Legacy Oral-Visual History Interview with Lynette Boyer

Background Information

Interview Information

This interview with Lynette Boyer (LB) was conducted for the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans' (MNCDHH) Oral-Visual History Project. This interview took place on June 8, 2011 at the Golden Rule Building (85 E. 7th Place, St. Paul, MN 55101). The interviewer was Teika Pakalns (TP), the on-site tactile interpreter was Alan Kenney, and the on-site interpreters were Patty Gordon and Cori Giles.

Translation Notes

A note about translation of this interview: The interview was recorded in American Sign Language (ASL). The interviewer and interviewee used ASL as a first language. The interviewee also used tactile ASL with the tactile interpreter during the interview. The signed information was translated into vernacular or spoken English by Certified Interpreters. Two Certified Interpreters voiced for the interview participants, one for the interviewer and the other for the interviewee.

This transcript and the open captions in the video are based on the spoken English information.

Actions are in brackets. Translation notes are in parentheses and italics (using the emphasis font), and they represent additional information and corrections about what was said.

Transcript of Interview with Lynette Boyer

Key to names:

LB = Lynette Boyer (signs in tactile American Sign Language, voiced in English by Patty Gordon)

TP = Teika Pakalns (signs in American Sign Language, voiced in English by Evonne Bilotta-Burke)

[Visual of title graphic "Minnesota Oral History Project Interview with Lynette Boyer"]

[Teika Pakalns is sitting with Lynette Boyer for the interview. The tactile interpreter, Alan Kenney, is sitting to the right of Lynette, and only his hands and arms are visible during the interview.]

TP: Hello, my name is Teika Pakalns. I am interviewing Lynette Boyer. This interview is part of the Oral-Visual History Project from the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans, or MCDHH. Today is June 8, 2011, and we are here in the Golden Rule Building in downtown St. Paul. We also have a tactile interpreter working with us today named Alan Kenney. I want to welcome you and thank you for coming. It's nice to have you here. I'd like you to tell us your name and name sign if you would.

LB: Hello. Thank you. My name is Lynette Boyer and my name sign looks like this (***signs letter "L" on arm***).

TP: Thank you. Now if you don't mind telling us a little bit about your background. Where you're from, your family -

LB: OK. I was born deaf. I went to the school for the deaf – what used to be called MSD, now it's called MSAD (***Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf***). I started in 1951. I learned to sign when I was about six years old. Things went along just fine. I graduated from school in 1964. And then I settled down. My vision wasn't a problem for me at the time. I lived independently, used the bus, worked, got by just fine. I got married in 1965 and then started a family.

I have three daughters, all hearing. My husband is deaf. We raised our daughters. I worked a lot of different jobs. I was at a factory for a while – lots of different jobs until later when I settled down a bit. I was able to drive from 1963 until 1974. That year I went to get my driver's license renewed, which meant, of course, I had to take the eye exam. I was struggling to read the letters. The person behind the counter just interrupted me and said I needed to go see an eye doctor. Well, that frightened me. Because I couldn't renew my license, my husband had to come and get me. I was so devastated I couldn't even talk to him about it. I was just devastated.

Well, I went to the family eye doctor and he examined me, my eyes - without an interpreter. At that time it was just much more common to just write back and forth for those kinds of things. So I was getting by reading lips, gesturing, writing. And all these people kept coming in and I started getting scared. Then the doctor said to me; "You have an eye disease." I didn't understand. He said I needed to go to the University of Minnesota. I didn't really get it, but I knew it was bad. I cried. I was heartbroken. My daughters were so upset about me crying. My husband was trying to explain how there was something wrong with my eyes, but he didn't understand it any more than I did.

My mother heard what was going on and she came right over and sat down with me. I asked her if she was able see at night and she said she could. Well, I hadn't been able to see at night for a long time. She said she couldn't understand why I was having vision problems. She knew I had to go to the doctor at the U – I think my other doctor told her. At that time I knew nothing about interpreters or how they worked - we just didn't have them. So my mother said I had to go to the University appointment. I must have seen ten different doctors in that building over the course of a very long day. Then they finally sent me back to the first doctor I saw. He told me I had retinitis pigmentosa. I had no idea what that was. The doctor said it was tunnel vision and that eventually I would become completely blind. I was horrified and heartbroken in part because I couldn't understand what I was being told.

So I went home and thought about what was going to happen. My sister got in touch with State Services for the Blind, or SSB. They asked me to come in to talk to them. Well, that appointment, I, of course, was writing back and forth again to communicate because SSB, at that time, never provided interpreters. I mean they knew as little as I did. Then one time (***the same time?***) I saw this woman coming towards me. She was blind but there was another woman walking beside her. They were coming up the stairs and this other woman signed "Hello" to me. I asked her if she knew sign and she said yes, she was an interpreter. I had no idea what that meant, but they came up to where I was and we went into a meeting room. Then the hearing woman who was blind talked and the interpreter signed to me. I thought it was great. See, my mother had not really explained everything the doctor had told her. She had just given me the shorthand version of my diagnosis and some other information, but with the interpreter I suddenly I had access to everything. That was it for me. I loved having an interpreter. It meant I could finally get all the questions answered.

