



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

An Interview With
Dennis Fitzgibbons

Interview Conducted By
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Transcript by
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Molly Graham: This is an interview with Dennis Fitzgibbons. Today is August 25, 2014. We're at 127 Main Street in South Portland, [Maine].

Dennis, I always like to start at the beginning. Where and when were you born?

Dennis Fitzgibbons: I was born in Brockton, Massachusetts in 1950.

MG: How old does that make you today?

DF: That makes me in my 63rd year.

MG: What was growing up in Brockton, Massachusetts like?

DF: Well, I didn't actually grow up there. I was raised for the first several years of my life in – where was that? – Randolph, Massachusetts, which was near Brockton. Then, at seven, my family moved to Millis, Massachusetts, which was a little bit sort of west of Boston, about twenty miles. I grew up there. Went right through the high school years, although I didn't go to high school there. I went to a Catholic school in Framingham, Massachusetts.

Then, I was injured at the age of 18 and took a different direction in life after that, than I had anticipated.

MG: First, tell me about that first chunk of your life and what family life was like, what you remember about growing up in the 50s and 60s.

DF: Well, I don't know how many people always can relate to this, but I often tell people that if they ever watched *Leave it to Beaver*, I could have been the Beav. It was a very simple life. It was that quintessential '50s growing up period where everybody in town knew each other. It was a small town. Wasn't what I'd call rural. Just that small town mentality and way of living. All the fathers worked, all the mothers stayed at home. It was sort of a carefree life, although I can still remember vividly the scare about Communism and the fear about atomic war and things like that. Nevertheless, it was a pretty simple life and I only have good memories of it. I've heard a lot of people say they never want to be a kid again. I can honestly say that my childhood was not perfect, but it was pretty close.

[laughter]

MG: Do you have siblings?

DF: I have two brothers and a sister. I'm the second of the four. We had the usual sibling issues, things like that, but we were spread across twelve years, so we weren't close in age necessarily.

MG: Did you go into Boston at all as a young kid?

DF: Yes. I remember even when we lived in Randolph, my mother was very adventurous and would take us to Boston to do Christmas shopping and things like that. This is before there were malls to go to in the suburbs. If you wanted to get anything, you had to go to downtown Boston to the big shopping district down there. My older brother and I would schlep the packages all day long. We had great adventures there and was just always fun to do because even though we were little, we were helping and we always got lunch out of it and an ice cream sundae or something. So, it was a good time.

MG: Yes. Not a bad deal.

DF: No, it was a good deal. At least we thought so at the time.

MG: What was life like growing up then maybe as opposed to growing up today? How is it different?

DF: Well, now we're bombarded with information all the time. Just if you look at things like television; there's so many stations on now that you can't even count them. They're just specialized. There's a lot of what I consider lousy television or not quality television. Not that it might have been of great quality when I was a kid, but I can also remember when there were only two networks and the third network, ABC, was beginning. My father, who was always the skeptic, said, "It'll never work having a third one. That's too many." [laughter] It was just the way life was then. Things were far more simpler. There weren't that many choices and even television wasn't on twenty-four hours a day. I can still remember the test pattern on the TV, when it would sign off.

MG: What were some of your favorite things to watch?

DF: Of course, the old Disney show, which was on once a week with the various historic shows that went with that and other interesting things that

way. I actually found a picture going through my father's mementos over the weekend and I found one of me on Santa's lap, wearing my Davy Crockett coon jacket with all the tethers or the tassels and things like that. Didn't have the hat. I don't know where the hat went.

MG: [laughter] Maybe it'll turn up.

DF: Yes, maybe it will turn up. But it was a simpler time really, in terms of choices that were there, information that was there. We just didn't have this constant bad news being filtered at us through things. For that matter, television news was in its infancy. So, you weren't turning on the TV all the time to hear what was going on in the world.

MG: What kind of kid were you? What sort of things did you like to do?

DF: Well, I wouldn't say I was an intentional troublemaker. I got into trouble a lot and just sort of had a tendency to explore and do things. I just loved the woods, being in the woods. I ended up in Boy Scouts and we did a lot of camping as a family. I loved the outdoors. I loved sports. It was a time when you got up in the morning, if you weren't going to school – let's

say it was summertime – you would just go out and play all day and you didn't come home. You left at probably nine o'clock in the morning and didn't come home until five o'clock in the afternoon. Nobody worried where you were because somebody's parent or mother was probably watching out for you. We managed to get into some mischief, but I wouldn't say trouble, until I got older.

MG: Nothing too serious. [laughter] What did you want to do growing up? What did you see for yourself as a young kid? Where'd you want to go and what did you want to do?

DF: The thing I remember most is I used to want to be a forest ranger. I loved camping and the outdoors that much and spent so much time out there that I knew plants and trees and what they were and where they grew and I knew rock formations and that type of thing. I had a real value for the outdoor life and could picture myself someday working in the land, in the forest, things like that, either forest management. Maybe it was a little naïve, but maybe in some state park or something like that, just taking care of the property, making sure it was treated well and preserved, etc.

MG: Where did you finish high school?

DF: I went to high school at a high school called Marian High School in Framingham, Massachusetts. It was run by the Sisters of St. Joseph. I consider going there to have been one of the turning points of my life in terms of who I was as a person because it got me out of the small town, which. While it was a great place to grow up, most people, when they finished high school, ended up staying there and they never moved beyond that, didn't have any dreams or aspirations. By going to what was more a regional school I met a lot of young people like myself from other towns and just sort of expanded my horizons that way. I wouldn't say I was a great student. I didn't choose to go there for religious reasons. I chose that as an alternative to being at Millis High School.

MG: Did you feel that school gave you different opportunities than a public school would have?

DF: Yes. Well, there used to be a certain cache to graduating from a Catholic School because everyone assumed that you were getting a great education and that you were disciplined and studied harder, had maybe a

broader scope of learning, that type of thing. Whether indeed that was true or not, you had that kind of reputation, but in addition to that, it really did broaden my horizons to meet people from a variety of towns, get to know people who lived twenty and thirty miles away from where I did. We all came together in a central location. It gave me opportunities then for part-time work and other things that I did that I wouldn't have had if I just stayed in the same town where I was.

MG: What were you doing for part-time work?

DF: Well, I did different things – pizza parlors, grocery stores, that type of thing.

MG: How were the nuns?

DF: Well, when I started as a freshman, I was scared to death of them. They were mean, [laughter] but by the time I graduated, they were afraid of me.

MG: [laughter] How come they were afraid of you?

DF: Well, at some point, I just realized that they were people like anyone else and that they had no reason to be mean other than the fact that they just seemed – they weren't all mean. You have to take it all with a grain of salt, but some of them were. I think their method of teaching was intimidation. That's what they wanted to do. They did a good job of that freshman year, but as you got a little bit more comfortable and I started to meet some of them who weren't and were reasonable, kind people versus the ones who weren't, I didn't put up with the ones who were mean anymore.

MG: What happened after high school? Where did you go and what did you want to do?

DF: Well, I still was looking at maybe the forest ranger piece. I did apply to a number of colleges – actually, I didn't apply – I applied to two colleges.

MG: That's a number.

DF: Yes. Well, back then, no one did the ten and twenty thing they do now. We all looked at state schools and things like that versus the costly ones. Of

course, cost all being relative, but I ended up going to Boston State College, which is down the road from Northeastern. In fact, it doesn't exist anymore, but it was just part of the State College system. I remember that my first year's tuition was two hundred dollars. [laughter] Tells you something about how things have changed. Yes. I commuted. I had to drive into Boston every day. I didn't pick a particular major because I couldn't get into the forest ranger thing because I needed to have had chemistry in high school and I didn't take chemistry. It never occurred to me that I could take chemistry otherwise and do it. I just sort of went in without a goal, which is not a good idea. I will admit that was a little bit immature looking back, because I graduated at seventeen, was one of the younger ones in my class, and I was not ready to assume the responsibilities of going to school. I quit after about three or four months. What I used to do is I'd skip classes and I'd go to work because I liked working. I dropped out of school and then the following spring is when I was injured while I was working. I wasn't working when I was injured, but I was employed.

MG: How did your family feel about you dropping out of school?

DF: They weren't happy because, again, this was the height of the Vietnam War, and that made me a more eligible person by not being in college and having the college deferment. [At] eighteen, it was 1968. Things were really rocking and rolling in Vietnam and everyone had a fear about going there. Can't say that it was a big fear for me. I didn't really want to go, but at the same time, I was immature and not really thinking about those kinds of consequences. I never did go, obviously.

MG: What happened instead?

DF: Like I said, I dropped out of school. I went to work full-time for the grocery store that I'd been working for. That's the kind of work that I could envision myself at the time continuing to do. I just found real meaning in stocking the shelves and making them look good and keeping them well stocked and I liked the people I worked with. Again, it was a fun thing to do for someone eighteen, but in the midst of that, then we went on through – I had other friends from previous places that I'd work and from school. We used to do other things. When spring came that year, several of us went off for a day of fun to the beach and stuff like that. On the way home, we were in a car accident where everybody in the car was really messed up, including

two who were killed. It was a disastrous event for several people. Again, that's where everything then came to a stop for a while and then had to get started again to figure out what I was going to do next.

MG: What were your injuries at that point in the accident?

DF: Well, I had a torn colon, punctured diaphragm, broken back and spinal cord injury, and various other contusions and abrasions and broken wrist, things like that. Was not a pretty picture.

MG: No. But one other person survived the crash, but with injuries?

DF: I'm sorry?

MG: Someone else survived the crash.

DF: Well, four people out of the six survived. Two were killed. Two ended up in body casts for six months and the one had some brain injury and a crushed foot. Everyone who came through it still is severely physically

injured, as well as having to deal with the aftermath of the deaths and things like that.

MG: What were those next couple months like after the accident?

DF: I ended up in acute care in Framingham Union hospital at the time because the accident was in the area where I lived. I was there for a month, flat on my back, pretty much trying to make sense of what was going on. I think the first week I was in a coma, which may have been a good thing because it started to allow some healing to go on. I had some strange memories of that because I remember being in intensive care one day and seeing what I thought was a nun floating by my bed. Well, it turned out it was because I was only a block and a half from the convent where the nuns where I went to high school were. Even though I'd been out for year, they'd heard obviously, that I was there. One of them used to come in and say her prayers near my bed while I was out.

