**Kenton Dickerson ADA Oral History Interview Transcript**

MARY MURRAY: Hello, my name is Mary Murray and today I'm interviewing Kenton Dickerson for the ADA in Tennessee Oral History Project. The date is April 23rd 2025. And we're in Nashville, Tennessee, and Kenton joins us via zoom from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Kenton, I'm happy you're here. As you know, the major goal is to contribute to a historical understanding of a disability experience and the ADA in Tennessee. So let's get started. How about we start with just telling me a little bit about yourself, whatever you're comfortable sharing.

KENTON DICKERSON: Okay. My name is Kenton Dickerson. And I have been involved with people with disabilities since oh, the early 1980s. I started out working for the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga um in a program that we we called the PACE Program, and it was helping people with disabilities find jobs. I worked there for about four years. And then I went to Chattanooga Cares dealing with AIDS education for another three or four years. Then I changed to The Center for Independent Living in Chattanooga which is called TRAC and Trail. Um and I was actually the director there for a couple of years before coming to Nashville. So I've had a lot of experience working with people with disabilities and dealing with some of the problems that they faced both before the ADA and afterwards. It's been a learning experience for all of us I’m sure. Because when I started, you know, there was no accessibility or there was very little, and it was …it was very difficult to deal with trying to help people particularly find jobs. Um but…that's that's where I come from.

MARY MURRAY: So, that's your work background. And is there anything specific with your own personal identity related to disability?

KENTON DICKERSON: My wife is …is pretty severely disabled. She has two artificial hips and two artificial knees. And I am moderately to severely hard of hearing. For her, it makes a lot of difference. For me, the main thing that I have experienced with my disability is um closed captioning, which I love. But um… Yeah, she had a very difficult time just walking around and moving. Fortunately, she's always been a hard worker. She's always had a job but there were still places where it was very difficult for her to get to and um I had to do a lot of very slow walking and holding her up for quite some time.

MARY MURRAY: Mm-hmm. So in your in your life you mentioned a lot about getting help for people working and your work experience. And are there other aspects of that the ADA when it did come about. Did it impact things?

KENTON DICKERSON: Oh, yeah. yeah. um…just out and about with with…that are obviously disabled and they're able to go places and do things now that they obviously could not do before the ADA. Uh going shopping, for instance, I've seen them in the malls, I see them in the stores. I see them in the grocery stores with them riding around in the carts. Um. So yeah, it's it's made a huge difference in the lives of people with disabilities.

MARY MURRAY: Do you think there's specifically as people learned about it, there were less barriers or do you think there were more? Do you have any stories related to trying to help people? You're smiling.

KENTON DICKERSON: Well I have one. I have one that um… can I tell this one? We ..When I was in Nashville. We had  a… a local chain of convenience stores call us and they wanted us to do a survey of six of their stores. They had been apparently somebody had come into one of their stores and fallen and they were suing them. And of course, when you sue somebody, you sue them for everything. So they were they were claiming that the stores weren't accessible. So we went around and we did.. I did actually surveys six of their stores and gave them a pretty thorough report. But what I found… was not so much that they were not accessible. This was a while after the ADA had passed um but the way they were operating their stores made their accessible features inaccessible. For instance um they had an accessible bathroom that you go down the hall to get to. Well, they would stack their their unused stock in that hall, which of course you can't get a wheelchair down or a walker or crutches. And that made their accessible bathroom inaccessible. The same thing with um accessible walkways to get into the store. Some of the stores were fairly old and they..they had curb cuts and things, but then they would place a..a waste can in the middle of the sidewalk. Where it blocked the door. And that's even after, you know the um the ADA was passed and that's what I would call and what most people call maintenance of effort. Um They kept ..they had the accessible places, but they didn't keep them accessible. And I think I went around to some of them after I had done the survey and we had made..a few pennies to you know, to move a trash can or a different place to stack your.. your stock or move something out of the way. And after a few months, I went around again just looking at them and seemed like they'd come right back to the same thing. It's habit. You know, it's people looking at things, if you don't realize that you .. that if you don't know somebody that has a disability or you don't have a disability yourself it's often… that people don't realize and that's… that's kind of what I have found. And that the lack of training of staff, lack of just… just basic understanding of what human needs are.

MARY MURRAY: Yeah, I was going to ask you more about that. So your efforts were to identify what they needed. Did you find that it was a lot of education or it was more attitudes?

