



Interviewee: **Janet Evans**

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TRACK 1

I told her the story of Stubby.

Who's Stubby?

Well, to make a long story short, Stubby is my foot. I make it into a joke so people don't get afraid of not seeing toes on my half foot. So Stubby's... So this one doctor last year wanted to know when Stubby was born and I went 02-02-02. And she asked me "What is that" and I went "What?" Then I go "February 2, 2002." First she started laughing and then she went out in the hall. It was funny because I just said 2-02-02 and she said "What's that?"

Okay, let's get started. If you could just start with your name, place of birth, family history, information about siblings and your parents.

My name is Janet B. Reidell Evans. I'm a widow. I live at 945 Roselle Court, Pittsburgh, 15207. And that's in the Glen Hazel section of Pittsburgh, which is off of Hazelwood Avenue. And I've been there for 32 years. Actually I married in the area. I was born in Pittsburgh. When I was a child I was all over the United States because my dad was in the Air Force. It was pretty good. But actually, my young life I was going from hospital to hospital and from what I understand I was institutionalized but at that time it was called a Home for Babies which I think that's what they did to deal with disabilities.

Can you back up a minute? You lived all over the United States and when you were born where did you say?

I was born in Pittsburgh but traveled when I was a kid because my dad was in the Air Force. But anyway, I had a brother and 2 sisters born under me. When I was 9, I was in the hospital for almost a year. They operated on my hips and I couldn't understand why I was in the hospital that long but I later learned why. So then I later went back home when I was 9 and then I was transferred to Philadelphia to a school called Home of the Merciful Savior, and actually I remember the address, it was 4400 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, the zip code I don't remember. But I spent... I was there two and a half years and I was able to go home. But then after I left that school, 18 hours later I was placed in another home in Pittsburgh (**5 MIN**) and I was there for 10 years and that was my teenage years from 12 to 22. There I learned how to adjust to institutional life which is not fun but somehow I managed. I didn't know that I was retarded and I was a little p.o.'d on that. But then my parents came to see me like every so often, but I knew I had to get out of there but I didn't know how. So then back in the late 60's, early 70's I said I

know how to get out of here, watch me. So they had these little signs on the wall like the Bill of Rights for people.

Where was this?

Allegheny Valley School. There was a junior school then and then there was a senior school later. But at the junior school I seemed to be like, I call them still kids, but I was like the mother of all the kids there because I was smarter than all of them. And I really didn't like the school but my parents couldn't take care of me and before I left the institution I found out why. But anyways, to make a long story short, when I moved to the senior school I was able to get my GED because I wasn't supposed to have a foster grandmother, here she turned out to be a school teacher. So she brought me the GED and I studied under a new program called Bay Service and they helped me get the GED and I made a bet with the program director. I said "that if I pass you owe me a spaghetti dinner." And he goes "No, no, no, you won't pass." I said "Watch me." I passed. I took the test one other time, but I passed. This was June 1974. In 1975, well in between that UCP to the institution and they were talking about a community living arrangement. And I said "Yeah, that's my key out of here." So I did what I could to help myself to show them that, yeah, I could live out in the real world. So with the combination of us and the GED I was sent away to Johnstown Rehab for more testing and they discovered that I could live in the real world. So called normal world, that's what it was called then. And I said yea, but I was not retarded. Going back a little bit, back in '75 I was going to the hospital for an operation and, I love this story, there was a group of doctors, about 30, and I said "I think I need to be retested" and he goes "Why?" I said "Read the diagnosis out loud to the doctors" and he goes "Why? We're not supposed to." And I said "Read it." And he said cerebral palsy, spastic in all four limbs, with mild retardation and I said "I'm not retarded." And he said "We'll see, say the alphabet backwards." And I did. And he said "Now count from 1000 backwards" and I said "Okay, I will." So I did and he goes "Yeah, you need retested." (10:00 MIN) So while I was there I had the operation and they tested me and the last day I was there he goes "Janet, come to my office right before you leave." So I went to his office. He goes "Girl, you're no more retarded than my little finger." And I go, "You going to strike that from my records?" and he says "Yes, I will strike it."

Who was that Janet?

Dr. Rosenthal. Rosenthal or Rosenberg at St. Francis.

So when you were born, your parents knew you had cerebral palsy?

Mmm-Hmmm.

And when you were 9 you went to Philadelphia. Why did you go to Philadelphia in the first place?

Because, this is what I'm thinking, when they had the cab strike 2 years earlier in Pittsburgh I was going to Pioneer School, but then my dad got transferred to California.

