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## Wayne Alexander interview for the Lest We Forget Collection of Oral Histories

Wayne Alexander

Jeff Moyer

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**WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**Lest We Forget Interview Project**

Interview date: July 14, 2003

Interviewer: Jeff Moyer

Interviewee: Wayne Alexander

**JM:** Today is Bastille Day, July 14th, 2003. This is a taping in the Akron portion of the Lest We Forget Project. I'm interviewing Wayne Alexander. Wayne uh what is your uh what is your work role?

**Wayne Alexander:** Um at the County Summit Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, my job is staff development manager. I'm responsible for training the uh approximately 720 employees that we have at the county board and--and whatever's required or mandated by the state.

**JM:** How long have you worked there?

**WA:** Um...I've been employed at the board now for uh almost 26 years.

**JM:** What experience did you have in the course of your professional work with state institutions?

**WA:** Um...early in my career, I uh paid a visit to Apple Creek Developmental Center. Um...it was about late...late 70s, and while a lot of the facilities were vacated, and the residents of the developmental center living in more hospitable environment there. Um the buildings that I visited were--were quite frightening in that they look very much like prison. Very stark and sterile. Um...bars on the windows, very heavy doors that would slam shut and lock with bars on the windows as well. Um...actually quite intimidating uh when I visited. Shortly thereafter, those buildings were uh removed, dismantled, torn-down, which was definitely progress.

**JM:** When you were working to move people back into the community, did you spend time at Apple Creek?

**WA:** Um...I did spend a little bit of time at Apple Creek. Visited some of the other developmental centers around the Northeast Ohio part of the state. Um...mainly uh to meet some of the folks that we would be deinstitutionalizing. Um...those people were scheduled to be brought up back into the community um in group homes around Summit County. So we did get a chance to visit some of the facilities, uh meet some of the individuals with disabilities that were gonna be reintegrated into their community. Um...and--and most of the facilities varied. Some of the older facilities were white, stark and sterile, and a few of the more modern facilities, were a little bit more inhabitable. Um...but by far the people that I met there, uh who have been

relocated to Summit County, have thrived. Um...very much thrived in--in their reintegration into our community, into their new group homes, working well with their staff. Um...often times back with some of their family members, and--and just seeing the growth and change in those folks. It's just very--been re--very positive for me...as....as a care provider over the years.

**JM:** When you were um...within the institution talking to people who were moving out, what...what was it like? What was your experience?

**WA:** It's interesting when--when you meet people who've spent um all or most of their lives in an institution, there's a...there's a lot of behaviors associated with that. Some--some of the individuals had a...a difficult time adjusting to the fact that they weren't constantly told what to do. I think uh a lot of typical people in our communities, take for granted the choices, the independence, the ability to make simple decisions like what you're going to have for breakfast, whether you're going to have cream in your coffee, and the decisions and choices we take for granted um...are really something brand new for people in an institution. Those folks had a lot of um...interesting behaviors that um...one of which I noticed was shoveling food. That if you didn't eat quickly, um...you would run out of time and staff would remove your meal, or other individuals sitting next to you might steal your food. Um...so there were a lot of um...interesting behaviors that people had to make adjustments to fit into society, to fit back into the community, that I thought was...was really quite interesting for me as a...service provider.

**JM:** What was the settling like where you would visit within the institution?

**WA:** Um...basically there were cells...in Apple Creek in particular there were cells. Um...there was a large area where everyone ate together. Um...there were staff um watching the doors, um...telling people what to do, telling people where to go...uh...making the decisions for them. I do remember that uh people were given what they would wear and there was no choice as far as clothing or outfits. Um...I did always--I remember I always visited the developmental centers in the warm weather...um... so the...just--just the wardrobe of people was very limited. Um...

**JM:** Did you have uh...was there uh any smell or odor to the place?

**WA:** Um yeah it was pretty foul. I would say you put a lot of...the odor...

**JM:** Begin with the--

**WA:** Yeah. Um...when I visited the--the--some of the developmental centers the--it was quite an unpleasant experience. Not only to the eye, but to the nose and the ears as well. There was a lot of uh...just a lot of people put in one large area, a lot of odors associated with that. The sounds were quite frightening at time--times, people just screaming and...and just a lot of emotional pain I noticed on the part of some of the residents there...and even though I only visited briefly over the years.

**JM:** You mentioned visiting people in cells?

**WA:** Uh yeah one of my--one of--the first visit I made uh the people weren't in cells at the time uh...but it was--it was fairly obvious they had lived in cells. We were giving--given a complete tour of the Apple Creek facility, and a couple of the buildings um...looked...as harsh as a prison would look. That there would be uh hard wood floors, um...concrete walls, bars on the windows, bars on the doors. The doors would slam shut and would be locked from the outside.

