

## CLAWS AND WINGS:

### AN ORAL HISTORY EXPLORATION OF DISABILITY IN DELAWARE 1917-2017

Transcription of video recorded July 18, 2017

Interviewer: Kim Burdick, MA, MPA (Referred to hereafter as KB)

Interviewee: John McNeal (Referred to hereafter as JM), Director for the State Council for Persons with Disabilities

Topics included: Spinal Cord Injury, ADA Coordinator, Transportation

Run time: 1:17:25

\* \* \* \* \*

JM: My name is John McNeal. I am the state ADA Coordinator. I'm also the Director of the State Council for Persons with Disabilities. Also a loving husband and a father of a wonderful little 2-year-old boy. I can't say my title without, certainly without mentioning them as well, those titles that we have when we live in the community and what our place is in the community are every bit as important as the titles we carry as professionals.

KB: And you might mention that you ran for office.

JM: I did, actually! I had the great pleasure in 2004 to, to be offered, or to be asked by our then-Treasurer and our later Secretary of Health and Social Services, then-Treasurer Jack Markell and, and Rita Landgraf, to, to run for office. Of course, that also meant to have some of the community support for, from my district, but it was a wonderful privilege. I would say, something that if anybody ever has an interest in doing they should absolutely do so, but it is a real challenge as well. It... One of the things that I had mentioned previously was just how much something like that can change a person. And we look at what happens in the world today, I can surely, I surely understand, you know, why we are in the kind of the, the, the challenging places we are with regards to peace and harmony and working together, whether it's at a legislative level or whether it's at a federal level with Congress.

My, my experience in running for office, for a House, Legislative House seat here in Delaware was, was one that I started, you know, in advance, over a year before the election. And I can honestly say by the time I got to the point where I was with, of Election Day, I kind of lost the person that actually was running. That process turns you into an individual who, who starts out running with great values and, and an understanding of what they want to do for the community, and by the time you get to Election Day you're a person who's trying to get elected and those two things have some real differences to them.

KB: So, so start out, when you were a kid. What, where did you live and what was your life like, just basically, up until high school?

JM: I started out, actually... My, my life has been unique. I've lived in many places and... I, I shouldn't say "unique." It's, it's... All of our lives are unique, so, kind of something, you know, all of us can say. I started out my life living with an elderly aunt and uncle and there were some family reasons why that, that occurred, but I... It kind of is going to be kind of like the, like the Tiny Tim story. I, you know, I, I, I lived with the, the elderly aunt and uncle in a, probably a, I think it was a 12x50 foot trailer. Not very much, they didn't have very much. He was, my grand-, my uncle was in his 60s and my,

my aunt was in her 50s at that time and for them to take on a, a newborn and raise him was something with, with the, you know, rather meager means.

But I was a prince. I was a complete prince to those, to those people. Never went without anything. Couldn't have my eye catch anything and not have it. Never had to ask for anything. But, you know, within that, also learned and valued from them, not just the giving nature, but a, but also an appreciation for, for what it is to not just give, but to give as well, for the meager means. It was not for lack of love. I don't think any little boy was ever loved as much as I was.

I lived there until I was four, or, I'm sorry, I think I was three when I was, I moved from there to my, my grandparents' house, home, from my father's parents, in Chesapeake City, Maryland. It's that place, I think, in the back of my mind that, you know, when all of us have an opportunity to, somebody mentions "home" to us, we all have a place in our mind forever as "home." And I think no matter where I live or where I go in life, somewhere in the back of my mind, Chesapeake City is always "home."

I grew up on the canal with, in my grandparents' home. While they were living, while my grandfather was living, and then while my grandfather passed. So I, I lived there for, you know, 'til I was 10. My father remarried and we moved to, we moved to Delaware, which was kind of a big step, you know? Big change. A new "mommy," so to speak. A stepmother who ultimately, in many ways, was a, a better mom to me than what I could've, you know, could've imagined from anywhere. My mother, you know, at that point in time anyway, my mother was, was very young. She was 15 when she had my sister, 17 when she had me. And there was, you know, there's always family differences, you know. I was not disconnected from my mother completely. We did the weekend here and weekend there, which really was kind of interesting with spiritual values, in the sense that my father was raised in an Irish Catholic home and my mother was raised in a, well, she was raised Irish Catholic and then as she got older she had some things occur in her life and it was more of a Southern Baptist church that she went to. So one week it was living in the Irish Catholic philosophy and then the next week it was living in the, in kind of a Southern Baptist. And that was like the perfect storm, actually, to identify that, you know, there's a great deal of differences in this world when we look at something that's supposed to be so common to all of us.

But it allowed me to develop my own spirituality. I think later in life, ultimately, really boded well for me and helped me. Helped me certainly identify certain things that I think sometimes, sometimes some philosophies and, you know, or being so deep in the one way of thinking, can sometimes blind you. And so, it was, you know, it was important. Like I said, my spirituality was, was utmost from the time I was very, very little.

You know, when I moved to Delaware, my, my father had some problems growing up, you know, some challenges with, with alcohol. And, and it was really... It was tough. It was tough on my stepmother, who was trying to, you know, nurture, you know, two new children, myself and my sister, including my, my half-brother, at a very young age as well. But she, she did a really great job and...

We, you know, my father's challenges created us to kind of bounce around from this home to that home, from this, you know, relative to that relative. It was kind of interesting. You really never find, you know, never quite feel grounded or secure to be in

any one place. But, on the flip side of that, I, you know, I got to see how a lot of people lived. I got to learn and understand how, you know, people live a different way of life and, and through that, also had the opportunity to meet great people outside of my family that showed me a different way of living. Outside of that. You know, much of my family was involved in, you know, you know, in alcoholism and much of my family smoked, you know. Those are, you know, the kind of the vices that, that if you live in most of your life just are, are normal. But being able to see outside, you know, other ways of life, other family members, allowed me to see that there's a lot of different "normals" out there, so...