KENTON DICKERSON: Well, I think it was more education um. Particularly in that particular instance, I think it was their lack of training. When they…they just wanted us to tell them what to do so they didn't get sued. And we did. And then they just went back to the same thing because it never incorporated their recommendations into the training of their staff and of course staff is… is .. turnover is a big thing in those convenience stores. So I just don't think that they kind of grasped the idea that this is something you need to keep doing in order to remain accessible.

MARY MURRAY: Yeah, in your own experience with working in different settings with your… your own disability, did you ever encounter people that didn't accommodate you?

KENTON DICKERSON: No. I really didn't need an accommodation until about oh about 2010, I started working for the.. I worked for the state of Tennessee for about a year. Um And they did accommodate me, provide me an accommodation um because what I needed was ..since I was on the phone a lot, I needed headphones. Because you know with the the telephone receiver feedback was just crazy. But they did provide me with that. What I did find is that um… they had no idea what what the ADA was about. We went to… They they made me go to this training session about human resources and discrimination. And um the first thing that the lady said when they…she talked about racial discrimination for a minute, and then she talked about the ADA and she said, well, Title II of the ADA covers medical facilities. And I went, this is crazy. You don't know what the ADA's about. It it- Title II is state and local government. And it covers not just medical facilities. But everything that the state does. And but…you know I was in a meeting. I didn't want to embarrass her, so I didn't speak up. I did kind of make a note of it afterwards. Um but…and another thing was when I was still working for the CIL before I went to work for the state. Donna will probably remember this. They had a- they invited us to come out to the Tennessee School for the Blind and do a presentation there about what we did. And so… the lady …the same lady… and she had…all of this information and printed material. At School for the Blind. Um they didn't have any Braille. Didn't have anything on disk. And just …it was like …What are you talking about these people? You know, they still don't know. And this was, this was… In 2010. 20 years almost after the ADA had passed. So it… the thing is, it still requires a lot of education. It's got to be an ongoing thing because as people… as there's turnover and as people who are not directly involved with it. Just maybe glance at the Act and see just the bare minimum or somebody tells them something, um there's not a lot of knowledge being passed around. Um it's it's just really… kind of hit or miss and that's …that's too bad.

MARY MURRAY: That makes me uh think if you're saying that's one of the things you need, what would you say if you- if the world in the future ..what that looks like for a better option for the ADA?

KENTON DICKERSON: Ah. I would say that when companies are are training new staff, there needs to be at least a unit in their training material about the ADA and maintenance of effort and just what… what it requires. I don't mean they have to go through all the technical manuals because that would take forever, but um just their basic requirements that …that…that people need to ..to comply with that are even very easy to do. There's self-checklists that you can get from ADA.gov that pretty well takes care of you and you can do a very a very easy self-analysis. But people don't think of doing that. Maybe there needs to be more publicity about the kinds of things that that are available. But I don't know people… they just don't know about it. And it gets out of their mind. They get, they get…um What do you say comply with-- they get busy with day-to-day activities. And, you know, their goals and their projects that they're working on and they forget and it just needs to be reminded occasionally. That um…that there is such a thing as accessibility and that um it's better for everyone. Like…like…who is to say you know accessibility benefits everyone. I like the fact that I can um, that I don't have to go up a bunch of steps because I'm getting old and fat … (laughs)… and it's getting hard. But um… the fact that … I guess, what am I trying to think of? Another part of getting old is the fact that I lose my train of thought.

MARY MURRAY: (laughs) I do too.

KENTON DICKERSON: But um

MARY MURRAY: I like your your term maintenance of effort. That that makes sense.

KENTON DICKERSON: Hmmm

MARY MURRAY: Isn't that what you're describing?

KENTON DICKERSON: Yeah, that's exactly what I'm describing. You've got to… if you have a… an accessible bathroom, make it so people can actually get in it. That sort of thing. It just takes constant thinking. And more. Ah wait a minute, if I do something can people get by? If I put something here, can people get by it?  Is the hall too narrow? Is it... um is is there something I'm not even seeing. Tell you a little story about… If Carol doesn't mind, I'll tell you a little story about her. She asked me to come … she worked with a… a housing thing for mentally disabled people for a while. And she asked me to come out and do a survey and I went to the house. And, you know, I said, well. I told her about we need a ramp to go up to the porch. And she said, well, I know we need to ramp to go up to the porch and I know we need to look at the bathrooms we need an accessible bathrooms. Should that do it? And I said well what about the little 4-inch step at the door? And she was like, what? What step? Because you get to be, you get so used to things that you don't, you forget about them being there. So she'd forgotten that there was a 4-inch step at the door to get into the place. So I had to tell her we needed a separate ramp to get from the porch to the door.  You know that’s just even those of us who are well-acquainted with… with accessibility, we don't think of things all the time. Sometimes we have to be remembered or reminded.

