



Interviewee: **Lucy Spruill**

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Well my name is Lucy Spruill and actually I was born in Washington, D.C., but I did not stay there very long. My mother's family was from southwest Pennsylvania. They lived at the time in Greene County and so I came there with my family to live when I was just a few months old and spent my entire growing up years in Greene County in Pennsylvania and I've spent my whole adult life here in the City of Pittsburgh in Allegheny County. I am the oldest of five. I grew up with my mom, my dad, and four younger brothers, no other sisters, and my mother's very large extended family. Most of them were within walking distance of my house. My disability is that I am partially paralyzed, I can't walk and it causes me to need to need the wheelchair for mobility and that happened when I was born with a condition called spina bifida. It's very much like being born with a spinal cord injury. That's a real easy and accurate way to understand it. At the time I was born medical practitioners had no idea what to do about this and most people just simply died. The year I was born the survival rate was 20%. So I was very fortunate. It was fortunate that I was born in a fairly big city in a major hospital. If I in fact had been born in Greene County we probably wouldn't be having this conversation. My parents were encouraged to just place me in an institution, forget about me, this is just an accident of nature, this will never happen again, you don't want to take this child home, she's going to die when she's very young anyway. And so my dad just wouldn't have it. I mean I was almost his first born child and he just wouldn't have it. He was outraged and he found a neurosurgeon real quick and said you have to do something. And no we're not leaving this child and putting this child in an institution and we don't do that in our family and yes we will take her home and you will do something about this. And so they found a neurosurgeon and he said to my dad I'll do the best I can, you know this is something new and we don't know how well this is going to work. I mean really, if it weren't for my parents' faith and values... I mean people talk about medical science, that was the other half, but anybody gave birth to a child with any major disability, that was it. That was the advice.

And that was back in the 40's?

Right, 1944.

So your parents sounds to me like maybe they were your heroes?

They were. They were. My mother had grown up in this remote, rural area in Pennsylvania. There were farmhouses and one room school houses. My dad grew up in Reading and he had been a musician for probably 10 years by the time I was born. My mother then, unfortunately, had a postpartum depression after I got home, after the two of us got home. But she's in this tiny third floor apartment in a little house in Washington, D.C., which was a very foreign environment for her. She's 400 miles away from her support system. My dad is working in a department store in the daytime and playing music at night and she is stuck there in this tiny apartment with this kid with a scary disability. So she had a postpartum depression. They didn't know what to do about that in those days either, believe me. So she was hospitalized and my dad then, my

grandmother, my mother's mother, my maternal grandmother then took me to the farm that they lived on and then as soon as my mother was discharged home, my dad very wisely...my dad was not a very educated person. He did not even graduate from high school. He quit high school during the depression. He said to help support his family like it was some kind of sacrifice but the truth is that he was happy to quit school. He did not like school. He liked playing music and being with his friends. But he was a very wise person and he decided that my mother needed to be near her support system. And so they just up and moved to Greene County. Just up and moved. And my dad, who was a city person, then made this big sacrifice to go and live in this place where there were farms and coal mines. Neither of which he knew anything or cared anything about. Because he thought it would be best for me and my mother. And it was, it was. He was right. He did not trust the medical system in Greene County. He absolutely did not trust anything in western Pennsylvania. So my parents made the trek back and forth to Philadelphia to get me medical care for many years. Many years, until my mother had two more children and it got to be really hard and some very wise doctor in Philadelphia said to my dad "Why are you coming here? You have an excellent hospital in Pittsburgh near where you live. Children's Hospital is an excellent hospital. You should be taking your daughter there." Well, still he wasn't sure so they took me to West Virginia University, talked to a doctor there and he said "You know you don't need to be coming this far. Children's Hospital is an excellent hospital. They'll take good care of your daughter." And they did and so from the time I was 8 or 9 I started going to Children's Hospital. So they stopped making this trek to Philadelphia every couple of months. But I mean, can you just imagine the devotion?

Your schooling when you lived in...

Well the first thing that happened was that someone came and gave me an IQ test of some sort. And I think I didn't do very well because it had, at that time, I didn't walk or move about at all. I was carried from the bedroom to the kitchen or the living room. And I didn't leave my house so they ask you questions on this IQ test. I remember there was a question about a picket fence. Well I didn't know what the heck a picket fence was. And there were probably lots of things on that test that I had, I had no experience to understand them. So they weren't going to do anything about my education. Someone said to my dad "Well what does she need an education for. What would she do with it? She's not going to live long anyway." My parents never believed the story about how I was not going to live long. So my dad just kept insisting and insisting and so finally they said okay well we'll put her in the homebound instruction program and that's what I was in for 10 years. Five hours a week. One hour of homebound education for every school day. But really...my mother had. Well let me just say, my grandmother was educated in Italy at a time when girls were sent to school for 2 or 3 years. As soon as they could read and write they didn't need anymore education. Boys were sent to school for 6 years, through sixth grade which was considered a complete education at that time and then if they were going to go on a lot of them went to seminaries and became priests or whatever. But between my mother and my grandmother, believe me I got an education.