MG: You had some sort of perceptions while you were in a coma?

DF: Well, I might have been sort of in and out. I've never really known and never really asked about it, but I do remember her going by and the black habit and things like that. I can remember my father at my bedside a couple of times. I do remember another time when – I think I was more conscious at this point, although you're in kind of a Neverland with that stuff. I'd had a [tracheotomy] in my throat for breathing and they had pinned it to my pillow because I guess I did a lot of flailing when I was unconscious. At one point, I was uncomfortable lying down and the pillow was bugging me, so I picked up the pillow and threw it to the other end of the bed. Of course, it was attached to the [tracheotomy] and it pulled the [tracheotomy] out. That was the day I ended up breathing on my own because they saw I could breathe on my own, once I'd done that. It was my first operation. [laughter]

MG: You did it yourself.

DF: I did it myself. Well, not intentionally. Again, I didn't know it was connected, but I remember that happening there.

MG: What's it like to come out of a coma?

DF: I don't know. It was like being in a dream-like state, I guess. Then, finally having that conscious place where you start to recognize where you are and you start to recognize people like my father and that type of thing. It was just strange. It's so long ago; it's hard to even relate to. Just an odd thing. Again, I was so banged up and so bruised. I had lots of different pains and aches. Some of that would just take over most of thought. You'd kind of focus in on those things. It took a while to start really taking in the whole picture, which was another week or two away.

MG: Can you tell me about the people who were taking care of you, the nurses and the doctors?

DF: Well, I remember one particular person was a male nurse there. He made a big impression on me in terms of what he said I could still do. I find it amazing to look back now with the positive energy that I receive from people that most people don't get anymore in rehab. From the very beginning, he would come in, he would be cheery, he would talk, he would ask how I was doing, and he would just say, "You can still work. You can still have a family. You can still do this. You can do that." It was just never any doubt expressed by him. Other people weren't expressing it either

when it came to the professionals, which was reassuring for me. I hadn't even started to think about that on my own, but it never struck me that not being able to walk again was going to hold me back. It was kind of a fascinating take because nowadays, it's not unusual for someone in my position to be told: "Don't go back to work. Collect SSDI [Social Security Disability Insurance]. Don't wear your body out trying to do those things." It's a whole different message. It's the wrong message, but I'm fortunate I got the right message right from day one, really. Really helped me in terms of not for one moment thinking that I wasn't going to recover and have a full life.

MG: The people I've talked to, when they've been told about their injuries, they've been given a list of the things they cannot do any longer. It sounds like it was helpful to hear that this isn't the end of the world.

DF: It was extremely helpful. No one ever gave me a list of what you can't do. That was really helpful for me because I had never been one to hang around. I've never been one to accept limits. Then I just went out and tested my limits to find out what I could and couldn't do. I found that I could do a lot more than people expected me to do.

MG: Did you have any moments of despair or wondering why did this happen?

DF: No, I'm not that kind of person. Whatever has come my way in life, I just assume this is the way it's supposed to be and just deal with it.

Sometimes it's a pain in the neck. I've had a few down moments obviously, but despair, no. Maybe a little feeling sorry for myself occasionally, but not really.

MG: How long were in the hospital for?

DF: Again, it's a lot of different nowadays than it was then. I was in for a month for acute care. Then, the last week or so, they were just waiting for a space to open up at a rehab facility, which then opened up in Boston at the old rehab institute [The Adult Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Division], which was part of Tufts Medical Center. I was transferred there. This was quite a learning experience for me, being a naïve kid from the 'burbs [suburbs] suddenly in the middle of the city in a hospital, which was a very busy place with a whole diverse population of employees and others

that I had little exposure to – African American people and other minorities. Again, dealing with the whole medical community there, physical therapists, occupational therapists, the whole gamut. It was an eye opener and well, it was actually a new adventure really, when it came down to it. I never took it as a negative. I made the most of it and acted out quite a bit.

MG: I recently did an interview with a Vietnam Veteran who lost his leg in Vietnam. While he was recovering in a hospital, they would all go a local bar and they'd fill up their prostheses with beer.

DF: [laughter] I love it.

MG: [laughter] I'm curious about the other people in your wing who had had similar injuries and what kind of friendships you were forming.

DF: Yes. When I was there I was put in a room with a – well, first day, I was there, they put me in a room with a couple of older people who were – gee, I was 18, they were fifties. After a day or two there, they decided I should be with someone younger and they moved me to a semi-private room with another guy who was quadriplegic. I was horrified to learn he'd been

in the hospital – he’d been there for a year and was still there. I thought, “Is this what I’m going to be looking at?” I was still flat on my back because I couldn’t sit up without excruciating pain. He was actually up and somewhat mobile and doing things. He thought he was going to show me the way and how to do things and how to get around and stuff, which he did a little bit, but he was also – he became very jealous of me because once I started to pick up steam, I surpassed what he was able to do because he was quadriplegic and I’m paraplegic and so the difference of being able to have full arm function is tremendous sometimes. There was some resentment on his part after a while. There were other people there. I got along with people fine and I managed to get along with him okay, too. But I was the youngest, so I think the nursing staff liked me because I was easy to get along with. Some of these other folks were not. They were upset and they were angry and they were not dealing positively with what had happened to them, understandably. I just had a better way of interacting with people in terms of getting along.

MG: It seemed like you had a unique attitude and outlook on what had happened, where you were more positive about it and optimistic, I guess.

DF: Well, again, my goal in life was to have fun. [laughter] I saw this might be an impediment, but I was still going to have fun. Any job I've ever had or anything I've ever had to do, you try to make it fun. Otherwise, it's a drag. Why not make the best of something like that? That's what I was trying to do is just figure it out. I like a challenge. It certainly has had its challenges along the way, but it doesn't do any good to moan and groan. It doesn't do any good to hang around waiting for something to change. I know a lot of people have said, "Well, why you don't sit around waiting for the cure." I've heard that happen. In recent years, I've met people with spinal cord injury who do nothing because they're waiting for the cure or they've got all the toys like standing chairs or this kind of thing that moves their legs or arms that don't work and all that type of thing, just so they'll be ready. I said, "Well, if I'd been doing that since I was injured, I would have wasted forty-plus years waiting. There's a life to be lived in the meantime. I don't want to look back and say you wasted it all waiting around for a cure that never came."

MG: What have been some of the challenges then?

DF: Not to put them off because there's huge challenges. I think some of the challenges have been physical barriers. When I was injured in 1969 there wasn't a lot of access around. Buildings, by and large, were not accessible. There were no laws in place to make that change. This is pre-ADA by a long time and even pre-Rehab Act of 1973. I do remember in 1968 was the Architectural Barriers Act and that was passed, but that didn't really do the job of changing the environment. I was out of the hospital for a year and I'd already had a year of seeing how difficult it could be to get anywhere or if I got there, then how I was going to get into a place. Either having to rely on friends to bump the chair up steps and things like that, which I did an awful lot. I stayed in touch with some of the nurses. I used to go back to the rehab place and visit. I saw my physical therapist and other people. One of the nurses, who was close to my age by a few years, said she had a roommate who was a physical therapist, was training another guy how to use long-leg braces and crutches to get around instead of using a wheelchair and asked would I be interested. Always being game for something, I said, "Sure." I got into doing that. Spent the better part of a year building up my strength and endurance. I got to the point where that's how I actually got around most of the time. In fact, there were years I didn't even own a wheelchair. That was my only way of mobility. I did that for

about twenty to thirty years – I can't remember exactly now. I'd have to think back on it. I would start to rely on a chair for around the house and things like that, but in terms of being able to go to work and out in the community, I could get into far more places because of being able to use the crutches and braces, versus not being able to get in because there was no ramp or something like that. So, I worked in places I couldn't have worked in. I went to school where I couldn't have gone to school. So, it opened up doors for me. But also wore me out. [laughter]

MG: Can you describe how it works?

DF: Well, the braces essentially were metal. My first ones were actually stainless steel. They were useless; they were so heavy, but I ended up getting some that were aluminum. They strapped around the upper thigh and across the knee. There were two pieces of metal that went up and down the leg and there was a hinge, of course, at the knee. You actually had to have your shoes adapted. There was a channel in the shoes that they would fit in either side of the ankle. They were essentially strapped to your legs. When you were standing or I was standing, you're actually kind of sitting on the back, just below your butt. You're almost sitting but standing type of thing.

Then, I had the crutches that used to have the band around the forearm. You had a little more freedom that way. If you were standing to relax, you could actually just – the forearm would bend up and you could sort of lean on it. We used to practice the cool look. [laughter]

MG: Leaning up against the wall, smoking a cigarette? [laughter]

DF: Yes, yes. That type of thing, yes. But it was a lot of work. It really took me about a year to build up the strength and endurance to do it all the time, because it was very demanding, but it kept me in great shape, too.

MG: You must have had some guns.

DF: I did. I did. Not anymore, but I did.

MG: Were you ever mistaken for a Vietnam veteran coming back from the war?

DF: I was.

MG: Were you treated differently because of that?

DF: No, not really. There were people who did ask if I was a Vietnam vet. I was never anti-vet, even though I did take part in some protests back then. I always felt bad that the vets were branded the way they were because it just wasn't right. They had been drafted and sent somewhere. It didn't make any sense. But I was asked and my answer's always been I never had a chance to serve. I was injured before that happened. I'm not sure I would have wanted to have served. I saw some friends really get messed up by doing so. I have been asked, but not all that frequently.

MG: Were you aware of the Rehab Act of 1973 when it was passed?

DF: I had passing awareness. It wasn't really strong. I remember I think my father mentioned something about it because of course it stated that any federal dollars used anywhere then required either municipalities or buildings or whatever to become accessible, which they didn't do, but he was aware of that and he made some kind of reference to it and said it ought to help. I didn't see any immediate payoff for that myself. I was busy doing other things. I was busy trying to work and have fun and do that kind of

thing. I didn't really pay attention to those issues of access and advocacy back then.

