

6-26-2003

## Pieksma-DeLange, Sergio Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland

Matthew Nickel

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### Recommended Citation

**Repository citation:** Nickel, Matthew, "Pieksma-DeLange, Sergio Oral History Interview: Polio Survivors in Holland" (2003). *Polio Survivors in Holland*. Paper 11.

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**Published in:** 2003 - *Polio Survivors in Holland (H88-0234)* - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, June 26, 2003.

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Oral History Project 2003  
Joint Archives of Holland  
Polio

Interviewee:  
Sergio Pieksma-Delange  
(edited)

Conducted by:  
Matthew Nickel  
26 June 2003

2003 Oral History Interview: Polio  
Interview with Sergio Pieksma-Delange  
Interviewer: Matthew Nickel  
26 June 2003  
(edited)

Index  
(Chronological Order)

- p. 1    Family in Colombia  
      Locations of orphanages in Colombia
- p. 2    Medical care and living condition in Colombia  
      Condition of disability  
      Soccer and friends  
      Inability to get into trouble
- p. 3    Riding a bicycle  
      Challenge of learning to drive
- p. 4    Learning and adjustments of people and culture  
      Language
- p. 5    Skiing  
      Hiking and walking  
      Swimming (Won 13<sup>th</sup> in state in H.S.)  
      School
- p. 6    Vocational school and Herman Miller  
      Living in Colombian Orphanages
- p. 7    Other disabled children in Colombia  
      How treated by other children
- p. 8    Going without needs  
      Bringing everything he owns  
      Given a chance through adoption, helping others
- p. 9    Relationships with other children  
      Choosing the kid who was left out  
      Power of serving food in Orphanage
- p. 10   Value of food to orphans  
      Eyesight hindered learning  
      Finding abandoned babies

- p. 11 Abandonment  
Adjustment to New family  
Sisters
- p. 12 School  
Eyesight hindered learning  
Liked school  
TV in Orphanage
- p. 13 Freedom in Bogota  
Girls  
Lack of medical treatment  
Bullies  
Polio as God's work
- p. 14 Polio made SPD a stronger, more compassionate person  
Value people more  
Helping people  
SPD's faith
- p. 15 Personal view of own affliction  
Loving humanity  
Trusting people
- p. 16 Influence of polio on spirituality and faith
- p. 17 Spirituality (con't)  
Abuse children received  
Overcoming rejection and adjusting to culture  
Orphanage lied to adoptive mother
- p. 18 Result of not accepting positive opportunities  
Thankful for parents and their support
- p. 19 Learning a new language, or anything new  
Teach someone something that was difficult to learn  
Rejection, mockery
- p. 20 Age gap in understanding polio and disability
- p. 21 Misunderstandings  
Helping people  
Friend Roy
- p. 22 Roy (con't)  
Negative influences and effect

- p. 23 Making choices  
Most challenging and difficult parts of polio
- p. 24 Positive experiences through polio  
Difficulty sympathizing without experience
- p. 25 Surviving layoffs at Herman Miller  
Work ethic  
Speaking up in unfair situations
- p. 26 Discrimination  
Employment  
Work Ethic
- p. 27 Routine  
Without family, gets involved in community  
Feeling of learning to ride a bike
- p.28 Biking  
Skiing
- p. 29 Learning about polio  
Education and challenge
- p. 30 Polio info  
Children asking and learning about polio and disability
- p. 31 Calvary Church  
Translate and relate  
Teaching people
- p. 32 Giving to community  
Discovering his bad eyesight  
Positive and peaceful attitude

2003 Oral History Interview: Polio  
Interview with Sergio Pieksma-Delange  
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26 June 2003  
(edited)

MN: To start, how old were you—

SPD: When I had polio? Two years.

MN: So you were really young.

SPD: Yeah.

MN: What do you remember of polio that early?

SPD: I found out from my adopted family that my birth mom was unable to take care of me, and I think due to the polio she left me in the hospital and never came back. Part of the reason is because she could not take care of me. She had a big family and I was the second youngest. But to this day, I don't know anybody. My brothers or sisters or my mom or dad. That is why, I think that is why she left me, because I got polio and in her desperation, because she was extremely poor. She didn't know what to do with me.

MN: Because of medical expenses?

SPD: Yes. And they lived out of whatever handouts people gave them and also at that time, back in 1970, in Colombia birth control was forbidden by the Catholic Church, so that is why they kept having babies and not being able to take care of it. I guess they were not educated in that and not knowledgeable. I think that is why, part of the reason, but I guess she did the best that she could. Say, I can't take care of him, I will bring him to the hospital and they might be able to take care of him. That is what she did, and I stayed there until I was five years old. Then I was sent to Bogotá [located in the mountains of central Colombia], when I was five. I lived there till I was 12, and I went to Cali [Located

in southwest Colombia, also in the mountains] and I lived there till I was 14 and a half.

That is when I was adopted.

MN: So you came to America when you were 14 and a half?

SPD: Yes.

MN: How were you taken care of medically as a child?

SPD: I used to, for a long time I didn't, I used to wear brace on my leg, like two metal rods, but most of the time I didn't wear anything, so I had huge holes in my right shoe. And they didn't give you any more shoes until you basically were walking out of them. They [Orphanage] didn't have a lot of money, and I wore out shoes a lot. I mean wore them out entirely. They came apart basically. They lasted maybe a month, maybe. Because when I walked dragged my foot like like this due to the fact that it is hanging like this [uses his hand to show limp] and I can't go like this, like, see, there is no muscle in there [Demonstrates that he could move his foot up and down]. I wear a brace now, and that keeps my foot straight and then I wear a half inch lift on my right shoe. But in Colombia, other than the special shoes which I wore, like maybe for a year or so, that is about it, and the rest of the time I just didn't wear anything. My leg is shorter than the other one. It affected all the way to my hip, all the way down. So I could not play soccer, I like playing soccer, but I couldn't play soccer because I couldn't run so my friends didn't pick me up for anything that involved running, I wasn't part of it, because I couldn't run. That kept me from getting into trouble too. [Laughter] So if I can't run then I guess I won't make trouble. Because if you needed to run away, then I would be the first one that got caught. But yeah, other than not being able to run or do sports that require a lot of running, I can do about everything else. I can swim, I can ski, I can ride a bicycle. I