**JM:** Not individual jail cells?

**WA:** No, not individual jail cells. Um...but when I visited, people weren't being housed in those cells, so I couldn't honestly tell you um... how the people--where there was one person per room, two or three people per room. But that the experience I did have was um...seeing people in the large um...like a cafeteria style eating area, with no privacy. Um...very noisy, very loud. Um...a lot of commotion and chaos. Um...just--just not--not a situation I would want to find myself in.

**JM:** Do you remember anything about the food?

**WA:** Everyone was eating the same thing. The food when I--when I was at the...developmental center, the food was the same for each individual. So people basically um ate what they were given. They ate what they were fed. There was no decision on the part of the individual, no acknowledgement of a person's likes or dislikes, regarding the menu. Um...no choice. You got what was given to you and if you didn't eat it quickly, you may not get to finish.

**JM:** When people...when you uh moved people back into the community, it--during the whole process did you see signs of abuse, neglect, injuries?

**WA:** When people were reintegrated into the community after leaving the developmental center, um...the thing that was most noticeable um...I just think...I never noticed any physical pain, any--any scars or marks or anything like that. Uh...it was more an emotional situation. Um...an individual brought back into the community...their adjustment period was sometimes short, sometimes lengthy...but I do remember working with a few individuals from some of the developmental centers who still had nightmares, uh...still had trauma inflicted on them, and would relive that trauma...uh by some triggering event in the workshop, and...and it would be shocking to see that an individual could still be adversely affected by an event that was ten years in their history, something that they had experienced in--in the developmental center, and depending on the trigger, um...would re-live it. Even years after they'd left that institution.

**JM:** Can you be specific?

**WA:** Um...yeah I used to have one individual that uh...one individual that um...when something was done by another individual, in confidential I don't want to share too much about that, um...that person would flee. And I just remember looking out the office window once and seeing him running up Market Street in Akron um...because his--his supervisor had done something...said something that triggered uh...uh...a ten year old memory in the individual. And his response was to flee. Now in a developmental center, I'm not sure where he would have fled to...my guess it was probably just run out of the room, but here in the community, he had the chance to--to literally leave the building and that's what he chose to do in response to--to

something that his instructor had mentioned that in hindsight was--was quite innocent. And that instructor was completely unaware um...of what he said, triggering that bad uh...memory in the part of that individual.

**JM:** What uh...what--how long had people been in the institution on average when they returned to the community?

**WA:** Um...Many of the individuals I worked with, when they returned to the community, had actually been in the developmental center most of their lives. These--these were individuals that we got out of the developmental centers in their 30s, some of them in their 40s, that had spent um...decades in that environment, in that institution.

**JM:** Did any of them ever speak about what life was like in the outside?

**WA:** A few of the individuals did share their experiences with me coming out of the developmental center. Um...mostly it wasn't to say how bad it was. Mostly it was to talk about um...staff providers in those environments who had been kind to them. A lot of times the individuals we had coming out of the developmental centers were um...not only happy to be in the community and had connected with a lot of their--the staff and some family members, and other people living with them in the group home. But they did have fond memories of family members who had since passed away, that would come and visit at the developmental centers. Fond memories of some of the staff and providers that had worked in those developmental centers, that were--had left a lasting impression for their kindness, and care. And in many ways, some of the developmental center's staff served as surrogate family for--for some of the individuals that were deinstitutionalized. Um...but typically I didn't get a lot of... bad experiences related to me. I really think the people that came out of the centers back in the communities...were happy to be where they were and...didn't want to relive um...the nasty horror stories. I think a lot of folks had successfully put that behind them, and were moving on with their lives in their new environments, in their communities. Um...just a breath of freedom. And why relive the past?

**JM:** The um...when people came back into the community, what did they bring with them?

**WA:** Um...when people returned, uh to their communities, uh really I don't recall them bringing much with them, other than some of their emotional baggage, um...some of their good memories, uh...but quite frankly, there weren't a lot of possessions. Typically I remember a few people having um...photographs of loved ones, photographs of staff, and--and other fellow residents from the uh...developmental centers. But I don't remember them bringing a lot of stuff. They didn't have furnishings, they didn't have their own TVs and stereos. But shortly after moving back into the community, those were some of the things that they got. They--they would buy a TV, buy a stereo, um...back in those days they didn't have the Walkman's like they do today. So people would get their transistor radios, um...start getting involved in the uh sports activities. The Indians, the Browns, the Cavaliers. Um...start--start going out into the real world and experiencing that, creating new memories.

**JM:** The expectations that were held about people when they were institutionalized, the whole structure of the institution, set a very low level of expectation compared to...what is expected of people living and integrating into the community, what have you seen in terms of a change in people who have been able to bring about...in their new circumstances?

