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Mary Beth Mitchell interview for the Lest We Forget Collection of Oral Histories

Mary Beth Mitchell

Jeff Moyer

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MARY BETH MITCHELL

Jeff: The date is Tuesday, July 15, 2003. We're in Akron, Ohio for the recording of this element of the Lest We Forget project and I'm interviewing Mary Beth Mitchell. Welcome, Mary Beth.

Mary Beth: Thank you.

Jeff: Mary Beth would you describe what your background has been concerning life inside the state institutions?

Mary Beth: I myself have had no personal experience about institutions as such. However, I do have a very dear friend who spent many of his years in an institution and he has shared with me some of those experiences, through the years that I've known him, and that's Jack Carroll.

Jeff: Yes, can you tell us what Jack told you about his life inside institutions?

Mary Beth: Actually for most of the time that I've known him which has been seven years, he has alluded to his life there but he hasn't really been forthcoming. In the past probably two or three months we've been working on some of his memoirs and writing them down. When he gets to parts where he says one of the chapters will have to be where I live and where I used to live he begins to stumble and he recalls some details that are rather outrageous. Situations where he was put into a role of almost like a jester of sorts where he would be making people laugh. He said that it was funny but he'd always said that it was kind of a sardonic aura. He also when he came back yesterday after his interview with you and recalling some of the things that he had been through. He recalled that when he was living in Cleveland that he felt incredibly trapped and very much in a prison. He was confined. He was locked in. He was made to do his wash and had to walk to get to it even though there was a washing machine and a dryer right across from his room. He remembers situations where some of the wards were filthy and he just remembers this kind of pervasive aura of despondency and depression in a way. I think that's why he doesn't talk about it an awful lot. It's not one of his happier times of his life. He has a tendency to block those times out.

Jeff: Jack came across as a man with great resilience and balance. I imagine to dredge up the particulars would be difficult for him. Is Jack the only person you've worked with that lived within an institution?

Mary Beth: Yes.

Jeff: You've worked with Jack for seven years.

Mary Beth: Yes.

Jeff: In what capacity?

Mary Beth: I work at a place called Hope Homes and it's a group home for three gentlemen, this particular home has three gentlemen in it with multiple disabilities and I'm a caregiver. I aid when they're unable to do things for themselves. I escort them to places and help them to become independent actually, as independent as they can possibly be. I help them to do that. That's basically the goal is to help them to become independent.

Jeff: So you both provide services to teach and services to support is that a fair statement?

Mary Beth: I don't know if it's so much to teach, depending on your definition. I would say

that I am there to bring out their independence that's already there because these three gentlemen are very independent souls and they just need to have situations which help them to use their independence and that empowers them.

Jeff: What have you seen in terms of personal growth for Jack and the others with whom you've worked in the years you're working with them?

Mary Beth: The three of them started out their career as roommates by the usual roommate kind of squabbling and it was always very civilized squabbling but they had a hard time settling their disputes. One of the most wonderful aspects of their growth was the fact that they have learned to deal with each other and resolve their own conflicts. I saw myself in the beginning as being kind of a guide to that resolution, the conflict resolution. I would redirect some of their statements and help them to see each other and they were very receptive. They're very, very good people. One of the best things that they've been able to do is get along. When they do still have disagreements which is going to happen in any family situation they're able to resolve it and understand that each one of them is an important person in their lives. So probably that's the most wonderful part about living in this situation. They are able to interact with each other and settle conflicts.

Jeff: From what you know about where Jack and others have lived before what's the difference between the settings they're in now and where they've been previously in terms of being able to develop and apply that skill.

Mary Beth: Where they are living right now is a family situation. They are encouraged to socialize and they're encouraged to go as many places as possible. For example, tonight we're going to the Firestone concert, outdoor concert. They are able to cook and clean and they have their own room. They have their own possessions. Each one of them has a respect for the other's possessions. There are no locks and keys. They are able to come and go within a limited amount of time just based upon their needs. For example, Jack needs to take medicine at a particular time so that needs to be taken into consideration when he does leave for extended periods of time. But for the most part it's a free situation. It's a situation where people are operating as a family would operate.

Jeff: And previously?

Mary Beth: From what Jack said there was very little respect for possessions and privacy. One of the things that I've noticed that I always found interesting at the beginning and then when I found out that he was living at Apple Creek for a time and I had heard stories about the open environment where people would take possessions at Apple Creek. I realized that part of the reason why he was less forthcoming with allowing people to use his things was because he had probably had problems with people taking them. He is a very generous person but when it comes to, for example, having a movie sent from the library, he is very possessive of that. His camera or his pictures, if someone asks may I see it. He's very hesitant in giving it to someone. And I always wondered about that because Jack is generous by nature. He is a very giving and loving person. For him to be so reluctant to share material items made me curious and once I found out that he had been living in a place where things were there one day and gone the next, then that kind of explained why he would be so possessive of his possessions. I'm not sure there are any other instances I can think of. But that's one thing that seems to be a difference.

