**Errol Elshtain ADA Oral History Interview Transcript**

MARY MURRAY: Hi my name is Mary Murray and today I'm here interviewing Errol Elshtain for the ADA in Tennessee Oral History Project. The date is May 16th 2025 and we are in Nashville Tennessee. Errol, I’m happy you're here.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: I’m glad to be here

MARY MURRAY: Good. The major goal of the project is to contribute to the historical understanding of disability experience and the ADA in Tennessee so let's get started and tell me a little bit about yourself

ERROL ELSHTAIN: We moved to Tennessee in 1988 and um I didn't have a job for a couple of years so I became a volunteer and I was uh familiar with The Arc because our oldest daughter uh had an intellectual disability and when we moved here I needed to find out what was available for her and so I started going to ARC of Davidson County board meetings and apparently I just talked uh even though I was not a member of the board but they invited me to be a member of the board and that started me on a role of volunteerism for a lot of different organizations that needed folks. So ultimately in 1990 Governor McWherter appointed me to the as a member of the Council on Developmental Disabilities and two years later I became a staff member. Originally as the planner and then as director of development which um both, despite the titles, um I was in charge of running the grants programs um for the Council and that was my delightful position um because it brought me into contact with large numbers of people who were providing services for people with disabilities and um it was my pleasure to run that you know run those programs and oversee the I had the oversight of the reports and so on and so forth. So that's uh a minimal introduction and I retired after 18 years at the Council staff but I do continue to volunteer on a number of so I have been a past board member of the coalition developmental dis and uh disability Tennessee disability Coalition. I'm currently uh for a second-round um chair of the Tennessee um state Council for the family support program. And I'm on another couple of boards so that keeps me involved with the disability community which is which is a treat for me.

MARY MURRAY: Do you think the ADA has made a difference in your life and in what ways?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Well in my life um because it hasn't made a specific difference to me although when it was imple- when it came into law the Council on Developmental Disabilities was able to develop a couple of grant programs that specifically related to the Americans with Disabilities Act. For one, and let me mention her name, Carol Moore Slater, who was at that time director of the disability pathfinder, which was another project of the Council, proposed a to visit restaurants and businesses in downtown Nashville to one, see how accessible they were and two, to educate the businesses as to what they could do if they were not accessible for for example people with who are using wheelchairs to be able to get in without going through the kitchen or some back entrance. If they could create braille menus for example and have accessible restrooms. So, we, the Council, funded that project which which was went which went forward and was quite exciting and then the other thing was we had a couple of projects to help agencies understand how to work with businesses on making accommodations reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities across wide range of disabilities. To help them understand that it would it didn't really take a lot of money to make those uh accommodations so there was a lot of education that was involved there. So, I was directly involved in in establishing the request for proposals for those grants and then of course monitoring them. So, in that sense that was how I was involved with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

MARY MURRAY: I imagine you heard stories about the impact those made.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Yes, yes well yes because when you get your reports that's what you're looking for you know and and how would it be sustained after the grant. We had three-year grants that could be renewed for another three years but sustainability was how could you go forward after the grant money was gone and, you know, you wanted folks to be able to continue to do that. So, I guess I could say that's the way ADA had an effect on my life. The other thing was that because curb cuts were put in and doors were um had little push buttons so that they could open and actually that helped me too because if you're, you know, pushing a a baby stroller which I was at the time when our um one of our grandchildren was born. And I and we adopted him and I took him around to a lot of meetings. So, it was very handy not to have to, you know, maneuver around to open the doorway while you're pushing the stroller through or whatever. So, it was a help for people who, lots of people who didn't have a disability but still unintended positive consequences from the ADA.

MARY MURRAY: did you feel like the impacted you know areas like discrimination or attitudes

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Attitudes yes. I think that it did because you were educating people. For example, the the you know the review of the restaurants and so on. You were you were educating people to the needs for access for people with disabilities and um and that would change people's attitudes. You know, a lot of times people just hadn't thought about it before you know. So, it was they and because people let's say, for example, if there were a couple of steps up into a restaurant or a business, they didn't see folks using wheelchairs because they didn't have access. So, letting letting the businesses know that uh people with uh disabilities had money to spend was a great educational process and um and I and I think that that's that's been successful so yes, yes. So, you know educating people was a good effect from the ADA. We would have tried to do it anyway and we did, but having the ADA behind you was was a great benefit.

