**Cynthia George ADA Oral History Interview Transcript**

CAROL WESTLAKE: Hello, my name's Carol Westlake, and I am here today with Dr. Cynthia George in Nashville Tennessee for….to interview her about the ADA in terms of the ADA Tennessee's oral history project. It is May 9th, 2025, and we are here to help build a greater understanding about the disability experience in Tennessee. Well Cynthia, I’m glad you are here.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Thank you.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Thank you so much for coming today.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: I'm so glad to be here.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Thank you. As you know the major goal of this sort of project is to try to contribute to you know our understanding of the Americans with Disabilities Act and what the disability experience has been over the last 35 or so years in Tennessee.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Yes.

CAROL WESTLAKE: I’m really anxious to hear your story.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Well I’m happy to share it.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Great, great. So if you will just start by telling me a little bit about yourself.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Sure. My name is Cynthia George, and I am from Nashville. I was born on the rock block actually in the old Baptist hospital along Elliston Place , and I was sick at my birth, and they rushed me to Vanderbilt, and I was in an incubator for about six weeks. I had some sort of a blood infection. But it was a rough start right there from the beginning, but I came out okay, right, and I made it (laughs) and but that but that overcoming stress to survive has kind of been a recurring theme in my life which I think is common for people with disabilities because our conditions are so tough and sometimes the world around us makes them even tougher. And so that has been a theme in my life.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, so you obviously identify as a person with a disability.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Yes, yes, yes (laughs)

CAROL WESTLAKE: So, so can you talk to me a little bit more about what that means to you or how that ..how you think that's impacted sort of your life experience?