KB: So, tell me about your coach, when you were in sports?

JM: Oh, gosh. I, yeah, you know, this goes along with kind of that spirituality conversation that I was having earlier. I, I was in junior league football. I was about 12 years old. And I had a coach, his name was Coach Rohrer, Wayne Rohrer. His, his son later, you know, through our, our common interest and our, you know, our, our camaraderie as teammates, we became best of friends. But Coach Rohrer took a special interest in me and I, I didn't realize it so much at, you know, as we were going through three or four seasons together. But my senior year (my senior year!), my last year in youth league football, Coach Rohrer was one of those types of people that kind of look like a motorcycle gang member, kind of a, you know, a Hell's Angel, so to speak. But he, he had a long beard and long hair.

He, he was one of those types of coaches that, you know, at 10, 11, 12 years old, that at halftime of games we had to go up on the other side of the building, 'cause I think mothers would weep for the conversations that he would have with us, with regards to how our play was in the first half if we weren't doing very well. Or, for that matter, even if we were doing very well, he always wanted us to do better. And he had a very unique way of getting that message across, which to me wasn't so unfamiliar because I'd kinda grown up in that lifestyle.

But, yeah, Coach Rohrer, you know, he was rough, and from time to time, and it was a, you know, certainly one of those people that you, that got your attention when he was around. He, you know, one specific time, we had a game and for all my, all my life, I had never been on a winning team. I'd always been a pretty good player on some teams that weren't so good, which didn't work out well when you had a sister who was also a super athlete, who was on a championship team every single year! Who had piles of trophies and all, you know, for me to admire and be reminded of.

But my senior, or last year, in, you know, youth league football, we, we had really good team. And we were in the playoffs and the winner had the chance to go on to the championship game. And, we were playing against a team, just kinda coincidentally that was, it was also a neighborhood rivalry because of the, the other coach lived across the street from, from Coach Rohrer. And they had their own unique thing that was going on. And we, we started out the game. We were doing quite well and probably with just a few minutes left in the game, the other team went ahead, and time was starting to count down, and, you know, when you're playing, watching a football game, that game seems like it takes forever to watch. When you're playing it, particularly when you're losing and you

want to go ahead, seconds are, you know, minutes are like seconds and seconds are, are very tiny.

But as the, as the game went on – it was cold, it was rainy – I went out for a pass. And when I went up for the pass I had one of the young men on the other team, who just happened to be the other coach's son, run under my legs. When he ran under my legs I, I, you know, the ball hit my hand, he ran under my legs, I flipped upside down, and landed on my head. And, of course I was hurt. I was... My, my, my feelings and my pride was probably hurt more than anything because I had missed the ball. I knew the game was coming to an end sooner rather than later, and so I, I lay there on the ground, on the other side of the, the other team's sideline. Coach Rohrer come running across the field. Of course, he's very upset because, one, it looked like somebody had run under my legs and tried to hurt me, and I'm sure that wasn't the case, but... So they were yelling back and forth and, you know, finally he comes over. He picks me up and he's, "Are you okay?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm okay." I've got my head down and, and I'm crying.

So we finally get off the field and as we're walking off the field, one of the things that struck me was, there was actually an older gentleman, probably a grandfather to one of the other players, he said, you know, "Well, Number 25's out of the game now. We should have this." Which, you know, looking back, must have meant that I was a pretty good football player. But, and I thought to myself, "I'm 12 years old. That's a heck of a thing to say about a 12-year-old!" So as we, as we walked off the field finally, I had to come out of the game for at least one play. When you hurt yourself, you have to come out of the game.

So the coach allowed me to go sit on the, sit on the bench. And I had never been out of the game before. I never... I played offence, I played defense, I played special teams. I didn't know what it was to come out of a game. I never got hurt. I'd always been very fortunate not to get hurt. And I was, I was sitting on the bench and I was crying and I was looking at the game, looking out thinking, you know, season's coming to a head. I've got my head down. And here comes Coach Rohrer.

Coach Rohrer comes over and, you know, that really tough, you know, rough guy. Comes down and he kneels down before me. And he sits down and he looks down and he says, "John, look at me." And I've got my head down, as, as we do when we're little ones, you know, we're not gonna look up. We're gonna, we're gonna have our heads down and, you know, acknowledged, "I'm looking, I'm looking." He said, "No, I want you to look at me." So he made me look in his eyes and he said, you know, "I need you to look at me. I need you to listen." He said, "There's gonna be times in your life where, you know, win some things and you're gonna lose some things, but you don't ever let anybody beat ya." And he said, "You know, it's okay if you're hurt and you want to sit over here, but you need to think about that. You need to decide if this is, you know, how you want to end this season and it's completely okay, if you're hurt. Those things are gonna happen, too, in life. But if you haven't finished what you were here to do, you need to decide if you want to get back into the game."

So, he got up. He left me with that. And I sat, you know, on, on the bench and suddenly I noticed, as I was looking down the bench that I was the only one there. I was the only one sittin' on the bench. You had little guys, you know, that were 9 years old, 10 years old,

who had never got into a game, you know, except for the obligatory time that they had to play a couple plays. And, and I look and I saw all the cheerleaders, you know, were now gone and, and all the fans were gone. They were kinda up in their cars. It was cold. It was raining. It was towards the end of the game so they were finishing out the game. It was kind of neat though, because where the cars were located it was like a, almost like kind of a stadium side, you know, stadium-style, you know, location, because the cars were all parked on a hill where they could sit up and everybody could look down.

So I sat there watching and, it was kind of funny, too, because I had never stopped long enough to notice that when you, you know, when your body is hot and it's cold outside that you're, you kind of get a steam coming off your jersey, and I thought, "Holy cow! You know, I'm on fire here." So I, I look up and down and I was like, "Oh, my gosh! You know, where is everybody at?" And the, you know, the other boys who never got into a game, they were all up on the sidelines watching what was left of the game, hoping beyond hope that we could still win this game.

