



Interviewee: **Joyce Driben**

Interviewee Number: **35**

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Date of Interview: **June 2, 2008**

Voices of our Region  
June 2nd, 2008  
Joyce Driben

I'm Joyce Driben and I grew up in Massachusetts actually. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts. A section of Boston called Dorchester and I have a twin sister who is sighted. Well depending on which name you like retinopathy of prematurity is the current name but I grew up calling it retrolental fibroplasia. When we were about four my younger brother was born and he has Cerebral Palsy. When it was time for him to be promoted to first grade the Boston school system refused to promote him and that was long before the days of the ADA Right to Education. And the legal advice my parents got was to move out of Boston so we moved to Brookline which is where I spent most of my growing up years. I went to Perkins. That's a school for the blind in Massachusetts. I'm one of the few people you might talk to who liked going through a school for the blind and did not wish to be mainstreamed because I got some advantages that I wouldn't have gotten in a larger high school.

### **How so?**

My Spanish class particularly in high school, the Spanish teacher I had always pulled in the Spanish speakers to work with our Spanish class. So I could when I was a senior in high school carry on a conversation in Spanish. Not something that I could have, we had 3 to 5 kids in my Spanish class. We couldn't have done that in public school. I got a chance to do some Girl Scout work where it was tailored to blind kids. And actually it was my first experience with deaf blind kids at the School for the Blind because they pulled some deaf blind kids into our troop and I was one of the people that got to learn how to communicate with them. So I got some advantages at Perkins that I would not have had in other schools. Disadvantages – my social skills were not what they could have been and my math skills were not what they could have been. But I gained a lot. I learned to participate in sports. I had a good music background. Played piano for years and in a choral group now. When I was at Brandeis, which is where I did my undergraduate work which is in Massachusetts, I wanted to go to a school, wanted to get a degree in social work. My parents were wonderful folks but they were very overprotective and I knew if I stayed in the Boston area I would never be able to have my own apartment and have my own freedom. So when it came time to apply for graduate schools I started writing letters to schools. And again this was before the ADA or before Right to Education, any kind of laws. And I wrote about seven graduate schools with social work. I did tell them I was blind, wondered what their experience had been with blind people in the past, and requested information about scholarships. Some schools never replied. The University of Chicago sent me a classic letter that basically said to the effect that “The degree of your success will depend on the degree of your visual handicap. We have not had favorable experience with blind people in the past.” That was back in '63. I interviewed at Columbia but did not get in and I interviewed at Pitt

and they were the only school that offered me a scholarship and we had no money, so I came to Pittsburgh. One of the things that was a real problem back then is getting a seeing eye dog admitted places. And I received a letter from the University of Pittsburgh Housing Department telling me that I would not be able to have my dog in a dorm. Totally illegal now but not then. And my mother and I came down after I graduated Brandeis in June of '63. My mother and I took the bus because she was not going to drive this distance. We came down to Pittsburgh. We didn't know anything about the city and I had not yet gotten my first Seeing Eye dog. I was using a cane and I was not particularly good with it and one of the reasons I wanted a dog is when I tried crossing streets with the cane I really didn't feel safe. And I knew a number of people with dogs so I applied to the Seeing Eye and was accepted for the July '63 class. But before going to Seeing Eye I came down here with my mom and we started talking to people at Pitt about housing and they were pretty adamant that I was not going to be in the dorm with a dog. Somebody in the Housing Department, I don't even know who she was, said to us very quietly, "You know there's this place on Craig Street. I think it's something like the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind. Why don't you go there and see if they can help you?" So we went over and at that time it was called the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind. And I told my tale of woe to the secretary and she had me see a Marcella Goldberg. And she said, "Did they put it in writing?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Do you have the letter with you?" I said, "Yes." And she said, "May I see the letter please?" And I handed it to her and that was the last I saw of the letter for many years. She immediately called Seeing Eye to verify my story that I was indeed registered for a class. And then she told me and my mother to go and enjoy Pittsburgh and she'd call us in a couple of days. And she did and she said, "Okay, you're in the dorms." Don't know what she did. I went to Graduate School in Social Work at Pitt. This was the days before computers and I had to type my papers on an electric typewriter. No then I actually still had a manual typewriter and used Braille to take notes. I graduated from Pitt.

### **You have an MSW?**

I have an MSW. I worked for many years at Pittsburgh Child Guidance Center until it became part of Western Psych. After Western Psych I ended up working at a hospital that no longer exists called Allegheny Neuropsychiatric Institute. Out near the airport. That was a big mistake because I had never had that kind of commute before and it was a difficult commute. I had carpool arrangements worked out but when my driver was instructed to go do other things I lost my ride. So I never knew if I was going to have a ride until like the day before or whether I was going to have to take a shuttle bus over to the North Side and then a bus out or maybe a bus into town at the end of the day and a bus out of town home.

