**Dr. Lou Conley ADA Oral History Interview Transcript**

DONNA DESTEFANO: Hello, my name is Donna DeStefano, and today I'm here interviewing Dr. Lou Conley for the ADA in Tennessee Oral History Project. The date is June 5th, 2025, and I'm in Nashville, Tennessee, and Dr. Conley is in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. Conley, I'm happy that you are here. The major goal of the project is to contribute to a historical understanding of the disability experience. And the ADA in Tennessee. So, we're going to get started now. Dr. Conley, tell me a little bit about yourself.

DR. LOU CONLEY: My name is Dr. Lou Conley, Dr. Lou Conley. And I was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. I mostly transitioned back and forth to Memphis and Grenada, Mississippi, a lot as a child. As a child, I contracted polio at age 3 years old. That affected my hearing. Most time that I could not speak, but I went through a lot of speech therapy, and it helped me with my speech. Some words I can say, some words I can't say, but I'm here. I have lived in Memphis, Tennessee all my life, and I have had a magnificent life run up. I had wonderful parents and grandparents to assist me along the way. I am now Dr. Conley. The struggle was real trying to get here. I went to school here in Memphis, Tennessee, and all my life, I just felt like that there was no support. Yet, I had parents and grandparents that truly encouraged me to seek my goals and dreams.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Thank you, Dr. Conley. So, you do identify as a person with a disability, is that correct?

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yeah.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes, and so.. can you talk a little bit about how your disability has impacted your life?