And, so I, I saw that I was all alone. I saw that I, you know, that I, I'd given up, you know, been out there playing all this time, and now I'm over here on the bench, I'm kind of giving up on something that, you know, even those that haven't gotten into a game would never give up on. So, I went over to the coach and kind of pulled on his shirt and said, "I want to get back in the game." And he said, "Okay. You go in and you tell Billy [redacted], and I still remember his name, to throw that ball as far as he can and I want you to run as fast as you can, catch that ball, and don't stop running till you get into the end zone."

So, I run in. I gave Billy instructions, you know. We were all kind of losing hope beyond hope. So I gave him the instructions. I went out and I took off running. Billy threw the ball as far as he could. I caught it and I kept running. And I think, you know, it's funny, as I think sometimes, even to this day, I still hear young man, it was me, and I can remember Todd and Alex, still chasing me as I was running down the sideline. So I ran. We scored a touchdown. And time was running out, you know, so I knew that we were close to winning the game, and my coach, my coach came running out on the field. And he picked me up. And he held me and I was crying, 'cause when I got to the end zone I just went down on my knees. First off I, you know, it happened just like he said it was gonna happen. And I got down on my knees, he came and picked me up, and he said, "Don't ever forget this. No matter what happens in life, you remember this all your life. There's gonna be times when you're gonna live, you're gonna win some things, you're gonna lose some things. But you never let anybody beat ya."

And, and that is really what I live my life on, you know, 12-years-old that's something, you know, a long story to get to the most meaningful part of it, that you don't ever give up on things. It's something that I hope to instill in my son, that we won't always win. We won't always lose. And we may not even when, you know, even when we haven't won a game or things happen in our lives that we can't do things the way that we used, we did them doesn't mean that we can't still find ourselves to be a part of it.

Because, you know, I had the privilege later in life, even after my injury, to become "Coach," and, and to be able to coach a young youth basketball team and have that same halftime talk with them, only for the things to unfold in the same manner. And, when we

were down by several points at half-, halftime, I think it was 18-4, and we came back and we won 33 to, or 34-32, and, and to have those young people come back, you know, those little guys, 8- to 11-year-old kids, go in, you know, to instill that, that you don't give up, you know. You play until that last whistle blows and, and anything can happen.

KB: And then, let me see. Next step after that, what, what did you do in high school and what were your aspirations then?

JM: Most of my high school aspir-... No. I, I traveled, or like I said, I moved around quite a bit. Like, I had a wonderful, like I said, stepmother and most of my, my teens, all of my teens, were living with her. So most of my life I wasn't necessarily living in a home that was biological to me. So all the love that I, that I grew to know came from individuals that weren't necessarily obligated to give me that. So, I have to add that in because it's just, it was just really something so important to know and understand.

And when I was... When I got to high school, again, a lot, you know, surrounded sports. And a lot was also, you know, around education. My parents took a... One of the things that I realized very early on and I can't mention high school and, you know, doing well or struggling in high school without mentioning the fact that, one, but you know, it's really never quite feeling like completely a part of something, went back to, goes, goes back to when I did move into my grandparents' house and I had a grandfather who just saw something in me. It was one of those, a, sit down and write, or sit down and watch the evening news, which I do to this day, read the newspaper, and I remember him telling me when I was a little boy, or I remember going to first grade, and I got my first report card and I got all Bs. And I went to my, my first grade teacher and I said, you know, "Are these good grades?" And she said, "No, they're awful." Well, I didn't know how to take that as a first grader. I was like, "Oh, my gosh! What am I going to do? I've got awful grades. I can't go home with these grades!"

And so I, I didn't go home. I went and I kind of sat on the banks, canal banks, so, like I said, I grew up on the canal banks, and my cousins came looking for me. And they found me and they took me in. I showed my grandfather my report card. And he said, "No, this is aw-, no, this is terrific! You know, straight Bs, that's really good." And so I saw something early on that says, "Okay. This is how you get positive attention. You do well in school."

And so I, you know, funny thing with that was, I went back. I worked even harder because I saw, okay, this is where I get that positive attention that all young people, all little ones crave. And I worked even harder and got straight As with the next report card and saw, "Oh, my gosh! I didn't get straight Bs! What am I gonna do?" But, you know, I went back and he instilled in me the importance of, you know, getting good grades and I saw that, again, as a way of, you know, you know, as a way of getting that positive attention which then led into, you know, later years working hard in school. Sometimes working not as hard as others, as other times. Sometimes struggling in school, which usually had more to do with behavior than it did with, with education. But, I continued to play basketball. I continued to, you know, enjoy, you know, playing football when I, when I could. But, I...

One of the things that I really began enjoying when I got to high school was writing. I loved writing. Didn't realize how much I loved writing. I loved debating. You know,

social studies classes, civics classes, those types of classes were, were the classes that I really, really enjoyed.

My senior year I, I moved from the biggest school in Delaware, William Penn, back to my hometown in Chesapeake City to, to, to play football with my friends. And it was, it was my senior year that I, I, I thought was gonna be that kind of a crown jewel. I get to do everything with my friends, even though it's, you know, not quite the big football school that William Penn was. That summer though, we had our, our summer prac-, or I'm sorry, our summer scrimmages and somewhere during the course of the summer scrimmages or when I was swimming between practices I had done something. I felt that I, I hurt my back. And I went back to, you know, the scrimmages, trying to tough it out, and I took a hit, And I later wound up in the hospital and through that, must have spent several weeks in the hospital, not knowing why I'd lost, you know, feeling and sensation in my legs. And it was kind of odd because I had gone back to school with, to be with my friends of my youth, forgetting that time moved on in many ways, even while I was, while I was away.

