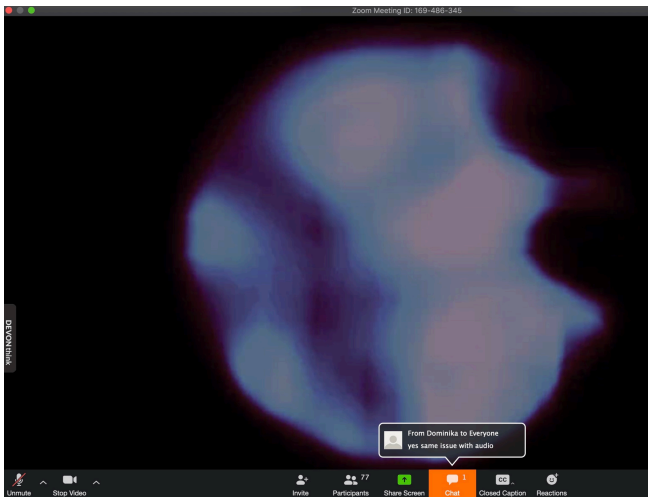

WARREN SHAW

Interview Date: December 1, 2022

Image Description: Text reads “The Remote Access Archive” atop a screenshot of a Zoom shared screen, which shows a work of art by Yo-Yo Lin. The art is a white and grey blob on a black background. The bottom shows a series of grey buttons, along with an orange chat button that is lit up. A speech bubble above it “From Dominika to everyone” says “yes same issue with audio.”

KEYWORDS

audio, audio transcription, Canada, community archives, digital accessibility, disability history, disability rights, image description, New York City, pre-COVID remote access, websites

IDENTITIES GIVEN

white, Eastern European Jewish, male

LOCATION

United States

Introductions and Background

Kelsie Acton:

Okay. Could you start by telling me your name, and where you currently call home?

Warren Shaw:

Sure. My name is Warren Shaw. I am a resident of New York City, and I have lived here with very few interruptions all my life.

Kelsie Acton:

Awesome. And what words do you use to describe your race and gender?

Warren Shaw:

I am white, of Eastern European Jewish extraction, and I am male.

Kelsie Acton:

Brilliant. Since this is a video recording, would you be comfy giving a brief visual description of yourself?

Warren Shaw:

Sure. I'm a white man in my sixties, I wear glasses, have a shaved head. No facial hair, I'm wearing a blue shirt, and I'm not sure you can see it but a black tie.

Kelsie Acton:

Brilliant, and just for the record this is Kelsie speaking. I am a white woman in my late thirties, clear glasses. Today I have a puffy black vest on and over my left corner you can see the sad [Warren begins to laugh] string of Christmas lights that have fallen down. [Both Kelsie and Warren laugh for several seconds]

Warren Shaw:

That—that is a very poignant tidbit.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, I think that really sets the mood here. Okay [laughs], so do you—do you identify as a disabled person, or a person with a disability?

Warren Shaw:

I do not.

Kelsie Acton:

Cool. But, do you consider yourself part of disability community or disability culture?

Warren Shaw:

Absolutely.

Kelsie Acton:

Brilliant. Do you mind telling me a little bit about that?

Warren Shaw:

Of course. Both my parents were physically disabled, and they were among the founders of the New York City disability rights movement when I was a little boy starting in the early 1960s. I grew up in the movement and the movement grew up in my living room, to a considerable degree. And that is a big part of my impetus and wanting to...organize and state the history of the movement and the history of disability in New York City in — what I think of as an historian of the modern era, which basically means from the Industrial — the later Industrial Revolution, onward from about 1860.

Documenting Disability Histories

Kelsie Acton:

So what was the moment you realized this was something that needed to be done?

Warren Shaw:

Well, even as a little boy, I was conscious of being extraordinarily fortunate to be living in the time and the place that I was living, and wanted to record it. When my parents gave me a camera for my sixth birthday I — it became an instant documentary and that urge never went away. When I was in law school in the early 1980s, I ran into people who worked in the profession of city planning, and had a very deep love for the city and its history, and that love communicated itself to me like a hurricane. I spent many years working on different aspects of the history of the city — architectural history, political history, cultural history. And…none of it quite clicked. For one thing, as a part time historian there are limits to the breadth of research I can undertake. That's of course something that's changed a good deal with the maturation of the Internet, research is a lot quicker than it used to be. But leaving that aside, I finally realized that the subject that I had a unique perspective on was the city's disability rights movement. That was about 15 years ago and I've been working on trying to assemble and tell that story, ever since. I've been working on a book for a number of years…seems like forever, the manuscript is roughly 550 pages. And, I know you're gonna ask me about my website but just to get there now, I started the website out of impatience with my book.

