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Acknowledgement

Development of this oral history was supported through the Mary E. Switzer Research Fellowship program, under a grant from the Department of Education, NIDRR grant number HF133F070013. Contents do not represent the policy of the Department of Education or endorsement by the Federal Government.

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Joe Caldwell
Adjunct Research Assistant Professor
Department of Disability and Human Development (MC 626)
University of Illinois at Chicago
Jcaldw3@uic.edu
selfadvocacyhistory@gmail.com

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James Meadours

2/16/2008

10:00AM – 12:30PM

2:30PM – 5:00PM

Austin, TX

Caldwell: So the first thing is would you mind sharing how old you are now?

Meadours: I am 41 years old.

Caldwell: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Meadours: Well, it is kind of interesting. I was born in Greenview, Mississippi. Something interesting happened in Greenview at the same time when I was born; but it is going to happen like 30 something years later. I am going to share that later. But I was born in Greenview, Mississippi. For a short time we lived in Alabama and my brother Joe was born. We moved from Alabama to Louisiana in the New Orleans area. We lived there for 11 years. I was only in my neighborhood school for a short time. They put me in a school across town. I felt I was different because I wasn't able to stay with the same schools that my brother Joe went. My dad's side of the family was from Louisiana in a small community. See my Grandma, Grandpa, my Aunt and Uncle, and my cousins –our younger cousins who were me and Joe's ages, we used to do a lot of stuff. A lot of the neighborhood kids called me names like "retard" and "handicapped." I felt I was different because they did not value me as a person. But my cousins did not treat me any different. They gave me the love and support I need. I remember some great, fond memories in the country because we ride go carts, we play games, play hide and seek.

It is kind of weird because whenever I go back to Louisiana, to my family reunion on my dad's side of the family, it is a big difference. When you look at the field as an adult it looks small, but when you look at it as a kid it looks big. When I was in the fifth grade and I was in the same school with Joe, they put me in an adaptive PE class in the second grade. I was in the fifth grade level, but for some reason they thought I needed the second grade adaptive PE class. That kind of make me upset because I confess, I was a diehard New Orleans Saints fan. I am still a diehard Saints fan. One day Archie Manning came to visit the fifth graders and the fourth graders in the school. They had the opportunity to talk to him, get his autograph, catch some balls.

Caldwell: Who was that?

Meadours: Archie Manning - Eli and Payton Manning's dad. I was in the second grade PE class. I was playing duck, duck, goose. I think that was the first ever self-advocate thing I ever did because I spoke up and complained

that wasn't right. But the next day the PE teacher got on to me because I should not have spoke up to my mom about that.

I was just in a new beginning in Louisiana, and we finally got word; we moved to Texas, moved to Houston. This is one of my school pictures. When we get to Houston, I thought it would be great. My neighborhood school was great for the first couple months, then they say, "James we need to put you in a different school way across town." I felt like I was different because the kids still teased me and called me names. I was all alone because I was the only one who go to a different school. The opportunity was... I did not have a lot of friends as a kid. My get away was riding my bicycle or flying my kite, because I am a big kite freak. At the same time... Now I am racing slot cars, but when I was a young child and also teenager I run a car on a slot to race around a track and stuff. It was fun.

I think the most memorable thing in grade school was –some people think it is silly, but I am going to say it anyway: I remember my first love. Her name was Carrie. She went to the same school as I did. We were both in love with each other and very happy with each other, but a couple months later she had to move away. That made me very sad. After Carrie, Lou Ann and I was together for a long, long time. Now I wish I knew what Carrie and Lou Ann are doing now in their lives. I just sometimes wish the kids got to know me better in my childhood, especially when I am in the elementary and middle school ages –because they really did not get to know me.

When I was in high school, in Sam Rayburn High School here in Texas, it was not my neighborhood high school it was across the town. Every day, Monday through Friday, a 45-minute bus ride back and forth, back and forth. I was in segregated classes. I think my mom was not the world's greatest advocate. She did not know about the laws like IDEA, because IDEA came about the same time I was in public school. I wish it could have been better, but she just tried. She don't know all the services available, but she just did what was right for James. I am not mad at her at all. She tried her best. She got the best she could know about at the time.

When I was in Sam Rayburn high school, I met a young boy and his family. It is kind of neat because he was playing in a baseball league called pooch pitch. It is like five pitch; they only have five pitches to hit the

ball. I just gave the boys encouragement and support; said they could hit the ball, go the extra mile and all that. In the 80s, in 1982 the team came in first place in regular season and first place in the tournament. At the same time when they did that, that was the first time ever in that league that the same team won both playoffs and the season in the same year. It was very exciting because the kids and the parents treated me like a person. They did not look at my disability or feel sorry for me. The neatest thing that ever happened to me was... They have a big picnic get together. Everyone get awards –the coaches, the players. The last part was my turn. I was real speechless because they gave me an award, a plaque to me as an honorary team player for their team. That made me feel real good inside.

At the same time my mom started to start her second family. My other brother, Douglas, who is 28 now and my sister was born. She is about 26 now. Also, my mom was pregnant with my youngest brother. I couldn't wait for the next season. During that time, one of my saddest parts of my high school... The neighborhood girls wanted to be my friends. Instead of being my friend, how can I say, they took advantage of me. I felt so guilty because they told me if I tell anyone about what happened, they said, "It will be your idea." I kept that secret a long time. The one regret I have is that I never told my real mom about that, about what happened to me.

At the same time we got word we need to move to Oklahoma. My dad had a choice of Oklahoma, Dallas, Texas, or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He decided to pick Tulsa, Oklahoma. This is when I was a sophomore in high school. I did not hear the words like sheltered workshops, group homes, institutions or the traditional type of services. When I was in Oklahoma, I was there a short time in my high school and they said, "We got a job for you." I said, "Cool! A job!" I thought it would be great. A job! Money! When I saw my first paycheck, I said, "That is not right. It is only \$7.70." Then I looked at the rate. They said it was fifty cents an hour. I said, "Oh, my gosh! It is like a sheltered workshop." I didn't read the fine print that said it was a sheltered workshop.

During that time, on my birthday, my mom had some complications with the baby. The doctor ordered her for bed rest at the hospital until she had the baby. On November 28, I have another brother was born. I was so excited about it. I called home to find out if it was a boy or girl. I caught the school bus from the workshop to another junior high school. I tried to

figure out, “Why my other brothers are here at the other junior high school? Why my principal here to give me and my brother a ride?” And he did not say anything. Joe did not say anything. When I walked in the room there was a Catholic priest, a nun, and my dad. The doctor told about what happened to mom. I was really sad about that. My whole world just crashing down on me. December 6th she passed away. That was the hardest thing I ever had to deal with at that time. I was so ashamed to tell my mom about the assault. That is one thing I felt real guilty about, but today I am more stronger. I make some bad choices at the time when I was a child because I was confused and messed up. I am going to be open and honest. I did not use illegal –Cocaine or Marijuana or anything like that, but I abuse over-the-counter. One of my escapes was Nyquil. I used to use Nyquil a lot because I was so depressed. I was confused.

Caldwell: How old were you when your mom passed away?

Meadours: I was 17.

Caldwell: She passed away from complications from the pregnancy?

Meadours: The placenta went to her heart. It stopped for about 45 minutes. When they finally revive her, she was totally incapacitated. That was hard for me because about four or five years ago when the Terri Schiavo case was going on. This was before I worked for the P & A. I worked for the statewide organization. A couple of the members wanted me to take a stand on the issue. I said, “Guys, this is too close to home for me. I am sorry. I cannot put my personal feelings to represent Texas advocates because I don’t feel comfortable about it. It would be more emotions and feelings.” I remember that day when I was at a meeting and we were talking about that. I never have panic attacks at work when I am dealing with issues for people with disabilities. But at that moment, I thought I was getting bored or something because my eyes started shutting down. Instead my panic attack was starting to attack me. I lost my sight for a couple hours. That was very scary to me.

When my mom died at seventeen, my whole world changed. My mom was a big believer in me. I know she wasn’t the greatest advocate for me in the school system. She did what she know best for me. I know all the things I am doing today; I know she is proud of me, but it is still not the same because I miss her a lot. High school was hard. None of the kids

could accept me. Make fun of me. Think I was different because when I was a senior in high school, I went to the high school and I was working in the sheltered workshop in the morning. They did not have no way to change clothes. Because sometimes I get myself a little dirty. The high school did not have a gym at the time to take a shower and freshen up. After high school they did not ask me what I wanted in my future. They thought the sheltered workshop was for me after high school. I graduated in 1986.

Caldwell: The high school you went to, was it a segregated high school? Was it all kids with disabilities? Were you in a class with kids with disabilities?

Meadours: The time in Houston was a segregated class –ninth and tenth grade. When I moved to Oklahoma I was in special education classes –in tenth grade. The only activity outside of that was the green house, working in the green house. In eleventh grade, I decided to take driver's ed. I got a D- but at least I was trying hard to pass. In the twelfth grade, somehow my old school system in Texas did not give me enough English classes and credits. If I didn't have two English classes for graduate, I won't graduate. I decided to do something about it. Because one of the most important things I like is science fiction and suspense –not those Friday the 13th or Norman Bates –but something more in your mind. I decided to take science fiction and suspense because that was part of the way you could get English credit for both of them. After that I had another class called Current Affairs. I really liked it because I am really into current affairs. I took some special education English classes, but the other classes was real fun because I worked very hard and have great memories of that. Still, the kids make fun of me and tease me, but I did not care because I have fun. In 1986, I graduate with my other classmates and walked the stage.

Caldwell: Did you get a regular diploma with the class?

Meadours: Yes.

Caldwell: Is there anything else you want to add about your school experiences?

Meadours: Maybe two things. I hope this could help parents let go of their sons and daughters. One of the things I was jealous of... It happened to Joe, it happened to Douglas, it happened to my sister, it happened to Thomas. For some reason, I wasn't able to go to my prom. I was really hurt inside –because my step-mother and my dad tried to overprotect me. I

remember one year, I tried to ask a young lady to be my date. I even bought her some flowers at the green house where I was working. I was deeply hurt. My dad said, "You need to stay home. You cannot go to the prom." That was really hurtful for me. A year before that he got remarried to a lady who was in the singles' support group who have lost loved ones –like a widowers' group. My dad got remarried. My other high school thing was... It is not high school, but I still cannot figure it out in 1985 why he did not want me to go to the wedding. I was the only one who did not go with the family. I was at home all day to watch the house. I was lucky I could walk to the station when I got my diploma. Some of the guys were going to have a party after graduation, but I wasn't invited. I was at home all day the next day and I was bored to death. I went to work in a sheltered workshop. That was the most hurtful thing. I did not went to the party, or the big event –the prom, or the homecoming dance. Because I think I should have.

Caldwell: What was your relationship like with your brother, Joe? I should know this. He is older than you?

Meadours: No. I am older than him.

Caldwell: By how much?

Meadours: He was born September 24, 1967. I was born in 1966 of October. Like 11 months, I think it is like 11 months. At the time, when we were kids, even in middle school and high school, we were not close at all. Because he think I was a flea. It feels like I was his shadow because I tried to fit in with his friends and everything. Me and him wasn't close at all.

Caldwell: You guys went mostly to two different schools?

Meadours: Yeah, except in Oklahoma. I was jealous with him one time. That is why I did the baseball team, because I was so jealous of him. I wanted to show something to them what I am doing –real positive and great for me. It broke my heart because I wanted to stay another year and help the baseball team again. That award really helped me believe in me. Also, it just felt good. Because Joe was running in track and field in eighth grade and seventh grade. It wasn't Special Olympics track and field; it was the school track and field event. It kind of made me feel little because Joe is in track and I have nothing to prove to my family what I could accomplish.