MARY MURRAY: Well and your experience with advocacy and activism, it sounds like you've had..that's a great example of that. Are there other stories that you might be able to share?

KENTON DICKERSON: Um I did a lot of work with this is not necessarily for the ADA um did a lot of work with Fair Housing Council. Which is… you know. ADA, it's it's confusing for people who run apartments because the ADA applies to some of it, but not all. The ADA applies to common areas, entrances, elevators. Things like that. But once you get into the apartments. Then the ADA goes away and the Fair Housing Act takes ..takes precedence. Although the accessibility requirements are a lot the same um once you're inside the apartment, there's certain you know measurements and things like that but um people don't realize, for instance that um all of the apartments on the ground floor need to make need … need to meet certain requirements, not just the AD, not just the ones that they call ADA apartments which is really strange because they're not ADA. But there are certain requirements for every apartment that's on the ground floor. There's two different kinds of access..accessibility .. and also the fact that.. that if a building is built for.. for any purpose other than, you know, or any purpose at all before 1988, and it's first occupied by someone before 1988, it doesn't have to be accessible at all, except for the common areas. So um…you know that can be confusing for people, but I find that a lot of the apartment complexes today that I've checked out have finally learned that and they keep ..they do a pretty good job of keeping up with those things. I wish businesses and other people would would do the same.

MARY MURRAY: Do you think the community is different because of advocacy?

KENTON DICKERSON: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely. It's certainly not perfect, but… The difference is amazing. Even with lack of accessibility that some places have. For instance… …lack of sidewalks, lack of curb cuts. Tell a story on myself. I moved into a neighborhood here in Chattanooga that has no curb cuts. I didn't think about it until I until I started walking around and I thought, where are the curb cuts? And this this neighborhood was… was built after the… after the ADA went into effect. But I guess nobody told the codes enforcement here that they needed to do that. But yeah, totally, our sidewalks are totally inaccessible. And I just didn't notice and I felt, oh, Lord, how did I do this? But um there again you don't think of everything all the time.

MARY MURRAY: How do you approach things like that? Do you ever feel like when you're advocating in situations, do you feel which battles you take on or what's risky, what's worth doing?

KENTON DICKERSON: Yeah. Well…for instance, we took on the city of.. of Goodlettsville. And particularly the …I was working for a client, one of our CIL clients but um… in doing the advocacy, we had to point out. ..She was complaining about not being able to get into City Hall. And we went, I went and did a survey and told them what they needed to do. And… finally, they got around to it, but there was one of their city council members who was an older gentleman, and he was totally against it. He was like, she's not even disabled. You can go to a doctor and give them $50, and they'll tell you. They'll say you're disabled (laugh,) but…..and he was actually their … their lawyer corrected him on that. But they finally came around and that was one of the things that we got was that the city hall now in Goodlettsville is accessible. The same thing… the same client or… She had a problem with a laundromat. And… I came. I went and did a survey. And I was just looking around in front of the owner. The owner saw me, and I must have must not look look casual enough… but he came and said what are you doing? I said, well, I've been asked to do this. He said, well, who's going to make me do that? And I just said, well. Department of Justice will do something …will do it. And um he finally put in a ramp. All he needed was just like a six-foot piece of asphalt to get up to the sidewalk, and he finally did that. So you can look around and make some…. You see where you have made some difference for some people. It’s often for one person that you're doing an advocacy for, but the advocacy improves things for everybody else. Um. We did a survey of an apartment in Antioch. And there were steps everywhere. This was a new apartment building. There were steps everywhere. That's the one place…the one time that we ever filed a suit. Through the Tennessee Fair Housing Council, there was a whole …there was a… this was a group of apartment builders who manage the whole chain of apartments and none of their places were accessible. And so, we had to take him to court. Um, I had to do a a a deposition. We didn't have to actually go to court because I think they settled out of court. But um… they finally came had to come up with a plan to to do what was at least um um readily accessible in those buildings because some of them you just couldn't ..you couldn't tear them down and make another …another place, but they were purposely building them so that they weren't accessible.

