**Cecil Williams ADA Oral History Interview Transcript**

CAROL WESTLAKE: Hello. My name is Carol Westlake and today I'm here interviewing Cecil Williams for the ADA in Tennessee Oral History Project. The date is May 29th and we're in Nashville, Tennessee um talking about the ADA. Cecil I'm glad you're here. Thank you for coming today.

CECIL WILLIAMS: Thanks for having me.

CAROL WESTLAKE: A major goal of our project um the oral history project is to contribute to a historical understanding of sort of the disability experience in Tennessee and experience with the Americans with Disabilities Act you know and so we're really delighted um that you are here to talk to us about those things so um for a start would you just tell me a little bit about yourself.

CECIL WILLIAMS: I’m from Chattanooga Tennessee. I um I deal with the physical disability called Spinal Cerebellum Ataxia. It affects your speech, your gait, your fine motor skills. Um Yeah. um I love sports. So, I found sports in adapted sports in 2018 to um you name it, I've done it um cycling racing uh adaptive mountain biking, everything, surfing. You name it, I've done it.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Wow. Wow. Were you an athlete before your disability?

CECIL WILLIAMS: I enjoyed track in high school. I wasn't the fastest but I I love the the the the experience.

CAROL WESTLAKE: How did you find adaptive sports?

CECIL WILLIAMS: It found me.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Oh really?

CECIL WILLIAMS: It found me. I just um, for me, you know how you you have a hunch that there's something more out there that you haven't found yet? So, I was looking and I would go to different networking events with my friend that has that support and a volunteer asked “You need any help?” I'm like “sure I need help” and they were like "Yeah, we, I, volunteered for such and such um foundation." I was like "Wait, email me." Then um he emailed me after after the event. And I went to my first adaptive cycling event and I was blown away. That was like April 2018 and I'm blown away I said you mean I get to live again so you know is it I want to do everything to which that kind of sparked a world of its own.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah. So you know in terms of the impact of your disability. Um did it at first it feel like you weren't living again? Is that…

CECIL WILLIAMS: It wasn’t—um now the backstory. I used to be…by age three I was hearing impaired, okay you know so hard of hearing. So, you know, I did speech therapy through our school and little special education, you know, for my speech. Um and I grew up and right after high school and freshman year of college I had a head-on collision in my first car. My first car at 95, a 1995 Toyota Corolla. I loved it. Had it for two weeks and boom. You know it just it come by surprise, I wouldn't, it wasn't in my plan, but it happened the way it’s supposed to happen. And uh so that was in 2003 and then the diagnosis was found and watched to 2004. And um I didn't have much symptoms right then and I thought I was just goofy but um I fractured my wrist and shattered my pinky bone. My right wrist, my left wrist, I'm sorry and my left pinky bone and my hand doctor thought it was um Carpal Tunnel so they sent me to a specialist to do to get some nerve work done and they found peripheral neuropathy and it led on to other founds.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, so you've had you've had a number of different kinds of disabilities and disability experiences, sort of over time.

CECIL WILLIAMS: I'm going to be very transparent with you. Um I'll say here, but I always wanted to be with the able-bodied people. With the people that that didn't have a physical disability, you know? I said I was in special ed. I love them, but I didn't want to be limited so uh so throughout my life I had various types of disability and without knowing that I learn how to adapt, you know? And I just wanted to be normal. If that makes sense.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, it does make sense and you know I think that's really one of the things about the Americans with Disabilities Act. It was really designed, in a lot of ways, to make life more normal, right? For people with disabilities. Because sometimes it's the environment that's disabling. Sometimes it's an accommodation you need, and I and I think adaptive sports is probably an example of that, right? I mean just the adaptations make it accessible, right?