### **How long did that last with that commute?**

Thirteen months. That was in 1990 and I left, wanting some time to kind of recoup and get my head together. I got on Social Security Disability, SSDI. And I was going to start

a private practice until my BVS, Blindness and Visual Services counselor told me that if I did that within two years they were likely going to open up my SSDI case and I was likely going to have to pay back the Social Security Disability. And then I waited because it was not worth doing that. And I needed some time between jobs and I applied for some others and I never got anything else. I've done a lot of consulting. I've done a lot of volunteering. So I've done kind of a hodgepodge of things since then.

**What did you do during that two year wait period for your health insurance?**

I had COBRA for 18 months. I was able to get that and then when that ended I was able to qualify for Medicare. COBRA was very expensive. It took a big bite but I didn't have any choice. I needed the health insurance. I'm president of a group called BOLD, Blind Outdoor Leisure Development. And we do a lot of outdoor and indoor recreational things and people know that I'm around and my name periodically gets passed around so I've ended up doing a lot of volunteer phone consultation. And it just so happens many people don't know where to go and what to do. I've talked about anything from radio information service where you were interviewed to even blind and vision rehabilitation services. Some of the programs that are out there and people have never heard of them. But the catch is a lot of the technology is very expensive and not everybody has that kind of money and if you're not working it's hard to get anybody to pay for it. One of the things, actually through Radio Information Service I do something called PORT which is Pittsburgh Old-time Radio Theater. We go out and we perform old time radio dramas. It's a fundraiser. We go to senior citizen centers.

**Wow.**

Oh, it's fun. I get to play some of the characters I used to listen to. Like we do a Fred Allen skit so I get to play Portland. Who was a bit of a ditz so it was kind of fun. And I've done a lot of stuff with BOLD. I enjoy some of the hiking. And I rowed other years. I don't think I'll be rowing this summer because my ankle is still healing. I've had knee and ankle problems. My knees particularly were giving out and my ankle at this point since I've broken it is certainly not going to be ready for skiing for quite awhile.

**How did you break your ankle?**

I had been home with this nice quiet dog, who is lying on my feet right now, for about a month and a half. And unlike my other dogs, what I didn't know about him is that he left a toy on the step, a kong. Which if you don't know what a kong is it's a hard, rubber toy kind of conical shape and it bounces. And my foot hit it just wrong and it bounced and unfortunately I didn't. And when I got down to the bottom of the steps, I fell from about three steps down. And then I thought well I'm going to get up and get some ice from the kitchen and I couldn't stand on my foot.

**So did you have a phone near by?**

I tend to carry my cordless phone around a lot. And the paramedics came and took me to Presby.

**And what about the dog then?**

The dog went with me actually.

**So you broke it pretty badly?**

Yeah I did. I broke two bones and I dislocated it.

**So Seeing Eye. They'll come and take the dog if you go into the hospital?**

Yeah, if you're ill or injured. They took him. They got him at the beginning of January, because I did this between Christmas and New Years and there's nobody there at that time. You know they're all off like many places were. So they took him and they just brought him back about a week and a half ago. So they kept him for me this whole time and kept his training up. Because there was no way I could work him. A friend of mine was here, I think my friend actually wanted to hang out and see the reunion. And he is very good at describing so he told me when he saw the van pull up and he said "Honey, that's from Seeing Eye." He could see Tudor in the back wagging his tail and looking around and very enthusiastically getting out and coming in here. So he really remembered me. Now he doesn't want to do these stairs so I don't know what he remembers from my fall. And he's been sleeping down here in the living room. I made him come up one night and I thought, you know, it's not worth the fight. And for the benefit of the tape he weighs 73 pounds and he is 24 ½ inches tall.

**Now Joyce, explain about the fact that you still have to know where you are going.**

Absolutely. I can't just say take me to the Giant Eagle. He may learn the pattern of when I go down certain streets I'm going to the Giant Eagle or I'm going to the bank. So I still have to know where I'm going. Now I have had a dog in the past that learned the term "restaurant" and that was very handy at times. One time I was looking for a restaurant. We were going to look out a possible restaurant for a party and I was with another blind friend and I said to the dog "find the restaurant" but I had never been on that street before but she found the restaurant. Now that can't all do that. I've taught them elevator. In a hotel "find the room" which is a great help.

**So you went to a nursing home?**

The Heritage Shady Side that's here in Squirrel Hill. The therapy part was great although I had to teach the therapists a bit about working with a blind person. Some of the aides were okay but I had to do everything from "Don't just bring me food, tell me what's here.