MARY MURRAY: Purposely?

KENTON DICKERSON: Yeah. Well, I heard that they finally went before the Tennessee Housing Authority and somebody asked him …So one of the people with the housing authority asked them, well, what would you do If you're designing one of these places and your designer told you that you needed to make it accessible. And they said…they literally said, we'd get another designer. (laughs) They wound up losing a bunch of money, but… You know, that I don't see. Some people, when it first… started. The ADA first started. There was some resistance. The mayor of Knoxville, for instance, if I remember correctly. Was, you know, he was like, well, we've got our own building code. Why do we need to adopt an ADA code? We've got our own building code. Well, I don't… know for certain, but I would imagine that a good bit of Knoxville was not accessible at the time. I have heard people say uh when it first came out, well, you people with disabilities just ought to stay home. Shouldn't be. Why do you have to go out? Just send somebody to do what you're …what the things you need for you. Send somebody else to do it. Why do you have to go out? When I was with TRAC, we had a …we had a little ramp up going from our parking lot up to our um… to the sidewalk. It was in a strip mall. And a person, a guy next to us um rented a place and he was selling vacuum cleaners. Or something. And he just insisted that he was going to park in our accessible parking place because it was in front of his … his part of the strip mall. And he said, well, why does it?…. He insisted he'd just take our sign and move it down the street. Down the strip mall. In front of our place where there wasn't a ramp. And he was like… Why do I have to, why does it have to be in front of my place? I told him that’s where the ramp was. And we finally… He had got several… citations for moving that sign and parking in the handicapped parking place. The funny thing was he made a… He spoke to one of our staff one day and this was a lady who was working for us. She had arthritis and she had been a Marine drill instructor. And she had to retire because of her arthritis. He spoke to her and she just… went at him like a..like a drill instructor would go at. I think that's probably when he moved. (laugh) But yeah, that's just a funny thing. I think he learned a few words that day.

MARY MURRAY: (laughs) I guess it sounds like it's all different kinds of approaches you have to use when you're advocating.

KENTON DICKERSON: Oh, yeah. Some people are like, oh, well, I didn't know that. We'll… We'll do what we can. And others are well too bad. and uh…so there's a whole bunch of different approaches that you have to take. You can be nice, you can be um...forceful and nice. And you can sometimes just be a Marine Drill Sergeant. But um yeah, it just depends on the people and what their attitude is. And I think most people have come around to the fact now, after what 35 years um…that they at least have some… the hostility isn't there so much anymore. As it was. Maybe… maybe they don't realize exactly what ..what has to be done, but they're not so much, well too bad anymore. I think that's what.. The whole thing with the with the ADA, in my opinion, was not made to… It wasn't passed to make things totally accessible right at the time. It was meant to be a.. an ongoing process. Because when it, you know, started out, if you had an existing building, you only had to do what was readily accessible. And then if ….then when you came along and… remodeled or if you did substantial remodeling, then you had to do other stuff. But um it was… meant to be… an ongoing um I guess project if you will or an ongoing  um environmental change um that wasn't …that wasn't ….wasn't really supposed to be something that was right immediately. It was very well thought out. Justin Dart and his group did a great job of figuring out some way to make it so it would improve in the future.

MARY MURRAY: And have you seen that?

KENTON DICKERSON: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, definitely um places that would… never have been accessible before are now. For instance, and transportation, for instance, I'll give you another one. When I worked for the university, I was trying to set up you know job interviews for people with disabilities. We had local transportation um that ..there's handicap transportation..but they required a two-week advance notice. And that .. you know, you want to go and interview with someone for a job and say, oh, can you wait two weeks? No, you can't. But now, of course, it's 24 hours. And it's it's much more responsible. And besides the fact that there are now accessible buses. Chattanooga has.. Chattanooga was one of the first places to… have accessible buses. And that was before I even moved to Nashville, but the problem was they were terrible accessible buses. So they finally had to get… get a whole new fleet of buses that actually were .. were working. But they had the …at least the… desire to do the right thing. They still don't. I believe here in Chattanooga, they still don't go beyond the city limits. Now, Nashville. They'll pick you up anywhere in the county because they don't… they go beyond what the ADA guidelines say um that you have to live within three quarters of a mile of a bus route. But Nashville, since it's city and county combined, they'll pick you up from anywhere and that's um….So they go above and beyond what ..what's required, but they will not take you out of the county. If you need to go… I used to think, well, what if somebody wanted to work for Nissan down in Smyrna? Well you can't… because you can't get there. Unless you drive. Something like that, but… transportation is … is improved, it's always still a problem, but it's much better than it was. Because you don't at least have to wait two weeks before anymore.

