

CHAPTER 6

TROUBLE GETTING INTEGRATED

(Ages 13-14 Years — 7th & 8th Grades)

In the fall of 1979 I began the 7th grade. The thing that was most memorable when I went back to school that year was the fact that several of my classmates, who had been left behind, including Doug, now joined me at Oak Hill. If you recall, they had remained at Northington Elementary while the older handicapped students, like myself, were transferred to the new facility. So, it was with a great sense of triumph that we started off the year with the family back together again.

Thanks to hurricane Frederick the school year began on an exciting note. That fall, Frederick struck the gulf coast and remnants of it made their way to Tuscaloosa. Though the storm had lost a major part of its strength by the time it reached us, bad weather was still expected. Despite that fact the schools did not close. But an hour into the school day the storm passed through town knocking out the power. It was kind of eerie being in school with the storm outside, but also quite fun, since we could not do any work. We gathered in the cafeteria where the teachers had different activities for the students. (Where do they dream these things up? – they must have a class that they all take in how to keep everyone occupied when all else fails.) Several of us brought our transistor radios allegedly to listen for storm reports, but actually to listen to some disco music, which (although I know it is hard for you to believe) *was* the rage back then.

When I got home that afternoon the power was still off, and we had to live like Abraham Lincoln. It is amazing what a brief outage of power can do to your sense of dependence on modern science. But then, we did have a TV that operated on a battery pack, so we cheated a little bit. It only lasted an hour and a half, and we had to do our gather-around-the-campfire and tell-your-favorite-story bit. During supper the old kerosene lamp provided the only light that Dad kept when he sold all of our other camping equipment. Relatively speaking, the damage to the Tuscaloosa area was light, and they had the power back on the next day, so it was only a minor inconvenience. Meanwhile I developed an interest in hurricanes just like I had with tornadoes four years earlier. Only this time I was able to put my interest to good use as I did a report on hurricanes for extra credit in science.

Like most young men of my age group, my favorite class was physical education. Of course, my favorite part of that was swimming in our new pool. They had now installed the heater, so that we could swim in the winter. Since I had taken swimming lessons and learned how to swim at a very young age, and had continued with it each summer, I was ahead of most of my classmates in this particular physical activity. The best part was that the PE coach had taken courses and was a certified lifeguard. So, no more lifejackets! What a relief it was to get into the pool and be able to move around unhampered. I was free to go wherever the water could take me.

Many of my classmates had not had swimming lessons, and some did not feel very comfortable in the water. They obviously did not get the same *lift* out of it that I did (no pun intended), and

some of them complained when the swimming sessions were mandated by the coach. It would take a couple of years before some of them “got with the program,” and there were a few others that never did learn to enjoy it. It appeared to me that it is really important that children overcome their fear for the water and learn to swim early in life.

This is one of the most significant and lasting physical things that parents can do for their children, and it is of particular importance to handicapped kids, especially those who, like me, would find greater autonomy in the water than anyplace else. This is true not only from the point of view of instilling a sense of freedom, but it is also the best exercise that most people can get, and the handicapped follow the rule much more often than the exception. This is because, being out of the wheelchair, this was the *only* time that certain muscles ever can get exercised. I know this because every time that school would start back and I would get back to regular exercise in the pool, I would discover many muscles that I never knew that I had. Parents of children with diseases like MD, where a loss of walking skill is inevitable, should feel that early swimming training is a necessity. To me the swimming pool eventually became a type of security blanket: it was the one place that I could go where I would be on an even footing with the rest of the kids. For, after being confined to a wheelchair for so long, it becomes a part of you. You feel quite vulnerable when you get out of it. So having the water around you gives you a sense of being at home.

This is a very interesting phenomenon. It is part of the human psyche to adapt. At this point I had only been confined to a wheelchair for about a year, but I had had swimming lessons for years before that. After coming to grips that I would never walk again there was obviously a grieving process that led at least to a temporary depression. This is overcome by the sense of being *at home* in the wheelchair. I had not gotten totally adapted to the wheelchair yet, so I felt generally comfortable getting out of it and into the pool. However, for those who had spent their entire lives in a wheelchair it might be quite uncomfortable. They apparently cannot realize how liberating swimming can be. For them it is a lot to cope with since they think of their chair as being part of themselves. Even many normal people are afraid of the water. Add to this potential insecurities caused by the handicap, and the problem is obvious. One of my fellow students clearly had the arm strength to swim, but since she did not start getting into the water until she was 12, she never could enjoy the freedom of being in the water. The pool and swimming became her nightmare. So it is important that parents start all kids off in learning how to swim early, but this might be especially important with the handicapped.

Our PE coach, Coach James Wilson, was quite good at his job, and he had a variety of ways to motivate people. Sometimes he was very reassuring, and at other times he would use gimmicks, and at still others he was an army drill sergeant. Even though I had had swimming lessons, and could swim better than many of my classmates, I still had some fear of being in water over my head. I had this idea that if I did not hold on to the wall I would sink to the bottom. Coach Wilson tried to get this out of my mind in a variety of ways, but to no avail. Then one day he slipped into his drill-sergeant role, with the theory of either sink or swim (pun intended). He just took my hands and threw them back away from the wall and would not let me grab back onto it. I knew that I had no choice but to make a go of it, so I took off for the other side. One of my classmates was in the way floating on an inner tube, so I just grabbed hold of that and figured I would ride that to the shallow end. But she saw what Coach Wilson was trying to do, and either she took his part or she

thought I might pull her under. In any event, she began slapping at me and would not let me grab onto the inner tube. Realizing that this would not work, I continued my pursuit of the other side of the deep end. One of the teacher's aids thought I was in trouble and was going to help me when Coach Wilson herded him off, and I realized then that I would have to make it on my own. So I kept flailing away, and the opposite wall arrived in short course, much to my surprise and delight. I was not at all enamored of Coach Wilson's Gestapo approach (when all else failed), and it took me a couple of weeks to get over it. I figured he and Hitler had the same answering service. However, when I gained confidence and recognized that there was absolutely no way that I could sink to the bottom without really trying, I realized that he had practiced some tough love on me which opened an entirely new dimension to my freedom in the water. From this point on I spent most of my time in the pool on the deep end further increasing the confidence in my swimming abilities. This was so much better for me, since I had some problems stubbing my toes from time to time on the shallow end, and this was one less thing that I had to worry about.