thought that I was never going to ride a bicycle. Then my adopted parents told me, yes you can. And then they made it possible, put a little block on the pedal, the right pedal. Right now I don't need the pedal any more, that big pedal since I learned to hold my balance. Then I can ride it no problem, but I was already under the thinking that, oh well, because I fell off then I was not given another chance to ride a bicycle. So I had the idea that in my head that I was not going to be able to ride a bicycle. And I did it. And then the same with skiing and the same with swimming, like I already had in my mind, I can't do this, I can't do those things because I was, in my mind I had that I could not do them. But my parents saw, my adopted parents saw beyond that and said "yes you can, you just haven't tried hard enough." Now I can do all those things. With driving, oh driving was probably the biggest challenge for me, because due to the fact that I can't press down with my right foot, I can't press the gas, so I had to cross my leg and this can hurt. I got in an accident because of that, because I had to think, "where was the break," because I was driving [with my left leg crossed over]. We paid for driving lessons and I failed the driver's test due to the fact that I was not ready because I have to think, which is the gas and which is the break, and it should be automatic. Then my parents suggested, well, you have enough money now, lets get your car setup so you learn to drive with your left foot. So when they have this, here is the gas pedal, it is like an extension, when you press, then both go down. [An additional pedal is created to the left of the brake so when pressed it press the other pedal to accelerate]. So now it is automatic, I know. I drive with my left foot instead of my right. I can show you in my car how it works. [Tape stopped which he shows] Let me get some shoes on, and my license. It took longer, I didn't get my drivers license until I was like 27, because, due to the fact that it took more time.



MN: That seems like a big adjustment.

SPD: Yes. Like everything for me took double the time because when I came from Colombia I only had like 4<sup>th</sup> grade school, and I was already supposed to be in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Almost going into high school. All those years I was behind, so my eye hand coordination was behind. Then on top of that I didn't speak English either. My parents didn't speak Spanish, so that was like another big adjustment that I had to make too. I graduated from high school when I was twenty-three. Everything took twice as long, but I did it. I figure, well, if I can do it, then anybody else can, because they didn't have all those things going against you, like learning a new language, living with some people you have not seen in your life before.

MN: Complete strangers.

SPD: And a different culture. When I came here, we used to live in Seattle Washington. And it was probably six months before I began to speak a little English. I went from not understanding a single word of English to actually learning English and learning to read and write. Now I can read and write in both Spanish and English. And I can speak both well. I can speak Spanish as well as I do English.

MN: You kept your Spanish up as well?

SPD: Yes. I never forgot it. Because of polio I can't lift heavy things, over 20 pounds and walk with them. If I was just picking it and setting it down, yes. But I can't walk and carry more than twenty pounds. And also walking in the snow is very difficult. It takes double the amount of work due to the fact that you sink. And try to pick yourself and that is really—

MN: It must be difficult.

SPD: Yes. And I can ski. I use only one ski. I downhill, and I am pretty good. Not the best, but I know my way around the mountain. I have poles that have a little ski, they are called outriggers. Something like that. It is not. It is just beginning to catch in Michigan within the last three or four years. Because I learned to ski like that in 1987. So, I was out west in Seattle. When I moved here in '90 I was probably the only person in Michigan or in Bittersweet or Cannonsberg to ski like that. Everybody was like "whoa!" Now you see more people skiing like that. I can't hike, like walking long distances, like when we went to Mt. Reineer we went up and it is difficult for me to walk if it is a lot of rocks and the ground is not level, then it is really hard to walk for me. I get tired cause you go up, and then coming down I was really tired, my parents had to help me down cause I was overtired. Other than walking long distances, running, I can't run and a lot of the sports that require a lot of walking I can't do, well, I can do them but it will be really slow. So it is almost like, no. I swam in high school. It was in a swimming team. I got an award for the most improved swimmer. I took like 13<sup>th</sup> place over the whole state for the 100-freestyle. And that is with my bad leg. If it was a good two legs, well, who knows how well I would have done then? But that was back, several years back. I am thankful to be in the United States. I am thankful of my parents for bringing me to the United States and giving me everything that I needed to succeed and get ahead. I took advantage of what I had. I mean, you could say well, I wasn't extremely smart in school, but it just took longer. It was not because I was dumb; it is because I didn't have the help since you were little. All those years in school, I repeated first grade like five times due to the fact that nobody was there to encourage me in school. And they didn't catch that, you stay there until you pass first grade or else they won't move you up. Here it is different. Here, if you

have a learning disability they will catch it right away and they will try to help you tutoring or do whatever is possible so you don't get behind. But I, with everything that I had against me I did the best that I could. And then I have been at Herman Miller seven and a half years. I went to a vocational school run by the state of Michigan, it is like a rehabilitation center for people with learning disabilities or physical, or drug abuse, it is like, instead of the state supporting you they teach you to do a skill. Like I learned to do upholstery and I graduated and at that time, Herman Miller was looking for employees and they saw the work that I did, and they said, "well, would you like to come and work for us?" They said, "First finish your school" and then yes, soon after I finished, they gave me the job. And I have been there ever since. Since '96.

MN: Could you describe what living in Colombia was like?

SPD: Well, mostly in Colombia, I lived in the orphanage. Everybody was your friend, like you had to get along with them because you saw them day or night. You were told always what to do. Everything was done for you or decided for you.

MN: By the caretakers?

SPD: Yes, they told you when to sleep, when to get up, what to eat, what to wear. If you did everything well, then it went well for you. If you broke the rules then you had it bad. Thank God that we went to school, or else we would have been bored out of our minds being close in that place all the time. And seeing the same people year after year after year. For the most part I was treated nice. I was blessed that God was looking out for me. Who knows, they could have abused me, sexually or I would end up in the street with nobody to care for me like it happened to many people. I knew also some friends that had polio too. I knew this boy that; both of his legs had polio so he had to walk with crutches

and when he was not using them, then would drag himself around, on the floor. Another boy had met a girl that had polio and then her foot was like this [makes a fist] because she didn't have a foot, and her leg was like mine, but instead of having the whole foot, it just had a ball. Another man had it in his arm.

MN: So other children in the orphanage had polio as well?

SPD: And they had other, something wrong with them. I went to see one time, we got a chance to see what the mental retarded children were treated like, and oh boy it was a sad sight. They had this boy banging his head against the wall and no protection and some pooped their pants and were lying on the ground. It was like, well, I thought I was bad off and they were even worse yet. Because the state can't take care of them, then they just go whenever they have the time to change him. It was really sad. If you have sometime wrong with you, they considered you like a, like reject you. Due to the fact that you are not normal. A lot of, I was made fun of many times—

MN: In school?

