



Oral History and Folklife Research, Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH
RALPH POLAND

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED: BY
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TRANSCRIPT BY
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Molly Graham: This is an interview with Ralph Poland. The interview is taking place on Tuesday, September 16th. We're in New Gloucester, Maine. Maybe I'll have you introduce yourself. Could you say, "I'm Ralph Poland," and then just a little bit about yourself?

Ralph Poland: Yes. My name is Ralph Poland. I live in Auburn, in a townhouse, but I have a camper in New Gloucester. That's where we're having an interview.

MG: Ralph, would you mind saying when and where you were born?

RP: I was born in 1954, July 31, 1954 in Englewood, California.

MG: How long did you live in Englewood for?

RP: I was there for four years. Then my parents moved back east.

MG: Do you have any memories of growing up in California?

RP: Very little. Yes. I remember some. I had an uncle [that] lived there. He used to come back here and vacation all the time. In '72, he told me anything I remembered wouldn't be there anymore. Between the earthquakes and remodeling, they tore everything down.

MG: What was your family doing out there in the first place?

RP: Well, they followed my grandmother. She had moved there a little while before that. It was him, and my father and some of his siblings. As they get on their feet, they went out there. My father started working at Douglas Aircraft. After a while, he decided he wanted to go and become air traffic control. He moved us back east and he went back to Oklahoma for schooling for that. Then, we settled down in Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC. After he was there for three years, he says he's ready to come back to Maine.

MG: They were from Maine originally?

RP: Yes.

MG: What did your mother do?

RP: She was a waitress.

MG: Tell me about growing up in Maine, what life was like for you.

RP: It was interesting. I didn't like the cold; I still don't. But I didn't like the humidity we had in Virginia. I get reminded of that at times here, but we moved around a lot after we came back here. We lived in Augusta for two years and then we got a house by the Auburn airport. That was my in my family for years. We lived there for almost three years. To me, my two older sisters, that's always been home to us. We've talked [about] that many times afterwards. To us, that was where home was.

MG: What other memories do you have about growing up and things you did as a kid?

RP: I had a hard time in school; I remember that. But early on, I started doing things with my hands. I was always out building camps or doing something.

MG: Was it just you and your two sisters?

RP: I had two older sisters. Then while we lived in the house in Auburn, I end up with a younger sister. She's ten years younger than me.

MG: What's it like having so many sisters?

RP: It was crazy. [laughter]

MG: What did you want to do when you grew up? How did you picture your life?

RP: I always saw myself as somebody that probably would have to work with my hands, fixing things or building things.

MG: What kinds of things were you building as a young person?

RP: Like I said, building cabins in the woods. I built a playhouse for my younger sister and stuff like that.

MG: What was high school like for you? What kind of extracurricular activities did you do or things outside of school?

RP: I wasn't very active with stuff because I concentrated on my studies. I knew then that I'd have to earn certain credits every year or I wouldn't graduate. Of course, I was so bad in school that my family's always telling me I need to quit school and go get a job. I felt if I couldn't stick it out, I'd be a quitter all my life. I stuck it out and earned extra credits wherever I could. Come my senior year, I only need half the credits as you normally need.

MG: What did do after high school?

RP: I went to work at Maine Rubber (inaudible) in Lewiston at the time and worked there for two years. Then I went to St. Johnsbury, Vermont to go to Bible School. Six months into that, the school closed. [laughter] So, I stayed in Vermont until the next fall when I went to Massachusetts to go to Bible School there.

MG: What appealed to you about Bible School?

RP: Well, when I was sixteen I accepted Christ. I was not brought up in a Christian home. That totally changed my life, totally, from the moment I accepted Christ. I wasn't interested in things I was interested in before or anything. It was like a new life experience for me. I decided I wanted to get some stuff under my belt that might help me from then on.

MG: What led up to accepting Christ or changing your life in that way?

RP: Well, I was very disturbed at that time, very depressed all the time. I grew up with domestic violence in my home and my father beat on my mother a lot. Finally, when I was fifteen, I was visiting a friend. My mother called me, told me to come home. There's trouble at home and she wanted me home. So, I went back. She picked me up, because my friend was in town. I came home and I ended up having the best time I ever had with my father that afternoon. Then, when it came time to go inside – we lived in a trailer park just down here. I went in the trailer and he had her down on the floor and he was trying to break her leg. I could tell they were fighting. At that time, my younger sister's standing in the corner screeching bloody

murder. At that point, I got a flashback to when I was a kid and couldn't even walk and see my two sisters screaming like that. All of a sudden, something kicked in. I [said], "I'm not going to put up with this anymore." I grabbed him, my father by the shirt. Never laid a hand on him ever before or after. I grabbed him, threw him in a chair. He looked at me kind of stunned. I looked at my mother. I said, "Get up and get out of here." She got up. I said, "Take them and go." I went out the door and as I get out the door, I turned to him. I said, "Don't you dare follow us." He was still sitting in that chair. I went out the door. She says, "Well, where do you want us to go now?" I says, "Get in the car and go." "Where we going to go? I ain't got money for gas." I said, "I don't care. Just go anywhere. Even if we just drive down the road and pull over and talk." I says, "We're going to get out of here for now. Let him cool off." We left my older – not my older sister, but my youngest – the one closest to me. She was seventeen and she had just run away from home because the boyfriend she was dating, my father didn't like. He tried to stop it. She took off with him. That turns out to be what they were fighting over at that time – who was to blame for that. I told her – I says, "You got a choice." I says, "We're out of here by this weekend or I'm gone." She says, "Well, you'll get hungry and you'll come back home." I said, "No, mom. If I ever leave this life, I would die of

starvation in some back alley, but I would never come back to it once I leave.” Next day, she came up to my cabin in the woods and said, “Don’t go anywhere. I got an apartment in town.” Life began to change (inaudible), but I still was very depressed and so forth. I got friendly with a family across the street from me. One day, they invited me to go to church with them one afternoon. Their son was being baptized. I went. That was a strange experience for me. At the end of the service, the pastor gave invitation, people come forward and accept Christ. I thought to myself – I was always shy and I always thought, “Who in their right mind ever do something like that? Walk down the middle in front of everyone?” I thought, “I would never do that.” I’m standing there, holding their hymnal with their oldest daughter. All of a sudden, I got this strong pull, pulling me like elastic. I don’t know what it was. Finally, it got so strong. I handed her the hymnbook. I said, “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m going somewhere.” The only thing I can remember from then on was standing in front of the pastor and he was talking to other people. Then he got done, he noticed me, and he came over and he asked to talk to me. He asked me if I’d like to accept Christ. I said, “Well, I don’t know why I’m here, but I just had a strong pull.” He said, “Well, let’s say the prayer then. See what happens.” I said the prayer to accept Christ. My life that moment changed

instantly, completely. Like I said, I was always depressed, always serious. I (inaudible) start laughing. I laughed so much everyone in the building knows it. When I got home, I was still that way. My mother, after she sent me to bed because I had school the next day, I heard her calling my father up – he was working. She said, “We got to talk. Our son just came and apparently he’s on drugs.” [laughter] It totally changed me. That whole week at school, the friends I was with, got real mad at me because I won’t want to do things they were doing all the time – nothing. The teachers couldn’t figure out what was going on with me because I changed to them.

MG: How else was life different?

RP: I wasn’t depressed anymore. I felt that there was a – the reason my depression was because of the environment I was in, and that there was another way and if I follow that way, maybe I’ll come out of that. I did. It really did help me big time. For another year or two, I battled with depression a lot, but it got less as time went on. Until the time I got out of high school, I felt I should find a way to go to Bible School at some point and see if I can’t get something – because I didn’t grow up in that

environment. I can see now that that was much better than the way I was living.

MG: Maybe you had some catching up to do with the Bible.

RP: Yes, absolutely. Yes.

MG: Was your mom able to leave your father?