MARY MURRAY: And did you find like there you experienced any barriers related to all of that or…?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: No, I don't think so once because we went in not with the, you know, “Okay you have to do this” kind of attitude, but more of “do you know about this, here's how we might be able to help you do it”. I I don't think there was a lot - there wasn't very much push back about that. So, and I think that had a lot to do with the fact that we approached it in a very positive way. Not a negative way like “uh oh you're not doing this and you better” um but “do you know about this?” you know about the Americans with Disabilities Act you know what you could do to make your business or your company more accommodating for people with disabilities and here let us help you understand how you could do it.

MARY MURRAY: And what do you think for the future the hopes and dreams for the ADA?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Well there's always more work to do, right? We found that about 10 years after we had, the Council had, done some of its projects around ADA and other work for people with disabilities for jobs and for access and for, you know, just all around you know being able to live a life that everyone had should be able to expect to to live. We tried, the Council had forums across the state and uh we would ask them you know what do you think? What's how do you think things have progressed over the past 10 years and the consensus was yes, we've made a lot of progress but there's much more to do. And so I think there's always much more to do there's always, you know, there's always going to be a little retrenchment after a while and people are still needing to learn about folks with disabilities and how they can help them live a life that anybody should be able to live.

MARY MURRAY: Your focus was on oversight and looking at the future.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Yes. So, when we there were quarterly reports due from the agencies or organizations that received our grants and I would read those reports and they they would have a grant would have to have goals to achieve over time of the grant and so they would have to address how they were meeting those milestones along the way. And we, you know, we would so I would over I read those reports and summarized them for the Council to see that that the grantees were making progress um and if that they were finding some barriers or difficulties we would try to understand and help them to get beyond those. So, it was it was, you know, you know it was not very rigid. We wouldn't cancel a grant because “well you didn't meet this milestone”, but we would try to help them to achieve the milestone in another way. Make suggestions to them. So, in that sense, yeah, I did that that kind of oversight.

MARY MURRAY: So that kind of work really had an impact. So,

ERROL ELSHTAIN: It it did. It did. And you know we saw we saw some very positive results. As I said, from these focus groups. For example, people were making good progress in terms of jobs for folks with disabilities. The accommodations that were made. Early on some organizations would say take high school students with disabilities and they would give them training in a at a job site but never hire them and we recognized that. The Council recognized that and so we made some endeavors to say let's not just train these folks but this needs to lead to a job for them and so that was uh that was a big and we saw some big big changes in terms of in terms of that. And businesses realized that it really didn't cost too much to make a lot of the accommodations that a person would need across a variety of barriers that existed at the time. So we did we did. We saw some some nice progress on on all of our grants I think.

MARY MURRAY: Tell me more about the focus groups.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: well these uh we met with um primarily I think we met with uh people who were working with agencies that provide services to people with disabilities because that was that was the way into making the world of making changes. I mean some of the agencies themselves although while they were providing services for people with disabilities didn't always have the best practices themselves for folks with disabilities. So, we were uh had a couple of grants that tried to address that. And so most of the folks went and the focus groups were say agency directors or uh people who ran their specific programs. So, they were in a position to really talk about, you know, what kind of progress have been made in terms of people getting jobs you know. They would they would provide training programs but would people hire them afterwards, so they um I think that was that that was mostly the folks um type of folks who were part of the focus groups. And, you know, and then some people with disabilities themselves, just so we could see, you know, you're not in the business of providing services but you're uh living you know you're living out there in the world what kind of progress have you have you seen.

MARY MURRAY: So, you really did make an impact when you think about educating the agencies?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Yes.

