

Legacy Oral-Visual History Interview with Richard “Rich” Diedrichsen

Background Information

Interview Information

This interview with Richard “Rich” Diedrichsen (RD) was conducted for the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans’ (MNCDHH) Oral-Visual History Project. This interview took place on June 8, 2011 at the Golden Rule Building (85 E. 7th Place, St. Paul, MN 55101). The interviewer was Barbara W. Sommer (BWS).

Translation Notes

The interview was recorded in English. The interviewer and interviewee used spoken English as a first language.

This transcript and the open captions in the video are based on the spoken English information.

Actions are in brackets. Translation notes are in parentheses and italics (using the emphasis font), and they represent additional information and corrections about what was said.

Transcript of Interview with Richard “Rich” Diedrichsen

Key to names:

RD = Richard “Rich” Diedrichsen (voices in English)

BWS = Barbara W. Sommer (voices in English)

[Visual of title graphic “Minnesota Oral History Project Interview with Rich Diedrichsen”]

[Barbara W. Sommer is sitting with Richard “Rich” Diedrichsen for the interview.]

[Interview time 04:54:04]

BWS: I want to welcome Rich Diedrichsen here today. I am Barb Sommer and we are doing an oral-visual history interview for the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans Oral-Visual History Project. It is June 8, 2011, and we are in the Golden Rule Building in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota (*in the MNCDHH office*). I would like to ask you to say your name and tell us a little bit about yourself. Give us a little background.

RD: My name is Richard Diedrichsen but the only person that calls me Richard is my mother. I’ve been Rich ever since I got in the Army. I actually grew up and most people called me Dick. When I got to the Army, we had too many Richards in the platoon so the sergeant said, “You are going to be Richard; you are going to be Rich; you are going to be Rick; you are going to be Dick. And don’t forget it.” Because he will. And that is how I got to be Rich. I’ve been Rich ever since. I use that name. I grew up in Mankato. I was actually born in Nebraska but we moved here when I was two years old. I went to school – high school- and everything there. After high school, I kind of fooled around and did two years of college.

After that I went into the Army. It was in the Army that I actually lost my hearing because of noise exposure. Coming back, I kind of fumbled around between jobs. Hooked up with a rehabilitation counselor from the Veterans Administration. He helped me to decide what I wanted to do. I thought – I groped around with a lot of different types of jobs that I might be interested in. I started college as a chemistry major, believe it or not. He got to talking to me about rehabilitation and what it entailed. I got interested in it. It seemed like a good fit for me because I like working with people; I like the idea of a variety in my job. He encouraged me to consider working with people who are deaf and hard of hearing. So they actually paid for sign language classes for me. They sent me to learn lip-reading and after the first class, the instructor said, “You lip-read better than you are going to when you get done with this class, so you don’t need to come back.” That was my story of how I got into this racket.

[Interview time 07:38:29]

BWS: Tell us a little bit more about the hearing loss as a veteran. Go into that a little bit.

RD: Actually, when I was in the service, I probably should have been wearing hearing protection but in most duty, I was in the boonies – we called it – most of us didn’t want to carry anything we didn’t need to carry. When you are nineteen-twenty years old, no matter when people tell you, “This is going to come back and haunt you,” you don’t really believe that. So that was the biggest part of my hearing loss – the noise exposure. I was in a very noisy environment. After that part of it, I got the rest of it - I attribute to age. As I get older, there are not things I want to listen to, I guess.

BWS: You ended up going in and finding vocational rehab work is what you wanted to do. Tell us a little bit more about that.

RD: Actually they did a lot of testing and that kind of stuff. Aptitude testing. Some of the things that I scored high on just amazed me. Things like engineering and that kind of stuff. I thought, “Nah, I don’t think I want to do that kind of stuff. I’d rather work with people.” So in the course of talking with the person who was my rehabilitation counselor at the time, he actually suggested, “Have you ever considered this?” I thought, “Well, no, not really.” He explained what it entailed and that. Sent me to the library to do a little research. It got put in as my career goal in my rehabilitation plan. There are some days I wonder if that was an accident or fate, but I can’t say that I’ve not enjoyed it.

[Interview time 10:02:20]

BWS: Tell us about how you started to get into the work that you are doing.

RD: When I was going to college, I graduated from my master’s degree in 1982. I finished my undergraduate work in 1980. At that time, they had just started the Regional Service Center (**RSC**) for deaf and hard of hearing in Mankato. The first manager down there, a gentleman by the name of Joe Weber, walked in and introduced himself. I noticed that on his lapel, he had a First Cavalry Division insignia. That was one of the units I served with, so we got to talking about that. Joe, like myself, lost his hearing in the service. His as a result of malaria. So when we started chatting, we got to be friends. I would visit him and his wife, who were both deaf, and they helped me polish up my sign language skills as well. When I started my internship, just by fate and chance, I guess, his office was directly across from mine. At that point in time, the Regional Service Centers were co-located with the Vocational

Rehabilitation offices – so we were right across from each other. I think it worked out well for both of us. It helped me to get a chance to get used to – if I’m going to work with people who are deaf and hard of hearing, is this something that fits me? Does it fit my personality? I think from Joe’s perspective, it was nice to have another person in the office that – when he wanted to take a break – he can converse with.