Caldwell: When you were with the baseball team, you were like a manager?

Meadours: Just encouragement, just give them encouragement. They can do it. Go the extra mile, like motivating speaking type of person.

Caldwell: That is needed.

Meadours: The assistant coach is a friend of mine. The friend I met is his dad and stuff.

Caldwell: How old were you then, when you did the baseball?

Meadours: About sixteen, like a year before I moved to Oklahoma. It was fun. I would never... Because as a little kid or a child I did sports but usually neighborhood sports, not competition sports until years later when I got older. I think it was the first time I got some people motivated because of my speaking. It wasn't self advocacy or anything like that, but.

Caldwell; Well, I was thinking in terms of your leadership skills, that helped you to build confidence in yourself and to help other people. That would be sort of an early thing it seems like?

Meadours: The other neat thing was that the parents were nice to me, the kids and parents. They really were kids. I am not being condescending or anything. They really were kids –like six or seven years old. The really were kids. Because you know, sometimes people are condescending to people with disabilities. They were typical kids who never met a person like me who have a cognitive disability who is a guy that root the team on. It was so neat because they practice nearby, just a couple miles from my house. I just have some good time memories of that. I remember a couple times if someone was missing from practice, sometimes the coach ask me to go over to their house and get them because it is so close. I remember one time one of the guys forgot that we had practice that day. He saw me at the door and said, "Opps!" He grabbed his glove and told his mom where he was going and walked with me to the practice field. I think that was the best part of my childhood –helping those kids. And spending time with my grandma and grandpa, and my cousins in Louisiana, and my uncle on my dad's side.

One of the things I wish is I knew my mom's grandma, but the person I really wanted to know was my grandpa, Grandpa Richard –because he died when I was only two years old. A lot of people say I have a lot of his trademarks of his speaking style and how I do things, how I present myself. Sometimes I just wish I could talk to him and tell him how proud

he is. He was a strong civic leader in the Los Angeles area. During that time period, during the civil rights movement, this is before Watts became famous –the Watts riots, they were living in the Watts area. My mom met my dad. My Aunt Sandy lived there too. After she graduated from high school, she moved on. My mom and my Uncle Bob... My grandfather on my mom's side was a strong civic leader. I think that most of the strong civic leader side of me is from my grandpa. A lot of the trademarks I do my aunt told me remind me so much of her dad, my grandpa.

Caldwell: When you were a young adult, after you graduated?

Meadours: Two years before that, my step-mom put me on a waiting list for a group home and also the Community-Based waiver. Two years later they got a phone call and they said they had an opening for me to move into the group home. No one asked me what I want. Still, me and Joe was not close. I was still working in the sheltered workshop; not part-time, now it would be full-time, because I was no longer going to high school. When I graduated from high school in 1986 I saw my grandparents from my dad's side of the family. I did not realize a year later that was the last time I would see them face-to-face. My grandpa got placed in the nursing home about the same time I was placed in a group home. Three months later he passed away in the nursing home. That kind of broke my heart because I thought me and him was close and had a great relationship. We never had fights. I never had a chance to say goodbye to him. Two years later I did have the opportunity to say goodbye to him.

The best thing that ever happened to me as a young adult was when I was living in the group home was... I used to be a Catholic. Not no more, but I was Catholic at the time. I found a group of people in the seniors group called the young adult group. They asked if I would be willing to join them. They said, "Sure. You can join us." At first I was real nervous and scared because of my previous experience in high school through grade school, but instead they accepted me for who I was. They valued me as a person. They give me a fair opportunity. Like a month before I met them, one of the Catholic priests, his name was Father Ivan, he told me about the young adult group and thought it would be a good match. I tell him what happened. He said, "It won't happen to you here. They are good people. They want to get to know you. Don't worry." I was so scared that night at the dance. I went to the dance and introduced myself. They invited me to come watch them play softball. It was great. I motivated them again, like the kids four years before that. After the game they invited me to join

them at one of the local pizza places. I was very excited about that. A year later, they had a new season. They invited me to join the softball league. That was my first real competition league for myself. I also met some great friends from that tournament –lasting good friends, good friendships. Some of them became my best friends. Like my friend Mary. Now they are husband and wife. They have three boys. Like my friend Barbara and her daughter, Michelle. Everything is falling into place living at the group home, but at the same time they are starting to treat me different from other people who live at the group home. Because I was the only one who ever lived in the community, they put higher expectations on me. They said, “You know better than that James. You know better than that.”

Caldwell: So, you lived at home for a couple years after high school before you went to the group home? Then you were still working at the sheltered workshop? What was like that?

Meadours: Well, the first couple years when I was in high school was a good experience. There was a nice green house manager and stuff. Good person to listen to and talking to. She decided that her and her family needed to move to Houston. I was really hurt about that. A new green house manager came about. I was really more hurt because she treated me so different than the other green house manager. I remember one time. I am pretty much not a trouble maker or have issues, behaviors or anything like that. I try to do my job. She got on me for some reason. They have places... I don't like that word, but I am going to use it anyway, like a “time out” room. She make me sit down for an hour without pay in the “timeout” room. I didn't like it. I was really hurt inside. Inside of me said, “How dare you do that to me?” Because I feel like she really did not give me the face value I needed. That was very hurtful to me because I never got sit down without pay. That made me really depressed. It wasn't a good experience, but I hope I challenge the people today and tomorrow that sheltered workshop is not accessible now because we now know people can do more in working in the community and to have a meaningful life in working in the community, to help them to find a job what they want to do and not what their job coaches or job supervisors want. It is kind of silly: back then I remember when I got out of the job at the sheltered workshop I listed the top twenty-five jobs I really wanted to do. One of them –some people think it is silly –was working for one of the airlines. Do the luggage or a person who cleans the airplanes or work in a

hotel, be a bell hop or something like that. But it is kind of funny: I am not doing this type of work; I am doing advocacy work.

Caldwell: Really, just keep talking about your experiences when you were a young adult in the workshop and the group home. Is there anything else you want to talk about the group home?

Meadours: Yes. I think I was real hurt inside. I have no way to ease my pain. I remember like at Thanksgiving, one of the staff invited me to come over to her house for Thanksgiving. I kind of said something to her. I felt like –I don't know how to say it, but I am going to say it anyway –I had feelings for her, because she was my age. That was hard for me. I can't help it, a guy who was the same age as the house manager. The other guys was a lot older than me. I was the youngest person who lived there. When she told the director, the director decided to do a behavior plan towards me. That was very hurtful because I had to earn tickets to go into the community. Fifteen tickets to go into the community. If I don't keep my apartment –not apartment, my side of the group home –clean they would take my computer away from me. That was very hurtful: to earn 20 tickets to do that. At the time, when I was a Catholic, the only way I could escape was to go to daily masses at my church because the church was just across the street from the group home. That was my escape from the guys for a while until the house manager said, "No. You can't do that!" That was very hurtful to me.

Caldwell: They told you, you couldn't go to church?

Meadours: I could only go to Sunday, but not the daily masses. And I know several times they didn't let Joe come over to visit with me sometimes.

Caldwell: They didn't let Joe come?

Meadours: No. They didn't like him. Sometimes Joe stayed across the street directly from the church. He come like 24 miles to spend the weekend with me. He watched me play softball and stuff like that; catch an AA farm baseball game –the Tulsa Drillers.

Caldwell: Why didn't they like him coming to visit?

Meadours: I think it was my dad and step-mother put the ideas in their head. They were afraid Joe may try to corrupt me to try to get out of the group home. I let the staff control me for five years, until I discovered self advocacy.

This is before I discovered speaking up for myself, being assertive, and who I am today. I wasn't a great advocate for myself at the time; now I am a great advocate for myself and others.

Caldwell: So, when did you first get involved with self advocacy?

Meadours: It is kind of accidental. I went to just change my voting card. The local Arc in Tulsa has someone from the League of Women Voters who do registration to vote. I went to change my card from my parent's house to the group home address. I met a wonderful lady named Michelle Hoffman. I introduced myself to her and we became friends. For some reason she lost my phone number and I lost hers. A year later we bumped into each other at the fair –of all the funny places in the world, the county fair. She asked me why I was not coming to the meetings. I said, "Well, the staff don't want to take me." She said, "Well, we will figure a way for you to get there." I started getting a ride to the meetings. Starting speaking up for myself; getting the courage and believing in myself.

Caldwell: What were the meetings like when you first started going? Do you remember what that was like?

Meadours: It was a lot of neat stuff because we talked about things important to the group, like voting, like community living, and how we could work together like a team. My early years in the self-advocacy movement and being involved with the Arc –because I was the first person with a disability to serve on the Arc board and I think I was also the youngest person to serve on the Arc board –I did not realize what was my true potential. No one took the time to say, "James, you have a lot of potential. Do something." I remember my first speech I did at the statewide conference. It was great. I was nervous, scared, frightened, butterflies in my stomach. I felt like if I look back again with my self-advocacy experience I would do the whole thing all over again the same. No regrets.

Caldwell: You said, when you did your first speech you were nervous. Was it to a big crowd?

Meadours: Yes, the statewide self-advocacy conference. I remember I ran for the first officer, for president. I gave about why I thought I could be a great president, but, of course, I lost. But that is okay. I wasn't upset or depressed or anything like that. It is a blessing in disguise, I think, because other things happened at the right time at the right place. Like in 1990, when I was on the Arc board, I decided to get my first job in the

community –working in a dishwasher room. The boss was giving me the cold shoulder treatment. The other employees said, “The person before you, who also have disabilities, have a lot of behavior issues.” I said, “I don’t have behavior issues. There is a time to have fun and a time to be serious.” They were supposed to give me a fair opportunity to show my true self. I worked there for seven months. One of the things I learned about quitting a job, you need to find another job to fall back on. When I quit my dishwasher job, I didn’t have another job in place. But I started to volunteer at the Arc for several months. Starting to learn more about public policy issues for folks with disabilities; starting to go to the capitol; starting to do a lot of stuff.

Caldwell: So this was the Arc of Tulsa? Was that the first board you were on?

Meadours: Yes

Caldwell: How did you get on their board? .

Meadours: Someone submitted my name. The funny story about it was when they put my name in print for who is running for board, they misspelled my last name. I corrected them and they fixed it.

Caldwell: What was that like being on the board?

Meadours: Well, the first year I just was listening and watching what people were talking about because, as a child and as a young adult in high school, I think I became more open up to break out of my shell of shyness. It helped me to break the mold. I started to get more active. One of the things I liked so much was I started going to Oklahoma City to go talk to the state legislature –to the senators, representatives, and the state agency folks, because we wanted quality of services for folks with disabilities. What was real interesting about that was that we had a lawsuit happening at about the same time. It was one of the institutions in Oklahoma called Hissom. It was real interesting –the community parents and the families of Hissom. The families of Hissom got the Cadillac of services and the community parents just get bits and pieces of services. The most amazing thing about those two groups, these two groups did not get along, but the most amazing, surprising thing was the self advocates, the people with disabilities –the community self advocates was working with the class of Hissom. Like make posters, the day at the capitol, get ready to go, be a strong voice... It was real neat because they did not look at each other better. They really wanted to work together. That was really

great. Me and another parent tried to talk to them about it and finally they tried to compromise and find a common ground and common voice where we could work together.

Caldwell: So it was the two groups of parents on both sides against each other, and where were the self advocates?

Meadours: They were together.

Caldwell: Working with both parents or with the community?

