CLAWS AND WINGS:
AN ORAL HISTORY EXPLORATION OF DISABILITY IN DELAWARE 1917-2017

Transcription of video recorded July 26, 2017
Interviewer: Kim Burdick, MA, MPA (Referred to hereafter as KB)
Interviewee: Billie Travalini (Referred to hereafter as BT), Writer and Advocate
Topics included: Governor Bacon Health Center, Writer and Speaker, Lupus
Run time: 38:49

This transcript was edited by Billie Travalini, therefore this transcript will not match the video.

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BT: Billie Travalini. I am a writer. I am an advocate for the mentally ill and at-risk children. I am the mother of two children, one who has autism and a new mother of nine years to a third child who my son Marc brought home from Horizon House Mental Health Clinic. I enjoy writing. I am also, as much as possible, active in the community. I am on the Historic Preservation Committee of the Fort DuPont Redevelopment and Preservation Corporation, in large part due to the children of Governor Bacon, children the state did not know what to do with because they didn't have housing: proper housing. So, they were all put in Governor Bacon from 1948 to1984 and the conditions were not good. I was one of those children, a sick child with lupus. I am the co-founder and coordinator of the Lewes Creative Writers Conference with the Lewes Public Library. We are proudly celebrating our 10th anniversary, August 18, 19, 2017. I am active on the Delaware Press Association, where we're doing a storytelling symposium at Widener University. And, I'm active with the Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council where we're doing a history of the treatment of persons with disabilities in Delaware, part of a nationwide program.

KB: So, we'll talk about your childhood and your experiences there in a minute, but how long professionally as an adult have you been working in this field? Since birth, I know, but…[laughs]

BT: Well, I think I began working in the field officially by my own description at the age of 15 when I was at Governor Bacon and I saw the abuse of the cerebral palsy children who lived in Tilton where I did. I did everything I could to protect them, including whispering to grandparents that had a little two-year-old [redacted] there and an attendant had spanked him really hard, whipped him for wetting his pants at night, and when they came little [redacted] was shaking so hard that his grandmother… It was only a temporary, you know, barrier that they sort of made into rooms. She came around and said, "What, [redacted], what's wrong?" And I just put my finger to my mouth and said, "Shh, they whupped him last night for wetting his bed." Her eyes got real big and I said, "Don't tell." She just shook her head. And I heard her in the next room talking to her husband and within 10 minutes they were walking out with [redacted] with a little, his little suitcase.

BT: The road to Governor Bacon was both long and short. It probably began the minute the judge made the very, very poor decision to put me with biological parents who were simply just that: biological parents. The first thing any child wants is safety. Number one. And too often people in childcare forget that. They think "biology" is a magic word. It's not. Safety is number one. Love is two. But it's number two as a big bonus. It's a huge bonus. But you need safety first. A child is a child. They need to be taken care of, looked at, nurtured, protected.

And so my father began… The first thing I remember is how bad he would talk about [redacted] and how he was going to teach me how things really were. My foster mother had made out this list of things I enjoyed. You know? I remember once she said I really liked hamburgers and baked beans. So one of the first odd, mean things he did was we were having dinner and everybody is sitting down and he goes in the kitchen. And, this is before--my mother always insisted on saying a blessing--he, plops a cold can of baked beans on my plate and says, "Here, you like 'em, now eat 'em." Nobody else was having baked beans. And I looked, and, you know, my mother said, "Oh, [redacted], come on, come on." He says, "No, she likes baked beans," and he insisted I eat them.

And then another time, my father insisted I drink a quart of buttermilk because he said it would put meat on my bones. I hated buttermilk. And he would do things like that, but then he became more…there's something about an abuser. They're always testing the water to see what they can get away with. So once he got away with that, he was ready for the next stage. One time, I remember, we were just going for a drive and I came out to the car and he says, you know, "Come here, Bugs." I thought I heard him wrong. I'm like, what? And, he said, "Did you hear me?" I said, "What?" And he said, "Come here, BUGS." And I thought, wow, that's really odd.

And then sometimes he would call me "Bathtub." That was his second favorite, you know, "Hey, Bathtub!" It wasn't till years later that I realized he was dehumanizing me by giving me non-human names.