MARY MURRAY: Yeah. When you had to help people get jobs, did you have to think about what beside …..you'd have to think of transportation and then the accessibility of the workplace …where there are other things?

KENTON DICKERSON: Yeah um I had, for instance, you know, sometimes you have to get people to …to be able to demonstrate that they can do the job. Um I had- I'm thinking of one lady that I ..that had ..that had a skin disease that was awful looking. And and it had affected her fingers. It actually had had eaten away the ends of her fingers. And she was an accountant. She was an excellent accountant, but people would look at her and say well, how can you be an accountant because you can't, how can you hold a pen or a pencil? So I had to suggest to her, you know, when you go for an interview, take some of your work with you. Then show them what you can do. You know where you've …where you’ve …some of the ledgers and stuff that you did in school and …and where you've worked before and just show them that you can write neatly and do the work. Because sometimes people I think when in employment, people will, you know, accept you in …you know ..you are in the office and they think you're a great person but in the back of their mind, they're they're thinking how can this person do what I need? How can a person in a wheelchair um get to the places that they need to go? How can ..how she can… keep a neat ledger when she doesn't even have whole fingers? That's what you have to overcome. It's not just a matter of getting to the the place and getting in the building. It's a matter of overcoming the people's ideas about what disabled people can and can't do.

MARY MURRAY: That that was a creative solution. That was a good one. sounds like that's made your job very rewarding.

KENTON DICKERSON: Yeah. Yeah, it could be… You know, when she got the job, I was like jumping up and down in the office and people were going, what are you doing? What's the matter with you? But yeah, there's sometimes you just have to be creative in in the ways you do things, particularly in employment. I haven't done employment in you know in years but um that was just one thing that I remember. And it's still…it’s still, is I think, prominent and and um in people having preconceived notions about um what people with disabilities can and can't do. I was watching a certain television broadcast around the 20 or just a little bit at the end of January. I'm not going to mention names, but there was a plane crash in Washington and where two planes came together. And people were saying, well, that's because you know… the FAA hires people who are mentally ill or epileptic or …or dwarves. I remember specifically saying dwarves. And that's why the two planes crash because they those people can't do the job. And like I say, I'm not making any accusations, but… but that's what I remember.

MARY MURRAY: And what went through your mind with all your experience?

KENTON DICKERSON: You're a fool. (laughs) No. I remember. You really don't have no clue about what people can do and what people can't do and what ….you're just making generalizations like not everybody at the FAA is a traffic controller. Not everybody, you know, why can't a dwarf be a traffic controller? They make chairs that go up and down, you know? So I was… Just the idea of people sometimes thinking that folks with disabilities are not like us. they're …they’re…for some reason they're just not um people.

MARY MURRAY: Frustrating.

KENTON DICKERSON: Yeah. Very frustrating. But um that's my that's my political statement for the day.

MARY MURRAY: Well um and just wrapping up, I'm thinking, is there anything else that you wanted to share that we haven't talked about?

KENTON DICKERSON: um…I'm thinking that …Is there still um.. a long way to go? For instance, in transportation and getting around. Like, this… Where I live, the nearest elementary school is like three miles away. And there were sidewalks. Actually, sidewalks with curb cuts that get down about two miles of that …that kids could walk on if they if they wanted to go…. If they wanted to walk to school. But um for the last mile, it’s on a road that's it gets a lot of traffic and has no sidewalks and in places no shoulders. And… that's you know people wonder why kids have to ride to school and that's one reason because we don't have the sidewalks and public accommodations that we really need.

MARY MURRAY: There is more to be done.

KENTON DICKERSON: There's much more to be done. But I can say it's a whole lot better than it was in 1991. The ADA has done wonders in terms of making the world more accessible and just better off for people who … who have disabilities.

MARY MURRAY: I appreciate you taking the time today. Those are… It is a perspective that I think is important for us all to remember. And I appreciate all the work that you did because you did make a difference.

KENTON DICKERSON: I hope so. I I still I want to go back to those places and see if they're still blocking the bathroom doors. (laughs) But I'm not driving to Nashville just to see that.

MARY MURRAY: I'm curious to know now. (laughs) Well, thank you, Kenton.