And, I’ll have to admit on a selfish level, that was a great thing for me as well. So, that’s how we got into that. He was one of the people that gave me a reference for my first job. I actually started working in 1982 with the Regional Service Center as a rehabilitation counselor. Back then, the Regional Service Centers were a co-partnership between the Department of Public Welfare and the Department of Rehabilitation Services in DVR as we called it – Department Vocational Rehabilitation. A division within the Department. So I worked with the Division of Rehabilitation as a counselor but I was assigned to the Regional Service Center because my work was with people who were deaf and hard of hearing. It’s kind of a unique match. That stayed in place for about the first four years that I worked and then the Division split up. It was shortly after that that I transferred to work with the Regional Service Center as a consultant. That was in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

[Interview time 13:23:06]

BWS: Let’s go back a little bit. Describe the Regional Service Centers as they were when you first learned of them and started working with them.

RD: The way they were set up back then, you had a person that they called the regional manager which was really just kind of a supervisor. They were also assigned some clients to do consulting with. They were employed by Vocational Rehabilitation as was my position as rehab counselor. So only two offices in the state of Minnesota to have rehabilitation counselors and that was St. Cloud and Minneapolis. And then we had regional consultant that was actually employed by the Department of Public Welfare. They did the other counties for the consulting work. And then we had a staff interpreter. Basically, we were breaking ground. I don’t think that we had some concept of what we would like to do, but we really didn’t have a model or a prototype to follow. Initially a lot of our work was with deaf people, culturally Deaf people – signing deaf people, and the reason for that was basically because they were the group of people that helped set up the Regional Service Centers. Back then there weren’t no real technological options. I remember one of our projects being just getting TTYs (***Teletypewriters or Text Telephones***) into the voter registrations places or the County Auditor’s offices because even something as simple as calling and finding out where you vote, unless you had a friend that would interpret that call for you, you were stuck. If you walked down to find a ride back and forth – that was the nature of where services were. A lot of interpreters, when I first started, were friends of the family or someone that was a family member. The concept of professional interpreters was very much in its infancy. Things as simple as an interpreter for a school system might earn \$6 or \$7 an hour and they were only paid for the hours that they were actually in the classroom interpreting, so if the student had a study hall or a gym class and didn’t need the interpreter, they weren’t paid for those hours. So it was a very, very unusual system. The idea of assistive technology – about the only assistive technology I can remember actually being commonplace were TTYs and maybe a few amplifying devices, if you would. Even they were very, very primitive – I guess is a polite way of putting it. As far as assistive listening devices, I got a

personal amplifier. I remember a fellow by the name of Bonham Cross. If you haven't heard that name, you don't know hard of hearing in the state of Minnesota. Bonham, actually, to me, he is the godfather of assistive devices in Minnesota. He started out with things – figuring out with a cassette tape player, there was a way to rig them. You could take a microphone and when someone spoke into it, you could amplify it and bring it out of the speaker. Those were the first assistive devices I remember being used in the state of Minnesota – long before we had the world-famous Williams Sound Pocket Talkers - some of the more sophisticated stuff that we see nowadays. Bonham was rigging those kinds of things out. He figured out which you telephone for us, you could pick up a magnetic image that went around a wire loop that ran around the room. The way he got the signal that got into that wire that ran around the room, he went down to Radio Shack and bought a hundred watt amplifier. And then took out this four-ohm jack and that ground, ran the wires around the room, fed the microphone into those amplifiers, and those were the assistive loops, as we called them, the loop system back then. That was kind of what we knew. If you look at the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, there is almost nothing in the original act about assistive technology for people that are hard of hearing. The reason is because there wasn't anything, or what was out there, most people did not know about. It was part of that omission of understanding the needs of people that are hard of hearing as being different than the needs of people who are deaf that kind of originated the Hearing Loss Association of America (**HLAA**) – which started out as Self Help for Hard of Hearing (**SHHH**) from (**Howard E.**) “Rocky” Stone. We have a separate group of people. The people who are deaf – what's very important to them is the culture, American Sign Language, and ability to have that eye contact or that face-to-face where we can communicate. The Deaf community is very important to them because it gives them a chance of normality – a chance to be just one of the people instead of being the deaf guy over there and if you want to talk to him, talk to the interpreter kind of thing – which is totally wrong. But keep in mind, when I grew up in school, there were no integrated student (**classes?**). There were – in fact, I remember only one or two people in my entire career, going to kindergarten through high school, where we even had people of color – any kind of diversity at all in our classroom. For the student to have special education, they were on the third floor way back in the corner. The only time we ever saw them was if we had a school-wide program and they would bring them together. It was so odd the way it happened because they'd be surrounded by their aids. I'm not sure if that was to protect us from them or them from us. If we talked to them, everybody was shocked that they would know who they were because they were always stuck away in the corner. I don't think it ever occurred to anybody to – hey, they're brothers and sisters of people we're going to school with. And when we go over to their house, we meet them. I mean, we know who they are. It's not like this is a big deal like they're making it out. But that was just the nature of things and I think a lot of that concept of that separateness was still very much a part of society. For people that are hard of hearing, the way this played into who we were and who we became – and there's a lot of denial in hearing loss – in fact, I'm a champion of saying in my training – other than chemical dependency, I can't think of any limitation that has a greater rate of denial. But keep in mind, for people that are hard of hearing, we didn't have that Deaf culture. We didn't have that language. We didn't have that identity. One of the things I think people that are hard of hearing need to be indebted to the Deaf community for, is showing us that by having that, you can create a sense of acceptance for yourself. Most people who were hard of hearing back then, they were kind of stuck between the worlds. I know that's become a commonplace description but, in a real sense, even for myself when I first started out in this business, I wasn't fluent

