



Voices
OF OUR REGION
THE DISABILITY CONNECTION

Interviewee: **James Chris Noschese**

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

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Cris Nochese

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Chris: My name is James Chris Nochese. Most people call me Chris. I was born in Connellsville, Pennsylvania. Like up in the mountains. Up in the mountain top, close to Seven Springs. That's where I lived and enjoyed living there, till maybe about, I was two years old. They found I couldn't hear and decided to look for a school for me and they found an oral school near Pittsburgh and so they drove me there. I was there for, oh, up to when I was 18. And then I transferred to a public school South Hills up on Mt. Washington and I was placed in a vocational training. There I learned electrical things and making radios, TV, that sort of thing I was learning. Full voice training. Then when I was a senior my father asked me, 'Do you plan to go to college? You can't. You can't go to college because, you know, you're in vocational track.' And, you know, just no interest in going to college. You see I have a full time job working at a gas station pumping the gas. I can fix cars, and do some small repairs and change oil. That was my... That was my goal. That was my lot. When I graduated from high school I'd be 21 years old soon and married my wife and then, you know. Argued with my father a little bit. He didn't want me to just to get a job doing that. He wanted better for me. He saw my report card with math. I had all As. So I should be able to do something else. So my father called the school advisor and said, 'No. It's not really right that he should be in vocational training. And so filled out some applications. I wanted to go to the University of Pittsburgh. You know, it was close to my home. I never heard of that. You know, schools for deaf. Wasn't interested. Then there was Bethany College in West Virginia. I filled out applications for, you know, for Pittsburgh and sent that out and about a week later Bethany College accepted me. Went there 3-1/2 years with BS in Computer Science. Remember I didn't have during my high school career or college, I didn't have support. No, I didn't have it. No interpreter. No note taker. Nothing. I was not "mainstreamed." I just made it like a regular public school student. You know, I didn't know any better. I didn't even think about it.

Interviewers: Did you read lips?

Chris: Very little. And I'm not really that skilled at doing the lip reading. I can maybe pick up maybe 45% and miss 55%. All my learning's through my eyes. Nothing through the ear. Math, very visual. I could pick up. It was easy. I could do work. When I went to college I was used to being visual so I could see what's on the board. But if there is like talking, conversations I would just, not knowing what's going on. Now I would try reading. At that time I didn't have very good reading skills. I started to read books when I was 18. But really I wasn't good at that. In college it forced me. So I just did my best. I would read and just kind of guess on the words. Try and there'd be questions. Okay just fill it out to the best of my ability. So I ended up getting strong Cs. I had problems with research paper. I didn't have any skills in that area. Nothing. College, you know, you're required to do research papers. I'm like ahhh. You know, it wasn't great, you

know. My high school never taught me how to do that because of the track I was in so... I had to get people help explaining what to do and interpreters for help but...but I didn't really have, you know, those skills for research. I graduated from college with the Bachelor's of Science. I worked in the Accounting Department and payroll. In the Payroll Department. That was at USX. Worked there a few months and it was just temporary. And then I was laid off. Okay, what am I going to do? I was curious about WPSD. Now that's the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. I went there and they had asked for volunteers but I went there. I figured okay. I was laid off so... They offered me a job as a dorm house parent. It's kind of like a counselor. I started picking up sign language at that time, when I was 24. I really enjoyed that and they asked me if I could sub as a teacher. I said "Okay, fine." And I just really fell in love with teaching. And I thought I love to be a teacher but I can't because of my background. So I signed up for the University of Pittsburgh for a teacher certificate. They had offered a teaching certificate there. Because I really wanted to teach. And so I went there for the teaching certificate. And I have six more credits and I can get a master's degree if I do that. So I said okay fine. So I got my certificate and my master's in deaf education. And then I got a job and taught seven years with special needs kids. Yes. At WPSD for seven years with them. And then I did another seven years with what's called the middle school program with special needs and regular classrooms. It was kind of like half way in between. Then later on the general program closed and I was put in the regular high school as a math teacher. And I taught there for 35 years. And then I retired. And so now I'm retired now. My parents had to give up their life up in the mountains and we ended up moving to Pittsburgh because I had three deaf brothers, one deaf sister, two hearing sisters. There's five deaf, two hearing. And so that's why they moved to Pittsburgh when I was seven years old. My parents are hearing.

Interviewers: So you went to school at DePaul until you were 18. Then you went to public school, right?

