**April Meredith ADA Oral History Interview Transcript**

SHELLIE MICHAEL: Hello my name is Shellie Michael and today I am here interviewing April Meredith for the ADA in Tennessee Oral History Project. The date is May 28th 2025 and we are in Nashville, Tennessee. April, I'm happy you're here. The major goal of the project is to contribute to the historical understanding of disability experience and the ADA in Tennessee. Let's get started If you would please tell me a little bit about yourself

APRIL MEREDITH: Sure, So yes, my name is April Dawn Meredith. I'm a middle-aged cisgendered female I have, I'm married and I've been married for 20 almost 26 years as of next month. And we have three children together that are human, and we now have three furry babies, three kitty cats, together. I do identify as having multiple disabilities and some are hidden, some are a little more visible due to assisted technology uses. But all around I am a proud person and human being and I just love life.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: Oh, that is great. And can you share? Are you comfortable sharing ways that having a disability or multiple disabilities has impacted your life experiences?

APRIL MEREDITH: So, I was born with a genetically inherited eye disease called Retinitis Pigmentosa which causes sight loss and it's been progressive, slowly over my life, actually to the point where I did not realize that I had I was born with this disease. It wasn't until adulthood that I had the official diagnosis even though I had been experiencing sight loss every few years of my life all the way to the point of having no functional eyesight. I now have limited light perception so all that impacts virtually every aspect of my life. Actually, truly, every aspect of my life in some form or fashion. It's not all bad, not all good, but definitely is something that you can't get away from. It's always there. I don't get a break from being disabled so even though sometimes you kind of like want to put on your good pair of eyes or something like that. I also have mental health conditions. I don't mind sharing. I am not ashamed. I am a big proponent of destigmatizing mental health services, mental health awareness. I do deal with depression and a few types of anxiety so having discussions like this and being recorded sometimes triggers extra feelings of what some people might think of as just stage fright. But it's definitely a little bit more severe of an experience for me. And then I’ve also acquired arthritis which is definitely impacting my mobility in other ways than blindness. Blindness has led to me to have orientation and mobility training and using, learning how to use, a white cane. I've chosen not to go the guide dog route, but I am considering actually maybe eventually getting a service animal to help with my mental health conditions. So, does that answer your question?

SHELLIE MICHAEL: That does. And thank you.

APRIL MEREDITH: Do you want me to elaborate on anything?

SHELLIE MICHAEL: Stage fright is real, so thank you for pushing past comfort zone boundaries and coming here to do this. We're really, really grateful for that. And so, what brought you to the world of disability rights advocacy?

APRIL MEREDITH: Oh, that's interesting. So, I've actually my whole life, in hindsight, have been passionate about serving or raising up people; helping others that seem to be pushed to the margins, whatever those identities may be. I've volunteered for Special Olympics. I've participated in disability and diversity awareness retreats and that includes not only people with disabilities but also other minority populations. And so, my whole life I've found myself feeling led to trying to raise people up that didn't have the same opportunities as others may have had given their life situations or just the way they were born. But it's definitely the diagnosis of my eye disease, my Retinitis Pigmentosa, where there was that realization that there wasn't treatment, that there wasn't a reversal surgery available, that eventual total blindness may be imminent, that led me to go “okay this isn't something I can just do part-time”. This is something that I am now. And it definitely took a toll on my mental health. It did take a journey. I often-times tell people I went in a much darker place mentally than I ever will with my sight. So, it took a lot of care and support from different people that were introduced into my life. Some were counselors. Some were faith-based companions. But what really got me connected was peers. Other people. Finding other people that could relate to my situation whether it be blindness or another disability or just that feeling of being marginalized. That feeling of “I am me, but I can't access all of me because of these different societal barriers or even self-inflicted barriers”. And it was through a lot of that peer support that I came to a realize that it was such a under-valued and unknown factor that was critical to me being able to learn how to cope with my mental health and to not only be blind but to live blind. And once I finally learned to access all of who I was again through training, through rehabilitation, through mental health counseling, and again the peer support. All that I turned into a passion. Saying other people may need this as well. Other people may be struggling in the dark. Other people may be being at home and feeling hopeless when there is hope out there, but they needed somebody to reach out to them. They needed somebody to make efforts towards awareness and education and putting themselves in a somewhat vulnerable state to say "Yes I'm blind. Yes, I'm disabled. Yes, I have these concepts and factors about me or features about me that some people are going to discriminate against. Some people are not going to like. Some people are going to make fun of. But it's okay. Or it's not okay. But it's all right.” As one of my favorite singers Jelly Roll says.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: Well it sounds like the support that you're describing is a lot like what you do at Pathfinder now is that you're paying it forward.