RP: Yes. She did, although, the next year was real hard and intense. My father was one – he was kind of possessive. As in many cases, I've learned now that he would go home to our place and leave notes for her. At the time, there was some situation where a guy had dated a daughter and the father didn't want him to, and he finally came and he abducted the daughter and killed the parents. He left notes at our door all the time, but (inaudible) letters. My sister's boyfriend's name was Walter. He would say – notes with W and so forth. So, you can interpret it like Walter or wife and, "I'm going kill." We were petrified all the time. Of course, he had guns and stuff. He was violent when he drank. So, I knew he was capable if the situation arose. He did show up a few times drunk. Finally, he settled

down. After the divorce, they kind of became friends. Down the road, she wanted to move back with him. I didn't want her to. Because I told her from the beginning, "You should leave and you should not go back until he goes for counseling for anger management." I said, "Otherwise, he's going to be same way." She told me again, "He would never go to that." I said, "Well, if he wants you back, that's what he'll have to do. Because otherwise, he's just going to pick up where he left off." Sure enough, two years later, she moved back with him. He picked right up where it was. After a few months, she decided she had to leave for good. She did.

MG: What has your relationship been with him since?

RP: Not that good. It was rough right up until he was dying of cancer. At that point, he seemed to open up more to me. He ended up giving me some of this land when he died.

MG: Can you describe where we are and the name of the road and the connection with the family?

RP: Yes. We're on Ralph Lane, just off 122 up in New Gloucester. There's a trailer park outside here. Back in 1967, we had built that trailer park and my father lived there until '86.

MG: When I think about the time you're talking about, the 1960s and early 70s, all the changes in the world, I think it was a time where many people probably weren't going to Bible School. I'm wondering if you can describe the mood of the times and then your experience with religion?

RP: My father was totally objected to it. He was very mad with me for doing that. He wouldn't speak to me for some time.

MG: For going to Bible School?

RP: Yes. In fact, I wanted him to go to my baptism and my high school graduation. He wouldn't go to either one of them he was so upset with me. He told me at one point, when I was eighteen, he was disappointed. He thought by then that I'd be married, give him three grandsons and we'd go out drinking together. I wanted no part of it.

MG: What did you want instead?

RP: I wanted to find my way to get to the point where I could establish a good job, get married and have my own family and support myself.

MG: So, when you moved from Vermont to Massachusetts, to finish up Bible School, how did life unfold from there?

RP: It was still rocky. The economy at that time was – we had recession after recessions in the late '70s. I went down there and I couldn't find work. I'd work for a while, but then I didn't have any work after a while. I couldn't find work. They suggested that I go to South Berwick where there were more opportunities. They had a ministry there where they'd take videotapes of classes down in Massachusetts and I could take them there. I went there and I lived there – I liked it there. So, after I was done there with school, I stayed there. Lived there for a total of twenty-six years. After a while, I became self-employed as a handyman and I did that right up until my heart attack and strokes.

MG: What do they teach you in Bible School?

RP: Well, they teach you signs of troubles that can arise, a lot of psychology. I learned a lot during that – got me to understand myself, my family and our environments I was in and everything. Gives you a good perspective on life.

MG: Were you able to influence the people around you?

RP: I tried. Some people I did. My mother, I constantly talked to. While I was living in South Berwick, she had turned to alcohol. She finally bottomed out with alcohol. Then, I had a card – I wish I still had it now. I lost it moving around, but she sent me a card. She said, “I love you,” and she wrote underneath it, “because you led me to Jesus.” I took part of it with me and I brought it with me when saw her. I said, “Why’d you send me this? I wasn’t even with you at that time.” She says, “Well, when I hit bottom with alcohol, there was no place to go. But because all you had been telling me, that you gave me where to go. You led me to Christ even though you wasn’t with me.” Changed a lot during that time.

MG: Were you ever worried that you'd end up behaving like your father or your mother?

RP: I was very concerned growing up I'd be like my father. I always tried to avoid it as much as I could and try to reexamine myself. In fact, I never would even touch alcohol and to this day, because I remember whenever there was trouble at home, there was always alcohol cans and bottles around.

MG: Do you think discovering Christ prevented you from falling into those traps?

RP: I think it did. I think eventually, I would have ended up going to drugs or something like so many else had, but thank God, that came along.

MG: Talk to me about being a handyman, the clients you met and work you did.

RP: Well, this camper for one. I got this after my father died. He gave me this land. I wanted to build here. I was still living in South Berwick. I knew in order to come up here and stay here to work on the land to get to the

point to build, I'd need some place to stay. A woman there in South Berwick, where I used to meet at Dunkin Donuts with some people, would talk to at night. One night she told me her daughter was trying to get rid of her camper. The floor was rotted and well, this whole front area was all rotted. You couldn't walk on it. She asked me if I'd be interested in it. I said, "Well, possibly." I said, "I'd have to look at it and see what they want for it and see what would have to be done." She said, "If anyone could fix it you could." I went and looked it and they come out. Her husband came out and he asked me if I was interested. I said, "Well, what would you want for it?" He said, "At this point, if you get it out of the yard, it's yours." I said, "Well, we'd have to make it legal." I says, "I'll buy it for a dollar. Give me a receipt for a dollar." He says, "Okay." I did that. The woman that told me about this, when I told her what I had to go through to fill out paperwork for the state of Maine to get their five cents, so I could register it. She couldn't believe it. [laughter] I found a spot in Wells, where I could park the trailer and work on it nearby. I ripped up the floor and by that point, I thought it'd be up front. By the time I was done, it was one sheet and I had taken everything out. At that point, I decided – well, I did that and then I put plywood down. That sat there one day – one Sunday night, just a few minutes before I had to leave. I kept thinking, "Man, at this point, I might as

well go the rest of the way.” I looked at the ceiling. I said, “I never did like that ceiling.” I ripped it down, threw it in the truck and I went to the dump Monday. Then, as I tore it apart, I tore things off, so I could put them back together, put them back. Finally, I had to rent a storage unit to put all the stuff, so I’d have the floor – the camper open to work on. I put it all back together and I had to replace all the paneling because everything was screwed from the outside. When I pulled it out, it destroyed the wood paneling (inaudible) good. Then I got it all back together again and moved up here and (inaudible) on my land.

MG: When was that?

RP: That was in ’03. In fact, that’s a picture a friend took of me. I asked him if he’d follow me up because I was nervous that I could have problems along the way. He took a picture of me when I backed into the lot.

MG: Was it in Berwick where you were for twenty-six years?

RP: South Berwick, yes.

MG: I always feel good even when I just screw in a light bulb and the light turns on. Did you always have that feeling of satisfaction when you'd fix something?

RP: Yes.

MG: Just tell me about work that you're particularly proud of.

RP: I would look at stuff and I would know what it would take to fix it. Not only fix it for the moment, but I would look at okay, if there was a problem, what caused that problem. I would take the time and find out what that is. I'd fix the problem. Then, I'd do the original painting or whatever. The customers were very pleased with that. I always backed up my word. Always told them have any problems with that in a year or two, you let me know and I'd fix it for nothing. That was the way it was. I stood by my word. After a while, I had repeat customers and because of word or mouth, I was always busy.

MG: How was the rest of your life unfolding? Were you a bachelor? Were you still pursuing religion?

RP: I was a bachelor. I still lived a Christian life. As time got on, I became active in local politics. I became a chairman of the town Republican Committee. I served as delegate to the York County Republicans for a long time, until just before I had my strokes. I went to state conventions for many years.

MG: Tell me about that.

RP: That was interesting.

MG: How come?

RP: Well, at first, I was an observer, but after I got going, I was always really strong with what I believe. I always stood up for it. I wasn't afraid to speak up about it. So, I ended up [one] time speaking at the conventions when they give times for mics or other people (inaudible) on the platform and so forth. I was amazed at people coming to me afterwards. Saying, man, you really spoke really good. Even people at York County committee

was shocked how well I presented myself and made my feelings clear. That was interesting.

MG: What kind of things would you say when you had the opportunity or a microphone in front of you?

RP: I was a conservative. So, I was always pushing for the conservative viewpoint. It was shocking because in Maine, it seems like the Democrats are more conservative, whereas nationally, it's the republicans that are conservative. When I go to the state conventions, I was confronted with – the party was always liberal, so I was always the outside. But I always voiced my opinions, tried to influence the platform as much as I could.

MG: What issues were particularly important for you?