MG: Who was your support network during this time, in the years after the injury?

DF: Well, like I said, I stayed in touch with some of the nurses and the therapists and they were part of it. I had a good network of friends. I did lose some friends when I was injured, that just kind of disappeared for whatever their reasons were. But I had some solid friends who stuck by me. I had a good strong network of people that I knew and other people that I met. I met some people along the way that became great long-term friends, still my friends.

MG: Where were you living during this time period?

DF: Well, initially, I returned home after the injury and lived with my parents for – I think it was maybe three to four years. Then, after I quit school for the third or fourth time, I had been going to Framingham State at

that point and there had been another college in between after the other thing – actually, two others. I was great at dropping out.

MG: [laughter] Sounds like it.

DF: Yes. It was difficult. That was probably the most traumatic thing, was trying to feel like you fit into college life and the whole social aspect when you couldn't go to the same places. You couldn't hang out in a dorm or you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that if you weren't living there. It wasn't accessible. I might be in a class, but had a difficult time reaching out to others and certainly, no one was reaching out to me. I was isolated a lot. I didn't do enough about it myself to break out of that. I didn't find it to be a nurturing experience, so to speak. I didn't find a lot of support among the colleges. They thought they were bending over backwards to make themselves accessible and they really weren't. They just didn't really understand. I didn't feel like I should be always asking for things, but there were things that I needed that I could have asked for or I should have – I doubt if I would have gotten. That was difficult. I was taking a work-study class at one point. I took a job, seventy-five dollars a week, running a tutoring program in a nearby town. It was part-time, but I thought,

“Seventy-five dollars a week. I’m out of here.” Moved out of the house. Got my own place with a friend. It was a good setup because he was in the Merchant Marine and away probably six months or more of the year, but still paid his rent. I got a little apartment and lived on my own there. It was great. Seventy-five dollars wasn’t a whole lot of money, but it was enough to pay my half of the rent and expenses that I had. I was on SSDI. After doing that for about a year, SSDI came along and said, “We’ll, you’re gainfully employed. You can’t get any benefits anymore. By the way, you owe us nine months back.” Well, I won’t get into the details, but apparently I was supposed to let them know I was working, but I thought seventy-five dollars was hardly what I would call gainful employment. Being young and not terribly responsible about some things, I didn’t. I went through a long, drawn out appeals process with that, but I never went back. I gave up SSDI. I gave up working with vocational rehab. I never found them to be helpful to me at all. They were too dictatorial, telling me what I could or couldn’t do. I just did it on my own terms, which probably is not the best path for a lot of people to take, but it’s worked for me.

MG: How long did you stay in the tutoring program?

DF: Well, things have a way of working out. I did that for about a year. Then, that same business, which was a non-profit, decided to go from being a community counseling and tutoring program to opening an alternative high school, which had been the dream of the founder. I was just kept on as an assistant teacher. After being there for several years, I ended up being the head teacher. The director came and said, “If you want to be able to continue doing this, you really need to finish college.” I said, “Oh, yeah. The old college thing.” But again, taking the alternative route, I bypassed getting a BA and I got into a master’s program and did get my master’s in education. I did. I did that in about an eighteen-month period. I was able to continue the teaching and doing that work without having to go back and deal with all the bachelor’s degree stuff.

MG: I’m wondering how school was different. Some of the people I’ve talked to who are in wheelchairs say that people just treat them differently or confuse a mental handicap with a physical handicap.

DF: Oh, yes. That’s happened to me, sure. I think the treating differently was definitely the case then because no one had ever done much work on disability awareness. It was all anybody – you had to do it on your own as

an individual. We were just making it up as we went along, so to speak. You could do it by the strength of your personality. An outgoing person would really be able to handle that kind of thing really easy. Someone who's not quite so outgoing or didn't have a lot of confidence, like I didn't, would not be so easy. The general public was not really up on disability in general. They didn't know the difference between a cognitive disability or physical or a mental or anything else. Disability just had a negative connotation to most people.

MG: Were you starting to feel like that was going to change and that the disability rights movement was around the corner, or gaining steam, or not quite at that point?

DF: Well, this was the 70s, and no. I saw no sign of the disability rights movements whatsoever. I know it was out there, but I didn't see it. Again, I still lived out in the greater Framingham area, west of Boston and I think outside the cities, you didn't see a lot of those kinds of things. I was just trying to find my own way. There was many a time I thought certain things like, "I hear about people with disabilities struggling and trying to do this and trying to do that." I said, "It really would be good if there was an

organization that did, say, peer support or offer training of some kind or whatever.” I remember saying that over and over again and even considering doing some of that myself. I had done the peer support piece informally when I got out of the hospital, was never unusual for the hospital to ask you to come back and meet newly injured people to show them that you can still function and all that. It had been done for me and I was happy to do that for other people, too, but it was very informal.

MG: When you did that, what did you tell them?

DF: It was usually sort of – there was usually someone there, a third party who would make the introduction and say, “Well, Dennis is doing this,” or whatever. It’d be just a chat. They’d leave the room and you wouldn’t even talk about the disability stuff. You’d talk about other things, which I think you need to do anyway first so that you can build up a rapport. I was not too receptive when anyone came to me right off, started talking about disability. I’d say, “Wait a minute. Who are you?” It’s like anything else. If you’re trying to bond with people or to interact, you have to start with the easy stuff. You can’t just dive right in. Some people do, but it’s not my style.

MG: Does any of the people that you met during that time period stand out to you, people that you coached or talked to?

DF: What stands out to me is that two of the people that I provided that sort of coaching to both killed themselves. That was not positive feedback of any kind. I know it nothing to do with me. Those are the kinds of things that used to make me wonder and say, “Why would someone kill themselves and why didn’t I?” You start to wonder what’s the difference maker there and what’s going on with me that I don’t have that kind of thought. Why would they do that? Couldn’t somebody have done something differently to have them not do that, but I’m not sure that could have been done. It was pretty discouraging to see that happen, but not uncommon. There is a lot of suicide in the spinal cord injury world.

MG: What do you think society could do to change that?

DF: Well, I think, some more formalized counseling would be helpful and probably some more peer support because it needs to happen early and often, early intervention type thing. But on top of that, one of the things that really, I think, pushes people that way is that as far as we’ve come, it’s still

very difficult for people to get around, to assimilate into the greater population and to see themselves as equal to or worthy like anyone else. I think some people just can't get away from that stigma that may be in their own head. On top of that, they really struggle. There's some significant struggles that can come with it, from your body doesn't always hold up well. I'm actually pretty fortunate that forty-plus years later, I'm in pretty good health. Not everyone can say that. There's a lot of things that can happen along the way. I know people do struggle and I don't know if any amount of support's going to help them, just like typical things with mental illness and things like that. Look at Robin Williams recently. He had all the help in the world available to him, but it just didn't happen or he didn't take advantage of it. Sometimes there's nothing you can do. It's not an easy question to answer.

MG: It sometimes surprises me. In terms of disability, I feel like it's inevitable. We will all age or it's something that could happen to anyone, but at the same time, society hasn't opened up about it or opened up to it.

DF: Well, more and more since I was a kid – it wasn't a big thing then, but now, it's like we're all Peter Pan and we all think we're going to live forever

and we're all going to have strong, healthy bodies and we're going to be models and things like that. That's an image that very few of us can live up to. It's just not the norm. I don't think people really look at disability as the norm, but it is. You can be born with a disability, as people are, and, as you said, as we get older, there's a good chance they will acquire a disability or more than one. It's just the natural way of life. But there's so much denial about staying young, staying beautiful, and all the things like that, that people really consider disability worse than death. When I was injured way back when, I remember people saying, "Gee, if that happened to me, I would have killed myself."

MG: What would you say to them?

DF: I would say, "Why?" I've always said it, and I still say it. I've had a great life. I have no complaints. I've worked most of my adult life. I've got a family. I've got kids. Got a great job. I have great friends. I've had great opportunity. I'm still having fun. Why would you not want to have that? Jokingly, I'll say, "Walking's not all it cracked up to be." [laughter]

MG: How is disability viewed differently in other countries or parts of the world?

DF: Well, the roots of our problems are still from other parts of the world. I think being mostly of European descent in this country – back in the Middle Ages, disability was an evil thing. It translated later through the churches that rather than an evil thing, it was a punishment from God or you became an object of pity and your purpose in life was to help people give. Begging and alms were important. The roles were never positive. You can go to very ancient times and maybe blindness was revered. Certain people made assumptions that people who were blind were wise and smart because they had this innate intelligence because they had to rely on other senses, but by and large, people with disability were never really portrayed in a positive light, although there were examples of when it was a positive spin. Who was it? Alexander the Great, I think had epilepsy. That was considered to be a gift from the gods. I think that was true of a few other people in history. Certainly some of the wild conquerors of the time probably had bipolar disorder, but of course, in a different time and different culture, things looked different and behaved different and fit in or don't fit in. It's never been something that carries positive annotations. It's always had

negative. Even modern society, our films and books and things like that, often the villains are people with some kind of disability. That disability is used as the reason for why they've become evil or twisted or something like that.

MG: How does that make you feel when you see movies like that?

DF: Well, it depends on what it is. Because there's the movies like that or nowadays, we have the "super-crip" movies, where someone's portrayed with a disability and overcoming things. Then the public thinks everyone should be able to overcome everything, which is not so easy either. There's just not enough portrayal [of] people with disabilities as every day, normal people. You're either the villain or you're some super person who has accomplished so much. Who is it? [Forrest] Gump.

MG: Yes. His braces busted and he ran across the country.

DF: Right. Clearly, of lower intelligence and yet, full of wisdom and understanding the world, etc. There's one. Then there was *Rain Man*.

There's just one after another. You can point to these things – *My Left Foot*.

They all take good stories, which may or may not be true, but at the same time, they exaggerate it so much, it's just beyond normalcy and it's beyond reason to expect that everyone with a disability can live up to those kinds of images.

MG: Is there any film or portrayal, that's gotten it right?

DF: I have to think about it because I'm not a big movie-watcher, but I think there's been a couple.