I started developing Reynaud's, which {makes}your capillaries constrict when you get cold. My father used that to his advantage by immediately taking me to a psychiatrist, a psychologist rather my hands turned purple, until I turned purple. He said I was refusing to cooperate in school and I was refusing to eat. And that I was telling people I was blind. And so, [redacted], gave me, [unclear, gathering thoughts] intelligence and then asked me some questions. And then I remember that I was forced to take gym based on [redacted] findings. That I was faking everything. It wasn't real. And dodge balls would hit me and my hands were so swollen. I went from 102 pounds at one point to 72 pounds.

And I remember President Kennedy's fitness initiative and you had to do pushups and I remember… And you wouldn't pass. You literally had to pass this test. So I'm trying and there's a girl and her name was [redacted]. It's funny, if you'd asked me that a month ago, I wouldn't have remembered her name. [redacted]. And she was a big…she was sort of a masculine girl. And we didn't talk that much but there was always a kindness in her manner. And she of course aced hers and she looked over, and she says, "I'll count for you." I said okay. So I'm pretty much doing nothing and she's going, "Four, five, six. Seven, eight, nine," you know? And, I passed, you know, because of her kindness.

And, that's something that's really important for people to know about kids that have a disability. That it doesn't totally define you. You don't want one thing to define you. Because, I saw myself as a whole person. I didn't dwell on that. And I always thought tomorrow would be a bit better. At least I would have a chance at it getting better. And I also had experiences of kindnesses and successes like anyone else. And the last thing I ever wanted was pity. I mean, hatred is better than pity. At least that's something that you can deal with, you know? It's not so personal to me. You know? I always felt that hatred is a problem with the other person. Pity is when they're actually pretending they know you.

But, from, from there I went to the… [redacted] wasn't… I later wrote to the Delaware Psychological Society and a woman…I forget her name… And she wrote me a wonderful letter of apology sort of. She looked up the records and said that back then, you know, too often, you know, what happened to me, you know, that it, without knowledge of the physical, that it was, you know. You know…

KB: That he listened to you dad, not to you?

BT: Yeah. And, and adults. And that while people that are professionals in the field want to believe we've changed so much, adults still have way, way too much say over what the children… Children instinctively know who to trust and who, who they're comfortable with. You know? Sometimes of course, there has to, you know, you have to weigh things, you know. The parent that gives the child everything, the child's gonna say, "Oh, I'd like this." You know, I'm not talking about that type of situation. You know? I'm talking about, you when there is a problem, if you assess it from the child. Put your child in… Put yourself in the child's shoes not in the adult shoes of a parent. After all, they're the parent.

And the next little psychological link is parents love their children. No, they don't all love their children.

KB: And how old were you when you got sent to Governor Bacon and why?

BT: I was sent to… I went to, to the… My father used to take me to mental health clinic at, that was then, I think there was only one, at the Farnhurst State Hospital. And they were very concerned about physical. I, I couldn't open my mouth because I have lupus, had lupus, scleroderma, and arthritis. It was a weird combination. And my jaw got so tight, you know, and my esophagus, too. Pretty much with scleroderma that tightening of tissues. I couldn't open it. I had to try to push food in. You know, and, of course, you know that just reinforced what my father was saying, that I didn't eat, you know? But, they had a teeth plate made that my, my teeth wouldn't always set down, you know? And that, that did help some, you know?

I was sent to Governor Bacon based on the records that I have because of a troubled household. And that's the case of most of the children sent there. So when you think about that, you know, they say with children with cerebral palsy, hemophilia, some of them blind, many, many, many have intellectual disabilities. Others, you know, CP or ADHD, and the trouble, the trouble… Many with sexual and other abuse.

So the child is sent away and nothing happened to the parents. My father, I know the state knew, because in the records it says that my sister called and said it. And then, a minister

called, partly out of guilt because my sister confessed to him and he called up my father and told him, him exactly what my sister said. And that was not a healthy day for my sister and I was in Governor Bacon at the time. You know?

So they did know. They did know.

KB: And how old were you when you went there?

BT: I was, I had just, like, turned 15.

KB: And how long were you there?

BT: 18 months. I was there 18 months. And, and gradually began to walk. But in Governor Bacon, I was in the hospital unit for a while. And even there I was having 104 temperature, 105 temperatures, and I was very swollen, very, very thin, very sick. And they sent me to the Delaware Hospital, and I was there I think almost like a month at one point, getting, you know, transfusions and things. And, and it's really quite remarkable that when I started getting better, I did get to go to Gov…Gunning Bedford…I think there was like three of us, you know? [KB: Who were still living at Governor Bacon?] But two [KB: And going to school?] that we would go to the gate. There was always a guard at the gate.