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Yes, well I’ll tell you I actually didn't identify as a person with disabilities as a child because despite that traumatic birth, and I was later diagnosed with autism and was in special education, I never knew, right, and my mother never told me that I had that diagnosis, and I thought I was in special education classes to help everyone else like as a teacher's aide and.. and (laughs) I guess they just allowed me to believe that. And I would …I would do things like my friend John, I believe he had spina bifida, but I’m not sure, but he had leg braces, and we would take him in a wagon, and I would pull him around the school, right, and so I would take him into the cafeteria or to the playground, and that was just always my responsibility, and so I always thought I was in special ed to support the other kids with special needs, and I didn't realize that I was special needs myself (laughs).. but I was ..and so I..I actually found out in 2019 my mother was in a nursing home, and she.. we were watching a TV show, and they were talking about a young boy with autism and on it was like a Dr. Phil show I think ….and she said "You had that" and I said "What do you mean I had that?" and I was like "It doesn't go away mom." (laughs) And she said "You had that …the gifted kind" and she said “But I would never let them call you that,” right, and she had already had a severe stroke at this time and so I didn't really push her to tell me more, I just kind of let that sink in and ….and then after she passed I was clearing out her house, and I found all my old IEPs which is the individualized education plan that I had gotten in school, and it's like the carbon copy forms with a pink one and a yellow one and a white one and so I was actually able to see the yellow IEP forms that my mother had kept all of these years, and I was able to see my progress, and I remember them making me pick nuts and bolts out of Play-Doh, but I didn't really understand that that was handwriting therapy, right, and I had dexterity.. manual dexterity issues which is a telltale sign of autism, right, and I didn't realize that… I just thought somebody had put all these nuts and bolts in the Play-Doh, and they needed me to help and take them out, right, (laughs) and so, again, I was helping to clean the playroom not getting autism therapy, and I don't know if they did that on purpose or if I just reframed my experience to …to feel that (laughs) ..you know, but that was really how I did, right, and all of my IEPs generally said I was pleasant and that I did good and that I was…. it said primary disabling condition, and it just had typed gifted (laughs). So I’ve been disablingly gifted since I was a child and …and sometimes that gave me a colorful perception, right, and so I never grew up identifying as a person with disability ..that came about later. I also had a car crash in 2009, and I had a concussion from that and as well as some muscular-skeletal injuries, and I’ve never really quite been the same after that. And it was about ..it took about 15 years really to even get the correct diagnosis, but over that 15-year period I had a ton of physical therapy, I had multiple surgeries, I had and just an increasing amount of pain. All of these genetic predispositions that I had started emerging, right, it was just kind of like a rapid aging almost, right, from just the trauma of that injury and part of it was debilitating migraines, and it's taken me about 15 years to get the correct diagnosis and treatment for that condition because migraines is something that a lot of doctors don't recognize or validate, but I don't know so but… but that's been …that was another shift in accepting a disability identity is that loss of mobility that came from that, the loss of functioning.. because it got pretty significant. Migraines so severe I had a stroke, right, I mean and so and then after that I started using a rolling walker, you know. I use a shower chair and grab bars and there's certain accommodations that I just have to have to get through a day, right, and to… to do the things that I need to do. And that's something that happened in my 30s, right, and so I technically have been disabled my entire life but didn't realize it (laughs), right, until I got this injury, and then 10 years after the physical injury I realized that I have also been autistic, right, and that that oddness that I’ve always had actually had a medical basis.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So that's really, really fascinating. So I’m wondering if like getting that identity or recognizing that identity and embracing that identity then changed the way that you dealt with the world.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Oh yes. I mean and if anything, it's changed the way I’ve dealt with myself, and I ..I grew up poor, right, and so there was a lot of struggles, right. We were homeless at times and just moved around a lot. Poverty kind of broke my mother, and so she was abusive. My father was in prison and… and so there was a lot of struggles, right, and at ..when I realized that I was autistic, I had to go through this period where I gave myself so much grace for everything that I had experienced before and I would think about some of my particular low moments in my life, you know, where I was just out in the rain and my car had been repossessed and I was standing there in tears, you know, and this was, you know, and I was just so stressed and I was like "oh well no wonder I was struggling to manage my bills." Like I was an autistic kid that had just moved on their own (laughs), you know, and you know and really the problem was I didn't open my bills. I just had this stack of envelopes, you know, that was just sitting there, and I didn't know that I was autistic to reach out for help in dealing with that problem. And so it escalated to the point that my car was repossessed, you know, and it led to a whole bunch of other financial issues, too, because you've got to open your mail (laughs), right, but I still to this day don't like opening my mail, and I have to force myself to do it, you know, and …and now of course I when I look back at that, and I, you know, because I’m …I’m brilliant, right, I’ve got a PhD, but I struggle to open my mail, right, and I never really understood that duality until I realized that I’m autistic and…. and as smart as I am, there is still that developmental delay, right, those manual dexterity issues, you know, the speech issues …which I sing in a band and sometimes I struggle with my tongue, right, and controlling my speech and so I have to practice a lot and work on that, and I never understood where that was. I just thought it was random (laughs), right, and now I realize that …that's part of my neurodivergence, and so I just gave myself so much grace and forgiveness and I remember just sobbing for that child that felt stupid or weird or didn't understand why something was happening. Yeah, so I’m so much more gentle with myself.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yes, and it sort of gives you some explanation and some reason and

CYNTHIA GEORGE: correct

CAROL WESTLAKE: but also kinds of brings us to accommodation, right, because

CYNTHIA GEORGE: correct

CAROL WESTLAKE: you have to ….you had to then find your own accommodations once you understood a little bit about being disabled, and that that kind of brings us to the ADA. So obviously in… in 2000 or in 1990 when, you know, the ADA passed and then then we had an anniversary and an anniversary ..you probably weren't that aware of the ADA because you weren't really in the world of disability. So when did you become aware of the ADA and start to really think about accommodation and disability?