SPD: In school and at home. Mostly, the comments that the kids that lived with me than the kids from school. Because they saw something wrong with you, then they called you by whatever was wrong with you. Nickname that was hurtful. It was hard for me to overcome that, because I was so used to being called "short foot," or I don't know, those mean things that kids say sometimes. I had a hard time making decisions too. Like when my parents went to Colombia, they told me, "you can pick any shoes that you want." And because I never had that choice to me, I spent like an hour just deciding what kind of shoes I wanted. It was exciting at the same time it was kind of weird. It was always, this is what you have, this is what you wear. No choice. That made it more difficult here in

the States. Now I have to choose what clothes I like, and what to eat, and whether to go to the movies or stuff like that, because I was not given choices. It made it hard with relating to my parents because I was always depending on them deciding for me what to do. No, now you have to decide for yourself what to do, and that was probably one of the biggest things. If I needed something, I didn't ask for it, I just went without. Due to the fact that it was already done for me. I can't say I am out of toothpaste because you share a big tube with everybody. Same with underwear. If you didn't get there quick enough when they wash the underwear, then you went without. Because there was not enough to go around. My mom said, bring everything that you own. All I owned was the clothes on my body and my schoolbooks, that is about my belongings. She was amazed. She didn't know that I was almost so desperate that I didn't have almost next to nothing. I believe that it was God that made it possible that I was adopted. I love being in this country because here I was given a chance, and I did the best with it. In return I can help other people. I can't give them a lot of money, because I don't have a lot of money, but I can translate for them, or if they have problem with a phone bill I call for them and make sure that it gets straightened out and I know they don't have it as I have it, but because I know English and Spanish, then I can help them and I can relate to them. I can't be like, "oh well, I have it all together and I have a better job than you so I don't even want to look at you." I can't do that because I know I had it difficult, and I know what they go through, I mean I lived, not in the same situation, but I know that it is hard for them to get ahead because they don't know English. And you can't act like if you were helped you can't just turn your back on your fellow human being and just look the other way when they need help. I will do everything that I can to help them. If I can't then I will find

somebody else that can. And churches like that are a great example. A lot of people don't have their papers up to date, and they are always living in fear that someday immigration is going to come and take them away. I don't have that concern because by being adopted I became a US citizen automatically. That itself is a blessing, which is not a big deal to me, but to them, yeah. Thank God I learned English, I didn't even have to go in front of and say the pledge of allegiance and how many presidents and all of that because all I had to do was sign my citizenship paper. And I could have done it easy because I learned that in school.

MN: Could you describe some of the relationships that you had with other children in Colombia?

SPD: I always went for the kid that was left out. I tried to become their friend because I myself was rejected many times due to the fact that I was never picked to play soccer or running most of the sports they knew had to do with running, or like playing basketball that would require running. And I knew that, I had good friends, and I always liked to talk to people and see the best of them. The good in people. Even though they were sometimes mean to you. Like when I lived in Bogotá everybody got a turn in serving the food for everybody. We had somebody that cooked for us and then at night they went home and everybody used to give out the food, like two people gave out the food for all the kids. Probably 20 to 60 kids. And then sometimes they kept some for themselves, like give little food and keep the rest for themselves, like eat a lot later. And I tried to make sure everybody had enough, even if the person that was serving with me. I say that's okay, you can, if you want to keep for yourself, you can give my half to everybody. And it turned out that when I gave out food, that is when they made what everybody liked. So

that was great. It worked. I don't know, somehow it always worked like that. And then, everybody never went hungry then, because if you were you could really get even with somebody then that did something to you that night and they couldn't do nothing about it. You just take it and get even the next time they served the food. I saw that like, that is not a nice thing to do. Food was a big deal to us. Like if they wanted to hurt us, they can take the TV away, take our toys, but don't take our food away. We saw food like a big deal. We didn't have much to begin with and then to take something that was, you can say precious. Probably that is what you look for I mean after being, after seeing kids walking with their mom and dad, and buying them ice cream and then you just look and whoever would take care of me. What did I do wrong to deserve, to be in this situation? Many time, the people that took care of us, they had a bad day so they decided not to give us food just because they were mad or things were not going good at home, so they took it out on us. Or somebody stole something and nobody wants to say who did it so they made us walk around naked around the soccer field at like three or four in the morning. Just because they were mad or somebody stole something, and nobody wanted to say who did it, and afraid of retaliation, like we will probably hurt him. So they say, you do not need to tell in front of anybody, just tell us and we will take care of [End of Tape 1 Side A] you. It wasn't fair but that was life back then. [From notes] For the most part I tried to be friendly to everybody, because I knew that we found babies left at our house, at the orphanage we lived in was big house and found a couple of abandoned babies. One time someone just left a baby, and luckily we found it and then she was adopted right away. When I was about five years old, I seen like, imagine this whole living room full of like 20 baby cribs, all full of babies and no body cares for them. Where do they come



from? And I saw hundreds of children with no parents. Like, it was at one time, there were like 120 kids living in one home. Wow, that was the most ever. They range from probably like six to years old to like eighteen. All different ages. We were all in the same boat. With the babies, I felt bad for the babies, and I was one of them myself. Who can leave a baby? But this, you can't comprehend that, but I saw many many children who were abandoned and they were not blessed like I was one of the lucky ones that got adopted at such a late age, in that it worked too, the adoption. When you are adopted later on in your life, it is more difficult to get adjusted to your family. There were times where they wanted to return me back, due to the adjusting. My mom and I got really angry at each other due to the fact that I didn't talk a lot. Instead of saying how I felt I kept it inside. I was angry. I didn't talk, cause I couldn't talk because I didn't know how to express myself due to the fact that I didn't speak their language. With time then God helped me and now we, I ask for forgiveness and then she, and I forgave her and now our relationship has been better than it has ever been with my mom and my dad. I have two sisters too that were adopted. None of us come from the same birth family. They came when they were younger. Nicole came with me, she was a year and a half. Karlana, she came later, and she was two and a half. So that is like 15 and 13 year difference. But they had it easier.

MN: The adjustment.

SPD: They were just beginning to speak spanish but they came so young that now they don't, because they were not exposed to it as much as I was.

MN: What, could you talk about going to school in Colombia, while you were in the orphanage?



SPD: Yes. We went to school in the morning and just talked to, they taught you how to write.

And add and subtract and multiply, division, Spanish grammar like English.