Was he still in the Air Force?

Mmm-Hmm. So then there was a physical therapist named Miss Doherty. She was a physical therapist at Pioneer and she moved to Philadelphia to work at this other school called Home of the Merciful Savior, what it is now I don't know. But I heard about 2 years ago that she is the director there now.

She talked your family into sending you there?

I guess, or Dr. Champ who was a doctor here in Pittsburgh and in Philadelphia. That's the only thing I can really tell you. Cause I don't know, I was young, I was dumb.

So when you left Philadelphia where was your family?

In Pittsburgh.

They were in Pittsburgh. Then why did you go and live at AVS?

I think the court ordered it cause something happened when I was in California. In Children's Hospit... and I don't want to talk about that.

Okay.

Because that part of my life is not important. Like I said, after I got out of AVS, that's when my life started. This is the whole year of 1976, I got out of the institution and someone said "Oh you'll be back in three months." I said, "No, I'm not. I'll probably be married by then." Lo and behold, okay here's the timeline. At the end of March I got out after fighting for a year to get out. May 8th I met my husband to be. June 7th of that same year he asked me to marry him over a 12 hour phone call. And I said "Why do you want to marry me?" He goes, "This phone call could get expensive!" So I said "Yea, I'll marry you." So anyway we were going to wait a year to get some more independent living and stuff. Well, in June... No, in August, it's my birthday, he gave me my engagement ring and the first words out of my mouth were "Will my finger turn green?" And the second thing I said was "Where's my new shoes?" And then he goes, "I should take the ring back and the shoes back and forget about you but since I love you so much you can keep them!" (15 MIN) So in September my parents found out I was getting married. And actually I'm going to tell you what I did. When I came out of the institution, for three months my parents did not know that I was out of the institution.

How'd you keep it from them or weren't they in touch with you anyhow?

I would call them every so often and I purposely waited three months. They didn't call the school or nothing. Nobody had heard from them. And I told them don't say nothing that I'm out of there because I was smart enough to take care of my own business.

How old were you then?

Twenty-two. 22 years old and still a little naïve about the real world but Harry was 27 years old than I am and he was a good guy. If you know what Colombo looked like, that's Harry. In September we set a date and my parents found out that I was engaged by my roommate and they go "What Janet?" and I go "Yea, I'm engaged" but we didn't tell them how old he was, we lied. Because at that time guys marrying younger women was like robbing the cradle. But we told my aunt and uncle how old he was but we shaved 10 years off because Harry did not look his age. But when they left we both cracked up laughing. So then we set the date for November 27th that year, it was a couple of days after Thanksgiving. When we were making out the invitations, Harry was sad and I asked why he was sad and he goes "My mom died 2 years to that date" and I said "What? I'll change it" He goes "No no no no." I said fine. I later found out a couple of days later that his cousin Marie on his side of the family said "That marriage is made in heaven." I go "What?" They go "Harry was looking for someone to be with him." You know, he was sad. He had some trouble with his life and he wanted a good partner. Even though the age difference really didn't matter to me because I told someone right before I got married that I knew what I was getting into. But I think I needed someone steady in my life because people come and go and Harry was there for 27 years. And he helped me with college and he helped me do whatever I wanted to do and he never said no.

And now I'm what you call self-employed. I have my own business. It's H & J Laundry. I've had that for 10 years. And what it is at the Pittsburgh Housing Authority is called a resident business. Harry didn't want me to take it and I really didn't want it either. I just went and got the information and gave it to the tenant council. They didn't want it so I just held onto the information. Four months later someone comes knocking on my door and says "Janet, why don't you take the thing?" and I said yea, why not. And I said to Harry that even if it only made \$1.00 for me its money in my pocket to help pay for the bills. And here I still have it 10 years later. I also worked for Fashion Bug. That was breaking ground then too. I worked there for 2 years and 2 months (**20 MIN**) and at the same time I was a security monitor for where I lived, Glen Hazel High-rise. I worked there for 2 years and 2 months. And I enjoyed it. But all along a lot of people have helped me along and they saw, they knew what I was capable of doing and I really never said no to nothing. I help people with... After Harry and I got married we got involved with the Access Program. We helped a whole bunch of other people to get that started because I think he was instrumental in getting Magic Carpet together with a whole bunch of other people. We were lucky because everything seemed to be following what I needed or wanted to do. The Access Program came in and then we started a program in 2002, I was part of that.

