

Cindy Higgins (Farnsworth House)

Interviewed by Nidia Flores and Tommy Pratt (2004)

My name is Cynthia Lee Higgins. My nickname is Cindy. I was born March 7, 1959 in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. When I was three-and-a-half, we moved to the state of Delaware because there was a school for people with orthopedic disabilities. I started going to school three months before I was four years old.

I grew up with my Mom and Dad and my sister, then when I was about eight years old, my brother was born. So I'm in the middle! My sister is two-and-a-half years older than me and my brother is eight years younger. I guess that's an average family ... not big, or small. My sister's name is Jill. Actually, her name is really Barbara Jill, but everyone calls her Jill. My brother's name is Chris. Now I have a step-brother and a step sister, but that didn't happen until later. We always had litters of Siamese cats. We had a bunch of them. When my brother was born we had one named Suki, and then when we were older, we had one named Misty.

Having Cerebral Palsy is not an illness, it's a disability. It's damage to your brain. They think I got my disability because my Mom's placenta turned fibrous, so there was not enough oxygen getting to me. I was born two-and-a-half months premature. I was very small, so I had to stay in the hospital for quite a while. There was an orthopedic hospital for children in Delaware, so we used to go there every few months for my check-ups, but I wasn't sick much. I only had ear infections when I was little, and once I fell out of my wheel chair and got a concussion.

Where we lived was a little bit like a college town. There were some things to do, but it wasn't like being in the city. We had a little sandwich shop that I used to go to with my sister. I don't think I got out as much as most young people because of my disability.

I went to a special school for people with disabilities from when I was almost four until I was seventeen. Before I was eight, they had me in a special program to help me learn how to read. It wasn't a physical program, it was called a patterning program. It was to help me develop coordination, because you have to learn to crawl and move in a straight line before your eyes can work together so you can learn to walk and do other things. And I had to do all of that before I could learn to read. There was a lot that I had to do at home before I could go back to school. When I did the patterning program, it took five people to help me, so we had five teams of five volunteers who came in to help. They were neighbors and other people who would come in to work with my Mom. We did all of that before my brother was born.

When I was little, the kids from my school were not from my neighborhood. In each class there were about ten kids, and the way the school worked, they would move you up to another level a little bit by age, but mostly by where you were in your academic stuff. So you didn't move up every year, but every couple of years. And in my neighborhood, I didn't have as many friends, because having a disability, I guess it

made them a little bit nervous. For entertainment, we went to the movies. Or, once in a while we'd go to the amusement park, that kind of thing. I watched a lot of TV. I didn't go out around the neighborhood everyday, but if my family was going out to visit someone or some place, I would go with them.

I liked school, but I didn't really like eighth grade because I was four years older than all of the other kids in my eighth grade classroom. So I was probably closer to my teachers than you would normally be because I was so much older than the other kids. I had to fight hard to be mainstreamed, because I wanted to go to college. So, when I was seventeen, I got mainstreamed into public school, and I spent a lot of time concentrating on my school work to be sure I kept up with everyone else. I did well, but I was four years older than my classmates because it took me longer to get there. I had to have a lot of determination to do well and catch up, so I probably spent most of my time studying.

I did do well, and I was in the National Honor Society. I did like to hang out and talk to people. I had friends in school, but it was hard to do things with them, because they weren't close by in my neighborhood. I pretty much never missed school. But, when I got to be a senior, I found out that no one comes to school on senior cut day, and that kind of thing. And it's hard to be in class when no one else comes, because there's nothing to do!

I did get into fights with my sister once in awhile, mostly about dumb things, and then I'd get yelled at! But I didn't get to go out a lot by myself, so my parents didn't need a lot of rules or curfews. I went out mostly with people. I don't know if I had as many opportunities to do things, but that wasn't a big issue for me. It's a little bit more complicated for me to go out with friends, because I would have to get my wheel chair where we wanted to go.

When I got home from school, I'd usually spend some time watching TV. Every once in a while my sister and I would go out to the luncheonette, or things like that. Then I did my homework. When I was sixteen, my parents separated, and it was kind of hard because I had to go stay with my Dad. But I did eventually go to college in Ohio, and I finished college with a Bachelor's degree in Social Work.