MN: Learning the Spanish Language.

SPD: Like nouns, pronouns, verbs and stuff like that. A little history and social studies and geography. I like history the most, because I like to learn about other people, but I wasn't, but there was another problem with me that I could not see and they didn't discover that until I got to the states. And then on top of the polio that is another thing, and I always sat in the back row so they didn't ask me questions. I was as blind as a bat, I couldn't even see the blackboard and nobody discovered that. Even if they had discovered that, they didn't have money to send me to the doctor and give me glasses. I didn't learn because of I was lazy, if it is because I was not helped. And then I got behind, farther behind. I guess was friendly to everybody. That is probably how I got through the grades after a while, just pass him through, even though he is dumb as a bell so we don't have to deal with him. I am sure a lot of boys were like that in the same situation I was, and those that were smart in school, hopefully got a better, got the chance to go to college. They said that once you were 18 you were on your own. Of course they will help you get into some kind of school learn this skill and those were the ones that were smart, us, I don't know, we would probably be farmers. I don't know. I don't know what would have happen if I had stayed in Colombia. I know I would not have had a future there, because my intellect was not the greatest but I tried to do my best. I liked school, mostly to go and be with my friends. I made a few friends in school. I always tried to do homework with them and just go and play and watch a little more TV, and they had a TV and they only allowed us to see TV certain hours after we did our homework and did our cleaning chores that we had

to do. Then the rest of the time we just goofed around. Sometimes we got to go to the movies. We walked or took the bus. That was in Bogotá, we had more freedom there. They say as long as you ask, you can go out to your friend, just tell us what time you get back. Or just get back by dinner or else you won't eat. Many times I was gone the whole Saturday, and somehow I got money to go and take the bus and see some friends, and school was good, and also they had a soccer team but due to the fact that I couldn't run so I was not allowed to play in running games. The girls, they were not going to look at any of us, we didn't have anything to offer so they just passed us by, like we were nothing. They went with the guys that had a little more money, or were better looking, so. I wasn't a big deal to me.

MN: Did you ever receive any kind of treatment or help for your foot while you were in Colombia?

SPD: No, because they can't afford it. They have to take care of, this agency was run by the city and they place you with children your own age so as you got older they placed you somewhere else. It was bad, because then you were hurt because you left all your friends and you had to start all over again. Of course the kids that were there already were mean to you and then they played tricks on you or tried to bully you, "oh, well, you have to do this and this for me." You say, "why?" "Hey, you are new so..." You couldn't do much about it except to try and put up with them until they decided not to pick on you anymore.

MN: How do you think having grown up with the effects of polio, how do you think that affected who you are as a person, your identity?

SPD: In a way, I think it has been a blessing. Not a blessing, I don't know, I believe that probably this is what God used to enable me to come to the states. Why? That's what I

hope to ask him someday. I think in a way it has made me a stronger person and have compassion for other people. That I went through all of this earlier in my life and that has made me realize that I am not too bad off, like some other people are. That is, if you think you have it bad, there is somebody else that has it even worse than you have. I haven't gone to war, but some people have. I have met some people like that. Or some people have been abused sexually. I just have my leg, but—I probably value people more for who they are, and probably help more people like help them in any way you can. I know a lot of people want you to help them financially, but I think it is better if you help them with something they can use later on. Like, they don't know how to read, then teach them to read. Then they can read later and they can be friends themselves later on, rather than giving them money, they spend it and then it gone. But if you teach them then they can be a better person, of course with God helping them. I mean, I pray for a lot of people. If they ask me to pray for something, I do that, because that is what I feel God has given me. I become friends with somebody, then I try to pray for them. Also, I consider myself extremely blessed because I learned about Jesus Christ here in the states. I wonder what my friends in Colombia right now. They are my age or older, and according to God's word, we are going to be in a better place where there is no more suffering and I sure want them to be there with me. I am sure everybody I can bring in there is welcome. There you will be perfect. You won't have your bad leg anymore, because that is what God says in his word. You believe it, and he has blessed me even more than I can imagine, about everything that I had asked, I have received. That is a miracle and a blessing in itself. I don't know how to thank my parents for what they did for me. They didn't have to do it. It was not easy for them, it was not easy for me. I think God intended

it to be like that, and that is the way it is. I would have preferred to be adopted earlier when my mom gave me up, then I would not have had to go through all of this, but who know, maybe that is what God decided, and you just have to make the best of it. I don't like polio. Now that I know more about it, I don't wish it on anybody. It is a terrible disease. I wish I didn't have it but, I could probably have a better job, or do more physical labor if I had my good two legs but I just see it as a little obstacle that hinders me from doing other things that people do. It hasn't stopped me really. It is only if you think in your mind, oh, can't always say oh "poor me." You know, that is like demeaning yourself, say hey, I can do it. I can't do that but I can do this. I don't like it when people put other people down, due to the fact that they make more money than you, or they are better off, because I believe that it doesn't matter who you are, we are all human beings and we have to respect each other and try to live good. We can like everybody. You can't hate anybody either. It would be nice if we all lived together like God intended man to be. Like does it matter? This would be a better world if everybody just did God's will, because I know God wants the best for us. I know I had it hard, but God has blessed me some much that I don't know, I can't just stay and do nothing. If I can help somebody I will do everything that I can, and people have taken advantage of my kindness. I lent people money, and they have not paid me. What is more hurtful is people that I trusted. I thought that they were my friend. They did this in return. To me money doesn't matter a lot. It shows that you can't trust everybody, like I did. Then my mom said, "Well I hope this will be a valuable lesson." Not everybody is what they pretend to be unfortunately. They can be your friend, just don't lend them any money. I say, I know I can't trust you with money, so don't ask me for money. I'll just help him. I don't hate him, I just had

what they did. Because the person did something and I know in their conscience they know they did wrong, and I let God deal with it. So I lost that money, well, I just have to be more careful to who you trust.

MN: Do you think polio has influenced you spirituality or your faith?

