was not satisfied. We weren't satisfied. That's why we went on to win three national championships, because we were always hungry.

Every year was a new story. Every year was just a beginning. Every year with Jim Hayes he was happy in May and he—by July he had a chip on his shoulder. And so—but it was right, I don't blame him for that because you have to be hungry in order to stay on top, because there's others that are even more hungrier than you eventually and that's when you lose it, but we were fortunate enough to be hungrier every year. We would train every summer. You'd lift and train one-on-one in our skills to be—to better yourselves and we did. We proved it and that's how we were able to continue that streak of championships.

<topic>Freshman Year</topic>

The first year that Jesus and I were on the team we only had a few individuals that had played wheelchair basketball as long as we had. They of course, they had played it, just as not as skillful. We went to the semi-finals and Jesus and I—Jesus fouled out and then I fouled out and of course we lost the game and we were really on our way to the finals. We didn't forget that in the following year.

<topic>Steven Welch</topic>

We were able to recruit more of them and then of course here comes Steven Welch. Which Steven... at the time, when he asked me to come to the university, I didn't know he had one more year. I thought he was going to be attending the same time as I was, but he had one more year of high school. So he came in the following year and we never looked back.

We had Steven Welch, and then we had Jason Van Beek, which was our center 6'5" individual. With the addition of Welch which was one of the best players out there at the time as a junior helped us out tremendously as well. Not to take anything away with Jesus, because Jesus was a fantastic player as well. As a matter of fact it was neck-and-neck between Jesus and Steven Welch at the time on how well they played.

<topic>Scholarships</topic>

Really we had a great group of guys that we had formed and Jim Hayes was a part of all that... that had facilitated that. He offered with those scholarships and we were able to excel and not worry about expenses or anything else, whereas a lot of our friends that we met at the university had to work, had to make ends meet in order to start to pay with their education. So for us, not to worry about those things, just concentrate on school, basketball, school, basketball was fantastic and we did.

<topic>Mechanical Engineering</topic>

I ended up in getting my degree in mechanical engineering and the reason why I chose mechanical was not because I initially choose that. I initially choose Physics. I wanted to become an astronaut. (Laughs) And that's why—what I was actually—I was always in love with space and so I was wanting to major in astrophysics. But, as I went on I noticed Jesu, he was majoring in mechanical engineering. That his work was a lot easier, but yet in the same thing, same thing—but it made more sense to me, more applicable. Your applying it to different things, making things. Astrophysics was more theory, and I guess if I wanted to, I wanted to go in depth into that would I—would I have loved it as much and I questioned those things.

I still want to go to space, but I said “Well, engineers still go to space,” and so I ended up switching my major over to mechanical engineering, because of my roommate Jesus. I ended up enjoying it. I really looked at it just the same way I did when I was a kid. I used to tinker with things. I used to try to change things and innovate. Of course at the time you don’t know how to, but you’re just trying to experiment just like that one time I tried a... I had a little a electric football game and I ended up learning that you can’t plug it in, because it ran out of batteries. I plugged it into the plug here (Laughs) 120 and it fried the whole thing. (Laughs) You know the child—you find things—you find out the hard way.

<topic>Per4Max</topic>

That I think is— became one of the things that really sparked the whole idea with Per4Max. The “P” or the number 4, “M” “a” “x”... there’s a 4, which is a number, we don’t write—we write “f” “o” “u” “r,” we write “P” “e” “r” and the 4 “M” “a” “x.” because there were four individuals that wanted to be engineers. At the time we were basketball players and those individuals were myself, Jesus Alamillo, Chhay Mac, and Phung Tran.

<topic>Sports wheelchairs</topic>

We all had an idea of creating the ideal quote unquote “basketball chair.” At the time, Sunrise Medical, which was Quickie [Quickie Wheelchair, Sunrise Medical, L.L.C., Fresno, California] had a chair, had a chair that was considered a sports chair, because it was made out of aluminum. It was not the typical E & J as I mentioned earlier, whereas it looks like a hospital chair. Now these chairs becoming lighter, now they’re looking a little slick, they have a little more camber angle, where there’s angle in the wheels to provide stability and you’re able to really whip those things around a lot better. They don’t come with arm rests anymore. They don’t come with push handles anymore. You’ve got a chair that’s a little faster and better bearings and different things like that.