CECIL WILLIAMS: I agree I agree. It– I didn't know how much I needed accessibility until I became disabled. I didn't know. I didn't think about how much it mattered you know. It didn't cross my mind, you know? Which has-- you don't know what you don't know right? So, when I found adaptive sports, um, let me go back a little bit. I I went on, I call it “The Adventures of Cecil.” That's my aha moment in 2018 um it was an empty photo album. And you know, I just made a declaration - I want to live more, I want to do more, I want to love more, I want to experience life like never before and I did that. You know, I was 34, I just turned 34 and I was ready to live and for the longest- I became officially permanently physical disabled in 2008. So, it took a process of time for the idea of a slowly progressive disease, the degenerative disease, its um it’s well so “The Adventures of Cecil” I feel like I want to experience life and it seems to put up so I'm like kind of put myself out there. I also share so more people with disabilities, right? They live in a bubble, right, because they don't know what's out there. Like I said, you know, I didn't know what I didn't know, so you know, I didn't know. So, uh when I start putting myself out there I start finding this this adaptive sports. I want to learn more about this and uh I'm just, my curiosity opened up and that's how I got into it advocacy, cause you know, it found me. Cause, I wasn’t looking it.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Is that right? How did advocacy find you?

CECIL WILLIAMS: Advocacy. I I was posting pictures of me doing rock climbing. You know, videos, you know, I was having fun. You know, I was saying "hey you can live." This you know, tagging the foundations uh brand awareness. Saying “hey, you can do what I'm doing. You're disabled or able- bodied, but hey, you can do this”. You know, um you have to research stuff, but, you know, I tag people. But how advocacy found me was, people started, my name started coming up in conversations right so I'm like “what's, what is the meaning the council on disability. what is, what is that? Like, why do you all want me?” Let me see what this is. I mean I already have a disability, I already deal with a disability, and I'm already fighting. Maybe it can align with I'm already doing.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So did you have to um fight for access to things um, you know. Is your community fairly accessible? I'm thinking of again about the Americans with Disabilities Act and some of those requirements, right, that that things are out there and available. Do you find that Chattanooga is a fairly accessible community?

CECIL WILLIAMS: Um you you have to look for it. It took me 10 years to find adaptive sports. I mean that’s my truth, you know, a a handful of people that know about these wonderful opportunities that's available for people with disabilities, you know. So that’s why I am so passionate about it. About adaptive sports, about advocacy. I’m like there's more if you want it, right? But other people, some people are comfortable with what, where they are at in life, okay. I don't fault them for that but I wanted more. Basically, I wanted to see how far I could go.

CAROL WESTLAKE: There you go. But you also, you know, you said, you know, you didn’t know what you didn’t know. And that's probably true for a lot of other folks in our disability community as well, right? And so, some of that work that you do, that found you. The advocacy work, whether it's, you know, the Council or I know that you participate in the Statewide Independent Living Council, right? Um you know, what what do you think that that kind of participation can do for you and for others in the community?

CECIL WILLIAMS: Well, for me I found my voice. I found something worth fighting for. You know, I was already fighting but I want to find something that gives you purpose and gives you meaning that’s more than just about you, you know? You found it, right? Cause I'm not just fighting for just me I’m fighting for people that come after me, you know, and schools that still around and may not know, you know. So, it just, it just, I have to be transparent. Um you have to put yourself out there and that's a scary feeling for people with disabilities of all kinds whether it's invisible, physical, how, you don't know how the outside world is going to view you and maybe it's all in your head. Maybe they're not thinking about you. Maybe they're just, they want to help you but they don't know how. But if you show yourself friendly and you let people know what you need, you know, they want to help you. But, you know, for me I put myself out there and I find, you know, um whatever came with it you know, the the obstacles, the misunderstanding, the mistakes. I got back up and fought for my place in the room. That sort of thing.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah. Yeah, and so, you know the Americans with Disabilities Act, again, is sort of designed to to to make a place in the world for folks with disabilities, right? And um and you have found a way to put yourself out there to try to make sure that that really happens. What do you think the world would look like if we were doing this really well for folks with disabilities and the ADA was really fulfilling its promise?