SPD: I believe that God gives everybody trials in their lives, to see if you are capable of doing, but dealing with it? I know God will help you along. He says that you are not alone. He who began a good work in you will be faithful in you, completed in you, and I think if God gives you a problem, he is going to be there with you to handle it. Like I said before, polio was probably the reason that I got here in the States, was probably one of the means that God used to get you here, probably would not be my choosing. If that is what God gave me, then I have to deal with it then, not that I wish I had something else wrong with me, but I think that with polio, then God keeps you humble. Yes, you have all these blessings but you also have to remember that it is a lot of people that are needing love. I was not loved at first, then God showed me how to love, and encourage other people. I encourage and help, I translate, I do everything that I can to show other people the love of Christ through me. What a better way to demonstrate it. A lot of people say you don't have to say a lot of things. God you will show God's love by your actions. How you behave, how you act, and work. At home and everywhere, at church. I think that is what God does for everybody, and he helps you along. Because the battle is the Lord's it is not you. And here is where I became a Christian. In Colombia, I knew there was a God, but it was rare when we went to church and if we went to church it was a catholic church but it was always, in the back of my mind, I knew that there was a God. I didn't have a Bible so I didn't have many ways of knowing who Jesus was till I got to the states, and God

blessed me in a Christian family, which was a blessing. Unfortunately to some of my friends, that were orphans that I lived with them. The father did horrible things to them. He molested them sexually. And then he fled the country so not to be prosecuted. I could have ended up like one of them. Thank God it was not me. But it could have happened to me, but that guy when he when to Colombia, he looked friendly and never in our dreams would think that something like that would happen to one of us. Unfortunately it did. I just feel really bad for them. Now I don't know when they, probably they are my age or maybe four years younger than I am, I don't know how that affected them emotionally, but it is too bad. Another kid that was adopted to his, he didn't take advantage of it and misbehaved and made a lot of problems for his adopted parents and then he end up leaving home and last time I heard that he was going to sell drugs. Like what kind of life is in that? I mean he had all the possibilities that he wasted them away. And everybody who came with me was about that age that I lived with then, had a really really hard time overcoming rejection and adjusting to this culture. I know that I am one of the ones that overcame that at such late age because my mom is a social worker she says that it will probably take you double the age to finally accept them as your mom and dad. She said that if she had to do it all over again, she will not do it. Because she was not, she did not know what she was getting into. Plus they lied to her at the orphanage, afraid that if they told her what I really was, that she might not adopt me. So they told her that I was very smart in school when I was not, I could barely see, can't swim, I can't ride a bike, I have the mind of a year old, and I am fourteen and a half and I think like a year old, because not all my intellect was developed. It develops growing up with your family, and then I was hurt, I was angry because I lost all my friends, I lost my country, I lost my identity, I

lost my food, I can't listen to my own music, I can't communicate with this people. I don't know how they will treat me. And I see, now you can see why it is a good reason that most of this adoptions at such a late age don't work very well. I mean they work, but mind is like a case, probably the reason I made it through is that I had love. I realize that if I didn't do it for myself, nobody else will do it for me and that is reality. Sure people give you the chance, but if you don't take it, you will be, not a loser, but in a way you will have lost a lot. A chance that is only given once. I believe that with God's help I made the right choice. I could have been bitter about it. Continue being angry towards your mother for bringing me here. I decided that I have to become the best as a way of thanking them, I have to become the best that I can. I think you can bring no greater pleasure to them or honor to your parents than being able to support yourself in that they help you and that they are proud of you. I know that they are proud of me. I am proud of them, and I pray for them every day, that God will continue to bless them. I think that is one of the way I can repay, if there is any way that I can repay what they did for me. I know I can't but I can pray for them that God will bless them always. And I pray for my sisters that they will do also the same, that they will honor them and become the best that they can in whatever they decide to do. Because they got exposed to things that I was never exposed to like drugs and whoever knows what is going on right now, with temptations, I didn't have those temptations. I was still struggling to learn the language so that all passed me. In a way it is a blessing because I never had to deal with drugs or alcohol or sex, and I was just concentrating and learning English and being able to speak the language and it was probably one of the biggest challenges I had. I can't describe like if someone speaks to you in Chinese, you have no clue what they are saying, that is the



same way English sounded to me. Now that I can understand and speak to you and understand me, it is like WOW! It took a lot of work, but that is what I tell people, if you want to learn a language you just need to be exposed to it and thrown into it like did, I had no choice but to learn English, because my parents were not going to learn Spanish. And I end up learning English and they only know a few words in Spanish. Everything takes time. Time and effort. If I were to say to somebody something like that, if you want to become somebody, just work at it and you can get ahead. Right now I am in the process of buying a condo on my own. I mean, I can't imagine, it is like it is happening before my eyes. Wow. It is something that I will be able to share with my friends if it is God's will [End Tape 1]. To teach someone something that was hard for you [From notes], like something that you struggle with, then to teach somebody else, but it was hard for you to learn, oh that, enabling somebody to do something that you could not do, I think that is the greatest thing you can do for a person.

MN: You talked about rejection a little bit at points. Did you ever suffer from any kind of either prejudice or rejection because of your polio?

SPD: Yes. A lot. Here I, even in the states I have little kids come and make fun of me like the way I walk, but it is no, I know that is wrong to do and it hurts me but if their parents didn't teach them, then what can you expect. I know it hurts. Sometimes if I have the chance then I tell them that is not a very nice to do, mocking somebody for the way they walk, or the defect they have because that hurts people. Because a lot of kids mock me I learn to oversee that. It used to bother me. I got angry about it because it hurt, but with time you just learn to [pause] look the other way I guess. A lot of kids ask me, "why do you walk like that?" I say, "Well, that is because when I young I had polio." And then



they ask, “What is polio?” Then you have to tell them what it is, and then when they ask those kinds of questions, then they learn something like, wow. Then they don’t mock you anymore because now they know that it is something that you live with.

MN: Do you think that there is an age gap there, that there's, maybe at a certain point there are some people who know what polio is, and then there are maybe younger people who don’t know or understand what polio is?