RP: The family issues. I was pro-life. Trying to think [of] some of the issues at the time that came up. I don't remember a lot of that time. It's strange.

MG: Was this in the '90s now?

RP: Yes. '90s and the early part of the 2000s.

MG: When did you have this operation?

RP: It was in November of '06.

MG: Not too long ago.

RP: Yes.

MG: What was going on with your health and life that led to having the operation?

RP: That, in itself, is interesting. I was working on an apartment for a friend of mine. I gutted it out. I was concentrating on getting it ready for sheetrock. I kept feeling pain in my chest, felt like a chest cold. I just kept ignoring – thinking that it's going to go away. They always do. Take Vitamin C and so forth, a lot of fluids and it go away. One day I was working, I realized, "Man, it's been a month now and it's not gone away.

That can't be a cold because colds don't go on this long." The day before I was due to receive a truckload of sheetrock and start hanging sheetrock, I realized that day that I should go and be checked (inaudible) just to be safe. I went to the emergency room, thinking they'd give me something for some sort of lung infection and send me right home. Instead, the doctor from the moment he saw me, he insisted I should stay overnight for observation. I didn't want to. I felt that that was pretty drastic, but it kept persisting. Finally, I gave in, thinking to myself that, "Well, by early tomorrow morning, they realize I shouldn't be here. Hopefully, in time, I can go to work, so I can be there to receive that sheetrock." Of course, I worked alone and I lived alone at the time. After I agreed to that, the doctor said, "Don't go anywhere. (inaudible) come get you here in the (ED?) when they get a room ready for you." Finally, two guys showed up with a stretcher. I got on that. They took me – it was one room and they (inaudible) transfer me from the stretcher to that bed. A nurse came and looked and sounding all shook up, saying, "You can't put a man in this bed. There's a woman on the other side of this curtain." They transferred me back on the stretcher, rolled me in the hallway. Said, "Soon as we get another room ready for you, well come get to you here." That was the last thing I remember that night. I learned several months later in my cardiologist's office that I had a heart attack right

there in the hallway. Because of the heart attack, they realized that's open heart surgery. All six graphs. During surgery, I suffered other complications, two of which I suffered, two debilitating strokes. Put me in extended coma for two and a half weeks. When I came out of my coma, had no feeling below my elbows or my knees, had no use of my hands, I couldn't talk. I was a living vegetable for a better part of two and a half months after that. Had two neurologists come and see me every day. They would try to get me to do things and say things. I couldn't talk, but they tried. I wondered whether they could understand any of it. I knew they were doing things to my feet, but I couldn't figure out what it was because I didn't feel anything. Later, I realized, they were poking to see if I was getting any feeling down there. Finally, one day, one neurologist said to me, "You'll be lucky if you're in a wheelchair the rest of your life." I couldn't talk, so I couldn't ask him why or anything. That scared the heck out of me. I laid there thinking, "Man, I'm too young to be this way. There's too much in life I still want to do." I was already very depressed again, because a friend had explained what had happened, because until he had explained it to me, I thought what I was experiencing was due to medications and the surgery. I remember as a kid, hearing that people had had severe strokes and they were in that condition, there was nothing they can do for them [except] basically

wait for them to die. I was scared to death. Like I said, I got very depressed again. Finally, I don't know how, but I got the (inaudible) within me, got thinking, "Well, I've got to try to think of positive things. Things (inaudible) stories of other people who overcome (inaudible)," because if I can't lick this depression, I'll be lost right here. This will be the end of the road. I remember the first thing that came to my mind was about this guy, young guy, who had lost both legs in Iraq and yet, they showed him standing on two prosthetic legs. They said he jogs and does marathons in the news. I got to thinking, "If he can come back from what he lost, surely I can find my way out of this mess." I would bring that to mind as much as I could. The next story that came to my mind, was about this young girl named Joni [Eareckson Tada]. She was seventeen years old. She was involved in a car accident. She broke her neck and was permanently paralyzed [from the] neck down, yet she wanted to do all kinds of things. She wrote books, was an inspirational speaker. She became known worldwide. She even learned how to paint. Sitting in a wheelchair all the time she got bored as teenagers do and they try to doodle on things, on paper. Well, she got to thinking, wonder if somebody could put a paintbrush in her mouth and some paint and paper, see if she could doodle. Well, she soon found out she could really paint doing that. She went on to even be a painter. I saw her movie of her

life back in early '80s. I remember walking out of that theater at that time, thinking, "Well, it's not what you have, it's what you do with it that counts." When that came to mind, I realized I got to stop thinking about what I've lost, because that just pulled me down. I'd rather think about what I have and how can I get myself better with what I have. I would constantly bring her story to mind and think about that.

MG: How long after coming out of the coma did you start to have those feelings of optimism?

RP: Within a week.

MG: Now, this may sound like a silly question, but do you remember being in a coma?

RP: Yes, yes. I do. It's strange. That's how I knew when I woke up I had the surgery. In fact, during my heart surgery, because of the complications – it was done in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, but due to complications, they transferred me to Tufts in Boston, where they redid it again. That's where I actually end up with the two strokes. Tufts is a medical school as well.

Apparently, they had people coming in at times, and they would explain what was done and so forth, because I would hear voices I wouldn't recognize talking about it. I always wondered, "What's so big about cabbage," because they were always talking about cabbage, but that was an acronym for – now, if I remember right. Coronary Artery [Bypass] Graft. (inaudible). That was what it was. I also remember when people come to visit me, if they touch my arm, I would realize someone's there and if they started speaking, I could recognize their voice. It was frustrating because I never could respond back, but I knew they were there. When I came out of my coma, they had moved me back to Portsmouth before I came out of my coma. So, I thought I was still in Tufts. The doctor's always had (inaudible) the neurologist every day would ask me – one of the questions would always be do know where you are? I would try to say Tufts in Boston, Mass. One day, the staff back in Portsmouth, they had used a (inaudible) to lift me up and set me down in a rolling recliner for a time each day. Finally, one day, they came in and asked me if I'd be interested in rolling me around in the hospital, get me out of that room. I said, "Yeah." I shook my head, yeah, definitely, because I was always on the go and all of a sudden, I'm stuck in that room. That was great. They did that just once for me. There's one hallway in the hospital that's all enclosed in glass. When they came around

that corner, I recognized it. I realized I'd been there just before everything happened to me, although I couldn't remember why. Because knowing I'd been there, I recognized. I tried to say, "This isn't Tufts Hospital." At that point, they stopped pushing – the CNA stopped pushing my chair. They came around. "What'd you say?" I said, "This isn't Tufts Hospital in Boston. This is Portsmouth Regional Hospital." She said, "That's right. Where'd you think you was?" I said, "Tufts Hospital in Boston, Mass." "Why'd you think that?" I said, "I remember hearing people saying that when I was in a coma." [laughter] The next day, when the doctors asked me if I knew where I was – when they asked me that, they both had a real serious look on their face, come across their face. Then one of them said, "That's not the answer you gave us in the past." At that point, they realized somehow I was able to understand what I was saying in the past. "How come you say – give us the answer you always did before?" I tried to explain to them what had happened. One looked at the other, says, "Well, he's still got his memory." [laughter]

MG: That's amazing. I don't know how to ask this question, but it makes me thinking differently about people who are in comas and have do not

resuscitate orders. Do you think about that? Do you think about cases where people –?

RP: Yes. Now I tell people anywhere, any opportunity I have, that when you got somebody in a coma, talk with them. You go visit them, talk with them. You may not really know if they're going to know you, but you're trying and whatever you do, do not discuss their condition with doctors there. Always step out of the room into another area, especially if it's negative. If it's good news, it's one thing, but anything that could be bad, don't talk about it around them. I think about that. I was thinking, "Man, if I'd heard those people talking about me back then and they were talking that I wasn't going to live, or that they were going to give up on me, that would have been very, very frustrating."

MG: Did you have people coming to visit you in the hospital?

RP: Yes.

MG: Who came?

RP: My pastor and my sister. She came with one of my other sisters. My older sister was living in Florida by then, but the other two sisters come down and visit me at times. I had two aunts that come to visit me and friends in the area came to visit me.

