



Voices
OF OUR REGION
THE DISABILITY CONNECTION

Interviewee: **William Coleman**

Interviewee Number: **24**

Interviewers: **Athena Aardweg, Judy Barricella**
& Tony Buba

Date of Interview: **May 23, 2008**

Voice of Our Region
May 23rd, 2008
Bill Coleman

My name is William Coleman. I was born in Pittsburgh in 1931. I am age 77. Married with two children, four grandchildren and one great-grandson. I have long been a life long resident of the city of Pittsburgh and currently a resident in the Homewood section of Pittsburgh. I am retired although I have an active life engaged in public service activities. Serving on the Boards of several non-profit corporations in the city and also serving as the treasurer of the HRC Employee's Credit Union at HealthSouth Harmarville. I became disabled at the age of 13 in 1945. I was injured playing basketball in school. I did not break anything. I recall the incident of hitting my head on the floor when I was in gym class. I felt some pains in my chest and a little bit dizzy. Went to the locker room after class. Got dressed. Walked up three flights of stairs to my next class. Then I was sitting there and my legs began to feel numb and I said let me get up and stretch my legs to go up to the pencil sharpener. And as I did I fell over who is now my wife. At which time the teacher began to recognize that something was wrong. It took her and some boys to carry me down to the doctor's office which was a room and a cot. I stayed there for approximately three hours before the doctor came to see me. The next morning I woke up I could not feel anything from my chest down. The bowel was gone. The bladder was gone. All feelings from the navel down were gone. I woke up screaming on that one. They had to pull the covers back to show me my legs were still there. Ultimately the feelings slowly began to come back again. It took months for it to occur. But by the fact that the spine wasn't broken, that was good on my part. They said it was a blood clot in the neck that interfered with the blood flow that really caused the paralysis.

and became a quadriplegic and from that point on we've led a pretty good, full life. I've had a lot of good rehabilitation associated with my work life when I was employed at Harmarville. And having been disabled now for over six decades I've truly been blessed to have made it to this point. And I can easily identify how it is that I got here. Number one, I have been blessed. The Lord has been good to me. I've had an excellent family, and the, has consisted originally of my parents and one sibling who is still living. I've been married now for 42 years to a lady who has really enhanced my life as well as two children which she brought into the marriage and four grandchildren that have accrued since then. In addition to that I have been the recipient of a lot of things that have occurred through the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, particularly the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. They helped to educate me through what was Duff's Business School. They were instrumental in my getting the only job that I ever had in life was working at Harmarville Rehabilitation Center. And they also have assisted me with assistive devices such as wheelchairs, the installation of my elevator, a handicapped accessible bathroom and other things. In addition to that they also were instrumental in helping to modify my van when I got it some years ago to enable me to travel about independently. Along with that other that I can mention that I've been blessed to have

excellent health care. And I have also been blessed to have excellent physicians. And as health is deteriorating with age as it happens with all of us, I'm still able to impact into the health system in a manner that I'm very happy about. As with anything, your capacity of independence diminishes with time and that has happened with me but in order to enable me to stay home I now have home health through the Commonwealth. And that brings about home health care to the average of about 21 hours a week and without that I would probably be at a nursing home so this enables my wife to not kill herself trying to take care of me. So I'm very happy to have that and hope that it continues for a long time.

So did you go back to school after your injury?

Never. I did only homebound study. The system wasn't very generous in allowing persons who were disabled to go to school. That was it. Most buildings weren't designed to enable us to get around in a wheelchair so I did homebound studies I had two days a week and, as I recall, approximately two and a half to three hours each day for two days a week. Then I took my GED and got it that way.

So at You're like the first person through the system almost as far as disability.

Well yeah because rehabilitation was a big really began to get a hold as results of guys coming out of World War II who were injured and wounded and everything and it was in its infancy whenever I became injured. My first stay in the hospital immediately after getting injured in school was at Children's Hospital. And I think I presented a challenge to them that they could meet because given the fact that I broke down substantially with decubitized on my bum and it was because I was just in a bed. You know they just laid you in bed and gave me oxygen to so you could breathe and in those days it wasn't little nasal oxygen it was a big tent. Nine months there and a large portion of that time was as a result of trying to cure the decubiti. in 1948 I went to the Woodville County Home which was on the grounds of Woodville. And when I tell people I was at Woodville they know that it was a mental institution I'd tell them, "No, I was on the other side of the wall." The county had started a fledgling rehab there with makeshift equipment and I spent a year and a half there and it was a rather depressing place. First of all it was segregated. It was a county operated facility that was totally racially segregated. I was a teenager. However the year and a half went by. You learn to survive and live in an environment that wasn't very healthy. I don't think there was any discrimination in the quality of care. I think it was just bad that's all. The people who were there were uncaring and in many instances they were, at that time they were political appointees. They didn't have qualities of nursing. I guess if you knew your ward or district chairman you could get a job there. It's bad to say on tape but I think a lot of those people were only there for a paycheck. But it turned out to be good simply because from there I met a case worker at OVR. And then things began to move up and up and up. From there I went to Kessler Rehab Center in West Orange, New Jersey and I was there for four months. So that was the first time that I began to really get quality rehabilitation. So