MG: I didn't see it, but I know they made a film about Temple Grandin.

DF: Yes, that was done well. I did see that, and it was done well.

MG: Over the years, have you seen the world of access change?

DF: Well, I've seen a lot of change. We still have a long way to go. It's one of the things that makes me grumpy. Like the chair I'm in. There's no comparison to my original chair when I got out of the hospital, which was stainless steel, probably weighed fifty to sixty pounds, was very difficult to

move around and lift and get in and out of the car. This weighs less than ten pounds – very easy to get in and out of the car and actually helps my mobility in terms of less stress on my arms, pushing, etc. That's just one example. Wheelchairs have come a long, long way. They've even gotten to the point where the smart designers are looking at them so that people who use them are looking at them as a fashion statement or a personal statement about who they are and how they want to look and get around, type of thing, which I think is great. You can get them in different colors, different sizes. There's all kinds of flavors you could get. They're incredibly expensive and difficult to get exactly what you want when you have to wrestle with the insurers, but it can be done. Everything else is out there too, from vehicles you can drive with different adaptive equipment. People have greater access now to the world through technology and computers, because even if they need adaptive equipment, they can still use a computer, whether it's through – I've seen one person that we worked with who controls a computer with the retinas of their eyes and is able to fully communicate with everyone they want to, using email, etc., and is on that computer hours and hours a day. For people who are blind, there are adaptive pieces to use, so they can read things on screen. People who are deaf have found an entire change to communication because of texting and things like that. In fact, very few

people have TTYs [teletypewriters] anymore because the deaf community doesn't use them now. They use texting and other ways of communicating with computers, etc. Huge changes that way. If you look at sports, which seems to always be the forerunner of changes, you've got the amputees now with those incredibly cool things for their legs. I can't remember what they're called now. You had the guy who was in the Olympics, was Paralympics and then he was allowed in the Olympics, even with that. The Olympians were complaining that he had an advantage. I thought this great. This is what the disability world needs is to be seen as an advantage in doing something. He didn't win, but athletes can be such whiners. They just didn't want this guy to even have an edge, which he didn't. I guess they call him "Blades." It's just amazing what people invent. I think necessity does create ways to change things and adapt. I think most people with disabilities learn to be very adaptable. You can go to anyone like me and go to their home and find different ways they make their home work for them. We've had employees here, same thing – fellow employees, other people I've known. You figure out your own world and how to make things as easy as you can or convenient as you can and still function within your home or your job or something like that.

MG: Do you need a glass or water or anything?

DF: No, I'll just take another sip of my coffee here. Thanks.

MG: Can you describe your home? Talk about how your house may be different from someone else's.

DF: Well, when we moved here, we had the challenge of finding something that was accessible to the chair. We looked for months and didn't really find anything that we wanted that worked. There was a real shortage of homes that are already barrier free. We finally found a ranch that – kind of an odd set up. It was originally a small ranch of say, four rooms. Later, another building was brought into the property, which originally was a workshop and then later was converted to living space. In between, they put another room that connected the two, but there were different levels. The newer space was down three steps from the older space. We went and looked at it. It's essentially a ranch, but with two levels. We thought, "Okay. How is this going to work?" We scratched our heads and scratched our heads because we liked it and everything else was good. I could get in the bathroom doors. They were wide enough. The bathroom was the right size and side. All the

rooms had big doors or the big kitchen had all the things that we wanted. So, we gave it some thought and then decided that we could adapt it by, first of all, building a ramp along the back and a deck outside. But in order to do that, first we had to put an edition on the house that would connect one to the other and it's an indoor ramp, essentially. It didn't take too much. It cost some money, but we moved from Massachusetts, so we had money left over from the sale of the home there and our new home didn't cost as much. Put that on and it works great. That's still the way it is. You come up between the house and the garage, go up the ramp, there's the deck, go in the door, which we had to put in with the ramp, etc. We had to take out a window and make a door in the house to create that flow, but we did it and it worked. That's really the only major change we made to the house.

MG: How did you meet your wife?

DF: I met her when I was teaching. She had been – what do you call them? – Vista volunteer. She was there for a while and we got to know each other and one thing led to another. [laughter]

MG: Did you move to Maine for this job here?

DF: Yes. I had been working. We had sort of had a gap in there. After I did the teaching for a while – I got married when I was still teaching. Wasn't making a whole lot of money. Teaching's not a very lucrative career. I decided I was going to leave the teaching job and go seek my fame and fortune in the business community. Thought I would do well. Wasn't as easy as I thought. I ended up taking a part-time job while I was out looking for work. Then, that turned into another full-time job, just like the other one had come along that way. That was not where I had anticipated to go. It was actually at a gas station, but I ended up going from being a part-time cashier to being the bookkeeper and then the gas station was sold and the guy who bought it bought that one and another one. I became number two and running these two businesses. I learned about retail and all the things [that] go with that and spent about ten years doing that. Again, all the while, still with a disability. That did not impede my being hired by him. He didn't see that as an issue. He just talked to other people who had worked with me, knew what I was able to do and I kept moving with him, which was good. Then, in 1989, the economy tanked and I was the first person to be let go because next to him, I made the most money. That was a real shocker because I had invested ten years there. Maybe after six or seven, I realized I

was sort of spinning my wheels. I wasn't using my talents to the best of my ability, but it was paying my bills. We had one child and we had another one on the way. You don't walk away from work. You got to pay the bills. Even along there, I had done that job, plus I had worked part-time for H & R Block, which I learned how to do. I was always busy working sixty or more hours a week. Then, I was laid off. I can honestly say that was probably the worst thing that ever happened to me, including my injury. Being male and having that male ego about having to be the breadwinner and head of the family and all that stuff, it was a real blow. Probably, unfortunately, it was just about the time the ADA was coming along. Suddenly, when I'm looking for work, now there's a federal law that talks about nondiscrimination. I had a heck of time in the interview process, because I think that most businesses were taking a new stance that they did not want to open the door to people with disabilities because they were afraid of all these potential liabilities. So, I was out for six-plus months, really trying to find some stuff. I thought I had a handle on getting a couple of good jobs, where I was going to be a trainer of other personnel, etc., and I knew I had the skills, and I had the personality for it. I thought I nailed interviews and things. I always came down to being one of the finalists, but in the end, didn't get the job. While I never took the steps to try to prove it, I do think

there was an element of discrimination going on with those things because how many times can you be the finalist and not be it? I didn't get bitter about it. I was more in a panic about what to do when the unemployment ran out. It was in 1990 that in desperation I looked at a job that someone showed me in Worcester, Massachusetts for a center for independent living. It was a substantial cut in pay compared to what I had been making at the gas station, but I remember going for the interview and being at the interview. The assistant director who interviewed me, halfway through the interview said, "You're really overqualified for this position. We have a management position open. Would you be interested in talking about that?" That switched gears. Then, that ended up being five thousand dollars more than the other one would have been, but it was still considerably less than I had been making, but it was a good boost right away. I said, "Sure. Let's talk about that." We did, and I got the job. I remember coming home from work the first day and saying to Lisa, my wife, I'm going to go a long way in this business. She, of course, was already wrung out from all the unemployment and she had to go back to work part-time even though we had two little kids. It put a lot of stress on the family and put a lot of stress on our credit and things like that, but it was good to be back to work. I just remember that being in this new business, they're doing all those things I had

been thinking over the years that someone should be doing and here now, was a place that was doing all those things that I talked about and thought about. It was great and I was ready for it, where I wouldn't have been ready for it twenty years before. I didn't really want to be amongst people with disabilities when I was younger, but at that point, I was mature enough to start looking at things differently and realizing that we're all people, we all have our gifts and talents. I found some great people to work with there. I also made a promise to myself, that I would never work anywhere again for five years without serious changes in either income or responsibility or something like that, and that I was not going to make that mistake I had made with the gas station where the loyalty I showed and then had it all ripped out from under me. That's how I got to this business. After a year there, I became assistant director from the other management position. The director there became one of my dearest friends and we had this great peer relationship. He also was a para with a chair. We really became close. Then, the following year, we already had a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to do something, but we lost the director who was doing it. I said I would take that position, but he opened it up for competition internally. He said to me, "You will probably get this position, but if you do, you won't be able to come back to be assistant director because we

probably will not be able to afford that anymore.” So, I took a big chance and said, “It's all right. I want it. There's a national exposure here. We're working on important things. We're working with the RWJ foundation. I'm going to have a chance to meet people around the country.” I took it. Then, when the project wound down two years later, Alpha One was also in the same grant and the director here, Steve Tremblay, had been part of the national team with me. We were at the final meeting of the whole grant. I think it was in March or April of that year. I talked about what we'd accomplished, what we were still working on, a conference that I was going to soon, and he pulled me over near the end of that and he said, “I'd like to hear more about that when you get back.” That was all well and good. I said, “Sure, sure.” A month later, of course, we're winding down and I'm well aware that the job is ending in weeks. I get a phone call and it's Steve on the phone. He says, “I want you to come up to Maine and tell me about that conference you went to where you're going to speak.” I said, “Well, okay. I'll do that.” Everybody else who I worked with said, “He's just going to offer you a job.” I said, “Well, I don't know about that,” but that's exactly what he did. I came in this office. He was sitting where you are. [laughter] You don't look like him, but that's okay. We talked for about five minutes about that conference. Then, he hemmed and hawed and he said, “Well, I

didn't really ask you here for that.” He offered me a job to work here. I thought that was a great opportunity. Alpha One's always had a fantastic reputation nationally. I learned about it through the project, but I also knew that people around the country and independent living have long known of the unique things we've done at this organization. It was a delight to be offered the job. I went home, talked to Lisa. It took us about five minutes to decide we wanted to live in Maine. At the time, the kids were in fourth grade, first grade or third grade, kindergarten. So, we thought we'd love to come to Maine to raise the kids here. It'll be more like how I grew up where I was, because it wasn't like that anymore down there. We did. One of the best things ever. I have the best job in the world.

MG: That's good. What was that grant-funded project, those two years?

