**Kasondra Farmer ADA Oral History Interview Transcript**

CAROL WESTLAKE: Hello my name is Carol Westlake and I am here today interviewing Kasondra Farmer um for the ADA in Tennessee Oral History Project um the date is April 11th 2025 and we’re in Nashville, Tennessee. Kasondra, we are delighted you are here. Thank you so much for joining us today um let me just start by asking you to tell um tell me a little bit about yourself.

KASONDRA FARMER: Gosh so that's always such an interesting question to answer right. So I guess I'll start by telling you that I have been an advocate in Tennessee since I was three years old. I got diagnosed with cerebral palsy at two and I was born five months early. I weighed two pounds 2 and a half ounces dropped down to a pound and an ounce. I had open heart surgery at two days old and was Angel of Mercy-ed from Baptist which is now St Thomas Midtown, for those people who are not quite as old as me don't remember when it was Baptist, to Vanderbilt because there was no life flight then. 1982 is a long time ago when you're talking medical advances so I got involved in advocacy really. I was a super precocious kid um and we met Carol Moore Slater from Vanderbilt when I was very, very young and she helped teach my mom to advocate for this very little child that nobody could really give her good diagnostics for, right. They just kept saying "We'll know more when she's older we'll know more when she's older." Um and in the process of her teaching my mother to advocate, Carol taught me to advocate. And so I became a spokesperson for United Cerebral Palsy at three uh back when we still did telethons and having super cute precocious kids was a good thing, right. And my advocacy just went on from there. Now I work for Empower Tennessee and I am our Director of Engagement and I'm also an Independent Living Specialist so I help I get to help people navigate the systems that maybe my mother and I didn't have anybody to help us navigate. And I love that because I get to use my lived experience every day to help other people.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So tell me a little bit about your lived experiences when you were younger. So when you were in school you were, you were an advocate, right? But what but what did it look like or how did it feel or what did it mean to sort of be a kid with a disability.

KASONDRA FARMER: Sure so again we're talking I started school pre-ADA and the first thing I always tell people that looking back in retrospect I find really interesting is that my mother was told when I went to start school that I needed to go to Harris Hillman instead of a regular public school.

CAROL WESTLAKE: And Harris Hillman was, uh Harris Hillman is?

KASONDRA FARMER: The school for children with significant complex disabilities. And I had been in a special needs preschool since I was three I had gone to Duncanwood which is no longer around much to my sadness. But I had been in school for a very long time and my mother was very confused. I was the 5-year-old that said things to my mother like "You exasperate me." When she asked me to clean my room and so that was something my mother fought really hard for was to get me in classes with, you know, typical peers. And then it was a really interesting experience right? I’m the only kid using a walker in a classroom full of other kids without disabilities and roaming the halls at a time where usually children with disabilities were taught together um regardless of their academic prowess or rigor. And so to see me just out roaming the halls with my classmates I'm sure was probably, I can only imagine, was probably disconcerting to some parents. But to me that was my norm that was always my norm. I sat in on my own IEP meetings and things for my entire life because as I'm sure a lot of families and individuals with disabilities can relate to my mom felt like she didn't have other advocates and so it was kind of me and her against the world. And so of course I sat in on my own IEPs and so that was always a really interesting thing. And fast forward right to getting bused to all the newest schools after the ADA was passed regardless of where I lived in the city because the new schools were the accessible schools.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Interesting. Yeah

KASONDRA FARMER: Yeah. And so if that meant I had to go 30 minutes across town or 45 minutes across town uh by a bus from where I lived then that was just the norm um so that was an interesting experience growing up because it often meant that I was going to school in really wealthy privileged areas and I grew up really poor so um that was an interesting dynamic to have with some of my classmates. Though I have to say in this life I've been fortunately blessed with a very large personality and so um I like to believe that my personality enters the room first and my chair enters second um and so I think that my personality has been able to override a lot in my life um but definitely an interesting experience of not going to school with people who kind of had the same socioeconomic experiences that I did. In the hopes of accessibility meaning you know better education and better experience opportunities and then fast forwarding again to high school where I went to a performing arts high school and got recruited for this high school. Applied, got in. My mother went to visit the school the summer before I would have started freshman year and the school wasn't accessible.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Wow.

KASONDRA FARMER: And Metro literally said more than once that they would pay for me to go to any other school in the district.

CAROL WESTLAKE: That was their solution?