DR. LOU CONLEY: When I was in elementary school… first when I was in… back and forth in Grenada, Mississippi, my grandparents always told me to never tell no one that I had unique, awesome ability. I don't like to say “dis”. A person with unique awesome abilities. And, they say because back in the day, as a mixed race, half Navajo Indian and African American that I will be placed in an institution. So that put a lot of fear in me back in the day not to say nothing. So I pretend like I knew how to hear because I was good at lip reading. So, in elementary school. I failed hearing tests. And I just always was quiet to look around my environment to find what everyone else is doing. And tried to fit in. And throughout my middle school, I did the same thing, but I made C’s, D’s and F’s in all of my classes. And even in high school….In high school, I wanted to be like everyone else, and I went to try to go to work, and I worked at McDonald's. And I was quiet, but again, I paid attention to my environment to see what everyone else is doing, how I can be just like them, although I knew that I had limitation, and I didn't talk much. They just said, she's quiet. And, I graduated from high school, was a difficult point for me because that was a point in my life of isolation. And I said, I wanted to go to school. I did go to Southwest Community… State Tech. It was State Tech then. And I had to learn basic math and English… that I still don't know how to write, nor read due to my unique awesome ability. Um… it took me some time. I was slower than everyone in college, and um… I tried to get a job on the campus, and I did. And I joined single parents and everything, the tries… programs to try to help me as well, because I had my daughter. But I was still falling back in the system. Not being able to make the goals because I couldn’t read and I couldn’t write. And I couldn't, understand a lot of things that society expected of who you as a person. But I still hid it. I hid that my hearing was a problem or concern. I did get a job. Working at State Tech College, and I worked in the president’s office. Can you believe that? (laugh) And I was the assistant secretary. I had the Secretary but I was assistant. And I… I didn't talk much, but I helped with.. with a lot of professors. And I give them their tests, make sure they have everything they need for their classes. But, when the Secretary was absent one day, it scared me, because the academic president wanted me to type a letter. And I was going like, EHHHH, couldn't type that letter. I left off all ED’s, ES’s, all of those things, and it was just kind of choppy. Um, um, he said… that I walked in his office, and said “I need to ask you a question” And he said "Did you say Lou, I came to ax you a question?" And he said, “Are you saying ax as in AX or are you saying… He said ax as an AX or are you saying ask as in A-S-K?” Uh… I said “Ask you a question. Like anyone else.” He said, “Lou, have a seat.” And he knew that I have hearing a problem from the way I talked, but I took it as… he was making fun of me and my talking because I… I know my speech was… was trouble at times. But I was doing the best I can. And he said that I needed to take an English class. And I… I explained to him… Um, my deafness and my hearing aids. He was… he was sort of not sympathetic, you know. And I go, like that day, I did go and sign up for an English class. And my professor said you keep leaving off your ES's, ED's, S’s and R’s because I ..I grew up not hearing those sounds in my head, and I cannot fathom how to write..um… correct sentences, because I couldn't… I didn't hear… I don't… I don't… I didn't learn how to do it, because deafness have you…if you're hearing impaired, have you not understanding… those, that you are leaving off ED’s, S’s, and R’s and all of that. and I… I went through, and it was an experience to learn, but that still didn't stop me from leaving off or writing and leaving off my ED’s, ES’s and R’s and everything. I left State Tech, and I…I didn't graduate. I…I left State Tech and went to Lemoyne-Owen College. The same thing…same thing, how society expects you to write and read. And I… I… and who are me thinking that I'm gonna go into criminal justice? (laughs) I was gonna go into criminal justice at Le Moyne-Owen College, thinking that, okay, what I'm going into criminal justice for. But I just wanted to advocate, uh, for people like me. But even if they were in criminal law or people with unique abilities. But, um… I left there, and I go like, well I passed two classes. Hmm, let me try the University of Memphis (laughs). And I got accepted into the University of Memphis, and… I…got over there, and I found out that I wasn't capable of completing a full load of classes at the University of Memphis. And I went from four classes to …to three classes. Then I went to three classes to two. I took one hard class in my subject and my subject was Management Information Systems. And I took one… um hard class and one easy class. And the writing and reading…again, was the impact again, that helped me to mirror that I'm still not able to… to write or read as I thought. And, uh, I went to basic again, but I… I… I went through it, and I learned… I told myself this time you're gonna learn, because you're not gonna take a lot of classes, you're gonna learn how to do this and get through this. And it was a slow process. It took me 14 years….including counseling… my church …to help me get through college…. 14 years to get one bachelor's degree, a Management Information uh uh degree ... a BBA in Management Information. And then I went on, and I, uh… said, let me, um… go get a job, because… I wanted to be normal. You know, if you have a… a limitation… it… it…it it hinders you from being able to get a place to live, or standing on your own two feet to be in the independent...independent. I went to State of Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation in Memphis to help me. And I said, I went down there, and I said I finished my degree. Because I took two loans, I have to get this done. Um, I had no help then, I just took student loans out to help. And I went down there and I said I am a person with a unique disability, and I want to work. And I showed him my bachelor's degree. And I said, um… They said, okay. And… I… I…I was accepted. And then… I… They call me back to the desk back there. And the guy said to me because you have a degree doesn't mean that you're gonna get a job. You think you're gonna come in here and take my job?

DONNA DESTEFANO: Oh my.

DR. LOU CONLEY: I said, no, no, no, I just want to work. He said, but you're hearing impaired; now, who’s gonna hire you? I said, well, they said at the University of Memphis Disability Services that I can come here and get help for a job.

DONNA DESTEFANO: And this is at the State’s Vocational Rehabilitation agency

DR. LOU CONLEY: The State Vocational Rehabilitation.

DONNA DESTEFANO: The agency that's supposed to help people with disabilities get jobs. Okay.

DR. LOU CONLEY: He said well I’ll get back with you. I said okay. I was excited and waited. Seven years passed. Nothing.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Wow. Wow.

DR. LOU CONLEY: He had put my application in the garbage. They said, you're not in the system. I’m not in the system? So, I go… again, and I…go back to school, because I don't… I didn't want to sit at home and watch stories. I didn't want to, … as I sit home, I felt… I wasn't productive. I wasn't doing anything with my life. Everything around me, and I watch people in my apartment go to work, and I take my daughter to school, and I see people happily driving…going to work, but I couldn't work.

DONNA DESTEFANO: That had to have been very hard. That had to have been very

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yeah, right, it was very hard. Um… And I go like, what am I doing wrong? Um… That time, I still had my counselor who was counseling me, and she said… and my psychiatrist. They said of all the people, who walks into our office, we have never said someone that they don't want a check.