I probably like the summer time best. I like Spring and Summer because I can be outside more. I like soft rock music. No I don't play a musical instrument, but I have a dulcimer that my sister made for me. I have it in my closet, but I never really learned how to play it. My favorite color is purple ... I like a lot of colors. I probably had different favorite colors when I was younger. I like to draw with lots of colors and make designs. I like swimming, and I like to go skiing. I have some pictures you can see.

When I got out of college, I left Ohio and I stayed at home with my Mom for about a year. Then I found out about some programs that they had here in Boston, so that's why I moved here. For the last fourteen or fifteen years I had a job doing peer

counseling for people who have disabilities or chronic illnesses. I liked it a lot because I like working with people.

I am very anti-war, and am a pacifist kind of person, but I don't know whether I was born that way or what! I probably got those values from my parents. I grew up very accepting of everyone. I think if you have a physical difference, you have to work at getting accepted by everyone, so maybe you just grow up more accepting of everyone no matter who they are. I had one friend when I was thirteen or fourteen, who after a while, would make excuses not to come over. And I thought maybe she didn't want to be around me because of my disability. Then I went off to college, and my roommate decided that she wasn't going to like me even before she met me, so that was a challenge. But I didn't have a lot of experiences like that when I was young.

I don't drive a car, but I drive my wheel chair. My brother is eight years younger than me, and when I was first learning to drive my wheel chair, he would speed it up and not tell me. Then I would crash it into things. My biggest adventure so far? I go swimming. When I was little, my Mom would throw me in the water, then jump in and come up under me. That was fun. I also like to go skiing. There's a thing that you can sit in like a sled, but it has skis on it. You have to learn to make your body lean to steer it the way you want to go.

There are a couple of things I can't do that I would like to experience if I could. Like with the skiing program, I would have never thought that I could ski until my sister found out about that program. We think there's a program for swimming with dolphins, which I'd like to do. But I've also heard that it might not be so good for the dolphins. I would still like to do that, but I don't know if I'll get a chance to or not. Also, I've never been outside of this country. My sister is in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, and she's hoping to come visit when my brother has his first baby in June. If she can't come here, we may go to visit her in the DR instead, if there are any accessible places for me to go.

Well, I like children, but I can't have children myself because I'm not married, and I couldn't take care of a child by myself, so I have a "Little Sister" She's not really little now, she's twenty-one. But when I started working with her she was only thirteen. It's a program called Partners for Youth with Disabilities, and we do different stuff together. I went to her high school graduation. And she can ask me questions about how it is living on your own, things like that. It's a nice program, and I like being part of it.

I still have a Siamese cat. She's eighteen years old, so she's like my family, too. My Mom and my sister live in Maine now (except that my sister is in the Dominican Republic at the moment). I don't see my Dad as often because he lives in Delaware, and, when your parents are divorced, it's kind of hard to get people together! I also have a step sister who I hardly ever see. I see her for Thanksgiving once in a while, or something, but I don't see her that much. And I have a step brother who has a couple of kids himself, but he lives in Delaware, and they don't ever come here, so I don't see

them much. I go to Delaware once or twice a year, but it's hard for me to travel around because I need a PCA (personal care attendant) to help me get dressed, to take showers and other help that I need.

Also, I do a lot of activist stuff. Today I was at the State House to lobby for the PCA (Personal Care Attendant) program. I'm involved in that kind of activism. Our family wasn't very religious, and we didn't go to church that much, so I'm not really a church going person. But I think it's also that I haven't really found a religion that I feel all that comfortable with except for my own personal beliefs. Yes, I believe in God, and I like being out in nature, and that kind of thing. And my boyfriend that I have now is Jewish, so he had a Seder, and I went to that. That was nice. I've known him for awhile, but at first we were just very good friends. When I met him, I had a different boyfriend, but I found I had so much more in common with my current boyfriend. And I still love my ex-boyfriend, but I had to be the one to break up with him because I found somebody who was a better fit for my life. Still, breaking up was one of the hardest things I ever had to do.

My advice to you? Just keep striving for what you want to do. Keep working on it. If there's something you really want to do, and obstacles get in your way, just keep asking for help and trying to figure out if there's a way that you can do it anyway.