Of course, in retrospect, I guess such tough-love measures that Coach Wilson was apt to apply at times would get him into a lawsuit today. This is unfortunate. It is true that I did not appreciate what he did at the time, although I fully recognized that he was totally in control of the situation and could have pulled me out at any time. However, he recognized my skill and just wanted me to recognize it as well. I was never in any real danger, and the exercise served a very positive purpose in my life. This is the reason that I think it is unfortunate that most of our teachers and coaches would justifiably feel that they dare not try something like this today. If all students and their parents fail to see the value of this, the teacher is likely to end up in court.

In addition to gaining confidence at the deep end, swimming also afforded me the opportunity to actually walk on the shallow end. When PE period was over the coach would call us back over to the steps to help those of us who were significantly impaired back into our wheelchairs. While everyone else was moving toward the steps, I would always sneak backward to get just a few extra seconds of pool time. I thought I was getting away with something here, but years later Coach Wilson told me that he knew exactly what I was doing. It was just part of his nature that he did not want to spoil my fun and let me get away with it.

Swimming did have its downside. In the dead of winter getting in and getting out were both somewhat uncomfortable. Since the pool was heated, getting in was not that bad, especially since it took only a couple of seconds to get used to the heated water. It was getting out that was worst, since the air in the pool area was quite cool and damp, and it took a while to dry off, which added to the cooling effect. So, if I ever wanted to get out of swimming, it was during those long cold winter months. You would think that taking a warm shower would help, but that lasted only as long as you were in the shower. So after a while I decided to just forgo that; I just dried off and with the help of the coach, and with his aid, I got dressed.

On those days when we did not go swimming we would spend most of our PE time in the gymnasium. There would always be one activity or another in which we could participate. Coach Wilson was always trying something to get through to us. For example, as is true in most gymnasium facilities, there were six basketball hoops around the gymnasium. He lowered one so that the students in wheelchairs could play. One day he came across me as I was shooting, and issued me

the challenge that if I could put in five in a row he would buy me a coke. That was all of the incentive that I needed to hone my basketball shooting skills, since I was a known coke-aholic. It took me a couple of weeks, but eventually I was able to nail five in a row. And, true to his word, Coach Wilson delivered the coke. This increased my confidence with regard to this particular physical skill, and further increased my enjoyment of PE. There is no doubt that Coach Wilson and others like him contributed heavily to this activity, which others might think would be naturally avoided by those who are physically impaired.

I got to like basketball to the extent that I would just get the ball and dribble it as long as I was allowed. I recalled many of the moves that I had practiced when I could walk, and I transferred this to my moves in the wheelchair. Occasionally I would forget myself and jam my finger on the ball. But, for the most part I found his to be quite rewarding. For example, I would count how many times I could do it without losing the ball, and my personal best was 117. I was quite proud of this record, which I was never able to beat or match again.

Sometimes when we were not in the gymnasium we were lucky enough to go over to the city park. At other times when the weather was right the coach and his assistants would take us for a walk through the picnic grounds. This was all part of Coach Wilson's approach to giving us enough variety to keep us from getting bored at any one thing.

The only time thing that ever got Coach Wilson's anger up was when a person refused to try something. If you said: "I can't do it," he would blow his top. If you said that you would try and then found that you could not do something, that was all right. The attitude was not that we can do everything, but that we will try and that we will do the best in what we try. I believe that this is a realistic and realizable approach to life that applies to the obviously handicapped as well as the apparently normal.

By far the most interesting subject to me was current affairs, which I began taking in the second semester of the seventh grade. There is a turning point in most people's lives in which they suddenly acquire a recognition of the world outside their family, community and even their nation. I am convinced that some people never open their eyes to the broader outside world, and this explains why they do not vote or seem to care about anything other than their own little world. But for most there is a point at which they come to a turning point where suddenly there is the recognition: "I never thought about that before." This course in current affairs was that turning point for me, and from that point forward I saw the world from a much different perspective.

Of course, the Iranian hostage crisis (as it was called) also did much to refocus my attention. Iran had taken several Americans hostage who, under normal circumstances, would have had diplomatic immunity since they were mostly employees of the US embassy. This had predominance in the news, but a second major item was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The current events class provided us a forum to discuss these actual events that were still in the process of unfolding. One thing the teacher kept impressing upon us was: "Any way that you want to look at it, we are in a war." This was an interesting statement, but it was not really fulfilled in a literal sense until 11 years later, and the players were not Iran or the Soviet Union, but the US (and its allies within the

UN) and Iraq. This was something that none of us would have imagined back in our seventh grade current affairs class.

Seventh grade in retrospect was a time when I was kept quite busy and did not have time to entertain depressing thoughts. With the exception of about four really bad days in late spring, I was depression free. The reason for this is quite complicated. If anything, you would think that the loss of my ability to walk would throw me into deep depression. But by the time my normal summer depression time came I was probably getting used to the wheelchair. I was coming up on my first anniversary of being confined to the wheelchair about the time that my grandparents came to visit us in late spring. It was when they left that I began to really feel depressed. It was as though I could see it coming, but I kept fighting it off. Then, that spring vacation we went to Louisiana and when I got to visit with Kevin the problem was far from my mind. Once I got back it returned for just a day or so. But soon the routine of finishing out the school year returned, and I was back to normal, anticipating returning to be with Kevin in the coming months.