Meadours: No. There were two self advocates –the class members was working with the community self advocates, working together. That was neat because they did not think less of the other group, because it was a big gap of families. The community families was so jealous of the Cadillac of services they had. But the self advocates in these two groups, the self advocates did not think less. As self advocates they wanted to come together to have one voice to help to improve services. I did try to educate the parents group. We need to have one voice. It is just not your sons and daughters, it is how we can fix the system. The thing I learned so much about... One of my role models was Dr. King because he was so assertive when he talked to people. People who are white, people who is Catholic or Jewish –he have a common voice. He was a person who was a very assertive person. I think I have a little bit of Dr. King in me because of that. I am a firm believer to be assertive. I am a firm believer in no violence and how we can work together. The neat thing that happened was that the two parents groups finally got together and had an understanding. They asked my brother Joe, “What would be a good Christmas present for James?” He said, “Well, you need to ask him that question, but I know for sure one of James’ dreams is to go to the Nutcracker some day.” He always teases me about my music. I like classical music and also like Pink Floyd, Erick Clapton. I know it is a big difference from Erick Clapton to classical music. But the parents, Maryanne and the other person who was working with us Francis, they came together and they got me a ticket to see the Nutcracker. We drove together to see the show. That was the most memorable memory I have with those two groups.

The other thing that was so neat with Michelle, you know how people do the makeup change over or something –face, make up, clothes. Well, I changed my whole wardrobe, clothes, and attitude of things. I got a new

suit. Well, not a new suit. I went to the thrift store because I did not have a lot of money. Since 1992, my attitude changed so much of how I look and how I present myself. Especially in 1991, because my job coach finally got a hold of me and said, "We got two jobs for you. You have the choice to work in the grocery store or the clothing store." When I went to the grocery store, it was good. I was bagging the bags and stuff like that, but I wanted to try the clothing job because the first time I took a job, I took the first job I see. I really liked the clothing job, but the manager said, "I cannot hire you until May." I still have to wait for three months, three hard months to use my Social Security check to pay rent at the group home. For those three months it was a torture. At the time I was getting nervous and nervous. Then May came and I was there for five wonderful years. They really valued my work. I did most everything, everything at the store, except for one thing –work the cash register. I was like a floor person, like a gopher. Do most everything around the store.

Caldwell: Was that your first job outside of the sheltered workshop?

Meadours: Second one. I did the dishwasher. The manager was really nice. His name was Brent. He realized that I could do much more. I worked like 32 hours a week, Monday through Saturday. The same time that year when I got my job I became president of the statewide People First group. One of my campaign promises was to visit each chapter around the State of Oklahoma. Start shaking hands and telling people who I was. This was before Joe was involved in self advocacy in Oklahoma. Got elected and a year later Joe got elected as vice president. We became a team for two years. I remember many, many late night travels to different chapters around the state. The same day we were coming back home because I have to work the next morning. I am the main person to get the store early because I am the person do the vacuum cleaning and clean the windows and make everything pretty and nice when customers walk in. I get home late sometimes and fall asleep and have to get up and go to work the next morning. I get there early anyway, around like 7:30 AM. Usually everyone else comes around 7:30 AM or 7:45 AM. It was great. My boss was a real great supporter of me. When I ask for time off, he said, "If you need to take time off, you have to work on Saturday." I said, "What the heck. I don't mind doing that." He was real supportive and encouraging of me doing things in the community; not just him but the workers around him. Be a member and part of your community. When I decided to tell him I want to run for national office for SABE, Self

Advocates Becoming Empowered, he was a good supporter for a year. During the one year, he was a great person.

My life was starting to change during that time in the early 1990s. My best friend and his wife and my friends at the singles group.... Well, it is not the singles group anymore it is the married group because most of them got married to each other. I took a risk in 1992. It was close to my one year anniversary at the clothing store. I tell them, I say, "I want to have the party next year at my place." They thought I was talking about the group home and I said, "No. My own apartment." At half-time, we missed the half-time show and we looked at newspaper classified apartments. That Saturday, a week later, Mathew and Mary met me at the clothing store and we went apartment hunting. The first five places was like too large, too medium, the price range wasn't right. The last place we went to, I still wanted to still live in the same location, was a nice studio apartment –one bedroom, a small kitchen area. I did that. When I told my circle of support, everyone was scared to death about me moving into the community, but the only folks that wasn't happy was the staff at the group home and my step-mother and my dad because they were against me. It just makes me sad how to describe them because they did not value my input, or experience, or anything. That breaks my heart.

Like I said earlier about my grandmother, she died in 1990; she never see the true self of me and what I am doing today, on my dad's side of the family. I wasn't able to say goodbye to her too and that was hurtful. Now I have a person who gives me a lot of encouragement and support: my Aunt Sandy. Since 1999 my brother and I take turns seeing her. She is a big dreamer in my life; she kind of challenges me and pushes me to limits. She is a wonderful lady. Before I left my job at the clothing store I asked my boss if he could hire another person with a disability to take my place at the clothing store and he did. Instead of a job coach train that person, I trained him. He thought I would be more qualified to do that because I did that for five years. Why not? I trained that person for a month –get adjusted and stuff. When I took the job as a VISTA volunteer for two years for the People First group in Oklahoma, it was great. The only thing I did not like. It is a big no, no for VISTAs and also AmeriCorps, because you cannot lobby. If you lobby, you can lose your money, you can lose your funding. I did that for two years.

Caldwell: You left your job at the clothing store to do the VISTA program. How did you get hooked up with that?

Meadours: Well, four years before that in 1993 we did long-range planning with the advisors and also the Arc of Tulsa. We did some long-range planning of People First. One of the things we wanted to do was to somehow get money to have VISTA to do training for people with disabilities. At the time I was president of People First. I was not trying to carve a job for me but for someone who would be willing to take a job. When I finished my term as president I believed we had new blood. I believe in new blood. I knew Joe got elected as President. It was hard for the first several months. I said, "Do you need any help, Joe?" I called Michelle too and she said, "We okay. We okay." I was a little hurt, but now I look back and can now understand where they were coming from. I feel the wait was worth waiting for. The job was great because of going to see each chapter, like in the northeastern part of the state. Help chapters to build capacity and to help the movement to be stronger than ever. It was great. The neatest part was when I raised my left hand. Each VISTA has to take a pledge, Like the same oath of office as the President of the United States. I was like, "Wow! That is amazing. I feel like the President of the United States. I am taking the same oath."

Caldwell: How does the VISTA program work? I don't know much about it.

Meadours: I will give you a short history of it. It got started in the 1960s when John F. Kennedy was President and he enacted the Peace Corps. He thought the Peace Corps be needed of countries who need assistance. At the same time when he did that Act he did the VISTAs because he thought different cities need some help and assistance. I don't know the right word, but I am going to try, high risk –like the projects in Chicago or New York or maybe to work at a local food bank or shelter. You would live the same situations like that person. The pay is not great, but it is the toughest job you will ever love. It helped me. Plus at the same time it helped me it also helped other self advocates. Because Tennessee did it for several years before we did it, we have a guide to look at. Also, in Washington state and how they did it with their People First group. Now, when Clinton was in office the first time, he did AmeriCorps and add more opportunities for young people to get involved. The other best part with the VISTAs was as a self advocate or a person with a disability, you don't have to worry about losing your SSI benefits. Instead of losing you benefits, each state is so different; you would get the maximum amount of dollars you get paid monthly on your Social Security. That was great for me because when I was working in the clothing store I just got a small check but at the same

time I got a paycheck from the clothing store. Instead of Medicaid, I used my work insurance to cover me more. If anyone, a person with a disability or a young professional, that would be a good program to join and to help you to learn to be more serving. I am going to talk more about it in the future of the self-advocacy movement, but it is about serving others and how we need to serve others to help them get what they need and how they can be successful.

Caldwell: When you did the VISTA program, your main job was to build capacity of the self-advocacy movement or did you do other things?

Meadours: Groups. Try to build capacity in the local chapters.

Caldwell: So when you applied for VISTA, you had to develop a plan about what you were going to do? Is that how it works?

Meadours: Yeah.

Caldwell: And that is a two year program and you get a little stipend or something to live? I am just trying to understand it.

Meadours: Yeah, like a living wage.

Caldwell: So really it gave you a chance to do your advocacy kind of full time. You had to be careful on your advocacy, but it gave you a chance to do it full time?

Meadours: Yeah. I think the other thing is I feel like it is needed. Like each person have steps in life, like steps of how people can reach from point A to point D. I don't know how to say this, but I am going to say this out loud... I was really glad I was a local leader, then a state leader, then a national leader, and now I am like a system advocate to advocate to make the system better for people like myself to have a life, a meaningful life. I am a firm believer in that. If anyone from the P & A's or the Centers of Excellence or the DD Councils, if they hear this I think you should try to encourage them to hire a person like me who has been a local leader and state leader or if they have been a national leader. Or if not a national leader, be used as a not paid policy worker and testify on behalf of the P & A's or on behalf of the people with disabilities in your state. I think it is key because you guys are the people and you guys are the funders. Since June 4th, I really love my job. I think it is a good job. It is a challenge sometimes. Sometimes I want to pull my hair. I know I don't have a lot of

hair anymore. My point is I want to challenge the three sister organizations to look at the Texas model and talk to me or to talk to my boss Jeff about how you guys could replicate it in other states. It is meaningful and powerful. At the same time they could do something about it. It is a great opportunity.

Caldwell: So, how did that come about? You did the VISTA for two years and what did you do after that?

Meadours: For nine years I was in the Louisiana area. I decided to move back home to Louisiana. Some folks from the Arc of Louisiana saw me speak in Washington, DC one time and asked me to speak in Louisiana. I did. I did my song and dance, talked about my story about closing institutions. I get ready to leave. I thought I was ready to go home and instead they wanted to have lunch with me. I said, "Okay they are offering me a job." I said, "One thing, let me think about the pros and the cons." The pros outweighed the cons and I said, "What the heck. This year I am going to be hitting 30. What the heck." I moved there like a year later because I told them I had already signed up for another year as a VISTA volunteer and I did not want to break that contract agreement. I wanted to respect that and I did that. A neat thing happened when I was getting ready to leave Oklahoma, some of my friends decided to recognize me for my advocacy work. One of the neatest honors I ever received is, like proclamation that became my day. December 9th is James Meadours Day in Oklahoma. It is not a state holiday. I wish it was a state holiday. One of these days maybe it will be a state holiday.

Caldwell: So there really is a James Meadours Day in Oklahoma?

Meadours: Yeah! I show you the proclamation. It is in my office. At the time when I was a leader of the movement, I was very, what I am trying to say, tunnel vision. I did it because it was the right thing to do. Like my mother, when she was trying to do the things for me as a child. I think she was trying to do the right thing for me but I am trying to do the right thing for people with disabilities in Oklahoma. When the Governor's brother gave me that proclamation, it made me cry. Because I wish several people was there, but I know in spirits in my life was my mom, my Grandma Ruth Anne, my Grandpa Richard, my Grandma Flo, and also my other grandparents from Louisiana. It just touched me. It is like the Star Fish story. The boy carry one star fish at a time. He toss it in the water. The gentleman say, "You cannot make a difference of any of them." "At least I saved this one. At

least I saved that one or make a difference for that day.” Because my beliefs, this sort of fits in my spiritual beliefs. I follow people like –people probably disagree –but I learned and listened to like Dr. King, what his vision was, like Gandhi or Abraham Lincoln, what their stand or beliefs were. Sometimes the traditional type of church and worship and tabernacle, it is not so meaningful to me because sometimes I don’t understand to have a God and stuff. Because if some days if some people make it and survive what happened to them but other people did not make it, I am trying to figure out why those people did not make it but those people could make it. That make me kind of sad inside.