They would bring me piles of books and make me my mother would sit me in front of the television and make me watch all manner of educational things and 11th grade I started attending high school and that was because in the summer between 10th and 11th grade my dad said “Well this kid is going to go to college and she’s no way ready for college.” I had braces, heavy braces, heavy iron braces at that time from like my shoulders down. At that time they put kids in maximum bracing, which they don’t do anymore but that’s what they did. And I could just barely walk from room to room because the braces weighed as much as I did. And I hadn’t been out in the world much, you know. My universe was my house and maybe the yard and maybe the house down the street or across the road. And my dad could see that I had a distance to go before I could, couldn’t go from that to college in one jump. So he had my mother ask the doctors for recommendations for what kind of rehab should I have. So they sent me to what was at that time called the Home for Crippled Children for the summer between my sophomore and junior years. And I stayed there for the summer and a couple more months. So I went there and this was Pittsburgh, okay? This was Pittsburgh in 1960 and these people were just undone about the fact that I was not attending school. In Pittsburgh, by that time kids with disabilities who didn’t have cognitive, learning disabilities went to school. So they started on my parents “Well, why isn’t she in school?” and “Why isn’t she going to school?” and then my dad’s overprotective side came out and said “Oh no she can’t go to school. She might fall. She might get hurt. She might get teased. If she gets teased she might cry. She’s happy where she is, she’s learning. Why should she have to go to school?” Well, the people from the Home for Crippled Children prevailed because I wanted to go to school. That experience at the Home for Crippled Children turned out to be a pivotal experience in my life because I had a vision for what my life could be like. So then I started attending the high school that I would have otherwise gone to. And I did that for two years. Those might have been the two toughest years of my life at that time. Because all the friendships were formed... High school kids are very, very narcissistic. They’re very wrapped up and they’re very self-absorbed and superficial and they’re not grown-ups. And I wasn’t a grown-up either. I was very lonely. I was very lonely. There were times when I would just go in the bathroom and cry for a little while. And then get myself back together and go back out. My parents, my family had very high expectations of me. I was expected to learn on the same level as all other kids and I was expected, and not only that, but my dad expected all of us to get all A’s, all of the time. And so, that’s what I was expected to do. I was expected to learn and to excel. I did not want to live at home and go to school. You know, no kid wants to do that. My dad didn’t want me to leave home but we made a bargain that I would go to this school in Reading where his family was and his family would keep an eye on me. I applied to and was accepted at this small church related college in Reading where my grandparents and my aunts and uncles lived. My dad basically told his family that this was the plan. I had not grown up around them, you know, I had been visiting at Christmas time. My aunt wrote the most horrible letter to my father and said “What do you mean you’re going to let this girl go away to college? She’s a basket case.” That was the term that she used. My dad was livid. He was *livid*. It was years before he spoke to his family ever again. So we went to Albright College and I had sent them all kinds of information about myself, my disability,

pictures, doctor's reports, things that they would not be entitled to now. And they accepted me. And then I got there and this and I still remember this Dean of Women who was a middle aged, blond woman and I got there and she said to my dad "This will never do" and they sat me in a chair outside her office and she took my dad into her office and there was shouting going on for awhile and then they came out and she said to me "Well, we'll let you try it for a couple of weeks and see how it goes." And until that time in my life I had no idea. I had no idea what bad faith and discrimination were. No idea. I had never gotten anything but support and encouragement from anyone in my life. This woman let me stay for two weeks and I did everything. I even went to a square dance. I climbed steps to go to a chapel. I did everything. And at the end of two weeks, I still remember, I was sitting in with friends in one of their rooms and we were listening to Peter, Paul & Mary...a Peter, Paul & Mary record. You know, I'm 63 years old I remember this as if it happened yesterday. And this woman came in and said pack your things your dad is on his way for you. I realized that she never had any intention of letting me stay. Never. And so I went home and I remember after a week or so I wrote this long, self-pitying letter to a friend my own age who I had met at the Home for Crippled Children who was at Pitt. He was my age. He was in high school when I was in high school. So he writes me back this profane letter essentially saying quit feeling sorry for yourself. Get off your ass and do something about this. He had enclosed an application to Pitt, he said "Apply to this place where they aren't so backward." And let me tell you, I applied in October, in December I hadn't heard anything. I called the Director of Admissions and he said "You want to start now?!" And I said, "I'm 18 years old and I've lost 4 months of my life already. Yeah, I want to start now." He said "I thought you wanted to start in September." I said "That's almost a whole year. I want to start now." So he said "why don't you come and talk to us." So my dad and I went and he told me how hard it would be to start in the wintertime and how hard the Pittsburgh winters were and how much trouble I would have getting around and why didn't I wait till summer and it would be so much easier and so forth. And I was just having none of it. "No. Absolutely not. I'm just going to start now. I want to start now." And so they said okay. So in January of 1963, I guess, I started college.

Was there anything else that you can identify in your life that has really had a major influence?

Working in the Civil Rights Movement. I got very involved in the Civil Rights Movement right away and that was really a major... that really shaped my adult world view. And also I learned a lot about how to accomplish social change and just community change goals. I learned that people could appear to be really different but they weren't. I would sit around and listen to African American people my parents' age talk and they said the same things my parents did. You know they had the same aspirations and issues and concerns that my family did. And then I started dating my ex-husband who is an African American and we would sit and laugh about the things that his parents said about white people and my parents said about black people and they were exactly the same. And we would laugh. It was just excellent...that was pivotal too. I

have two kids. I have a daughter who is 40 and married and has two kids and twins on the way. And my son just got married about a year ago. So what I keep being impressed with is how much progress we've made and how different and how much better the world is now. I mean, even in Greene County where there are now a few more things than sheep farms and coal mines, they pay attention to the ADA and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act and, you know, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and so I have lived through just an astounding amount of positive social change.