And so, at the time—we had an idea on coming out with somethin’ better. Better than what Quickie just came out with. Because all they were doing was just creating this box frame that was not catered to you, it’s just a general, off the shelf. We slap all the nuts and bolts together and here it is, at your door in less than—in three weeks. Our goal was to create a chair that was tailored to the game, with camber. That’s welded. That’s made for you. Not knowing how to use CAD [Computer Automated Design software] systems or any of that, we don’t know how to design. Everything was like drafting tables and very—computing was just coming into that era.

<topic>Stephen Kugle</topic>

We were learning and just getting our feet wet and we met with this—with my counselor, which his name was Dr. Kugle [Stephen T. Kugle], that was Jesus’ counselor initially and I of course—we all got transferred to him. (Knock on door) We ended up meeting with him and we told him our idea and he said “Yeah, okay, well you guys need to get this intensive course on “AutoCAD” [Computer software program] and you’re gonna learn this and that’s gonna be on this Saturday.” And sure enough we have to wake up at 7 o’clock in the morning and learn this program that we were to like “What?” and we weren’t exactly sure just what it was.

We all learned it. I excelled in it. And when I did I started tinkering with it and I continued playing around with it. By my senior year we hadn’t built anything yet, by the way. We were still (Laughs) just a lot of talk, like he said. He used to always tell us, “You guys are a bunch of talkers. You know you’re not goin’ to do anything. You’re not going to amount to any of it. Per4Max is gonna be nothin’,” and blah, blah, blah. For me it was more just the opposite he was throwing fuel into the fire. I work the opposite. When you tell me I can’t do something. I do just the opposite. I told him I said “Per4Max starts with me and it

ends with me and I'll make it happen." Sure enough—unfortunately he passed away in 1998. He didn't get to see Per4mMax started in 1999.

<topic>Per4Max</topic>

But, I continued and I took it and the four individuals after we graduated it was me left. I brought some of the individuals from the past on board of the group—of the Per4Max initial group from college. It just—other things in their life took over and it was just hard to maintain it, so in the end there were a lot of struggles, a lot of struggles. To start a business you're either all in or you're not.

[Pause]

Wettengel

So, you got Perf4Max off the ground?

Hernandez

<topic>Raul Ortega</topic>

So in 1999, I— what I was doin' is this... in '96 after I graduated. I went on to meet with one of my friends that was my teammate actually with the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks [Semi- professional Wheelchair Basketball team] for a short period of time. His name was Raul Ortega [A leading member of Mexico's men's wheelchair Tennis Team]. He was inspiring to me when I met him because it was the same thing we were trying to do.

Per4Max started out and he was one of the other ones that would say "You guys talk a lot, but you are just aren't doing anything." And then we used to blame of course our counselor "Well, of course it's his fault." Because he was building, he was actually building things, actually building a chair in Mexico, and a very smart guy. Raul actually inspired me—in 1996 when I went to see how he was doing things and really learned a lot of the things that he was doing. Then what I did was started helping him and try to better what he was doing, and started implementing the CAD system and all these other things that he was doing.

<topic>First Job</topic>

Everything was doing is like building the product in the air, it's just no fixtures, you know just things—very primitive to the point you could easily make mistakes. At the time, of course, I was no genius myself, but at the same time I was using the skills that I had learned in school and I had the manufacturing skills after I graduated. I kinda got my feet wet with a— I was hired to work for a company to do all robotic automation. So this company, it was small it was a perfect fit for me. It was really strange because I was hired also by Hughes Missiles [Now a part of the Raytheon Company, Waltham, Massachusetts] to work for them out of Arizona. So really that fork in the road—and you either go one way or the other.

When I chose to work for this company it really opened up my eyes to manufacturing. You learned a lot of theory but you can't really apply it, you know. You get these values, they don't mean anything, but there standard values out there in life and you just don't have something where you have a quarter or you don't have point two zero (.20) of a thread. You have point two five (.25) which is a quarter. And so you begin to understand that life is—has the ability to make anything but you have your standards to make life easier and then begin to learn different things in order to acclimate yourself and understand how to manufacture and that's what I did it. I just learned.