The summer between my seventh and eighth grades turned out to be one of the best in my recollection. At this time my parents acquired an electric wheelchair. My cousin Kevin had already had an electric wheelchair for a couple of years now. That made life a whole lot more fun; especially when I went down to visit him. Now, instead of our having to stay in close to the house, we could roam out into the yard and the shop where my grandfather worked. We could even go into the woods a ways without having to bother the others to come and push us. Since we both had a newfound sense of independence with our motor-driven chairs, it made our summer visit all the more enjoyable.

There was a popular TV program called CHiPs about two motorcycle cops who worked for the California Highway Patrol. Kevin and I acted this out during the daytime, where our wheelchairs were the motorcycles and we were patrolling the highways of California – which was basically the walkway between Kevin’s and our grandparent’s houses. We also developed a wheelchair version of football that we played. Our sisters served as referees. We tried to play a tackle version for a while. However, it was obvious that the wheelchairs would not be able to take this wear and tear, so we reverted to a flag version.

(One problem that we ran into with my new wheelchair was that it was impractical to use it inside of our house. This was not a serious problem at this point, since I was still able to use my arms to roll myself around in the manual wheelchair in the house. This served to keep my arms exercised and strong, but I really enjoyed being able to have much more freedom when I was outside, since my arms were also beginning to show the effects of MD at this point. Unfortunately, our house being on a hill did not facilitate my being able to use the electric wheelchair very much around my own house. Eventually we left the electric wheelchair at my grandparent’s house so that I would have it there when we visited.)

Kevin and I got along really well, both because we both had the same condition, and because we had many other things in common. We enjoyed the same music, TV shows, and most of the other things that kids of our age group are into. What helped us the most was that we both shared the same sense of humor. This enabled us to joke about our conditions, and in that way we

would help to uplift one another, most of the time without even having this intent or knowing that we were doing it. We lived so far apart and only saw each other about four times (on average) each year. In most cases when we went through our separate depressions we were apart from each other, so I can never recall a situation where we brought each other down. Whenever we would go to Louisiana, I am sure that he was looking forward to seeing me just as much as I was to seeing him. Our spirits were always quite high with anticipation of getting together, and this might have been a very positive aspect of our not being together on a daily basis. I could imagine if we spent all of our time together that things could have been quite different, and it might have developed into a negative situation. Of course, there were times when we had some arguments. Most of them were just the petty things, so we ignored any of the irritating habits that might drive other people nuts.

Unfortunately, the **summer of 1980** was not a pleasant time for Kevin and his family, as his parents went through a hard divorce. I did not realize how much his sense of humor and joking meant to me until I heard about this after our first visit early in the summer. I began wondering if he was still going to be the same. Would he still be joking around and cutting up? We returned to Louisiana later that summer, and much to my relief, he was not changed that much by the incident, even though there is no doubt in my mind that the whole affair must have been very hard on him. The result was that his father left them, and this had to hurt. However, he learned to adapt to this as he had to his many physical hardships, and seemed to remain, at least on the surface, good old Kevin.

My theory is that we got our sense of humor from our grandfather. An example of one of the jokes that Paw Paw told stands out in my mind. Paw Paw was in his carpenter shop, and Kevin and I were in there watching him, along with Spike, Kevin's dog. For some reason, Paw Paw had spilt a little gasoline on the floor and Spike went on over and began sniffing it. Knowing that this was not going to be good for the dog, Paw Paw chased him off exclaiming: "Get out of here, Spike, you don't want any of that!"

Kevin, being curious, asked Paw Paw what would happen if Spike drank some of the gasoline. Never passing up any opportunity for a joke, Paw Paw used a little hyperbole: "Old Spike would start running around the yard, he would jump flips over the birdbath, and after circling ten times like his tail was on fire, he would roll over stiff."

Kevin persisted: "Would it kill him? Would it kill him?"

Old Paw Paw looked at Kevin with a straight face and never batted an eye: "Naaa, he would just run out of gas."

It was this dry, spontaneous, off the cuff humor that enabled Kevin to cope so well. Like Paw Paw, he did not have a large repertoire of jokes. However, he could find humor in the common and ordinary, and even in many of the nuances of his condition. This type of thing is contagious, and Kevin and I tended to feed on each other in this regard.

On one particular occasion Kevin decided that he was going to eat onions and drink chocolate milk. Unfortunately, his stomach did not agree on this decision, and he needed to tell his mother that he could not eat anything for the rest of the day. After expressing his distress, he asked:

“Mom. You think that was how MD got started? ... from some freak accident like someone mixing chocolate milk and onions?”

“Sure,” she replied, as she gave him some brand X pink stuff to take. “Problem is, nobody’s ever figured out what that mixture was.”

“Be nice if they did, then something like this could be found to cure it ...” as the taste of it hit him he shook off the taste and said: “...but I’m not sure I would want to take it.”

Kevin and I were to be Paw Paw’s only grandsons for a long while, and we got along quite well with him. He would be working on something in his shop and Kevin and I would join him. He would always give us some odd jobs that would both help him and bolster our self-confidence as well. A really creative person can always come up with ways that other people can help. Paw Paw knew, at times, that he could probably get the whole job done quicker if he left us out. However, there were other times that what we learned earlier from him helped him considerably.

As an example there was the time Paw Paw was building bird houses. Some of the pieces of wood that had been cut needed to be fastened together. He gave these pieces to Kevin and me, along with the screws. We would then place the screws in the appropriate place, but since neither one of us could use a screwdriver, we just got the screws started with our fingers. Though we could not complete the task, we could at least get it started. Meanwhile Paw Paw was back at his table sawing his next piece of wood. When he finished he would come over to where Kevin and I were, grab the screwdriver and put the finishing touches on the process. Though Kevin and I were limited in what we could do physically, we were still anxious to provide whatever help we could, and Paw Paw had a special way of being able to identify just what that was. In this case there was no doubt that our help enabled him to move the project along much faster than if he had been working alone. As Kevin and I looked at the birdhouses that Paw Paw strategically placed in his back yard, we had a good sense of accomplishment knowing that we had participated in their construction.