DF: Well, they had decided to put out an RFP to centers for independent living. Their name of it was Improving Service Systems for People with Disabilities. It was pretty broad. But they were giving the centers that were funded an opportunity to look at different ways to strengthen their operations and look at new ways of doing things that would impact the community. Worcester, which had written theirs before I even got involved, theirs was

all about health care, that people with disabilities typically don't get adequate healthcare for a variety of reasons, mostly because of the barriers that exist. They were trying to work with the HMOs in central Massachusetts. At the time, central Massachusetts had the deepest penetration of managed care than anywhere in the country, which was kind of odd. It was a great opportunity to work with some of the HMOs. Our project was to demonstrate that the independent living services overlapped on the HMO services, would improve the health of their members who had disabilities. We were able to get Fallon Community Health Plan, in particular, to work with us. We did a study over a period of about a year and a half to measure our impact and the ultimate impact was we demonstrated that for the people in the project, we saved an average of – gee, it was over two thousand dollars per member per month we saved Fallon. We knew we could have an impact and even we were blown away by the numbers. But in the end, Fallon didn't want to work with us. This is one of the all-time ironies in the world. They were afraid of what they call adverse selection. I thought, talk about a euphemism. They didn't want to attract too many people with disabilities. They thought they would if they did. I thought, “How crazy is that?” Anyway, because of the work I'd done with the HMOs down there, Steve up here – Maine was getting ready to enter managed care and he

wanted Alpha One to be involved and he wanted me to lead that effort.

That's why I was recruited.

MG: Dennis, I've taken over an hour of your time. I still have more questions.

DF: That's okay. I have nothing else scheduled.

MG: I'll keep going and you let me know when you have to kick me out.

[laughter] Can you tell me more about Alpha One, its history, its mission, and things like that?

DF: Well, founded in 1978. This is now our 36th year, I believe. That's old for many centers. There are certainly some that are older, but we were one of the first ten to receive federal funding back in '79. In fact, it was the Rehab Act of '78 and the reauthorization that the feds decided to put money into independent living. They put out an RFP to the States to compete and Maine entered that competition and won. Alpha One received its first federal grant. I think it was – gee, it was less than fifty thousand dollars to begin offering independent living services. So, with that money – Steve

Tremblay was the founder. He created an organization with a board of directors, made up mostly of people with disabilities, which is what's required in independent living, and started to try to advocate for better systems that serve people. Some of the early things that happened with that were getting the state to pay for home-based care services that were self-directed, so that people who were younger and become disabled would be able to continue to grow their own life. In order to go to work or go to school, they needed personal assistance to do that in the morning or in the evening or whatever. The state created a pilot program that we ran, the original HBC program. That grew over the years considerably. Later, in the '80s, they advocated for waivers that were now available through the Reagan administration. The reason for that was because there are a lot of younger people with disabilities living in nursing homes who, with some personal assistance, could live independently. Alpha One was in the forefront of pushing that. I think it was 1980 – well, maybe '86 we started our waiver program here, funded by the state Medicaid system. We continue to push over the years for programs for people who are not nursing home eligible, but still needed assistance in the community in order to function in their lives. That happened in 1995. By then, in '95, we then had

three different consumer-directed programs that we were administering and we continue to administer the three of those now.

MG: What are those three?

DF: Well, there's HBC, which is state funded. Then, there's the physically disabled waiver, which is known as section 22 in Medicaid world. The other one is consumer directed attendant services, which is section 12 in Medicaid world, but they're all consumer directed and they're all basically the same model, but with some tweaks and twists with the rule making that goes in. For instance, eligibilities are a little bit different in terms of income and that type of thing.

MG: Can you talk a little bit about the communities you serve and who benefits from Alpha One?

DF: Well, the federal requirements are that a center serve all people with disabilities. It doesn't matter whether it's physical, mental, cognitive, sensory, or multiple whatever it is. You serve everybody. It's a little difficult to do that. We started out before those – before getting grounded in

that, by picking on things, we're taking on HBC – was serving people with physical disabilities. I think we're known for doing that because both Steve and I use a wheelchair, so we have physical disabilities, and many of the people associated with the company have always had physical disability, but not everybody. We hire people who are of all disabilities, and we've had that mix here ever since day one. Our board has had a mix. I think some of the programs we deliver do serve everybody and some do not. It just depends on which one it is we've gotten into. One of the reasons I came to Alpha One in particular was because of what's now called the mPower program, was originally the adapted equipment loan program. That was a great – it is a great example of changing systems to work better for people with disabilities. This was again, early eighties when Steve decided that, first of all, the state should take a better look at independent living. He was able to convince their governor back then to create a commission on independent living. That commission met for a year and then came in with a list of recommendations of how to improve the living situation for everybody. One of the recommendations was that people with disabilities, of all disabilities, need different types of adaptive equipment or assistive technology, but it's hard to pay for those things, if you're not working, you're living on limited income. Medicaid would cover it. Often Medicare

wouldn't or private insurance. So, if you need something to be more independent, how are you going to get that? The recommendation was to create a loan fund that people could borrow from. It was a great recommendation, but now how do you make that real? Steve and Kim Wallace who used to work for us, both great leaders in their time, started going around talking to people, looking for ways to figure that out and they went to the Finance Authority of Maine and met with Stan Provus, who used to run Finance Authority of Maine. I think he was not their first stop. He was the later stop, but he's the last stop because they sat there and had the discussion, talked about what they wanted and he thought it was a great idea, said, "How much are you looking for?" I don't think they had even thought about that. They kind of looked at each other and almost simultaneously said, "A million." He said, "Not enough." He said, "If you're going to do this, you got to get enough money to do it." He said, "Five million, bottom line. It's got to be at least that. They said, "Okay." Then they decided together that they should get it on the ballot and the referendum and have the people of Maine vote on it, which was very unique at the time because referendums are almost always about bricks and mortar things. This was a concept to create a financial loan program for a target population, people with disabilities. They did that, and they got it on the ballot. Then, went

through a six-month campaign to promote it. They went all over the state, Lions Clubs, all the different things that you could go to and talk to – radio, TV, whatever they could do to promote the idea, so that when the election was held in November that year, it passed and it passed by the widest margin of anything up until that time. It was over seventy percent approval, which when I learned about that from afar, I thought, “Now there’s a population of people who support the concept of people with disabilities having an ability to move forward and around something that’s not a handout. It’s an actual loan.” You’re borrowing the money, but you got to pay it back. I like that because it offers people that dignity of being treated like anyone else and the expectation that they will repay the loan. It’s also built on the independent living concept in that there’s a loan board that’s a majority of people with disabilities who meet monthly and listen to the loan applications, etc. and they decide whether to fund the loan or not. Typically, you’ll get better terms and better rates than you would at a bank. It’s an incredibly powerful program. It’s so powerful that the rest of the country copied us. Afterwards NIDRR, the National Institute for Disability Research and Rehabilitation, put out a grant, which we were awarded. We called it Credit-able. We went and taught other states how to create their own loan programs. I wish I’d been here then, because they went to Alaska, Hawaii. They had a great time,

but it was a time when change was supported, new ideas were supported and they were able to spread the word. Even after all that, I think almost every state has a loan program, but none of them come close still to the amount of money in our loan program, because now ours actually went up from five million to six and a half million later. Ten years later, more was added. It's a fabulous program. It can make the difference between dependence and independence.

MG: Do you think the ADA had anything to do with those changes?

DF: It's all pre-ADA. It's all pre-ADA. Going back on that, I don't remember the actual mission statement from way back when. We have since changed our mission statement, so it's more succinct and to the point about what we do. That is moving people with disabilities from dependence to self-reliance. That's what independent living is all about. That's always been the mission here. We also have that approach that we're a peer-based organization and that self-help model. We believe in hiring people with disabilities who are qualified, that can do the job and demonstrate on that kind of a level, that you can work, you can be successful, you can make a difference. As an organization operated by and for people with disabilities,

we serve as a peer model that way, to other organizations that it's possible; people can be productive, they can give back, and they can be trusted to do the work anyone else can be doing. We take it to whatever level we can and we've always prided ourselves on being innovative and trying new things like the loan program, like HBC, like many of the things that we've developed as a menu of services. They all have a certain amount of risk to them, but we're not afraid of taking those risks. I think that's why we've got the reputation we've had around the country in terms of innovation. They call it entrepreneurship, but I think it's just a matter of doing what needs to be done to advance the lives of people with disabilities.

MG: The loan program seems to be a great stopgap for that vicious cycle of discrimination, unemployment, and then financial freedom.

DF: Yes, it is. I think the toughest one still is employment. The numbers of people who are employed are shockingly low. If the general population was at that rate, there'd be rioting in the streets. Yet, we accept that for people with disabilities. It's wrong because people can work and if they were encouraged to work instead of encouraged not to work, and encouraged to

earn a living as opposed to going on to benefits, it would be significantly different. It's not like it can't be done. It's just a matter of will.

MG: I want to turn now to maybe talking about the disability rights movement and the ADA. But I wanted to ask you earlier about how raising a family is different when you have a disability.

DF: Well, it's had its challenges, but when the kids had to get into school systems and things like that, I wanted to make sure that I could participate and support and everything. I was always checking out schools. When we were looking for a home up here, I wanted to be in a community that not only found education important, but was going to allow me to participate in whatever level I could. That worked out well where we live. We live in Yarmouth, which is a topnotch school system, but also never really presented any barriers to my participation. It's impacted a social life because we make lots of friends, but at the same time, I can't get into many people's homes, because they're not built that way. It's been difficult. I always thought when I was kid, if I had kids, I'd do all the different sporting things with kids and you can't necessarily do the same things. At the same time, you can do other things. I do believe that my kids and I have a great

relationship. They, I don't think, have any wounds because I have a disability. I remember my daughter once breaking into tears when I couldn't use the crutches and braces anymore. I had to use a chair. We were going to go to a friend's family's house for our usual Christmas thing with them. Her first thought over anything else – and she might have been only four or five – was daddy won't be able to get in. She was aware of those kinds of things, but it never really stopped us from doing anything.

MG: How is having a disability in Maine different? Is the culture different? Is it tough because of all the rural areas?