DONNA DESTEFANO: (laughs)

DR. LOU CONLEY: I just want to check once a month. I said, well, I want a check just like yours, I want a… Hmm… no, once a week… with money to live and everything. Like I said, we'll do all we can to support you.

DONNA DESTEFANO: That's great. You certainly had a lot of persistence as you in everything that you have done, and everything that you have shared so far is… takes a lot of persistence. And I do want to… was all of this happening before the ADA was passed? In 1990? Yes.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yes

DONNA DESTEFANO: Okay.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Well, I graduated in 1983.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Okay.

DR. LOU CONLEY: … from high school. So, you guys will remember my age, I was young, and… a lot of that was in my 20s back then, trying to find my way in life. My, uh, my, um… counselor said to me “I believe in you, and you have what it takes.” And she… but she had to get me to see that. Because when you're beat down in the system, my… just trying to provide and feed yourself, but you don't want that… the food stamps, SNAP. You don't want the… $300 check on disability coming in.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Just… you yearn for more. Your heart yearns for more. And life, and um… my heart kept yearning.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes.

DR. LOU CONLEY: And, uh… I… went back to the University of Memphis after the disappointment with V… VR. And I went for it. A second degree. During my second degree, I also went and worked part-time at UT Health Science Center. And all of this was leading up to who I am today. I just couldn't see it back then. I went to work in SDS, Students with Disabilities Offices at UT Health Sciences in Memphis. Again, I was also at the academic,uh, office with the president. And everything. Same as State Tech. Again, there. But then, I was also working with both and SDS, I would help student with disability on the medical level, then. Nurses, doctors, all those who had, um… A unique ability, but they was in medical school, and I thought, hmm… If they in there, hmmm, Why can't I go? I be the same. They have a unique ability. That… although it's ADHD, anxiety, whatever it may be, they are in medical school, they're in dental school, they're at nursing school, they are going there. And I gave them all their tests. And I've seen people cry and everything like that, and I'm going, hmm… They're crying too because it's a fear of you having a… a unique ability that limits you from being the best, and you try to just be the same as everyone else. But you're not, and you have to accept that, and that's what I learned in that space I'm in at UT Health Science Center. So, back at the University of Memphis, I went… I got my… I went for a bachelor, of professional study, and disability in rehab.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Okay.

DR. LOU CONLEY: That… that… that put a light on to understand how I can help myself, help others and advocate for myself, because I didn't understand the system. How does… why… people look at people with a unique ability in such provocative, perverse way that is always negative. So, in my head, I said, I'm not a “dis”. I kept saying, I'm not a “dis”, I'm not a “dis” I'm not a “dis, I'm not a “dis”. I'm a person with abilities.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Right.

DR. LOU CONLEY: My ability may be limited, but I have abilities to contribute. It may not be the same as yours, but I can contribute somehow, someway. So, um… After that, now I have… two degrees, I go back to VR. Downtown. That's how truly this… You know, I help, and I'm trying to get a full-time position, trying to help myself and be independent. Yes, they're accepted me

and I… at VR and everything. They didn't allow me to, um, help, I… gave me to someone over in Brownsville, Tennessee because of what had happened in my complaint of the guy throwing me out of system and putting my stuff in the garbage. Um… they sent me to… another person in Brownsville, Tennessee who was lifesaving.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Right, and Brownsville is… that's a bit of a ways outside of Memphis, correct? That's, like… How long… is it a half hour? I forget.