SPD: Probably. Yes. Because if you don’t know about it, I figure that if you learn to, if you know about the disease and how people have to live their lives according to that disability, then you tend to have more compassion towards them, because you have been there and you know that it is not funny when somebody falls down or when something bad—the first thing you think about is laughing, the way they fall, and then it is not nice. It is funny that it happened to that person, but when it happens to you than it is not so funny. You know. Then I have to overcome that too. You got so used to being made fun of then you just made fun of other kids too. I mean I can’t say I didn’t make fun of anybody, because I did, then I mean you give and then you receive, but you can’t pay evil for evil so. In a way, my mom taught me about not making fun, my adopted mom. And she has a disability with her hearing. Which a lot of people sometimes think that she is dumb because she says “What?” That is because she can’t hear it. Sometimes they look at you like if you are dumb. Like with me running. I can’t run. Then she, that drew me closer to her because now I understand that she has hearing aids and sometimes she struggles to hear what you are saying. If I can’t pronounce all of the words, that’s probably some of the misunderstanding that we have. I didn’t, at first I didn’t notice that she wore hearing aids. So I thought she was not listening to me because I don’t speak

loud enough then she can't hear me and then she has also tried to teach me how to say the words properly and I found, "err, did I say it wrong again?" A lot of misunderstands, so I thought she was not understanding or correcting me a lot of me, a lot of correction went on and I was angry about it like, oh, I cannot pronounce this word right. Then I had to overlook that, I know she is trying to help me so I have to be more patient and understand that she has a problem hearing and in a way that brings us closer. I had a of rejection and also kids were mean because you didn't have enough, plus you have another thing wrong with you and then that made you down. I feel like I have been, sometimes I have been placed with like the people that are low class, not low class, but something is wrong with them. It seems like God is using me there to encourage them along and speak out for them. The same at school. I went with the people that had something wrong with them and I was able to help a few of my friends, and we became good friends. With Todd, I told him, you had it all, and this is your last chance and if you don't make it here, later on you are going to regret not taking advantage of what is given to you. He graduated from high school and completed his training program and now he has a good job. Same with Roy. Roy was a man that didn't like to, wasn't very clean. But I also understand that when you parents didn't teach you then you don't learn and then I asked some friends, how will I tell Roy that he needs to shower more often without hurting his feelings. Some friend of mine told me "Well, tell him that you are his friend, don't take this personal, I am just trying to help you out. You work at a hospital and cleaning, you have more reason have to take more showers and wash your cloths. If you don't know how, I can teach you." If you want a girlfriends, if you smell, nobody is going to come around you. Look more presentable. He has improved a lot. Still, sometimes he struggles. But he is

getting better, now he has a baby. He is doing good. He is planning to marry this girl, she also has a disability. I met her several times. What I think that is good is that you help in one way or another to better this person's life, probably something that you said or something that you did. I help him too, like when he didn't have a place to stay and he was interviewing for job so I said, "Hey, Roy, stay with me for a few weeks till you get your feet back on the ground. His mom says that I was the best friend that he could have ever had. I said, "All I did was let him stay at my place." He is good. He lives in Muskegon. That is relationships that you will never forget. That is so your friends, when they need help, and those kind of people are not going to take advantage of you because they know they struggle too. So of course you don't want to hurt friend. I have known him eight years, and my other friend eight years. And my friend in Lansing, he says, you know, I don't like hanging with these friends that I used to hang around with because all they do, all they want to do is drink and smoke weed. And they never get ahead. With you, he says, you talk about different things, it is not necessary to smoke weed or drink alcohol to have a nice time. You can do without it. When I come around you influence me positive. I say, that is what I have to do. That is what the word of God says. I can't encourage you in your bad behavior. When you come to my home you are not going to find beer or alcohol, because I can't influence you in a negative way. And his mom says that if it wasn't for me he would not have made it. I say, well, it is because he made it, I mean I guess, I just told him, I gave him advice, and encouragement, but he did it himself. That is what I will tell somebody else. When I give my testimony, I say, you don't know how blessed you are to live in this great country that gives you a lot of opportunities, and if you take them, you can become about everything that you want to

become. If you don't get ahead, it is your fault. Nobody else going to do it for you because you will say, yeah, you have to love everybody, but God doesn't expect you to do everything for somebody else. He gave each human being, first a choice, and a brain too, to make the right choices. I believe that because of it, your actions, you suffer the consequences. I try to live my life as best as I can, I am not perfect in any way, but I will try to do the best. If I can help somebody along, then yes, I will certainly do that.

MN: What has been the most challenging or difficult part of having had polio? [Tape stopped for doorbell]

SPD: Probably, being able to do what everyone else does. I always liked soccer, and I have not been able to do it. That is probably one setback. And, probably put up with all the mocking that I went through. But I think with that I have overcome many things. If I think of other people they have worse disabilities than I have. I am just thankful to God that I can walk without having to use crutches. So I can't run or play football, but I still can do other things, I can swim. And I can swim pretty good. What I like about swimming is that it is a sport that I can do and I enjoy doing, like skiing too. I can enjoy skiing and I think, rewarding is that I can do something that I thought I could not do. Riding a bicycle, that too. And, oh, another big thing is, the thing that I hate the most about having polio is not being able to wear any shoe that I like. That has always been probably the downside of polio. Not being able to wear any shoe that I want to because I always have to have a lift on it [shows shoes]. And I have shoes that, they have to unglue this and put the lift on. Probably with my pants also, I have trouble finding pants that are short enough, that is probably the downside. Other than that, I learn to live with it.

MN: Is there anything that you, when you think about the experience with polio, is there anything that you would see as an almost positive outcome?

SPD: Probably the positive is that that is probably what enabled me to come to the States. One of the reasons, that's due to the disease that I have probably people had more compassion for me, or felt sorry for me, I don't know but I think that, I don't know, in a way, I don't know if I if I didn't have polio I don't think I would be here to tell you the truth. In a way, I don't know if you can consider that a blessing but to be honest, yeah, I think that is what God used for me to come here because my mom probably saw my picture and said, "What about this boy?" Almost, everybody that adopts somebody will look first at how is the child physically. I can guarantee you that that is what a person that wanted to adopt a kid. Cause there are very few people who will adopt somebody with a disability unless they have like a tremendous amount of love for that kid. Because I have seen people that adopted mentally retarded child which is a more severe disability than I have. I don't know if I will do it myself because I mean, you have to have extra love. Very loving person to love beyond that disability. I don't know, you can sympathize with somebody but unless you have been in the actual situation, you can talk about polio or other disease all you want to but unless you have been there and you know how hard it is. That is why you can tell somebody, I feel sorry for you but it is something that you can't describe unless you have been there. I can't tell you about being an orphan. You probably have heard in the news how many kids are homeless and stuff. Unless you have been there, done it yourself, then I think that is what enables you to become a better person. You have to become better than that person to demonstrate to them that yeah you are worth a lot. When I do my job I do the best that I can. I can't move probably as fast as the