A lot of people think I am too sensitive, but I am too sensitive. I can’t help it! It is always like I tell my female friends, sometimes I feel like the mind of a female in a male body. They laugh at me, at that joke, all the time. I am very sensitive of people; I am very savvy and passionate and very sensitive. Whenever I go to those state schools in Texas or go to the hearing and they say, “They cannot do this. They too severe. They cannot do that.” I say, “You are all wrong!” That is when I go the extra mile. In my gut, telling me. People like Dr. King and Gandhi and Lincoln and people like that who believed in peace. They were true believers. I know they are not Gods, but they are people you can relate more and talk to. The other thing that is hurtful to me, like the good book says, you need to love your neighbor by yourself. True. But whenever I am watching TV or flipping around the channels I get hurt when one party get on to another party or another party is getting over another party.

One of my good, close friends decided to come out of the closet. She told me she was a lesbian. She asked if I had any problems with that. I said, “No. I won’t treat you any different.” When I was in Oklahoma, the Catholic Church decided to sell their Disney stock because of that protest about same sex insurance. Disney was the first company to recognize that. That was very hurtful for me because I was a traditional type of Catholic –gone to all the masses, Christmas, Easter, and Palm Sunday. I was really hurt and that is why I left the Church.

That is why I always look up to Dr. King. Because thirty something years later. Like I said earlier, I was born I Greenville, Mississippi. Like two years before I was born, Dr. Martin Luther King was there doing some civil rights stuff. At the same time, when I moved from Mississippi to Alabama and to where Joe was born in Selma, the bus boycott was there. I feel like the civil rights movement got started when we were young, like two or

three months old. I don't remember anything, but it is like an omen for me. Because thirty something years later, I have the opportunity to meet Dr. King's son, Martin Luther King III. That was a special moment in my life that I will never forget. He was a wonderful supporter in my life. I tell how much his dad meant to me. He talked ten minutes and it was so great.

Also, people like Justin Dart... I help him educate more about people with cognitive disabilities. He did not really understand what the self-advocacy movement was. I remember that day of the national conference in Oklahoma. Part of my job as a VISTA volunteer was to meet people at the airport, the speakers. This was before 911 and all the new rules of the airlines where you cannot get through the gate anymore. I met him and his wife at the gate; have a chance to help them with their bags, have a chance to talk with them. The group of the self advocates knew that his birthday was that weekend. Michelle, her background was a graphic designer, and she did an American flag type poster and all the self advocates and advisors signed the card and gave it to Justin. He was really touched about that.

Caldwell: What was it about Justin that made you really respect him or see him as a good leader? What was it about him?

Meadours: I think he was a good listener; he listened to both sides of the issue. I try to be assertive. He take risks, no matter what people think of him. I remember in 1992, when he gave a speech somewhere he shocked everyone in the world, especially his party. He was a Republican all his life. In 1992, if I remember right, or in 1994, Bob Dole and Bill Clinton ran. Justin decided to endorse Clinton instead of Bob Dole for President. That was so amazing for him. It took a lot of courage to do that because he was a firm believer in the Republican Party. The only regret I have... I remember a month before he died I was in DC and I went to the American Association of Persons with Disabilities, Andy's group. Andy asked me to go with him to meet with Arlen Specter about some issues about the Hate Crimes bill to improve for people with disabilities. They thought I would be a great person to talk about my story. I saw him and his wife going the opposite way. I said, "Justin, I will see you when I get back. It will be an hour meeting." Instead of an hour it took three hours to be done and he had already left to go home. When I got the news –I was in Tennessee – when he passed away, it make me sad. The group who asked me to speak ask me to talk a little bit about who Justin was because a lot of young parents was there, a lot of young self advocates too. Explain what

Justin was, who he was, and how he impact their lives; explain the ADA and stuff. The other person I wish I got to know, but the sad thing is I wish he did not hide his disability, was FDR. FDR hide his disability because during the time of the depression and war if the people know of his disability then they think he is a weak President and cannot do nothing. That is sad. He go to Warm Springs all the time, but they don't know why. Now we know, but back then they did not know why they went to Warm Springs. Or Ms. Keller. She dies one year before I was born.

Caldwell: There are a couple things I want to go back to, but let's keep going with when you went to Louisiana. After your VISTA you got offered the job in Louisiana. You went down there. What was that for? What were you doing? What job was that?

Meadours: I was doing self advocacy work, trying to build chapters there. At the time, they only had two chapters in the state –one in Shreveport, Louisiana, that is up north of Louisiana, and one down south in Tupelo, Louisiana, a real small community down south outside of New Orleans. My job was to start local chapters around the state. It was very hard work.

Caldwell: Who was it with?

Meadours: With the Arc of Louisiana. It was very hard and challenging to somehow change the attitude about people with disabilities, especially professionals who have a disability. That was very hurtful for me. I have to prove myself to them. I decided to go back to my old neighborhood at the same time, as a child in the New Orleans area. Like they say: you can't go back home again. I remember one time I did some chapter work on the west bank of the New Orleans area and I decided to go see an old friend and her mom, but she was working. I was trying so hard to be her friend and she just snubbed me away. Most of my friends was really just people in the office. That was the hardest part. I wanted people to accept me for who I was. I didn't want people to feel sorry for me. They didn't want me being part of any group.

It was hard, probably the hardest thing I ever had to adjust –especially in 2003 because I got like a regional award. I don't like this name, but I am going to use that old name: it is Region of AAMR Award for making a significant contribution in the 20th Century. I was one of their honorees. I decided to send a real powerful e-mail to my dad and my step-mother and tell them I really want them to be there. I ask them to come and I will be

willing to pay airfare. I checked the status all the time. Find out if he read it, read it, read it. Finally he decided to delete it. At the time I was getting ready to go to Alabama and I got a call from Joe saying that our step-mother passed away a couple weeks ago, but no one told us she passed away. That was very hurtful to me and to Joe, I think. He never told me, but I think in my gut feeling it did hurt him. Doing the same thing in Louisiana for seven years; made some friends outside of work, finally.

One time I met a guy named James –another James and he is a person who was Deaf, he do sign language. I met him at church. I thought he wanted to be a friend of mine, instead he used me and he assaulted me. Except this time around on Tuesday I spoke up. I know the assault was Saturday, but on Tuesday I went to the program and a real nice rape crisis person came and talked to me, a first responder and detective. I decided to file charges against him. I felt like I was losing my focus in Louisiana. One of my friends from Texas –we had been friends since 2003, and she has been keeping an eye open for me if any jobs open for me in Texas – she said, “They have a job opening at the Arc of Texas doing some peer to peer work.” I said, “What the heck” and put my application in. I got the job.

Meadours: I got the job at Texas Advocates. They got a grant called the Peer to Peer grant. The three areas that were the focus were: Corpus Christi, San Antonio, and the Rio Grande Valley. The Rio Grande Valley is really, really south Texas. Also, to support the chapters, but the main focus was just those three areas. It was very hard because doing some recruiting through the small workshops and also at the same time we were doing some leadership academy stuff, and the hard part was... Corpus Christi was doing good, San Antonio was doing a good job, but not the Rio Grande Valley because we were trying to find people who would be willing to do trainings and hire staff. That was a bear for us and driving me a little crazy. I did that for two years. A lot of people from Texas saw me speaking at different meetings and they said, “We need to get this guy and to keep him in Texas.” That made me feel real good, because for a while I felt a little discouraged because I felt like I had not been useful. I tried to do everything and I was not a great administration person on the Peer to Peer grant. If I had my choice I would be in the field. Do more than one training once a month and the leadership academy once a month.

Sometimes I went to the Capitol but not as often as I would like to at the time. But when Jeff saw me, and Patty, they were very impressed with my

speaking style and energy. Jeff recruited me. They stole me away from the Texas Advocates to them. It is going to be a year in June. I really love my job because each day is a different thing to do. I focus on one thing at a time. They have been a great supporter. It is kind of unique. We have eight people in our department. I don't have like one support person to support me on my job; I have eight other people to support me. Like Jeff Miller does health care issues for adults and kids with disabilities; sometimes I need him to brainstorm with if we have something, a law or a bill comes up and how it is going to impact Texas. Like he helped me understand more about the CHIP program for children with disabilities; I am a firm believer that kids should get health care to and I was real vocal about that too. He support me that way and he gave feedback about what he thought about my speech when I have to go with him about health care issues. Or I go to Sarah –she does housing and employment. I could talk to Sarah about the housing issues because Sarah knows my concerns about sheltered workshops, day programs, and day hab, and also adult day care. Sometimes I brainstorm with her. Like Monica –she does children's mental health issues and I want to understand more about it. My boss Jeff –he is the big boss. I almost forgot someone else. Me and LaSalle Thompson –we do presentations together on the HAVA project, Help America Vote Act. Last week we did the first time for both of us the presentation on HAVA: what is it and how it fits into your life. It was great. Also, Jeff Garrison Tate –he is the policy person. He is our supervisor in our unit. He has been a wonderful boss. He helped me and encouraged me to do things and challenge my life.

I really love my job. I think I finally found the dream job I really want to do. I already did the local, state, and national stuff; now I want to be an advocate for the system, how to create the system to become a good system and where we want to be at. Because this little boy, me, I never imagined myself doing this kind of work. This was before the sheltered workshop. I thought I would be at home with mom and dad and doing nothing and wasting away. Not me wasting away, but the opportunity. I love my mom. I am very grateful for the job I have. I love the people I work with. I just wish other P & A's would take this message to heart because you guys have some good leaders in your local state. You guys could follow Texas. We are the first one in our state to have someone like me in the policy unit. I am a firm believer in to serve and help others. I am not in it to for myself to make money or a name for myself at the capitol. It is to help people who do not have a voice, the people who I met

at the institutions or large ICR/MRs, or group homes in Texas –because their voices need to be heard. This job is also a challenge because some people disagree with what I believe in. That is okay. I keep on fighting for what I believe is right.

Caldwell: It sounds like you do a lot of different things with your job now. A lot of different issues you do now. What is your title now?

Meadours: Self-Advocacy Specialist in the policy unit.

Caldwell: Do you know many P & A's that have hired self advocates?

Meadours: No. There are not many. Nancy, but she is doing the Medicaid Reference stuff. It is not the same stuff that I do.

Caldwell: Or many universities? There are not many University Centers that have hired self advocates as part of the center. They might work on a grant or something, but not full time.

Meadours: I think Tia is the only one. A few months ago I talked to Jeff about it. I said, "Jeff, at the next Commissioner's forum or NRA meeting try to do a presentation about this job. Try to convince the other states to do it because it is the right thing to do." If we do not tap into past leaders they feel like the people do not appreciate them. They will be gone. We will lose their history because they know the history of the movement. We need to use our past leaders in jobs like this. Then they can feel like they can be a contribution to the group and to help train the new leaders in the movement. I think that is so important. That is so important. Help them realize their true potential that they could offer because they could offer so much. I never dreamed I would have a policy goal. That was my ultimate goal.

I think I got my first dream; it wasn't advocacy, when I was only seven years old. One of the last moon shots, space movies, like Apollo space craft. I fell in love with space. I was a big Trekee back then. I wanted to someday be like Kirk. I wanted to someday go to other planets and see other worlds. But it is so funny, I look back now. My mom thought I would go to the stars and different planets. But it is so amazing, now I look back and I have been to different states, cities, and towns throughout my career as a self-advocate leader. In places I have never been before. I have been traveling inner space instead of outer space, but still feel like I have been traveling. It is so amazing to me because... Whenever I do my

speeches to represent SABE when I was chair, that was the most fun to see other chapters and push the envelope. One of my dreams for SABE, this was eight years ago when I was chair of SABE, was to somehow get the money through the DD Act to have self-advocacy centers. I am so happy to say we have come a long way. We grew so quickly.

Caldwell: When were you chair of SABE?

Meadours: Acting chair from 1999 to 2000 and then elected chair from 2000 to 2002.

Caldwell: So did you follow Tia?

Meadours: Yeah. Big shoes.

Caldwell: At that point you were still in Oklahoma?