APRIL MEREDITH: Absolutely. So, I've been in the disability service field for, gosh, about 15 years or so. It actually started in Japan. I was teaching English and that's actually the country where I was living when I was diagnosed with my blindness and actually when I had to disclose to my co-workers, my bosses. I did experience a lot of “oh well, I guess you got to quit your job” or “oh”, you know, like it's a disappointment. Like I disappointed them by recognizing “oh, this is what's going on and here's how we need to deal with it kind of thing”. And here's a new adventure to go on. It wasn't like that at first. At first it was just feelings of embarrassment, feelings of shame. But one aspect that they did value was that I had a unique ability to connect and relate to the children that did experience disabilities themselves. That they were living lives with disabilities, and they were being very marginalized very segregated even in the public-school setting. They didn't even have playtime with people who did not experience disabilities. And so, they started asking me to go to these classes and teach. And that just really sparked a sense of belonging for me, a belonging for them, and them seeing like "Oh here's somebody that's working that has a disability." And I'm going "Wow here's a child that has been told they're not as equal or valued as other students that don't have their health conditions or their disabilities and I'm treating them with the respect that they deserved and the attention that they deserved and was playing games with them. I was finding, you know, accommodations and accessible ways to bring them into the classrooms with other children, whether they had disabilities or not, or whether they were obvious disabilities or not. And so, by teaching there, but with my progressive sight loss, I think that cultivated a foundation of a need in the community that I could fill and that my disability wasn't a closing door. It was actually an opening door to a new adventure and new possibilities not only in my personal life but also in my professional life. So, Japan, unfortunately, couldn't accommodate me long term because they do not have the Americans with Disabilities Act active over there. So, by living life there with a disability and then coming to America with a progressive disability there was a very distinct comparison in my life and awareness of how good we had it here in America. But also, how far behind it could go if we weren't careful to continue educating and challenging situations. So, after I went through vocational rehabilitation, the whole time I was thinking I want to - while I'm getting peer support, I'm also honing in those skills of peer support. I want to continue giving back. That led me to working at Empower Tennessee, a Middle Tennessee Center for Independent Living, for six years as an independent living specialist. I worked with all types of people from all different backgrounds, across-disability, various ages and again found myself doing peer support groups both in a designated classroom setting as well as in my own creations. I really love the intersect between disabilities and other identities that somebody may gravitate towards. In my case I’m big about the cross connection between women’s rights and disability rights and so that led me to creating a group called empowered ladies which was a peer support group for women with disabilities and any other intersecting identities. We welcome people who were transgendered, who were non-binary, and people who were maybe not even quite identify as having a disability but they had a health condition that they felt limited a major life function and they were still searching for how they wanted to identify. So, wherever a person's journey was I found that I was good at helping people address them or helping address people where they are in their life journey with disabilities as well as helping them come to feel more empowered about being a person with a disability. It's okay if that's not your primary identity, if you primarily identify with something else. Just recognizing that it is a part of you and that it's not - it doesn't have to be- a bad part. After Empower Tennessee as you mentioned I got a job working with Tennessee Disability Pathfinder. So now I serve the entire state and helping professionals, people with disabilities, their loved ones, caregivers, so anybody that could be potentially impacted by disability either directly or indirectly and needing to navigate any life situation. I help provide resources agencies information and some navigation assistance on how to access the systems services and supports that they need to address those life situations. And it could be directly related to a disability or it may not. Because people with disabilities have regular problems like everybody else - needing housing. We have basic needs – food, water, shelter, companionship, emotional well-being, recreational interests, hobbies. But a lot of times those are overshadowed for people with disabilities. We, ourselves in the disability community, will sometimes focus on just the things that are going on with our bodies or what's not going on with our bodies. And specially we have some tough days where we do have to focus on that. But one of my passions is to help people say, “you can have a pity party but you don't live in pity”. So, I say “we can visit those pity parties. We can scream in our pillows or blow up balloons and write our frustrations on them and then pop them. Whatever we need to do to release those stresses in life.” It's not abnormal for a person with disability to have stresses any more than it is a person that doesn't experience life with disabilities.

So one thing that I really love about working at Tennessee Disability Pathfinder is that we touch on the lives of everyone connected to the disability community again directly or indirectly and we help them navigate their worlds, their situations, their culture, based on whatever they need, based on their interests, the gaps that exist. We help address those and minimize those and find workarounds. But then we take those gaps We take those needs that and requests that we receive and then turn around and apply it to educating legislators or educating various people in the community on areas for improvement so that we can make our communities more inclusive and welcoming to everyone.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: So, you started your career as an educator It sounds like that's the through line that goes through as you continue to work with people. And so going back to that time in Japan, so you experienced life without the ADA and then came back here. And so what kinds of differences did you notice?