other people but I know in my mind that I am doing the best that I can and that is probably what has kept me at Herman Miller and I have survived all those layoffs. It is probably because of my attendance and my friendliness towards everybody. I go the extra mile. Even though somebody leaves the job halfway done, I try to finish it and due to the fact that I might not be the fastest one, but I try to be the nicest person to work with and a person that will depend and not back stab you. I try not to talk about anybody behind their back because that is not right to do. Yeah, you can't like everybody, but if your boss is happy with what you are doing then keep doing it, you know? Yeah you see things that are not fair, but, I try to speak, mostly for the people that I work with that don't speak a lot of good, I mean they speak English but not as well as I do. I try to speak for them although sometimes they look at you like "hey, who is this?" The way I feel is if you are not willing to step out and speak then don't complain. If you want things to change, then you have to make your voice heard. Due to the being brave sometimes even though you, not everybody has to agree with you but when I speak I speak not just for me, but for the whole group because we all go through that. We all have to live with the choice they have made and if they made the wrong choices, if that is not working right might as well speak up to make our work better, because we have to live with each other. Maybe it is one person who decided, no this is the way that it has to be done but if it is not working, hey change it. Sometimes they are not brave enough because they think, "oh if I speak out my job will be in jeopardy." I think it will be worse if you don't speak up and keep doing your job wrong. Some other people have began speaking too, that didn't speak. They say, hey, if you can't say it, I'll say it for you. I will find one of the other persons that would say it for you. Don't keep it inside because you have to live with it and then I had gotten

in trouble due to that because I had found discrimination against me because a lot of people who are non-white they don't like, they hate it when you tell them something to do when they don't want to do it themselves and all they do is complain about it. I say, hey, if I need to, I am the kind of person that will speak so everybody hears the same. I don't need to go and speak behind your back. If I have something to say to you, I'll say it. Because God says "know the truth and the truth and the truth will set you free." I know sometimes in the work you will get hurt for saying the truth but most of the time people will respect you for that. They will know that you stand for something and it is something good and it is not going to affect them bad. In a bad way. Then you earn respect from your fellow co-workers, and that is what I tried to do, not, it is not perfect but you just have to make the best of it.

MN: Have you ever had any problems with employment because of your polio?

SPD: [Thinks] No, not really. Because I had many jobs and I never have been fired from a job. They always, when I work for somebody they don't want me to leave, due to the fact that I will to everything that they ask me and more. When I bag groceries at D&W, I did it for five years, started that in November and in December I made employee of the month. I didn't need to be told what to do, I say, "Tell me what you expect of me." And with my parents the same, they didn't have to tell me twice to clean or wash the dishes, it was done automatically. I guess that is the way I grew up. They taught me how to respect people and do what they needed to be done and I always did it the best that I could. With discipline I never had a problem with my parents. They say we can leave you a year or a week in our house by yourself and we will not be afraid that anything would be missing. "I don't know about your sisters but..." because they grew up here so they will most



likely throw a party and who knows what would happen. They told me, “With you, what can we ask of you, nothing because you did it all. We didn’t need to ask you to do something. You did it, and didn’t need to wake you in the morning for school.” They can set their watches by the time I get up because I was always. I am the kind of person that likes to be in a routine. It doesn’t matter to me if I do the same thing every day. I think it is better for me. I am more the type of person, I don’t like to lead, but I like to follow and encourage others, that is the way I function. But if there is something to be said I will say it. If I know somebody is being mistreated, I will stand up for them it does not matter. And I know that other people will respect me for that. I know we don’t live in a perfect world but you have to live the best that you can. When they decide it will affect you later on, especially in your job. Trouble is then that you have to go there every day so you can’t go hating your job. Work extra hard but once you get home you forget all about it. In a way it is nice to me because I don’t have a family to deal with my own children or my husband or my wife, but in another way is lonely too. What do you do now? I try to get involved in church things and it takes my time, a lot of my time. That is good because I am helping somebody else and I enjoy doing that. I enjoy helping other people.

MN: Earlier you talked about skiing and biking, and swimming and some of the physical activities you do, what did it feel like when you did finally learn how to ride a bike?

SPD: That was probably the greatest thing. Before I just took the bus or walked everywhere.

[End Tape 2 Side A] When I learned I took long rides to the park. My parents encouraged me [From Notes]. Explore, I mean ride your bicycle around the city and see what it is like, and then I enjoyed riding my bicycle to work, to the park, and spent hours by the lake riding bicycle. Then my parents got me a brand new bicycle which was greater. Oh



wow. That was when mountain bikes just began to come out in '86 and '87. Man, I have the best bike in the neighborhood. I didn't have anybody to brag to, but. My sister was like, probably like five or four even. And then the neighbor kids, I was way older than them. So I just rode my bike just by myself and it was mostly by myself. And then I enjoyed that, and then swimming, and swimming was good, cause I took swimming for P.E. instead of climbing the rope or running, I couldn't do that very well, but I could swim, so I swam a lot. I have not swam lately. But I am hoping to get back into it if I get this condo with the pool, then I will start swimming laps so I can be fit again like I was in high school. Skiing, it was good, especially telling your friends "oh man I ski." And I ski on one ski, like "what you downhill, no way!" Watch when we go on the skiing retreat from youth group, you'll see. Wow, man you ski better than I do. Told you. Then when I went Colorado, and being able to ski no problem, I was afraid because you go on the gondola and then you go half way up the mountain and then you take another chair lift and my dad says, man this will be the hardest skiing you will ever do. And I say, you think you have it all together, just wait till we go to Colorado then you know what really skiing will be about. Sure enough, I skied myself dead tired. We went for a week and we skied like probably from 10 until four in the afternoon like everyday. I couldn't ski anymore due to my hips, my legs, I was so tired. It was fun but after a while I could not even get up because I was extremely tired. Never got tired like that before but that was like overdoing it. That was fun, I would do it again. Being able just to ski like everybody else and some people on two skis just beginning to learn to ski, falling down, I just go swishing by, and "whoa, man, did you see that?" And yeah, you fit with everybody else, though I don't wear a ski, this leg just hangs. I don't wear a ski so I just wear a boot, a

snow boot and that is it. I don't put it down for anything, just when I walk then to the lift, when I ski it just hangs off, and down you go. It is amazing what I have been able to accomplish. The biggest accomplishment is learning English. That was probably the toughest one. But, I don't know, I figure everything is working out just the way God planned it. I have a good job. Paid my car off, now I am ready to move into this condo and have something, stop paying rent. Just make a condo payment and it will be mine. In thirty years, but I will have something to show for it, instead of giving your money to the landlord and not seeing it again. I can't stop being blessed, it is wonderful.

MN: Well you have answered my questions, you told me some great stories, I guess, is there anything else that you know of about your experience with polio or about coming to America that I have not asked or have not heard? Anything that comes to mind?