MARY MURRAY: Could you give an example?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: I think that um the agencies originally saw their job as just here's a place for a person with disability to go during the day so they're not just sitting at home with nothing to do. And they didn't always see their job as preparing a person to go outside of their organization uh their, you know, their workshop programs so that was, that was, an emphasis that some of our grants had. That um to say you know don't assume that a person coming to your uh day program and that's and that's where they're going to stay. But let's look towards um training a person to move out of your workshop into something else. And so, from that perspective, yes, I think that's true.

MARY MURRAY: You've had a lot of experience with advocacy and activism I'd say.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Yes, um I didn't, you know, I didn't come to Tennessee with that in mind. As I said we were familiar with - we lived in Massachusetts and we were familiar with uh then the association for retarded children and it's gone through a number of name changes so it's it's now just The Arc which is nice. So, our daughter had some contact with uh The Arc in Massachusetts so where we lived uh and they were somewhat helpful. But I was not, I never went to their board meetings. I mean, I just knew about them. But coming to Tennessee and being asked to join the board of The Arc of Davidson County um was really a a step towards advocacy for me. I mean, we obviously, I was advocating for our daughter to find out what was available for her in Nashville and Tennessee and the wider perspective. But um as I said, I was available for all kinds of um activities. uh I remember people would, you know, pull out their calendars to figure out what when should a meeting be and I said “well just tell me because I don't have anything else to do so uh I'll be”, you know, “whatever time you say and day you say I'll be there” um so that um and I feel that uh as the and my position with the Council uh on the Council staff, Council on uh Develop on Developmental Disabilities of Tennessee  um

I had an opportunity to. Our executive director wanted to be sure that when people called us uh wound up calling us that they would be heard. And the way people found out, what mostly happened and my experience, people would call and they would talk to me. Now they wound up talking to us because they called other organizations in the state that provided services for people with disabilities but were shunted around. That was that was their experience. They would say "Oh well I called this office, I called that office. And they would tell me to call this office and this other office”. So even though the um the Council on Developmental Disabilities didn't provide any direct services for people with disabilities, we really only had a grant program had these grant programs but um we would try not to say "Well we we can't help you, call this office." But rather to just listen to what they had to say. And uh there were many times when uh ultimately, I, you know, um I I didn't have any specific suggestion for folks. But they would say “well you know you're the first person who's listened to my story”. So just listening to people's stories went went a long way even if even if you didn't have something specific to help them. And um one of the things that we've heard this was this was always top of uh top of the list when we would ask Council members um to uh, who are were our representatives out uh into the community uh in a sense, what they heard what was what was the thing that they heard people um felt they most was most needed. And uh top of the list for um uh for folks out in the community was “we need”, you know, “couldn't there be just one number that we had to call that um could what, you know, “we could talk to them and find out what uh what was available for a person with disabilities”. And that led to a contract with, I think it was originally the Kennedy Center uh uh at Vanderbilt, um to uh what's now known I guess it's Tennessee Disability Pathfinder. And the idea there was we would have one phone number, an 800 number, and the staff of the uh Pathfinder would make sure that uh they they were supposed to try to find out for every community in Tennessee uh what services were available for people with disabilities. So, if somebody called from wherever they could look down their list and um offer some suggestions for services. And uh that and that has been quite successful. Pathfinder is uh still going and um they uh of course you know it's all electronic now. People can go online and find it they don't have to call. The thing that astonished me a little bit was despite the fact that one aspect of the initial grant was to uh publicize um the existence of Tennessee Disability Pathfinder and the phone number and I would go to meetings this is you know several years um after Pathfinder had been operating and was always surprised to find that, you know, I would say “well you you know, do you know about Tennessee Disability Pathfinder?” “No. What's that?” So, getting word out about um services that are available uh to to the folks is a is a difficult problem uh and um you know we try several different solutions uh I you know. I guess, um you know, word of mouth turns out to be a very big uh probably the most effective way to let people know. So, if people have are going to meetings of one sort or another you have to make try to make sure that you're telling uh people about this. Another example of that is the uh Tennessee Family Support Program which was uh initially uh that was a grant um to develop, to write the legislation for that. That was a grant from the Council. And then the uh the state um it was it was the the law was passed and so um I forget what the title is now it's got a different title. it was titled title 33 uh for a long time. So that was state law that created it and then um the now Department of Disabilities and Aging - gone through a number of name changes through the years - runs uh operates that program. And people um find out when we ask uh on annual surveys when we ask people how they found out about family the Family Support Program the number one thing is usually word of mouth. You know some some friend um or relative or um community member knew about it and told a person about it. So uh again, you know, we think, you know, how can how can people not know about this because we're immersed in it. We're, you know, in the middle of it and so it lets you know that, you know, there's still a lot of work to do to let people know

what's available out there for people with disabilities.