And, one little boy, he was 8, he would always run away, he was a foster child. And I, I always wondered why 'cause he had no place to go. And they would always find him and they would put him in lock-up. Because Tilton had…was military, they were military buildings and that's where the lock-up was. It was like a six by eight cell, no window, no door, nothing. And you could hear, no toilet, you could hear him bang when he had to go to the bathroom, when he was hungry or something, then they would open the door. And they had metal trays back then that I can still hear in my head them sliding that metal tray across the linoleum to him.

And, now that they're developing, you know, Fort DuPont, which kind of cringes on me because anybody that would, lived in Delaware from the '50s, '60s, '70s, it's Governor Bacon. And, without me going to the meetings, they were making every effort to pretend that that history didn't exist, other than it had become a, a, a health center. It wasn't a health center! It was a detention camp. It was a detention camp. You got up when they said to get up. You cleaned the floors, everything. You, you had, you scrubbed every single day. You scrubbed your clothes in the sink. You scrubbed the floors. You had chores. You, when you ate there was a mess hall, a different building, snow and everything you'd walk down there, which was hard for me, when I lived there, even though when I got out of Tilton and into a cottage it was hard because I still wasn't that healthy and I have Reynaud's, so, you know. But, and then you march back. If you went rollerskating you marched back.

And in Happy Hall the attendants would enjoy assaulting the girls. It was common. It was common. Along with the cerebral palsy kids. And I wrote in a newspaper article about [redacted] being sexually assaulted. And she had big braces on her legs and, you know. And I know when she came back and she was so happy, and I said, "What's going on, [redacted]?" 'cause she wasn't acting like she ever did before. And she said, "I can't tell you. I can't tell you." And, you know. And, and she kind of looked from side to side, sort of like a lurching, and I, and I said, "Come on. You can tell me. You can tell me." And

she finally, she had troubled speech, too, and she said, “I’m in love.” And I go, “You’re in love! Who you in love with?” “I can’t tell you,” and then she, was a long conversation, and she said that she promised, that she had to promise and promise and promise and I said, “Well, you can tell me, you’re so happy. You can tell me. I want to hear. I want to hear why you’re so happy.” And, and finally she told me she was in love with her teacher, who was a very good-looking younger man.

And I said, “Well,” (I always liked to write so I was always asking questions) and I said, “Well, how do you know he loves you?” And she didn’t say anything for the longest time and then she says that “he kissed me.” And then I said, “That’s not love!” And she started telling me more. And she finally went into enough detail, there is no way, no way, I mean, that this girl could know that. My father was sexually abusive. There’s no way that she could have known that. She had come from Stockley from the time she was a very small, you know, like one years old, she had been in Stockley. And, so I felt trapped. I had given my word, you know, I had given my word. So, I, I remember feeling so desperate. And finally I just said, “[redacted].” And she was kind of like dancing, you know, like this silly, you know, happy dance, and I said, “[redacted].” I said, “If you are ever even five minutes late coming home from school, I’m gonna tell.” And she knew what that meant, that she wouldn’t have, you know. I remember her just kind of, her [unclear] walking away, you know?

So when you said, “When did you become sort of advocate, I was always like that, you know?” Years later, in Alfred I…I was at Eugene Memorial, not Alfred I. Eugene Memorial, after I was really, really, really sick, again. And I was on so much prednisone and a they put me in there. And, it wasn’t the same thing. Don’t get me wrong. But the food would come up in the elevator to the patients, so when I was able, and it {food}would often be cool…I’ll say putting it nicely. So I began ask if anybody…and they were all in their rooms, so I said, “Who wants to go down to the (you know) to the cafeteria?” And they did. So, I would just take them four wheelchairs at a time, put ’em in, in, in, in the elevator, take ’em down, next one, next one, next one, you know. And then one time one of the aides broke [redacted] leg, by hitting it on the side rail. And, and I had told them over and over that she kept asking for the…her light was on..to get the bedpan and they didn’t come. And, they didn’t come. And the last time I went in there they were playing cards, the nurses in this little back room, and I said, “She needs a bedpan and she needs it now.” And one of them got up. She put her hands on her hips and she goes, she said, “You better mind your own business, little miss, or you and I are going to get in a tumble.”