MG: Earlier, you said something about six grafts. I didn't know what that meant.

RP: Yes. There's six arteries to your heart and they did all six.

MG: What do you mean, "did all six?"

RP: In the heart surgery, they go in and they clean – they cut out the clogged arteries and they splice in veins to take from your other parts of your body. Me, they took it from my legs.

MG: They did that with six arteries.

RP: That's why it's a graft. That's why they're called grafts.

MG: Can you describe, for someone listening to this, what happens when you have a stroke or what a stroke is?

RP: I can't remember that, because I was under anesthesia when it happened. I can only remember the effects I had afterwards. It's like a head cold, but about a thousand times worse. Everything is a jumbled mess. It's hard in the beginning to put two thoughts together to form anything, but after a while, you start piecing things back together slowly.

MG: Because a stroke is what happens when there's a lack of oxygen to your brain?

RP: Yes.

MG: It sounds like it has to do a lot of work to rewire itself.

RP: Yes, it does. Yes. That's why there's a lot of work involved.

MG: Tell me about that process of recovery and what started to change? You eventually got feeling in your feet and speech came back to you.

RP: Not in that order, but yes.

MG: Tell me the order.

RP: They started doing very little therapy for me in Portsmouth. Just started getting me to sit up in bed. That was a lot of work and I couldn't believe how hard that was. I'll never forget one time, they came in with this tall mirror, stand up mirror like women to use to dress in front of. After they set me up, one of them rolls it over to the bed and they told me they want me to try to keep myself up. If I see myself falling one way, to try to right myself. Then, they asked me if I had any questions. I said, yes. Who's that old fart looking back me? I couldn't believe I looked so bad. I looked I aged at least thirty years since the last time I looked in the mirror. That kind of thing, it makes you look so bad. It takes your appearance as well as everything else. I remember how much work it was to try to hold myself up. Then there was a woman that also came, a speech therapist that would try to get me to say things and do things. Eventually, she would have me try to swallow little bits of sherbet, which tasted real good because I (inaudible) eaten anything. I was fed through a feeding tube. Then, they finally – she gave me a little bit of soda. Then, one day she's – she couldn't do it,

because she was pregnant, but she had told me another person could come with me that's going to go down to x-ray and they were going to do x-rays of me swallowing, see if I can swallow things on my own okay. If I can, she's going to give the okay for me to eat, which I felt that was good news. The x-ray showed I could. I started eating, but immediately I found that too hard and too much work for me, because I had no use of my hands so they had to feed me. It was that time I got transferred from Portsmouth Regional Hospital to New England Rehab in Portland. First, they would feed me and after that we started having me eat on my own. It was so hard because my hands shook. If I could get something on the fork, time it got to my mouth or in the air in my mouth, it would be off. Or if it was still on it, I didn't hit my mouth; I hit some other part of my face. I was always a mess and it was always so much work. I would always look forward to it being over.

MG: It must have been so frustrating.

RP: Oh, yes. Sure was.

MG: Here you are a handy man, who's now having trouble feeding himself.

RP: Yes.

MG: What was that like for you?

RP: Well, I wanted to be able to get back to what I did before. This gave me more and more drive to do all the therapy I could because that's the only way I was going to get better.

MG: Did your relationship with Christ change at all during this time?

RP: No. In fact, early on, when I was shut out from the outside world, because I couldn't talk and people didn't talk with me much because I couldn't talk, I was left only with (inaudible) in me. I'll tell you, if it weren't for my faith, I don't know I could have gone through it. I remember my younger years in church, another man gave a testimony. He didn't go on to (inaudible). He didn't go into details about what he was in the hospital for, but he said he was shut out from the outside world and it was his faith that got him through it. I didn't really understand what it meant until then. All of sudden, it was me, and now I know.

MG: How else did things progress and change? When did you start feeling like you could do more?

RP: In New England Rehab, they had a lot of therapy for it. If I remember, up to six sessions a day and there was time to rest in between. For me, it was necessary to have, even though it was very tiring for me in the beginning. They had me do little things. Of course, it's like at that stage – after having that severe strokes, it's like building blocks. You concentrate on that pyramid at the top, but to get that one at the top, there's many blocks you got to put in place to support that one and that's the way it is with therapy. There's so many little things that you got to learn to do in order to do bigger things to eventually get to the point where you can care for yourself or do other tasks. It was real frustrating to me because they'd ask me to do things I thought were pretty stupid. In my mind, I'd think “Well, that's stupid. That's pretty easy.” But when I try to do it, it wasn't so easy. Then, as time went on, I'd see I'd get better at it. Then they'd add other things to it. Then, after a while, they wouldn't ask me to do those stupid things. They'd add other things, stupid things. Eventually, they'd get to the point where you could do things – they'd ask you to do things you could see where it would be something that would be helpful. I remember one day

asking my occupational therapist – I could talk a little bit. I said, “What can I be doing laying here in bed to get myself better, because I’m not going to get any better by laying here.” He says, “Well, there’s really nothing you can do in bed.” A couple days later I asked him again. He said, “Well, wait a minute, I’ll be right back.” He went and he got this sponge. I think it was a pink one. He asked me to put that in my left hand. I put it in my left hand, and he says, “Try to squeeze it.” So, I tried to squeeze it. I looked at him. I said, “What the heck kind of sponge is this? This thing’s hard.” He said, “Well, just keep concentrating. Try to squeeze it.” Finally, I squeezed it. He said, “Okay. Now, put that in your other hand. Try it again.” Because each hand was different than the other one, but still useless. Again, I would do that. He said, “Okay. Now do that up to ten times each and then lay back down on your tray. Only do that up to a couple times a day.” He says, “If it gets easy, let me know.” I worked on that every day. By one Sunday night, I realized I could that pretty easy. I was pretty proud of myself. Next day, when he came, I picked it up. I said, “Look.” I thought he’d be happy. Turn around and he (inaudible) door. I think [to myself], “What the heck’s going on? I would have thought he’d been happy. Where’d he go?” Couple minutes came back with another sponge. He said, “Okay. Squeeze this one.” I try to squeeze it. I [said], “What’s this one? This one’s harder than

the other one was.” He said, “Yes. That’s to build up your hands.” He said, “Do the same thing.” When I did it, he [said], “Okay. Do that ten times each day. When this gets easy let me know again.” A couple weeks later, I told him again. I says, “Look, I’m doing this real easy.” Again, he booked out of the room. I was thinking, “Well, last time he did it, he went and got something. Maybe that’s what he’s doing.” Sure enough, he came back. I can’t think what they call it, but it’s a little plastic thing you put elastics on to exercise hands. He says, “Try to squeeze this.” It only had one elastic on. It was real hard, but I was able to do it. He says, “Okay. Now do this ten times. Each time it gets easy, let us know. We’ll add more elastics to it.” I said, “Okay.” Then one day, he had me up trying to see if I can balance myself standing with a walker. I looked at him at one point. I said, “I want to learn to walk again, too.” He says, “I understand you have no feeling in your feet. Is that true?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, you’re never going to be able to walk if you have no feeling in your feet.” I said, “Well, I’ve got to try.” He says, “Okay. You’re really determined.” He says, “We’ll try. But I’m going to tell you, it’s impossible. It ain’t going to happen.” A couple days later, he came in and the wheelchair to give me therapy. He got me just outside the door. He says, “You really want to try to walk?” I said, “Absolutely. I got to walk. I’m not going to do it if I don’t try.” He said,