DR. LOU CONLEY: ah, it's about an hour one, but she came to me. And every time I met, the VR counselors came to me. She doesn't work anymore, she's very retired, I don't know. But when I say lifesaving…lifesaver…who checks …not only was my VR counselor, was my friend, was my, uh, mentor, was my… uh… I… who… whose saw the best in me and said “I'm not looking at your …your disability. I'm looking at you, and I have never met a client like you. I have never had a client of all the… I think she worked there for 30, 35 years... “I never seen no one like you, who's so gung-ho and wanted to work to be something . So, after I graduated from the University of Memphis with my degree, and she knew I had these two degrees. And I said, well, I want to be like you. Help other people with unique, awesome abilities. And I applied for every university, including the University of Memphis. And I was rejected in the state of Tennessee. Because when you have to write your professional statement letter for college for a master’s program, I was rejected. And she always, my VR counselor, will always make sure I read my statement. So it sounds good, or what I did to make sure that I… everything sounds good, and I didn't leave those EDs and ERs off. I make sure an ING's, and she… she checked my thing, and she said, “Lou?” And she'll say “You left that “s” off right here. I go aw...aw. There was nothing I had to help back in the day. There was no Grammarly, there was no… what's the name, so she gave me this little computer thing that I would type my stuff in and make sure each sentence will say the ING as it is for people with unique abilities to make sure. And that's the only thing I had a spell check button that helped me. And I sent my… my application, I applied to every college in the state of Tennessee almost, and everybody rejected me.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Okay.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Because I had to tell them that I am a person with abilities, but I'm hearing impaired. And it's almost like colleges just went like, no, we can't have hearing impaired people. Because the University of Memphis did the same thing, but they knew me from the first one, and they had a little thing on their necks in the class to help to understand what was being said. Colleges just didn't want to help me at all. Now, one college came in the mail. And I know that you know her name was Ms. Humphrey, Humphrey, Jane Humphrey at the Arc. And, um, she said… I said, got a letter from Auburn. They said that you are accepted into the University of Auburn. No car, no financial stability, no way to get there, nothing and everything, and I said, well… I can’t go. I don't have money to go… I don't have no way to get there. Ms. Humphrey said you're going ..you're going. And I said, um… I never be on a plane before. I… I was afraid and scared. She called Auburn. Mm-hmm, Try to set up stuff for me to help me. Uh, we set up interpreters to help me, who wanted to meet with me, to help me, um… Um, mmm… So that I won't feel lost. Uh, she had got my shuttle coming from Atlanta to Auburn, because it's another hour and a half, something like that. And, um, I arrived at Auburn University due to my Jane Humphrey VR counselor and um, who's my lifesaver. I graduated from Auburn University with my Masters of Education and Rehabilitation Council.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Wow. Wow. So this is your… this is your third degree, right? I can't…I think I'm keeping track right? Okay.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yeah, this is the third one. My professor said, Lou, you need to go back to Memphis. I said, uh-a, I don't want to go. I don't, I'm going to stay at Auburn. I'm gonna get me a job, I’m gonna get me some help, and I'm gonna live in Auburn.. Auburn, Georgia. I was gonna go down there. They said… You need to go back. There are so many people who are dependent on you in the Deaf community. To help other people. To see you, Lou. They need to see you. My professor, I said, no. That is too hard there. Um, they're not gonna let me get a job. They're not gonna let me help and feed myself. I don't know what to do. And my professor said, go back.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Wow.

DR. LOU CONLEY: AH! I arrive back in Memphis, Tennessee. And everything. I have 3 degrees, and I, you know, I was now on my own, because Jane Humphrey, the VR counselor, had did her job. Everything, but I was still in the system. Still trying to do, uh… I came, because we were looking for me a job now. Now, her job was to find me a job. And she go like… This technology stuff, I'm not used to, because she was older, I'm not used to all this technology stuff. They changed the system and be alright, da-da-da, and I said, oh, okay. And she said, I'm working hard for you. I'm working hard. We tried to get jobs. Everything was turned down. We worked hard.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Now, was this, was the ADA… had the ADA passed at this point, then?

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Okay. So there was some… protections and stuff that were put…

DR. LOU CONLEY: I had the protections, even in college, you know, for

ADA in colleges, but it was sort of, um… Mmm… I feel like that under the ADA, most colleges use it to their discretion, not for you.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Okay, so yeah, because I was going to ask whether you thought it was because they didn't know or they just were not doing what they should.

