

CLAWS AND WINGS:

AN ORAL HISTORY EXPLORATION OF DISABILITY IN DELAWARE 1917-2017

Transcription of video recorded July 28, 2017

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

Interviewee: Martha Brooks (Referred to hereafter as MB), Parent and Retired
Special Educator with the State Department of Education

Topics included: Delaware Transition Project, Public Law 94-142, Bureau of Mental
Retardation, Autism, Inclusion

Run time: 16:18

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MB: My name's Martha Brooks and I am currently retired and, but before I retired I worked here in the State of Delaware as the first Transition Project Coordinator, then as a supervisor at the Department of Public Instruction, at that point. Then I became the team leader and eventually the director for the Exceptional Children Early Childhood Division at the Department of Education as it evolved. And then my last three years I spent as Associate Secretary for Curriculum Instruction Improvement in the department.

KB: So, how did you get started in your interest in working with kids with disabilities?

MB: That started a long, long time ago, when I was, I think, 16. My first summer job, I went to a camp in Vermont where I grew up called Silver Towers Camp for quote, "Retarded Children." This would've been a long time ago, early '60s. And I was a junior counselor that first year and these wonderful kids came for, there was girls' camp and a boys' camp, for a month each.

Many of the kids were coming out of the state institution. Some came from, some were still living at home, but many of them came directly from the state institution and I fell in love with these kids. And some of them were actually older than, much older than I was. When I say "kids," they went from very young kids to adults, so it was a summer break for them. And I've just learned a lot and discovered I loved the population.

Then several years later, after school, after college, and I'd had an opportunity, I'd been teaching elementary education and I had an opportunity just as prior to the implementation of Public Law 94-142 there was a lot, I always forget the number, that set the indication that kids were going to finally be able to come to school with disabilities. In the district I was working in in Washington state had started a program and because they knew that I had an interest in, in that I was invited to be a teacher in that initial program.

So from that point on I worked in special education, first as a teacher then as an administrator for the rest of my working career. And then, along the way, the other thing that I have to say that really got me into this stuff, is that in that class, that first class, we had in Washington, we went out and recruited kids. These were kids who had never been in school before and we went to their homes, we found them, and brought them into the school program.

And there was this one little boy was in foster care who was five years old and had never... he lucked out. He started from the right when he should have been starting for

school but I kind of fell in love with him because he really was a cute little kid and had had not, not had an easy start to his life, and as I said, was in foster care at that point. And my husband and I, I'll let him tell how he met Ross, so you can, 'cause that's the other part of the story, but we eventually brought Ross home as a foster child 'cause we were, at that point, subsidized adoptions were an experimental program, and we were put into the control group. And at that point we didn't have enough money to say, "We can adopt him outright" without, you know, knowing there would be some supports for him.

And so we took, we went into the control group. At about a year and a half later, before we moved back east, we were able to finalize an adoption with him so we didn't have to go through all the foster care rigmarole any more. And, so, he's always kept the balance for me in my, my work, that, you know, what, what's real and what's doable and all those kinds of things. He's 52 now, by the way.

KB: So, when, when did you move to Delaware?

MB: We moved to Delaware in 1979 when Tim first got his job at, at the University of Delaware. And I went to graduate school at that point. I got my doctorate in special education at Temple. And at that point we had three boys and one was a baby at that time when we first moved here. And then, eventually, after I finished my, my program, I got a job working with, first in Christina with the Transition Project and then eventually moved onto the Department. But, that's how long we've been here: 30... [KB: 36?] 38 years now, yeah.

KB: So, what do you think about the labels that kids get?

MB: I won't live to see it, but I, my, my vision for the future is that someday we don't worry about labeling people and everybody gets the supports and the services that they personally need. I have gone through that all the way from a very... Well, the history of classification of children is, is a fascinating subject all unto itself. And, when you look at what it does it simply takes names that become unpopular or determined to be discriminatory and changes them to something that sounds better until that eventually sounds not so good anymore either. So I, I that's my vision for the world, is that someday we will be able to not look at you and say, "You have mental retardation" or "You have autism" or you have whatever. You have these needs to help you, you know, live in our world and those are what we're gonna provide for you. But we're not there yet.