Let's work out a way for me to tell you what I want. You've got to read me the menu." At times they sent up a volunteer who was very sweet but she couldn't read to save her soul. And it would take us a half hour to fill out a week's menu. I didn't know what was going to happen when I left the nursing home. Because meals were provided even if not always the greatest and there were aides, again not always the greatest, but there was somebody around to help me in a wheelchair. Because I was in a wheelchair and being blind and in a wheelchair is not a great combination. I decided I was going to come home after the nursing home. And yes we had to move some things around in here and I had to get a hospital bed and a wheelchair and stuff. I got home the end of January. January 31st was my discharge date and it was toward the end of April when... I started being able to put weight on my foot toward the end of March and then I was on a walker. And you can't really do stairs on a walker. So it was like towards the end of April when I could finally get up and take a shower and then the Occupational Therapist said okay let's see how you're doing on the stairs. And finally he said to me at the end of April, beginning of May, "Okay, I think you can sleep upstairs now." The health insurance is paying for the Physical Therapy and Occupational therapy, yes. But I've had to pay a lot for my aides. Because that's not covered by insurance.

**Joyce, throughout your life what has been the biggest challenge for you?**

Information access is often one of the biggest things. And also attitudinal stuff. People in society have very strange notions about blindness. While I've job hunted, a lot of people, I have to convince them that I can function. I was just reading that 70% of working age blind people are unemployed and I don't know if it's typical of other disabilities or not. I usually don't tell people that I'm blind right away. My strategy was to get the interview, get it scheduled and then get directions and in the course of getting the directions slip in the fact that I'm totally blind and that's why I need clear directions.

**What do you say that you are most proud of in your life?**

I think I've been proud of having to get through graduate school and work for as long as I did. You know I worked for more than 25 years. There are a lot of people that can't say that. There's one of the things I'm proud of. And actually having been able to recover from my ankle break and doing as well as I'm doing now. That I'm walking and I'm able to move around independently. Another thing I'm proud of is keeping BOLD going. Blind Outdoor Leisure Development. Because I think that's really helped a lot of people. I've had a good time and we've been able to get a lot of people out that might not have otherwise had a chance.

**Are you busy enough? Not that I'm looking to give you work...**

I may be looking for work. For the last few months I was sort of confined to the house but now I'm beginning to look for more stuff.

## **So did you do a lot of reading in the last couple months?**

I read. I listened to the radio. Radio Information Service was a godsend because I had trouble sleeping and they're on 24 hours a day. My mother was one of my biggest influences. Because as protective as she was, and back then there were no parents' groups for blind kids. She didn't know what she was doing with a blind child and didn't what to do or how to do it. And we didn't get a whole lot of family support. And yet she was willing to let me try stuff although it was difficult for her. She used to knit. I got a lot of knitted things when I was growing up. And she told me later that it was one way she could handle her anxiety. I appreciated her honesty and her willingness to try and the fact is that I was the only Jewish kid for a long time at Perkins whose family wanted her to have a Jewish education. And she really had to fight for me to have the Jewish education because in Massachusetts at the time there was a law that anybody who went to a private school, which Perkins was, had to have an hour a week of religious education. They wanted to stick me in a class with Protestant kids. And my parents said absolutely not. So I think she was the first advocate I really knew because she had to fight for me to get the Jewish education and she had to later on fight for me to get the books I needed with the Commission for the Blind in Massachusetts. So she was my role model for being an advocate. You asked me before what else I was proud of? There is now a lot of audio description around here. And I don't know if you know what that is but when a blind person goes to a play or the opera you miss the visuals. And you can't have your buddy in the audience going "this is what's happening". It's going to drive everybody nuts. I've tried it. And the opera now does audio description. On the Tuesday night performance of the opera there's somebody up there describing the visuals and giving us some of the translation. Pittsburgh Opera now provides audio description. But I was one of the people that pushed for it. And now we can go for audio description at the opera and at city theater and Pittsburgh Irishman Classical Theater. So all of these things exist. And I have recently ran into dog discrimination again. I had forgotten about that. I stopped at the state store with a friend last week and he said "Oh there's a Dollar Store here" and with the aide I was with on Friday I needed a few things. And I said that's close let's see about that. And we get there and we walk in and the man is like "no dogs" and both my aide and I are trying to explain what the dog was and he didn't care. "Dog might pee" is what he said to me. "Dog might pee or poop." And the aide goes "If he does I'll clean it up." And the guy was like "Just this once and just for you." And I thought I don't want to be in a store for just this once. And so I took my business to Target. And I always think that nobody ever talks about what the role of people with disabilities has been in the history of a city and I think that's an important thing to do. Younger people with disabilities don't have a sense of what the struggle has been for some of us. I didn't talk about the rejection for jobs and I'm sure you heard about it from other people. People who apply for jobs and not gotten them or applied to schools and not gotten in. And I think that's been an important part of what people have had to overcome.