I was just thrown right into it—a big huge project for Crane Plumbing [Now a part of American Standard, Piscataway, NJ] and so I remember the company. Crane Plumbing, they make—if you ever look at your urinal at all you'll see this little, a little logo—you probably know what I'm talking about. But we were to manufacture... or assemble, manufacture some of these components with a robot. And so we had a conveyor system that we put together and of course that was my project. My fear was to lose a bunch of money on it and then they would fire me because I didn't know anything I was talking about. Fortunately the project went really well and did really well with that project and I did really well by learning some of the things and learned some of the ropes. Computer aided design and manufacturing and just machines too, interacting with machinists, making the parts.

<topic>Raul Ortega</topic>

In the end, that really helped me learn how to manufacture and help Raul Ortega in how to manufacture things better. And as it went on I was helping Raul and I wanted to partner up with him where I would have the manufacturing— I would have the engineering here and he would manufacture in Mexico since—cheaper labor and different things like that and that was my goal. In 1999 I pitched it to him; things were transitioning in the business or the job that I was in, they had sold out; things moving on.

<topic>Per4Max</topic>

The original owner had asked me if he—if I wanted to go with him or stay with the current company. So I ended up going with him. But I had pitched to him that “Hey, I had had this idea... I found it was pretty lucrative. Are you interested in creating this wheelchair company called Per4Max? Because I feel that there's the —there are clients that are interested.” And he said “Yeah” and he came in as an investor. He didn't know anything about the sport. He had just heard. He had seen me in the chair. His name is Tim Criswell. As a matter of fact he is an alumni [alumnus] from the university as well. He was a bright—a really smart guy—very bright individual. He helped me out, invested into our, the company. I pretty much invested myself in what I had and what I had gotten from some of the commercials and things like that I had done in the past. So I had a little bit of money there stashed away from all this time for that in fact helped me start up Per4Max.

And of course it was very scary the first year because we went and sponsored the national wheelchair basketball games that year in Chicago. I was playing with the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks and of course juggling the business I had pretty much had a product on display that had cost me an arm and a leg to make. (Laughs) I had found an individual that made drag racing cars frame. He of course charged me like \$65 an hour to pretty much create these frames for me. In the end there was no possible way that I could sell anything and stay within the competition's reach of their retail price.

I of course quickly changed that, but I just needed those demos [Demonstration models]. So he got me the demos. He and I made a great presentation. We did a good job on it. But we only sold one chair. So that's not gonna cut it. Of course we lost a lot of money that first year. As we went on of course we got more customers, but still we were struggling and little by little we'd just—we'd dig deep in order to get more clientele, and more recognition and exposure and of course knowledge. We learned from the mistakes we were making along the way. As the company grew—well, for one let me take that back just a way.

<topic>Raul Ortega</topic>

When we partnered up with Tim, also Raul Ortega was supposed to be part of the group. He, last minute decided he couldn't—he didn't want to do it. He had his own business that he was running in Mexico that he didn't want to be part of it. That really hit me really hard because how are we going to manufacture

because he's going to do the welding. He's going to do all that. That's why I had to choose this company that was Brinks Race Craft [Brink Race Craft, Arlington, Texas] they're still around, this company that was making this drag racing cars. He helped me out. It cost me an arm and a leg to do so but in the end I was able to succeed and put that product out on the table and to display at those nationals

<topic>Per4Max</topic>

As we grew, we found welders that could possibly just contract, just make these chairs. One of them that's still with us, Dennis Fournier, started his own company [ASIL Custom Welding, Arlington, Texas], because he asked me "Well look, are you going to have more of these chairs?" and I said "Well, sure I hope so, you know." "Are you going to keep me busy enough?" and I said "I think so." Sure enough he started his own company on the side and went on to work for himself.

<topic>Sports Wheelchairs</topic>

So, I would send him these chairs and he would make these chairs for me and we created fixtures and did things right. We put it on a computer and took people's measurements and tailored 'em to each individual and put it on a computer and he would create 'em. So, that there was different, because no one was doing that in the industry. Quickie which was huge, you know their publicly traded, on the NASDAQ [National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations] and had Top End, which was part of Invacare, publicly traded.