DR. LOU CONLEY: They they'll give you only so much… And when you're asking for stuff to help you… the “hearing individual” we call accidental because if a hearing individual thinks that because I'm giving you accommodations, you somehow gonna be better than them, and you're going, no, no, no, it's gonna… it’s gonna… I'm way slower than you. You're way advanced than me. And no matter if I got the accommodations, I still will fail. They are, because even if you gave me the extra time, I still may fail because I have unique limitations, that's… that's… that's… hindering my life, that… it takes more and longer for me to do things than you. And I heard that so many times from hearing individuals. And I'm going oh, it's not like it's a cheat sheet for us. I had to study just like you. Um… But many thought that it was. But not at Auburn University.

DONNA DESTEFANO: So they… Auburn was very different than the rest of…

DR. LOU CONLEY: Auburn University was my… When I say… the disability service was on cue for me. They helped me recognize some things. The professors were like “You're gonna pass. I'm gonna make sure that you know everything you need to know before you leave this campus.” Now, my stay was at a hotel, at Auburn's hotel across the street from the campus. And… there were four deaf individuals. Some are of who are hard of hearing and some was deaf, deaf, deaf, and they couldn't even hear nothing that falls on the ground. I can’t hear a falls on the ground, but I can see it. And, uh, and everything. Um, Auburn gave all of us, we individuals had our own interpreters. They walk with us through classes everywhere we went. If I try to say I want to order something on the menu… I just say four, and they'll say, oh, you want four? We'll sign. You know..you know. So, Auburn was my… they gave me the cue, not only the classroom was set up so universal that not only that I… and all the… we had… wheelchair we had visually impaired blindness … any type of cerebral palsy, spinal defect, all of us within this class learning from… learning, and we were all getting our Master’s, and you look at us and go like, wow. And there was no judgment, and we had the typical, normal students as well. That… who love being around us, but Auburn made it feel like a family. It made us feel like that universal design classroom that was set up for any unique, awesome ability that you had. You had screens on one side with the caption going down, and the professor talking. The writing of the, um, the, um… Miller screen, the syllabus, you had the writing of what they were saying. It was just awesome. Not only that I received the accommodation, but the whole entire class, those with and without unique abilities received the same accommodation which was very fair. So that no one would feel left out.

DONNA DESTEFANO: So you saw… you saw some pretty amazing real-life accommodations working, and universal design working for everybody.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yes.

DONNA DESTEFANO: What the real spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act is in action, and you got to see that after those other years of… of being discriminated against, and… and having people's attitudes sort of keep you down.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yes. Auburn… Auburn did not have a discrimination. Auburn… When they say War Eagles, War Eagles, they… they are War Eagles. And they were going to fight for you. No matter who you are. I love… of how they made me feel. And all, and they, they, they never knew any of my trauma. But I felt at home. I felt at home So, I… I live in the moment. Of those two years at Auburn University from 2011 to 2013 to get my Master's of Education and Rehabilitation Counseling. That was one of my best experiences of my life with ADA. I had no problem. They protected me, they gave me… When I ..If I'm going to pass a class to another room. Computer setup right there. Before I even get there. Huh? If I need… need anything. I had note-takers because I wasn't fast in writing like everyone else. Um, and everything, but even though I tried to take note.. take it they would have that screen and everything.. before I even walk out of the classroom, it is emailed to me. Just… just like that. Auburn. This is your notes for this class, da da, da I wouldn't be planning. How am I gonna get to know, but I don't know what, we just… I know I listened to… try to…watch what the professor do, but I still didn't understand. They all… and they sent the video of the professor, so I can understand what just went on, what just happened. Go to the next class. Same thing, just like that. So, it was easy for me to study. It was easy for me to… to… to… pass. It was easy for me because the ADA at Auburn University was off the chain.

DONNA DESTEFANO: So that made a huge difference in your life. The fact that the ADA existed, but also that the people at Auburn knew what to do, and it just seemed like they did it seamlessly, and… and very effectively.