Jeff: The three gentlemen that live in the home, the Hope Home where you work, how do they spend their days?

Mary Beth: In a variety of different ways. They're very independent as I said. When we first got together in that particular home seven years ago we would try to engage them in games and different activities. One of the games that went over well was poker but for the most part board games and things like that are really not something that interests them. So we decided that they were quite able to come home from work and do the things that they wanted to do. Jack loves to sit out on the porch and read. He takes walks. He goes downstairs and he exercises on his bicycle. He is very independent as far as cleaning his own room and doing his wash. He does things before he has to do them. He's an avid reader as I said. He loves to read. He's also interested in movies. One of the social things that we do in the home is we enjoy gathering in front of the television and we have a Friday night dinner and a movie type of situation. We like to discuss different movies and that's one thing that they really do like to do together when they're in the home is watch a movie. We love to sit around and just talk. That is probably their very favorite thing to do is just to sit around and talk. They would rather engage themselves in conversation than to play a board game that doesn't interest them. So we do a lot of conversing. There's a lot of social interaction. They encourage one another too. They listen to each other when they have—sometimes the conversation overlaps but they do remember things from day-to-day that each one of them has done and continue the discussion at later times, ask each other how their day was. So probably I would say that the most social thing that we do is just we talk and we joke. Just yesterday we had some people come over from the chapel. This is where they attend church. Jack is a free spirit and he'll go at times but he has God in his heart and he says you don't need to go to church to see God. But he'll go for the social aspect of church and people from that particular church, the chapel, come to visit on Mondays occasionally when the situation is good. Just yesterday we were all of us, two of the people from the church, and the three gentlemen and myself we were sitting on the patio of the porch and just talking and having a lovely time. We must have spent a good two hours just sitting on the porch and talking.

Jeff: A lost art.

Mary Beth: Oh, definitely and these gentlemen are wonderful at conversation. Another thing is we do go out and do many activities. The gentlemen have been to Washington, D.C. to be tourists; had a wonderful time. They went to Niagara Falls last year. They've been to West Virginia for a concert and an overnight stay. They're planning and hoping that they can take a cruise some time soon. So all of this is guided by Hope Homes and various caseworkers that are able to guide them and help them to do these activities. Staff goes with them and they have a wonderful time. We go to sometimes two concerts a week. Firestone concert is one and Barborton Lake Anna concerts on Fridays. We go to visit their friends. Jack has a girl friend that lives in Ravenna that we go and visit quite often on a Sunday. There are many, many activities that we do together and they do things individually as well. Jack usually visits his lady friend on Sundays by himself. We take him down and he does that. Jack also does things on his own. Sometimes he'll call SCAT and make arrangements to go to the mall or go bowling or go swimming.

Jeff: SCAT is?

Mary Beth: SCAT is the public transportation for men and women with disabilities.

Person: Could you just say that phrase again and call them SCAT instead of saying local transportation.

Mary Beth: Jack will call public transportation and make arrangements to have transportation pick him up and take him to the mall or to swim or to go bowling on his own.

Jeff: You mentioned several things but do you see the neighborhood, the people in the immediate vicinity accepting and are the men living in the home a part of the community ??

Mary Beth: Now that's a really good question. That has been a mixed type of reaction. Our neighbors to the right have been incredibly accepting. They have two children and the children come and call on Jack to come and play with them. The little girl just adores Jack and the mother is very receptive. She's a neighbor. She converses with him. Jack goes over and sits on her porch and talks to her while they watch the children play. Or Jack is sometimes very interactive with the children doing squirt gun activities and running through the hose and just being a part of that group. He knows probably every child in the neighborhood by name and they know him and they say hello to him and he's just very well received. He's a very popular person. He remembers when he asks them a question he'll respond to it the next day and continue the conversation. They have a very good relationship and they do the same for him. They remember and ask him about things. The neighbor to the left was hesitant at first. I think at first she felt a bit threatened by the idea of someone, now Jack felt that it was someone with disabilities that she felt threatened by. In a larger perspective she may have just felt threatened by a grown man with her children. That's understandable. But she was very frosty with him at first. A bit reserved as a matter of fact almost unfriendly and would tell him that he could not be in the yard playing with the children. It was not acceptable to her and Jack would become very vocal and it was hard for him to understand why she couldn't accept him. He blamed it on the fact that he had a disability and she was ignorant of that and not understanding that just because he had a disability he couldn't relate to her children. Then through the years it was funny because he would just continue to say hello to her and he wore her down. If anybody could do something like that, that's Jack. Now she'll be going past and say, "Hey Jack, how's it going?" And Jack will respond, "Good, how was your day today." They have a nice, hello, goodbye relationship. She still isn't comfortable with him being in the yard and again from a larger perspective, I don't think it's the disability. Jack mentioned once too that there was another group of men with disabilities that lived in the house that we occupy now. They were less visible. They were not active in the community as the three gentlemen that are there now. And that they may have developed some misperceptions based on the neighbors that were there before and when they were visible I guess they were a bit ruckus and left the building a lot without any supervision and created some noise. So Jack also thinks that maybe that prejudice followed us there.