[Both laugh]

The book is taking forever. But I can write short historical essays, and post them on the web on a frequent basis and that's what I've been doing since I started the website early in 2021.

Kelsie Acton:

Wow. Okay, so in many ways, this website has…all the background work has been going on for a tremendous amount of time. But its current form is relatively new.

Warren Shaw:

Yes.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. So…You've told me how the website works for you in that you've got like nice, short…and as someone going through it it's quite a quick, compelling and easy read. Have you gotten any feedback from people other than me, encountering the website, what are people —

Warren Shaw:

I have, I have. Other people have come to me, with interview topics, and questions, and requests to give presentations, and I have earlier — this was about a year ago at this point — begun doing a history, a disability history column for Able News, which is the newspaper of record for the disability community in the tri-state area. And where I reach, it's safe to say, a larger audience than my website reaches.

Kelsie Acton:

That's very cool. So have there been…other advantages or disadvantages? To the website as opposed to the book?

Warren Shaw:

Well, this, their, their focuses are a bit different, that is to say my book attempts to cover the period at least in some measure from the 1860s to about 1980. Whereas most of the entries in my website and in Able News are, are later, they're more recent. And the reason for that is practical. Uh, for the most part, in, in other words…You know I don't mean to sound flippant, but you can't interview the dead. And, and so in wanting to describe segments of the disability movement, that I don't already know about, or haven't already written about — which is my primary motivation with the website, and the newspaper column, because otherwise I'll just write the book, which I'm continuing to do anyway. In order to do that I've had to talk to people who are living. And it's been enormously gratifying, to bring to some historical focus to elements of the city's disability community and disability rights movement that hasn't really gotten the focused attention that they deserve.

Kelsie Acton:

Could you tell me, who are those folks?

Warren Shaw:

Well, I'll give you an example. There is in—in the city a disability cultural organization called Art Beyond Sight. Which has been around for about 30 years, and has had a wide impact in bringing arts education and artistic expression to people with sensory impairments, including but not limited to people with visual disabilities. They have been particularly influential in developing art, and artists, and also education, and access to cultural facilities. But because their practice is to support what others are doing without requiring primary attribution, they're not that well known. And in fact, when I approached the principal of Art Beyond Sight about a year ago, to do a piece about them, no one had ever approached them before. The piece that I wrote about Art Beyond Sight is the first of its kind. And, even

just telling you about that is really deeply moving for me. You know because it means…it means that my work is making a difference.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. [Long pause] Sorry this is just me processing and thinking.

Warren Shaw:

I, I also, with respect to the early founders of the 1960s, managed to get in touch with Itzhak Perlman, the famed violinist, who was claimed as a friend, of one of the pioneers, a man named Curtis Brewer who passed away in 1990, and therefore is unavailable for comment. Well I reached Mr. Perlman. He confirmed that they were friends, and he was generous enough to give me an interview. And he was every bit as gracious as he seems to be on TV. He was very informative, and once again he told me that no one had ever asked him about Curtis before. Which goes to show that even with the rise of disability studies, and the self-consciousness among the disability community, Americans are not historically minded people. We don't, we just don't approach things longitudinally so well.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, so in many ways, you're—you're capturing something that's in the process of disappearing right now.

Warren Shaw:

Yes, I'm afraid that's true. There is a poignance…about this kind of work. And the desire to talk to people—a lot of the people I interview are fairly elderly. And there's the desire to get their stories while I can.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. [Long pause] And you're documenting them. So thank you—

Warren Shaw:

Yes.

Kelsie Acton:

It was like, yeah. I enjoy this kind of interview, because I don't have to pretend not to be a fan. So…it was really moving to come across your website. And find all these histories. And like — I'm not from New York. I'm not even from the States but to see a piece of history that I had never seen was really wonderful.

Regionalism of Disability Movements

Warren Shaw:

Well, you know from the little that I have been able to…look beyond the United States it seems to me that disability history is far better established as a scholarly subject in Britain than it is in the United States. It doesn't really exist in the United States.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, I grew up in Canada…Where I feel like our disability rights movement got, like, truncated a little bit?