CYNTHIA GEORGE: In my Master's program actually, becoming a social worker. And even though I had been receiving services and accommodations because I would ask for them and not realize that that's what I was doing and my mother also had disabilities and ….and so I …she ..my grandmother too. And so I would even request accommodations for them as a child to take them in a wheelchair or like I was …that was just part of me always helping others and so I had been using the ADA my whole life and just never knew, right. And …and when I got into a Master's program, I remember reading it in a book, right, in my policy class and …and …and it just made so much sense. you know. And …and that's really why I went to become a social worker anyways is because I wanted to understand how those policies worked, right, and …and I knew it was the law because I heard them talk about it on TV, but I really didn't know how to look up a federal code, right, or how to read case law. And of course now I’m a professional and I have a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and a Master's degree in Social Work and a PhD in Social Work and …and I teach public policy, right, and so I have a profound understanding of the ADA now as well as the Fair Housing Act and the IDEA Act and the Rehabilitation Act and the series of public policies that support people with disabilities, and I also worked as a case manager for people with disabilities using Medicaid waivers to get home- and community-based services and so I have been a key player in the implementation of ensuring that those services support people to meet their needs in activities of daily living and instrumental activities of daily living, right, like I know all the legal terminology for that and so I’ve gotten a lot more sophisticated from the young days of me just telling my school that they needed to fix the ramp because John had to bump over the bump every day on the way to the cafeteria in his wagon, right… right (laughs), all the way, you know, that was at five and six years old, all the way to now I’m 50 and, you know, I’m working on proposals to the city to improve parking for disabled people in downtown Nashville, right, and so it's a whole different scheme of things for me personally and I’m so happy that I was able to get that education, right, and understand because the legal …the laws do need work, right, and …and the …the laws only work if people with disabilities use them and the business owners, right, and the environmental managers have to respect them and that conversation has to happen and that conversation has gotten easier and easier to have I think over the years.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Has it?

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Yes…yes (laughs)

CAROL WESTLAKE: So…so you think that implementation of the ADA has kind of improved or ..or it's become easier anyway. I guess those are two separate things, aren't they?

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Yes, it has and, well, I will say that in the past 100 days there are some threats right that have occurred to that but, in my lifetime, it has gone from no one talked about it, my mother refused to let my teachers call me autistic, right, she never told me because she didn't want me to face the stigmas that came with that, right, I mean and so she… she hid it.. to now I’m in a place where it is disability pride and disability joy, and I carry that banner with pride, right, and ..and we still get shamed, right, like they'll, you know, there's… there's plenty of people that have made careers of being social media influencers around disability on, you know, and that sort of stuff and they get shamed a lot and they still get attacked and so I’m not going to say that stigma's over, but at least there's space for disability pride and disability joy, right, and you ….there's now the trend where people want the diagnosis, right. And before you hid from the diagnosis so that you didn't have to face the stigma, and now people want the diagnosis because they know that they need those accommodations, right. They need to be able to figure out why they are doing the things that they're doing so that they can connect to the correct remedy, right, (laughs) if there is a magic pill everyone wants it, right, and if there's not a magic pill and we actually have to change our behaviors, then we need to know what's driving the behaviors so that we can break those down and come up with the right tools and techniques, right, to change those behaviors and, you know, and that's of course from a PhD level social worker (laughs), right. And so that's a professional opinion (laughs), right, with that, too, like that's actually what behavior scientists are trying to do through treatment plans, right, is to help people figure that out. Of course, the whole world of diagnostics is a bit of a mess, and doctors are …get to spend 20 minutes with their patients, you know, and they don't really have a lot of time to diagnose complex issues. Of course, people are now just put it in the Chat GPT and… and then, you know, (laughs) finding out that they're getting some better diagnosis that way for complex health conditions, but however you get your diagnosis, right, there …there is a considerable knowledge base that has been built of what to do once you get some of these diagnoses, right, and what are some of the best accommodations to promote your ability to work, right, and if you don't know what's happening to you, then it's difficult psychologically to tap into some of those behavior changes that you might need to do or to even know what to request. It can be completely overwhelming, right, yeah.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So ….but as a person with a disability you have managed to make it through higher education more than once …you have clearly managed to navigate the work world, right, work environments. Can you talk a little bit about what that took in terms of, you know, did you need to use the ADA to get those accommodations? Were you in a pretty easy place for, you know, and… and h.. and has that changed over time?