MARY MURRAY: Even with the internet?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Even with the internet. Yeah exactly.

MARY MURRAY: So, you feel like the community has had an in from the time that you started till now the community has changed?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: um I think it has changed. I think that uh part of the change comes from, again, another program of the Council on Developmental Disabilities was Partners and Policymaking. So, every year for, I don't know, what it must be 30 years or so a class is supported by the Council, a Council grant, to come to Nashville and learn how to be an advocate. So, family members, persons with disabilities, apply to the program and they commit to 12 weeks of coming to sessions. They they're given homework and the concept is, and this is this has worked quite well, is that learn what your rights are. Learn how to become an advocate and then go back to your community and practice those skills. Become a board member of some community board. And that's been effective. We see that uh in uh for a lot of folks they say “well, you know, I was I'm a partners graduate” and they're very proud to have had that experience and say that, you know, was you this also quite a lot uh you know it was life-changing this is you know this changed my life because one I learned how to advocate for myself. I went back I, you know, I joined the board, uh and I was able to, you know, make some changes in my community. One of the most recent ones was um uh and this they were uh there was one young woman who realized she had an adult with a disability and needed a way to, when they were on trips, to have an adult changing table. You know, you have for uh for babies and for young children um most restrooms now will have a changing table that's available for doing that. But that's not going to work for an adult who needs help uh and so uh she um uh was instrumental in getting a bill passed through the legislature uh requesting that uh adult changing tables. So and she was a partners graduate and she acknowledges the fact that, you know, if she had if she hadn't been a partners graduate she hadn't gone to Partners in Policymaking, she probably, you know, wouldn't have thought that she would be able to make that kind of change. So not that, you know, my involvement in all of these things is from the perspective of my position at the Council on Developmental Disabilities was I didn't do any of these things, but being able to write the request for proposals to present to the Council and get the Council's ideas for what kinds of projects they thought would be good, I mean that was, you know, that's how I was involved in uh in those sorts of in those sorts of things.

MARY MURRAY: A valuable part of the puzzle.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Well yes, I guess that's right. Because you know if we if we weren't, you know, if we weren't providing the opportunities for people to apply for the grants then they might, you know, they might not have happened.

MARY MURAY: So those partners were they all different people?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Oh yes, oh yes. Yes, so um the classes, I can't remember how large the classes were, but um I think that they would take up to maybe 20-25 people there were openings um and as I said people would apply uh and would have to commit to coming to Nashville uh for the for the presentations. I think it was always a a Friday and Saturday so um there was an overnight stay and um the program would you know make it possible um if it would provide, you know, obviously the transportation, meals um respite care in case, you know, they had a young child or even an adult um family member with a disability who, you know, needed to have some uh care while they were away but the main caregiver was away. So just to make it absolutely as easy as possible for people to be part of the program. And I and I think that that's that was always um part of uh almost any Council grant. That you wanted agencies to be able to do their work. So, you know, you made all kinds of things possible for the agency to do their work for individuals uh to be able to participate in, you know, in whatever the the grant might be.

MARY MURRAY: That would be the things you would look for when you were reviewing?