What was that called? The Disability Agenda?

The Disability Agenda of 2000. It's the Pittsburgh mayor's task force on disabilities and I'm a part of that too. I'm also a toastmaster and I've been one for like 16 years. Like I said I've been advocate for seniors. I've been an advocate for disabilities, and I also have an Associates Degree for Behavioral Sciences. I got that back after I got married. I went to Community College in 1980 to 1984. And there I raised Cain cause I helped the college become more accessible to other students and my last year there they asked me to work and put a accessible handbook together there. And I did and here unbeknownst to me it won a national award for student handbooks for the college.

Janet, you were married for 27 years?

Yeah.

Time flies doesn't it?

Yeah. But the one thing is Harry always let me do what I wanted to do. And some people, cause to look at me, sometimes you think I cannot do it but guess what, I've never thought myself a person with a disability. I thought I was normal. And people who knew me throughout the years thought I had to struggle but to me it was easy. Yeah, I had some disappointments, but you know what, I always had faith in myself and God is always with me and if I asked for something I usually got it.

Where do you think you get the determination? Where does that come from?

Because when I was a kid I always said I wanted to be like everybody else. Well guess what, I'm like everybody else and a little bit different. I mean as far as I've made it. I could have sat back and let the world go by. But one of my professors, he told me "You know Janet, you shouldn't feel sad. It's a two way street and you need to see the world and the world needs to see you. And jump on and enjoy your life cause you only live once." And that's what I do. And I'm still growing. Everybody wants to ask me questions so that's why I made up the consulting card. But you know what **(25 MIN)** now I feel like I'm a teacher to the younger generations. Because we want to keep what we have and strive for more because after us, the people coming up, they won't realize what we had to do and if they don't keep it up for us they are going to lose it. Because really if you get down to the nitty gritty, when we fight for accessibility and independence we're really fighting for everyone. Even the legislators don't realize that it takes only one second to become disabled. It does. So they help us, in a way, they're helping themselves. And that's the way I look at it. You don't have to scream and shout. Just talk, come up with a solutions. If you can't do it one way at least try it another way, and never give up.

What are you most proud of when you think about all the things you have been able to do and experience?

I had a wonderful life. I never really realized but I did help a lot of people. I've inspired a lot of people without even noticing it. And I'm proud of, I guess, what I did. I'm proud that I have a home life. I don't have to be in the institution. And I can hire and fire people. And I'm pleased the rules have changed. And I've got a lot more living to do and a lot more hell raising to do.

You talk about the Access Program, I know my mother takes Access and I never really knew where it came from. How did Access get started?

Back in '77, UMTA, that was the Urban Mass Transit, they provided a grant um, it begins with a P... a pilot program. Because Open Doors for the Handicapped at that time had started a program called Magic Carpet and some of the taxi cabs at that time was Colinal Taxi, Yellow Taxi, Magic Carpet. It was under a pilot program called Paratransit. The state provides monies and they would go door to door helping people to go either to the doctors or to school or to work. Well a group of us made up of people with disabilities, and seniors, and business people that at that time were called the Southwestern Planning Commission. And what happened was, I think at that time they got like 18 carriers to participate. Access was like an umbrella to have contracts with all these carriers but the carriers were... it was up to the carriers to hire their drivers, maintain their lift vans, and take people from door to door to where they're going. And also they were wondering how they would pay for this. I may not remember all the teeny tiny details but we have strip tickets which at that time it was at a discount. I think at that time we only paid like \$6.00. The book costs \$20.00 and there are 20 tickets. And if you had a disability and you were under 65 (**30 MIN**) or if you had your disability either before or right after the age of 18 then you would ride with the green tickets and you were allowed to take a free escort. If you would take anymore than you had to pay with another set of tickets. And this was good for people who were disabled like, um, 18 to 65. Once you hit 65, if you still needed a wheelchair then you would use the brown tickets. And then the yellow tickets, 65 and older they came through the lottery. Port Authority, I'm not quite sure how they got into it in the beginning, but back in the '90s they kind of took over the discounts. So even though some years we've been paying higher prices it's still 20 tickets. Now people with disabilities prefer to have the Access, and some, I'm not saying all, prefer that if they have to pay a little more they would. They don't want no cuts. And to me it helped me live my life because I went to school. An agency paid for my transportation. I went to work, you know, I went shopping, I went visiting. So that's really the whole program with Access is get people out of their homes. And when they talk about buses, back in the later '90s they put lifts on buses and I thought that was a good thing because there are a lot of people who prefer to ride the bus than take Access. Even though Access has their little bugs, it's a good program. A couple of years ago it won a national award for efficiency and how different agencies use it to take care of their clients.