Chris: And I graduated when I was almost 21. It's South Hills High School. I grew up in Brookline and I would walk to school every day. It would be about a 30 minute walk up a hill. Every day. But, you know, DePaul really wasn't the proper place because it was very strong oral. It was full oral. Now I wasn't in an oral program. They just placed me in a dark room. Me, I couldn't talk so they pushed me off to the side and put me in that so called dark room. But I know, DePaul they have a good program. And it's good for those students who are oral and it's good. But it wasn't for me, that's all. When I was say about nine years old. First day they opened school in the school year in September. The teacher told me that my speech was so-so at best. But says, 'You work with me. We'll do fine.' Now at the end of the year, he said, 'Oh, your speech has improved so much.' And so I was like, okay. When I would go out, talking with people and they puzzled look on their face. They couldn't understand what I was saying. The couldn't understand me. Okay, that was fine. Well, when I returned there next fall it was a different teacher. And it was the same thing. They said, 'Oh, your speech is not very good. But I'm going to work with you and see what we can do.' So at the end of that

year they said, 'Oh, your speech has improved so much.' But I said, you know, 'No. You just understand me. It's not the speech itself. You're just used to me. You're just used to my voice. That's why you know what I'm talking about.' But for myself, I just know my speech is just the same as it was. But they just learned through me. I wasn't learning from you, but you learned from me to understand what I was saying just because you know me. And so that's how I found out. "Ahhh, forget it." I'm married. It will be 36 years now. I've known her for 45 years. We met at DePaul when I was 15 years old. She's hard of hearing. Now she can speak very well. Now I have two children. The boy is 31 years old and he works at...is the Dean of Students at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. My daughter, she is 29. She works at a big investment firm in New York City. They're both hearing but they're both very skilled in sign language. Now I often wished that my parents could sign. But my dad, he couldn't do that very well. It was tough understanding with his speech. "What? What?" Well same with my mom. I wish that we could have had good meaningful conversations but it was just limited. "How are you? How was work?" But never asked deeper questions, deeper communication. But I still loved both of them, of course. But I really wish that they knew sign language. We didn't really have the best communication, but I know my mom she loved me so much. She was so proud of me. She'd always talk about that. But just conversations with me, ahh that was kind of shaky.

What's the hardest thing that you've dealt with in your life? Your biggest struggle?

Chris: Really, failure. My favorite. I love failure. Because failure taught me something. I do better. I fail. Well, why did I fail? Analyze it myself, figure it out, figure what was wrong. But as far as like the biggest frustration. My home. I have a kitchen, you know, some of the plaster's falling down but, so okay well. I just clean it up and... Yeah, the deaf people they have a lot of people they can communicate with. But there's also the oppression that happens, you know, from hearing...not being able to get jobs and...and those type of things that are communication based. You know, without the other deaf around there would be so much isolation. You know, there would be boredom. But, you know, there be amongst other deaf, we can identify with each other. We can communicate, talk. We have the common problems and common situations. You know, family situations, doctor situations. Everything that affects us as deaf people. You know we exchange information, share our experiences, history of, you know, why we are there. So that's very worthwhile. Most of the deaf try to get help through OVR. But it just ends up not being good enough. We need more than that. Private companies, phhh, that's where the problem is. We need to have more private company involvement in accepting the deaf. Like for disabled people, wheelchair, blind, you know. We end up just mostly working for the federal or the state. But I would really like to see more from the private sector. That's where we're having our problems right now. You know I...I did work for U.S. Steel but it was a temporary layoff and there's my decision to go to WPSD. But they ended up calling me back. And I told them sorry. Where I worked before, there's more paperwork but there was no communication. When I finished my work, and they were impressed with my work, yes. But it was just so monotonous, just

the same thing figuring out the numbers and same, same, same. When I worked at WPSD it was more of a challenge. Every day there was a different challenge.

Interviewers: What are you most proud of in your life?

Chris: My two children. Yeah, my two kids.

Interviewers: And who's your hero?

Chris: I'd say my brother. Bob. He had a hard life. It was terrible. Divorce he went through. He was attacked for no reason. He's really my hero.

Interviewers: Is there any particular issue important for the deaf community right now that people should be aware of?

Chris: I would say more accessibility for doctor's offices. For getting interpreters. A second one would be more accessibility into lawyer's offices. They charge fees and they're very high but then, you know, they don't want to put out for an interpreter. I'd like to see that...that be available. I'm talking about the small time offices, they can't afford interpreters. There's other little things like I'd like to see more accessibility for movies in the theaters and public theaters, more captioning. Saturday and Sunday, you know, I could go there but that's it. But there's nothing throughout the week, I'd like to see that improved. I'd like to see the 911 system improved. There's problems with the communication there. They need to improve that with police. Just to being aware of deaf needs. Well, when I call 911 the operator isn't aware of a TTY. You know, teletype machine for the deaf, right. They don't know and so they hang up. So that's a problem. Some aren't aware of what a TTY is. They need more training about that. All over the state's not bad and Allegheny County it's not bad, but I'm talking about other smaller towns in Pennsylvania or rural areas that...where they have a 911 system and they're just not familiar with TTYs and so they need to work on that situation to improve it. And another thing, FEMA. Pennsylvania Emergency Management. They should learn how to treat deaf, you know. Need to have an interpreter ready when they reply. Say if there's an accident or...or maybe there's some announcement, people are running. What do the deaf do? They need to improve a way of...of helping make the deaf aware and helping them get out.