APRIL MEREDITH: When I came back to America from living in Japan I was a little bit, well not a little bit, I was overwhelmed with my new diagnosis and my new reality. Thankfully I was able to get involved with vocational rehabilitation - get some training, get connected with peers in the community who were also experiencing either sight loss or maybe they were born blind or they had other disabilities and could had other disabilities and could relate to me and help me not feel as alone or isolated as what I was feeling in Japan. I don't want to, you know, bash Japan too much because it it's a wonderful country with a lot of wonderful aspects but definitely we, to some extent, are privileged in America to have the ADA now as a foundation from which to build our confidence, to build our strengths, to recognize our value as people with disabilities not just in this world in this country but in the in this world. The ADA is a prime example and resonating light to the world to show that when people with disabilities are given the opportunity to have barriers broken, societal misconceptions dismantled, and the chance to live life fully, equitably, with financial security, then we are an invaluable part of the community. We are great contributors. When we make money, we spend money. When we make more money, we spend more money. So the ADA in America gives us a type of solid foundation that can help us navigate any challenges or barriers that we do face, whether it be discrimination or microaggressions. It gives us a something to grasp to say, “but even the law, even the government, the federal government, gives me a right to be here, to play here, to work here.” and I, too, can have my own chance to make mistakes, to have dignity and risk but also have abilities and opportunities to excel. But unfortunately, in Japan there was a big ceiling. The ADA has no ceiling. Like I said it's the groundwork from which we build and it's the minimum standards from which we want to grow. Japan has, unfortunately, still a ceiling and minimum expectations for people with disabilities. The ADA helps us even if there are some societal barriers or societal stigmas that we still have to address. It gives us a tool and a reference point that we can utilize as we take on our lives personally and professionally.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: And so, you said ADA has no ceiling. Do you see further promise or further directions or further places for it to go for it to fully realize its promise and potential?

APRIL MEREDITH: I think it's actually very critical that the disability community recognize that right now in 2025 we are experiencing some direct attacks to disability rights and even guidelines of the ADA and potential dismantling of the ADA itself. So my forefathers, my

Foremothers, my community of people with disabilities, came together at one time over a long period of time and I think it's important that we remember the history of the ADA that led to it finally and ultimately being passed because I think we have gotten a bit complacent. With that privilege comes complacency. So, we're hitting, you know, we have a whole generation now of people like my children that have always grown up with the ADA and so they don't quite remember what it took to get it established into law to begin with. But a difference between the fight in the past and now is, I think, we were on the brink of finally having Americans with Disabilities Act and the Independent Living Movement recognize the beauty of diversity. In the past it was very white male-dominated. Those fights, not to discredit any of those who do not fit in those categories that were involved, but it was predominantly that. And we now realize that if we can all come together in a collective voice then we can not only preserve the ADA's spirit and the foundations that were fought very hard for us to get, but we can continue to progress and raise it even further. I think a good example is like accessible technology that was not around on the internet and computers and things that were not around or in common use and in the households when the ADA was passed. That's an area that's being worked on and promoted a lot now and fought for. I am a screen reader user so I depend on the accessible creation of websites and apps in order for me to be able to navigate them with my screen reader. So I think the ADA gives us that essence or that spirit from which to say as technology evolves, as we gain other methods of communication and interaction with the world around us, so does our challenge to make sure that our rights are not being left behind in these designs and in these evolutions. But again, we have to make sure that we have respect for each identity that does exist within the disability community. Respect for the spectrum of beauty but also have a collective voice that states very sternly and very clearly that we are here. We're not going away and in fact we're going to continue to excel further. And we're not trying to push the boundaries. We're just trying to push the concepts of inclusion and try to get to the point where it's a non-issue. It would be nice if you didn't have to think about is this park accessible to a wheelchair traveler? Is this website accessible to a screen reader user? Is this event going to be too loud for my neurodivergent child? It would be great if we can, really just on the forefront, have event planning, technology designs, and facilities created and built from ground one with plans - intentional plans of making everybody as welcomed and as welcomed and disability friendly and all-inclusive as possible.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: So, a lot of your advocacy has been one-on-one with individuals, but you have also mentioned doing some public policy work. Is your advocacy going to go in that direction or do you have recommendations for advocates in that space?

APRIL MEREDITH: So, on the professional side I do a lot of education of the ADA. I am a member of the ADA National Trainer Leadership Network. I do love spreading awareness educating people on the history of the ADA, the importance and values of it. The challenges that may or that that we are experiencing now and the value of making sure to have a voice, and have awareness of those rights and connecting people with other resources such as our ADA centers so that they can have ongoing resources to ask ADA questions learn and continue to learn more. The ADA is not only a right or it's not only like a foundation of rights for people with disability. It's a responsibility that we uphold it, that we continue to learn about it, and utilize it in a very outward and open manner. Don't shy away from requesting those reasonable accommodations. Don't shy away from speaking up when you know that an entity is, maybe a movie theater, is failing to create a space for a wheelchair traveler. I like to go to the movies with a friend who's a wheelchair traveler and there's still times when you have to choose a specific movie based on the theater. The specific seating just because of the seating arrangements. But in my personal life, yes, I’m very involved with advocacy.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: You've done so much in your career so I'm sure you have a lot of successes you could point back at. So, is there something that comes to right now? A story or particular success that you're really proud of?