Thank you.

Now do you understand a little bit?

Because my mother uses it all the time and it's nice to know the history.

That's why I got that (unintelligible) All you have to do is ask me a question and if I don't have the answer I'll send you to a library. Or to an agency that can help. But that's me.

Who helped you the most to get out of AVS?

First, mainly I'm my own motivator so I had counselors there. Bay Service helped me. UCP helped me. Psychiatrists wanted to keep me there; others wanted to keep me there because I was a money maker for them. Yes, they wanted me to stay, they hired a psychologist to say I was incompetent and when they had that staffing for me to get out the psychologist said "No, she's incapable." And I turned around to him and asked why did you test me, why did I have two jobs here and the school wanted me to supervise the running of the snack bar? I ran the green home and did ceramics for them and I sold plants for the greenhouse and I had my own off-the-side Avon business that I had. So I said "If I'm so incompetent why did I pass the GED test?" and they went "Yeah, she did." And I said "Guess what?" And they said "What?" **(35 MIN)** "I'm over 21 and I'm signing myself out." But you had to have a place to go in order to get out because they couldn't release you at that time.

Where did you go then?

Westgate Village under the supervision of UCP. That was their pilot program and I was so successful and I only stayed in for several months! But I tell you it was my own motivation, it was what I wanted to do and I wasn't going to say no to anybody. But I had to be patient. You've got to listen to other folks and what they have to say. And to me it wasn't a real hard struggle because I had to learn to, how to be around people on the outside world. And I hate being in institutions. But you know something, when you first come out you're so used to doing things in the morning, things in the afternoon and evening and when to go to bed. And me, I had to learn "Janet, this is your life and not nobody's, not the institution's." I accomplished a lot. Another thing I did when I was going to Community College, I won a national award among junior colleges. I was in an English class and we were asked to write a little biography about ourselves and our family tree. Alex Haley was sponsoring scholarships for a book called "The Blooming of the Spirits". Twelve thousand people applied for that and two of us from our English class won a scholarship, won a book. A spot in the book. That was back in '83 and that was kinda neat, to tell my story. And all that time, the seniors where I lived, they relied on me and Harry to help with their paperwork like rent rebates and Harry and I did that.

And as Harry got older he couldn't do it, I took over for a little while. But then I got busier with everything else. But I'm happy. I don't think I'm... I'm proud. I don't really realize it because most people tell me "Janet, think about all of the people you've helped, think about all of things you've done." And I say "All I've done is lived my life. I'm no different than the next person." That's the way I look at things.

But you lived your life the way you wanted.

And you know what, it's a crazy life and I like it that way. And my heroes are Mae West and Lucille Ball.

MaeWest?

Oh, I love Mae West. But I have a roommate now. He's computer literate but that doesn't mean I'm not. I learned a lot on my own. I learned a lot on my own through my foster grandmother, my aides, and my girlfriend who helped me with the computer. When I volunteered at Presby and told everybody where to go because some people thought I said "hell" when I said "L".

You never used the Mae West line on Harry did you? "Come up and see me some time"?

No but I've used it on somebody else! But I am very computer literate. I've learned a lot of it on my own. Like I said Larry (40 MIN) helped me with some and now I can teach a class on internet safety because believe me it's a bad world out there. Because when you say you want to be on the internet, you better do your homework first because you are going to end up spamming a lot of things, especially in your emails. And don't fall for those things that say you won this or you could win. No, that's out. What else do you need?

Since you've been able to live a life you that you really seem to enjoy, how about some words of wisdom on how to keep following that? You seem to have such a positive light on everything what can you share with the rest of us?

If you have a dream, follow it and don't back down. If you can't get it one way try another way, legally. Keep a positive attitude and speak up for yourself. Because like if you look in the mirror in the morning, the only one you've got to answer to is yourself. And try to help solve some of your problems but ask for help in a nice way. Don't demand it. Cause in a way you are when you speak softly and reason with people cause you can get a whole lot more with that than being too radical and screaming and yelling because nobody wants to hear you.

Unless there's something else in regards to your history or fact preserving or your stories is there anything else you want to share?