We were competing against these companies. They were not even doing that. We were. So I had this little program which was called Solidworks [Dassault Systèmes SolidWorks Corp.] and I would put in animation that would show and rotate the chair and you could see it in 3-D [Three dimensional] and different things like that. And I would display it at some of our events, and I would go to every event possible in order to display our product and showcase it and they were all like "Wow! What is that?" Of course everyone went on seeing what their chair was gonna look like. So that's what captured a lot of individuals.

<U.S. Men's National Wheelchair Basketball Team</topic>

But, not only that, this is the other thing, that in '99, I was also trying out for the U.S.A. National Team. What I did with that is—in order to get credibility with everyone out there I needed to be one of the elite players. I needed to be part of the twelve best players in the United States and I needed to be on that U. S. A. National Team. (Someone in the shop yells.) So I tried— so I—I went out—I tried out for the National Team and I made it. I really worked hard. I asked 'em what—what needed to happen, to—in order for me to get on that team and they said "Well, you need to improve here, here, here. And if you do that you'll be on this team." Sure enough, that's what I did.

While I was starting out my company I would take off in the middle night, at eight o'clock at night and go to U.T.A. There was six times a week. I would train for four to five hours shooting, drills, pushing. I got to hand it to this janitor that did not speak English. He was a Vietnamese gentleman that a— somewhere or other we communicated and he would let me into the gym. And I would just train all night. You know what I'm talkin' about? I could be there until four o'clock in the morning, still shooting until—and he would say "Just lock it" and just—and everything would be just fine long as you do that we're good. And sure 'nuff throughout that whole time I went to the Sydney games and I came back and I bought 'em a shirt, a T-shirt and I gave it to 'em. Once again, we didn't really communicate things. He didn't know really what he had done for me.

But for me to be part of that team was great, because it gave me so much credibility over the rest. To be able to say “That guys an engineer, he’s makin’ his own chair.” I actually made my own chair with “Stars and Stripes” at the game. You’ll see it at some of the clips that show highlights of some of our games.

Wettengel

Are these the games in Australia?

Hernandez

Yeah, yeah, Sydney 2000, and I created that chair for that and at the last minute too. It was not like I had been training on it for that long. I just made it happen. It was great and it felt really good. And I went on from those games—I actually attended...

Wettengel

Well you did pretty well at those games right?

Hernandez

Yeah, well we coulda done better. We got the bronze [Third place]. We were short by two points beating Holland to go to the finals, or to go to the gold, to play for the gold, to play against Canada. But prior to that we had gone to the Pan-American Games We won gold there against Canada, we beat them in Mexico. Two years later we went to World in Kitakyushu, Japan and won gold [First Place] in double overtime against Canada. It was great. Once again our product was out there and it was excelling and many other individuals that wanted our product, these little things that didn’t look like much, but they were seeds for the future.

<topic>Sponsorship</topic>

I would sponsor some of the kids as they were growing up and eventually these kids become adults. Sure enough nowadays these adults and their product of choice is Per4Max. As players we saw things that needed to change in order to evolve a product, make it better, make it for that particular sport as opposed in the past to have these chairs that were generic or made for a multitude of different sports, not specific to that sport. So that’s what was key to this and we were understanding and the kids that were coming up; it was a new generation of individuals that would change the sport and it is.

Now, they pay individuals out there in Europe to play this sport, \$80,000 a year in order to play wheelchair basketball. Unheard of, I would have never thought. I’m in here telling you about when we first started out, I’m just getting a scholarship to play wheelchair basketball, which was unheard of, and that was Jim Hayes. I was the first recipient of that scholarship to go to the University of Texas at Arlington and created what is now. Now you’ve got a lot of kids out there and he planted that seed. He had a dream and he fulfilled it and not just fulfilled it but we were all successful in doin’ it. That’s the great part about it. Not just go halfway, you go full... full throttle and we were successful in that and it that was great.

I think Per4Max has been successful because of all those things I told you to look to ...

[Pause]

Wettengel

If you don't mind going back a little bit, back to U.T.A. When you first... when you were at U.T.A. What were some of the accommodations like at the school?