“Okay. Well, we’ll try right here.” I said, “Okay.” He opened up my walker. He set it in front of me. He says, “I’ll help you stand up when you’re ready.” He helped me stand up under the walker. He says, “When you’re ready, try to take a step.” Took a long time, but I stepped one – let’s back up. I’m sorry. That time when I told him I wanted to walk and he told me I couldn’t because I had no feeling below my legs, I said, “Can you do me a couple favors?” He said, “What’s that?” [I said], “Let me know when my left foot looks like it’s on the floor, like it’s ready for me to step from my right foot.” He said, “Okay.” They did that. He said, “Okay. It looks it.” I took a mental note how my upper leg felt. Then did the same thing with my right foot. He said, “What’s that about?” I said, “Well, now I know how my upper legs feels when it’s really to take a step. Now I’m ready to try to walk.” He said, “Well, not today, but we’ll try it sometime if you’re really determined.” That time, I walked and I was able to manage after about ten minutes, two tiles. I could look down and see the tiles that I progressed and I was shot. Then I told him, “I got to sit down.” He’s says, “You had enough?” I said, “Yes.” [He] says, “You realize you can’t walk?” “No, no.” I said, “I want to keep trying.” He said, “You got to be kidding.” I said, “No, I’m serious. I’m serious.” After two months there in New England Rehab, I was able to walk a hundred tiles before I rest. At the end

of that (inaudible) as it's getting time to be discharged, they told me I could not go home to live on my own for a year. I lived on my own on the second floor in South Berwick. The staff asked me if I had any siblings. I said, "Yes. I got three sisters." They said, "Well, what's the possibility of going to live with one of them?" I said, "I don't see me being able to live with any of them." I said, "One of them is in Florida and one of them lives in a small mobile home. The other one, a small apartment," which is what I end up with, basically a one-roomer. I said, "I don't see me going there." They said, "How about any siblings?" I said, "I don't have any siblings." [They] said, "Well, if you can't come up with a place to go, when it comes time to discharge, they'll discharge you to a nursing home." Well, I didn't like that idea and I was very upset with it. I still couldn't talk much, so I couldn't talk to people about it. Finally, one day, my youngest sister came in. She [said], "Don't worry. Come and stay with me, when you're discharged." She was the one that had the mobile home and lives in Poland. When I was discharged, I went to stay with her. I was there for four months with an hour session of physical and occupational therapy once a week during that time. As I waited for an opportunity to start going to WestSide, which is part of Goodwill in Lewiston, as an outpatient. Then, I started going there and my aunt who was in her eighties at the time, in there all the time visiting me,

taking me places, told me that she didn't see any change in me from the time I left the hospital until I started going to WestSide. Says, that point on, she started seeing me progressing a lot. I went there for two years. During that time, they helped me with my speech therapy, do a lot of vocal exercises and stuff. I hated them, but I realized I couldn't talk if I couldn't do that. Learn now to better use my hands and stuff. They tried talk on different crutches and stuff for me after awhile, to walk. Nothing worked. One day, one of my physical therapists and I passed another one of my physical therapists in the hall. They started whispering amongst themselves. I'm standing there, holding myself up with a walker. I saw them shaking their heads no. (inaudible) thinking to myself, "Boy, I hope they're not talking about me because that wouldn't be good." It seems like I no more than thought that, then they turn around and ask me to explain to both of them why I find it so hard to walk with anything (inaudible) on. I said, "Well, I've got to concentrate on standing, moving my left foot, moving my cane or other thing you give me, and then my right foot." I said, "That's just too much. I can't think about that all at once." They turned and looked at each other and shook their heads no again. I thought to myself, "They are talking about me and it's not good." I stood there thinking, "Man, I got to come up with something. They're going to give up on me and I want to walk." Finally, I

said, "Excuse me." They turned around and looked at me kind of surprised-like. I said, "We haven't tried everything yet." They said, "What do you mean? We tried everything we got here." I said, "Well, there's only one thing you haven't tried yet." Looked at each other, looked at me, (inaudible) "What's that?" I said, "I haven't tried me walking with anything." They [said], "That can't be done. No way." I said, "Well, that's only thing we haven't tried." They said, "No. That can't be done. You (inaudible) walker. You got to go to other assistive devices before you can eventually walk. If you can't do that, you got to stick with a walker." I said, "Well, I've got to learn to walk. If nothing else has worked, that's the only thing we haven't tried. Me, I got to try everything." I looked at her. I said, "The walls and the halls here are narrow. You have the (inaudible) belt on me. If we fall, I can try to catch myself and you have the (inaudible) belt to try to catch me." I says, "All I'm asking is give me a week. If you don't see progress in that week, then we can revisit this and go from there." Looked at each other, shook their heads. One of them said to me, "Don't get your hopes up, because it's not going to happen. But we'll give it a week just for your satisfaction." During that week, I asked her, I says, "Do you see any progress?" She says, "I can't believe that. I don't know why or how, but you are making progress. But you're walking real slow." I said, "I know,

but I can pick up my pace once I get it down.” I said, “Are you interested in pursuing this?” She says, “Yes. We can try this for a while and then we’ll try a cane again.” I said, “Okay.” We did that for about a month. One day, she asked me, “Do you want to try a cane again?” I said, “No.” She said, “Why are you so against going to a cane?” I said, “I got to walk.” I said, “I want to return to work. How can I work if I got to hold on to something just to stand and walk?” She [said], “You’re never going to have to worry about going back to work again.” I said, “Oh, yes. I’ve got to. I’m too young. I can’t sit around and do nothing the rest of my life.” We kept going with that. Eventually, I got to the point where I was able to live alone on my own, (inaudible) again and drive again. Then, four months after I was discharged from WestSide, I got my first job at Wal-Mart. My job coach at Voc. Rehab, when I told her I was hired, told me, “Don’t get too excited. A lot of people after disability, takes three more jobs before they can hold one.” But I’ve been working at Wal-Mart for almost five years.

MG: What do you do at Wal-Mart?

RP: I was a counter person at the tire and lube, where I make (inaudible) and stuff. That was very chaotic for me, answering phones and running the

registers and had to buzz for people to let out to go through into the garage and stuff, and also answered customers' questions. It was crazy. One day, one of the managers asked me if I was interested in working anywhere else in the store. I told him hardware would be interesting for me, because it'd be related to what I used to do. I said, "If (inaudible) can't go back to what I used to do, I still know how to and I could be helpful to customers there." After a while, that manager told me they were going to transfer me to another department that covers hardware and housewares and domestics. They transferred me there. I worked there for about a month. During that month, I received two letters from the store manager and the district manager. They saw me with customers and they were impressed with how I had helped the customers, showed them the items, help them find what they needed to solve the problem. After the second letter, I thought to myself, "I guess, my spot in hardware is secured. [I don't have] to worry about being moved out of here." Well, within two weeks of that, I was moved to housewares, where I knew absolutely nothing. I've been there now for three years. [laughter]

MG: Have you learned about housewares since?

RP: Oh, yes. Yes. [laughter]

MG: Are you treated any differently since the operation?

RP: At first I was, but after a while, as I get more independent that wore off, yes.

MG: How were you treated differently?

RP: Just like I was before. It was frustrating (inaudible) started at Wal-Mart, because that's the first job I had in three years. I still was in bad shape. It was hard for me still to walk and so forth and stand for long. I was supposed to stand – be on my feet for at least two hours before a break. When it come time for my break, I would tell them, I've got to go have a break. They would say, "Well, we'll get to it eventually. We can't leave the counter. We've got nobody available. I'd have to tell them, "You got to get someone soon because my legs are going to give out at some point and you'll have to pick me up and then replace me. Then, I'll be shot for the rest of the day." That was very frustrating and that went on a lot.

MG: I want to hear more about the therapists you worked with and maybe the relationships you formed with them. Who was particularly helpful?

RP: I quickly formed a bond with all my therapists, from those back early on in Portsmouth. I was always glad to see him and I was very upset when I was transferred to New England Rehab, so I wouldn't see them anymore. That was my first time I took it hard when I lost a therapist.

MG: Does anyone in particular stand out to you?

RP: My first therapist, her name was Kathy.

MG: Why was she special?

RP: Just the way she treated me, spoke to me, and encouraged me to do things.

MG: Did things change at all with your family or friends after your strokes?

RP: They'd come and see me, but they were always down, kind of upset. Between how bad off I was and with the prognosis was, I believe. Because of that, I'd always lay there wishing somebody would come visit me in general, that probably knew me. They could probably give me some encouragement. Maybe inspire me to where I could find a way out of that mess, but nobody ever came like that. When people did come to visit me, as I got to talk, I could tell them – I remembering them visiting me when I was in a coma, and them touching my arm and things they would say. It was very spooky, because their eyes open up real wide. “How the heck you know that? You were in a coma when I said that?” [laughter]

MG: What kind of things would they say that you remembered?