enough in sign language that I could really fit into the Deaf community. Deaf culture was not my identity. So even though I did a lot of things with the Deaf community and thanked them very much for the acceptance they gave me, I wasn't in a true sense a culturally Deaf person. At the same time, when I would interact with people that had normal hearing, I missed enough things – I misunderstood enough things – I just plain fouled up on communication – that it wasn't unusual for saying, "Are you deaf? How come you're not like other deaf people?" It's like – OK, I don't fit into this community, I don't fit into this community – please tell me where I belong. I think that was very much a part of it. I think on a national level Rocky Stone, who actually started out almost like myself and have more normal hearing, and then losing his hearing, he understood how this impacted the person's whole sense of identity and that. From that, he was able to say – he had the organizational skills, he had that concept of how to put things together. My understanding is he worked for the CIA (**Central Intelligence Agency**), so he understood how to get people organized into a mission, a goal-oriented movement. With those skills and the fact he had an awful, awful lot of contacts with an awful lot of people – in fact, several years ago when Congressman Jim (**James**) Oberstar came into my office in Duluth, because they were putting a TTY into his Congressional office, I was talking to him and he mentioned to me that he knew Rocky Stone. I said, "OK." He said, "Yeah, he was my neighbor. Our kids played together when I lived in Washington, D.C." It was that perfect storm of circumstances that brought Rocky together with the right people and he began a concept of developing an identity and a support system for people who are hard of hearing so they can develop enough self-esteem to begin to ask for the things they to integrate into society – which so many of them were – "I don't want anybody to know about this." I actually believe that every person on this planet has something about themselves that they spend an awful lot of time and energy hiding from the rest of the world. And for people that are hard of hearing, oftentimes it's their hearing loss. And bluffing, faking, you know, nod your head – OK, fine. That worked just great as long as you're answering close to what the person expected you to say. Now if you are not, you are going to get some very, very weird looks. And from the very, very weird looks, you quickly learn to – "Oh, that makes you (**inaudible**) – it's time for me to leave." The problem with that it creates a tremendous amount of isolation. And it creates a tremendous amount of loss of esteem. And it creates a tremendous amount of depression. That's sad because I've met so many hard of hearing and deaf people in my career that are just absolutely fantastic people. They are absolutely gifted, intelligent people. And the world is not seeing their gifts and talents. They are not seeing that person that would make an excellent friend – either because they lack the ability to accept that person in spite of their hearing loss or because that person has learned it's not a friendly environment out there when you can't communicate and so they've withdrawn for their own protection.

[Interview time 26:42:06]

BWS: Did you see, and do you see, differences with Greater Minnesota? You've worked – you are in St. Cloud and you've worked in Duluth and other places. Did you see there were needs there that could be met through the Regional Service Centers or HLAA?

RD: I think the greatest thing in rural Minnesota is it's very, very similar to the experience I had growing up in grade school and high school – you never have that exposure to a lot of people that are different – different in the sense of being deaf and hard of hearing – because there weren't a lot of people there

that were deaf and hard of hearing. Most of them have found out that it was easier to move to larger cities where you might find a Deaf community or where you might find a Self Help for Hard of Hearing or Hearing Loss Association support group. Even today, 2011, the operating support group for HLAA are (*in*) the Twin Cities and St. Cloud. There wasn't exposure to people. I think that – by the same token, it seems odd because never do I give a presentation or do I talk to a group of people about my hearing loss and ask the first question – “How many of you know someone who has a hearing loss?” Well, all of them have a parent, a grandparent, a brother, a sister, someone that either is either deaf or hard of hearing. It's amazing how many times I ask them, “What kind of a hearing loss?” “Oh, my brother is deaf.” I say, “OK. Tell me about that.” “Well, he wears hearing aids and he has a lot of assistive equipment.” I said, “Well, does he communicate with sign language?” “No.” “OK, so he's hard of hearing, right?” It's amazing how many people only see hearing and deaf. They don't see that group of people that are in between that are considered hard of hearing.