Jeff: Do you see any prejudice or attitudinal blocks being put up to accessing public services, businesses, medical offices, anything of the sort?

Mary Beth: Actually we've had some incredible successes as far as where we go. The gentlemen are well known. Well at least one of our gentlemen is well known at the Comedy Club in Cuyahoga Falls Hilarities. He goes there once a month and the people there call him by name. This past Thursday all four of us went and they were so accommodating and so wonderful. I think that the attitude that we've been received with is based on these three gentlemen's whole attitude toward society. They look society in the face. They aren't bashful. They're polite and they say thank you and people are very responsive to that mannerly attitude. It's not a grueling thing. It's just a very polite way of being and these are three very

polite gentlemen. Wherever we go, for example, one of the gentlemen went to Clays Park and they got stuck. The van got stuck in the mud and they were helped by somebody immediately. Whenever we go out somebody always holds the door. It was kind of interesting though, sometimes it's taken to extreme. We were at a Firestone concert and I was assisting one of our gentlemen with his coat because it was getting a little cool. A woman, well-intentioned, ran over and began helping. I said, "thank you." Well, another Jack said "Thank you." and she said, "Oh, you're real welcome, honey, I've been here and done this. I know how this is." Her whole demeanor was rather sugary and she said, "There you go sweetie, is that okay." Poor Jack, he's a 39 year-old man and he's okay. He smiled at her and just left it be at that. Afterward I said what a sweetheart she was and he just laughed. They shrug things like that off for the most part because the blessings is what they count and they run into way more sincere people than they do people who are well intentioned but sugary and go overboard.

Jeff: So it sounds like if you see limitations they're limitations of attitude that are helpful to the extreme without sensitivity to actual need. You've not seen any out and out hostility, prejudice, denial of services?

Mary Beth: No, I would need to have some time to think about that because as I said the seven years that I've spent with them I've been really blessed. I think that at times we in the home, the staff, have a tendency to become a bit more protective than we need to be. There are times when we don't know where the line is between what our residents want to do and can do. Sometimes that not knowing has a tendency to make us take the safe alternative and help them more than they should be helped. That has a tendency to have a disabling affect and I don't know what to do about that because we're faced with a situation that if we decide that they can do it, they're just saying they don't want to, and we push them and they fall. So we need to take them on their word and 99 percent of the time they're not bluffing. They do what they can and they do give 100 percent. But there are times when we just wonder and we wonder if we're aiding their gradual deceleration of their faculties, aiding their using the wheelchair more, for example, aiding their using a walker more, aiding their sitting down too much, weight gain sometimes, things like that. That's a really difficult position to be in. We want to be more enabling and sometimes we have a tendency to take the protective safe route and be a bit disabling. But it's not done without a lot of thought, again the well-intentions.

Jeff: The evolution of their lives the men with whom you work, what's the nature of their family involvement?

Mary Beth: We have been very blessed with excellent families. Jack Carroll's is wonderful. In writing down his ideas about his life, his praises to his family is on almost every page. His sister is very actively involved. His mother was very actively involved. He never sensed any kind of resentment toward his existence as a person with cerebral palsy from his family ever. He was cherished and he felt cherished. Brian has family that is in North Carolina and in Texas and they call all the time and Florida and they visit in summers just to come and see him. He also has good friends that are able to take him places and help him to be involved when we're not involved with something at the home. Jack Whittaker has family in New Jersey that's very active in his life. He just went up for his aunt's birthday to visit her in New Jersey. She's been here to visit and make sure that things are going well for him. He has an excellent attorney who has provided guidance for him and he's his legal guardian. As far as family, we've been very blessed that these gentlemen have their family very much involved.

Jeff: Do you think that the numbers of men living together is an optimum number or would you like to see it smaller or in terms of planning for the future community integration what are your thoughts on the numbers of people appropriate to live together?