After our vacation in Louisiana was over I returned to Tuscaloosa, where I was to begin another session of summer school. However, things were considerably different this summer. The majority of my friends had decided, for whatever reason, not to attend summer school that year. Many of the students who were there were either strangers to me or else I had only a remote recollection of them. The majority of them were much younger than I, which tended to make me feel like I was out of place – like I was in kindergarten or first grade. So, after attending class just for one day, I decided that I was not going to get much out of summer school this year. My parents agreed with this assessment, and I never went back.

This did not spoil my summer. My sister and I did many things during that summer that kept us busy and occupied. We slept late every day and stayed up late as well. Also, that summer Mom had taken a part-time job as an accountant for a shopkeeper in one of the local malls. She

would most often take Missy and me with her, and while she was going over the books, we would roam throughout the mall, checking in with Mom every now and then. This kept us more than occupied for the two days per week that she would typically work in this capacity.

Right after Mom was hired she found out that the store was going out of business, and that was the reason that they needed a temporary accountant to get things in order. The lady that owned the store was not the most friendly of types. Whenever Missy and I would enter her store she would look up and start frowning. Mom later explained that she would mistake us for customers, and that we were interrupting their work. One day when we were going back to the store we stopped at a pay phone and called to tell Mom that we were coming back to the store so that they would know that we were not customers coming to disrupt them. It was partly to keep the owner from getting mad, but mostly just the smart-aleck act of a couple of kids. It was apparent that Mother did not share our enthusiasm for this joke, and she let us know that this type of humor would not be appreciated in the future.

Those closest to me today may find this hard to believe, but there was a time when I didn't care too much about football even though I lived so close to The University of Alabama. I gradually began following the University's Crimson Tide football program in late 1979 when I was in the 7th grade. A friend of mine had gotten his hands on a football schedule for Alabama, and I noticed that on the 17th of November (my 13th birthday) Alabama was playing a game in Tuscaloosa. I felt that this would be a great birthday present for me if we could get tickets for that game. I mentioned it to my father but he said that it was too short notice and that the game was sold out. However, the game was on TV and I watched the Tide win quite easily. This was the year that Alabama won the National championship.

As the summer of 1980 rolled on I forgot about football until I learned that my father had gotten a ticket to one of the Alabama games to be played in Tuscaloosa that fall. Game day arrived on October 25, 1980 and I was really excited. Fortunately the entire episode lived up to my wildest expectations. However, I soon discovered that I did not know as much about the game as I thought I did. So, in between cokes and hot dogs and shouting *Rooooolll Tiiiiiiide!!!!* Dad explained the game of football to me, and I was hooked.

The following spring (1981), Coach Paul Bear Bryant was getting ready to break the all time record of the most games won by any head coach. By this time I had been following Alabama football for over a year and had gotten really interested in it, and Coach Bryant was one of my favorite heroes. Dad thought it would be a great idea to have a meeting arranged for me with "The Bear," and he talked to his friend Jerry Belk, director of the Parks and Recreation Authority about this. Jerry had contacts in the University's athletic department and he spent the next few months trying to find a convenient time when we could meet. They felt that sometime in the summer when he was not so busy would be best.

All of this was kept a secret from me out of fear of getting my hopes up for something that might have proved impossible. However, once the deal was nearly set up they let me in on the sur-

prise. The news could not have come at a better time, for I had spent the summer of 1981 in another odd-year round of depression (that I will detail later). This was just what the doctor ordered.

The one thing that my parents insisted on, however, was that I not tell any of my friends, since they did not want all of them bothering Coach Bryant. This was hard enough. The other torture was waiting for the Athletic Department to call back and tell us when the day and the time were for us to meet him. Finally they called back and gave us the date (July, 1981). Waiting for it to come was a nerve-wracking experience.

When the day finally came Mom took a motion picture camera to document the momentous occasion. Bear was very pleasant and fun to be with. I had all kinds of questions to ask him, but when I got in his presence I could not bring myself to ask him any of them, and my parents had to do the talking for me. One of the things that they told him is that I had trouble sleeping the night before some Alabama games. Bear replied that he had trouble sleeping before all of the games. One thing that impressed me was the junk that he had on his desk – he even had a wadded up pair of socks on his desk. It was a wonder that he could find anything on it – but then, I guess that is what he had a secretary for.

Later on that year Bear's team won enough games to make him the all-time record-holder for the most games won by a college football coach. This tended to make our meeting all the more memorable. I would mark it as one of the most exciting days in my life. I cannot recall now if I properly thanked my father for arranging that, and if I did not, let me take this opportunity now: "Thanks dad – it was great!"

In the fall of 1980, as I got close to celebrating my 14th birthday, I got ready to enter the eighth grade. This year was to be a major change in my academic career that I had not anticipated. When handicapped children are placed in school with other children with physical disabilities, there is a tendency for these students to become isolated from the others, in which we might call the "real" world. Two years earlier the Tuscaloosa school system began to remedy this "problem" (as it was perceived to be) by allowing handicapped children who had a normal mental capacity to take many of their classes with the other students. So now I was taking such classes as English and Math in the normal public school environment. We would be bussed to our special classes – physical education, home economics (survival skills), etc. – but would spend the major portion of the morning with the general public school population.

The program had been initiated with a transition, and when I was in the sixth grade two of my friends had taken part in this program. Pam was one of them, and there was another boy who had a slight case of cerebral palsy that affected his walking and speech. In fact, this boy was completely integrated into the regular school system so that we practically lost contact with him.

Anyone who is handicapped but has the mental capacity should certainly be given that opportunity to attend school with the other students. In this age of information there is no doubt that physical handicaps should not keep one from being able to contribute to society. So it is important that the handicapped not be totally isolated from the rest of the world. There is a big advantage to

our taking courses with the normal students, since when we get a job we will have to be integrated into society. It helps build self-esteem. Even though we are not at the same physical level, we can be on the same mental level.