KASONDRA FARMER: If I didn't make them make the school accessible for people that know me it's no shock that I said "I got into this school this school is where I'm going I’ll see you in August." Um the only downside to that experience being that I then got called a six-figure student to my face for the next four years of school.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Wow. How'd that feel?

KASONDRA FARMER: Not great not great I mean was I a six-figure student. Yes is it great to be reminded of that when you're trying to be especially in high school when you're trying to be like everybody else no it's one more way that you stand out right again I put myself in in a situation where I was the only person with a visible disability in my art school and then to get continually singled out by administration wasn't the greatest feeling um but I did it so that nobody else had to right

CAROL WESTLAKE: So that the next student could use the accessibility.

KASONDRA FARMER: Exactly

CAROL WESTLAKE: That you had helped create.

KASONDRA FARMER: And because not everybody's me. I have a pretty thick skin. I’m a pretty confident person not likely to back down on a whole lot of things but not everybody has that personality type or those.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Where do you think that comes from? I mean does your disability contribute to that? Sounds like your mom contributes to that, but you know.

KASONDRA Farmer: I think I'm very fortunate in my life that I've had some really strong role models. My mother certainly contributed. Carol Moore Slater certainly contributed. And I think a lot of it is innately part of who I am. um Do I feel like a lot of that is because of my disability? Yes. I mean I have to say yes. I don't know a life in which I don't have my disability um so it's easier to say that having my disability I feel like made me more compassionate or empathetic or sympathetic but I think I had to be tough. I had to be unafraid to back down. I was eight before ADA passed so I knew to some degree, right, as much as you can at eight years old, what it is to live preADA and to watch things change post ADA. And even now in 2025 I say all the time to our clients, look we're not where we were we're not where we could be, but like we're somewhere in the middle of that. And, so yes, there's more work to do but look at how far we've come.

CAROL WESTLAKE: And I think that you've really seen, I mean so you have grown up with the ADA right? I mean, so you, you're aware of it and you describe that experience um of getting into the high school and that the ADA having that impact on your life because you could work to make sure that you had the access you needed to go to the high school that um that you were chosen for and that you that you chose. Are there are there other examples of how the ADA may have made a difference um in your life sort of over time as it grew and you did.

KASONDRA FARMER: I think there's tons of examples of the impact of the ADA on my life. I think the fact that I work a full-time job with a really good salary um is an example of the ADA at work. I think the fact that at 20 years old I got out of school and found a job really quickly um is a great example of that. I think the fact that I was able to spend much of my teenage years in downtown Nashville with my friends hanging out in places like the arcade and things like that just like all of my other friends were doing is a great representation of all that the ADA has done. um You know I've used paratransit in this city since I was 14 I went to a performing arts high school um so it was a charter school and there was no transportation you either took the metro buses or you took, in my case, paratransit. And so I've watched paratransit kind of grow in flux over the years and that definitely came along as a part of the ADA. And I love to watch the people who have grown up not knowing anything else and how confident they are in their rights. I think that that's something that the rest of us kind of maybe took a little slower um to get to. But I love to watch the new generation coming up and even you know people in my generation who are really able to say no look this is this is my right and like let's talk about this. Let's talk about why access matters why equal transportation matters why, why equal housing matters. Why equitable employment matters and be so strong in their convictions of it. Looking back to when I was growing up and nobody could tell my mother the outcomes. Nobody could tell her what life was going to look like for me and I think about how terrified she must have been as an 18-year-old kid. To not know what life was going to look like for her child. And I'm so grateful that even though it may have taken us a while to get to the ADA right, like we all wish it could have been signed sooner, I'm so grateful that it exists and that it does offer us the protections that we have and also equally mindful that if we don't continue to fight for those things nothing changes nothing improves.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Right, so you had to fight to get the accessibility for the high school, for example, and then you know earlier you talked to me a little bit about your first job which you were able to get right out of out of college, which it might not have always been true for folks with disabilities, right, in previous generations um but but it wasn't perfect was it?