DF: It's a funny mix because I think that on an individual basis, people are always willing to help if you need help. I think Maine is that kind of a place. No matter what, whether you're in a big city or a small town, if someone sees you struggling to do something or looking like you could use a hand, people are right there to offer. On the other hand, if you want them to make city hall accessible, they're not. They don't like having to do anything. They don't want to spend money that they don't understand spending or something like that. There's a big aversion to compliance with the law, which is very discouraging because I have money to spend and I want to go

out and spend it someplace, whether it's a restaurant or a music venue or something like that. If I can't get in, I'm not going to spend my money. You could say it's discrimination and it is, but at the same time, it's foolish on the part of the proprietor to be cutting out part of the population that would be there to spend money and help them earn their living. So, it's just an odd thing, but I don't get it really, bottom line. It's not that difficult to do. Yes, it can be expensive in some cases, but if you're building something brand new, it's not a significant amount of money. It can be done usually for very little more than it would be if you didn't. Retrofitting things can be challenging, but it can also be done. We've seen it in many places. That's one of the things we've taken here as an approach is that when the ADA was passed, we actually, before that, had sued a number of businesses around the area under the Maine Human Rights Act legislation. When ADA passed, we decided to shift gears and instead of suing businesses and things like that, we wanted to become a resource and we hired an architect as a way of starting to do that. We continue to have an architect on board. That person is able to sell our services on the expertise around how to make your building or city or town or whatever accessible. It was quite an interesting body of work we've done over the years with that since the ADA passed, but we've done – assessed the courthouses in Maine, so they're now either accessible or have

a plan in place to work on that. Our architect designed the observation tower on the bridge up at Verona, the suspension bridge, so that people with disabilities would be able to ride the elevator and get up there and look around. We were contacted by DOT [Department of Transportation] to do that. We grew the reputation of being a strong, knowledgeable resource that could help. We tried to take us a different direction, being here not only for people with disabilities, but the community at large in order to see how they could be more inclusive and make those changes. But still a long way to go.

MG: Maybe we'll go back in time now and if you could talk about what was going on in the disability rights movement leading up to the ADA. Who was involved and what was taking place?

DF: Here in Maine, I wouldn't know that because I wasn't here at the time. I didn't come until '95, but I know Steve was involved, Kim Wallace. People like Penny Plourde, Ron Hansen, a number of people that are all gone now. Penny's still around, but the others are gone, and others that I never knew. When the ADA was approaching during those years in the 80s, I think they were supportive of the national effort and they probably worked with the senators and representatives here in Maine to get them on board and

did their own grassroots type thing, but what's been interesting here in Maine and Steve's approach was always to pay attention to business in Maine, not in Washington. While they saw the value of doing that and they supported the value of doing that, they're always more conscious of remembering that the work is going on here. I think that's what's made us a strong organization is not getting too distracted by what's going on elsewhere. Pay attention to it, be informed, and support, but don't be flying back and forth to Washington all the time getting deeply invested in whatever goes on there. I don't know. I suppose you could have an opposing opinion of that, but I think one of the reasons we've been strong is that we have paid attention to what goes on here and have supported things like ADA, which did pass. I know a lot of effort went in more to building things here, as it should be, as other states have done, too. I think in Massachusetts where I was doing a lot of work when the ADA was first passed, some of the advocates there, I know spend a lot of time doing those things – great leaders, determined people, as they were everywhere, you still had to pay attention to business at home.

MG: What do you remember when the ADA passed? Was it something that was on your radar? Did you feel a personal connection to it?

DF: Leading up to it, it wasn't really on my radar that much, because again, I wasn't working in the disability business, so to speak. I was still at that gas station, making sure we were selling the smokes and cokes and gas and things like that. You're just wrapped up into life as it was. Then when I got the new job in Worcester with the center there, obviously, ADA was on everybody's plate and it was the buzz. The more I learned, the more excited I was, as was everyone else, because we thought, "This is going to be huge." We're going to have such greater access to things and greater inclusion that everyone was looking to jump on the wagon for different things. In fact, one of the grants and the RWJ thing was a center that decided that they would create an ADA consulting business. They thought they were going to get rich doing that. They landed a huge contract right away with the island of Nantucket. That was very impressive obviously, but they were in Western Massachusetts and Nantucket's a plane ride away. It actually ended up being a tough job for them. They had some other work that way too, but it didn't develop into the lucrative business they hoped it would. I think back then, I remember a lot of people hanging shingles up to be ADA consultants. They didn't often know much about the ADA. It was brand new. People were still interpreting it. They may not have ever done anything in the

disability field. Lawyers were doing that and other people who might know something, but didn't know a whole lot. So, I think the initial excitement wore out after about five years when we saw how slow progress actually would be, but at the same time, we were successful in building that architectural consulting, which I guess you could say is related to that, but it's not only related to that, because we tie in all the pieces of all the codes that are out there. You can't just build a building based on ADA. You've got to look at safety codes and all the other things that are tied into it, and know the differences and how one contradicts the other and then what are you going to do. That's kind of the depth of knowledge we built. I don't know. Depending on the day, I'm happy with the progress I've seen and then other times I'm disgusted when I see a new building built that's not accessible. How you can be twenty-four years after the law and there's no one accountable because it's a mix. You've got an architect who designed a building not accessible. You've got a town or a city that signed off on it. You've got the fire marshal's office, did the same thing. Then, it's given an occupancy permit before it's inspected. Then, you get in there and it doesn't work. It can be pretty discouraging.

MG: Did you sense any immediate changes?

DF: Interestingly, ADA, when it started out, was all about employment. Everyone thought they'd see a big boost in people getting jobs. That has never been the case. It's actually turned out to [have] made much more progress from the Title III public accommodations point of view, where more and more businesses over time have become accessible, especially when they build new locations, etc. I think we've seen the biggest bang for the buck there, where I think we thought it would be first and foremost with jobs, and maybe second with municipalities and state government, which also lags terribly behind. Kind of flipped where the expectations were.

MG: Did it change your life in any way?

DF: Yes. I think it's enriched, as I can get into more places and do more things. I think that, for instance, travel, going to another city and expecting to find a wheelchair accessible room, it turns out it actually is. Where in the past, they've been pretty horrible. Excuse me. Restaurants, things like that, while they're not always perfect, just seeing when they try to make the attempt and they're trying to do the right thing or they're doing the best they can under certain circumstances. I think that's good. Same thing with

museums and other venues, where you're trying to enjoy different cultural events, I think. Some places have just done a fabulous job and they're incredible. Others just lag behind out of lack of awareness or someone asking. Unfortunately, that's what the ADA is about. Someone's got to point out – it usually has to be an individual who takes a stance because they're frustrated and have seen that it could be better. That's just hard to do. If you're trying to live your life and work and raise a family, you can't be complaining all day or talking to businesses or whatever all day. It takes a lot of energy.

MG: I bet.

DF: Having kids in Yarmouth, where I raised the kids and they grew up, it's not perfect. They've done a decent job on things, but things still get approved that aren't accessible. They've done things that I would complain about, but I wouldn't do it when I had kids in the school system. I wasn't going to rock the boat because that doesn't always go over. I didn't want the kids feeling the wrath in any kind of way of my ruffling feathers anywhere in town. Now that they're out of school, it's different. I think some people would have done it anyway with kids in that situation, but I wouldn't.

Anyway, I think you have to make your choices. I'm not going to make a complaint about everything, but there's certain things I will and I do complain about.

MG: Can you give me an example?

DF: Sure. I haven't gotten into it deeply, but there's a grocery store in town that has recently remodeled and the remodeling is making it less accessible than it was before. I've already had a little interaction with them and I've stopped now because they keep working on things and it keeps getting worse. I'm going to see their store manager first with a list, point things out with the chapter and verse on the law in terms of showing where it's wrong and if I don't get anywhere that way, I'll just take it further through the system until we get some action, but I'm not going to just let them continue doing that because it's just not right. It's not just about me. There's other people who come in there, too. But it's more personal because it's the store I used to enjoy going to and I'm not enjoying it so much now.

MG: You had said that at the time of your injury you weren't as big an advocate for people with disabilities as you became later in life. I'm curious what changed or what your mindset was early on.

DF: Well, I think early on is that my experience personally with disability had always been negative. My earliest memory is my parents used to drag my older brother and I to go visit this other couple they knew. The other couple's children were all grown except for their youngest who had, I believe it was, cerebral palsy. No one ever talked about it. We'd go into this old home that smelled like old people. Their son would be in a wheelchair in the corner. We'd all be brought into another room and he'd be left in that room. All the message and vibe I picked up whenever I went there as a kid was all negative. No one spoke to him. He made funny noises and didn't speak. Every once in a while, when we'd be in the room, he'd make a noise and his mother would get up and go in and fuss over him and stuff. If you don't tell kids what's going on, then they make it up in their head. What I made up was that there's something wrong here, that's why they keep him in another room. They don't even include him, so that's not a good thing. Everything I got about it was just a level of discomfort. I carried that with me unknowingly. The only other exposure I had to

disability as a kid was we had people in Millis, where I grew up – small town, everybody knew each other. There were some adults who had mental retardation who used to ride their bikes around town and you knew who they were and everybody knew them. No one bothered them. They were just included in the community. I had some peers in school who'd had polio, but it wasn't severe. They had maybe a short leg brace on one leg or maybe part of their arm might be withered with the musculature. They were just part of the group. They did the best they could with things and we always included them in things and it was normalized that way. There was nobody around with a significant disability, physical disability. When I got into rehab hospital and suddenly was surrounded by all these people with very significant disabilities, which was anywhere from spinal cord injury to stroke and other things, that really had an impact on me. Then, to come out of rehab and back to life and then to have people associate me with all people with disabilities that, to me, had a negative connotation. I worked hard to stay away from that. I didn't want to be just the disabled guy. I wanted to be Dennis, still having fun, doing whatever with my friends. So, that's how I spent a lot of time. It was until I married, I was working, I had kids, and you grow up essentially and you start to see life differently. Then, when I got laid off and ended up in that situation, suddenly I'm at the center

in Worcester working with other people with disabilities and seeing that they have their capabilities. It was foolish to feel the way I did before. I would say maturity is what made the difference. I'm glad it happened. It really has made me a better person to be more accepting and to learn more and to value people more than I did. Also, I made some great friends around the country who have significant disabilities.