But individual students should not be forced into this situation. It is wrong to lump all handicapped together and treat them identically, as is true of any other minority. As with most options, this one has a downside. In the end the individual and his/her parents need to weigh the various options and make this decision for themselves. A student who is in special education for a while might become used to it and not be comfortable in another environment. Within the special education class, students are even further subdivided into smaller sections and students need to get accustomed to a larger more diverse environment. There is also a problem with making friends – some can do it and others cannot. As opposed to the protected environment, when handicapped students are integrated into the normal classes they have to learn to be a minority. In the isolated environment they fit right in because there is a similarity between all of our handicaps. But in regular school I recognized myself as being clearly a minority of one.

It was difficult for me to get used to how I was received by the normal kids in class. Some would talk, most would be indifferent. All are curious about how you feel. Some would come right out and ask about it; but most of them just did not know how to approach it. They are ill at ease and act awkward. What I wanted was for them to treat me like they would any other ordinary person and establish a relationship. Within that relationship they would learn what the limits are as to what I felt comfortable talking about or not. I did not want them to see me as the same as them, necessarily. I was hopeful that they might view me like someone with a different hair color or perhaps a strange accent. But that was not to be.

When I entered the eighth grade my teacher felt that I was ready to participate in this program. The junior high and middle school systems in Tuscaloosa were arranged where each school building served an entire grade. This arose as a solution to the problems of racial segregation that was resolved in 1979. So I was to attend Eastwood Middle School, which served the needs of all of the 8th-grade kids of the entire Tuscaloosa City area.

Looking back now, I cannot recall if I was excited about this venture or not. My mixed emotions probably canceled each other out. I was certainly apprehensive and nervous about going into a new and strange environment, which would not be the case had I not been isolated from it for so long. But, I have always been excited by new and different challenges, and this was no exception. The bus would come at about 7:30 AM and take me over to Eastwood, where I would take two classes that lasted about two hours. After that, one of the students would push me outside where another bus would take me over to Oak Hill, where I would rejoin my more familiar learning environment in time for our “free” period.

One of the first classes that I took at Eastwood was art. I used to draw all kinds of pictures in my work notebooks anyway, and when the teachers found these doodles they figured that it was a good idea for me to take a class in art. My parents and I determined it best to make the second class one of social studies; however, this was not open to me, and so I enrolled in a math course. I was

not happy about this, but figured that it did not matter where I took it, I was not going to enjoy math much in any case.

With the exception that the art teacher had us drawing all kinds of weird stuff, the art class worked out quite well. I was more inclined toward Bugs Bunny or Fred Flintstone, but the art teacher had her own ideas as to what we should draw. For example, one thing that I particularly remember is the teacher sticking an old log and a bicycle tire and all kinds of other junk on top of the table and asked us to draw what we saw. I was not interested in drawing junk, and not having anything really defined made it that much harder. I suppose this was intended to spur our creativity, but I am not sure that such does not take the creativity out of some children who want a motivation for what they do (other than just that the teacher told us to do it). The teacher came up behind me, on this occasion, and told me that I had drawn the log too small. So, I erased it and drew it again, and this time she told me that I had drawn it too big. The result on my part was, for the most part, frustration. Of course, there were some students who knew exactly how large to draw it, but I am not sure where they got their information, and I tend to think that it was probably just a lucky guess.

It was not that the art teacher was not nice, although occasionally she demonstrated a temper that would get the best of her. However, it was never at my expense. I behaved myself (to a much greater degree of discipline than when I was in the handicapped classes), and I knew what buttons to push and what not to push in order to keep myself from her infrequent displays of wrath. She was quite attractive, and I sort of developed a mild crush on her after a while.

At one time she assigned a project where each student was to draw a picture of another student without looking at the paper. You were to stare straight ahead at the person and draw the picture without looking down. Never having done anything like this, I found this an impossible task (try it sometime). Fortunately, the person that I was drawing helped me draw something that both resembled her and also looked like I had not looked down in the process.

We also had a project where we had to carve a piece of wood with a penknife, and the teacher told me to be careful so that I would not cut myself. I did not pay much attention, since I figured that I could handle it. And I did an admirable job until about the final few carvings when the penknife slipped and cut my thumb. Fortunately it was not too bad, and I had a package of Kleenex that I carried with me by which I was able to resolve this minor problem. When she came by to check what I was doing she saw the blood on my hand and realized what I had done. She put a Band-Aid on my thumb, and it was probably at this point that I realized that I had a crush on her. I guess this mitigated what otherwise I considered being the nonsense of not getting to draw what I wanted to draw in this class. My parents and I were somewhat disappointed when I got a B on my first report card. However, by the end of the school year, I did bring this grade up to an A, so apparently I did not allow my lack of interest to get the best of me.

One problem that I had in the art class was that all of the tables were quite high, and all of the students would sit on stools as they did their drawing and other activities. There was no way that I could use that type of table from my wheelchair. There was a small desk by the teacher's desk, and that is where they put me. This tended to keep me isolated, and accentuated to the "difference" between myself and the rest of the class. I am not sure if it was the table arrangement or

what, but there was very little interaction between myself and the rest of the students. Perhaps it was just the personality mix. It only takes one or two people in a class for you to get a completely different picture of the class in general. A couple of nasties who tend to dominate things as compared to a couple of people who go out of their way to get involved with you. Or, perhaps the students in the art class were just afraid and did not know how to talk to someone who was so “different” from them. I can understand how people feel who are different for whatever reason. For example, if I had been the only black kid in the art class, I would probably have gotten the same reception. It was not one of animosity, or prejudice, just more like indifference. However, this was still not a pleasant environment.

The only time I had any interaction with the other students in the art class was when we did a group project. Not that this was a big problem in my life. It was clear that they could not change the tables just for me. None of them actually went out of their way to ignore me. But when I got my stuff done early, I got bored. It got so boring that I actually watched the clock and counted down to math class. I looked forward to it because at least there was interaction with other students. Even though they were not physically handicapped, most of us shared a common problem when it came to math.