DR. LOU CONLEY: They did. Um, um… Even the day after I have… I got my doctorate, I still consider myself a War Eagle first from Auburn University. I consider that one of my things. But after I got back from Auburn, I then… Um… sat around for a minute, still couldn't get a job. I went part-time and worked as, um… like an intern at VA for a while and everything like that. And then I was met again with those barriers. Where you come from? Deaf people? We've never had a Deaf person here. Hum, hum, hum, Um, most people went, um… who Deaf. They are… they clean the floors downstairs,  they clean the damn house, you get a degree. I don't know if it's just “quote” Memphis or the State of Tennessee Um… but… when I… when I see it in there, show up. It's like, ah! Y'all not gonna do work. Y'all not gonna… you you because they… they think back to old, old, old way of deafness. And they think that society here in Memphis, think back to old, old way of deafness in the state of Tennessee, that deaf people are deaf and dumb. We’re not!

DONNA DESTEFANO: Right.

DR. LOU CONLEY: We're not… we're not… that. Um, um, and… All my life, I've been trying to prove that we’re not. My brain is thinking. I'm… I'm thinking I...I...I...I...I could give back the privilege and my degrees make no difference. Only thing they looked at was… my deafness.

DONNA DESTEFANO: So you had to do quite a bit of advocacy for yourself in the face of all that discrimination, that you were back facing. um… and… and…and How did you do that?

DR. LOU CONLEY: Well next step I did was… I became involved. I was appointed by Governor Haslam to sit on the Council for the Deaf, Deaf-Blind, Hard Hearing. I sat on it for about 6 years. I also… said hmmm what else can I do? Hmm… my mind is, I need to learn. How can I help others who are the same as me? But I have 3 degrees, yet I still … Voc Rehab Memphis will not get me a job. What am I doing wrong? What…what…And I'm going like, well, there Deaf Caucasian people who work for VR. But that was not a Deaf person of color. And I want… I can work… I can work, but I never got the job. No job at VR. No matter how I act. So I went and I applied to become the State of Tennessee Rehabilitation Council member. Got on that. And I said, hmm, this is how the state works. Hmm, and I… the bridge, the gap stop bridging. Oh, okay. I saw the discrimination. I saw many things that I did not want to see. And I… they… they needed a person from the Memphis area. I was that person. And I saw even the people in Voc Rehab who was in the state of Tennessee. How the barriers. They did not like me being on that Council, but I learned. Um, then I went back, and I was voted the President of the Deaf, Deaf Blind Council, and I met those same rehabil... VR counselors, State of Tennessee Rehabilitation Council. Uh, you know, um… negative… hmm… says behind the scenes. It was discrimination of…of me being the President. That I was the first African American. They said, “No, you're not … no you’re not, you’re not the first person of color to be the President of the Deaf, Deaf-Blind, Hard of Hearing Council”. So, I went back, they told me the lady’s name, and I went back and asked her. Are you… was you on the Council? She said, no, I was just a member of the Council. I was never the President. She said, you are the first.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Wow.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Uh, I met… I was met with such racism that I resigned.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Okay. Wow.

DR. LOU CONLEY: I resigned.

DONNA DESTEFANO: So … so discrimination in multiple ways. Um In terms of disability as well as race. By state employees, is that correct?

DR. LOU CONLEY: By state employees..state employees. And um, I resigned. Um, because… they were… they had the… They had the Caucasian Council…. Council members attacking me. I'm like… I'm just here, you know, to try to help all people who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Deaf-Blind in the category state of Tennessee. And being the first person of color, it irritated the Council members. It irritated because many voted, but when others got in their ears, it was a turn of tables. Um, so I, um, resigned because I didn't believe that this was to be, uh, very constructive approach, and I didn’t like conflict. I don't like conflict, um um… It could've… it could have been worse for me. Um, and many of the Deaf community here in Memphis and of all other colors and races they were trying to fight for me, and uh, you know, I just… Because they needed me to advocate for them. Um, because they were Deaf… They didn't have the schooling and the education I had. And they needed my help, and I was getting calls from Texas, from Chattanooga, Knoxville ... people of all colors asking me to say we need your help on this Council. The Council is not listening to us and our voices. It's all about them. And on the Council, you still have those same State of Tennessee individuals who sit there who are hearing and does not understand the feelings of people who are in the Deaf, Deaf-blind, Hard-of-Hearing community because they cannot sit on that Council many times and tell them what is really what. I heard their voices. And they all voted. But, um, I left. And after I left, I was the… Uh, also the… uh, City of Memphis Council member for the, um the citizens with disabilities with, uh, uh, Jim Strickland. I enjoyed that and everything. I served my tenure about 6 years. And then I left, uh, because I needed to move on. I also was the President of the Memphis Independent Living Center. I've been a member, I was a member there for almost 8 years, and then I became President uh for 4 years in IL as well, because I needed to do more things for myself as well. Uh, because I was going back to school again. Okay, um, because I still couldn't get a job. I couldn't… I couldn't shake what… what was it that I needed to do. So I go back to the University of Memphis. And I applied for an EDS, Educational Specialist and… and School Counseling. Maybe I can go to the school to help the children with unique, awesome abilities. Um, and, um… I was… There, I got… I mean, I, at the university, and I met my professor who thought that I was extraordinary.…well I don't.. back again, my esteem is down. I'm just trying to… well, I've just didn’t want to stay at home. In my life, I think my career was school. I just didn't wanna be at home. I needed to find myself doing something that is unique to help me not to feel depressed with anxiety at all times, and I kept going like that.