**WA:** I think the changes over the years with people who have come out of the developmental centers has been remarkable. I know that personally John and--John Gill and I have been friends for many years and...and uh I don't recall the exact date but somewhere in the 80s, John came out of developmental center and I watched him blossom. I've worked with him on and off, both at the old Akron Center and the Tallmadge Center, and--and even a few years since I've left, direct workshop involvement with John. But I noticed that John found himself a great place to live...and Judy's provided a wonderful home for him. And John's had a couple of roommates over the years that he's gotten along really well with. I've watched him blossom at the workshops where he's found employment, where he's made new friends, both with staff and--and other individuals in the workshop programs here in Summit County. John's been involved in our planning and priorities community, which is part of our--our--one of our board functions that helps chart the course for the County Summit Board of MRDD, in Summit County. Um...helped--helped make the plans and prior--set the plans and priorities for the agency. He's--he's just blossomed in the fact that he's gotten involved in Special Olympics. Um...he and I used to always discuss the Cleveland Indians and the Cavaliers, and the Browns. And--and together share our frustrations or share the joys of having a decent sports team.

So I've watched him just blossom and--and develop friendships and make a home for himself, and become involved in his community, that I think is truly exceptional. Um...it's not--it's not very often that you meet um...typical people in our communities that reach the level of involvement. Every time I would see John and there was a levy for our agency coming due, he would always volunteer to help stuff or label envelopes for our mailings, always--always wanting to be involved because John's a very dedicated individual, knows he's part of the community and--and actually has a responsibility to that community that's helped him out over the years too. He just definitely is the kind of person that wants to give back.

And over the years, I--I've met a lot of individuals coming out of the developmental centers who have made a home for themselves, made new friends, um..learned to use public transportation, found work in the community, found a wide variety of activities in the community. Um...going to the park, going to concerts, uh just something as simple as walking down to the corner store to buy a soda, or gum or candy, is...is a freedom that...the folks in the developmental center, it was something they never had. Just--just the choices that you and I would take for granted. Every day, simply the ability to walk out of your house and get your mail, that was not something a person in a developmental center was allowed to do. And it's amazing that that--those simple little freedoms that you and I might take for granted, were something--it was...it was a gift to people that had come out of those centers and--and moved back into their community.

**JM:** The um...life in the institution often involved disconnect with families, did--what was your experience in terms of people's relationship with their families? Within--inside and outside?

**WA:** For folks that lived in the developmental center, one of the most difficult issues was uh being segregated from their families. It was very difficult. Um...to maintain a relationship with family members. In some situations the individual had basically been abandoned by their family. And that was--that was one of the hardest, saddest things to deal with. Cause personally, I'm very involved with my family, and understand the value of family, and some people um...when they were first born, their parents were told by doctors, other professionals, whom were somewhat god-like in the minds of these older parents, and they were told that your son or daughter would amount to nothing, so you just send them away...and abandon them. And I do know a few families that refused to do that, found ways to educate and house their children with disabilities, in more humane ways.

But for the people in the developmental centers, especially Apple Creek, or Gallipolis, which is so far away from many of the urban areas, where that individual's families lived, it was definitely a hardship to travel an hour, two hours, to go make a visit. Um...so the isolation, um...was very severe on the part of those individuals in the developmental centers. Um...luckily, those folks had the chance to work with a lot of good quality staff who basically became surrogate family for those folks. So...while they may have lost their blood relatives, in some respects they gained new families when they were in those developmental centers. And now that those folks are back in our communities, they've gained even uh larger surrogate families in the form of group home staff, um staff from the board of MRDD program, and then the people that they would meet in the community, their neighbors, people they'd meet on the bus, and those sorts of relationships have been established um...over the years. But there--definitely sad to watch um...people in the developmental centers be so isolated from their family. Um...um...that sense of isolation, a real sense of abandonment on the part of those individuals was sad, and probably one of the more heartbreaking aspects of developmental centers in Ohio.

**JM:** You're very concise and very thorough.

**WA:** Thank you.

**JM:** Um...Judy do you have other areas you want to explore with Wayne?

**Judy Leasure:** No, I think we're....as you said, he got right to the point.

**JM:** Yeah.

**JL:** That's great.

**JM:** Anything else you'd like to add Wayne?

**WA:** One of the things I'd like to add is really to congratulate all those folks that came out of the developmental centers, moved into our communities, and just congratulate them on um...just the freedoms that they've helped to establish. And--and early in the...I believe it was 1970s, there was some lawsuits, cidals, um...that helped make all this possible. That helped force the issue with regard to state legislature. I think a debt is owed to those parents, those families, and the individuals that came out of the institutions, and proved that they belonged in our communities.

That they could do what was expected. That the isolation, that the seclusion, over the years was really unnecessary. And hopefully down the road we'll see those developmental centers emptied, and that all those folks will--will find themselves in their communities. To me, it's uh...the deinstitutionalization process is simply an extension of the Civil Rights Movement from the 50s for African-Americans in our communities. It was just an extension of the freedom of housing, of jobs, and most importantly of opportunities. The--that I think that's been the breath of freedom since...since World War II that we've experienced in this country. And quite frankly it's been long overdue.

**JM:** Thank you.

**WA:** You're welcome. Anything else?