I am not totally blaming anyone for this unfortunate situation. My own lack of integration with the normal kids prior to this probably hurt. At Oak Hill I had been with the same students for four or five years, not only as classmates but almost as family. This was hard to leave behind. Being with them over this time period had resulted in my becoming an informal leader. I interacted with all of these kids quite heavily, and enjoyed their company immensely. Here at Eastwood I was just one of many students and it seemed that the only thing that made me stand out was the wheelchair. My response was to retreat into shyness.

The math class that I took at Eastwood was right next door to where I took art, so this was quite convenient. Getting someone to push me was no problem in that the kids were more than willing to help. The problem with math was probably me. I never liked it, and I never will. It really did not matter who the teacher was or where it was. I am not unlike many other kids in this regard, and those who can be turned on to it early in life are quite fortunate, since this is something that our current world is going to require of everyone to some extent.

Despite my dislike of the subject, I did grow rather attached to the teacher. She was pretty, young, and had a real nice personality, which, unlike my art teacher, was not prone to causing flare-ups in her temper. In fact, the entire time that I was with her, she never seemed to get mad at all. But, the time that I was to enjoy her was short, since she would shortly have a baby. While her replacement was nice, she had a very sharp tongue, which tended to turn many of us off.

The thing that enabled me to enjoy math even more than I enjoyed art was the students who were in the math class. I found that I could socialize with them much easier than I could with the people in the art class. Here the tables were all the same normal size and I could sit anywhere, so, in a sense I could be considered as “part of the class.” This also enabled me to interact with the students more freely, and once they recognized that I had much the same interests, likes and dislikes (including that of math for many of them), we hit it off. Making funny comments between working

math problems was a welcomed relief to me and those around me as well, and it helped to ensure further interaction.

One of the most important things in this regard is for the handicapped person to maintain a sense of humor. This tends to put those who are struggling for words with a common ground on which they can communicate. The worst thing is to put people off with complaining, since the result will be that ordinary people will just want to avoid you. Humor is a delicate thing in this regard however, and those who are not handicapped have a hard time relating to this. For, although the handicapped will often make a joke about their condition in order to break the ice and get the conversation and interaction going, humor at the expense of the handicapped individual is generally not at all welcomed from those who cannot really understand our plight. This is a difficult, and as I said – quite delicate, issue for most normal people to understand. For, although we will go out of the way to make jokes about ourselves to break the ice (and keep it broken), we are not seeking agreement and help in this regard. This is our thing to make a joke about, not yours. The heaping of further derision is generally not welcomed. However, it is difficult for most normal people to not want to jump into the fray and add to the fun at our expense.

Of course, all handicapped people are not the same in this regard, but I believe that I am probably much more resilient in this area than are many others. This depends very highly on the relationship that exists. If it is a close relationship, then usually both parties know where to draw the line, and there is an open channel of communication that enables this line to be pretty well defined. So, some of the things that I would accept from, say Kevin and Missy, would not be acceptable from others. I also have several close friends who would really have to be intentionally nasty to offend me. However, some of these same remarks from others who I don't know as well might be extremely obnoxious to me. My advice to those who wish to respond in kind is to do just that. If I say something funny about my condition, then you say something funny about *your* condition (not mine). I find this to be something that normal folk cannot seem to understand, and often they think they are doing me a favor by topping me, but at my expense. Again, I do not feel that I am being overly sensitive in this area, for my experience has been that most handicapped people are not nearly as flexible as I am in being able to take a crack.

The interaction that I had within the math class was not without its downside. Even though I was not the first handicapped person within the Tuscaloosa school system to be integrated with regular classes, I felt as if I was. Most people have some prejudice toward and stereotypes about those in wheelchairs, and this is somewhat magnified in teen-agers, probably more so than in any other age group. Very young kids tend to ignore handicaps and just go about their business of having fun. Older people tend to mature out of their self-centeredness, although some never get over their adolescent mentality. The major prejudice that I encountered was that there was always a feeling that there had to be some mental disability that went along with my obvious physical disability. So, going out into the regular school system, I felt pressure to destroy this myth. I did everything that I could to avoid making a fool of myself. I applied the old proverb: Better to keep your mouth shut and have people think you are a fool than open it and remove all doubt. Or, perhaps more positively, paraphrasing Solomon: “Even a fool is thought to be wise when he openeth not his mouth.”

Thus, whenever a question was asked, I hardly ever raised my hand. The problem with this approach is that it might have confirmed suspicions that others had, since my silence might be interpreted as ignorance. So, I was between a rock and a hard place. The experience taught me how others who were minorities in their race, nationality or religion tend to feel unjustly discriminated against for no good reason. I recognized the courage that it took many of them to do something for the very first time. I began to sympathize with such people who had experienced the same type of thing, such as Vivian Malone (the first African American to enroll at The University of Alabama) or Jackie Robinson. I wanted to proclaim: “Just because I am different in one thing does not make me different in everything!”

Unfortunately, this problem did not just affect me in class. Even though it was hard for my parents and close friends to believe, I developed a severe case of shyness. If I was really close to someone and knew them really well – like some of the kids that sat right next to me, then I could carry on a regular conversation with them with no problem. However, if it was someone that I did not know very well, or if they were not real close to me, I could not bring myself to raise my voice and speak to them. I felt that this would attract attention to me and that they would start staring at me. Mostly, it was a fear that the person to whom I was talking would not hear me and would then not pay attention to what I was saying, causing me to look stupid in front of everyone.

Of course, I recognize now that this was just childish fear, and it was not totally justified, but that is how I felt. And, at times, this was quite painful for me. For example, if I would see someone at church or at school that I had not seen for quite a while, sometimes I would be dying to speak to them but would let the opportunity pass by if I had to raise my voice in order to get their attention. For some reason, I just could not bring myself to speak to them. Therefore, unless they came close to me, or I was somehow able to maneuver myself in their direction, we just would not speak. This was quite painful for me, for I craved communication at this time in my life. Not only would this bring disappointment at the time, but also when I got home I felt like a failure for wanting to talk but not being able to bring myself to it. It was also a fear that they would feel that I had not really wanted to talk and had just snubbed them. This possibility of hurting their feelings keeps me in a state of worry almost constantly.