DONNA DESTEFANO: And that took a lot of persistence on your part.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Yeah, uh, I went to the University of Memphis and I got my EDS in School Counseling, but along the way, I met um… new people, uh… came into, um, the University of Memphis Disability Program on the, uh, office, and they were looking at me like “You already got three degrees. Why do you want more?” Well, you don't know my story. My life has been very hard. I have, I don't want to stay at home. I want to… “But why? You got degrees. Why don’t you just go get a job?” It's not that easy for me. It's not that easy for me. Um… Uh, so… they were coming up with all kinds of stuff to do… to trip me up or fail me. There was time, um… I write and stuff. My professor saying, “Well, you left off the ED and S”. Okay. “Well, you didn't cite that.” I said, yes I did. It's at the end of the paper. My citations are at the end of the paper. “Well, you gotta cite it” Uh, “Where you… at the end.” Well, I didn't know that. No one never told me that. “So, no matter who tells you about the citations, you don't know it like that.” I'm like okay. But I remember …I said, no one….you can say it, but I need to be shown, show me visuals. “What… what are you talking about?” Okay, so I got through that, and I learned how to cite through citations..the, uh, better. Then I met my professor of Tiger Life. I was in her disability class and, uh, everything, and she remembered me because I also have a certificate as a disability expert as well from the University of Memphis. That's a certificate, 3 degrees with a certificate. Now an EDS. Ooooo.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Really…

DR. LOU CONLEY: And I uh...so, she helped me. She said. No one can understand me as a student trying to be a school counselor in an EDS program. She had to come in and advocate on many days. Uh, because professors did not understand me as a… uh …Deaf, Hearing Impaired person...um, and how I think and how we… we see the world from our view. I said, your views of the world is different. Mine is different because of what I have experienced in my life. Um, and she helped me, and then she said, come work for me at Tiger Life. I go, what? Oh, yes! She gave me a job for the first time in my life with 3 degrees all that I got a job. I got a job. I was so happy. I was a paraprofessional helping students over there with disabilities and unique abilities and children coming from high school who cannot go to college. And at the University of Memphis, the University of Memphis Tiger Life Program gave them an opportunity to see themselves much better, and she said, “Lou, you're a role model.” First time someone said that to me. Lou, you're a role model. You can show these students how this is done. They look up to you. I said, how? She's like, you got 3 degrees! (laughs) You can show them. And I learned so much from the Tiger Life Program. Uh and I kept moving up in the Tiger Life Program, kept moving up. And then my professor, same person, she comes to me and say “I want you to come work with me at the University of Memphis Institute on Disability.” I go, huh? She said, I need you to help me with my classes. So I just started doing… watching her in her classroom, and helping the students in the classroom who would, uh, cause she taught courses as well, undergrad and master's level courses. And I helped her with that as well. Um, and then she said. “You know if you become Dr. Conley, you can make a difference in life, really, really. Shut everyone's mouth.” I go.. Oh I’m so tired of school. And I start crying, so I just wanna work. She said, “You can do it, Lou.” She said, “I vouch for you.” Here I go again, applying to become a doctor of education, of special education. And, all the barriers went up against me. I mean, it was tough for 6 years. Um, and… I sit at home and I taught her classes from Zoom. That was my job. I created the syllablus and everything. And by me not being around people, I was able to learn so much from research from my home and computer, and I taught students, especially when COVID happened, I was teaching, teaching, teaching. And, um, I got so good at it, she just left me alone. (laughs) And, um, I taught undergrad and master's level course while I was getting my doctorate. And I can say truly, um… my doctorate of all my degrees… I'm so grateful that when I look back over the road, I have no student loan debt. All paid for.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Good for you.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Through my work. Of saying, I'll work If you could help me pay for my classes. I’ll work. I stay. I do whatever I um stay um…, but I… I don't want bills because I can't afford bills. Um, and… My doctorate was paid for by me working for my professor. She helped me to realize, uh, what I can do in my life. And I… graduated. Uh, May 2024. My doctorate of Education and Instruction Curriculum Leadership and Special Education.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Congratulations to you.