CECIL WILLIAMS: Hmmm. That's a good question. We have a long way to go. Um I think I think for me personally, I can only speak for me, um I learned how to adapt and let people help me but there are still, it’s still hard and there's still places and establishments that are not accessible, you know, with my, for my disability. So um in a perfect world it will be normal, you know, it'll be normal. Not not say "Hey that's inspiring." No, it's inspiring but it's normal. Let's make it normal. Changing tables. “We need this.” Changing tables in state parks, we have that now. You know, uh and curb cuts, you know. We we're getting there it It's a slow process but let's make it normal. And you know um, when you go inside an establishment right and they see a person with a disability or they may not know but like a person can feel comfortable coming up to someone at the shop, and be like “hey can you accompany me?” You know, you know, that should not be weird.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Right. That should not be weird.

CECIL WILLIAMS: You know, that can you come? I want to be, I want, I like what you like. Alright? But I need, I- this is what I need to enjoy what you like.

CAROL WESTLAKE Do you think the presence of  people with disabilities in the community moves that forward?

CECIL WILLIAMS: I want to see more of that. Um some some of the things I do, mainly cause I drive, I still drive, you know, I’m fortunate to to still drive. But like there’s a presence of people with disabilities, but there is also a disconnect. If that makes sense. Does that make sense?

CAROL WESTLAKE: What do you think that disconnect is?

CECIL WILLIAMS: You only go where they feel safe, you know, and and I'm that person that pushes down them to go where it's not safe, but I'm figure it out.

CAROL WESTLAKE: How do we, how do we make the community more safe, do you think? More accessible.

CECIL WILLIAMS: We need more transportation for not just for older people with disabilities, but also younger people with disabilities. You know, they have their caregiver or guardian whatever it may be, but have more transportation for people with disabilities to to to travel, you know. Um, I like to go to Atlanta a lot, you know.

I live in Chattanooga. I drive two hours just to race, you know¬. I mean, because that’s what I love to but everybody can’t do that. Plus, it takes money and transportation.

CECIL WILLIAMS: Uh but to answer your question, is that we have to address those barriers that people with different abilities, disabilities may face. Okay. You can’t put us all in the same, same bandwagon. My disability may be different than the next, you know you have neurodiverse, you have people that deal with sensory, um hard of hearing. I’m hear- I deal with being hearing impaired. Um, people with cerebral cerebral palsy, people with amputee, you know um accessibility looks different for everyone with a disability.

CAROL WESTLAKE: It does look different, doesn’t it.

CECIL WILLIAMS: Right? You know so if I, okay, what do you need, you know um

CAROL WESTLAKE: You know, over, over time, so you know you had a a young experience with a hearing impairment, right? And and that sort of a disability and a car accident that created some temporary disabilities I'm sure. Um and and then this diagnosis that's kind of been progressive. Um, so, you've had a different sets of experiences over your lifetime. Do you think that the community is getting better um at accommodating people with disabilities and including people with disabilities? I'm I'm back to thinking about the sort of advocacy and activism that that you've engaged in. That other people have engaged in in the community. Um you said we have a long way to go and I think that's absolutely true. Do you think we've made progress over your experience?

CECIL WILLIAMS: We’ve definitely made progress. Um the the the doors where you can push to open, you know, that's a lifesaver. Uh curb cuts been serves their purpose. You know, if you use a manual wheelchair. Ramps serve their purpose um. A lot of other things like volunteers you may need volunteers for different events. They help people with disability that may need it, you know. There is a definite push, you know. They need volunteers like, for example, mountain biking, right? So, um, if well, I'm in the manual wheelchair, I need help getting on the bike so I can enjoy being in the woods you know. So, it just it takes it takes a village.

CAROL WESTLAKE: It does take a village, yeah. It is and our village is getting better, you think?