KASONDRA FARMER: It wasn't perfect. So I worked for the state um straight out of college and um without naming the state agency or anything like that um I asked for accommodations. I was really transparent about needing accommodations when I went in. My CP affects the right side of my body more than the left as is often the case with individuals with CP one side of the body will usually be more affected. So I only type with one hand um and as we all know jobs these days are incredibly technology heavy and so pretty much from day one I was advocating for speech-to-type software or different keyboard things like that. And I kept being told "Oh you don't need those you're doing great." Like "You don't need those you're doing great." Well cut to 6 months later I’m on the floor. I’m actually interviewing people who are coming into this agency for help and I am not doing fine. I am floundering and so the conversation was "Oh you really do need those accommodations that you have been asking for." And then it took them six months to get me an appointment to get the accommodations and on my last day before I would have had civil service protection, 30 minutes to the end of my day, they let me go. Because I had been without the accommodations for so long that it was almost impossible to get caught up. So, and no, I didn't fight that. Could I have fought that? Yes. Would I have known at 22 fight that? Maybe not. I hated the job. I mean, that's just me being completely transparent. I hated the job. I didn't want to fight for it. But looking back, the advocate in me kind of wishes I had um because I could have made it better for somebody else. And I think that's kind of been a large theme of my life, is how do I use these experiences that I've had that are maybe not the greatest experiences, right? They're uncomfortable being called a six-figure student. It's uncomfortable being the only kid in your class with a disability. It’s uncomfortable being like "I need these accommodations." And being told "No like you really don't”. But if I can use the experiences I have to help make things better for the people that come along behind me, I think that's all any of us want to do.

CAROL WESTLAKE: And do you think things are getting better? I mean I'm sort of thinking in terms of attitudinal barriers. Do you know bosses who resist, um you know, um systems that do welcomeness in the community right when you show up at the arcade is or whatever that would be?

KASONDRA FARMER: I think, in large part, things are better than they were. Things are certainly better than they've been over the course of my lifetime. Right? I look at my niece who is 20 and her generation and how accepting and loving and compassionate and empathetic um her generation is to anybody that's different for you know any reason right? And I think, okay, there's hope, right? And certainly we see attitude shifts in employers and in um locations. I mean we're so lucky here in East Nashville that so many businesses are so accommodating. We know that that's not the case necessarily throughout the entire state, but here in Nashville I think people are overwhelmingly more accepting um than I've seen over the course of my life. But again with that caveat of we know things are always changing we know things are always in flux and so how do we fight to keep the things that we have?

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, and that. And that really brings us to sort of advocacy and activism and that's kind of where you started with me, right? Like been an advocate forever along with your mom along with others um how does how does that work sort of individually and collectively, I mean you also work in an organization, right, that that um sees itself as an advocate. Talk to me about how that looks or feels in the community.

KASONDRA FARMER: Sure. So again I am so blessed when I say I've been an advocate here since I was three. I don't know anything else. I don't know what it is to not, for the good and bad, feel the weight of our community. Right? I don't have the luxury to stay silent I'm very educated. I’m incredibly well spoken and I feel like it is my responsibility to speak for other people who may not always get that same opportunity. Even being here with you today, like not everybody's going to get an opportunity like this. So I don't know what it is to not feel that. But I also know that it's so important and that being a part of communities that are wanting to make change, who are fighting to make change, are so important. I've been talking a lot lately about joy as an act of resistance um and finding those moments of joy. Whether it's joy doing something you love to do like a dance class or rock climbing or whether it is finding joy in what your body with whatever its limitations are can do. Joy is an act of resistance and it's a reoccurring theme this year. It seems like. But also it's so important because we know that advocacy work is hard we know that it's hard to speak for communities and populations that maybe there are some people who would like us to, to you know, fade a little more silently in the background. Fading in the background has never been something I've done particularly well. I'm so grateful for the opportunities I have to be in community and to hear other people's stories and to be able to share those stories. Whether it's sharing them through something like peer mentoring or peer support groups or whether it's doing something like being here with you today or speaking at Cordell Hull or any number of opportunities that I've had over the course of my life. I'm so grateful for the confidence that it's given me but also the ability to really be able to hear other people's stories and take them and carry them in my heart because nobody's experiences look the same.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, so there's probably a role in advocacy for building community as well. Does that does that feel like a role of advocacy for you?