Meadours: In Louisiana.

Caldwell: What were some of the things you did when you were chair? You mentioned the funding issue and you wanted to see that. What was going on with SABE when you were chair?

Meadours: One of the things was we formed a legislature group. Also, looked for grants –how self advocates and families could work together –a grant called Project Leadership, a three year grant from ADD.

Caldwell: What was Project Leadership?

Meadours: Help self advocates and families to train on the next level of how the federal government works. It was very exciting because it was the first time that on the national level, national parent leaders and national self advocate leaders could talk about issues. They felt safe to talk about it. And to give them tips about how to talk to their federal officials. I think the other thing most memorable was when I was Chair of SABE I had the opportunity to go to a leadership conference in England. That was my first ever overseas trip –a little nervous, but it was a good experience. It was great to meet other self advocates from around the world. One group I wish was there but they was not there was the group from Hong Kong. I met some self advocates back in 1993 in Canada at the International People First Conference from Hong Kong. We had a chance to talk. Some of them speak English and some of them don't. They use a translator. I wonder how they are doing since China have control. I am worried for people with disabilities in other countries, especially the old

countries like China, and what used to be the Soviet Union, Romania, and other countries. I think life is important and we should be real sensitive about.

Caldwell: What was that like to meet self advocates from other countries and see the international movement?

Meadours: It was great. I just can't believe how many people is like me. It was so interesting. The most interesting group was of the whole get together was the England group because they do away with –I don't like this word but I am going to say it anyway – the "mental retardation" word. The England folks fought it, and fought it for a long time. Now they do not have it in rules or textbooks or anything like that. They put learning disability instead of the MR word. It was so interesting how they go about and done it. I think the other interesting thing was when I was in Canada at the international conference how Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland tried to get along. Because at the time in Belfast the Catholics and Protestants were fighting among themselves but the two self-advocacy groups were trying to work together and have a common voice. But the most memorable was the folks from Hong Kong. I wonder how they are doing. They are always on my mind.

Caldwell: Well, maybe there will be another international conference one of these days. Just to stick on the self-advocacy movement, you talked about the funding issue a little bit. Do you want to say more about that, the funding and what you would like to see and why?

Meadours: I think that is one of the things that is so key –no matter if it is Texas, California, Alabama, or Illinois –a lot of places get money from different sources and agencies. Places like Oklahoma they get money from the state, the Developmental Disabilities Service Division, and they have been real open and a great support for People First, but in Illinois they are struggling. No one is really helping them to get funding. The DD Council is taking their funding away from them. The advocates in the community are very upset with the state and the DD Council and very adamant about that. We need to somehow put another sister organization. It is not going to be painful. It is going to be a positive thing. They could be the group to give money to each chapter around the state. Each chapter should get like the same amount of money. Like the DD Councils or the UCEDDs, by population. Is that right?

Caldwell: I am not sure how the money is split up. The University Centers get the same amount in each state, so it is not based on population. The territories get a little less but they get a certain amount.

Meadours: Maybe instead of the DD Council model with population it could be like the Centers for Excellence to get the full amount to help them reach their needs to be successful. I think funding is important, to support the money with no strings attached, because a lot of times I see DD Councils –I am not going to pick one DD Council or another –maybe pick one or two groups of people to do self-advocacy training. They do it as a training but not fund a statewide group or give them the right amount to money for continued support. I think it is so important to help the movement. The money is going to be tighter and tighter each year. If we ask the state services for people with disabilities, we do not have the money like 20 years ago, 10 years ago, or five years ago. Like in Texas, how we could do that? Support the self-advocacy movement by the state and also how the statewide self advocates could speak their mind about state institutions. Like the chicken and the egg, which come first? That scares me. I think it is so important to have an independent group to do that. I think it is wise to have a sister organization to give money to the statewide self-advocacy groups. Everyone could work together and form a common voice because we want each person with a disability to be happy.

Caldwell: What sort of things do you see that money could do for the self-advocacy movement? How would the movement use the money?

Meadours: I think they could use some of the money for educational trainings; others could do recruitment, like a recruitment drive; others could start new chapters. One of the things I noticed this past week –I was in the Dallas area –I saw a lot of young people; we need to somehow get young people involved in the movement, maybe try to start a self advocacy groups in different high schools across the state. The other thing that is key is to hire people with disabilities to be staff people. It is kind of like the next level of being president of a local or statewide group.

Caldwell: Like a paid director?

Meadours: Kind of like Joe does, like an executive director. Also, with that –I don't know how to say it but I am going to –if we talked about all the things I just said, one of the most important things is someone who will be willing and committed to support this person. Like Joe and Robin. Because

whenever Joe needs help or assistance, Joe asks Robin to help him –not Robin assumes to help Joe. It is so important. It needs to be a two-way street to have a good support person to work together. One of the most frustrating things... I know a mistake one time. One of the states hired a self advocate and he through the support person is a co-worker, but he said, “I am your supervisor that is it.” It was very frustrating for him.

Caldwell: Because he didn't have the support he needed?

Meadours: Yeah. Because with all the things we want to work on, if we don't have a good support person –not to do the job for us—but to brainstorm like I do with my boss Jeff sometime. I talk to him all the time and ask him, “What do you think about this? Should I take this part out?” Things like that.

Caldwell: What other challenges do you think the self advocacy movement faces?

Meadours; I think the service providers who are afraid of the movement because people would have the power to say what they want, to have a voice. The other thing I am worried about the movement –I know a lot of people going to disagree with what I am going to say but I am going to say it anyway – we have been talking about self advocacy for thirty something years all over the United States and the last five to eight years we have been talking about self determination. My fear of self determination is that self determination is self advocacy. I feel like they are using a new word for the thing we already use. I know they are talking about fiscal agents and individual budgets and that is great; that is wonderful, but self determination is also to have that empowerment, to believe in yourself, to speak out. I think it is so important that we should not leave out that piece. I know they have the four principles of self determination and the last one in confirmation, but still I think it should be more broad –not just have the fiscal part of it or to have only the individual budgets or micro boards.

The key is people should have the power to become empowered with self determination. I am a firm believer in community and that stuff should be in the community, and look at community services, but at the same time we need to look at ourselves and make sure we are doing the right thing. It is like we closed institutions in the 60s, 70s, and even the 80s; community programs were in place. I am just very worried about self determination because if we talk about a new way of services how are we going to get the money to do the traditional type of services, if people

chose that; how we keep the institutions open; and three: how we keep the self-determination model working all at the same time. That is impossible and the people who would get hurt the most is people with disabilities, and also our movement. People say, "James you are off based about self determination. It is not self advocacy." It is self advocacy! It is civil rights. It is to speak up for yourself. I feel like they use a different name on it.

Caldwell: What would you describe what self advocacy means or what self advocacy is?

Meadours: What self advocacy means to me is to be able to speak out and take risks. You, and the people you serve, to help them to become more empowered in your life, and the issues affecting your life, and what you want to achieve in your life. I can't help but mention serve, because I am a firm believer in serve, because self advocacy is supposed to serve.

Caldwell: What other supports do you think are needed to strengthen or expand the movement?

Meadours: I think to strengthen the movement: have no strings attached when you do things. Like for example, if John decided to talk to the officers and members and say, "Guys, we have a range of problems here and we want to talk to the state. We cannot, but I need your guys support to help talk to them about the institution problems in the state." When they speak up the state should not take away their funding from them because they act like bad children. They should be more sensitive to understand their issues. For myself, here in Texas, one of the things that is so important is that they need to find their identity and to have a strong voice and to become more empowered. To have the courage not to worry about what people say about them. To have a strong voice and to increase funding to help support the statewide self-advocacy movement.

Caldwell: What is your vision for the self-advocacy movement for the future?

Meadours: For Texas or national?

Caldwell: I guess both. You could talk about Texas first.

Meadours: It is a long vision. That self advocates be at the capitol a lot, be more visible, speaking out about state schools. Have the opportunity to hit some points and convince the legislature in Texas that we need to shut

some of these places down. Also, don't have to be afraid to speak their mind at meetings when people disagree with what they are saying, especially the parents who think institutions should still be open. At the national level, my dream of self advocacy is simple: do what the Texas P&A model did. Also, no strings attached whenever a state agency gives money to statewide self-advocacy efforts. To build a bridge and to better connect the grassroots with the national; we are trying now but it could be better.

Caldwell: When you look back at the things that helped you become a leader. What kind of leadership experiences do you think you have had throughout your life that have helped you become a leader?

Meadours; I think several things helped me become a leader. I remember one time I just got started and me and another person from another state... He said he was going to talk about the legislative process and thought it would be great for me and him to do it together. I was ready to go and present; he presented also. Instead he did all the talking and did not let me have a word. During the Q & A questions some of the members and some of the advisors raised their hands and asked me the questions instead of him. My friends Michelle was there and John, the local director of the Arc. Afterwards we decided to go out to dinner and I told John and Michelle, "If I ever fall into that trap and do what the person did to me, will you kick me in the backside, because I don't want to be like him?" It is not about me, me, me all the time. It is about how we can fix the system. That experience kind of –I wasn't a selfish person before that –but it helped me to be a better person, who I am today. How we can fix the system and how we can advocate for everyone, not just yourself. First you need to advocate for yourself but you also need to advocate for others. I cannot help repeat myself, serving other. I am a firm believer; each person is serving in different ways, helping people, if you are a self advocate or professional or family member or sibling. That moment kind of woke me up and shaped who I was. It just woke me up, a little reminder of where I came from, from living in a group home with ten other people and from working in a sheltered workshop.

Caldwell: When you were developing as a leader, did you have any role models or mentors, people you looked up to and who influenced you?

Meadours: I think early on, before I got involved with the national group, before I met other self advocates around the country, I think my friend Michelle

Hoffman, John, the Oklahoma Commissioner of services for folks with disabilities –his name is Jim Nicholson, Jule Lightner and Betsy Stevens, and several other self advocates in the group –like Barbara Eastling because she used to live in an institution in Oklahoma, Warren Nades too used to live in an institution. I am also starting to get to know Nancy Ward during that time period too. Part of the requirements was that she had to be involved in the court monitoring system. She got self advocacy started in Oklahoma. The funny story about that was that they only had eight people show up at the first meeting. I was not one of the original eight people at the meeting. I came three months later. It is kind of funny because if I never changed my voting card I would probably be still living at the group home, working in the sheltered workshop, and never met the people I met today as leaders. Leaders to me also look ahead. She is not a leader, but she is a role model to me, is my aunt. She kind of pushed the envelope on to me and challenged my mind. Eight years ago she got her Ph.D. in education. I looked to her as a role model. If she could in her age get her doctorate, I could do anything I put my mind to. And she believed in me and even took risks with me. I like to snow ski and she sometimes worries about me skiing because she don't want me to break a leg or an arm or something like that. I think the other leaders I wish I got to know... One person I especially I wanted to get to know, but he passed away before his time, was Rolland Johnson. He was from Pennsylvania. He was one of the persons who got out of Pennhurst state school. I wish I got to know him better. I wish I got to know who he was, what he does, what did he accomplish. I know my background is different from Rolland's, but I still wish I had the opportunity to met him and talk to him.

Caldwell: What events or opportunities do you think you had in your life that really helped you develop your skills to be a leader?