Hernandez

All right.

Wettengel

Was it fairly easy to get around?

Hernandez

<topic>Accommodations at U.T.A.</topic>

Yeah. When I first came to U.T.A., Cooper Street— Cooper Street was being renovated because of what had happened to Andy Beck [Andrew David Beck was killed in 1989 while attempting to cross Cooper Street], the fact that there was an accident that was caused by the lack of crosswalks and different things like that. It was not accessible. And then there was a bridge that was built, it had an elevator to go over and across. Those things made it very easy to get around the campus. Yeah the campus—I never felt that it was inaccessible. We rarely as a matter of fact —we had a car—we rarely had to use the vehicle.

We always pushed to our class. Yeah, very accessible, but Jim Hayes had already planted that seed years before that when he had a few individuals experience it; Vice-Presidents, the President, to experience what it was like to go out and get around campus. [1974 Handicapped Administrators Day; Jim Hayes challenges Wendell Nedderman, Wayne Duke, and Dudley Wetzel to go around campus in wheelchairs] See it at his level. Quickly they learned, we need to get automatic doors, we need to get these ramps to make sure the building were accessible to everyone, not just the able bodied, but the disabled individuals as well.

Jim Hayes opened that and made sure that they could see. Yeah. I really felt very welcome to the university. It was a small school. I didn't know what to expect because I was used to U.S.C. [University of Southern California, Berkeley], U.C.L.A. [University of California, Los Angeles], Stanford, all these universities in California. They were huge. And I came from a big high school and they were huge. The University of Texas at Arlington was a small school. It was a commuter school and we didn't have a football team. With that said it made room for us. It made room for us to put U.T.A. on the map.

So the fact that we won those two national championships and then went to—as you can see out there, there's a picture of Bill Clinton (Points to picture) and we went to be honored by President Bill Clinton (William Jefferson Clinton III, 42nd President of the United States) put U.T. on the map. They hadn't had anything to talk—to really talk about much, they had a good track team. The basketball team was okay. Their volleyball team had done some good stuff, but our team did something great. And that really opened up a lot of things in adaptive sports. (Knock on door)

[Pause]

Wettengel

One other question I would like to ask. You were in a position to travel with the U.T.A. team to different schools, what was that like?

Hernandez

<topic>Recognition for Movin' Mavs</topic>

Oh, you know that was fantastic, especially when you're flying, not driving. Nowadays they drive and they're short on their budget. Which I feel that could —should change. I feel that they are not getting the recognition that we did during that time. Jim Hayes used to really bring that recognition to a lot of 'em to see. I know a lot of staff has changed at the university and they don't know the history behind it now. And I don't like it. I feel that we put U.T. on the map and then all of a sudden, you know, they forgot. You know, old news and that sort of thing I guess, but during our time when we were traveling it was very convenient to be able to have the funds to be able to fly to these different locations and play against—at the university level.

It was fantastic really, because we as a team it's what you dream of, being part of a university and goin' out there and playing against your rivalries and the experiences that you go through. It was great. It was really great, Once again Jim Hayes was just able to make it that opportunity.

Wettengel

And you're still active with basketball... wheelchair basketball?

Hernandez

<topic>Giving Back to the Sport</topic>

Yeah, I'm in my last leg of it now. I don't play as much as I used to. I've got two kids and they really take a lot of my time and the business as well. I love the sport. I love to give back to the sport because it's given me a lot. Adaptive sports has given me a lot and who'd have thought that I would have done this and what accomplishments that I would have had. ? What people I would have met. Yeah, you couldn't dream of it. It's given me so many great opportunities to meet leaders and people all over the world that I don't think anyone else could dream of. I think that nowadays for me—changing a little bit up where I'm giving something back to my kids and seeing them grow up and giving them maybe the opportunities as well that I've had it would be great.

I know that being disabled has opened up some of these doors and I took advantage of the opportunities. Some have had these opportunities and didn't cherish them. For me I saw them as opportunities that needed to be taken serious. And took 'em and used 'em to leverage yourself up to the next step—adventure. To be able to come in and get a full scholarship to play wheelchair basketball, I could have chosen basket weaving as my major, but I choose one of the hardest majors at the university, especially at the University at Arlington, an engineer and it was no walk in the park. I will just say I struggled to be able to sustain the quality and the prestige I guess that the university requires.