MG: What have you learned about other types of disabilities?

DF: Well, I've just learned that they're people. They have hopes and dreams and frustrations. They experience many of the same things I do for one reason or another. Doesn't matter what their disability is. They've probably been discriminated against one way or another. They've had trouble finding a job when they didn't have a job. They've had difficulty finding a place to live, no matter what kind of disability they have. I like to say when I talk to people that as far as we've come, people with disabilities still live lives of low expectations. Now, I expect a lot from myself and I always did. I was fortunate to have the support to achieve what I have, but most people are told, "Don't work." They're talked down to, they're patronized and they get onto Medicaid or Medicare or to SSI or SSDI. They

live in poverty, at poverty level. They can't aspire to get off of that because once you're in the system, it's extremely difficult to get out. People don't expect them to. That's why we have such low employment. That's why people are using those systems. We build the systems to essentially warehouse people. They may no longer be in institutions, but they're still at home and they're not out there as part of the daily life of their community and they ought to be.

MG: What's your vision for the future?

DF: That is my vision for the future. We need to do something to engage people with disabilities more than we are. That's sort of some of the things we're working on now. I hate to put the onus on people with disabilities, but the general public is not going to wake up tomorrow and say, "Gee, let's go out and include people with disabilities," because it's not first and foremost on their agenda for getting up every day. I think what I'd like to do is to create some system where we can encourage people with disabilities to get involved in their own community. That's how you change people's hearts and minds, is by being someone who is known and people get to know you as a person versus that guy with the disability or that gal with a disability

and they see you're involved on say, the planning board or the library committee or you volunteer somewhere – whatever it might be, you're out and about, so that you're normalizing people who have a disability versus that person who just shows up at a special function or something like that. We won't change anything until people are seen as important members of their community just because of who they are. Not because of a diagnosis or a disability.

MG: Do you feel like there's anything missing from the ADA, the law itself, something that should be in there that isn't?

DF: Oh, yes. You need someone with a gun. [laughter] I'm only kidding, but you need enforcement. There's no ADA police out there, that will go around and tell people what they're doing wrong and that they have to change it. It's driven by consumer complaint and that's not easy to do. If you live in a town in Maine where 500 people live and something's not accessible, it's hard for that person to complain if half those people that have to make the change they're related to. I don't mean that in a bad way, but small towns are like that. You don't want to be the one who forces the town to spend money and do things that is not in the budget when they're already

struggling to get by. You don't want to do that. It's not a healthy position to be in. You could do it maybe a little bit more anonymously in a larger community, but still, takes time and energy and you can still be then the target of anger and frustration. It's not a good way to be. It's hard. We need the police.

MG: [laughter] What do you hope someone who may listen to these interviews that we're collecting learns?

DF: I would hope they would get out of it that people with disabilities really want to do these things, that they want to be able to have a meaningful life. It's not about whining. I don't like whining. I don't whine myself. Some people do. Pointing out what doesn't work is not whining. I hope it's not interpreted that way, because I meet people or people who work here all the time who really have a lot to offer. I'm struck by their wisdom, their innovation, their character, their humor. Some of the funniest people I know are the people I've met in independent living or here at Alpha One. A couple of us can get each other laughing sometimes over some of the absurdities that we deal with all the time. Rather than crying about it, complaining about it, we'll have a good laugh sometimes – it's that gallows

kind of humor, but it then reenergizes us to try to do things about things. I'm just so glad to have met some of the people I've met that I wouldn't have if I hadn't been laid off from that job back in the late '80s and then ended up in the career that I've had since. It's been a great ride. It's amazing.

MG: Looking back, what's been your greatest personal achievement?

DF: In independent living or things like that?

MG: Overall, in your life.

DF: I think my family's my greatest achievement.

MG: Good answer.

DF: [laughter] Well, when all is said and done, it's about the people that you know and love. The work here is important, but I've learned that it's not about me. If I disappeared tomorrow, it wouldn't be long before I was anonymous and I'd be that guy who used to run Alpha One. They'd be

having trouble remembering my name. That's okay, because you make an impact on the people closest to you. I think family's clearly it. The friends and people like that who you're closest to.

MG: This answer for you may be different because you had such a positive attitude the whole time, but if at eighteen if you were shown how the rest of your life unfolded, what would have surprised you?

DF: I would have been surprised that I was running any kind of organization. I think I've always had some leadership ability and some skills to work with people. But I didn't have that kind of aspiration because I wasn't smart enough then to know what I wanted. In fact, I don't know if I came across clearly, but I've never done a whole lot of career planning.

MG: Four-time college drop out. [laughter]

DF: Yes, that's probably all the planning I did, but I was lucky. Things kind of came my way as I went along. I'm smart enough to take advantage of certain things, but I think in some cases, people wanted to give me opportunity and I'm thankful for that. I even thank the guy who laid me off,

not personally. I was bitter for quite a while because of that. Then I realized, a few years later, that if he hadn't done that, I wouldn't be where I am. There's always a reason for things happening or you can find one and that was one there. I was spinning my wheels and I wasn't using my talents and abilities. Although it caused some struggle for a while, it was all worth it.

MG: Did you ever encounter any opposition to your work in disability rights?

DF: Oh, yes.

MG: Talk to me about that.

DF: I ran into a lot of it when I was doing the Robert Wood Johnson work and I would go to conferences and get in there and start talking about how it was important to implement the ADA and things like that, especially in the health care system. The health care system's not the most open system to change. I ran into a lot of opposition at conferences and things where I would speak, but that didn't bother me because I think I made an impact at a

certain point with those things. I think you run into less of that. Even though there's not a willingness to always comply, I think that people are still more open to the thoughts and ideas and if you convinced them – they're open to being convinced. But it's still basic human nature. They always want to know what's in it for them, as opposed to just doing the right thing. [laughter] Opposition? Yes, but never violent. No one's ever thrown anything at me.

MG: Good.

DF: Yes, it is good. [laughter]

MG: You've advocated for home care workers being paid well. I wanted you to just talk a little bit about that and why they're so important.

DF: I'm happy to. Many people with disabilities, for whatever reason, do need some assistance in their life, whether it's hands on help getting dressed or maybe being reminded they need to do something right now or they might need an interpreter if they're deaf or a reader if they're blind or a driver. There's lots of assistance that people need out there in order to be

productive, but that doesn't stop them from being productive. It's just an extra tool they need in order to do so. I heard someone kiddingly say recently where they were talking about – oh, someone with the expression “wheelchair -bound,” and I've never liked that term – or “confined to a wheelchair.” I've tried to reverse that when I talk to people and say, “I'm not confined to this chair. I would be really confined if I didn't have the chair. I'm no more wheelchair-bound than you are shoe-bound. All you able-bodied people have those shoes, you know? It helps me come and go. It helps me be productive. I'd really be bound if I didn't have it.” It's just that mindset of how you look at things. Language can really impose barriers. If we can just change the way we talk about things and make them more positive, then people can understand in a different light. Now, I lost track of where I was going.

MG: We were talking about homecare workers.

DF: Homecare workers. Homecare workers do all these kind of things and again, it's not necessarily even homecare. They could be job support work, things like that, but they're never really paid well. They're not even paid a living wage. We use them for people with disabilities. They serve us. They

serve elders. They're serving our mothers, our fathers, our brothers, our sisters, people we love and care about and yet, they're not paid a living wage. What kind of respect is that for someone we entrust with such important work? We recently went through this with my father. He was with us for ten months and we were bringing people in the home to help him. I know those people weren't paid what they deserve to be paid and they worked hard. He wasn't necessarily easy to work with. When he went to the nursing home, the same thing. Now, I know they're a paid a little bit more there, but the work they do is just amazing and it's not necessarily easy. But the attitudes are so positive and so kind and respectful. I'm a real believer and I spent the last few years on the board of the Direct Care Alliance in New York City, which was promoting direct care nationally. That experience was a great eye opener for me to really respect people who do that work much more than I did before. I think because of that and the people I've met who do that work and I've seen the heart and soul they pour into that, they deserve to be paid a living wage. Everyone deserves a living wage. We're foolish if we think we can continue not to with the number of people who are going to require these kind of services in the very near future, because who's going to do it if people aren't paid and respected. They deserve that respect.

MG: What's unique about the relationship between a homecare worker and the person they're caring for?

DF: Well, that depends on the kind of service it is. With ours, which is consumer directed, I think it's extremely unique because the individual consumer actually hires their own people through our services. They're taught how to recruit, interview, hire, train, schedule, etc. They really are the employer, but they develop a very strong relationship usually because now that person's their employee. It changes that role. If you're in typical home care, you're a patient. Now you're the employer. It really flips relationships to a point where now as that employer, you're going to hire the person that you want to come into your home, when you want them to come in, to do things the way you want them done. It empowers the consumer to do that, but I believe it also empowers the worker because they now see an individual with a disability who's capable of doing those things and they develop this mutual respect and typically build strong relationships. Doesn't always happen. Sometimes people have to be fired or they're not cut out for that kind of work. But when it works, it works remarkably well, as opposed to the typical home health thing where day to day, a different worker may be

coming into your home and therefore, you don't have an opportunity to establish those kinds of relationships. Home care agencies are hard pressed to staff all the work they're supposed to be doing and so people get left without. That staffing issue hardly ever comes up with our programs because again, of that bond and relationship that people have. It makes a huge difference to put the consumer in the driver's seat. The loyalty that I've seen develop both ways in that model is unlike you would see in most other models.

MG: Or relationships, I imagine.

DF: Yes. Well, it's resulted in a few permanent relationships, too.

Surprise, surprise. [laughter]

MG: I'm just getting to the end of my questions. How is your life different today because the ADA exists?

DF: Well, I think it's better because I think the ADA has resulted in changes and [while] they're slower than I would like to see, there have been changes that have made a difference, not only in my life, but many people's

lives. I think that's for the good. I'm glad it's there and while I complain that we don't have ADA police and things like that, it still have been effective in making incremental progress as we go. I really don't realistically expect that we'll ever be fully implemented in my lifetime, but that's okay. I'm enjoying the things that come along as they do.