Meadours: Several things. I think one thing –it is kind of funny for me and Michelle –it was Sunday afternoon and I was looking in the newspaper in community events. I did my first speech a couple weeks after that. I saw something in the paper about toastmasters, public speaking classes. I was getting ready to call Michelle and she was getting ready to call me. I said, “Michelle, funny you should call me because I was trying to call you about toastmasters.” Me and her had the opportunity to learn more about toastmasters and how to be more effective at public speaking. If any leader who is new, or any leader who has been a leader for a long, long time, should have an opportunity to do toastmasters because I felt like it is

a need. It is a great success program. They don't criticize you or put you down, but they give you helpful tools to be successful to communicate to the group what you need or tell you how you could interject yourself much better, give you helpful tips. It is great because it is a good group of people. I always tell people my secret success is toastmasters. It is the truth. I was involved with toastmaster; it makes me happy because I did it for two years and it was a wonderful experience. I think the other thing was watching other people talking, presenting themselves. I see other self advocates just talk about the problems we have but no one really talks about the solutions to those problems. One of the things I learned early in my self-advocacy career is that it is important to talk about the issues but also to talk about the solution of the problem. Not depend on the state, or the bureaucracy of the state, or someone else, we need to also help define and develop a plan of how the system should look like for us too. Not just let the bureaucrats do it in Austin, downtown, or the state Department of Aging and Disability Services, we need to be a voice to create the system and fix the system. As leaders, we need to do that; not be a one way, say here is the problem and not do anything about it to fix it.

Caldwell: Just to go back to toastmasters. What is that like? I am not sure I understand what they do? Do you join a group or go and present at meetings?

Meadours: It is an organization of different people from different backgrounds. It is like a club. You pay dues. You give public speaking on different subject matters. Like the first one is the ice breaker speech. The ice breaker speech is like, this is my story. It is kind of like when you testify or tell a little bit about you in self advocacy, but it is kind of different because instead of talking about your experience as a person with a disability you talk all about you, like four or five steps. First, talk about the beginning of your story. Two, where you came from and how you go there, from point A to point C. D, solutions if you address some problems. And F, what is the outcome of that talk. They give you like fifteen minutes. After fifteen minutes, you will get a yellow light. The five minute warning is a red light. Also, do speeches on topic level issues that just come out of people's heads. Maybe it is something about the weather, "What do you think of the weather today?" Do a five minute speech on that. Also, it is a good group to praise you and don't have to criticize you.

Caldwell: That sounds like a great leadership development thing. Are there other things you can think of that really helped you develop your leadership skills?

Meadours: I think also when I was involved in my singles group, I educate them more about who I was and who I am as a person with a disability. They didn't look at me as a person with a disability; they looked at me as James, a member of that church, or James, the individual who lives catty-corner of the church. I made pathways for other people with disabilities because the neighborhood where we were living, some of the neighbors didn't like the folks at the group home. I don't know why; but when I came, their attitude changed in a positive way because I started going to the local stores around there –get my local music at the local music store, go to the local restaurant and educate those employees, educate my church. It just touched, feeled, and related. One of the neat things, not as a leader, but it just came up naturally: people felt comfortable in talking with me and asking what I think. Whenever we played softball against another team –it is not funny but I can laugh now –one of the other team members was a DJ. He never met me in person but he knew who I was. He hit the ball towards me in the outfield. I dove for it and guess what happened, I stole a base hit from him. The next day... Usually when something comes up to talk about issues for folks with disabilities, sometimes they call me on the radio to be interviewed about what I think. This time he turned the tables on me. I did not know he was planning on mentioning my name on the radio but he did. He said, "Friends of James Meadours. If you know who James Meadours is in the field of disabilities, you know what he did? He stole the baseball from me. He stole a hit from me. That is not right. You need to talk to him about that." It was kind of funny. I can laugh about it now, but a lot of my friends gave me a hard time about that. It was so neat. I educated because I wanted to be involved with the community. I didn't want people to treat me different. The neat part was I was having fun, a good time with everyone, and the camaraderie was there. It was just so wonderful because they didn't look at my disability. If I get a base it, I get a base hit. If I get out, I get out. It was so amazing because one of the guys did not realize I had a disability. It was so funny when he told me that I found out he had a brother with a disability. The brother is Paul, but the sibling is Billy. I remember a couple times I saw Billy at the softball game. I said, "I did not put you guys together." He said, "Yeah. We are bothers." I said, "I know your brother for a long time when I was working at the greenhouse, at the sheltered workshop." I think

as a leader also, it is not just a voice or a sound –just being there at the right place at the right time to make a physical presence. I feel like I make a lot of difference for folks just being there. Not saying anything, but just being there and included. That was the most powerful thing I think when I was a leader, I was just there.

Caldwell: The singles group. Was that part of the church?

Meadours: Yes.

Caldwell: Was that also the group that helped you move?

Meadours: Yes, they helped me get out of the group home. Three weeks later I moved out of the group home to the apartment. Two things were the most frustrating. My best friend and his wife were so excited about me moving into the community; at the same time, they were angry with my dad and step-mother because they were not willing to help me or give me any money to start out right off the bat. One of the mistakes the group home did –no offense to the group homes but –I was so used to cook for eleven other people, but it was so hard to cook for one person. It was so funny, I tried to cook pasta one time at my apartment, but I was so used to cook for ten other people and myself; it was hard. I called my friends and asked them for instructions and they finally gave me the support I needed to talk me through it. A funny thing happened a month later the group home went out of business. I was shocked. Something in my gut told me, “James, you need to move.” For some reason I was at the right place at the right time, because if they went out of business I know my dad and my step-mother would not take me back home. But that is okay, because at the time I really like the community where I was living –so supportive of what I was doing. The singles group was the best thing that ever happened to me before self advocacy.

Caldwell: The singles group was through the church. But also, some of the people from your job helped you move too?

Meadours: Yeah. My boss was, Brent. Brent was a big supporter of me moving. I was getting some assisted living hours, like three or four hours one day a week to help me with grocery shopping and laundry –some of the basic things you take for granted. I remember one time when I was doing the store and the worker called me and said, “We need to do something now. I cannot do it later. We need to do it now!” I made me feel so little and terrible, because I never asked my boss that, that much. It made me so

angry when that person did that to me. It made me feel so little to ask my boss. I said, "Brent, I need to leave now." He said, "Why?" It just made me feel terrible. At the last meeting I had with him, my friend Michelle was there and I said, "I think you crossed the line." She said, "How dare you make James feel real awkward to ask his boss for the time off." The other funny story I wanted to share at the group home was –I don't know if Joe told you this –I liked to drink wine and beer on special occasions and the only place I could not drink it was at the group home. It is a true story. When I moved away from the group home, my brother gave me a house warming gift. I said, "Joe, let me open the package now." He said, "No, you have to wait till you get to your new apartment." I said, "I want to open it now." He said, "No, you have to wait." I said, "Okay Joe, I will wait." My new place was like three blocks away from my old place. Finally go there. Got all the stuff moved in. Got settled in. Everything was great. I said, "Joe, is it time to open my package?" He said, "Yes, you can open your package." Guess what was in the package? A six-pack of beer, a six-pack of Budweiser beer! At the group home, I cannot have a liquor drink in the group home, because of one of their rules, the group home rules – you cannot have alcohol. It was so funny, me, Joe, my confirmation sponsor, Mathew –Mary couldn't have it because she was pregnant at the time –we all had a beer all together. It was a nice surprise, house warming gift. It sure would have shocked them at the group home, but they didn't know about it.

The other thing that was neat when I got involved with self advocacy. At first me and Joe was really far apart. Our relationship was okay, it could have been better, but I think over time our relationship changed because he became more aware of what I was doing. I think he became close to me and what I was doing. I still remember that night I dragged him off his bed to come to the meetings, the first meeting in his community. If anyone asks, it is my fault. Don't blame Joe Meadours; blame me because I am the one who got him involved. I don't know how many times Joe shared his story with other people, but I am going to say something about Joe. Other people have told me this story. I wish he told this to me, but... He has said, "Three things could have happened to me. I could be in a ditch somewhere, be in jail, or be dead. But, I am happy where I am living because of my big brother James. My big brother James helped me to know who I am and be the person I am today." I wish he say that to me face to face, but I know he is modest and private about that to me because he did not want me to worry about him. I understand; and I love

him for that. Sometimes I want to kick his butt, but I love him. I need to get on him because he is a big Alabama fan, okay.

Caldwell: I wanted to go back to that too, a little bit: how the self advocacy movement influenced how you feel about yourself or how you feel about your disability?

Meadours: I think one of the things that was so interesting for me was I wasn't ashamed of my disability. I don't know how to say this but I am going to try my best –it is like, they are so used to trying to group people with disabilities only with people with disabilities and I kind of the one that pushed the envelope to show what people could really do who have disabilities. I educate my church at the time. I educate my community where I was living at the time. I educate my co-workers at the clothing store and also the general public whenever I do testimony or share my story. In 1992, I did like an employment workshop and they wanted me to talk about self advocacy and the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA. They had a person with a physical disability, a person who was blind, a person with a cognitive disability, and a person with HIV/AIDS. It was so interesting, we did all our speeches; we did our song and dance. It was one of the most hurtful things I ever saw: no one would go over by the guy with HIV/AIDS. I was the only one who went over and shook his hand and told him best of luck to his life. That really broke my heart. People were so prejudice against themselves they didn't want to shake the hand of a man who had HIV/AIDS. I did shake his hand. I was so mad. Two days later the movie *Philadelphia* came on through the theaters. That is one thing I never understood: people's hate. My friend said, "I am never going to see another Tom Hanks movie again." I said, "Why?" She said, "He plays a person who has HIV and AIDS." I told her, "If you do that, then you cause hate. People like you cause hatred around the country and around the world. You offend me." She said, "What do you mean? You were born this way. You have a disability. But if you are gay, you are not born that way." I said I know people who are gay and lesbians in Tulsa. She asked me who they are and I said, "No. People like you would cause them trouble and hate crimes against them. No thank you. I pay respect to them." As a leader, I need to hear all sides of issues and also be a good listener. Also, I am a firm believer –I cannot help but mention this – to serve others. That is the word that means so much to me –to serve. It makes my strength stronger in what I believe in.

Caldwell: Just hearing you talk about people with HIV or people who are gay or lesbian, you are very accepting of differences. Do you think there is something about the self-advocacy movement that is even more accepting of differences than other movements –say the independent living movement or other disability movements –do you think there is any difference where the self-advocacy movement is more accepting?

Meadours: Yeah, it is very interesting. Funny you ask... I had just gotten elected to the SABE board in 1994 in Virginia, in the DC area. It was our first board meeting that fall. Me and Michelle went to Connecticut. All the other members of SABE went up there to the Connecticut People First Conference. Michelle and Bonnie they were partners together. They were a couple. And one of the other members said, "We need to kick out Michelle and Bonnie because they are a couple." All the self advocates told him, "If we do that then we defeat who we are as a group. We should not discriminate." We all rallied around them. Bonnie was so happy about that, and Michelle too. I think in our field, in our movement, in our human service field –I don't know how to say it but I am going to say it out loud – people who are in different backgrounds, different sexual practices, different belief systems, different gender, different race –I feel it is alright to tell us because we know how they feel when someone discriminates against one another.

One of the things we need to educate the system about is that it is alright to come out of the closet if you are gay or lesbian and be open with the people you work with. You don't have to put a shield across your face and pretend it is not true. I always say this because people think I am weird, I am not a gay man, but I am real sensitive inside me. I care about all different issues no matter if it is people with disabilities issue or other issues. Like when the Challenger blew up like 21 years ago, I am real emotional. Like Katrina three years ago, because Louisiana was my home as a child and also an adult, I felt very depressed and very sensitive. It was so amazing when I called my friend Stephanie and her partner Katherine, she told me of all the people in the world who she thought would call and see if they were okay, I was the only one who took the time to call her and her partner Katherine to find out if they were okay. They lost everything at their house. We have a relationship. I remember me and Katherine had a good visit one time on the Riverboat in New Orleans for a fundraiser event for one of the family resource centers. She asked me why I am so sensitive about things like that. I said that is who I

am. If I look back I would not change anything. I think when my mom died I think my sensitive side started to show me more. It broke my heart more, what I am feeling, through my writing to Comlink and other listservs across the country of issues affecting people with disabilities. I don't just talk about myself. I talk about how the system should work.