BWS: Is that – that's the background that you brought to – that HLAA – the Hearing Loss Association of America – is working with? Is that where you see that you sort of fit?

RD: It very much is. In fact, if I talk to people who are deaf, especially culturally Deaf people, what's important to them is to have qualified sign language interpreters or have video relay services – those kinds of things – so they can do things that involve communication very much the way hearing people do. If I talk to hard of hearing people, those who have accepted their hearing loss – they would talk to you in terms of amplification devices or assistive listening devices or improving hearing aids. Cochlear implants. There used to be a Cochlear Implant Association in the United States. They've merged together with people who are hard of hearing because they had so much in common. They had a hearing loss that prevented communication, prevented full access to society, but they didn't have the sign language ability that allowed them to get that access the way the Deaf community does. So that group – it's based on that in-between group is – if you look at the statistics – about ten percent of the people – and sometimes it will go up to about thirty percent of the people – that can benefit from hearing aids, have and use hearing aids. So that should give you an indication of the number of people that are out there either hiding their hearing loss or trying to function without that equipment, either through ignorance or because they don't want to be identified.

[Interview time 30:49:09]

BWS: You talked about Rocky Stone. Talk a little bit more about his role with hearing loss and the Hearing Loss Association of America – the chapter you are with in St. Cloud. Take us through some of that.

RD: If I were to put my finger on the reason why Hearing Loss Association of America – Self Help for Hard of Hearing – was able to develop itself into an identified unit, or an identified group, Rocky Stone was the type of individual that had tremendous self-esteem. He was confident in who he was. He did not identify himself by his hearing loss. He identified himself by who he was. Because of that, he was able to model that to other people. I think that is the greatest benefit of the Hearing Loss Association of America. You have people who have gone down that path. They have gone through that accepting process. None of us are perfect. All of us bluff. Some of us get tired. We still make mistakes and those

kinds of things. But at least to a certain degree, we've come to that realization that "I am a person with a hearing loss. I'm not a hearing impaired person." I think that the most important thing about that is – if I say, "I am a person with a hearing loss," then I can look at that person and say, "What are my gifts? What are my talents? What do I have to offer? How can I offer that using the assistive technology and the techniques and the strategies for overcoming my hearing loss? And even not overcoming it, just being able to do things differently and still put out that person for the world to benefit from." If I say, "I am a hearing impaired person, I am impaired. I am a person that's impaired." Now why would I want to take an impaired or a defective object and try to present that to the world? What you do with defective or impaired object is you put them on the shelf and hope you don't need to use them because they don't function correctly. This is, I think, what happens with a lot of people who are hard of hearing. They don't see themselves as being a person with a hearing loss. They see themselves as a defective person or they see themselves as unable. I've seen this in my work where I have consultants that happen to be culturally Deaf with tremendous skills. They happen to work with an interpreter to bring those skills to the people they serve. A lot of time, people that are older and have developed a hearing loss, when they see those consultants that happen to be deaf and working with an interpreter, they don't see the skills – they see, "Oh my goodness – this is the one thing in my life, I most fear – becoming deaf. Because I'm having so much trouble coping with my life, even with a little bit of hearing loss – my goodness, if I were deaf, I'd be a total invalid. I wouldn't be able to function at all." The silliness of that is, as I mentioned earlier, it was from the Deaf community that we go those gifts of understanding by identifying yourself. Having an identity, having self-esteem, having your role models and that, having your community – you can actually help people to grow and develop and to become that person that has something to offer. We're going to offer it in a different way because we have a hearing loss. We're going to do things a little differently. We may have assistive devices. I may have a cochlear implant. I may have a hearing aid. I may lip read. I may have a flashing alarm for my doorbell or something like that. But, guess what, I can sit here and tell you, "I teach Red Cross CPR to hearing people." I start my class by explaining to them, "I'm here to teach you. I have these skills. I can teach you but if you have a question, you're going to have to get my attention first. As long as we can do that, I have so much to offer you."

[Interview time 35:54:09]

BWS: Good point, good point, and a good bridge. Finding ways to bridge in different situations. Will you talk a little about the HLAA in St. Cloud and how that organization came about and works? Some of what it does.