Warren Shaw:

Oh —

Kelsie Acton:

Uh huh. And I think there's even less disability history, there. But yes, definitely, much more disability history here in the UK [United Kingdom].

Warren Shaw:

I don't mean to turn the tables. But can you tell me a little about Canada? I'm fascinated.

Kelsie Acton:

So I think there was at the same time as the States, sort of rising disability rights. And then it just kind of…The big wins never happened. Yeah, it was a weird moment and there are people who are doing the work on history who would trace this and explain this much better than I do. But my understanding is the sort of, moment of Rick Hansen and a number of like disabled sports and endurance superstars coincided with…Canada, Canadian disability rights activists, not getting the sort of wins that would have given us the equivalent of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act]. Like we only just got, a couple of years ago, the first national accessibility legislation, and it only covers, like banks, trains. And, doesn't even have the companies over a particular size. The industries which it regulates are very limited. There's also like some structural stuff around…Most of the big disability rights cases have been decided in provincial courts. So they've never made it to the level of which it would have national impact.

Warren Shaw:

That is true in the United States to a considerable degree, and I'll also say I don't know much about the political structure of Canada, but...The disability rights movement in the United States mostly consists of local movements. The New York City disability rights movement is a separate movement. And to go a little bit further, the various segments of the disability community have their own movements. It's all a matter of coalition, and coalitions are inherently a little fragile. But…it makes sense to me, to cover the New York City disability movement as a phenomenon in itself. Nationally, there have been efforts to create national organizations - the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped Americans, the

American Congress of Citizens with Disabilities, and some other efforts. But for the most part…they haven't had a lot of longevity.

Kelsie Acton:

Hmm.

Warren Shaw:

It's—it's these local movements that have managed to create a self-sustaining sort of base.

Kelsie Acton:

Interesting.

Warren Shaw:

And I don't know—

Kelsie Acton:

That's super interesting.

Warren Shaw:

I don't know if that's the case in Canada.

Kelsie Acton:

I mean it's actually a really interesting point in terms…of like the overarching question of the Remote Access Archive is, what does the local enable? And what does added distance enable? And, what I'm hearing you say, is that for a lot of disability history…in many ways it's been the local,

and the local, and I'm assuming like, to use a terrible fancy academic word, co-presence of being in the same spaces.

Warren Shaw:

Well absolutely. The founders, in the early 1960s, their first battles could easily be summarized as freedom of association, and freedom of travel. The movement had its first sort of critical mass, at a pool, that — the only pool in the tri-state area that was accessible to people with disabilities. A man who lived nearby who had a spinal cord injury persuaded that school, a public school, to allow him to run evening swim classes for disabled adults, one night every two weeks I believe. And the personalities who came together there became some of the most important forces that created the city's disability rights movement. Because of the freedom of association that pool permitted. And their first project was an exemption from paying parking meter fees so as to facilitate freedom of movement. Because it's one thing to have a car with hand controls. But if you have to go to the car every hour to feed the meter, your freedom of travel is largely illusory.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah.

Warren Shaw:

See what I mean?

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. That's brilliant and really fascinating.

Warren Shaw:

So, the concept of community at a distance is an expansion of the fundamental freedom element, that's really at the heart, of the disability rights movement, and one that places it beyond all other all human categories, of race, and religion, and gender and whatnot, when it comes to the disability rights, movement, we are all human beings. And we are all seeking a common level of access to the things that everybody wants in life.

Warren's Website and Digital Accessibility

Kelsie Acton:

Yes. [Long pause] So I'm gonna pivot awkwardly here. How did and has access informed how you built your website?

Warren Shaw:

Well I wanted to make sure that it was usable by people with sensory disabilities. So I worked with input from the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, to make sure that it incorporated enough features so that people with visual impairments can use it, and so that people with auditory impairments can use it. I make a point of recording audio of all of the entries, because I think that's just a little bit more human than the mechanical voicing.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, it's your—

Warren Shaw:

Well I think the mechanical voicing is something of a miracle. Alt Speech is a wonderful thing, don't get me wrong.

Kelsie Acton:

No, but the audio is a really beautiful touch. Can you talk to me about the design choices? Like you've chosen a very particular font, and very particular colors for this website.

Warren Shaw:

Yes. Yes, the font, the colors, the levels of contrast, the…number of headings, all conform to disability practices and protocols, including Alt Speech, so that mechanical, computerized readers will be able to deliver the contents to users hopefully without too much trouble. I mean, it does all get very intricate but I have really made…I've really tried.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, it's very obvious in the design. Are there other ways that considering access informs the work you do, not just in the website?