Caldwell: I wanted to ask you more about disability identity and being a person with a disability. The one thing I wanted to ask you is: you were just talking about people who are gay or lesbian and being open about that and being "out of the closet," do you think there is a similar thing for people with disabilities in being open and talking about their disabilities?

Meadours: I think so. When my mom died –this is going to be hard but I am going to try –when I was in Houston and New Orleans and Oklahoma, I felt very isolated and jealous of Joe because I knew I had a disability. It was just very painful to me to go to do the things I want to do. I want to be part of my community and no one give me a fair opportunity to get to know me. It is just so painful, memories of it. Like the old word says, "Sticks and Stones break you bones, but words never hurt." But those words does hurt. It does hurt me. When I got assaulted I was so scared. I felt so paralyzed. I got assaulted several more times with those same girls because they would give me the same guilt trip. They would say, "With your disability we are going to say it was your idea." I was too ashamed to tell anyone. I just felt more distance to my dad and to my family. My dad wanted me to be the man of the house when he is on the road flying the airplane. Sometimes I wanted to just be a teenager and that was hard. I felt like my dad wanted to hide me because I have a disability. I felt left out in my childhood. Watch my mom. Sometimes I would sneak out and go and play with some of the other kids. But other times I would get lonely, very lonely, because the only escape I have it to fly my kite or ride my bicycle. I think I was ashamed of my disability when I was young because I was so jealous of Joe because he was able to stay in neighborhood schools, and the friends he had.

Caldwell: What things do you think helped you to feel more positive about, that it is okay to have a disability, to feel positive about that and feel good about yourself? What things helped you get through that?

Meadours: I think... He is deceased now, but he was a real smart and neat person; his name is Father Ivan. When I moved from my house where my family lived to the group home, Father Ivan was one of the Catholic priests at the

Church where I was going. I talked to him a good long time. I said, "Father Ivan, I wonder if they have any good groups to join in, a singles group or anything for me to help out?" He said, "Funny you should ask. We have a nice young adult group here." I said, "I wonder if it would be good for me." He said, "Yeah, it would be good for you." I went to the dance. I said my name and said I lived in the group home. I thought they would kick me out, won't accept me and make fun of me like I was in high school again. But instead they gave me their open arms. They received me as a person. I tell them I had a disability because I did not want to hide my disability. I was honest with them. I finally found a group of people who accepted me. Over time in my community in Tulsa in the area I was living at a lot of people were starting to have an open mind about me, to be sensitive and also to be nice to me. I tell them, "Don't have pity on me because I have a disability." During that time too, years later, self advocacy helped me to realize the big picture. You are not just helping yourself but you are helping everyone else in the community. I think it is important to not just help yourself but to help others too, to know that. I think it is important.

Caldwell: One of the other things you said was that you got your brother Joe into the self advocacy movement and that helped him to find out who he was. So some of the same issues you were going through it sounds like you also helped introduce Joe to that too?

Meadours: Sometimes I wonder. Once in a while I look back at my life and me and Joe's relationship. When I went to the group home we were far apart, but today we are close together. We talk to each other once a day; if not once a day then every other day. I just want to let him know how much I love him and appreciate him as my little brother.

Caldwell: I wanted to also go back because you said something before. You said in the early 1990s that is when things really started to come together for you. What was it that really changed at that time? Was it the self advocacy movement or moving out of the group home? What was going on at that time?

Meadours: I think during the middle 1990s several things happened. I was moving out of the group home into my own place. At the same time the self advocacy movement was getting stronger in Oklahoma. Also, the people around me, the professional people in my life and also the people not working in the system, we became closer together. I believe it was in

1989 or 1990, me, Mathew, Mary, Greg and Katie, and Kelly –went to a retreat. I think that retreat helped me to grow a lot as a person, spiritually and my inner self. It helped me to realize I could do something. A lot of people did not take any stuff against me. They were real blunt and honest with me. I always ask people to be real blunt with me and to not hold anything back. I want to hear the honest truth. Also, the self advocacy movement was becoming more stronger and also my personal life and choice to live in the community. I remember one time I wrote a letter to the Arc's newsletter. I challenged them about closing the sheltered workshops. The sheltered workshop people was not happy at all because of my comment. They got mad at the Arc. I said, "Don't let them get mad at you, direct them to me. Don't let them destroy you." The Arc of Tulsa is kind of unique as an advocacy Arc. They don't provide services or anything like some of the Arcs in other states. The Arc of Tulsa does pure advocacy work, no direct services at all.

Caldwell: How do you think being in the self-advocacy movement has influenced who you are and how you feel about yourself?

Meadours: That is a tough one.

Caldwell: You have talked about it already, but anything else you want to add about how the self advocacy movement has influenced who you are and how you feel about yourself?

Meadours: One of the toughest growing pains I had to deal with was my own dad. I thought my dad would be real open and supportive about my choice to move to Louisiana in 1997. Instead, he was so negative. He told me, "Louisiana is not the same as when you were a child. It is a lot different." I decided not to let it get to me and I did it anyway. Back track a minute. When I decided to move from the group home I lost the family I had, except Joe –because they thought the group home was the only answer for me. I know the first year was hard, but the neat thing was I have a neighbor who was real nice and kind towards me. Her name was Diane. Once in a while I would stay over at her house because sometimes I get nervous when big thunderstorms come in Oklahoma. I remember one time we saw a big thunderstorm was coming and she said, "James, you can come to my place and stay overnight if you don't feel comfortable." I remember one time in May or April we saw a tornado was starting to form and we went to the basement real quick. She was a great neighbor.

Caldwell: This might seem like an obvious question, but so you talk about it, do you feel a connection or bond with other people with disabilities?

Meadours: Yes.

Caldwell: Why do you say that? What do you mean?

Meadours: Like Tia is different from me. We have the same experience but different situations. That is different from me, and Joe, and Julie, but we still have the same discrimination against us in our lives. Nancy and Tia and Joe never lived in a group home, but I did. Like in school, I went to like four different schools from kindergarten to fifth grade and I was in segregated classes. It is the same common theme of discrimination, but the worlds would be different. A different way they got discriminated. I remember one time Nancy shared a story about she was working in a sheltered workshop and her boss decided to quit. She decided to put her resume together and thought she would have a chance to work there. Instead, they hired someone outside the agency and guess who had to train them –Nancy. If she was qualified enough to train the person, why did she not get the job? There is something wrong with that picture. That is discrimination. We all got discriminated against one way or the other. Also, expectations –people put expectation to me that I cannot live in the community or I cannot do things in the community. Today, I say I am happy I am in the community. I know I still have some boxes around since I moved a couple months ago. Hey, I have a housekeeper that comes every other week to help keep my apartment clean and I have money to do that and be responsible. The other thing is: I think it is camaraderie. We talk about, talk to each other about the same issue, but the end result is we can fix the problem. Each person's path is so different from one way to another. I know me and Joe's path is way different from Nancy's and Julie's, but we still have the same issues of discrimination –different situations of discrimination.

Caldwell: Let me ask you, do you think there are positive things about being a person with a disability? Like, for example, you talked about how you are more sensitive, especially to discrimination and other issues. Do you think there are things like that are positive about being a person with a disability?

Meadours: Yes. I think it is positive because people can come to us and feel comfortable and talk to us about it. Like my friend Margaret. I remember

one time I was on my way back from a trip and I saw Margaret on the airplane. She asked me if I needed a ride home. A couple of times we did things together and she introduced me to her partner, Phyllis. She finally told me about her partner and I said, "We need to do something together." It is kind of funny you should ask that question, because whenever I am with Margaret and Phyllis and some of their other friends, I feel like a token male. Because I am the only male and all those ladies are lesbians. Sometimes the guys look at me at the restaurant and sometimes I have six ladies with me. He says, "Looks like you are lucky, sir." If he only know. If only he knows. We go to the movies and go out to eat and do some fun stuff together. I just want to challenges the system, not just in Texas, in the country, to see people with disabilities are really open minded, not a closed mind. I know sometimes the parents, if they hear the support worker is gay or lesbian, they will freak out. But if they come out of the closet towards the person they serve, the person will know how they feel when they get discrimination and not have to pull the wool over their face. One person I know in the state, she told me she was a lesbian but she treated me so different and so hard. It made me feel like a person left out. I tried everything to show her I was a good person. I was at the same place she was at and she invited someone I know to do some type of vote competition, but I feel kind of angry inside. I feel like I got assaulted. If she feels comfortable with the other persons in the office, why would she not treat me the same way? That really hurt me but luckily that is only one person. Other people who have come out of the closet for me in Texas know I am not a discriminating person.

Caldwell: What about the bigger disability community –like the independent living movement and the self-advocacy movement –do you feel a connection with people from the independent living movement or people with physical disabilities or is it different?

Meadours: It is very different. A long time ago the independent living movement did not really understand what self advocacy was. They were worried about the advisors of the groups, that the advisors would tell the group what to do. I decided to do a letter of understanding of the three sister organizations –NICL, ADAPT, and SABE could come together and talk about why they need to work together. NICL and ADAPT thought they didn't have a clear picture of what we were as a group.

Caldwell: Did you do that letter when you were chair?

Meadours: Yeah. In Texas we are trying to do the same thing now with Texas advocates.

Caldwell: Do you think things have come together more?

Meadours: I think they are coming closer together. It sure is getting better. Like eight years ago, we did not have a member of the CCD. I never imagined to see self advocates involved, to be a member of CCD. We have come a long way.

Caldwell: Why do you think there is a divide between the independent living movement and the self-advocacy movement, like NICL and SABE?

Meadours: Because I think they think the advisors do all the talking, but really the advisors don't do all the talking. I think they are developing a form about what is really going on with the chapters. Sometimes we do have some bad advisors who sometimes talk too much. The other thing is that some of the people with physical disabilities think they are better than them. Another reason is that we get the Cadillac of services. Like the Home and Community Based waiver, one person says, "People with developmental disabilities get the Cadillac of services, but a person like me is just getting a small amount of services." That is why a lot of states are looking at one size fits all model and that worries me. My point of view, I know it is a strong need, but at the same times we need to have the right people to do the job to be successful. If we still pump more money into institutions like we did last year in Texas \$45 million dollars and we have the people from the old school thinking, we cannot accomplish that. We need to sunset the system, recruit new people who are my age or your age, and recreate the system. We are discontent about the current system. It is so broken. It is so messed up and it is useless. I think that with the right kind of support of the self advocates and the right kind of understanding of people with physical disabilities we could all come together because that is a strong message.

Caldwell: I want to jump back to another topic –leadership and the meaning of leadership. What I am trying to get at is, you know, people use the word leadership and it means a lot of different things to different people. What would you say leadership means to you?

Meadours: Leadership means to me a person to listen, to support, to be in power of issues affecting them and others, to create systems, to make the system better for folks with disabilities. Leadership is also to have an open mind

and to let other leaders come in too at the same time. Leadership means to be assertive not aggressive. Leadership means having, not too much control, but control to tell people what they need to do, what their roles and responsibilities are. Leadership also means to know that there is a time to walk away when new blood comes in. Leadership also means to respect other's opinions. Our beliefs are different but I respect their opinions.

Caldwell: Do you consider yourself a leader?

Meadours: Yeah.

Caldwell: Why do you say that? Or when do you think you became a leader?