CYNTHIA GEORGE: I’ll tell you it was a lot easier to get accommodations as a college student than it was a college employee. And as a college student it was as simple as filling out an assessment and saying "This is what I needed”. My doctor provided a ream of paperwork ultimately to justify that, and then they just said “okay” and gave me the service and, right? And I needed to always have a padded office chair with arms on it because I can't hold my arms up for very long. I needed, you know, it took me a long time to park and so sometimes I would be late to class and, you know. But those were some of the, you know… I didn't need a lot, right, and because I was so academically gifted that I worked circles around some of my teachers even, right, and so nobody ever really challenged my accommodations as a student because my work ethic was so superior that, you know, they couldn't say anything, and they just said give her chair ….whatever she needs… priority seating, you know. I mean and the and, you know, and I’ve always been really good at school, right, and now the main ….now I was bored in school and, like bored out of my mind to the point that I would challenge my teachers, and any problems I had with teachers were generally because I was pointing out where they were wrong (laughs), right, and ….and that started in kindergarten, quite frankly.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Perhaps not disability.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: (laughs) Right, well I mean it is and it's …it's autism and it's my neurodivergence and it's about me being disablingly gifted, and some people see that as an advantage, but it actually meant that I never got picked for the student things, right, to re…. to represent my peers because they were afraid of what I might say, right, or I might challenge authority, or I might point out one of their shortcomings and, you know, I was never really the favorite even though I was respected and, you know, and so it… it diminished my social powers and skills a little bit because I threatened their position, quite frankly, and you know and …and … and so that was always an issue and it's still an issue sometimes with my supervisors at work when I can easily point out where they're out of compliance, right, because I remember those compliance standards, I know what the codes are and I know when you're violating them, And I…my inner self can't tolerate it, right (laughs), and so and ..and I never knew why that was. I just thought why am I so intense? Why am I such a stickler? and now I realize it's that inability to process those gray areas, right, and so now I have the right techniques, right, and so I can adjust and say "Okay, this is me being more stringent than the rest of the world”. …Is you, know, and let me relax on that, you know, and so I… so I can balance that sort of stuff. But it absolutely was the… the other end of an intellectual disability, right, where my brain was functioning so much faster than everyone around me that even though my peers liked me, they didn't want to be in a group with me because they couldn't keep up, you know, and so I would end up doing all this work alone and being off in left field and presenting the rainbow epistemology and new ways of thinking and my teachers didn't even know how to handle it, you know. And so that's really why my PhD program in my bored hours, right, when I started a punk band, right. And so I wrote a bunch of songs about the curriculum and about my experiences in higher education and ended up singing them and releasing that on the same day that I defended my dissertation, and I absolutely think of that as I didn't know I at the time I was autistic, but now I know I did that because I’m autistic (laughs), right, When everybody thought I was crazy that was really just my neurodivergence manifesting in the education system which is designed for neurotypicals and to train my brain to think in a certain way. I was fighting for my brain's ability to keep thinking the way that it wanted to think, right, and I won (laughs), right. It does. And that and that, of course, was not written on an accommodation letter that was just …. my teachers would fight with me sometimes on how they had to handle me differently than other students, you know, but I got a hundred on almost everything, you know, and .. and so they really couldn't argue. I could back up my new ideas, right, and so they just kind of had to let me go. Now when I became an employee of a university, it was different. And I really had to fight to get a chair with arms on it, and …there was a whole different system. There was a different office that I had to submit letters to, and I never saw that person's face. It was just letters sent by email, right, I never had a conversation with them. My doctor had to redo paperwork. This was the same university, but it was just instead of with this person in this nice office that I would go talk to, it was just this black box, you know, that I was just submitting paperwork to and getting rejected and then had to resubmit and rejected and resubmit and rejected. And finally like three months later they got me a chair (laughs), right...right, and but they still had me in an office going up five flights of stairs, you know, I mean and ….and so it was… it was complicated, and I ended up getting let go from that research assistant position after the first year I think because of that failure to