And, so I spent, you know, those weeks in the hospital, you know, pretty much on my own, you know, not getting any visitors from, you know, from the football team. The football team being told that, you know, that my family was suing the football team when that wasn't the case, it was just that we had paid for insurance. So word got around that, you know, that I was, we were suing. Not only that, you know, at football and basketball seasons there was big write-ups about, in the paper, about my transferring to, to the new school. And so that kind of got thrown back as well, you know, even by some of the teachers.

But I finally made it back to school. I did recover, for the most part, although I lost my, my senior football season and my senior basketball season. And when I went back to school I just really threw myself into, threw myself into the, once again, my academics. And really committed, probably more than I ever had, into my academics. And tried to get things back on course there. And kind of went through most of that year, kind of by myself, in, to some degree, but developing friendships with, you know, some of the students that had come in during the course that I had been away, but regained, you know, throughout, you know, through the course of the year, you know, some of those friendships back. But, you know, what went along with that was, you know, what do I, was, what was I gonna do after I got out of high school? And, as we all, you know, have to think about our senior years, and I thought that, you know, if nothing else... I was a little depressed come, you know, when I first got back to school, so I signed up to go into the Navy's nuclear program.

And, as fate would have it, I went into basic training and identified that my, it was identified that I had a back injury that I hadn't disclosed and was given the opportunity to go home or, or – I wanted to be on submarines – or to be on a different type of ship, an aircraft carrier or something. And also having young love waiting for me at home, I decided to go home. And, you know, as young love would work out, in the end the young lady broke up a few weeks later. She was much smarter than I was. She was, knew her future much better than, than I did. But, to make a long story short, that was something else that didn't work out exactly the way that I had planned, as life generally has it for us. We all think we can plan it out perfectly, but it doesn't always work out that way.

KB: And when did you start riding motorcycles?

JM: I didn't start riding motorcycles until... Oh, I had bought a motorcycle, my first motorcycle, probably when I was 19 or so. And it wasn't long after I had bought that motorcycle that I realized that it wasn't probably in the best interest for me. And then my roommate, you know, as it happens, you know, I was, got involved with another young lady and her family really became kinda my family. We were probably, we probably, as most young people do – I shouldn't say "probably" – we thought we were more mature than what we were. We lived together. And she actually bought a motorcycle. And she, she was a better rider than I was. And, and I traveled quite a bit at that time, you know, for the type of work that I, that I did. I went to Alabama at, you know, one point in time, and it was when I was working down in Alabama that I got a phone call that she had wrecked her motorcycle and then she had been in... You know, I thought, you know, she hit, I think, an 8-point buck or something, a deer, on, you know, doing a relatively good speed. And she, you know, she was hurt.

So I was, I had a wonderful boss at that time, said, you know, "You need to get up there and, and be with her." And, you know, like most things, you know, young people have their ins and their outs, you know, pretty frequently, not being to make up our mind what we want and need to do with our lives. And my, my heart always weighed heavier than my common sense on a lot of things. So, so I, I, you know, I was, I was afraid. So I came up here, came back to be with her. And when I got up here I, you know, didn't really have another way to get around, but I found her. She was just fine. She was well. She wasn't injured. And the only thing that happened to the bike was it bent the rearview mirror of the bike.

So, I decided that that would be my way of getting around, I would just use the motorcycle to, to get around. And, you know, couple weeks later she and I kind, once again, had kind of our outs again. But I, I needed to, you know, I, I decided to do some work back and forth in Dover, so I was driving quite a long distance each day on the bike. But I had in a kind of, kind of, what's the word that I'm looking for? In an unorthodox manner had kind of run into my mother again at a social event and she had invited me to a, a political fundraiser, of all things. And I, I accepted and she, you know, she told me, she said, "I just wanted, you know, none of my friends know that I have a son who's done well for himself, so could you, you know, would you be willing to come?"

So I did. And it was at that event where I, where, where, you know, it was a wonderful day. It was really a whole lot of fun. There was a lot of men so I got to show off my athletic prowess playing basketball and volleyball and all the things that I enjoyed. And I was just about to leave the fundraiser and I had a young lady ask me to dance. And I'll never forget it. My last dance was to the song "Unchained Melody." I shouldn't say "my last dance." My last dance on my, you know, as a, as a person who could stand on his own two feet, literally, then, was to "Unchained Melody," which was kind of ironic 'cause that was like the last, one of, movie that I'd last seen with my significant other at that time. And we, we'd had a discussion after seeing the movie about the "what if thing's happen?" and, you know, the movie, the, the song came from the movie, "Ghost," if you can remember it from that year. And it was a really touching, romantic movie about, you know, a young man who, Patrick Swayze, who gets, loses his life, but he looks over his significant other at that time, or his wife, I should say, Demi Moore.

And, you know, after the movie, we had one of those conversations of, “Well what would you do?” And I remember telling her that if I couldn’t dribble a basketball I wouldn’t want to live, you know. But of course, you know, it started out with, “Would you look after me?” You know, “Of course I would.” And then, “Well, what if this happened and what if this happened?” And somehow we got to “What if you were paralyzed?” You know, and I told her if I couldn’t dribble a basketball, no, I wouldn’t want to live. And I remember how genuinely I felt that way. I couldn’t imagine not having my, my physical abilities, you know, or my athletic prowess. She was more jealous of a basketball than she had to be of another girl at that point in time, so.

But anyway, so, I, you know, I left that night and I rode the bike up the road and, you know, I had things that I was thinking about. One of the things that I was concerned about was, was... Wasn’t far from where my mother lived and I knew where she lived pretty well. And to get myself back and forth to her place without worrying too much about, you know, the windy, thin roads that, that were, that were in that area. And, but this particular area, even though it wasn’t far from where she lived wasn’t an area that I frequently went to. So as I was riding up the road, I came up to a hill. And as I was going up the hill, it wasn’t a very steep hill, I was going up the hill, I was worried about, you know, things like: I don’t know this road very well, I’m afraid there could be, you know, turns or something like that where a car could come out. So I didn’t want to have to stop suddenly and be afraid that something behind me was gonna run me over.