RD: HLAA in St. Cloud – Self Help for Hard of Hearing – the first chapter is here in the Twin Cities. It had kind of an unusual infancy. There was some people had some business background and that – they happened to have a hearing loss. Some of them developed it later in life. But they understood marketing, they understood how to present this and promote it. So they started a little bitty group. In fact, they started meeting in a travel agency because one of the co-founders happened to own the travel agency. They met there. Well, they had enough of a success – they had a gentleman by the name of Jeremy Nyquist. Jeremy Nyquist lived up in Onamia, Minnesota – almost the end of the earth or, at least, you can see it from there. OK? Not really. In fact, it is a beautiful area. But Jeremy was coming down to the HLAA group here – the Self Help for Hard of Hearing as we called it. And he hooked up with

a lady who was actually working as a consultant with the Regional Service Center in Willmar. Her name was Brenda Eddy. They had met people from HLAA and they knew about the groups and that. So what happened is, somewhere along the line, they talked to other people and the other people got – they got enough people together that decided, “We should have this in St. Cloud.” And so they started meeting in St. Cloud. Originally it was the same thing as you have from any other group – be it AA to cancer survivors or anything like that – you had a couple of people that came and most of them saying because they were looking for answers. From that, they told somebody else. We were blessed in St. Cloud in the fact that we had one of the people that joined our group is a college professor in the communication disorders program at St. Cloud State. And then we had one who happened to have been a teacher for the deaf and hard of hearing and she knew every student – they loved her and she loved them. We also some support from people that were with the Regional Service Center. I’m not going to take much credit for this because there were a lot of people who laid a lot of groundwork before I ever got there. If I come across in this interview at all as having good self-esteem and acceptance, it was those people that laid that groundwork and helped me develop that identity as a hard of hearing person that I’m indebted to. Just the idea of being able to go once a month and sit down with people who understood what I was saying when I bring up – “You know, the other day, I had to go to the doctor’s office,” or “I wanted to go to a city council meeting,” and I called ahead and told them I would need accommodations because I have a hearing loss. The first thing they said was, “Well, we provide interpreters.” Now in my situation, that was OK because I have enough sign language skills that that will bridge the gap. But for most of the people that I was sitting around the table with, they were saying, “I don’t have any sign language skills. I lost my hearing when I was forty years old from a car accident.” Or, “I lost my hearing as I got older.” “I lost my hearing because I was in a very noisy environment in my work.” Or something of that nature. “I never learned sign language.” So how do we explain that to them? Even to this day, if I mention to someone that I need assistive listening devices or that I need captioning to go to a meeting, there still – there’s a lot of puzzlement out there because they don’t make that connection that, yes, I have a hearing loss – no, I’m not deaf.

[Interview time 40:48:15]

BWS: How large is the group now? Talk a little bit about the organization.

RD: In St. Cloud right now, we probably have about sixteen or seventeen members. Compare that with the Deaf club who has closer to fifty or sixty members. A lot of this is done at time with what I said before, to find those people who not only are willing to admit, “I have a hearing loss. I’m not deaf. What kinds of things are out there to benefit me?” It’s not unusual for us to have people that – two months ago, lady stopped at one of our meetings because we now meet in the Whitney Senior Center. She stopped in and said, “I saw the advertisement – the posting for this group. My husband’s hard of hearing.” It’s very, very – I wish it wasn’t, but it’s typical that sometimes you have the children or the spouse or someone like that or the brother or the sister come in – “How do I get my husband, my wife, my brother to come to a group like this because he’s struggling but he doesn’t want to admit that he has a hearing loss.”

BWS: You serve the northern area of Minnesota? Do you pull people in from beyond St. Cloud?

RD: I would say if you did a radius of about thirty to forty miles around St. Cloud, that is our most common. If we do, we've had a couple of state conferences in St. Cloud. Basically, we've pulled people in from five or six states. This is probably one of the names that you hear from Self Help Hard of Hearing is Tom Oberlin. Tom basically – he was successful and he didn't like to be in the limelight but he didn't mind promoting the concept of Self Help for the Hard of Hearing. So when we had our first state conference in St. Cloud in 1996, Tom – out of his own pocket – brought in a nationally known speaker, Sam Trychin. Anyone who's hard of hearing who reads anything about research in hard of hearing probably recognized that name because he's done a lot on coping strategy. So in a lot of ways we've been blessed by people that believe enough in the – actually support it so that – if we had to be self-supporting, we'd have never got off the ground, so to speak.

[Interview time 43:53:26]

BWS: How does your organization work and interact with the club in the Twin Cities? Serving different geographic areas? How does that work?

