



A conversation with Lois Curtis

Voice Over:

(Hip-Hop music plays)

Barry Whaley:

Hi everybody. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network, I want to welcome you to "Section 504 at 50." I'm Barry Whaley, I'm the project director of the Southeast ADA Center.

"Section 504 at 50" is a special interview series created in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the landmark Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In this series, Dr. Peter Blanck speaks with leaders of the Disability Rights movement, who've advanced the cause of equal rights through their tireless work.

On June 22, 1999, the United States Supreme Court held in the case of *Olmstead v. LC*, that the unjustified segregation of persons with disabilities constitutes discrimination in violation of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Court said that, "Public entities must provide community-based services to people with disabilities when such services are appropriate, the affected person does not oppose community-based services, and that community-based services can be reasonably accommodated taking into account the resources available to the public entity and the needs of others who are receiving services from the entity."

At the heart of *Olmstead* was Lois Curtis, and later Elaine Wilson, two women with intellectual disabilities. They were held at the Georgia Regional Hospital for years after their treatment team determined they were able to live in the community because the state of Georgia did not want to provide the funds they needed to live independently.

In our interview today, we're honored to have Lois Curtis as our guest. She's the original plaintiff in *Olmstead v. LC*. Ms. Curtis is a Black disability rights activist,



visual artist, and public speaker who helped open the doors to freedom for many people because of the Olmstead decision.

Joining Lois today is Ms. Petula Golden, a trusted support companion and friend to Ms. Curtis. Ladies, I want to welcome you to the interview. We're pleased to have you with us, and Peter, I will turn it over to you.

Peter Blanck:

Well, hello Lois and Petula. It's really a great pleasure and honor to be with you today.

Lois Curtis:

Hello.

Barry Whaley:

Bless you.

Peter Blanck:

God bless you. I hope you both are well.

Lois Curtis:

Definitely, thank you.

Peter Blanck:

Lois, you have been a groundbreaking self-advocate for many years, certainly since the Olmstead decision. How has your life been?

Lois Curtis:

Good, and better, and sorry and low, happy, intrusion, I remember, and gorgeous. With nature, to authority, to pride. Rest to the army's, Rob Bommer, who was the first Knight and President in the state capitol. He was the best, Rob Bommer, President. Are you going to write that? My poem?

Peter Blanck:

Well, Lois, what do you like to do now during the day? I know you're a very good artist?



Lois Curtis:

I like knitting, sewing and doing all that and making some money, sell some clothes and shoes. I write. I'm going to do that today.

Petula Golden:

Not today though.

Lois Curtis:

We'll do another day, and write some records. I paused up the hill when the time that we struggled with Lee and Jess, I said, "Jess, I thank you for all the things you did for me." I want her to come back and say something and Lilly and Joe and that should be it, and Jane.

Peter Blanck:

Petula, how long have you worked with Lois?

Petula Golden:

About 10 and a half years now.

Peter Blanck:

Wow. Lois, you guys are good friends?

Lois Curtis:

Yeah.

Peter Blanck:

What was your life like way back when you were growing up?

Lois Curtis:

I was a mental institution patient for Pride High for 17 months. When I got there, I got sick. I trespass the board, and I told them I wanted an attorney to take me to court and find out did I go ... Also with the staff agents, who will basically go and drug you and treat you. I made it through many years, since the state. After all that, about 21, I'm granted

Peter Blanck:



What do you remember-

Lois Curtis:

When I went to prison over six years at Potash Penitentiary. Are you going to record that?

Peter Blanck:

Yeah.

Lois Curtis:

Oh god, I did good because when I had stabbed my sister, I didn't mean to do that. I told her that I was sorry. I went to court with Jane and Bess and Olsen and we talked about my case. I went to Rye Street and told Wayne, I didn't mean to do that to my sister. I told them and they sent an ambulance. Are you going to record that?

Petula Golden:

I'm recording it.

Lois Curtis:

Gordon Post was my parole officer on Superior. I went out of town and an officer person came and they were taking me to court. I told them I had a case because of Mr. Gordon Post, Ernie Rohan, and Ms. Smith. I've been an only child when I was 13, I was at Earl Mitchell High School with Lonny and Ms. Walker and Frida. She's afraid of something. Steven and Brooke Shields. Are you going to record with Earl and Brooke Shields?

Petula Golden:

Yes.

Lois Curtis:

Tim was there when I was about 15 up at Brooke Run.

Petula Golden:

Okay.

Lois Curtis:



Because I did the hard work we had to sign for the retarded kids out there at Brooke Run. We were just killing it, and we were just having things. I remember seeing them out there with the staff members on Brooke Run.

Peter Blanck:

Petula, did Lois tell you about her childhood?

Petula Golden:

She did, she does.

Peter Blanck:

What do you find interesting about her childhood?

Lois Curtis:

My auntie was Shirley. She called the mental institution, at KG, we needed to commit her, saying I was juggling down there and rolling the beaches at Cab County.

Petula Golden:

What's interesting for me is the different memories that she tells me about her mom and how they used to cook and go out and do different things like that.

Lois Curtis:

Are you going to record that over at Cab County?

Petula Golden:

And her grandfather and stuff like that, she remembers, stuff like that.

Peter Blanck:

Where was she born?

Petula Golden:

She was born here in Atlanta, Georgia. She was raised in Kirkwood, she said she went to Price High School. Yeah, she was raised in Kirkwood.

Lois Curtis:



My aunt and my daddy was Neville because my dad lives in Englewood. He lives in Atlanta.

Petula Golden:

Her dad, she said, is from Englewood, Atlanta.