KB: So if you had, had a magic wand what would you do to change the world?

MB: That's what I would do! I would say, take away the labels and just every, every child, whether it's a poverty issue, what, whatever it is, we will meet your needs to make sure you get the very best education you can, you can possibly get.

KB: Were you involved at all in the formation of ADA?

MB: Not with the ADA, no. I had a lot of involvement over the years in terms of rules and regulations around Public, what was originally Public Law 94-142, and eventually evolved in the IDEA and changed names every time they reauthorized it.

And I did have, I had an opportunity to work through the National Association of State Directors of Special Education for which I was a member and served as, as president for

one term. And we were very involved working with Department of Education at the federal level to develop the rules and regulations around those laws.

KB: Did it make a difference in Ross's life or he was too little?

MB: Ross made more of a difference in my life because Ross always kept me grounded. And so I would look at, you know, it's very easy to get when you're in bureaucracies to get swallowed up by the bureaucracy and Ross always made sure that I never forgot what the view was like from a parent's perspective, from a family perspective, and so I, I credit him more than I would credit me with that one.

KB: Did he go to public school?

MB: Yes, he went all the way through public school, and graduated...

KB: Where was he?

MB: When we were in Delaware he started out with two years in the Delaware Autistic Program and then we, he moved to Wallace Wallin. He was at that point 11 when we moved here, I think. And the Autistic Program was just getting really started. They had no programs for teenagers, really, yet or any kind of vocational kinds of programs and Ross ready for that and so we moved him to Wallace Wallin and he graduated from Wallace Wallin in Colonial.

KB: And where is he now?

MB: He lives in a supervised apartment in Bear, it's a KenCrest home. And we see him at least a weekend a month. We talk to him almost every day on the phone, he calls, loves to call us on the phone and we talk to him a lot. And, in fact, next week, we're all headed off to North Carolina for his week's vacation. We do that every summer now. Since we retired we've been able to kind of plan a trip around his needs as opposed to some of the rest of the family. But that's a big, huge family reunion thing we're doing so he will, he's very excited about that.

KB: So if somebody was going to write a biography about you, what would you want them to remember?

MB: About me? Well, for one thing I'd want them to remember that I have an almost now 50-year marriage with this wonderful man over here and that we have managed to survive the ups and downs of life over all these years. I would want them to remember my three sons because I have two other sons who are equally wonderful and, and are doing very well. And I have now, in addition to their two lovely wives, we have between them four grandchildren, which those are the things that I think really matter the most. When you look back, it's family that comes first.

I loved my career. I would, if I were starting over again I would, I might do a few things along the way differently but I would still, I would still follow the same path. I think public education is a, is a very worthwhile, important part of our country and our democracy and I would do the same thing.

I'm basically pretty proud of the work that I did, most of time. There are a few things I would have done differently in hindsight! But for the most part, so I guess that's what I would cover, those kinds of things.

Oh! I mean, if you want to go on a totally different thing, it would be what's happened in terms of what the expectations for me as a young girl growing up and what, where women are today, major change in my life. And I think I've certainly benefited from that and I think the same would be said of the disability efforts. I mean, in both areas is a long ways to go, but they're both areas that in my lifetime I've seen dramatic changes.

KB: So tell me your thoughts on mainstreaming and then we'll talk about the Delaware Transition Project.

MB: Mainstreaming, and I do think Tim did a very good job of describing the impact. First of all, "mainstreaming" is one of those words you wouldn't hear today. You would hear...we went from mainstreaming to "LRE," standing for "least restrictive environment," and now we would pretty much use the term "inclusion," an inclusive society, including all people with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

Those were languages out of the IDEA and, and I think they do encompass a little bit more, 'cause mainstreaming was bringing a group of kids out from segregated classes and streaming them into a regular class. Inclusion is a much more, kind of vibrant term that allows for movement basing on the needs of kids, but saying they're all part of the public system. They're all part of the community. They're all...and we have to figure out ways to make them be part of those communities, not separate. That, that's really the... keep harping on it.