RD: In a lot of sense, we're almost joined at the hip in a lot of ways. In other ways we're separate. It started out meetings functioning as groups and that kind of stuff, we probably have no more relationship than a couple of AA groups that are in different cities. But when it comes to things like the statewide convention, this October we're going to do the Walk for Hearing, which is a national initiative (**Hearing Loss Association of America: Walk4Hearing**) for fundraising – most of the time, we'll work together. The reason why we work together is because we get that critical mass. If I had to get the volunteers I need to run a state conference just out of the St. Cloud group, I would probably be in trouble. Interestingly enough, there are probably about three people in the St. Cloud group that are younger than me. I'm sixty-one. So that'll give you an idea. We're a small group. We're older people. But by the same token, in the Twin Cities you'll see more of that spread of age and I think it's simply because you have that critical mass. I'm also seeing people in the Twin Cities chapter that sometimes they may have gotten exposed to Self Help for the Hard of Hearing earlier. We meet in the senior center but we're not a senior group. But because we meet in the senior center, most people assume we are. That's been one of our struggles overall in the association is to get some of those younger members. It's very unusual to see people in their forties or thirties coming to those kinds of groups.

BWS: It serves a distinct need.

RD: It does. It does very much. I see a lot of people that are younger that are more inclined to hide their hearing loss. They struggle more because of it. Bluffing is a good example. If you're on the job and you want to bluff and pretend you don't have a hearing loss – one of the things that a lot of parents will ask me – “How do I get my son or my daughter to wear their hearing aids?” My first question is, “How old are they?” If they say they are in junior high or high school, I say, “Do you own any Super Glue?” Most kids in junior high and high school – and we've all gone through this – nobody wants to look different. So they want to blend in and off comes their hearing aid. The problem with that is – if I tell somebody I have a hearing loss, they may react badly to it. But at least they know why we're not communicating. If I try to fake it, and they ask me a question and I give them an inappropriate answer, they're not just deciding that this person does not care enough about the relationship to want to communicate with me,

that he's just being a smart aleck – is he stupid? Is there something cognitively wrong with him? They have to try to figure out why that communication isn't happening. If I tell them up front why, they may react to it badly. I have no control over that. But at least I've told them – "This is the reason why I can't communicate the way other people do with you and, you know what, I can't change that."

[Interview time 48:02:09]

BWS: You've done work with the hearing loss association and with the Regional Service Centers – we'll take a little break and then I'd like to ask you about the Commission (**MNCDHH**) and its work.

[Short break in interview – chatting during break not transcribed.]

[Interview time 00:29:00 – Interview clock reset to zero for taping purposes]

BWS: We've covered HLAA. Is there anything else you would like to cover about that?

RD: The critical thing about St. Cloud and any of the rural areas – I think there's always going to be need for that partnership. I think the critical thing about St. Cloud or any of the rural areas, is that we're going to be reaching out to people that won't come to the Twin Cities. That's true of any kind of an organization. Whatever state you're in, it's the Big City, it's the real people kind of thing. A concept of that divide. I think that's always going to be true. We're going to be able to get people that will come to St. Cloud for a meeting that may not come to the Twin Cities for a meeting. Which is, by the way, one of the reasons why oftentimes we've had our state association – our state meetings – in St. Cloud because you would never get a lot of rural people to come down here. The thing that we're indebted to the Twin Cities people – they are close to where the influence sometimes needs to happen. They can go to Commission meetings more easily. They can go to the legislature more easily. They have a larger group so there's that critical mass if you need to present your story to the media or to any of the legislative groups or a hearing or even a public utilities commission. People who are hard of hearing need some of the same exemptions from costs that people that are deaf need. Yes, we can hear, but we can't hear well enough. It doesn't take us longer to use, for example, 411 or something like that – so there is a need. People who are DeafBlind oftentimes – the concept of what works for one – so we need both groups. We are blessed in Minnesota in that there isn't an us-them attitude about it. In fact, I think the friendship there has been absolutely phenomenal. They're willing to work together because we know that at the end of the day, it's not about us, it's not about them, it's about the people that are hard of hearing in the state of Minnesota. The need to have that message gotten out and we're all dedicated to that concept, to that mission. I think that it met a very, very good working relationship.

[Interview time 03:23:29]

BWS: What do you see for the future?

RD: What I see for the future – I don't see a change in a tremendous amount. The reason I don't see it changing a tremendous amount is because most of the attitudes about other groups are passed down from one leadership to another. Right now, with the collaboration between the leadership, when we have a new president in St. Cloud, for example, or when there is a new president in the Twin Cities chapter, even the Aloha group – which is really the young group of the Twin Cities chapter – we don't say, "Watch out for those people," or "We had this bad experience with this group." What we say is,

“This is another part of our organization. This is who we can collaborate with and make ourselves stronger as a group.” Barring anything earth-shattering that should happen, and I don’t foresee that happening, I think the groups are going to continue to collaborate because we know that there’s that mutual dependency, that mutual ability to work together.