MG: What am I missing about you, your life, your work, the ADA?

DF: Good question. Wish you'd given that to me earlier. Wow.

MG: What I think might happen is I'll go back to New Jersey, I'll listen to this recording and think, "I can't believe I didn't ask him about this, this and that." I'll drive away and you'll think, "Oh, I should have told her about this." Maybe jot those stories down.

DF: Let me tell you a quick story. It's a family favorite. My in-laws who have always been great, since we were married – this is sort of a two part story. They lived and worked in Worcester, where I ended up working, but they were there first. She was a social worker in one of the hospitals and he was a Lutheran minister. They were both extremely generous people. They

decided back just before our son was born, they were going to build a retirement home on Martha's Vineyard, which they did. Then a few years later, when I could no longer use the crutches and braces, and I needed the wheelchair, the first people I heard from were them. They said, "What do you need to have down on the Vineyard so you can still go there?" They put in a ramp and they redid the doorways to the bathroom, so it was now usable, which is all they really needed. Good for them to do that and that was great and that was pre-ADA. They were always big supporters of the Clintons. You go forward a couple of years. I get into the RWJ thing. I'm doing all this work in managed care and they've since build another home on the Vineyard because the first one was too far out of town and she didn't drive and if anything happened to him, they realized, they'd be stuck when they retired. So, they built another place, but the first thing they did then is said, "What do you need in this new place in order for you to be able to function there?" They built a first floor bedroom with a roll-in shower and its own bathroom and all that, just so that I'd be able to enjoy the house when I came. Then, [Bill] Clinton was elected. Judy loved cats. They had Socks the cat. Okay? In fact, I still have a Vineyard T-shirt about Socks the cat, because the Clintons vacationed there a couple times. I'm making this a long, long story, I know. I went on vacation one summer. I think it might

have been '93, '94. I was down on the Vineyard. I guess it was '93. The phone rings for me, and it's our receptionist at work in Worcester saying, "Dennis, you've been invited to the White House." I said, "What? Don't be pulling my leg," because we teased a lot. "No, no. It's true. It's true." I said, "Come on. That just doesn't make any sense." She said, "No, I'll put you through to Bob who was the director." So, she did. He said, "No, it's true, Den. They want you to go to the White House," because they were doing this thing – because that's when they were trying to do the Clinton Health Care System. They had noticed what was going on with this other stuff. I said, "Well, that's okay." He said, "I don't think we can send you; it'd cost too much money." I said, "Well, that's okay then." I just thought that was interesting, but I said, "I'm not going to lose any sleep over it." Anyway, when I got back to work, he had changed his mind. Said, "Yeah, I think you should go, because it'd be good for us, it'd be good for you. The exposure can't hurt." I went down. It was the middle of July one year. I remember going to the airport and then getting a taxi. You get in. The taxi [driver] said, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "To the White House." Of course, I was impressed, but he said, "Yeah, yeah. Okay. Sure. You and a thousand other people." Anyway, it turned out, it was originally going to be about thirty people involved and then it kept growing and growing. By the

time I got there, there was a line around the outside, which was okay. It was a fun day. We got to be out on the South Lawn. All these advocates are out there – people around the country again, all the big names that I had never met. Then, President Clinton spoke and then Hilary spoke and then Al Gore spoke and Tipper Gore spoke. You had all the big people like, Justin Dart, leaders of the movement and all and Judy Heumann. They were all there. It was a fun thing to be out in the blazing hot sun. It ended and a bunch of the crazier ones were saying, “Let’s go march on Capitol Hill.” I say, “You go ahead. It’s ninety degrees here. I’m not marching anywhere.” They all took off to go to Capitol Hill, but first they had this meet and greet. Everyone just swarmed everywhere. I just stayed away from it. I don’t really care if I shake the President’s hand or not. We sort of drifted around and I started just drifting myself around the grounds, just enjoying the ambiance, being at the White House and all. Finally, most of the people were gone and I was over in a shaded area. The White House was just about thirty yards this way. I look over at the backdoor and I see this guy come out with a cat, on a leash. I’m thinking, “That’s got to be Socks, right?” Meanwhile, all these guys kept approaching me as I kept moving around saying, “Thanks for coming today, sir. Did you have a good time?” I’d say “Yes,” which meant “go.” I would just move, but then I stayed and this guy comes closer and

closer. He says, “Good afternoon, sir.” I said, “Good afternoon.” I said, “Is that Socks, the presidential cat?” He said, “Yes, it is. Would you like to hold him? I went, “Sure.” So, I have a picture of me with Socks. I didn’t meet the President or the first lady or any of the others, but I have a picture of Socks.

MG: Your parents-in-law must have really loved that.

DF: They did, especially Judy. She was so happy.

MG: Very jealous, I’m sure.

DF: She was extremely jealous. That’s all she cared about. That’s a great story.

MG: Did you get a lock of Socks’ hair?

DF: No, but actually, he got his claw into my pants and caused a little tear.

I was not happy. I’m only kidding. I held him for a couple minutes and then

the guy had to take him for his walk. I said, “Did you draw the short straw on this today?” Secret service having to walk the cat.

MG: Socks duty.

DF: Really. That was funny. There was another one that I’ll tell you.

MG: Good.

DF: When we were here, at Alpha One working and I think this was back – gee, what year was it? Would have been 2000. George W. Bush was running for President. Steve [Tremblay] was a big Republican and I’m not. Our board of directors chair at the time, was representative here in Maine, Bill Schneider and he was connected to the party. George W. Bush was going around the country campaigning. Through Bill, and it might have been Charlie Summers, they asked us if George W. could come here to unveil his disability policy. We said, “Of course. That would be great.” Three days before they came, while we were in here and the FBI is here with their bomb-sniffing dogs all over the building, we’re on the phone with the George W. Bush campaign. They’re asking us, what should he talk about

when he's here and what are the issues that should be in his plan. We got to actually have input into the New Freedom Initiative in terms of what it would look like when he was elected. Then, he came that day. It was a great day. It was a lot of fun, to tell you the truth. We had national press buses. We had three buses do a press out here on the side street. We had him in here with the secret service. He went around and met all the staff. We invited all kinds of friends. We had the conference room all decked out with flags and things like that and set up for people we invited to attend. This was not my office at the time. It was Steve's. They kept us here for an interview for him. When he was done with his speech, he actually came into my office, which was out front. That's where John Nunan sits now. He came in and he joined me, Steve, and Bill Schneider in there. Just the three of us with him. He sat there with a Styrofoam cup of coffee, drinking his coffee, chatting with us in general, in a chair just like that. We're just sitting around, talking to him. It was a good half hour or more. As people would keep coming in, knocking and saying – he'd say, "No. I'm talking to these fellows." It was very chummy and it was an interesting experience.

MG: I bet.

DF: Yes.

MG: Did he get to make good on any of those policies?

DF: He did. I think the New Freedom Initiative was a well-thought out set of principles and means to advance the lives of people with disabilities. I think including homecare, home based services – not that they weren't there already, but I think they were addressed. Transportation was addressed. Housing was addressed. It was broad-based and there were many, many attempts to improve the lives of people with disabilities, which was impressive. I think that's a unique thing that people often miss, is that we see more progress for disability with Republican presidents than we do with Democratic. I think that most people would guess otherwise, but ADA was signed by his father. We had more [progress] – Nixon, was the one who signed the Rehab Act, even though he opposed it from the beginning. All the major changes have been supported more by the republicans than the democrats. Little secret you may not want to publish in this.

MG: Do you want me to turn it off?

DF: No. That's all right. I don't care about that. Sitting with him in my office, I just got a certain feeling about George W. that just didn't feel right. That very day when I left – I think it was in June, that year, and the primaries were coming up – I actually drove to Yarmouth and registered as a Republican in my life so I could vote against him in the primary and voted for John McCain instead. Yes. I got some kind of feeling I just didn't like, to the point where I would take the step of registering as a Republican.

MG: Did you reregister as a Democrat later on?

DF: No. I've always been Independent.

MG: Is the White House ADA accessible?

DF: Fairly, but I don't know if it's 100% accessible. Under Franklin Roosevelt, it was very accessible. The day he died, they started tearing down the access in the White House and around Washington. They had made the Capitol accessible for when he went up there. As soon as he was gone, they tore it all down.

MG: What else would you like to talk about while I'm here? Anything I'm missing from your life or the ADA?

DF: No. I would just end by saying I'm more committed than ever to it. There's still so much to be done and I see so many possibilities that I think that we can accomplish a lot, but we need to work harder together. That's one of the things we've been doing as an organization is partnering with more groups and organizations and looking for ways to get people on board with these ideas, recognizing that we're not always going to agree. I think that thankfully there's a mood here in the state and I'm not taking credit for it; other people have done it, too. It's less about special groups than it is about working together. I see more and more people recognizing that. We need to do that in order to stretch resources further, but also to work for common issues versus singular ones. I think we've been siloed too much in terms of how funding is distributed and that creates opposition among groups. We have to be able to look beyond that. It's one thing to say it. It's another thing to do it. I think we're getting to the point where we're doing it, which is comforting to me. I think that's real progress. I have great faith more in some of the people I see out there involved, the next generation, etc. I'm happy about our board. We've been able to develop young people. For

a long time, we had a much older board and now we've got, I'd say, a couple people in their twenties. We actually have one in their teens coming on tomorrow, a couple in the twenties, another one or two in the thirties. We're starting to develop next generation. It's encouraging.

MG: Good. Well, I'm hopeful that your words and your story and will inspire others to action or at least raise awareness. I'm just so grateful for you spending the time with me. Thank you.

DF: I'm glad to have done it.

MG: Yes. I bet as soon as I drive away, I'll think of four more questions I wish I had asked you. If that does that happen, could I reschedule another time to chat?

DF: Sure. Yes. Absolutely.

MG: Great. Well, I'll turn this off. Thank you so much.

DF: My pleasure.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 2/6/2016