So, I needed to look over my shoulder and find out, because the rearview mirror was broke. So I turned around, I looked over my shoulder. And when I looked back I was right in the middle of a split in the road at the top of the, at the top of the hill. And I went straight into the woods, several feet into the woods. Some people... Still to this day, can’t imagine how I got as far into the woods as I did. And then I found, you know... The funny thing is, as you’re going through this, this takes like mere seconds, you know, maybe two seconds, but in that whole process your mind is working so fast that you actually... All these options come to you. And to me it was: get off the bike, stay on the bike, you know, having the conversation with myself, you know, of how, you know, what would turn out from that.

And I remember thinking to myself, “Just ride it out. You’ll be okay.” You know? “You’ve lived a charmed life. All will be well.” And then I hit something that was a lot stronger than me or the bike, that stopped me suddenly and I went head over, over the handlebars and head-first into a tree.

Now fortunately I had a helmet on. But, you know, I damaged my spinal cord. I had broken my neck and there I was laying up in the woods, 9:00 at night. And laying there for quite some time. And it was kinda interesting because you, you lay there, and you know, it’s nighttime and it’s in the woods. You’re out in the country and if you, you can hear things for just miles. You hear things that you otherwise could never hear. And, the interes-, you know, thing was, there was cars that would come by, pass, periodically. There wasn’t very many. I knew the cars would be coming away from the fundraiser that I was at. And one stopped. And, you know, and I hear the people talking in the, in the car. They had the windows down. Was back before every car had air conditioning like it does now. And the gentleman said, “That looks like a motorcycle headlight up there to me.” And I could hear the young lady in the car say, “No. It looks like a house to me. I think,

you know, I...Honey, I want to get home.” And I was like, “ Oh, my god. What did I do to a woman?” [KB: Laughs] “Somebody... This one’s gonna do me in!” You know, and I wasn’t at a point where I could, you know, I had collapsed a lung and, and I couldn’t yell for help. I had some internal bleeding that was taking place. But fortunately he prevailed and he decided he was gonna come up and take a look.

So they, they came up, they looked, they found me. I could tell them where to go get help. I remember sitting there, you know, even as I waiting, it’s kind of strange the things you think about, you have, you know, quite a bit of time. I don’t know if it was, you know, an hour or two hour period of time, but, you know, somebody told me I had a 2 hour and 5 minute headlight because my headlight went off just shortly after I was found. And, but I remember my biggest concern was thinking about that charmed life as I was laying there was, you know, I was gonna be late to work for the next day. Or I was gonna have to miss work, you know, and I was, as I was contemplating, I, all I could think about was how I was gonna get myself to the shoulder before I was found.

And, I, I kept digging my elbow in, digging my elbow in, trying to get to the edge of the road. And I thought I, you know, I couldn’t get up and move because maybe I was in shock. And then I thought, “Well, if I was in shock, I probably wouldn’t be thinking I was in shock.” So, anyway, once I was found, I was helicoptered to Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson University Hospital [editor: Philadelphia]. Got great care there. Went to rehab at Magee Rehabilitation Center after that. Was identified that I had a C5-6 fracture in my spine, up in my, my neck area. Was told that it was what they call an “incomplete spinal cord injury.” Which meant that I, I would recover some, I could recover some of my, some of my physical attributes. But I mostly recovered after that was...

At, at, me, at the time that it happened, because of the swelling and the bleeding on the spinal cord, I couldn’t move any, you know, anything from my neck down, and of course I was in a what they call a “halo,” this apparatus that gets screwed into your forehead and into the back of your head. And you have to wear it until your neck, it, your neck heals. I had a spinal fusion that was done, where they took bone from my hip and grafted it to my neck. So it was, it was quite the ordeal. And, of course, for me, I, here I was in a position of unable to possibly dribble a basketball again. Course at that point in time I didn’t think that, you know. I was somebody who, again, you know, you win some things, you lose some things, but you don’t let anything beat ya. So this was just a game to me that I was going to beat. That, and beating and winning this game and walking again. If anybody could prove it could happen, that it would be me.

And, of course I had plenty of folks who knew, plenty of folks who knew my determination, you know, fed that as well, you know? Which is the right thing to do, particularly early in this stage of a spinal cord injury. You work really hard everyday and if something comes back, you know, you work at that. You maximize your utility. My favorite class in high school was my senior year economics class and of anything that I could say that, you know, I learned the most from was that basic fundamental. And that fundamental says you maximize your utilities. So whatever utilities that you have, whatever, whatever attributes you have available to you to use, you maximize that. And then if something comes along you, you work hard and you maximize that. So, that’s the way I, I took my injury. And I even still point where, you know, I remember the day, you know, I was unable to, you know... One of the things that’s below my injury is

something called “flexion,” the ability to raise your wrist. And this hand I can’t do it in my left hand, but one morning I noticed I had like a little flicker in my right, so I just kept working at it and working at it. And no, it’s not much. I maximized how much I could do it, and, and strengthening just that little bit I could tell... It’s funny how such a, a little thing in many ways can help you in other things. Picking up cups and not dropping them and things like that. So, again, maximizing your utilities.

But like I said, I thought it was a game. I thought it was a game to overcome having a spinal cord injury and to walk again. And after, it took a lit-, a bit of time, and I came home out of, out of Magee, and right back to my parents’ house. And again, back to, you know, a, to some of, you know, a 70x14 foot mobile home where, you know, to rebuild my life again. So, really I had spent actually most of my life trying to get away from my family, wanted to move out when I was 18, not for any other reason, you know, than to live a different way of life. I love my family. I love, you know, all that they had offered me and all that they had given me, and my extended family as well. Actually, I shouldn’t call it “extended,” but my stepparents, grandparents, and how they loved me.