KB; And how did you get out of there and get to college?

BT: Well, I went to different high schools, obviously. You know, I went to Gunning Bedford a little while, before that I had went to De La Warr, which wasn’t strong academically at all. And then when they put me back…when I got out of Governor Bacon, even though the records, and I was told by the state, oh, that they had… I had gotten records before, right? And some of them were the same, but some of them… They told me they gave me all the records this time. They didn’t, because I already have some that shows that I, there were more. But they demanded that I sign something and never talk about the records and never show them. Well, that’s like saying I don’t own my own history. That doesn’t set right with me. So unless they got an extra cell, you know, in the

women's prison for somebody who wants to know their own records, I think they should do away with that…that silliness.

But, I, the records show in their own words that my parents had been completely unamenable to any sort of counseling, any sort of relationship. That my father had grandiose ideas. That he was highly manipulative. And that my mother seemed,..appeared to them…to be extremely guilt-ridden and at times, you know, overtly rejected me altogether. And that's true, because she just wanted me gone, because it's…it was too painful, the whole thing.

And, and yet despite all that, despite my…them knowing about the sexual physical abuse and all, and they said an aunt wanted me, but they still put it {decision}up to my parents. My father certainly didn't want a well-off aunt to have custody of me because he…he had a lot of secrets that he, you know, he wanted close to the vest. So, the state…and there's only one possible reason they would put me back with my father it was the cheapest and easiest road.

Why contest my father saying "no" to an aunt? And the same thing happened with little [redacted], 50 years later, little [redacted], who, whose aunts begged for her and her mother end up killing her.

KB: So, when, when you got done with all of that, then you went to U of D?

BT: To where?

KB: To the University?

BT: Well, not quite that simple. I, I, I only stayed with my parents a few months because my father was starting up again. And I knew that I would physically not be able to take it again. I wasn't gonna risk that again. I wasn't gonna go backwards. So I told my sister one day, he was locking me in my bedroom and trying to stop me from going to school. So, he…my sister had to use a knife to get into the bedroom after they were asleep so she comes in. I said, "I won't be here in the morning, you know, when, I won't be here when in the afternoon when you get home from school." She said, "Yes, you will. Yes, you will." "No."

I had NO idea where I was going. After school, I just started walking. And, a friend from high school, not a really close, close friend, but somebody that I knew well, and, you know, liked, her name was [redacted], she said, "You want to come over to my house?" And I said, "Yes," and I could tell she suspected something. So I went over her house, this was in Garfield Park, and I just said, "I'm not going home." And she didn't, she knew I was in Governor Bacon and all. She had written, wrote to me there.

And so I, at about an hour and a half, a knock on the door. And her mother looks out and it's my father. She said, "Go in the bedroom. Go in the closet." I hadn't said a word to her. Now maybe [redacted] did or maybe just sensed it because her husband was a troubled man with alcohol, so. So, I went in the closet but I could hear her say that, "No, no, I haven't seen Elizabeth." [The speaker's given name.] You know. Oh, and my father said, "She needs her medicine. She's really sick. Her mother and I are SO worried." He was, he was very manipulative. He was VERY, my father was very intelligent, very well-read, very, you know, could argue on any topic, really. And, but she wasn't buying it.

And, so, what she did was, she called that minister that I was talking about. The one that had betrayed my sister. So, he said I could come, come there, it was like [unclear] Methodist Church. So, I went there and then he called the state and I ended up going back to court and then I lived at the Children's Home in Claymont. And then, the older girls' part on Broom Street and I went to Wilmington High, which I really liked. Really, really liked. I did well there. But then after high school, you turn 18, and then the state just dumps you. So I went to live with a friend, from high school, who lived at 2nd and Adams. The house was so damp, old, and run-down that the steps upstairs, they, they, they tilted a lot, you know?

I got sick, and I ended up back in the hospital. And when I went to the hospital, of course they said, "What's your address?" And I said, "I don't have one." And they talked about, "We better call Woods-Haven." This is how the state operates. I never even bagged a class in school, and they're suggesting Woods-Haven!

So, when I was in the hospital, I also, oh! They did…did surgery on my hand. A doctor who saw me there decided that he could…The problem with my hand, both hands, was that I had lupus so much that the swelling had caused the tendons to slip off the knuckles. And this could be corrected. It should have been corrected earlier, he said. But, just like today, a poor child does not get the same treatment as a child that has, is from a family of means. That's not the America we live in.