Meadours: I think I became a leader when I got elected to one of my first officer position. I was punching a hole in a bag. Like the elephant, one piece at a time. It took a lot of growing pains that first leadership. I missed a lot of stuff too as a leader, but I felt the issues were so important. Now I look at myself as a systems advocate and also to help others to be a leader to someday be like a systems advocate. Because I feel like I have gone to the next level. A lot of people say I am a leader. I say, "Yes, but I am systems advocate too." I did my time as a leader to run for officers and boards and committees. A lot of my friends call me a leader. I appreciate that but I also tell them that we have other leaders in our state too. I say, "Don't depend on me all the time."

Caldwell: You know some people say that leaders are born leaders and other people say that leaders are made. Do you know that saying? What would you say? People are born leaders or they become leaders later?

Meadours: I would say later. For me, I never imagined myself being a leader. This person, me, in the fourth grade never thought about being a leader. He just wanted to be an astronaut and travel the stars and the moon. It is funny now to look back now at that fourth grade picture.

Caldwell: Would you say that the experience you had being a person with a disability and some of the discrimination you faced, did those things help you become a leader?

Meadours: Yeah, later in 1990s. With all the information today, I would do the same thing over again as a child. I would not change a thing.

Caldwell: Like thinking back on your life, you would do it all over again the way you did it?

Meadours: Yes, because as a leader it is a two way street. I am very humble. I am a firm believer in letting other people lead when the time is right. I remember the opportunity to run one more term for People First president for People First of Oklahoma, and I decided not to. I had a chance to run again for chair of SABE and I decided not to. I did my time. I did my service for them. I think other steps came through in my life for that. Someone asked me the other day if I was going to run for the national board. I said, "No. I did my time. I did my time and service. I want to focus on Texas and shape the leaders in Texas to have the power to tell the folks in downtown Austin how the service system should look like." Because that is another true leader, I think –helping to teach others to be leaders.

One of the things I like about my job is helping the next generation of self-advocacy leaders. This past week me and my co-worker did a HAVA, Help America Vote Act, at the community college. The first class was, well, could be better. I felt like I wasn't in tune with the meeting. But the second class was really hopping, excited about it. They took notes. The teacher said, "You don't have to take notes. We have copies of it." But those kids, those young adults really wanted to be in focus. It was real great. I could see some of them being leaders some day. My favorite person in the group was Eddie. He have a good sense of humor, a good, caring heart. The teacher told a little bit about him after everyone left and stuff. She said that Eddie taught the class about how to help the other student because Eddie and the other student are persons who have seizures. Eddie taught us how to help and support the other individual when he have a seizure. Eddie teached us how to do that and how to help him when he is having a seizure attack. Me and him hit it off great. I feel like I wish we could have more Eddies around. He could be a great leader. Now we are going to help him hooked up with one of the self advocacy groups in the Dallas area. And everyone else too, but especially Eddie. I want him to get involved. He reminds me so much of me when I was young –he had more hair of course.

Something else about the next generation... I am honest with them. Sometimes I am jealous for the people of tomorrow. I have never been selfish in my life on things. I was lucky. I went to school and got a high school diploma and everything. But the high school kids of tomorrow have

better opportunities –like go to the local community college for continuing education, don't have to go to high school to do that, when you finish at twenty-one you finish at your community college. And better job opportunities, better transitional programs and services. Like twenty-one years ago I was working at a green house in a sheltered workshop with no transitional planning. But I am happy at the same time about the next generation. We need to give them the tools we learned before we be gone forever. I feel like we need to be there with them and to shape them. If I did not have my friends help me and shape who I was, I would not be here today. That is my message for the next generation. Somehow to shape them to be the best persons they can be and how they can be more empowered themselves and help others to have a stronger voice. It is just so amazing. The folks of the next generation, we really need to get them going now before ourselves, we disappear forever and the only way they know about us is through video tape, DVD, or audio tape. I don't want to do that. We have some great minds in the country and also great minds in those individual states. Some of them are local leaders, some of them state leaders, or some of them both, or some of them are past national leaders or local representatives of regions of SABE. That is key. Like Kennedy said in his inaugural address, he wanted people of the new generation to come and serve in this generation because we are passing the torch. I am a firm believer we need to teach, listen, watch, observe, and learn.

Caldwell: What are some of the other differences you see between your generation and the next generation, the young people of today?

Meadours: I think the other difference is how the parents are willing to hear what their sons and daughters want in their life now. The other thing that is different is the parents trust the older generation teaching their sons and daughters what self advocacy is. Also, a positive thing, the families of the next generation of leaders can accept ideas from a self advocate's point of view. We used to have a program called Partners in Policymaking. Those Partners in Policymaking classes was a great success because they helped those parents to realize that their sons and daughters could be like them someday. I wish I had the picture, but I don't have it anymore. I lost it. I met a guy named Charlie. He is about 78 years old. Myself, I was about 40 years old at the time. And a young girl who was about 7 years old. We got a picture of me, Charlie, and her all three sitting together –so yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We decided to share it with her mother

and she was so happy about that picture. She did not realize that Charlie used to live in the institution most of his life. She did not realize that I used to live in a group home and work in a sheltered workshop. It is just so amazing the parent's attitudes have changed so much.

Caldwell: What do you think young people today can benefit from the self-advocacy movement? What can they get out of it by joining or being involved in the self-advocacy movement?

Meadours: They can help others like themselves to carry the torch, to have a strong voice to tell them it is okay to speak your mind. You don't have to worry about it like we did back then. You have a free meeting room and it is okay to speak your mind. Also, we have a lot of federal laws now to help, like the Americans with Disabilities Act. Each year the IDEA law is getting better and better with the reauthorization. Also, the DD Act, because Self Advocates Becoming Empowered are going to be part of the DD Act and that would be amazing. I would be so happy to see that day, because I remember that day in 2000 that was one of my campaign promises to somehow talk to Sue and somehow get the funding –to convince Sue and ADD that it is a need and also to educate the DD Directors across the country to fund and support self advocacy.

Caldwell: What kind of supports do you think would be most helpful for young people or young self advocates?

Meadours: I think it would be great to have a mentor like me to help give them support –a good, understanding person that has been doing self advocacy for a long time. Not to take over, but just show them the ropes like someone did for me when I was living in Oklahoma, but mainly to be like a mentor person. If Eddie was living in Austin, I would try to be his mentor but he lives in Dallas. It is a long commute. But I think it would be good to have mentors –like me and Joe and Nancy and Julie –for people who are coming up in age, the people of tomorrow.

Caldwell: Do you see a lot of young people getting involved in the self advocacy movement or is that something you are worried about?

Meadours: It is something I am worried. It is like self determination stuff. It is the same thing.

Caldwell: So you want to find a way to get more young people involved? Some states have gone and started chapters in high schools or getting more into

the high schools and transition. That sounds like it needs to happen more?

Meadours: Yeah. Texas is not the world's greatest self advocacy group. I wish they were, but I wish we could be stronger to do more outreach. That is the other key, doing outreach and getting younger people involved. Also, keeping the memories alive through pictures or video tape or audio tape about our history and where we came from. Because in this region, out of the other three states –Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana –Texas Advocates is 28 years old. Oklahoma is only 18 years old. It started in 1990.

Caldwell: So Texas is older? Where did it start in Texas?

Meadours: Yeah. I don't know where. I was living in Texas at the time, but I don't know.

Caldwell: So, if you are speaking, like you did last week, what advice would you give young people that want to get involved in self advocacy or want to become a leader? What advice would you give young people?

Meadours: Take your time. It will come to you. For the long-run you need to stay with it and give something nice back. It is not about you, it is about how we can create a voice for folks with disabilities. One of the difficult things with that –I am going to answer the question but it is going to be hard not to lose it –for the longest time I didn't want to display myself with the plaques and trophies at my office. I didn't want people to think I was a goodie two shoes. I decided not to hang my plaques for a while. I never did. One day, my boss asked me, "James. How come you don't bring your awards in?" I said, "Well, I don't want people to think I am a Mr. Big Shot." After all the stuff I collected I finally put it on my wall. I want to tell the young people, it will take time. It will take trust. It will take understanding. It will take risk in what you believe is right. You can achieve what I achieved in my life. I feel without us, you cannot be who you are today and we want you to be the people of tomorrow, the future generation.

Caldwell: Just to go back to leadership, what qualities or skills do you think it is important for leaders to have?

Meadours: A good listener –hear both sides of the issues before you make the decision. Sensitivity. When you hear different things sometimes you need

to restrain yourself because as a leader, or a system advocate, sometimes you cannot speak out at a meeting –you have to keep your hands in your legs. Compassion. Caring. The fire in the belly. Not just being in it for yourself but helping others to reach their dream. Have a good two way street.

Caldwell: Do you think you have a certain leadership style, the way you approach leadership?

Meadours: I think I have a certain style. If you ask my brother Joe, he is very different from me.

Caldwell: His leadership style? How are you different?

Meadours: When we was in Oklahoma, the group wanted me to be the head person of the national conference. I said, "Sorry guys. I cannot do it because I am a VISTA volunteer." Joe decided to run for chair of that group, but he lost that position. He ran for co-chair. My friend Barbara, the state school did not teach her anything about reading. What was so neat was that Joe was right behind her and helped her read every other word to her of her speech. He whispered in her ear what the next word was. That is another great quality as a leader, to help another leader out. She could have asked one of the other advisors to do it, but Joe took it upon himself and Barbara accepted the help. That was neat because that opened the eyes of people like Justin Dart and Bob Williams at the time. It was a great success because them two worked together. Joe did his speech and they alternated speeches.

Caldwell: You talked about some of the important people in your life, the people who have been the closest to you in your life. When you think about your leadership development and how you developed to be a leader, who would you say were the most important people who helped you along the way?

Meadours: I would say Michelle Hoffman.

Caldwell: Michelle was with People First of Oklahoma? Was she an advisor?

Meadours: Yeah. And John Ghada, the local Executive Director of the Arc. He came on board at the Arc of Tulsa the same day I came on the board. Jim Nicholson, the Commissioner of services for people with disabilities in Oklahoma. Years later, Nancy and Tia. And also people who wasn't in

the field like my friends Mathew, Mary, Barbara, people in my community in Tulsa who accepted who I was after high school. I think also the people I just cross paths with at like the local airport, convenience store or drug store. It is kind of strange because I am like a people person. I think about six years ago I went back to Oklahoma for some time off from work. One of the ladies from the clothing store who was one of the customers. She forgot I moved to Louisiana at the time. She was picking up her daughter at the airport and she was on the same flight as me. She said, "We miss you at the clothing store!"

Caldwell: So where do you see yourself going in the future? What are your personal goals?

Meadours: Well, I thought about going to college. I heard the University of Texas has a good political science unit. I want to get a political science degree or a liberal arts degree. My other personal goal is, not professional but on the home front, I really want to set a five or ten year goal to own my own home. I want to make Austin my home. I don't want to hop around state by state. I am going to be 42 years old this May. I kind of want to settle down. I already have some people that are my friends in my community. I want to belong to the slot cars. I don't want to miss that connection. I really love those slot cars. That is my hobby –race around the track. It is a good sport, good connection.

Caldwell: I think we covered everything I can think of. Is there anything that we didn't get to talk about that you can think of that you want to talk about?

Meadours: I think everything.

Caldwell: Anything about how you became a leader or anything about the self-advocacy movement or the future of the movement?

Meadours: If I am talking to the young people now, we want you to be the voices and we want to help you to get there. We want to give you the support to reach your dreams and hopes because we went through those struggles before you was born. I hope you can help the people of your tomorrow to have a better life. It is important who we are. Also, don't forget your past, the past of us. You guys be the people of tomorrow, of your generation because it is so important to carry the torch generation by generation. I am a firm believer it that. One of the things I learned earlier is that it is not just me it is everyone to work together. I hope this can help you and help families to show the true potential of their sons and daughters. Also, to

help professionals to be more sensitive and be more aware of what people can do if they just put their mind to it.