there was a five year span from 1945 until 1950 that I just kind of languished you know. Just kind of made it through life; that was it. And then after that I came back home and OVR put me into business school which was an excellent thing. And through OVR I got a job at Harmarville. And at that time in this town African Americans had an ace of a bad time trying to get a job. And surprisingly as it may seem and unknown to some, the situation hasn't gotten a whole lot better. My son landed a job here. My daughter has a job. All of my nieces and nephews, with the exception of one, are gone. They could see that there wasn't an opportunity.

Tell me a little bit about that segregation, Bill. Like when you went to Kessler or when you went to work at Harmarville, was there still a lot of segregation?

Oh yeah, I was the first black at Harmarville. Well at that time, Pittsburgh was a very segregated town. I mean we could not stay in hotels. Physicians could not practice in the hospitals. Job opportunities were limited. I remember I went naïve as it were on my part after I got out of school I was seeking work opportunities and I remember I went to the old Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph which ultimately became what is the Press and now the Post-Gazette. And I got all dressed up and went downtown seeking a job opportunity you know. And went in there and they just flatly told me we don't hire Negroes.

And what's interesting about that is now a days we might think that if you went down and you're in a wheelchair, well they didn't want you because of the wheelchair. But the color superceded the disability.

Oh yes, yup it dd. It did. It did indeed. Now they look at you and wonder if your mind is still functioning. It's amazing how people still talk down to you because you're in a wheelchair. That reminds me of a funny story which I was embarrassed. I was at a conference once and across the table from me there was a gentleman who was deaf. And I was talking loudly to him and somebody came to me and said "Dummy, you can yell at him, he still can't hear you, you know." But I'm, I'm out on my own 90 to 95% of the time and you go into stores and people still approach you if you use a credit card or something like that "can you sign your name?"

But the fun of being in the wheelchair is traveling you know. I have seen in the years gone by when our kids were young we had traveled extensively by car and my children used to hurriedly get out of the car and run into the hotel and say come back out, "Dad you can get into the bathroom." It was a big deal to get into the bathroom. But traveling by air used to be fun but not anymore. It's a real bear to try to get in and out of an airplane. Well you've got to be picked up and carried in and put into a seat and then picked up again and taken out and transferred. And of course if your not in a hub city were they have a lot of hands on you're in trouble.

But the improvement in technology, in assistive technology and cushioning and everything has enabled us to have a better quality of life. Had we had the cushions of

today then I would not have endured nearly the pain that I've had in having to have decubiti surgery. Had we had motorized wheelchairs we could have gotten around a lot better. Had we had cut curbs the way the Center for Independent Living and the disabled community fought the city tooth and nail to get. Because they were a little bit reluctant to do so and had to be taken to federal court in order to adhere to a federal law of access. But had we had all these things 20 years ago as opposed to now life would have been a lot better.

I lived in perhaps the most inaccessible house you could ever imagine. Because the house was on a hillside and it had 30 steps. So I had to learn to crawl up and down 30 steps to get up and down, you know. And I think maybe I got married because one I was in love and two I didn't want to crawl up those steps anymore.

What's been the biggest struggle for you through your life?

Sheesh! Trying to keep a degree of independence going. No only do you lose independence in terms of your upper mobility but you also lose body functions. And by that I mean bowel and bladder and everything like that. So I guess the biggest challenge, gee I don't know, getting up every morning. Sometimes people say to me, I've been asked "Were you in the military zone?" I say, "No, my biggest worry is pulling my pants up in the morning." Judy, I guess the biggest challenge is to get up and face the day and try and do the things you want to do. I feel better doing something. When I'm at home and not doing anything, I internalize my feelings and I have pain. I'm not without pain. I have had pain everyday of my life over the last 60 some years. I've learned to tolerate it, and thank goodness, because of supportive help and my wife and to have a wheelchair, have a wheelchair accessible van in which I can drive. The big excitement of my life besides getting married, I don't know I was probably scared when I got married. But the biggest excitement in my life was driving. Learning to drive. That meant that I didn't have to wait on you or anybody else to come and get me. I mean I've sat there like a kid looking out the window waiting for Santa Claus for somebody to come. And they're supposed to be at one and they come at quarter to two and say "I've gotta be back at three". But when I learned to drive that really opened the world to me. It enabled me to go and see and do things

What about what you're most proud of in your life?

