

Peter Trier

Audio transcript: On lack of experience with other people with disabilities and the impact of coming to Berkeley in 1973

Date: May 28, 1996

Interviewer: Susan O'Hara

Note: Transcripts have been lightly edited; therefore there may be slight discrepancies with audio clips.

Trier:

Basically, the choice you typically had was either, if you were born disabled, either you went the route with disabled people, which meant you went to schools for disabled people, and ultimately the end route of that was typically a sheltered workshop of some kind. Or, if you were very lucky, you might be mainstreamed. If you were mainstreamed, that meant that you were—like, I was, throughout elementary school and junior high school and high school—always the only seriously disabled, certainly, and in many cases the only disabled person who attended the school, and so my relationships were with nondisabled students and nondisabled teachers and faculty.

Basically, relating to them, which in my case [was] primarily around trying to be a good student or trying to be outstanding in some way because you're obviously not physically outstanding. You really don't have much relationship with people who are disabled. My goals in terms of my parents apparently were that I would be an achiever academically so I could be some kind of professional eventually.

But there wasn't very much involvement with other disabled people at all. When I was a kid, I went to, I think, the first junior great books group in the country, or one of the first ones, that was in Maryland. I certainly didn't relate to other disabled people very much at all. So coming to Berkeley and going to the residence program meant that I would be very closely involved with disabled people and the disabled community in a way that I hadn't been before.

In a way, it was worse because even people who had spinal cord injuries, at least by the time they went to school, they had gone to rehab, so they were at least in some environment where—not by choice but by circumstance—they were around a lot of disabled people. It turned out to be not a big deal, but it made me a little nervous at the time.

O'Hara:

Why did it become not a big deal? What was the process?

Trier:

One of the processes was that you quickly meet such a wide variety of people. I mean, Scott Luebking was one of the people I lived with. Mary Ann Hiserman was one of the people I lived

with. Donnie Johnson was one of the people I lived with. People who really don't seem to have a whole lot in common. You can say that they're disabled, but that's about it.

But the first week after I moved there, Michael Pachovas—who was a rather imposing person, just physically—came up. Michael wanted to start a disabled students' union. He wanted to have a meeting at the apartment he shared with Phil Chavez. So my first outing from Cowell—before classes started—was to go with four or five other students from Cowell Hospital to the campus and across a small part of Berkeley to Michael's apartment.

So fairly soon I was involved with the Disabled Students' Union. Ultimately, I was on the housing committee, the head of which flaked out fairly quickly, so I was the head very quickly.

End of transcript