



Interviewee: **Zetta Murphy**

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Voices of Our Region

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Zetta Murphy. I was born here in Pittsburgh. My parents weren't from Pittsburgh. My mother was from South Carolina, my father was from Kentucky. My mother came up after my dad. They met at a social at church. I had six brothers and sisters. Two of my sisters are deceased. There's a lot of rheumatoid illnesses in our family. I grew up in the South Side. When we were little we were on the flat part of the South Side, then we moved to the South Side slopes. I was born three months premature, and I have the retinopathy of prematurity, but no, I'm the only one that's blind. I went to the School for Blind Children my whole years from Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade. I liked it there. It was pretty good. You know, I felt like a regular kid, and it was a little bit tricky because I have hip deformities. So they had to make some accommodations for me. I did pretty good. I was almost going into high school, and they did give us a choice of where to go, which my choice would have been Schenley High School, and I decided that I wanted to stay at the school because there were more opportunities for training, and I just liked my social network and I chose not to go. I stayed there. Yeah, I stayed there and I had more opportunities. I was in the band, I was in the choir, I was drama club. I did a lot of things there. I remember when they took me there and they showed me around and stuff like that, and the principal said I was a good baby, cause I was holding on, he was carrying me through and he was showing my parents the grounds. And I liked it, and he asked me would I like to stay here, and I said, "Yes." You know, but I was just always kind of Mama's girl, because I always sat with the grownups while the kids were playing. I didn't play too much cause I wasn't able to get around too much.

Course, I used to crawl around on the floor and I liked the boys because I liked their house parents, and I crawled around on the floor to the boys' section. I'd pull myself on one of the boys' beds and when they came down at night to say prayers, I was in their beds. Yeah, I was a radical child.

When I graduated from high school I went to Community College, the North Side campus, and I took Child Development for my studies and I enjoyed that. It was a very interesting experience. I made some friends there. So I did that and then after I did that I transferred to Carlow College, and I took Psychology and Speech and Hearing Therapy. They weren't really sure that I would make it because of -- they didn't even want to pay me to go to Community College because when I was in, how old was I? I was about sixteen or seventeen years old I started having mental health issues, which I still have mental health issues. I have bipolar disorder, and they weren't sure that I could handle the stress of it. They weren't sure they wanted to pay for it, since I was going to have to have extended periods of therapy and like my mother told them, "She has the right to fall on her butt and fail just like anybody else. She wouldn't be the first one to drop out of school."

And so they did pay for it, and then when I went to Carlow College I did have some relapses and I wasn't able to finish because my mother got sick and she passed away at forty-eight. I got through three years of Carlow College and I wasn't able to do it anymore. So that was kind of sad.

I worked part-time at -- well, actually, when I first dropped out I didn't work, but then a few years later I worked as a teacher's aide at the School for the Blind. I did that about four years, then I quit that cause I had to get my mental health together cause I was having mental health issues again. Then in my later twenties I went back there to be a teacher's aide for a student that was deaf, blind. That was very interesting cause I knew some sign language, and so I used to go to the conferences and things like that, and I had a good time. Being a teacher's aide was very nice. I used to volunteer at a camp. I did that for six years.

Tell... For people who don't know anything about this building, will you say something about this building?

Well, it started as a space for people that were blind and visually-impaired, and I guess it was named for Senator Moorehead, and he was very interested in doing things for people that are blind and visually-impaired. I like living in the apartment because you have your privacy. I have a lot of people that I know in here. They have a lot of activities in here. A couple times a month they'll have different kinds of games in here. They have a Tenant Council in here. They did have an exercise group, but I don't think they have that anymore. But they have different activities that come in. So it's pretty nice.

So, you keep yourself pretty active?

Oh, yeah. I'm coming back from when I had my hospitalization for mental health issues. I was in the hospital for six months. I was at Western Psych. It was very strange because I ended up having hand surgery for carpal tunnel surgery, and they think the anesthesia must have triggered it. They don't know for sure, and I've had mental health hospitalizations, but not that severe. I just totally crashed, and I wasn't able to communicate, I wasn't able to deal with myself and they had me in a special unit. I had pneumonia, my body curled up in a catatonic state. I had to have ECT treatments, electroconvulsive therapy. They think it must have had something to do with the bipolar, but they're not sure. But the ECT did work. It took an attorney to overturn my medical directive, because I said in my medical directive I did not want to have ECT, and so they tried medications, they tried talking, they tried everything else, but they had to do the ECT, so they had to get my attorney friend to overturn the ECT so I could get it.