accommodate, you know, and so it was just that was during the onset of my physical disabilities when I hadn't really accepted how physically limited my mobility had gotten, and so I was not as firm in making accommodation requests, right, and again because I didn't have my diagnosis…. I didn't know I would just get dizzy walking down the stairs ….I didn't know that it was because I was having vestibular migraines, and the motion of going down the stairs was triggering that, right. Now I know how to write that specific thing in an accommodation request (laughs) and say because of this condition, I need this accommodation. Before it was just me crazy, feeling crazy, sounding crazy, and I don't know, I just can't see straight and I, you know, right, and so my ability to master the system and deal with that black box of work accommodations has gotten better.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Hopefully the black box has gotten a little better too.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: It depends (sigh), right, it depends on your environment, and I find that all the environments where I’ve needed to write down formal accommodation requests, my supervisors are generally a jerk (laughs) And, you know, I mean in…. in all the environments where it's been no big deal …are the places where my supervisors are great people that are human- centered, right. And so it's actually part of what I consider now, right, you know, when I, especially when I give advice, I’m a professor, right, and so I give advice to a lot of students and …and I make sure to tell them, don't go where you're not valued, you know, and ….and if it's going to be that difficult and that complicated, then you've really got to think about is this the right environment for me.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So that really brings us to sort of the advocacy and… and activism, right. And ..as an element of the ADA and as an element of our community …the disability community in terms of ..in terms of doing that, and so you have obviously engaged in a huge amount of self- advocacy -- fabulous …fabulous, but I know that you've done other kinds of advocacy efforts and…and activism efforts and just really interested in learning a little bit about that and the kind of impacts you think that that has had.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Oh ..(breath)… goodness um I definitely have fought for me and my friends a lot, right, and I and I have greatly improved my quality of life, my ability to work and …and I’ve helped a lot of people to…. to maintain their ability to work as well and probably prevented a lot of strokes and stress-related disorders, too, by helping people to secure their accommodations so that they can live healthy lives, right, because that's really what it's about and, you know, and so I would also like to say that I…. I’ve probably saved employers a lot of money in, you know, preventing lawsuits and, you know, other sorts of things that… that could have happened even from injuries with, you know, that happen to people disabilities when they don't get their accommodations, right. It can end up that kind of a lawsuit as well as someone filing a discrimination suit. And so it really is beneficial to employers to make sure that they're supporting their employees with disabilities, right, and so and I’d like to think that I have been influential in helping groups that I’ve worked with to understand that, right. And I am part of United Campus Workers and American Association with University Professors, and I’m kind of a point of contact for faculty and campus workers when they need that sort of advice, right. And so I’m proud to be in that position and to be able to share the knowledge that I have. It's really been hard learned, right, (laughs) and a lot of making a lot of mistakes and doing things wrong a lot, you know, and then figuring it out and refusing to give up. Being told no and saying I’m not going to stop, you know, and.. and now I’m at the point in my life where I am trying to take that bigger, right. Where of course now I’m teaching social workers, and so a lot of social workers even in our discipline may not get exposed to disability inclusion-specific information, right, and so having a faculty member with disabilities helps because I’m able to give them that information. I’m also working with Nashville’s mayor's office. I’m on two of his special advisory subcommittees for people with disabilities, and I’m working in transportation and outreach. And so I mean in our …at our first meeting we got Uber to agree to add a seeing eye dog or a mobility device button on their app, right, (laughs) and that's in development right now as a direct result of my comments in that meeting, right, and being part of a group and a and a…. a team that's going to receive that and take it to the right people. And again, I’m so lucky and honored to be in a position where I can say that, right. Where I can be at that table, where I can have this knowledge (laughs), right, and I can speak up for people that may have autism to the point where they could not get a PhD, right, and because it… it would just be too overwhelming, right, or too much, and I’m happy that I can advocate for people that would have mobility issues so severe they could not manage some of the activities that I do, right, you know, and so I can be there at that table to .. to fight for those needs on a macro scale, right.