For me, I'm glad I took the hard road. I'm glad I did because if I had taken the easy road who knows where I would have been. I think that sometimes you have to pay your price to be successful. If you don't, you're asking to be mediocre. We're successful at this moment just because we choose to take a hard road. I've also—after I graduated from the university and won those three national championships and went on to win twelve national championships at the— in the national level with the Dallas Wheelchair Mavericks. I've been surrounded by great talent. And I've worked hard to be a part of that talent as well.

To be part of a national team and win a few national titles or gold medals at Pan-American and Kitakyushu and also be part of the Sydney games, win the bronze medal, was fantastic. For my mom also to be at the Sydney games and she was part of it and got to see that. It's her story. It's her, because she's the one who actually gave me that opportunity. So you have to go back, you have to look and go "Where's it come from?" And it comes from her. The thing about it is this. We—I would have never been in the United States without her.

Wettengel

Well, I would be remiss if I didn't ask you her name.

Hernandez

<topic>Rosa Benitez</topic>

Her name... Rosa... Rosa Benitez. Yeah, she's a tough cookie. (Laughs) Of course to this day she still gives you a hard time on many other things, but still it's different.

Wettengel

Is she still in California?

Hernandez

Yeah, still in California, She's comin'—she's comin' this weekend for my kid's birthday, my older child. It's great.

<topic>Putting in the Work</topic>

It's great to be able to say and tell the story and hopefully it inspires other individuals to work hard. 'Cause when you do it pays off. I think a lot of us don't ever see that from anybody. They— a lot of times they tell you their story and here I am and I'm famous. But they never tell you what the struggles that they went through in order for them to be successful. Everyone—I see everyone who wants to be like the microwave. Everything wants to be done now. And so you put it in and five minutes later you're successful.

No, it doesn't work that way; you really have to work hard in order for you to get to the top. And to stay on top you still could have to continue to working to stay there. That's pretty much how I kinda see it. A lot of people say "Well you're given, oh, you're given that, you're given enough opportunity." Well, yes, but you have to be there. What do you do with it afterwards, because I can tell you this." There are individuals out there that were given the same opportunities I did, but were not as successful, because they decided to take a different road in life.

They decided school wasn't for them. They decided, girlfriends are more important than school. Not to blame 'em it's just that—what do they—do they feel comfortable with their life? If they are then they did—they made the right choice. But if they're not, then you have to look back and understand you missed an opportunity that could of takin' you to a different level.

Wettengel

Very good, thank you very much. Is there anything else you can think of you might like to add to this?

Hernandez

<topic>Jim Hayes</topic>

No, no I think that—Jim— I don't think has been recognized as much as he should be at the University of Texas at Arlington. I feel that there should be some sort of monument or something that recognizes him as being such a great leader and inspirational athlete and that was part of that program that brought us. Now it continues and hopefully it continues for years and years to come. And I hope that the university opens up and sees that what it can create, individuals like myself and many others that have gone through the system that have... can tell you the successful story of what this program created.

Because they got me where I'm at, I got a degree in mechanical engineering. Why? Because there was a scholarship that was offered by Jim Hayes, that he worked hard to be able to raise these funds some way or another it provided. I did something and it created this product that's changing other people's lives and hopefully I will be able at least to pass it on. Which we are nowadays, we sponsor the U.T.A. Movin' Mavs and sponsor other universities. So it's not just them, we do it in the broad spectrum, because I don't look at it as just the university, I look at it overall as disabled individuals that need to be helped to be able to accomplish their goals.

If it's our product that's helping them move around or use to excel, and make them the next Willie Hernandez, that's gonna be a mechanical engineer, astronaut, actor, whatever it may be, that I was able to at least offer 'em somethin'. And that's what we're all about. Just being able to give back and being able to at least support these individuals. If the university sees that it can create these individuals, like ah, then they're doing the right thing, by all means support 'em because individuals that are disabled are human as well. They're just limited in—by their legs or arms, that they have a great mind. (Claps hands together)

Wettengel

Well, again thank you very much. I appreciate this.