But I wanted a different way of life than what I grew up in. I will say with regards to my stepmother’s parents, they were extremely hardworking. My grandfather never missed a day of work – I think he missed a day of work in 40 years. So, but anyway, that’s, you know, back with them and going, “Okay,” you know. “We build ourselves out of this.” And that’s where, that’s where the real challenge started. I was no longer in a rehab. I didn’t have all of those people everyday telling me to get up, get out of bed, get to rehab, or get to physical therapy, get to occupational therapy. Do those things. I’d lost, you know, now I’m out in the real world as opposed to a hospital room surrounded with, by people who are, in many ways, just like me, other people with spinal cord injuries. Other people who are (in) wheelchairs. Not everything is 100%, you know, ADA compliant, where you can wheel around freely. It’s in the heart of Philadelphia, and so you get a little sample of that when you go out, but you can’t, don’t realize, now you’re in a world, you know, and at that point in time I was in a manual wheelchair, which I could barely move myself.

So, I know, as much as I had a real determination, I was set in a place where I had a real challenge to, of all things, that were going to challenge my determination on what, you know, was gonna happen, and coming to the realization after time, that I was never gonna walk again. So that game would be a game that I would lose. And that was something that would be hard for me to swallow. But, once again, I had good people come into my life. And I don’t know of anybody, I, I’ve said it time and time again, I’ve Forest Gumped my way into this extraordinarily ordinary life. And it’s largely come my... The, in many ways, the impact that one person, with me, periodically through my life, kind of like Coach Rohrer, in a lot of ways. And there was a lot of Coach Rohrers. Well, let me rephrase: there was only one “Coach Rohrer.” But there’s a lot of, there’s a lot of people out there that have their own way of touching and impacting people.

And again, it’s, you know, one of the things that I said earlier. I was always driven by my heart and I had a young lady come into my life who was a, who was one of my home health aides. And she saw something in me. One, she saw that I still had a lot to give as a person. But she was like, “You need to get out.” You know. So she talked me into taking a class at Del Tech. Just take one class and see where that goes. And she also saw

something in me romantically, which gave me value again. The sense of, if somebody else can see something in me then there must be something fundamentally good there. So there's something to build on. And, and then also realizing that, you know, what, what, the help realized since I was, you know, this is still, in many ways, a game. It's a game of life. And walking again doesn't necessarily mean that you have to do it on your own two feet. That there's a number of ways to walk and...

KB: Did, did you graduate from Del Tech, then?

JM: No I didn't. I, took the one class and when I was taking the one class I had a, I had the... I got an oppor-, opportunity after taking, I, actually, I, I think I went two semesters, 27 years ago, so. I took a couple different classes and, I... No, I didn't graduate. I, I got offered a job to do peer support for Easter Seals. But, in all of it, that's getting ahead just a little bit. One of the things, one of the opportunities that came from the going to school was somebody had stated that I should get in touch with Vocational Rehab and maybe get a power wheelchair instead of trying to wheel myself every place. And, so I did. I called Voc Rehab and they came out, and something that I hadn't heard of, and I never thought, I thought a power wheelchair was like a Ferrari would be to most common people. How in the world am I ever gonna afford something like that, you know? That was for, that was for rich people.

And, so, no. They helped pay for it and I, I, I did take another class later. But, you know, the other thing it did, it just allowed me to open up avenues, open up social life and... You know I would actually use it to wheel back and forth instead of taking a bus back and forth to Del Tech. I lived across Route, think, 13 from it, so I would ride myself over, cross Route 13, taking, you know, some risks from time to time. Or ride, you know, in my chair down to the mall, the Dover Mall, which was... [KB: That's pretty far.] Yeah, about a quarter mile away from where I was living.

Started challenging myself. Started saying, "Wait a second," you know. "I'm the same person that I was before." You know, I'm, you know... I, I, I didn't identify this all myself. Again, helped some people identified it into me and, like I said, I was also a very spiritual person. And I do remember waking up one night in the middle of the night and thinking about my life and almost having a voice speak to me in that way that Coach Rohrer did, because those were words that Coach Rohrer spoke. They were not coming from Coach Rohrer. I never heard the man speak so softly in my entire life! It was almost like talking to somebody out of their body. But I, it was like having a voice to me, a voice that I'd heard before coming in and say, you know, "There's gonna be some," you know, that, you know, "what was it that you wanted in your life before, John?"

And, you know, I thought to myself, I wanted, you know, my own family. Of course, my wife, you know, a wife, you know, that I would love and value. My own family. Do something meaningful in life. Have purpose. And be able to give back and, of course, be able to support that family and the things that I wanted to do in life. And, you know, the question was thrown back to me, "Well why, what's stopping you from doing that?" And, you know, the only answer that I had was, "Either myself or nothing." And I could never admit to myself that I couldn't do something about that.

So, so ultimately, you know, I... Eventually, having a power wheelchair, the ability to get around. I, you know, I found my way, you know, once again in the hands of some other

really good people. You know it took a few years, and then I, I made a phone call. Somebody suggested I make a phone call to this young lady by the name of Jamie Wolfe who was working for Center for Independent Living, which I didn't know much about. And she invited me in to, into the office, you know, and got out. And, eventually, actually, we became roommates. And that was the beginning of a new life for me. And that's when, that's when John McNeal really discovered John McNeal.

I think most of my life, even up to the time I had my motorcycle accident, for as much as I thought I was doing the right thing and heading into the right direction, and people would say, "Well," you know, "you, you, you know, you had so much, so much available to you when you were 22 years old. You know, how could you possibly," you know, "imagine anything less than that?" And, you know, I can't imagine things not unfolding in the way that they've unfolded.