[Interview time 04:43:13]

BWS: Do you work with any other state organizations like the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens? Collaboration there? It sounds as if there could be but you each have your own areas of focus.

RD: We have our own areas of focus and we have mutual concerns. As recently as a couple of months ago, I remember going to the Twin Cities HLAA chapter meeting and Dann Trainer, who is the president of the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens (**MADC**), came and presented. He spoke to us about ways we could collaborate together. I see a lot of people – when I go to – if I go to a Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens event, I see a lot of people from HLAA. If I go to an HLAA event, I see people from Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens. What we’re advocating for, the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens may be advocating for what their group of people need. HLAA may be advocating for what our group of people need. I’ll give you an example of that. It’s the movie theaters. HLAA – we want them to have these assistive devices, have the batteries, have the listening devices working. For people who are deaf in the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens, they would rather have the captions. But, by the same token, we’re smart enough to realize that the perfect captioning out there, even if I’ve got an assistive device, I’m going to have more access to that movie. So it’s sort of like religions or denominations. Let’s quit looking at what we disagree with because that’s only a small part of our (**unintelligible**). Let’s look at the things that we do agree with and that is that people with hearing loss from a mild hearing loss all the way down to deafness, we have similar needs. Our barrier is communication. We need access in order to integrate into a group. So I absolutely dislike the concept of us-them. I absolutely dislike that concept. It’s almost like if you have the Army-Navy – they’re on my team. We have a mutual mission here. Let’s work together because it really doesn’t make any difference who gets the credit. What makes the difference is who gets the access. That’s my concept. Am I going to sit here and pretend that everybody has that same attitude? No. but I can’t control what everybody else is after. What I can do is continue to say, “We’ve got a lot of things that we have as mutual interests. Let’s work with those.”

The Minnesota Commission for Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing (**MNCDHH**) – I remember when we first started with the Regional Service Centers, we were called the Regional Service Center for the Deaf. I remember when the Minnesota Commission first started out, they were called the commission for deaf. And now it is commission for deaf and hard of hearing. Then the commission for deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing. The idea is that as we realize that there are other people who share some of the same problems we have. Communication/access, we can do a lot better pulling together than trying to fragment out. We’re not strong enough alone but we’re strong enough together. And that’s not strength in the sense of “let’s beat somebody over the head.” The more we can communicate to the general public out there, hearing loss, vision loss, people who have to use a wheelchair and that, that’s not just a very, very small segment of your population. A large segment of the population has some form of special need or accommodation need. When you build a society that’s accessible to everyone, everyone can

contribute. I just detest this idea of “the reason why we’re making these accommodations is that these people have a chance to participate.” No, no. It’s not about participation. It’s about contribution. Several years ago, I was involved in an initiative to get TTYs into Minnesota rest stops. My idea and my communication with the Department of Transportation was not about “if I need help, I can make a phone call.” But what I told the Commissioner at one point was, “What if I happen to be driving down the road and I see that you’ve had an accident and you need help. When I get to that rest stop, do you want me to be able to call and get you that help?” It’s not about my participating in your getting help. It’s about my ability to get the help for you. I can be involved in the process. And that will benefit you. Sure, there might be somebody else that passes by that can pick up that phone and make the phone call. But what if they choose not to? Wouldn’t you rather make sure that anybody would be able to get the help coming? I think that idea – it’s about our being able to offer something to society that nobody else is able to offer. I’m the only me that is out there.

[Interview time 11:04:05]

BWS: Advocacy?

RD: Advocacy, again, advocacy, a lot of time, is a bad word because it almost comes across that people say “advocacy” involves your making me do something. No, no. What I’m doing is I’m asking you to allow society to involve a hundred percent of its members. That’s what I’m advocating for. I’m not advocating for something special. I’m not advocating for something that you don’t deserve. I’m advocating for everybody getting the equality, everybody getting the same deserves. That’s what my concept of advocacy is. I know that sometimes it’s not always comes across that way, but you know what, I don’t think there’s anybody on this planet that – whatever group you belong to and you find near and dear – be it your church, your club, your association, your friendship circles, something like that – that you don’t have people in each of those segments that are good people and some that – ah – they could use a little work on their bedside manners. Advocates are the same way. There are some that are very, very good job. There are some that come across kind of crass. But let’s not lose the message in the personalities. Let’s realize the concept of advocacy is about “this is a society and this it’s a society of all these people. Let’s make sure that one hundred percent of them have something to offer and that something that they can equally contribute.”

BWS: You’ve been doing this for thirty-some years.

RD: I’d say I’ve been working for the state of Minnesota for twenty-nine years. Needless to say, I was probably involved before that. Yeah, I’ve been around for a long time.