Warren Shaw:

Well…that's a hard question to answer because COVID has sort of scrambled everything. You know, I am a member of several disability organizations, the Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled, and two disability history organizations that have gotten started this year. They're both in very much the earliest stages. But I'm involved with them, and I wrote a piece about them, earlier this year basically sort of welcoming them. And all of that takes place completely virtually at least so far. Whether that would have been the case…if not for COVID? Well before COVID, the Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled met in person. But now for almost three years we have not. There are some advantages to that, for example, you and I can have a face-to-face meeting, separated by an ocean! That's pretty cool! We couldn't do that, so easily. So there is certainly a benefit to it. On the other hand, in person…has distinct qualities, that I'm not sure we are all that able to quantify. And in fact, the question of remote versus in person raises questions that are fundamental to the future of cities, among other things.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. [Long pause] Yes, in many ways cities enable access and enable, better stand — or have historically enabled better standards of living for disabled people, which poses a very big question for the future I think.

Warren Shaw:

Yes, I agree. I mean, there is continuing progress here in New York City. This year came a very important settlement of a lawsuit involving access to the city's subway system. And the timeframe is lengthy, it's measured close to 30 years. But by the end of that time, almost all of the more than 450 subway stops in the city's network will be accessible to people in wheelchairs. Which is, for a Victorian Era piece of machinery, quite an extraordinary victory.

Kelsie Acton:

Wow. [Pause] And so there's a lot of talk about disability culture being very “online”, right now, partly in part because of the pandemic. I think that started even earlier, though, with the rise of disability activism on Twitter. Do you see your work as part of that online disability culture?

Warren Shaw:

I didn't intend it that way — but yeah, sure. I mean, my website was a way of trying to…move the subject of disability history and awareness of disability history forward, on a timeframe measured in months rather than years and half-decades. George Orwell once likened writing a book to having a long disease, and mine is a very long one. I mean, I've been at it for a dozen years and I think I'm close to halfway done with a rough draft.

Kelsie Acton:

Wow.

Warren Shaw:

Yeah. There's a lot to say.

Pre-Digital Era Remote Access

Kelsie Acton:

Okay. I do have one more question. But the question I really want to ask you is - do you know any stories about remote access, about people connecting at distance, from your…from all the history you've learned and like shared?

Warren Shaw:

That's an interesting question. In the 1940s, the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped quickly created dozens of local chapters. And that can only be described as a national network, and that was with nothing other than telephone and mail, and perhaps telegraphs–not telegraphs, telegrams. So it was doable. And then—there was another effort to create, a national movement, in the 1970s, coming out of the 504 fracas. The Americans with — I'm just thinking out loud — the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 likewise mostly took place before the cybernetic revolution. However in COVID, entire disability arts festivals have now gone online, and then people can participate in them from anywhere. I think that's an extraordinary benefit.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. I'm really interested in these stories about…like the American Federation for the Physically Handicapped. You may not know the answers to this, but, are there places where people have their phone trees documented or those telegrams? Or even I've been trying to hunt down old newsletters, as well, but—

Warren Shaw:

There is a book about the AFPH.

Kelsie Acton:

Okay.

Warren Shaw:

I believe it's called *Out of the Horrors of War*. I posted an article that discusses them among other things, it's on the website, and I believe — I actually can't remember the…actually maybe it's not on my website. Give me a second let me check. You know, I don't mean to show off, but it's sometimes—

Kelsie Acton:

No!

Warren Shaw:

It's sometimes hard for me to remember all of the postings I've created? National—Disability Employment—Employment Awareness Month, is the primary surviving artifact of the AFPH's work.

Kelsie Acton:

Okay.

Warren Shaw:

And I don't have an article about it. But it's National Disability Employment Awareness Month, NDEAM.

Kelsie Acton:

Cool, thank you for that—

Warren Shaw:

Sure.

Conclusions

Kelsie Acton:

That was pretty shamelessly like, trying to figure out where I should go next but, thank you for bearing with me as I wander around from question to question, late at night. Are there questions I should have asked? Are there any other stories you think I should know?

Warren Shaw:

Oh there are endless stories, but I've enjoyed this conversation very very much. I really have.

Kelsie Acton:

Good. Me too, it's such a huge pleasure to talk to you and hear about your work.

Warren Shaw:

Well, thank you.