I don't remember how many ECT's I had. They said I had a good many of them. But the nurses were nice and I have a support circle of friends that come around and support me with different things. The doctor was not really used to working with people with disabilities, but he at least listened to my support circle and kept them abreast on things, and they were there at all my meetings.

I was sort of curious about the people at Western Psych understanding that, first of all you're blind, you use a wheelchair and you have this mental health issue. Did they look at you as a whole person, or were they just looking at you as your mental illness?

Well, I think that they got better, as my circle people helped them learn about me as a whole person, I felt that I was treated pretty well. I had a good doctor and I went to his... They had a mental health conference last fall and I went to his conference, and he talked about... He walked right up to me and talked to me and he asked me if it was all right if he talked about me. So that was pretty neat. I thought that was pretty interesting. I have a good therapist, Susan. I see Susan about every two-three weeks. I see my psychiatrist every month or two. I keep the doctors running because between that and my PCP and my neurologist, my arthritis doctor, so I go and see a lot of them. I go on most of them myself. Some of them that I meet me over there that will meet me over there. My case manager will meet me over there.

Will Access take you into a building?

They'll take me in, but they can't take me up an elevator.

What's been the biggest struggle in your life?

Well, I'll say my mental health struggles has been my struggle just recently. Yeah, I take four different medications. I have a mobile medication nurse that comes in from Western Psych and she helps me to pour my pills. Not just my medications for mental health, but all my medications. I have my blood pressure medicine, I have my seizure disorder medicine. I have fourteen pills I take in the morning and fifteen pills I take at night. I do believe that because even though the physical disabilities do cause me challenges, I think that the mental health part is the most challenging. Most people don't understand it because they can't really, they can't see it, and then if someone does behave a little bit strangely, they don't understand about it. Because like I said, I have personal assistant people who will come in and they don't understand like some days where I'm not as clear as I need to be, or if I forget things more, they think I'm making it up. Yeah, it's a sore point to some of my personal assistants, cause they don't understand it.

The mental health part is harder, because society and the community doesn't understand it, or is it more of a personal confusion?

I think it's both, actually, cause like you say, the community does not understand mental health issues, and I know it's caused me some problems on a personal level, as well. And sometimes I feel, how can I say it, it's just hard, you know.

You know, everyone always says that the mental health is so much harder on society. What do we do with this?

I guess a lot of it means more education, more education about it to help people understand, because I know in my family there's other people that have mental health issues. I have several cousins that have it. My aunt, my one aunt had it. She stayed at Mayview State Hospital. Two of my cousins stayed there too, for awhile. I'm glad I never had to do that, cause actually, when I was in the hospital my psychiatrist at first was suggesting that I go to Mayview, if I was going to stay there for an extended period of time. Fortunately, my attorney friend said, "No."

Well, you have a circle that you can trust.

Yeah, I have my circle that I can trust. Like I said, I have my one person acts as my guardian while I'm in the hospital, and she pays all my bills and does everything to make sure that everything is kept open.

So, Zetta, tell us how you got involved with the DD Council?

Developmental Disabilities Council. A man named Bob Garrett called me and invited me to the dinner that, they were meeting in Pittsburgh – I think was '92 – so from '92 to '93 I was on a committee to work on things, and in '93 I actually was appointed to be on the Council.

Most influential person in your life?

Well I would say between my mother and my grandmother, because my mother kept me trying to do more things and trying to do more things on my own. And my grandmother, who tried to make me have a better attitude. She always said, "Keep smiling. Keep trying. Keep doing what you're doing."

Is there anything that you wanted to say, Zeta, that we didn't ask you?

Well, just that I'm getting back towards work, being a peer counselor over at Mercy Renaissance Center. I was working for them for awhile until I got sick, and then they had a rule, I guess, that if you were gone six months or more, you had to start over again, so I'm working on getting my credentials back so I can be a peer counselor with them.