APRIL MEREDITH: Prior to beginning my career at Empower Tennessee and then Tennessee Disability Pathfinder I was a member of People First of Tennessee and I was able to help get the three major institutions closed in Tennessee and not just closed but I was instrumental in helping make sure that 100% of the residents were able to be transitioned appropriately and with within a reasonable time frame with the needed supports that they requested so that they could live in the community.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: So, what's ahead for you as an activist? You still have more to contribute.

APRIL MEREDITH: I'll be honest I do consider myself to be more of an advocate and less of an activist.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: How do you define the difference?

APRIL MEREDITH: There is a place for activists and I'm glad they're out there but in my mind I feel like an activist is somebody that's a bit aggressive a little bit more direct than my approach and sometimes is very blunt about their demands and how they feel society should work. It absolutely took activism to get the ADA passed to begin with because more soft-spoken, slow-paced advocacy wasn't being heard. I feel like I am an advocate counterpart to an activist, if that makes sense. I can work alongside them. So, for me, I’m more of a research, provide the information, tell my personal story, and try to make an impact through those personal connections, long-term developments of relationships with legislators and then as far as on a systemic level. But also continuing to be open to educating people in my daily life. It could be a person at a store that is talking to my husband who's in line with me instead of to me and I'm the one that's paying. I'm the one that's shopping and he's just there with me. It could be talking with another family member who is saying a joke that really isn't funny and shouldn't be acceptable because even something as a simple joke fosters and empowers the concept that people with disabilities are less than, that we are just the the butt of a punchline. To me being an advocate is 24/7. It's ongoing. Whereas activism has more specific intentions - maybe specific places and times and agendas. I have an overall mission and passion to be able to live my life as fully as possible, to reach my potential. And that wouldn't be possible without the ADA.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: And so, what's next?

APRIL MEREDITH: That's a good question. So, what is next is I definitely want to continue with my own education and training of the ADA. I'm in the process of becoming a certified ADA coordinator.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: What does that position do?

APRIL MEREDITH: Well, it may just open up some more service opportunities within my current position at Tennessee Disability Pathfinder. Just like being part of the ADA trainer leadership network has already. I've been able to add the ADA education piece and in fact I know this is going to be archived, but I've already got an ADA basics training at the Library for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. They've already got me recorded giving a presentation there that's being archived. I don't intend on being too famous. but I want to do my part. I do not ever want to sit privileged again as I felt I relied on growing up. And didn't really realize until moving away to Japan and then moving back to America on just how important it is that the ADA be here. That people with disabilities actively engage with their community and challenge expectations with their peers, with other organizations. I'm involved with three blind specific organizations where we do a lot of advocacy that not only benefits the blind community but everyone. In fact, a lot of people use smartphones these days and the talking Siri or Google talk back options. That was a technology originally pushed for and designed specifically for the blind community and now everybody utilizes it. So, that's the kind of advocacy I love to do. I love to just kind of be behind the scenes when I can and know I had a little part in getting that created. That's just where I roll. But, that said, I'm always willing to partner with an advocate or an activist when the time comes. And I do feel like the time has come. I think we can no longer be complacent with where the ADA was and how it was established but we have to continue to make sure that it is valued that it is valid and that it's necessary in order for us as a community to continue to thrive. And the only way to do that is through collective unity and I'm definitely willing to do that. I'm also very passionate with writing so that's another way that I use my voice. I'm actually a much better writer than speaker, I feel. So, contributing articles to the Compass e-newsletter that Tennessee Disability Pathfinder produces. I've contributed to Breaking Ground magazine both articles about dismantling subminimum wage and also a lot of my personal poetry that is very reflective of me and the various disabilities that I experience. Breaking Ground magazine is a publication through the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. I definitely see myself continuing to write. I am working on a memoir, a poetry collection, maybe a chat book. But still most importantly just living my life on my own terms or as we say in the NFB “living the life I want”. And the only way I can do that is by preserving, challenging and continuing to validate the ADA.

SHELLIE MICHAEL: What a great note to end on. Thank you so much. And I can tell you're a poet You've spoken so poetically today. You talked a lot about darkness as a reality and also as a metaphor, but you brought a lot of light. So thank you.

APRIL MEREDITH: Thank you so much It's been a pleasure talking with you.