



Voices
OF OUR REGION
THE DISABILITY CONNECTION

Interviewee: Donald Mervis

Interviewee Number: **07**

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

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Donald: My name is Donald Mervis. I was born in Nova Scotia, Canada. When I was 16 days old I was adopted by a couple from Kittanning, Pennsylvania. I have a brother who is 7 years younger than I am. He is now a doctor in the ER in _____ Ohio. I was married 10 years and have two beautiful young ladies who are both in college now I'm an old man. I was born with Cerebral Palsy. When I was 5-1/2 years old I entered school at the Rodgden Home where I was there for 15 years. I graduated from Rodgden in 1967. After I graduated I went to Pennsylvania Rehab which is now Hiram G. Andrews. They told me if I wanted to get more education I should go home and read a book. And I said, 'no way.' I called my dad and told him, and my dad called Harrisburg and I stayed at the rehab for a year and took business courses. And when I left there I took courses from Penn State and CCAC, and I learned many things. Back in the 80s I was very involved in the 70's I formed a group called The Young Adults Handicapped, which was a recreation socialization program. I got a grant for a van and was going to get people from their homes and take them out on outings like shopping and movies.

Interviewers: So you take them on outings, shopping, movies?

Donald: Yeah. Movies.

Interviewers: What counties? You said three counties, which ones?

Donald: Indiana, Armstrong and Westmoreland.

Donald: I did that for 10 years. After I worked for UCP. And when I was there, at UCP, I was a board member and they weren't doing anything for the older folks. And then I went out to California for about a year. And then I started a food bank in Ford City. And now we've given away bags of food every week to around 200 families. I did that for a couple years. That's when I met my wife, my ex-wife. And we gave it awhile and then we got married and we started out in a big farm house. Nice, nice house. It was around 400 acres. But, it was really nice. And from there we moved to Homewood City and rented a house in Homewood City. We got a loan for a house out in the country and that's when I started working at the [??] on 10th Avenue. I must have worked there five years. And then I had a medical problem and I had some problems with my nose. So, I left there and retired for awhile.

Interviewers: You drove down from Indiana County every day to go to work?

Donald: Yeah. 90 minutes.

Interviewers: How did you get there?

Donald: By car. I had a driver.

Donald: And I was going all over. I was the service coordinator.

Interviewers: Oh.

Donald: And I did that for about 6 years. And then I retired for awhile and didn't do much of anything until I got involved again at the center as a senior counselor doing DMU work. And then I picked up some senior counselors. I have, right now I have about 12 people that I'm working with and everyone's young and I'm a board member on the board of directors.

Interviewers: So this woman that's with you...

Donald: Yeah.

Interviewers: Is she your driver?

Donald: My driver. My right hand and my left foot. She does everything. I lived at home until I was 40 years old and then I met my ex and got married and when I got married I lost my disability.

Interviewers: You mean your disability money?

Donald: Yeah. They said because I was marrying I had to go on SSI. And today I get around \$600 a month. And if I wouldn't have gotten married I'd be getting \$1,200 or \$1,500. Now, I don't know what getting married has to do with my disability.

Interviewers: So, if you get SSI you can only make so much money. Is that right?

Donald: Yeah, but I don't make anything. My expenses are set by what I own.

Interviewers: Plenty of people that are married that are on SSD.

Donald: Yeah. If I would have worked, okay...I was on disability from my dad. That's what I was on from.

Interviewers: So, Don, can I ask you how old you are?

Donald: I will be 62 in September.

Interviewers: Who or what's been the biggest influence on your life?

Donald: The biggest influence on my life has been my relationship to Jesus. That keeps me going.

Interviewers: And have you always had that relationship or...

Donald: No. I was adopted by a Jewish couple and they raised me as a Jew. I was Bar-Mitzvahed and confirmed and when I was 17 I found the Messiah.

Interviewers: What's your family think about that?

Donald: Well, it was difficult for many years. And then I think they decided and before he died, my dad asked me, will you pray with him. And he received the Messiah. I had my wonderful parents who did everything for me. They did more for me than my natural parents would do. When I was a year old I said to a doc in Pittsburgh who told my mom and dad, you've raised me having a disability and loved me, yet they should take me back because I would never be any more than... if my God-givens was still living today I would like to go see him and Mary. I'm not a vegetable. I'm a fruit. They left and never went back. And they gave me day to day life to me and that's why I'm here, is they were wonderful and did everything.

Interviewers: How did they find you in Nova Scotia?

Donald: I was in a home for unwed mothers and...did you ever hear of the butter box babies? There's two doctors, they were husband and wife. They had this home for unwed mothers. And what they were doing, they were selling these babies and if the babies were born and they had a disability or their moms foreign, they would put them in a butter box and bury them in the back yard. And if they would have known I had Cerebral Palsy they would have put me in a butter box.

Interviewers: So then your parents bought you?

Donald: Yeah. In 1946 they paid \$10,000. They never hid that I was adopted. I always knew I was adopted. But it didn't even matter because they loved me as their own.

Interviewers: So Don, has your life been what you imagined it would be? Has it been different than you imagined? Or...

Donald: No. It's beyond anything I'd...beyond my wildest dreams. Everything is so good and I am so blessed.

Interviewers: What's been the hardest thing for you, in your life?

Donald: My speech. I think if I...if I could talk better I would have done things different. Maybe, maybe not. But if I could have one year I would want my speech. Because I have so much to say.

Interviewers: Does talking this much wear you out?

Donald: Well, I use more energy. Yeah. They tell me I use three times as much energy whatever I do.

Interviewers: What are you proudest of in your life?

Donald: My accomplishments. I have more I want to do.

Interviewers: Well, Don, do you have any words of wisdom for us?

Donald: My words of wisdom are, don't depend on the government. Because the way it's going they don't care about people they care about power. And I don't care if you're Democrat or Republican, it's not pretty. You need to put your trust in God.

Interviewers: We just found this out now. You were at Disney World and...

Donald: Yeah. I went on the ride at MGM. I rode the roller coaster. And I have to tell you Disney really did a really nice job, at least at MGM almost everything is accessible down there.

Interviewers: So how do you feel as like a person that has fought for all these accessibilities and now you are actually able to go on...

Donald: It's pretty cool.