**Carol Westlake and Donna DeStefano: ADA in Tennessee Oral History Project Introduction Transcript**

DONNA DESTEFANO: Welcome to the ADA oral history. My name is Donna DeStefano

CAROL WESTLAKE: and I'm Carol Westlake

DONNA DESTEFANO: And we'd like to give you some background as to why we decided to do this oral history. A little bit of the behind the scenes before you get into watching some of the ones that we will be recording.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So, Donna, how many years have you been the coalition's ADA coordinator?

DONNA DESTEFANO: So, 24 years.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So, you took over right when you started away.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes. Yes. Dara Howe had been the coordinator and when I got there she brought the boxes into my office and said “here these are yours”.

CAROL WESTLAKE: yeah

DONNA DESTEFANO: Cuz she had been doing it for however many years before that - because I came in 2000.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah. So, it was probably almost 10 years before that she, she, was doing that work. So, the coalition, the Tennessee Disability Coalition has always had a relationship with the Disability and ADA centers around the around the country, particularly the Southeast Center. We have done training and technical assistance and uh worked with individuals and businesses on compliance with the ADA. So, it's always been an important part of our work.

DONNA DESTEFANO: It has. And those centers have been federally funded since right after the ADA passed in 1990. And there are 10 major centers across the United States. And we're affiliated with the Southeast ADA Center, one of the one of the eight states that's part of the Southeast.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, the states. So, we've had a long relationship with the ADA centers that way. And so, you know, I think you and I started talking and over the years we have met so many interesting people who have had such amazing experiences or traumatic . experiences. Frankly, a whole range of things relative to the ADA. And as we come up on the 35th anniversary, you and I started talking about how do we preserve that? How do we take a look at 35 years of the Americans with Disabilities Act and think about where we were, where we've gone, where we're going, you know, and how do how do we get those stories?

DONNA DESTEFANO: Right? And so with the magic of video and recording and being able to do it multiple ways, it's made it much easier to do that. In the past we might have gotten pictures and things like that and written stories, but now we have the luxury of video that we can actually get some people to talk with us about their experiences, good and bad, and whatever they want to share.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah. Yeah. So, it's been real it's really been an interesting thing to think about and, you know, we started out thinking it was just going to be really simple. We would just like record some folks and there we'd be and as it turns out oral history is a thing.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes, we learned a lot about that.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Oh yeah. And we've been really grateful to our colleagues at Autism Tennessee, particularly, you know, Casey Davis, who is an archivist, as it turns out. You know, when you ask about things, people know things, and she has been really instrumental in helping us learn how to do this well.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Right. And then there were the folks at the University of Kentucky. There's a whole center for oral history that we learned about.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah.

DONNA DESTEFANO: And we're fortunate to be able to talk with the director of that

 and really had a good opportunity to find out the depth of oral histories that are being conducted currently in the United States.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah.

DONNA DESTEFANO: So, we went a little bit more informal than some of the, our, friends in the oral history world who…

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, we're not going to take it quite to that depth at this point. Although, you know, I think it's something that we might consider in the future. But for now, we really want to grab about 10 stories for starts, for starting, and to kind of pilot it and to kind of get our feet wet in oral history. And so you and I started by making a list of, like, who do we know that's got some, that has been in this world, who might have been alive and active pre- ADA all the way through the 35 years. How about younger people who are just coming up now and what's their experience been? To juxtapose with other kinds of things. And so we generated a list and we started making calls.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Right. Right. And so as we generated the list, we really paid attention to trying to make sure we got across the state of Tennessee. We did rural areas, we did urban areas, and we took a look at different kinds of disability.

Because all of those things impact a person's experience. And even though this is just the beginning, right, 10 the first 10 that we're looking at doing, we wanted to have some good representation. And so I think with the folks that we came up with and contacted and agreed to participate in this exciting project. I think we have some great folks.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah. And they'll have really good stories to tell.

DONNA DESTEFANO: They will. And it'll be the real life kinds of things. We have seen a lot of change in our lifetime Being, you know, way back along when things were much more segregated before the ADA. Before section 504. Yeah, before IDEA. And our history has been as teachers of children with disabilities and learning about these new laws as they came into place.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Right. Right. So, I mean, I think we've had this advantage of, you know, 45 years at least of experience in the disability community. And so, you know, I mean, I'm reminded of that old expression about those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat it, right? And the march of civil rights for people with disabilities has been slow in a lot of ways. It has been sporadic. But it's been really important. I think that that's one of the things we hope to capture.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes. Yeah. And each of these pieces of legislation, Section 504, the IDEA, the ADA, they came at a hard fought for struggle.

CAROLK WESTLAKE: Absolutely.

DONNA DESTEFANO: That was not easy. And families were very involved, people with disabilities. The ADA, there was concern the day of that it would pass that day. Yeah. and folks were lined up outside, you know, to make sure that their voices were heard and that is still critical and important today. I think we have because of the ADA we have seen changes in the physical environment certainly as well as some other kinds of things and the opportunities are more there than they were when we were younger and so the opportunity, the opportunities, being greatly expanded has changed our world to the better.

CAROL WESTLAKE: It has and we have a ways to go. But I think that one of our, I know my concern, and I think you share it, is that we don't go back.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes. Right. that there's not retrenchment. There's always a little bit of threat about that. Sometimes the threats are greater than others.

DONNA DESTEFANO: and over the years for the ADA there's been continual threats

 to pull it back to, you know, have a notification act before you know you've taken any action against an entity that is not accessible. And the reality is that the ADA is minimum standards.

CAROL WESTLAKE: And that's an important thing to remember.

 DONNA DESTEFANO: Very minimum and hard fought for so agreed to on a bipartisan basis that there are certain things that we can and should do as a country and these are the things that we're going to do so let's go ahead and do it. And so that any threat to roll any piece of it back is a reality that does need to be dealt with in each generation that that has those threats. And we continue to see that happening today, in in 2025.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah. And it really has real life day to day implications for people. So, I think that's really important. So, we really hope that you enjoy these oral histories. The stories that these Tennessans have to tell, Because I think that they're important part of the fabric of our communities in Tennessee.

DONNA DESTEFANO: And we are very fortunate and thankful to the 10 folks who have agreed to participate in this project. You'll, you will enjoy the stories. We're going to enjoy the stories as we hear them and the real life issues that remain. And I think that will help all of us look at what the path needs to be forward. And where do we go from here?

CAROL WESTLAKE: Right. Thanks.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Thank you.