KB: Especially with Jamie. She wouldn't let you go backwards! [Laughs]

JM: The funny thing was that, you know, you know, Jamie gave me the opportunity. It was the first time, well, it was the first time living in, out in the community on my own. You know, I spent a lot of time... She lived in downtown Dover at the time, right next to the Governor's mansion. How perfect! So I could invite myself to parties, if I wanted to, parties that the Governor was having. But mostly it got me, you know, really, "Okay, now you have to depend on yourself."

And, you know, and I, I happened to meet some other folks along the way, you know, my, my friend Ray Hunt, who also worked at Independent Resources and Daniese McMullin-Powell and some others who, you know, who really showed me, you know, it's not just a matter of living life for yourself but, you know, you have a lot to give. Our way of life, you know, living life as a disability, is it's not easy. But if you want more, if you want, if we, if we as a community want more, or we want to be more involved in the community or more part of the community, then that was something worth fighting for.

KB: So once you met all these, these fighters, these wonderful people, how did you get from there to where you are now?

JM: You know, you don't... You know, it's, it's kinda like walking up the stairs. You know, again, like I said, I'll say probably a thousand times that I've Forest Gumped my way into the life that I have. It always seems like the right person at the right time fell into my life. But I know that also doesn't come without some responsibility myself. I know that I'm somewhat responsible for, you know, respon-, responsible for the, we're always held responsible for the bad things that we do in life. When we, never, usually don't credit ourselves for the good things that come of our lives. And, so I know a lot of that had to do with, well, you know, first, you know, I have to say, even while I was living with my parents, my stepmother took wonderful, wonderful care, you know, of me. So, you know, living with Jamie, living downtown, I actually spent a lot of time at Independent Resources to the point where I, I think they just thought, "This guy's around an awful lot. Why don't we just offer him a job?" So they did.

And I worked at Independent Resources for five years. It was a wonderful experience, you know, working to help other people with disabilities find the resources and services they need, needed to live in the community. And by that time, it didn't take long being

around that group to, to know and feel self-determination. To know and feel and understand what it is, you know, not just to, you know, not to just accept, you know, what society, society had to offer you, but sometimes take. And edu-, take by means oftentimes of educating others. So, I, I took the opportunity that was provided to me through Independent Resources to, to, one, to get to learn, to know, to learn how to, you know, advocate for others and advocate for myself through that process. To understand and know what it was to, to, you know, to meet and work with legislators and policy makers. No one understands at the beginning that they're people, they're neighbors, they're people just like the rest of us, you know. They work for us. We oftentimes, you know, put our eye and look, feel as though we look really high, you know, look up, you know, to them. And yes, their job is tough and their job is, is meaningful and purposeful. But we have to always remember that they work for us so that if we want something done, we have to push them, sometimes nudge them, sometimes shove, you know, some folks in the direction to, to help us get to where we need.

And that's ultimately what happened with me. I mean, I, I, you know, I took that opportunity and then I, you know, Jamie and I moved out of an apartment. I had another apartment that I was moving into that wasn't quite ready and spent some time living with another friend and his mother, the Hunts. More, additional people: Ray and I were great friends. It wasn't just a matter of going back to work. It was about, you know, being part of the community, and being a part of the community to me meant being able to go in and out, have a social life. That meant, you know, spending some time at the local club or, or doing things. Going out and meeting people. We spent a lot of time, maybe too much time at times, doing those types of things. But I never, I, I found myself unknowing-, I think unknowingly, feeling a level of equality, and, and an importance, to anybody else.

And, you know, and that was instilled in me in a number of ways. You know, coaching basketball to young, you know, young quote/unquote able-bodied kids. Being able to teach again was just a, you know, was so empowering to know that, you know, the true measure of a man is not how tall you stand. It's how much you look up to him. You know? And that was something that, you know, that, that really drove me was, you know, it's, you know, I'm 6'2", but I'm, you know... I think my, the life that I have and the life that's been given to me, you know, through the peers and being educated by others gave me an opportunity to be looked up to, far more than I did when I stood 6'2", so...

KB: Tell me about ADA. Did that happen after your accident?

JM: Oh, that is kind of an interesting story, because the ADA was signed just weeks, literally a few weeks, before I had my, my injury. It was signed in July; I had my, my motorcycle accident in August. And I remember hearing about things on the news about it, even after I had, you know, after my injury. It was still a story in the news and it was, it was interesting, because I really never gave much thought to what this ADA thing, this Americans with Disabilities Act, or what that, what it would mean. Of course, I had no history to that. My history began the year the ADA was signed. It's only now, later in life, you know, going through the processes of understanding what the ADA meant and what's happened since the ADA was signed, is one thing. But, you know. I, having the education and being around the people that I know, I also know that there was a lot of work that went before that, Section 504, the Rehabilitation Act, which was really the

parent, you know, the father, the mother, I should say, of, of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

But it was signed into law, like I said, the year of my injury. How ironic. Like I said, things just happen at the right time for me. You know, of course, it was signed for just me. No, but no, I, I, it, I, I, I got an opportunity to learn more about it. In fact, when I was working for Independent Resources we identified that the city of Dover had signed onto an amicus brief supporting a lawsuit that the city of Sacramento was in, where they were being sued for noncompliance of sidewalks, for their infrastructure, their fundamental infrastructure. And they, actually settlement agreement was that they were gonna have to spend \$20 million a year for the next 30 years on sidewalk infrastructure. But anyway, we had signed on, and there was a magazine article in one of our disability, more of our disability-related magazines, and it was noted that Dover had, was on a list of, a “Hall of Shame” list.

So, you know, I saw that and I took, I was like, “Ah. I wonder if our City Council knows anything about that?” So I marched down to City Council with the magazine and said, “Are you aware that you are, you know, you’ve signed onto this amicus brief?” You know, “Are you aware of what this means and what it means to individuals like myself? You know, what the ADA is and what the ADA does and how important,” you know, “this bill is, or, you know, this law is, and, you know, and that what happened in Sacramento could happen here?”