RP: I remember my pastor reflecting back on the time earlier and the things I was doing [in the] early '80s on up through.

MG: What did you think when you were told you wouldn't walk again?

RP: I was devastated, because I felt, “Man, everything I want to get back to it would not be possible if I can't walk.”

MG: How did that make you feel?

RP: Hopeless.

MG: Was it extra amazing when you could walk and you made those first hundred steps?

RP: It just made me more determined. No matter what they said, I was going to try. Every step of the way, I was always told, "You're not going to. Can't do that. You can't do that." I kept pushing.

MG: Are there things today that you still struggle to do?

RP: Oh, yes. Every day is different.

MG: Tell me about that.

RP: Well, some days my hands are more shaky. Sometimes I can't talk good. Some days, my legs bother me a lot. They hurt after I'm on them for

a while every day. At the end of my shift, they're real sore. Each day is different with them. I never get used to any kind of specific feeling. Sometimes I can't remember. My memory's not that good. Sometimes it's very sharp.

MG: It sounds a little inconsistent.

RP: Yes. Sometimes I can problem solve quick. Sometimes I got to (inaudible) go do something else and over time, figure it out.

MG: Are there any sort of unexpected changes? Do you dream differently? I don't know. Is there something that you wouldn't expect to be different, different?

RP: I don't know because every day has always been different for me from the get-go. Some of my dreams, I've dreamed back when I was in the hospital or being there again. Way back before anything happened to me, enough things in life happened to me where I learned that if it's possible for something to happen once, it can happen again. I remember at WestSide after a while, some of the other clients there, as they saw me progress, they

asked me one day if I ever thought what I would do if I found myself back where I was again. I said, “Yes. I have, because I realize that if something can happen once, it can happen again.” But I hope I’ve got my senses about me, so I can remember that [I’ve] been there once before and found my way out. If that’s the case, the first time would have been much harder than the second, because the first time I didn’t know if I could. No one told me I could. [laughter]

MG: What changes have you made to make sure that this doesn’t happen again? Anything with your diet or lifestyle?

RP: I’ve had to change my diet big time. I was a meat and potatoes guy. I used to crave steak dinners. Now, every time I do, I think back [to] what it was like when I was in a [vegetative] state. All of a sudden, the desire’s gone. I got to almost push myself to have a hamburger now. [laughter]

MG: Were your parents passed on when you had your stroke?

RP: Yes. Yes, when I growing up, my father used to have me do stuff and the times my – as I got older and trailer park – when trailer’s moving, he’d

have me help him stop the trailer. My back would bother me, because I'd have to carry blocks and (inaudible) on to him. He'd always say, "Oh, it's all in your head." I wish he was alive now, because I'd tell him this time you'd be right. It's all in my head. [laughter]

MG: I still have a few more questions, but I just want to let you know we've been going for a little over an hour and I want to make sure you're okay with time and feeling okay.

RP: Yes, I'm free until about 2:00 or so. I've got plenty of time.

MG: Good. Did the surgery and the aftermath affect your finances at all?

RP: Oh, yes. Big time.

MG: Talk to me about that.

RP: Well, working for yourself, when you're not working, you're not earning money. In fact, I had many estimates of things and was about to

take deposits on them to start. That all ended immediately. I didn't have anything for an income until I started getting disability almost a year later.

MG: What effect did that have on you?

RP: A lot. The things I needed, that needed to be purchased, my sister or other people would step forward and do that. It was frustrating not being able to do it for myself, even that.

MG: Can you tell me about the relationship that Goodwill Industries has had in your life and what that has meant?

RP: Well, when they got me the first intake interview, they asked me what my goals were. I told them I wanted to learn to walk, regain use of my hands, live independently (inaudible), drive, and go back to work full-time. The look on her face told me that they didn't think that was – that was never going to happen, but I was determined. I've got to get back the way it was. They actually helped me do most of that.

MG: Did they help you get the job at Wal-Mart?

RP: No, I was gone then. But while I was there in '08 – I was discharged in '09, but in '08, I had decided it was time that I could live on my own again. I asked them, my case manager, if she could help me get a place. So she [says], “Well, first we got to know where you want to live? Do you want to go back to South Berwick or live here?” I said, “Well, I’d love to go back to South Berwick, but my priority is to get better. I know if I go back to South Berwick, my therapy’s going to stop at least until I can pick up something down there again and everybody’s had a chance to learn and get familiar with me. I guess, I’ve got to stay here and find something up here, at least until I get done with therapy.” She’s said, “Well, then I’ll help you with that.” She told me how to contact Auburn Housing and she helped me with the forms and stuff. That summer, while waiting for an apartment to open up, I decided to come here to stay. I had a problem where I was staying with my sister and I decided I should go there for the summer anyway, get used to being on my own. I haven’t been able to be there since I got out of the hospital and I wanted to be there. I came here. My neighbor took me back to WestSide the next day. I says, “I should be fine for me. They’ll get my transportation to bring me up here.” They were kind of concerned when I first told them. Both my physical and occupational therapists had come out

with me the next few days, take a look at everything and make sure it's safe and so forth and I can do it. They were very supportive after that. They took me to K-mart and had me get some big blocks of things for freezers. They said, we'll keep them here. Every time you come in, you bring one from the cooler and bring another one for the next day. They were very supportive with me. They helped me get my transportation there to come (inaudible) come pick me up here and take me here afterwards.

MG: What was the hardest thing about living on your own again?

RP: It was challenging because I had to keep everything in a cooler and make sure I remembered to bring a block with me when I left and make sure that was the first thing I put in when I got here, so it didn't melt too much. It was a challenge having to prepare my meals, because I didn't dare to use the grill yet. I basically used cans and stuff.

MG: Can you tell me a little bit about the volunteer work you mentioned you were doing?

RP: Yes. My occupational therapist at WestSide told me at one point – I was still using a walker – that if I’m determined and want to go back to work at some point, I should really look into doing some volunteer work because that would help me to get back being used to being some place at a certain time, interacting with other people, and I could use that for ongoing therapy. When he said that, the latter, I said – to me, that was important because I needed all the therapy I could get to get back to being better. I started trying to volunteer around Lewiston/Auburn, but it was very tough. Nobody wanted to take me. Of course, I was walking around looking for it in a walker. [laughter] Finally, I filled [out] an application at the hospital, CMMC [Central Maine Medical Center] in Lewiston. After about a month, the director there called me in for an interview. I went in my walker, had an interview with her, thinking to myself, “She won’t have anything to do with me, seeing me in a walker.” She asked me, “What’d you do for work,” before I had my strokes. I told her I was [in the] handyman trade, where I go into people’s homes and businesses and fix things. Says, “Well, maybe you’d work out good (inaudible).” I said, “What’s that?” She [said], “That’s the department that’s made up of carpenters, painters, and plumbers and mechanics that go around the hospital fixing things.” I said, “Yes. That would work out good for me.” I said, “I still have (inaudible) on how to do

it. I need the motor skills to do it. That would be like therapy for me.” I said, “Yes. I would like that.” She says, “Let me talk with him and we’ll get back to you and we’ll go from there. See if they’re interested.” I got a call from her about four days later. She [said], “Yes. They’re willing to take you. Why don’t you come in next Thursday and meet with them.” I came in next Thursday and I met one of the engineers. Then he said, “We’ll go and introduce you to the mechanic I’m going to have you work with.” I said, “Okay.” He took me into the shop. It was outside the door, the shop. He opened the door and he said, “Howard, would you come here?” I said, to myself, “Howard, that’s interesting. I knew a Howard once.” He came out. He looked at me. “I thought I knew you.” I said, “Why do you say that?” Because I didn’t recognize him. I hadn’t seen him since he was a kid. He says, “Well, I was told I was going to be assigned a Ralph Poland. I remember Ralph Poland when I was going to Fairview back in Auburn, way back in the early ’60s.

MG: Did you remember him eventually?

RP: Yes. I can remember the name, but I just didn’t recognize him because he changed so much. It was interesting.

MG: You were able to work with him for some time?

RP: Yes.

MG: Do you still?