I just hope people remember when I'm done because I have helped tons of people who have disabilities. When they see me they're impressed by me. Especially the seniors when I go to important meetings, they tell the other ones, even the workers, "Housing, yeah Janet goes to meetings. She's in a wheelchair but she doesn't let the weather stop her, she doesn't let the van stop her, the only way she can get stopped is if she's sick or has something else to do. That's the only way you can stop her."

Is there anything else?

I don't know. There's still a whole lot of me. Like I said, I just know people and if you want to be seen you've got to get to know whose your leaders are and talk with them. In the world, it's really not nice to people with disabilities. Some people will talk with you, nice in front of your face, but when they turn they just back stab you or walk away from you. When I walk into a room I feel like E.F. Hutton (45 MIN) when I talk they listen.

What do you think is something that people that don't have a disability can't understand, how to relate to you or tend to look at you or judge you? How do you make people realize that you have accomplished everything and much more and still have never seen yourself as having to struggle any more, it's just a difference? How do you feel that people without disabilities can come to terms with the fact that the difference isn't what it seems to be?

The older generation, they tend to feel sorry for us and they want to help you and sometimes they don't realize that we are really people too. They look at the body and some bodies are all crinkled up and they think they can't do nothing. But they need to learn. And the younger generation, as long as they're mixed with people with disabilities it's okay and they're learning. But yet, they don't think too much of what's going to happen when they get older. Because everything's here now for them. I don't know because I never really had to struggle too much with being non-disabled. Because actually, once, I laugh at this one, my girlfriend... she's my friend... she keeps forgetting that I have a disability. She does, she forgets. And any of my friends and people who work with me, they forget I have a disability. But they realize then and they think I'm something special. Here's an exercise you might want to use when you are talking with a group of people. This is what I used to do when I was doing speeches for United Way from '77 until about '90. I used to get the group together and before I would tell them my own story, this is what I did. I go, "How many of you have had a cup of coffee in a cup or a mug?" Some would stand up and I'd tell them to stand up and stay there and then I would ask them "How many of you have used a pencil or a pen to write your thoughts down?" And some more would stand up. And then I asked them "How many of you wear glasses to see whatever you are writing or seeing?" and the rest some would stand up. And then I would say "Okay I'm going to get you all to stand up now, how many of you have used motor transportation to get from Point A to Point B to get to Point C. It could be a bus, truck, car or even your legs," and by this time everybody stood up.

So I said okay you can all sit down. Then I said now people with crutches, braces, wheelchairs, hearing aids I said what do they all have in common? You know they never got this? I said if you look at it they are all objects. They're objects. Wheelchairs help people to get around. You glasses to help you see better. Hearing aids help you hear better. Automobiles help you get from Point A to Point B. Your legs help you to travel. **(50 MIN)** Your pencils are objects to help you write down your thoughts. Your cups are objects to hold a hot cup of coffee. I said if you want a hot cup of coffee you can't hold it in your hands because you'll burn your hands. So that's was that lesson. It was powerful. And I said that to about 500 to 600 people.

One of my concerns, and probably a lot of other people, is that as we head into a downturn of the economy and people are looking for cutbacks with the way things are going we are going to lose instead of gain.

Right, and even right now the steering committee, we're looking at things now like what happens if the Port Authority goes on strike? What is going to be the most important things for us? And we're talking now like work related jobs, schooling, hospitals and the busiest times of the days, what's going to be more important? And the group there said work, even if you have a volunteer job, work is the most important. And then school and then the doctors. So we're working on that now. And that's why I think that my time is now to speak up.

Do you have a.... ?

I have a pet bird named Charley.

A bird?

Yea, his name is Charley. The bird is 23 years old.

Parrot or Cockatiel?

Cockatiel. And he sits on my shoulders. He's a womanizer. If you have a high pitched voice he will start singing. And he actually, in his own way, in bird language, will tell you when he wants out of that cage, he'll tell you when its time to change water or food. And he will tell you... And with me he gives me kisses, and he doesn't like my roommate. Charley is a good watch bird. When someone is knocking on the door Charley makes sure I hear it or if the phone rings Charley's right there in his own way answering it.

Cockatiels are wonderful birds. My parents had one.

I originally got Charley for Harry because Harry was home most of the time alone when I was going to school and going to work. I swear you'd think that bird was a human. He

eats pizza crust, potato bread, potato chips, little bit of egg, he likes his grapes, he likes green beans, spaghetti, he likes his cakes and cookies. That bird eats good. The only things were not allowed to feed him are chocolate and meat. But he eats everything else and seed.

Normal bird food.

Yea.

Thank you so much. We really appreciate it.

I hope I was able to help