Lois Curtis:

He grew up with my mama. That's all he did, the right thing on East Villa.

Peter Blanck:

Lois, how did you end up in that institution?

Lois Curtis:

Oh, I was in an institution when I was 12. I was a patient there.

Peter Blanck:

You were 12.

Lois Curtis:

Then I was sent down to Cheney Wood when I was 11 with all the people that were kids with the treatment in psychiatry.

Petula Golden:

I believe she went to the institution after her sister was stabbed.

Peter Blanck:

Yeah. Why did she go?

Lois Curtis:

That was on Rye Street and Lindenville.

Petula Golden:

Now why, that, I'm not too sure of. Her mom would probably know better about that.

Lois Curtis:



My mama was Ms. Curtis.

Peter Blanck:

Is her mom still alive?

Petula Golden:

No, she's not. She died many years ago.

Peter Blanck:

Lois, do you have any other family members still alive?

Lois Curtis:

I have a nephew named Tyrell and my Auntie Shirley. She got a little boy. He went to school at DH Stout on Englewood.

Petula Golden:

And Patricia.

Lois Curtis:

Patricia. She did something.

Petula Golden:

What's your other sister's name? Barbara Jean?

Lois Curtis:

Barbara Jean, yeah. I remember seeing them.

Peter Blanck:

Does she see them?

Petula Golden:

And your uncle?

Lois Curtis:

Yeah, Uncle Ryan, and Phil.



Peter Blanck:

Lois, I know you met President Obama. How was that?

Lois Curtis:

That was good, yeah. I had the time with Obama and I told him to send some pictures of the dogs he had. I sent him a picture, a lady had a dog on the rug with Lola, Lee and Johnny. That was the person, and I wrote it out and I mailed it to Obama.

Peter Blanck:

Petula, did you go to meet President Obama?

Petula Golden:

I did not, I think I met Lois the year after that.

Peter Blanck:

Oh.

Petula Golden:

We'll do that when we're finished.

Peter Blanck:

Petula, who have you met with her that's famous? Or who have you met over the years?

Petula Golden:

The only person I met that's famous is Lois herself, that's it.

Peter Blanck:

Yeah.

Petula Golden:

That's it, that is it.

Peter Blanck:



Do you think that she has inspired a lot of other people to do the same thing that she's done?

Petula Golden:

Yes, most definitely. She has a positive spirit. She explains what she's been through and how she overcame and where she is now.

Peter Blanck:

Lois, do you get messages or mail or communication?

Lois Curtis:

I get some of the people who I write letters to, the President Alumni Leigh. She hasn't been writing me back, but I will write that I wish she helped me write some letters to Obama and Leigh and Lola and Jasper and Bill.

Petula Golden:

She writes her family members as well.

Peter Blanck:

Yeah.

Petula Golden:

Yeah, she writes letters every week.

Peter Blanck:

Wow.

Petula Golden:

She's very into writing music and stuff like that, so she'll write them songs and send them songs as well.

Peter Blanck:

Lois, do you like to travel at all? Do you go outside?

Lois Curtis:



I go out of town and travel to the hotels. She's going to talk about that we get on the airplane.

Petula Golden:

He means when you go away on vacation and stuff like that?

Lois Curtis:

I go on vacation, to the people there, they have meetings, and they talk about my art in the meetings and I see them.

Peter Blanck:

Do you sell your art?

Lois Curtis:

Yeah, I sell art. I want to sell them. It came from my house.

Peter Blanck:

Do you have a website that shows where all your art is?

Lois Curtis:

It's in my room at home. I'm going to get Petula to tell you to bring them. Are you going to bring them? Where are you at?

Petula Golden:

Not today.

Peter Blanck:

I'm in New York, but I want to see more of your art. Lois, do you talk with the lawyers who helped you in your case?

Lois Curtis:

Yeah, Joe Cougar was my judge, I think, the Superior. We were going to post the jail. We had all the deputies go out there and take me to Court and brought me to Jackson Street and Rye Street.

Peter Blanck:



Lois, what do you want to tell everybody out there about your story?

Lois Curtis:

I want to tell them that I thank God I'm doing better with myself, have them approve of my just rights and try to reach them today.

Peter Blanck:

Thank you, Lois.

Lois Curtis:

Are you recording?

Peter Blanck:

Would you add anything, Petula?

Petula Golden:

I would just say, I guess, thankful to the people who helped her get out of that horrible situation, whatever magic that happened, it was a miracle.

Peter Blanck:

Yes.

Petula Golden:

I'm pretty sure it took a lot of work and a lot of time, and a lot of effort. It worked out in the end, so I would definitely say that was amazing.

Peter Blanck:

Yes. Well, Lois, you are a champion. Many people are proud of you for what you did, and you're making everybody better because they don't have to go through what you went through.

Lois Curtis:

Yeah.

Peter Blanck:



I thank you very much for talking with us. It really is a pleasure and an honor to speak with you. I'm going to look up your artwork because I want to know more about that as well.

Lois Curtis:

Okay, bye.

Peter Blanck:

Okay. Thank you Petula and Lois very much.

Petula Golden:

No problem, you're welcome.

Peter Blanck:

We'll be in touch, and I hope we'll speak again soon.

Barry Whaley:

Our guest for this interview today has been Lois Curtis and her companion, Petula Golden. Listeners, you can access this and other Section 504 at 50 interviews at our website, Section 5-0-4 A-T-5-0, that's Section 504 at 50.org.

The Section 504 at 50 series is produced by the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and in collaboration with the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Rehabilitation Research and Training. (music)