SPD: With polio? I didn't really know what it was until I was living in Seattle. I was not sure about polio, my mom talked about it and stuff. Then I had to write a report on a disease for health class. Probably that is why I passed the class because I did a great job on it. It was probably the biggest learning to write English. My parents, they saw the potential in me, they said, "we want you to learn all you can, that is why we are pulling you out of the bilingual program because that is too easy for you. It is not a challenge anymore." Cause I already knew the answers to the test because I spoke more English than everybody else. And then they said we don't want you to graduate from the bilingual program, sure you can graduate, but then you will not learn as much as you can. So from now on you will only have two classes in the bilingual program, that will be math and ESL because those were the ones that I struggle with. The rest of your classes will be like with normal speaking, English speaking students. And yeah, my grades went down like to a C, B, so

they didn't drop to a D or an E because I still did the work. Then I wrote that essay on polio and I found out that this disease goes back since Egypt, back thousands of years cause they have a little writing with pictures—

MN: Hieroglyphics?

SPD: Yeah, then they show a little guy with a short leg, a skinny leg like that so they found even writings and then I find out that it is a disease that kind of eats your muscles and the muscles never develop. As you can see, it is true, because look at my legs. Here I don't have muscle, and here, see that leg is bigger than the other. It says that you can die from it. It can affect your arm, your legs, it can come back if you don't take care of yourself, that is why you have to watch out when you eat and when it comes back it could be devastating, if it comes back. That is if you don't take care of yourself. I know I will do everything that I cannot do. Then say once is enough. And probably, I can tell other kids that are curious about it and say "Why do you walk like that?" Then I have to show them my brace and my shoe. And oh, and they ask me "Is your shoe heavy?" I say "No, you learn to work with it." I mean kids are full of questions you ask them, you tell them once and then later on they will ask you again. Then they don't make fun of them anymore. And I can relate to them because I lived with kids for so long that any kid that, child that I find that I relate to them then they become friendly towards me. Even if they don't like anyone else, they see me, and probably a couple times and they are already playing and goofing with me, because I include them. Even the little Hispanic kids I see them, "Hey, what's up?! Que pasa amigo?!" I say, give me five, and then they feel like they are loved. It is probably one of my qualities, I bring people together because I have the advantage of speaking both languages. I don't keep it for myself, I share it with everybody else. When

I came to Calvary Church, that is what I have been able, God has been able to help me to connect English speaking with Hispanic people. Our church is growing because of that. Before it was, there was service in English and service in Spanish downstairs, then I came along and told the pastor that I was looking for a place to serve and this is what I know. He said you came to the right place, here is, then I became friends with the pastor and his wife and then several other Dutch people that were leaning toward becoming, how will we make this work. I was the missing part.

MN: So you translate?

SPD: Yes. Translate and also I can relate. Sometimes they can't relate to the American people because oh, well he makes more money than me or might be more educated. [Tape stopped because phone rang] I have been able, because I can relate to both groups, and that is when the pastor says, you can relate, they can't tell me something because I am the pastor and they see me like higher up, but with you they can tell you anything. They can tell things that they will not be able to share with me and because you are friendly and you make them fit in. Well, that is like God's will, that is how God uses me at church. And I know they go through a hard time because I went through a hard time myself. I say, I know it is difficult to learn to read and sometimes they don't want to. Say I don't know how to read even in Spanish. I say, don't feel bad, if I were to tell you that I was in first grade five times, I say I know that is difficult. I say, you can learn to read. If you learn to read then you can teach your children to read. We are going to start teaching them to read in Spanish, because some of them don't even know how to read in Spanish. That is something that you take for granted. And then somebody always says, "oh, man,

you don't know how to read?" They will just make fun of you and then you just shy away and you don't want to deal with that person, again, not so you won't be embarrassed.

MN: Feel excluded.

SPD: Yes. They have become more aware of the Bible. Before they used to take a long time to find passages in the Bible and oh, wow, sometimes they beat me in finding passages. At first it took them forever and the pastor says, don't be in a hurry we will wait for you till you find it. This is in the Old Testament, this is in the New Testament. I mean wow, I even amaze myself. There was this woman, she was as blind as a bat, then Sylvia, who is the pastor's wife, how about getting Angela some glasses or getting her eyes checked. She said "I don't have time to do it, but would you be willing to take her to Wal-Mart and have her eyes checked." I said, "Sure." I could have said no. But when we saw that her eyes were like extremely bad. The optometrist says that is probably the strongest prescription that I have ever given. "Does she drive?" I say no. "Thank God because she can't see nothing." At first I say "This is what they are going to do they are going to blow air in her eye" so she doesn't get scared. Then read this "A". Well you have to wear this at first, you are going to get a headache because your eye are getting used to it. She used to hold the Bible right next to her eyes. And now with the glasses she is wearing them all the time. I say, look, I know at first it will be hard because I know I went through that myself when I got glasses, like wow I can see better, because my parents began to notice, this guy can't see. Cause they ask me, "Where is that plane coming from or what does it say on that plane" I say I don't know. Then I say, oh great, on top of my defect of my leg now I need glasses, oh boy just think of the names they are going to call me. Then I say great, that is what I needed. Then the reason they found out because I was flying my kite

and I was looking at it and suddenly it went down and then I was going to wrong direction to get it and my parents say "Why is he running that way if the kite fell that way." Say that boy needs some glasses. Oh I hated them for that, but then I got used to wearing them and now I don't take them off. Only to go to sleep. And the same happened with Angela. Now she wears them all the time. She can see better, and it was just a great feeling that now she can see. It betters your life like, you don't know how much it impacts your life, like wow, not being able to see and then seeing better. I can't see without my glasses, I can't see far away. But without my glasses I can't drive because I can't see the road signs and when you do something like that for somebody else, help them along, that is probably the greatest reward that you can have. Seeing somebody succeed because you help them along, not you did it for them, but you help them along. Man, that is great. That is the greatest reward you get for helping people. Seeing them be happy and like, wow, I am worth more than I thought I was worth. And that is how I tried to encourage them. I say hey, you are God's children and God will do everything that you can so you can be successful and we are all children of God and he will help us along, if you will let him. Or you can be bitter and mad about life and be a grouch, it doesn't work, I know. It is better to be at peace and be joyful. If you complain all the time, nobody cares, nobody listens. Say what can we help you with? Sometimes you can help people and sometimes you can't.

[End of Interview]