CAROL WESTLAKE: I also have this sense that, you know, like the… the punk band is an act of activism, right.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: (laughs) Oh yes.

CAROL WESTLAKE: You know …I mean in… in terms of the… the broader community, right.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Absolutely, (laughs) yes, and …I actually… I do use the punk band for scholarly pursuits, right, it's part of how I market my academic self, right, and so I …. I do consulting, and I will help organizations create evaluation plans, right, so they can create data around the effectiveness of the interventions that they're doing. And I you …that they find me based off of my band, right, that's my marketing (laughs), right. And if you want a unique academic perspective, right, and then then I’m your gal (laughs), right, and… and of course that's totally what an autistic would do, right, it's a very neurodivergent way to market yourself and… and I didn't know that, you know, when I started the band, but now it just seems so appropriate. I also present at academic conferences through the band. I have songs like I won an International Safety Media Award at the World Health Organization's World Safety Conference in 2022 for a Covid safety campaign that I did which was a punk song about a social work theory about .. called the membership perspective and Covid safety and I created social media images and like a toolkit that social work faculty could use to teach Covid safety and, you know, and… and I think I’m the first punk band that's ever won an award at that conference. It's normally car companies making highway safety commercials and, you know, drunk driving prevention and here's my punk band with a Covid safety song (laughs).

CAROL WESTLAKE: But you also reach a whole new audience.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: I …. do (laughs)

CAROL WESTLAKE: I mean you know there's that there's that academic piece, and there's, you know, clearly that messaging, but then there's this… this I think relatively cool disability and other kinds of messaging that's going out to the community that listens to punk music.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: yes, yes, yes

CAROL WESTLAKE: So… so… so tell me about the right to party because I actually… (Cynthia laughs)..I know a little bit about your activism.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Yes, my current project is called Disabled to the Front, and that is a play on the phrase of Girls to the Front from the riot girl movement in the late 80s and the 90s where girls and women were fighting to be safe in music venues. And so, there was a lot of sexual assault. This was when moshing, you know, really took off and so they …people were getting hurt and so they were fighting for girls to be safe, to see the show up front and not be forced to the back of the room, right. And so having mobility impairments, right, I mean and, of course, growing up in Nashville I love live music even though I didn't start my band until 2015. I love live music, and I’ve always been friends with musicians and always went to shows, and I was very distraught that I was losing the ability to participate in standing room-only shows, right, and that …even though I’m you know 6' tall and robust and normally I would be fine in the mosh pit. In fact I would be one of the guards along the edges to make sure that no one behind me got hurt, you know. I could no longer do those things, right (laughs). And even though I look as strong and fit as I used to…so someone moshing would not think twice about bumping into me, but that could send me careening to the ground, you know, with a serious injury, and so I had to act totally differently in these venues. And, of course, being a performer is challenging, too, because the stages aren't often accessible, and you have to carry so much gear, you know, right, it… it you know it's… it's late nights, right. It's not easy being in a band, you know, which is normally why young people do it, you know, when their bodies are fresh and they can handle hangovers, (laughs) right. And so, it was different when I was coming at it for this scholarly pursuit. But so that was really kind of what drove me to wanting to do something, and I was at a Music City Center event, and the night mayor...which there's about 13 cities I believe in the state that have a night mayor and that is a .. for cities that have significant night life. And so, Nashville is one of those cities. Atlanta, LA, New York …those sorts of places. But our night mayor had made a public statement in this Music City Center meeting, and he said if anyone has any special interests and wants to create committees to support night life …aspects of night life …let me know. And so, of course, I took my little walker and wheeled right over to him and said is anyone doing anything around people with disabilities access to night life? And he said no, but we would love that. And…. and so, from that conversation, it came to now we have an advisory committee. I believe there's 15 people on it. There's some requesting to be on it, and we're we've got to vote and decide if we're going to grow any bigger. And then we're creating an advisory group of people with disabilities to participate in focus groups and take surveys and give feedback on their experiences with nightlife. We have fifth and Broadway which is one of the largest complexes down there. They own all the property for Assembly Food Hall and Sky Deck, which is the largest rooftop venue in downtown Nashville. They have offered to partner with us. We're going to meet next week, and we're going to support them to improve their accessibility and hopefully create a model location in the downtown Nashville area so that that model and influence can spread to other parts of Nashville. And it's about public safety because if it's safe for people with disabilities, then it's safe for everyone. And it's about promoting tourism. And it's about getting people with disabilities to the front, right, and knowing that they're going to be welcome in the city of Nashville and that we want our locals, right, (laughs) and we want the tourists to come here, and we want them to have fun. Like people with disabilities normally ….you can get an Access Ride to go to a doctor's office, but you may not be able to get a ride at nighttime, you know, to come into Nashville to go out. Or like there's a rule for people that live in community supported housing on Medicaid that they have to be in their bed at midnight, right. Oh there's some people very upset about that (laughs) right. And because that inhibits their ability to participate in night life, and …and it's so important to engage in those social activities, because that's what makes us human, right. That's what makes everything else that we're doing worth it …is being able to connect with our friends and our family in recreation, right. When… whether it's a music venue or a sporting event or just dinner and pool and, you know, darts or whatever, you know, it's very important that everyone have equal access to those activities and… and you know. And… and to kind of bring full circle, you know, right, we were talking about the beginning of the ADA and when it was…. disabilities were hidden, right, and now we're to the point where it is disability pride and disability joy. And we have been fighting for people's basic access to survive, right. To be able to get health care, housing, food, care and now we're at the point where the fight is to party, right. The… the fight is to be a normal functioning human being and a part of society. People with disabilities have money, right. They have jobs, and they work, and they want to go out and recreate, they want to travel, they want to do these things and… and it's just time (laughs), right and...