And come to find, actually, the City Council knew nothing about it. It was a decision which often is made by city managers, and the city manager at that time had signed onto it. Now the city manager was, you know, in a little bit of trouble with City Council. They didn’t want their name on a “Hall of Shame.” And, the organ-, the City, the city manager to, to work with myself and my coworkers to develop a kind of a self-evaluation of where, where and what needed to be done for the city of Dover.

So that was really my first involvement with really getting into, okay, this is what Title II of the ADA is, this is what Title II requires a city to do, a town to do. So, you know, we did mostly buildings at that time. Wasn’t much thought going into the sidewalk infrastructure. I think even at that time, I didn’t give as much consideration I think. I think when the ADA was first signed into law and we were talking to, you know, the conversation was, you know, making places accessible for people to participate in, you know, in activities of employment and community services, it wasn’t so much... It was getting into the building, not so much getting TO the building. So, so things like sidewalk infrastructure and those type of things really weren’t given much consideration. But it was my first, you know, involvement in, in ADA compliance and understanding the ADA.

So, so we worked with them to develop the self-evaluation and then I got... It was at that time that I was approached about running for office so other things kinda took priority and I, you know, I went through that wonderful process. And after, it wasn’t long after that that I was offered a state job, you know, working for the state, working as an auditor for Social Services, which I did for 5 years. Another experience that brought me more into the main, mainstream of society. I was working with, you know, I wasn’t working in the disability field anymore. I was working, you know, with knowledge and

understanding of, of something else, you know, another level of equality to me. Working, you know, with some reasonable accommodations, but doing the same job that everybody else did, to the point that I even, you know, I became the president of our union.

Which, again, being asked, you know, to participate in some way, shape, or form as a leader is to me the true measure of equality. When you have, you know, the rest of the community, when the community comes to you or a group comes to you and says, "We want you to lead us," you know, "and represent us." I don't get that you can have a, you know, that's the probably the greatest measure of, of equality and, and inclusion that you can possibly attain, so I knew that we... You know, I don't say "me," I knew that WE made, had made here great strides, because nothing that I had done, you know, with regards to... I, nothing that I had accomplished at that point in time was ever done, even to this day, without the thought of those that helped get me there, from that home health aide who got me to college, to Jamie who got me kind of out of the house, to Ray who got me into, you know, the local pub, to, to, you know, to, you know, another relationship that got me involved in my own family. A relationship where, you know, three beautiful young ladies, to this day, that I still call my daughter, really terrific and successful young ladies, who were also all a part of, you know, working on the campaign and everything else, and feeling as though that I was, I was qualified for that.

You know, so, nothing, nowhere, and I, that's probably with most of us, but I know it certainly for myself as much as anything, that, that I had, I've gotten nothing that I have in life without somebody else. And also, you know, that didn't come in a smooth transition, you know, it wasn't like walking up a ramp. It was literally like climbing up steps. Sometimes you trip on a step and you fall back one. But I, you know, there was a number of occasions where we had some steps back and then some things moving forward. And like I said, something always, when I fell back, something always seemed to be the right thing to capture me. Not only did that fall back, did I fall back, but something even better came from that falling back, or falling down, so to speak. Whether it was something that I learned, or somebody else that I met along the way.

Some of the most unique experiences and some of the friends that I have to this day are, are people that have literally had to pick me up out of my wheelchair on the side of a street because I hit something and tumbled out of a chair. But from that comes, you know, has really come unique experiences, far more than I could have ever imagined or maybe even noticed if I had never had to go through some of the challenges, you know. And, and I, you know, what better... I don't, I don't, I don't say this as a... You know, you know... living your life in a wheelchair is not the easiest thing in the world and it's not something, you know, I've had the opportunity to speak to young people and talk about the success and, and, and love and a love of life that I have, love of way of life that I have. And, you know, I catch myself sometimes, you know, saying that, you know, I couldn't have done it without, you know, living my life as a wheelchair user. I couldn't have. It's not easy for anybody with a disability. By no means.

KB: So, if you wanted, if somebody was going to write your biography or some big article about you, what would you want them to say about you?

JM: It's probably some, hard for some people to believe, but I'd much rather be the writer of the story. [KB: Laughs] No, really. At this point in time I would, because there's,

again, you know, I'll, you know, I'll get to that. I, I, you know... My story gets told so often that I'd really like to be, start to get into position of telling the story of, of others and interviewing others and their way of life. But if somebody was to write my biography, you know, I would want them to write, you know, that I lived by my mantra, that the true measure of a man is not how tall he stands, but how much he's looked up to.

KB: And then you'll be the next Coach Rohrer. [JM: What's that?] And then you'll be the next Coach Rohrer. [JM: Yeah.] You are.

JM: You know, and that, you know, that, that was an individual who embraced everybody, who, although never practiced what his grandmother taught him, which was, you have, you know, two ears and one mouth. Use them accordingly. [KB: Laughs] That at some point, you know, that I, that I did listen long enough to learn. That I wouldn't have got to where I am without some practice with that. It's probably hard for a lot of people to believe sometimes, even for myself. You know, but ultimately that I was somebody who loved everybody, embraced everybody. And in doing so, you know, who was a, who was a teacher, a learner, a teacher, and, you know, a good husband, a good father, which means a good provider.

You know, I've got a 2-year-old little boy at home who's the spitting image of me, you know, who I hope's, who I hope in every way has the wonderment of life that I have. Who turns out successful with making some really dumb choices in life like I did. Hopefully he'll be smarter than I will. That's what his mother's for. You know, but ultimately a man that, you know, if somebody was to write my biography, as I've said it for like the fourth time now, that it would be something that, you know, people could say that I, I spoke of, of life the way that I lived it. And from that, was really an extraordinarily ordinary life which is, you know, when people think about what they would life, what they want their life to be, I can tell you there's nothing better than it being just ordinary, you know, shared with the community and with everybody else. No better or no worse than anybody else's.