Sometimes I would get feedback that a teacher or a friend felt that I was not as outgoing as I should be, and it would take me a very long time to get over this. I needed more than just being told that; after all, I *knew* that. What I needed was someone to tell me how or to explain why I was retreating this way. The only good thing that came out of this maturing experience was that before my confinement, like most young people, I usually did much more talking than listening, thereby missing out on quite a bit of knowledge and wisdom from older people and even my peer group. This way, since I was not able (or willing) to speak up, I tended to take in far more than would otherwise be possible. I am sure that I was much better off for it, although I paid a very high emotional price for this increased knowledge.

Another downside of the overall integration experience was the behavior of some of the administrators and teachers at Oak Hill, the school where I had most of my previous schooling with the handicapped students. I got the feeling that I was considered a “token” handicapped student, or

one that was to prove that “mainstreaming” is possible. This is probably easy for most minorities to identify with, but perhaps impossible for others. Although I cannot put my finger on too many specific events that I could say caused this feeling, it was clearly there. I recognize that this could have been completely a problem on my part, but I suspect that the problem was a combination of factors, some due to me, and others caused by actions of the teachers and administrators. For example, it seemed that the reputation of Oak Hill was resting on the shoulders of the kids who were thrust into this situation where we had to compete with the general population of students in our grade. If we competed successfully, this would demonstrate how good Oak Hill was; however, if not we would make them look bad. While this was not overtly stated, I could read between the lines. A very predominant question that I was asked quite frequently was: “Did you make any friends?” Now, there was a student at Eastwood who was assigned to meet me at the bus and push me to my first class. I felt that we had become well acquainted with each other, and when the winter semester began, he was assigned to take art class with me. This gave us a chance to get closer, and I would get him to push me to my math class. So, after a little time I was ready when the standard question came.

The interchange went like this: “Have you made any friends.”

“Yes, one.”

“What’s his name.”

I responded with the first name of my new friend.

“What’s his last name.”

“I don’t know ...” I responded, never having thought to ask his last name or to pay much attention to it when it did come up.

“Well, he must not be much of a friend if you don’t even know his last name.”

Perhaps a conversation to this effect seems quite trivial, and perhaps I had not made the number and type of friends that I ought to have made. The net effect on me at this point was just to solidify my suspicion that it would be quite impossible for me to satisfy this person.

(As a side note, there is more to say about the friend that I mentioned who helped me out so much. It was some 15 years later when my parents were installing a burglar alarm at our house. The man installing it had inadvertently tripped the alarm and he did not turn it off in time. Within a few minutes two policemen arrived at our house, and one of them was my friend. I had not seen him since we had taken our art class together, but he recognized me immediately despite the fact that I had a problem recalling him. Once he told me the grade and the circumstances it all came back to me quite well. Despite our forced separation, it was clear that we still had feelings of friendship for each other. When you are only in 7th or 8th grade, last names are the least of your problems.)

Another thing that contributed to this overall feeling of disenfranchisement was the experience of a friend of mine who had been with me at Oak Hill and who was taking some classes as I was. Somehow she managed to get herself either locked in the restroom or else could not open the door. No one could hear her when she called for help. Finally, one of the students went in to use the restroom, but by that time my friend was on the verge of tears. But, instead of being met with understanding, her embarrassment was further intensified when she was chastised by one of the main authority figures at Oak Hill – as if this was unbecoming of handicapped behavior. Perhaps it was not something to cry about, but put yourself in her place – it is difficult to know exactly what your emotional response would be.

It seemed to me then (and still does now) that if a normal student had somehow gotten caught in the restroom and could not get out, this would not have happened. Let's say that somehow the door had gotten locked and this student had no idea how long it would be before they would be able to get out. Do you suppose that they would be chastised for getting a little upset about it? Why should handicapped students be held up to a higher standard? Perhaps the faculty and administration felt that such was necessary in order to enable us to cope in the "real world." In retrospect I feel that it had the very opposite effect.

Both of these anecdotes illustrate a similar point: the students had now become demonstration objects as opposed to recipients of the benefits of the education system. I realize that this is a very fine line, and that, perhaps, someone must hold the handicapped to a higher standard. Jackie Robinson had to be the *greatest* of baseball players. It was not enough for him to just be average or even above average. It didn't matter that he was an individual human being first. To society he represented an entire race. If he had not been a great baseball player chances are he would have had no impact at all. If our society had been fair he would not have had to be outstanding. For some reason society holds minorities up to a higher standard. Jackie Robinson was Jackie Robinson first, and a baseball player second, and an African American third; but somehow society has it all in reversed order. People wanted me to succeed and they wanted the program to succeed, and I am grateful for that. But they did not realize the pressure that this was placing on us.

Generally, Eastwood turned out to be somewhat of a disappointment, unlike what I had anticipated. I was somewhat turned off by math just because it was math. And, as for art, which I had looked forward to, it turned out to be a frustration because of the separation from the class that I described above. The art class itself was fine as long as I could draw what I wanted to, but most of the time the teacher had another agenda. But mostly, the pressure that I was putting on myself in trying to represent all of the handicapped people in the whole world kept me in a perpetual state of nervousness. The combination of all of this was further compounded with having to go to two schools at the same time. You could not get down to a routine – as soon as you settled in at one school it was time to go to the other. And finally, there was a certain status that I enjoyed among the special student class that I did not enjoy in the other classes.

A major difficulty that I had with integrating into the normal classes is that I could not excel in the two classes that I took. If I could have taken social studies, for example, I believe that this would have greatly improved my self-confidence. However, being off balance and away from home was a difficult combination to overcome. I really feel that I had the capacity to succeed in the

normal school environment, but there were just too many things that were working together against me at this point. It was going to take a period of adapting before this could happen.