CAROL WESTLAKE: So that's …so that's part of the legacy of the 35 years and that….. that arc with the ADA.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: I think …so, right, like I used to be fighting to… to pull John in the wagon and to get to the cafeteria safely, right. And now, somebody with spina bifida needs to be able to get to the rooftop of a Nashville bar so that they can party as well (laughs).

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, excellent… excellent advocacy and activism. (laugh)

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Right, right (laughs)

CAROL WESTLAKE: So… so you… you mentioned just really briefly that you know there are things we need to do to improve the law or improve implementation. And just talk to me a little bit about what you see as sort of the future of the ADA.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Oh goodness. I think that the future of all disability policy right now is really up in the air, and it's very hard to predict what's going to happen. But I believe that the disability community is strong. And we actually are pretty well respected, you know, and we're nonpartisan, and it's a, you know, there's a lot of support for people with disabilities. But I don't know that they have been motivated or energized to speak up since the 90s. And so, in policy world, there's a term called residual value, right. Meaning that if your policy goal is not achieved, there is still some residual value, right. And … and that works both ways, right. Like some people working to suppress the ADA may not actually stop it, but they can spread a lot of fear so that people won't use their rights, or they'll go back into the closet, so to speak. They'll go back to that shame model where they're hiding their disability. And that would be them reaping their residual value, right. And so, my hope, my dream for the ADA, right, which is what I’m planning to do and, you know, what I’m hoping to inspire is us claiming our residual value, right. And we may not get everything that we want in terms of full equality all the time. But we have to fight to keep our space for disability pride and disability joy. Like we cannot lose that ground, and we have to come together and stand strong in solidarity. It's going to take support from across movements, and… and not just like left and right, you know. It's going to take a broad base of people to stand up and say we are human beings, and we will not allow the systems around us to encroach upon our right to exist, right.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Right.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Because that's really what's happening, and they're our systems, and we have to control them, and I think there's a complacency that has kind of happened where people have gotten lax a little bit on standing up for their rights. And I… I'm always trying to look at that silver lining, right, that's just part of coping with the life that I’ve had (laughs), right. I’m… I’m astute at looking at the silver lining, and while there may be attempts to repress the ADA right now, anytime I’m a punk, right, anytime you repress me, I’m only going to get stronger, right. And so I’m hoping that for any attempt to stop the ADA is going to motivate this next generation of disabled advocates to stand up and claim their space, right, and, you know, and keep the movement going because that's all we can do is keep moving forward.

CAROL WESTLAKE: That is fabulous. Thank you so much.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: You’re so welcome.

CAROL WESTLAKE: It was a delight to have this conversation. Love being able to, you know, hear your story, to be able to share your story. And I think it'll be a great part of our oral history. So, thank you for being here.

CYNTHIA GEORGE: Thank you very much, and thank you for your years of service to this population. We appreciate you.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Thank you.