RP: I volunteer at plant ops. He's not there anymore. He injured his knee and he's out now permanently. During that time, at times, they would assign me with different people. One day, the plumber asked me to help him. He was in (inaudible) commodes, up in the rehab unit. I went up with him and at one point, asked me to go in the hallway to get a tube that he was going to need in a minute. I started going through the room, patient was trying untangle an extension cord from his wheelchair. I was real puzzled. I said, "Where'd that extension cord come from and how in the world did it get tangled up in this wheelchair?" I stopped, untangled it for him, and talking to him. Then, after I got it untangled, he asked me if I could wheel him out into the hallway. I remembered when I was New England Rehab, people would try to leave, so they had the doors locked. I'm thinking, "Man, I can't help somebody – can't be a part of somebody doing that." I told him, "I'd

have to go out and ask the nurses first.” I told him because they got to make sure you’re not going to try to anywhere. He said, “No, no. I’m not trying to anywhere. I just got to get out of this room.” When he said that, I knew exactly what he meant because I was stuck a room a long time. I went in the hallway, locked him down. After I got the tool, I’m walking back in the room, I got thinking, “Man, there’s got to be something I can do in rehab because I can emphasize with the patients here.” Later that day, I came back and up I talked to the manager of rehab and asked her if she had anything for volunteers there. She said “No, we don’t. I took a step back, kind of disappointing. Then [she] says, “But by chance, can you come up on Saturdays and do activities with the patients?” I thought to myself, “I don’t know what that is, but (inaudible) this point.” At the same time, I can get my foot in the door because like I said, I used to wish people would come see me when I was in vegetative state; nobody did. After a while I got thinking if I’d ever found my way out of the mess, how I’d do that myself. There was an opportunity right there. I said, “Yes.” I’ve been there now for over five years.

MG: What’s that like working with patients who experienced something similar?

RP: It's rewarding. When I see a reaction in them that they're getting it and they're getting inspired and they're ready to take on – accept and take on what's happened to them or the staff tells me later that, “Boy, you really had a positive impact on that patient.” That, to me, validating everything I went through was for a higher cause.

MG: Yes. It must mean so much more hearing it from you than it would a doctor who hasn't experienced something similar.

RP: Yes. I had many patients early on tell me that it's good to finally hear it from somebody who's been through it themselves, not somebody that read it from a book.

MG: Do any of those patients stand out to you, ones that you've worked to inspire and keep company?

RP: There were so many and I only knew them by first names. I know that there was one that couldn't even talk. I remember the staff telling me don't bother with him because he can't talk. I said, “No, no. I'm going to him.” I

said, “I was in that case myself once and people wouldn’t come talk to me. I think it’s bad. It’s good for them to have people around.” I go in and share my story and share how frustrating it was when I couldn’t talk and keep telling them no matter what anyone might say, keep trying. If they give you exercise, do them. He [had the] longest stay there. He was there, in that rehab, for about three months. Most people average about two weeks. I saw a lot of progress with him. He got so he was glad to see me. After a while I started – once I found out I could, I would take him and other patients around the hospital just get them off the floor or out of the room for a while because it was so therapeutic for me that one time it was done to me. I know the staff can’t do that all the time. When I’m there on Saturdays, that’s why I do that with them.

MG: Did he ever talk eventually?

RP: A little bit, yes. At Wal-Mart, working at Wal-Mart, I’ve seen his sister at times and she would always comment how well he was doing and how thankful they were – what I did for them.

MG: Having an insider's perspective of the rehab process and now with your volunteer work, are there things that you think we should be doing differently in terms of rehabilitation?

RP: I keep myself active out here. I've done a lot here since I had my strokes. In fact, this year, I'm working on a big project that's taken all summer and something people said, I've never been able to do, but taking dirt down here and making a dam, because the run-off comes by the camper. I want to dam it up and control it, so I can have water flow out into a basin and I can draw water from. I had installed a PVC valve upstream inside the dam that I can turn on and off. I realized early on this year that I'm not going to be able to do that if I can't come up with another way to get dirt up because my wheelbarrow [is] real tough to do it – put much in it and I would need a lot of dirt. Finally got [to thinking] well, I've seen – lately, I've seen two wheel wheelbarrows at places like Home Depot. I went to look to see what it would cost [for] one. I realized that's way out of my budget. Plus, somebody could steal something like that from me. Then I got thinking, well, how could I convert mine to do that? Adapt it to do it myself. Then, somebody sees something jerry-rigged, they'd be less likely to take it anyway. I came up [with] what I would need. I got the things and I did that

this spring. It worked beautifully. I was able to be able to build the whole dam with the dirt.

MG: That's great. It sounds like you're very resourceful.

RP: Yes.

MG: When were you able to start driving again?

RP: Just before I was discharged back in '09.

MG: Was that exhilarating to have that freedom?

RP: Yes.

MG: What was the first place you went to in your car?

RP: Believe it or not, I was coming here to get someone – bring me out to get my truck and taking it in town where – the apartment where I live. They

told me not to go very far at first, so I used it just to go to WestSide or to go shopping.

MG: Let's maybe shift gears a little bit and we can talk about the Americans with Disabilities Act.

RP: Yes.

MG: Was that something you were aware of before you had your strokes?

RP: Yes.

MG: In what capacity?

RP: I knew of it. I felt that some of those things were good, but a lot of them I was unaware of how necessary they were. In fact, being a handyman, one of the things that affected me early on was building steps and stairs for people. Buildings codes required a ten inch tread. That meant the stairs or steps had to stretch further. I was always wondering why they required so much. But once I had to learn to walk again, when they were used in

helping me to use – I’m trying to think of – makeshift steps in the gyms, in the rehab, they had both the narrow steps and the wide step. I realized immediately how important it is to have that wide step. Then, that first year before I could drive, that winter, I’d have to use my walker to get around town. It was tough getting up over curves and snow banks because they didn’t plow the sidewalks very good. That brought in a lot more realization. The bus would lower itself so I could get on and off. I realized there was a time it couldn’t do that. I realized then I’m lucky this all happened to me again, at the time it did, because first, the heart attack, ten or twenty years earlier, wouldn’t had the technology; I would have died. The strokes, I could have died just from the strokes or been left in a vegetative state because not that long ago, they felt they couldn’t do anything for someone in that situation. Now, because of the Disabilities Act, instead of being forced to be a shut in, I can participate and get back into life again, which helps me to have self-esteem, self-hope and encouragement and get out there and doing things, instead of staying home and thinking, “Well, somebody else is going to do this for me.” That’s one of the things I learned at WestSide. It was tough. My occupational therapist told me I was disabled. That was a tough thing for me to overcome, but through the course of time I was at WestSide, I learned how to go from my disability controlling me, to me

controlling my disability. That's where I used strategies, face your limitations, use strategies to work around them and carry on.

MG: The thing I keep hearing from people who have disabilities and in our conversations about the ADA is we've come a long way and we've made a lot of changes, but we still have so much more accomplish.

RP: There's a lot of awareness that needs to be made to people in general. Where I live, I live on the fifth floor of a six-story apartment building. They have grocery carts tenants can use to take things up to their apartments or bring things down. Well, when they're done with them, they just push them in the elevator and leave it. Well, there are people in our building that are in wheelchairs. They cannot get in the elevator with the cart there and it's tough for them to maneuver a cart because you're sitting – picture yourself sitting down in a chair and trying to maneuver a cart, you don't have the leverage because you're not standing. Also, you've got to extend your arms because you got reach beyond your legs, your knees, to the cart. Then you got the gap in the elevator that's a resistance. So, that is hard to get the other tenants to realize that infringes on their right to equal access to the elevators and to move around independently.

MG: What else about the disability rights movement did you become aware of after your surgery?

RP: When I first started to work, I began to learn that – and become aware that the place of employment has to make compensations for your disabilities, so you can still do the job. I can remember – never had to do that before. In fact, when I first was telling my job coach I want to go back to work, but yet, seeing my condition and being self-employed, I told her, “But at this point, I’m not employable.” She said, “Don’t tell yourself [that]. Don’t say that and don’t think that. You are employable.”