After a couple of months I decided that I had had enough of Eastwood, and I decided that I should go back to Oak Hill. I discussed this with my parents and found that they were against it. They were fairly adamant that I should at least finish out the year. This did not seem to be a reasonable request at the time, given my unhappy state of affairs. However, looking back on it, this was a good decision, for if I had retreated at this point I would have had a much more difficult time later on in adjusting to the “real world.”

Even though this experience did not work out for me, I feel that overall it is beneficial for handicapped students to be integrated into the normal classroom setting. I feel that the biggest problem is that it had come too late for me. Some transition earlier on would have been much better. I believe that being integrated with normal students is of particular value for MD students who for a large part of their lives (i.e., before the disease really starts to take hold) have been with their normal counterparts. I agree that when the debilitating effects begin to cause significant problems, the move to a special class is beneficial. However, once the transition to a wheelchair is completed and the normal physical competition becomes less of an issue, some major advantages can be attained by getting back to the regular classroom.

On the other hand, neither do I regret going back to special education after one year. Perhaps if we had kept our original teachers (and the initial philosophy that they had) at Oak Hill, I would not be saying this. But later we got a new teacher who put much more emphasis on academics, and she got us back to this same level. If this change had not occurred I would not have received a high school diploma, probably just a certificate. However, given the value of my experience (despite its pain) with the normal classes, I would say that if at all possible all handicapped kids should take some of the normal classes, and preferably at least a year should be spent in this environment.

Like so many other things this is quite dependent on the particular needs and personality of the individual. There is no standard answer that holds for all. Additionally, not all school systems can provide the type of services, due to financial limitations. The most important thing is that the material covered provides the background that the handicapped people will need to function in the real world. Since it is obvious that they will not be able to do physically demanding jobs, they will have to depend upon their knowledge and thinking abilities to earn a living. If this can be attained in a special handicapped class, this might be acceptable. However, it is up to the parents to be sure that what is being taught is of the same or higher caliber as that taught in the normal schools. Parents might examine the levels of the books being used to be sure that adequate attention to training is being given.

Like most kids my age, I began paying a whole lot more attention to the world around me. By watching the news on television I was able to keep up with current events. That fall the biggest event in the country at this time was the presidential election. Back in the fall of 1976 in our social studies class when we studied the election between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, I found it quite

boring. (I was overjoyed when it snowed on the day that we were to watch the inauguration of Jimmy Carter and I did not have to watch it. That night at the supper table when it was my turn to say the blessing I not only thanked God for the food but also went on to thank Him for the snow as well.) Now, however, four years later in the fall of 1980 the election between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan really interested me.

I had started out the year for Jimmy Carter but was influenced by my teacher at Oak Hill who was a big Reagan supporter. My parents did not tell me who they were voting for out of fear that I would blab to everyone that I knew – or perhaps they had not totally made up their minds either. In any event, my teacher eventually pulled me over to his side, and, as it turned out, this was consistent with my parents' viewpoint. We did not study the election at school as we had done before, but I discovered that politics can be quite fascinating at times, and I followed the election on my own.

Once Reagan was elected, the teacher announced (as before) that we would watch the inauguration. This time I was looking forward to it. This was still when I was spending a couple of hours at Eastwood each day and the rest of the time at Oak Hill. It was at Oak Hill where we were going to watch the inauguration.. Under normal circumstances I would have arrived at Oak Hill from Eastwood in plenty of time to watch the ceremony. However, on that day the person who drove the bus forgot to pick me up. One of the students went in to call while all that I could do was to stare at my watch. It was then that it dawned on me how many things had changed in these four years. I had gone from thanking God for avoiding the inauguration to being terribly annoyed at the bus driver for having to miss it. However, he did show up in due time and was able to get me there in time.

The spring of 1981 came as we wound down to the closing days of the school year. For the first time I had to take final exams in both art and math. Fortunately, I passed both of them – got an A in art and B in math.

I was looking forward to summer vacation, which was particularly exciting after a year in which I had had so many problems in adapting. The first month of June was quite good, probably in contrast to the difficulties that I had encountered. It began with a visit from some relatives. However, when they left I began to feel that something was missing. By the time the Fourth of July came around I was in the midst of another serious bout with depression. I cannot be sure exactly what caused it. These things tended to hit during the summer when I was not occupied with school. Part of it might have been because the previous summer had been so great that I had over-anticipated the fun that I would have this summer. These expectations were just not realized and I spiraled down quickly.

There were not too many children in our neighborhood since we were rather isolated. However, two girls who lived across the street had come back from Taiwan where they had spent the summer last year. This might have seemed to be an asset, but it had the effect of taking Missy away for quite a bit of the time while the previous year we had been almost inseparable. Last year we fought a lot as siblings always tend to do, and there were probably times that I would have wished

that she was occupied somewhere else. However, this summer I realized how valuable her companionship was as I had to do most of the summer things by myself.

The symptoms of my plight were the same as I had experienced before. Thoughts kept entering my mind – mean thoughts about my parents, my sister, God and Christ. I worried that I did not love my family and God, and I worried that this hatred would condemn me eternally. The more that I worried, the worse the depression got. But I had learned a few things from my previous struggles. Most importantly, when you are suffering from depression the best thing that you can do is to keep yourself busy. My father had gotten back from a trip to Wisconsin on business and, knowing that I liked to get *TV Guides* from all over the country; he brought me one from Madison. So, in order to keep myself busy and to try to counter these evil thoughts, I picked up that *TV Guide* and read it cover to cover – not just the articles but each and every TV listing. These were stations that were hundreds of miles away that I had no chance of ever picking up. Certainly different people have different ways of coping, but the primary thing is to keep your mind off of it in whatever way works for you. The biggest event to take my mind off of my problems was, of course, meeting the “Bear.”