Family. Oh yeah, yeah. Great wife, two great kids, four great grandchildren, and a great-grandson where he's yet to develop since he's pushing three. Yeah, family and not only the immediate family but my brother as well as my parents. I'm in my third generation of kids that have helped me carry packages in the house. I mean the kids grew up on this block are not fearful of a wheelchair. We've seen people, kids who were fearful of a wheelchair you know. Thinking that maybe what's happened to him is going to happen to me or if I touch him. And there's always a curiosity on a part of the kids asking "What happened?" Well you know you don't go into detail, just I hurt my leg you know. I've

had parents snatch the kids away saying “Don’t bother him.” I think that puts fear into the minds of kids that there must be something wrong with him that my mama told me not to touch him or talk to him. But even today I have young kids who come up and say, “Mr. Coleman, can I help you?”

And that’s another thing that concerns me are the number of kids that are available are reducing itself. And the neighborhood is not as cohesive as it once was. I mean we knew everybody from corner to corner. You don’t know that anymore. You may do well to know from three houses up and three houses down. I’ve been here for 42 years; since 1964.

So you’ve seen a lot of people come and go.

Yes, and more going and nobody’s coming. We’re looking into a dying neighborhood. I know that as the older people die the younger people don’t want the properties and they just walk away from it. That’s all.

But you give a lot to non-profit organizations.

Well you’ve got to give back, Judy. I have been the recipient of much. You just can’t keep continuing to take. And I think that I have a talent that I can put to use on a Board of Directors and I make time. And in doing so I would hope that I have improved the quality of services which they give. And that’s from a large agency to a very small agency.

And you’re on the [???] board?

Well, why don’t you list what boards... What are you involved in right now?

Sickle Cell Society of Pennsylvania. The Center for Independent Living. TRCIL, there’s two Boards there that I serve on. And Action Housing. And I’m also on the Board of Directors of The West Arm Therapy Services which is a rehabilitation outpatient rehab program. And also I’m on the Board of the Competitive Employment Opportunities, CEO.

There are a lot of public programs to help older people stay in their homes.

Yes indeed. Indeed, and I am the recipient of one. The PDA Waiver Programs, things like that. And yet when we look at the cost of it a lot of people can’t seem to fathom that it’s cheaper for me to be here with an attendant coming 20 hours a week then it is to be 24/7 in a nursing home. It is less than half the cost.

Civil Rights movement inspired every other movement that started taking place after that.

There are changes in attitude. We have to admit that. But there's an awful lot of old attitudes that still prevail. I don't know whether I'm right or wrong but I think that disabled people still make able bodied people uncomfortable at times, you know, and everything. We have seen handicapped parking. When I first started driving there was no such thing around. You parked and got a ticket. And now of course we have handicapped parking and thanks to a person who's now deceased, what's her name? Her and her husband.

Ruth?

Ruth Brenyo. Yeah. They're the ones who helped get the legislation started for HP plate in Pennsylvania. As I understand was the first one to have that. Now it's all over the state and all over the country. But now you have the handicapped placards and of course with the proliferation of placards we don't have enough handicapped spots now. Because everybody comes up with a handicapped placard, put it in the window and run in the building. And you can't question it because they could easily qualify. You could qualify for a family member. Ruth Brenyo was a real dynamo in terms of dealing with the needs of disability. Her and her husband. I mean they fought tooth and nail and they were hardnosed. Hardnosed. I mean there was no compromising on their part. You can't escape talking about the disability community in Western Pennsylvania, if not in Pennsylvania, because as I said, they were the ones who instituted and got the legislation through. She always got HP-0001. That was her designated plate. They started the first Access paratransit service. It started out with two station wagons and now it's grown into Access.

But Judy, I'm not brave to ride in the streets of Pittsburgh in my wheelchair. I am a coward, you know?. I've been hit by a car. In the parking lot at Station Square. They were coming from a Steelers game and I was going to...

They were drunk.

I was going to an affair at the hotel and I came out of the parking lot and started across and, boy, he nailed me and spun me around. I've only been on a bus a couple of times. Bus comes by the house but I've only been on it a couple of times. I still prefer to drive and to use Access whenever I have to.

What kind of advice would you give in regards to our society?

Well I'll tell you, and I'm not being facetious, be kind to old people because if you live long enough you're going to be there. And as you have treated people, that's the way by which you're going to be treated too. So it's good to leave a legacy of kindness behind you simply because we're all going to get old and infirmed and however strong and

independent and we don't need anybody now, that day will come when you'll need somebody.

The title of this is "Tell Your Story" and was give to me by a friend, Susan Roberts.

Please don't underestimate what God gave you to say.

Please don't take for granted why God has given you this day.

He is given you a story to tell as only you can.

One that will bring Him glory and hope to your fellow man.

ce.