KASONDRA FARMER: I feel like it is. I feel like, right, we joke. I'm 40 now so I'm technically the adultier adult in a lot of rooms - don't know how that happened or when that happened. But we talk a lot about the fact um especially in my friends group um which I have a lot of female friends and I have a lot of female friends in chairs and we talk a lot about how we are now the people that the younger generation is looking to for the answers and looking to for the experiences of okay well what do you do in that job interview? When you're like- I need accommodations- and they're like “No, you don't”. Or what do I do when you know I move into my first apartment and I can't reach the bottom shelves of the cabinets or um what do I do when I I'm going out to my car and there's somebody parked in the access aisle? We are the people that are the people that are answering those questions now for the generations that come after us and so I think that building community is so important because what we know is that it will be our communities that get us through the hardest times. It'll be our communities that we lean on for support and unfortunately the thing that we know as human beings is that there will always be hard times. We can only hope that there will always be opportunities to find the light and to find the joy. But community is so vitally important. Not just in advocacy. Certainly in that, but it's so important to find your people. The people that understand your experiences kind of innately without you having to explain everything, right? Why is it so frustrating when I go out of the grocery store and there's somebody parked in the access aisle? it's nice to have people that you don't always have to explain those things to.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah.

KASONDRA FARMER: And so, community is so vitally important and I really think that the ADA has played a part in allowing people to find community. We have things like the Southeast ADA Center that can connect people. We have, you know, webinars and workshops and peer support groups. And with the advent of the internet and then with 2020 and everything going online, I think more and more people are being able to find their community than ever before. And it's possible that we wouldn't have that without also having had the ADA.

CAROL WESTLAKE: Yeah, that's great. Thank you. That's really, I think, that I think that is important. So do the younger people that you maybe encounter or have opportunities to work with or opportunities to share with, um do they feel a real risk to asserting their rights under the ADA? Are they are they really aware of those rights, do you think? I mean have we done a decent job of educating folks, or do we need to do better?

KASONDRA FARMER I think the younger you get, the less aware they are, right? I mean, I work with girls as young as two and three and they're not, you know, like any other two or three year old, public policy is not theirs, but they do understand like oh I can get around in my wheelchair better than I can get around you know crawling or scooting or touch walking. You know, whatever the case may be, um I think as I've watched individuals get older um that I've known from the time they were very young. I watched them really hold a stake in the rights that they're granted under the ADA. I watched them do things that I potentially would have never thought to pursue, right? I didn't learn to drive at 16 because a my school didn't have driver's ed because it was a charter school. But also I wouldn't have known that if they offered driver's ed to the other students they also had to offer it to me. Kids nowadays are aware of those things. They're able to fight for those things. They're able to fight for an education that they want and futures that they want and watching them do that because by and large by the time kids are about 13-14, I'm watching them really start to become aware, right, of the ADA, of the rights that they have. If they haven't been before, right, we know in some situations kids have to figure it out earlier right for any number of reasons, but by 13-14 you're watching kids really get it. It's really clicking for them and they're able to really start voicing that for themselves and fighting for it for themselves and that's a really wonderful thing to see. Do I think we could always do a better job teaching people? Yes, right? I don't know how many presentations I've given where I say out loud the ADA is the bare minimum and people are shocked. They're flabbergasted. Interesting that the ADA is the minimum, right, that somebody can legally do. Like it's not your be all and end all guideline um but I think the younger generations are really getting it. I've watched kids that I've watched grow up go on to have these amazing lives and these amazing experiences. I think about one little girl I know, in particular, who is living in Sweden right now like and she is studying to be an occupational therapist in Sweden, like because she can. Because she can and what a great experience that is and that it allows people to dream bigger for themselves than I think people did before the ADA was signed. I mean certainly before I possibly would have you know um.

CAROL WESTLAKE: So you so you feel like we have made progress. I mean this project is really about taking a look backward and forward right for the 35 years of the ADA in Tennessee and and Tennessee's kind of progress, and our community's progress in the lives of people with disabilities. And so, you, you've seen all of that.

KASONDRA FARMER: I’ve seen it in my experience. Yeah I mean and of course I come from a very Nashvillian lens, right? I’ve I've lived in the city my whole life and so I am aware because I am well connected to our community that my experiences here in Nashville may not be the same experiences of somebody in more rural Tennessee. But I think we keep pushing outwards. Right? Like Nashville's made some pretty good progress, now let's let's keep pushing it out there. And there are other cities that that's that's the case for, as well, but let's keep pushing for it to get better everywhere and for all Tennesseans and not just select groups.

Great, great. Kasondra, thank you so much for being with us today and for sharing your story and your perspective um on the the world in Nashville and in Tennessee and the progress we're making with the ADA. Thank you.

Kasondra Farmer: My absolute pleasure.