MG: The other thing that keeps coming up in these conversations is that – I don’t know how to quite put this, but there’s a real lack of awareness for the ADA and the work that still needs to be done among people who don’t have a disability when really, it’s either inevitable or possible all of a sudden to be directly affected. I think about the other movements – women’s rights movement, civil rights movement. Here we have a society that has blinders on to something that could really easily one day affect anybody.

RP: Yes.

MG: I wonder why you think that's the case.

RP: Well, I remember when I was a handyman, when people would talk to me about wanting to redo their kitchen or bathrooms. I always tell them, "Not only to look at it now, about how it would serve you now, but think about how it could serve you twenty-plus years from now, if you're in a wheelchair or something, God forbid. But if it happened, you [don't] want to spend that money and find out that it ain't going to work for you or be told you can't go home because you couldn't get around at home or do the things you need to there." All the time, I'm thinking, I never have to face that for decades, but all of a sudden, I found myself in the same situation. People don't tend to want to think about that. They do put blinders on, hoping that that will never happen to them, but eventually disability will happen to us or somebody we know. We need to all become aware and be aware of our environment while we're putting obstacles in the way of other people that are disabled.

MG: What other changes would you like to see made in terms of the ADA?

RP: I would say we just need to put more focus on people that are disabled, to give them more encouragement. Yes, you have a disability, but that doesn't necessarily mean you are totally unable. You could still do things. Give them encouragements to do for themselves. I think if they can do for themselves, they'll feel better for themselves, and they'll be physically, as well as mentally and emotionally better off.

MG: I think that's a great point. I also think what Goodwill is doing to change people's perceptions about the employability of people with disabilities is really impressive.

RP: Yes.

MG: Are there other things you want to add about the ADA?

RP: I'm blank at the moment.

MG: [laughter] I think it's contagious.

RP: (inaudible) Yes. I would like – when I had to use the walker, I used to wish that we could get – and I know they do the best they can with the funds they have, but if we can find ways for the road crews in the community, different communities, to do a better job of plowing sidewalks and be aware that when they plow them that you get snow banks from one direction to another or if the blade doesn't scrape down, it packs it down, it makes [it] very tough [for] people that can't walk good or wheelchairs to even maneuver through them at all. That needs to be changed so they can still get out, get going. We want to move away from shut-ins. That should be the last resort for people.

MG: That's the thing I keep hearing is to not create these barriers so that people are "homebound" and employment discrimination has been a big problem I've seen.

RP: People in general tend to get irritated by people that are disabled that they know that keep requiring them to do things for them, but if we, as a community, do everything we can to remove obstacles in the way of people with disabilities, they'll be able to do more for themselves. They'll discover from that, that they can do even more for themselves than they ever thought

they could. They'll feel better about themselves, more confident in doing them for themselves and less likely to ask – and asking other people to do things will become last resort.

MG: What has been your greatest source of pride?

RP: Being able to accomplish things that I was never told that I would be able to accomplish.

MG: On the other side of things, what have been some big obstacles for you?

RP: It's my ongoing limitations I do have.

MG: How do you think you're different because this happened to you?

RP: When I look back, if people [would have] told me before everything that happened to me, what I'd go through when I was going through it, I would have told them they're mistaken. No possible way that'd be me. But having gone through it, of course, I always say with a brain injury, nobody

knows what a brain injury is until they've had one. From that point on, they would not wish on their worst enemy. But having everything, the whole [kit] and caboodle I've gone through, happened to me, now looking back, I realize, I'm a better person having gone through it.

MG: How is having a cognitive disability different from a physical one?

RP: If you can't comprehend – just think [of] a small child. You have to teach him how to do things. Imagine being an adult once knowing how to do it, now you can't. Part of your mind, where the motor skills are – excuse me. The part of your mind where the thoughts are, transfer that thought to your motor skills side and yet, the motor skills part of your brain doesn't have any ability to help you do that, get you to do that. That's an awful weird feeling.

MG: There's that frustration that exists having lived so long, being able to do those things.

RP: Yes.

MG: What else do you want to tell me about? What am I missing about your life and your experience?

RP: Well, I know, for me, and not only me, but a lot of people with brain injuries and probably others, there are people in your life that was very important in your life and after you acquire your disability, they can't take it; they leave. You tend to take that personal. Thank God I was able to think and really reason to think back before all this happened to me, the times I've had where I saw people that was real tough off and didn't know what to do, how I could help them. You do, you tend to want to shy away. If you can't help them, you want to get out of the picture, and realize not take it personal; it's not personal. They're just going through the same thing you're doing now. Encourage people that might be faced with that to take the time, go get educated by other people as to what that person may be going through and find ways they can help them. I tried to do that in rehab. When I visit patients and their families there, I explain to them a lot what they can do. In fact, now, in our rehab unit, there's a three ring binder with all the different things that can be symptoms after a stroke that patients, survivors of strokes cope with. I had asked them to take some time and go and look at that. They can realize now, as well as later, that if their loved one says he can't do

something because of something, there's probably more to it than just an excuse. Because you look at them, you think, "Well, they look totally normal, they got to be well now." With a brain injury, it's hard because somebody has an injury that mends within days up to weeks; illnesses, weeks to month, where a brain injury, it takes – the recovery can't be measured in weeks or months. It's months to a lifetime. They tend to get impatient with them quick on because – "Well, I don't see anything wrong. Why can't you do that? You can do that. Why can't you do this?" Well, those two things take a different part of your brain. If that part of the brain is damaged, they can't do it right.

MG: Do you think that a lack of empathy is what is leading people to drop out from your life or other people's lives?

RP: They feel frustrated that they can't wave their magic wand?

RP: There's so much they got to be aware of in life now. Things like awareness of disabilities and barriers that you can unintentionally put in front of disabled people. But brain injury awareness is one that nobody wants anything to do with. Once themselves or a loved one has one, they

have to take a crash course in learning it. It's so much in itself, all alone, the fact that seeing that in their loved one, that they tend to just want to walk off. We need more attention spent focused on those people as well. Brain injury is not only hard on the individual that has it, it's tough on the people around them as well – spouses, family members.

MG: Are there people that have stuck with you?

RP: Yes.

MG: Tell me about that.

RP: I got a friend in South Berwick that I worked for early on that I got to know. When I couldn't even talk in the hospital, he took the reigns and took care of my affairs and stuff. He did a lot to help me get back on my feet.

MG: Have you formed a network of people who have been affected similarly who have brain injuries?

RP: I attend a support group for brain injury in Goodwill and WestSide, once a month. Those of us that have been attending for quite a while, form a bond like our own family.

MG: Tell me how those relationships are different maybe from relationships with other friends and family that haven't been affected.

RP: Because when they see your limitations, they understand them. The others just don't understand them.

MG: I wanted to ask, have you discovered any new abilities that you didn't have before your strokes?

RP: I was always shy. I could not talk to people – carry a conversation with someone I don't know. Now I can when I – I never saw myself doing what I'm doing now in rehab, by going to a room, immediately I begin talking [to] somebody I have no clue about. Don't even know why they're there, other than they're being rehabilitated [for] something.

MG: That's great. Anything else I'm missing or other things you want to talk about?

RP: I can't think of anything.

MG: You know what's going to happen is I'll drive down the road and I'll think of four more questions.

RP: Yes, me too.

MG: It's not hard for me to come back here. Now I know where to go. If we think of other things we want to add to the record, we'll set up a second session.

RP: Yes. Okay.

MG: In the meantime, I'll send you a copy of this CD, you can listen to it. If there's things you want to fix or add, we'll arrange for another time to chat.

RP: Okay. Yes.

MG: If that's it for now, I'll turn this off. Thank you so much for taking the time and for sharing your story.

RP: Yes. Thank you. Thank you for doing it. Hopefully, it can be encouraging for somebody.

MG: It will be. I think we live in a world where we value so youth, and vitality, but everyone is susceptible to disability.

RP: At any age, too.

MG: We're celebrating the 25th anniversary of the ADA, but as technology and society changes, we need to keep up with it.

RP: Yes.

MG: I think we still have a ways to go, but this will be a great exhibit and good stories are being recorded, yours included. This has been such a treat.

Thank you so much. I'll turn this off and if we want to speak again, we certainly can. Thank you.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 2/7/2016