I am an absolutely firm believer in the concept, in part again because as part of my doctoral program I had to study the history of disabilities and what we have done to people with disabilities in the past is horrendous. And it wouldn't take, and there been, you can if you look at there is good times when they were treated well and then there have been bad times when they were abandoned on the side of the hill. So, and all kinds of things in between. So, you know it can go back and forth as times change. So I think that making sure that people with disabilities are included in all aspects of, of what, our lives is really critical.

KB: So, tell me about the Transition Project.

MB: Well, the Transition Project, I would, was, again, Tim did a good job of saying what's good and bad about grants, because I was started out as a, a federal grant that we were able to receive. And at that point in time the whole concept of transition from school to adult life was people were realizing that that was a real breakdown point for people with disabilities. We were getting them up through school at that point thanks to 94-142 and IDEA, but there, there wasn't necessarily any pieces for them to move into without waitlists and things like that, Voc Rehab and other agencies.

So we developed this project that included the Division of Voc Rehab, the Division of, at that point, DMR, Division on Retardation, which is now DDDS, and Education, and the three of us were all partners in that and I was the first project director. And I worked with all those agencies to try to lay the ground work that. Transition is still a major focus within the Department of Education and it's come a long way. It's been a very slow process, I mean, because you're changing not just the lives of individuals. You're changing whole bureaucracies and how they did deliver services and things.

So it's not been a speedy one. The supported employment concept came along in there and I think that one still has a long ways to go in terms of getting the training back into high schools. We can serve kids who don't graduate from high school or "I'm going to get a, quote, real diploma until the age of 21." And so you've got years in there that you can really focus on vocational job experience, getting them out there, but building those relationships with businesses and the agencies that support that step is the real challenge. And there are people who can give you a much better picture now of what's happening right now than I can. I just know what was going on when we were getting started, that would've been 1984, '85, it's a long time ago.

KB: So, did that lead to ADA do you think?

MB: I, I'm not sure. I think ADA was probably already in the works by that point, cause it was the late... I think it came about more because of the impact of what was happening in schools and then realizing that we now are starting to see graduates that had been all the way through school or getting close to that in terms of exiting the system and then not having any place to go. So I think the two always kind of go together. 504 was in existence all through those years, so it would've... That was really the only handle that we had until the ADA was passed in the '90s.

KB: So it was a big gap?

MB: It was, it all came together eventually but it was a big gap, yes.

KB: How did it impact Ross?

MB: Well, like I said, we tried, we moved Ross to Wallin with the idea that they, they had more of a vocational program started at that point. What we discovered about our son is that he really, really would've been a really good rich man who could've sat and watched his TV most of the day! He's, he's very interested in some things and when he's interested in something he wants to do it but because he's a combination of, he has minor physical disabilities as well as, as the behavior and, and some mental issues, he doesn't concentrate for very long periods of time. So work... I think with the right kind of environment if we were starting out today with the thesis in place, I agree with Tim, that we could have pushed harder.

The one...they tried in one day out in supported employment, he's at Elwyn and has been at Elwyn now for what, 25, 30 years, long time, and he loves Elwyn. He loves the people at Elwyn. He's very happy there. But they tried him in a supported employment job for one day and that was it! [KB: Laughs] He would need pretty constant support and that's going to be the hardest one. The concept of building internal support within a business is a challenging one. It's been successful in some places and there are some places you can look to, but it's not an easy thing and Ross is a person that really, people have to get to know him before they're comfortable around him and, and are willing to that. So, that didn't work for him, but like I said, is very happy at Elwyn and I think, given his age, that's where he will stay, at this point.