Mary Beth: We are going to be hopefully moving by January. It's something that's been delayed for reasons and when we move we're actually going to be acquiring a new resident. So four gentlemen, what I'm thinking is that if the house is the proper size, big families are prevalent. You could have a big family and be cooperative and have a good environment. The problem arises when the home is understaffed. I'm hoping that we will be able to have another staff person at all times except perhaps when they are sleeping. But for activities if one of the gentlemen doesn't wish to go to one of the concerts it's very difficult because we all have to go most of the time. Now Jack Carroll, he can stay at home and have independent time. But we have one resident who needs to have care and he would have to come along whether he wants to stay at home or not. That's the one thing that I think if it is a bigger home and they're not on top of each other then I think four, even five doesn't sound unreasonable if the space is good and if the staff is there to be able to provide for opportunities.

Jeff: Have you ever seen any aggression between the men?

Mary Beth: Oh, that's kind of funny. Yes, they're men and they have disagreements and we have a man who has a self-proclaimed hot temper and he blames it on his cultural heritage. He'll say this is what my father was and this is why I'm this way and then he also says I'm a Taurus and that's why he's like that. He can get angry. As far as violence his bark is much worse than his bite. But his bark is pretty loud, but he has no follow through with it. He has an outburst and then he goes to his room, settles down, comes back and nine times out of ten he'll apologize. The other two are much more passive. The other two men are much more passive but they don't back down from a confrontation. They face each other and actually it's very healthy. They are able to air their problems without keeping them inside. I think that's what's kept us happy for the past seven years is they're honest with each other. The aggression is limited to talk and outbursts and stiffening of jaws. But he's fine. They don't do any damage.

Jeff: Was there anything in the any of their backgrounds or vibes that you read that suggested that they in previous living situations had problems controlling aggression or involved violence?

Mary Beth: Yes, I think that some of the things that I know might be confidential. But I do know that the person with the temper, the man with the temper has had some episodes where things got out of control.

Jeff: Do you know the nature of the living circumstances he was in at the time?

Mary Beth: He always lived with his mother. He lived with his mother and he was a single child. He came from there and began living at Hope Homes. As a matter of fact he went from, I think he was in two, maybe, I'm sure of two homes before he came to ours. And it was all moving because of his discontent and moving because of his temper. I think we finally found a chemistry that works.

Jeff: So your opinion is that when able to choose with whom one lives and the proper supports even people that have a background can live successfully together.

Mary Beth: That's been our experience. As a matter of fact what you just brought up brings to mind the fact that he had asked Jack Carroll before the move to our home if he would like to be his roommate. They felt that within each other that they were going to be able to get

along. I definitely think that when the dynamics are right it can work. As I said our staff has been very, almost counseling in their nature from the beginning and redirection and guidance rather than getting upset with the situation. They've been guided like a family counselor almost, a built-in family counselor so that's really helped. Now they do things automatically that at first because of the different dynamics may not have done on their own. It would be an advantage to any family to have a built-in counselor there to settle disputes—could have used one several times.

Jeff: Do you have any thoughts that you would like to pursue that we haven't covered or questions you want to respond to more.

Mary Beth: Well, one of the things that I wanted to bring out too was the idea of involvement in community. I've noticed how Jack has struggled being able to get back into the community in a job that he would feel satisfied with. I've noticed so many of Jack's talents working with him and being with him for so many years that I see as being unused and undeveloped—for example, his ability to listen. One of the things that he has done for me is he's practically helped me raise my daughter since she was eleven-years old because when I come to work these people being like friends have listened to all of us talk. We don't bare our souls but we do tell them the rudiments of what's happening in our lives. My daughter adopted Jack and enjoyed having him come to her plays and gymnastics events. Whenever I would get upset with my adolescent daughter he would remind me, "Mary Beth, she's a good girl. She's just a teenager, Mary Beth" and he counseled an assistant supervisor's son over the phone once and gave him compliments and made him feel good. Another staff member's little boy comes into the house to show Jack his awards and things that he has done. He's a people magnet and I see that as a talent that could be developed if the right person were able to get a hold of that and use it in some imaginative way that would be productive. I see him as a counselor or a mentor or so many things that involve conversation and social skills. He's wonderful at giving people hope and kindness and a good ear and good advice, excellent advice that makes sense. So that's one thing that I can see happening in the future is that people who do work with people with disabilities when they try to find them positions it would be nice if people who hired people had more imagination and could fit them in. Another example, would be Jack, the other Jack, Jack Whittaker would be an excellent person to have in a radio station, knows all of the artists. If he could have just a small couple of hours within a radio station being a gofer this would give him so much satisfaction and could possibly be very productive and a good public relations kind of a move for a place that played music, a radio station. So I can see things like this in these gentlemen. I would hope that more imagination could be used when placing people in positions in the community.