And, so he was a resident. I look back now and I think he wanted experience. So he does it, but there's a huge problem. I wake up, so many hours later and there's like four people in business suits around me with a clipboard and they want me to sign something. Nobody had signed for my operation, and they realized it. So, they want me to sign, but I kept passing out and coming to, passing out and coming to and all. And I think partly based on that for the first time ever in a hospital, I saw a social worker.

And then when I got out, they arranged for me to live in a boarding house and I was going to… it was like an offshoot of Goldey Beacom and I took business classes. And then I started taking classes at University of Delaware. I started getting better, you know, I was able to work some, you know, and I lived with my sister. And I started taking classes. And, I started having a more normal life. And then I…I got...I definitely started getting much healthier, And, I started going full-time and I got married when I just turned 22. And, I finished a degree, an Associate's in accounting and then I just went on to get a Bachelor's in…in literature and journalism.

And I, I love school. It's my safety net. I always loved school. I was just surprised at the end when I was called into, like, the dean's office and told, "I have good news!" and I said, "What?" [Redacted] said, and he said, "You are the first person…you and [redacted]," who later went on to be *Washington Post* reporter and then a high-profile Washington, DC lawyer. "You and [redacted] are the first two journalist majors," you know, minor…it was a minor, but you know, "at the University of Delaware to ever be nominated for Phi Beta Kappa." So, that was that, and, and I…I was the founding president of the Journalist Society down there.

So, that was nice. And when I got married, I…I founded a local chapter of the Lupus Foundation and I was on the advisory board to the Brandywine School District. And I look back now, I always think, 24 years old? I was by far the youngest on that board, you

know? I remember being surprised that they...where did they get my name. You know what I mean? Although, I never asked. And I was also on the board of the Arthritis Foundation, with [redacted] and she was a very nice person, you know. I was on a committee with very, very down-to-earth, very nice person.

Yeah. So it was a lot of good experiences, too.

I don't believe…I don't believe that a disability, whether it…it…it's in a child or adult, should define who you are. You should define who you are. You don't get defined from… nobody has that right to define you from the outside. And you shouldn't allow that. It's silly to allow that, you know. So, I feel that the experiences I went through made me more whole.

If, if someone asked me the greatest fear that I have in life, I've always had it would be to be bored.

KB: And you're never bored.

BT: No, I'm never bored! I…I feel that you have to live life. I've met many people I…I dated a fella that lived…a wonderful man, but he was raised in a box with quote "his own kind." Raised in a box and and was very uncomfortable getting out of it. I wanted to go down the Wilmington waterfront to eat and we started going down there and he…you know…takes… I said to turn, you know, you know, right here, you know, to the right here, and he turned at the next block and he goes, [gasp] "I told you, I told you. I. I don't like to come down here. I'm not comfortable." I…it's the next block. It'll take us the same place.

But, that is sad to me. That's far sadder than my struggle with lupus. Because that narrows your window of what this whole process of living means. I mean…I believe we're all in the process of becoming. If you put yourself in a box you allow others to label you. Then, you're sheltering yourself from that box and why should you shelter yourself from something that is natural? You know? They put an elephant in a cage. On what…on what level is that right? You know? So, you know, it's been interesting.

And I have to say that, I've always thought of writing in practical terms and all, too, and it's pretty amazing how... You know, I was married for 31½ years and when I was divorced I went back to my childhood, I went back to writing and I thought, "What am I gonna do?" You know, how am I gonna support myself? How am I gonna pay all these bills and all? And I had went right back to what I knew. I thought, "Wait a minute. When I write, if I write in first person, I can't write in second and third." If I write, you know, in past tense, then I'm eliminating present tense or future. So it's all about decision-making. About choosing what you feel passionate about, what you understand and build from that. Because you'll put more vested time, or vested work into it, you know?

And, I think this is something that everyone who has a quote "disability"… although that word makes me cringe slightly, 'cause I don't know a disability is always a disability. Sometimes it's just a challenge that is actually a benefit, you know … Those who are helping you are perhaps feeling sorry for you. You almost always know them better than they know you. Because they're looking at you as the disabled one, and you're looking at them as, "Oh, it's okay. I'm letting you help me but I'm really quite fine, thank you."

You know, so it, it's an interesting journey. It's an interesting journey.

KB: Thank you, Billie, very much.