CECIL WILLIAMS: I think it is. I think it is. Um I don't want to beat around the bush. When I'm saying is it's getting better you know um getting better.

CAROL WESTLAKE: If there was a barrier you could you could fix what would it be?

CECIL WILLIAMS: Transportation.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Transportation, yeah.

CECIL WILLIAMS: That's the biggest one. Um you know um let’s say now is a good time to go to Colorado. “Why, why would you want to go to Colorado?” Because I want to, you know. To, what’s a foundation to do adaptive mountain biking, rafting and it's a different atmosphere and different people you know. It is it’s there for you to enjoy um. I think but what I really want to say is that you have to be your own best advocate right and that's what for me that's what I had to learn. I had to learn how to speak up, right? Speak up for things I need. No one knows what you need until you tell them, right? So, you you you can't get mad that they don't know, right? So, is is you have to learn how to open your mouth.

CAROL WESTLAKE: And you've learned how to do that?

CECIL WILLIAMS: I did. I used to not have no voice. Um and when my parents was my voice, you know, they fought for me, you know, speaking before that, the physical disability, you know, but they did all my things for me. They they were my voice. So I had to learn to depend on them. But when I learned that “hey Cecil you have a voice.” Your voice is your power.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Right

CECIL WILLIAMS: Right, and there a lot of things that I had to learn for me. As I told you choose somebody else being my voice. So, when I found my voice, I'm speaking for other people not just me. I mean I know how to say what I'm saying.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Because self- advocacy really is advocacy, and that's probably the most important message of advocacy is that “your voice is your power” for yourself and for others.

CECIL WILLIAMS: It is. It is. I mean, it matters. What you, what you, what’s in your mind, what you have in your mind, your ideas, your vision, and all that stuff matters, right?

CAROL WESTLAKE: Right.

CECIL WILLIAMS: And if you have a disability. You're not able to write. I'm not able to write, so I use a cell phone. I can tell someone else to write this for me. Write that down for me, if I. So, what I'm saying is that, don't be silent, alright. You have to keep fighting.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, good.

CECIL WILLIAMS: And and I'm a fighter. I'm a fighter.

CAROL WESTLAKE: That might that might be a good message to end on. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me today?

CECIL WILLIAMS: If I can tell you anything from me, accept your disability, right? As I learned how to accept mine. What I deal with. That means that you you have it, but you don't have to like it. But you you can do something about it, right? I had to learn how to love myself, right? And I went to therapy to deal with those trauma instead of the things that I mean that's going on that I may not understand but if you have someone to talk to, to help you get through that stuff that's in your mind that it's hard to get through. Um you got to face it. You got to face it. I mean you got to take responsibility. Another thing is that it's all scary. You know, but at the end of the day if you put yourself out there you can look back and say "Hey I did that." You know, I did that. You know, but I'm wise enough to know that it wasn’t just me. That might have been inspired by what I'm doing. Whether they’re able-bodied, whether they have a disability whether they don't know if they can. Like some people with say, I do obstacle course racing, right? That’s um whether there’s I'm I'm out there on the courses you know in my hike freedom grit chair, you know, that’s and I have a team and we navigate to the woods to the forest and obstacles but when I’m finished that - I did that. Whether it's five miles, whether it's 10 miles I completed that. And get done with a disability and you say that you can't do that I'm “Hey I just did that” What do you mean you can’t do that, I did it. That's my takeaway. I want, when people look at me, I want them to understand that they can do it too. But you got to want it. You know, it takes time, you know, to build up your confidence, your self-esteem. Conf- I’m confident now but I had to build it up. And uh the last thing, too, I want to say. Well the last two things I want to say is you have to put yourself out there uh and you have to be good for yourself.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Good. Those are important lessons. Appreciate that. Thank you so much for being here and for sharing sort of your story and your perspective um on disability in the community and on the ADA. Thank you.

CECIL WILLIAMS: Thank you for having me.