ERROL ELSHTIAN: Yes absolutely. Absolutely. And um just um um shout out to the Tennessee uh Disability Coalition. They recognized that they probably would not have been able to come together without a grant from the Council and so they created a program of uh which I'm, you know, pleased to say I was part of the beginnings of, that of uh the Small Grants Program where people could apply for a small amount of money. It would, it was $10,000. But it would be enough for or for or people to get a start if you didn't or to make some improvements in what they were already doing. And so you know I think that was a you know such a fantastic thing for the Coalition to do. To recognize they got started because of a grant. Let's help some other folks. Pay this forward in a way - let's help some other folks who you know might not have access to uh other kinds of grant funds um to get started. And so that's been, you know, that was that was great to continue, you know, to be able to be part of that uh getting started. and going forward.

MARY MURRAY: Did you see a thing a lot of things grow from that?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: I think so. There were um there were interesting ideas that originally the Coalition Small Grants Program would just say we have some money available you can apply for up to $10,000. To and there were no um there were no other parameters. So people could send in whatever they were thinking about. They didn't, there was not a specific topic at that time that the Coalition was looking to address. Now as programs evolve you realize well, you know, maybe we should be looking for some kinds of specific things that uh for people to do. And so, I think that that they're doing now. That that's what they're doing now um but originally so you you got all kinds of interesting ideas that that that people uh people had uh to um for existing programs or for, you know, new ideas. And the grant process was much simpler than most grant programs. You know, present your idea and um so you could just present the idea. This is the way the program worked originally. So, there would be a letter of interest - what's your idea and how and, you know, and a couple of paragraphs on how you might accomplish this um, uh and then the people who were the the the panel of folks who were reading those would select some for a full proposal. And then that was more of a more of a standard kind of proposal where you'd have to put your you know milestones and goals and how you were going to sustain the program after the grant was over um and, but it was very, you know, so there were, you know, there were some some interesting things. One, one of the ones there was a program in Franklin that wanted to provide it's this is a um where they combine actors and musicians who are you know, who are professionals to come in and work with folks with disabilities to put on a play. And what they needed was individual microphones so that the folks could be heard. And we fund, you know, so we funded the Small Grants Program funded that. And um that's they've gone on to do you know pretty pretty big programs that they would put on. I think they originally did it at the Franklin Theater but they put on a couple of programs now at the uh Polk Theater at TPAC, you know. So that from that they were able to expand their program just from the initial their initial grant. Now who would have, you know, we wouldn't have thought about that and so that was just sort of one of the, you know, here you have an idea - present it and you know perhaps we can give you a little bit of money to make that go forward.

MARY MURRAY: You really saw things evolve.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: We did we did uh things are still evolving. In fact, I've evolved off the (laughs). See I have my tie. This is my this is my evolution tie for um because for the Disability Coalition uh I was able to be a board member for many years just because um the Council had a seat on the board. Then after I retired I could, I could be a member just as a as an individual and I continued to do that. And then I don't know why I did this because they decided maybe board members would have term limits. And uh apparently, I voted for that and then I wanted, I- I ran out of I ran out of my term. I couldn't believe it. What, after 32 years I suddenly can't be a board member anymore but so they gave me a tie as a as a consolation prize for not being. But obviously I'm still involved. I’m still a member of the Coalition uh and I'm still involved uh in you know in any ways that I can be to you know forward Coalition uh I uh principles for people with disabilities to be you know uh welcome members and uh and of the community of the community and have just the sort of life that you know we all would like to have.

MARY MURRAY: Yeah, well experience is, I'm sure was, a major contributor to all those years.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Yes, I guess so.

MARY MURARY, Yes and hard work to be on a board.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Um well sometimes, sometimes yeah, you know, you make some decisions that uh you have decision some decisions to make that are you know you know are going to affect um people's lives so yes.

MARY MURRAY: Well it sounds like you contributed a lot.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Well I, you know, I did what I could do. yes right.

MARY MURRAY: What would you, is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you might want to just say about your experience?

ERROL ELSHTAIN: I probably have, you know, talked way beyond the main concept of, you know, Americans with Disabilities Act but um I don't think so. You know, I um I'm glad to look back and, see that I had some small role in, making some changes uh for people with disabilities uh in and their lives and an in the world um so I think that's probably the end of it.

MARY MURRAY: Just learning this today it sounds like a lot, thank you.

ERROL ELSHTAIN: Well thank you.