DR. LOU CONLEY: Here I am today, um… um, my story… I know. My story is unique, and I tell people, don't look at me now. Please, because… my degree, I'm a Christian, and I give my degree to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, because it doesn't belong to me, and I asked for … asked him to tell me, what do you need me to do with this? What is my purpose? And my purpose, again, is helping individuals with unique abilities to realize that empowerment…realize…hmm…that they, too, can achieve their goal. It may be hard. It may be heartbreaking as well to go through some things… that people feel like that ADA is their right. Um… And I… I believe that… ADA is for people with unique abilities. Not something that is a… a privilege to have. It’s ADA is something that helps people with unique abilities achieve their goals with their limitations. And I always say..told my students at the University of Memphis when I started teaching them to become rehabilitated that you can be just one way. One way from having to receive the same accommodations. Because it's somebody else today, it could be you tomorrow, but disability abilities is a group of people that you can join the group at any time.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Right, right.

DR. LOU CONLEY: You can join. No matter what age you are. What your… your… status in life. Or what you may have or think you have or… may…. you can… you're always welcome. I always tell, you're always welcome to my group because we will treat you. The same. We will love you, and you'll be a part of the family because I have experience. Some of them was harsh. Discrimination and barriers in my life. It gets better, but it's still ..some people say “She's not hearing impaired”. I said, I don't. Oh, yes, I still have my struggles, although you see all this fixed up now. It does look better than before. I still have my challenges.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Dr. Conley, I mean. In terms of unique, awesome people who happen to have a disability, uh, you certainly are, um, one of the leaders, um… in… in everything that you have done. And, um… and have plowed the way without, and with the ADA and still are plowing the way

DR. LOU CONLEY: Thank you. It has been the greatest reward of my life to contribute, even in just a small way. I use my ADA, my advocacy in every way possible, whether it's little… small, the smallest level that is to the largest level. Help anyone I can. uh ADA it's needed.

DONNA DESTEFANO: It is.

DR. LOU CONLEY: It's needed. It is so important. At this… this… fight for ADA. There's so many people with unique, awesome abilities and disabilities who fall and I know that those without try to make it their rights instead of the people with unique abilities rights. It is still needed. And the fight, it’s going on. I'm on the line to fight for ADA. Um, because our children need it in school. That autism kids who need it there. ADHD kids who need it there. Hearing-impaired kids who need it there...people in wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and even the elderly, we need it. We need it.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes. Yes, we do. Yes, we do!

DR. LOU CONLEY: We need it, um, um… And… and… It should be something that is given without question.

DONNA DESTEFANO: Yes.

DR. LOU CONLEY: If your medical records say you have a unique, awesome ability, disability? Then you should receive ADA. And if you have challenges and limitations, you should receive ADA. And no one has the right to take it from you and tell you that you only can have this, you only can have this. Who said that my ADA was limited? Whatever I need in my life to make me successful, self-sufficient, independent. Then I want all of my ADA rights.

DONNA DESTEFANO: We are very grateful to you. Thank you very much, Dr. Conley.