[Interview time 13:18:22]

BWS: What are the some of the major changes that you’ve seen as you look back through our work with the Regional Service Centers and your volunteer work? Are there any major changes or advances you’ve seen in that time and also talk a little about the future and what you’d like to see coming.

RD: The major changes, I think, were the – when the Regional Service Centers started out, we were regional service center for the deaf. Part of that was because they were the group of people that were most separated from society. We didn’t realize at the time that there was this other group of people

called DeafBlind that probably had a lot more needs. But most of them – remember I started in 1982 – we still had the concept of institutionalization. So most people that have more sophisticated development needs or more intense needs or the greater amount of needs – whatever you want to say – such as DeafBlind, they put them in an institution and served them in an assembly line fashion. So for a lot of time, the people that were out in the community were those that were hard of hearing and those that were deaf. The people that were deaf still had more barriers at that point in time because of the advances in technology – the ADA (**Americans with Disabilities Act**) wasn't even passed at this point in time. So that was where we started out. Once we got to a point to where they were elevated to some ability to participate in society – and it wasn't one hundred percent – and it's never going to be one hundred percent – because you're still dealing with attitudes and that. But when that came, then people that are hard of hearing, because of the concept of HLAA and Self Help for the Hard of Hearing, they began to develop that same type of a sense of identity, a sense of "it's OK for us to present our needs as being different from deaf and hard of hearing – don't rob Peter to pay Paul – but as equally important to be addressed because we need to participate too." Once that was crossed, then it became the sense of "what about these people that are DeafBlind?" They shouldn't be - if they need services, provide the services to them. But don't use the concept that they need the services and help at a greater level to isolate them from their ability to participate. So I think that was the evolution of it.

In the future, if I had a magic wand – and none exists – what would I like to see? I would like to see a society that's – you know what – irregardless of differences, this person still has something to contribute. Let's do what we need to do to allow that contribution to happen because it's going to make society stronger.

You hinted on about the Minnesota Commission for Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing – I think one of the great accomplishments of that group was – in the beginning there were a lot of people who were deaf or the person had to work with people who were deaf on that group. And they addressed the needs as they saw them. As they began to get hard of hearing people – Bonham Cross was at one time the chair, some of the others have been chairs – they began to come in and participate and have a seat at the table – and they brought their needs and the commission was good about saying "what do we agree on and how can we advocate so there's a cross (**over**)?" When people who are DeafBlind were allowed to come out into society because they were no longer isolated by those barriers that were imposed, then they could take a seat at the table. Somewhere down the line we need to look at things like – who knows? People that have deafness or a hearing loss who also happen to be autistic, also happen to be cognitively challenged, also happen to be severe and persistent mental illness. They probably have some unique needs that I don't know about. When we bring them to the table, we can listen to those needs and find out, "OK, in the future, when I'm advocating for access, how can I make sure that the people who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing, their needs for access are addressed – but also these other segments that I may not know about." If I walk into a building within three or four minutes, I will be able to tell you if there's visual smoke alarms in that building. It is the first thing I look for because it's important to me to know – "will I be able to be warned?" If you ask me after an hour in that building, are there Braille numbers on the doors for the offices, I don't know. But if I bring my friend who happens to be deaf and blind in, within that same three or four minutes, she's probably going to be

able to answer that question. I need them at the table to tell us how we can do a better job by advocating for a hundred percent access and a hundred percent participation in society. I think that's my concept of why the Commission is a viable resource to the state of Minnesota – a viable resource to the country, for that matter – because a lot of the things that have happened in Minnesota have been transferred to other parts of the country. We've always been a leader and I think we should be proud of that. We shouldn't sit down and congratulate ourselves, but we should say, "As long as we are a leader, let's keep leading."

[Interview time 19:56:11]

BWS: Anything else you'd like to add?

RD: Anything I'd like to add. You know, I realize that there are some people whose attitudes will never change. There are some people that will surprise themselves. As I grew up in Mankato, with the exposure I had to people who were different, people who had any kind of limitations, people that were deaf and hard of hearing, I developed my concept of what role could these people play in society? I think that with the Regional Service Centers, the Commission, with the ADA, with all the other groups that are out there – and please understand I give equal credence to Minnesota – Alzheimers associations or for disability causes or any of those groups – anybody who's out there presenting the message to the people – "yes, I'm different, but yes, I'm a person and I have something to contribute." To me, it's survival for us as a society. On Day One, when I associated with the Regional Service Centers, all my associations with the Minnesota Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing – Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing – I'm old enough that I have the wrong concept – but the problem is that – yes, I've had some disagreements. But it's not the disagreements that we have to build on. It's the agreements. I have seen that change over the years. I have so much faith in the society as a whole – in the state of Minnesota, in humans in general – that I think most people are basically good people. If they can begin to understand a person, they'll be accepting to them. That's my hope.

BWS: Thank you.

RD: You're welcome. Thank you.