Then the woman asked me to over go to the Minneapolis Society for the Blind for some training. I agreed, but when I got there and saw all these people with the white canes, I was appalled. I had never seen anything like it. I had no idea what these people were doing with these canes banging around chairs and all that. At the Society for the Blind, they were offering training in lots of different things, like how to work with a cane or what is called O & M, that would help me be safe.

[Interview time 8:26:29]
TP: Sorry to interrupt, but what is O & M?

LB: Oh, that's Orientation and Mobility. Mostly it means working with the white cane. So, I learned how to work with a cane to navigate, communication tips for sign language, cooking –just what I needed to remain safe as my vision started to deteriorate. They taught me large print, Braille. I even worked in a woodshop, did crafts – all sorts of things including housekeeping –how you can take care of a house – cleaning and vacuuming even if your sight is limited. At some point they finally blindfolded me to take me outside for O & M practice. I hated it. It was so scary to be outside when you can't hear the traffic. It just felt so dangerous! Then I had to do it cooking – blindfolded. Oh my goodness, can you imagine? Working around a stove when you can't see? But I did it. Later with the cleaning -

[Teika laughing, Lynette smiling.]

Oh, yes, with some of the cleaning, I had so much trouble keeping track of where I was in their house. Even making a bed. How in the world do you understand if a bed is made properly? I like a properly made bed. I asked them how to make a bed blindfolded. They said, "You just figure it out yourself." So I did. I got down on the floor and I used my hands along the bedframe to make sure all the sides were even and everything was tucked in. Then I took the blindfold off and it was beautiful. There were so many things I learned – so many experiences I had there. I was there for ten-and-a-half months. I learned Braille – I took a class in that – and when I "graduated" from the training, I was able to go home and then work with my family to adjust to the changes that we needed to make.

So things went along. The kids grew up. I got a job – well, it was more a volunteer position. I started that, let's see, in 1979. No, I mean 1978. There was a doctor who worked at Ramsey Hospital – his name was Frank Zondlo. He was interested in teaching me how to facilitate meetings. So another DeafBlind person named Les (***Leslie***) Peterson and I went to a training with some other people. We were learning how to function as officers for meetings –like being on a board. Once I learned that, Frank asked me to come to a meeting of what is now the Minnesota DeafBlind Association (***MDBA***), although at that time we called it DeafBlind of Minnesota. That was the first time that I really realized how isolated deaf people were if they were also blind. I had already been very active in the Deaf community, so I rolled up my sleeves. I went to every person at that meeting, introduced myself, and I shared with them more about who I was and what my life experiences were. So we all got to know each other just a little bit.

Later in 1979, just before November, they elected me President of MDBA. I mean, it wasn't that formal an experience at that time, but let's see – it was just a new organization.

[Interview time 12:50:15]
TP: Lynette, do you mind expanding a bit on what MDBA is? What does that mean?

LB: MDBA is the Minnesota DeafBlind Association. After becoming president, I came up with the idea of having a banquet because I had already met people in the Lion's Club. I knew Deaf people, hearing people that were out there in the community – and they knew me. I wanted a place where we could all meet each together. At first the DeafBlind people refused but I convinced them to come. But when they got there, they just all clustered together. I had hoped they'd socialize more with each other, but they didn't. I just thought, "Well, I guess that's all right. I just have to give them time."

Then, informally, I asked a person from the Lion's Club who was hearing to talk to a person from the Deaf community and the DeafBlind group. They gave a talk as well. Then we ate. After dinner, I took a couple of the Lions and a couple of the interpreters and a couple of the DeafBlind people and dragged them into a room together. At first, all the DeafBlind people just sat there but eventually they started talking and after that, they were just all over me about how much they loved the Lions Club. It was so great. They loved it! Then folks at the Lions Club invited us to go to a camp up North in New Hope. It was beautiful. People in the DeafBlind community were so excited. Learning to accept each other and be accepted, becoming more engaged. Then in 1980 they formally became MDBA as an entity with an identity of its own. So now we get back to 1981. Remember how I told you I was working as a volunteer? That's somewhat connected to my work with MDBA. I was asked to come volunteer for a company called In Touch Inc. People ask about the name but it was because DeafBlind people have to touch each other all the time for tactile communication, to get attention – contact is so critical for us. Thus the name In Touch, which served DeafBlind people. Sharon Plett was there. She had asked if I would be willing to do some volunteer work. I would be supporting some of the development for DeafBlind people, doing outreach, working with organizations like Social Security to talk to them about they can communicate with DeafBlind people. I also went out teaching sign language to some people who were experiencing a hearing loss and a vision loss. I would go out to nursing homes and visit people who were DeafBlind and living in isolation. And then, let's see, what else? Once a week, we had a get-together so everybody had a chance to get out. Often these people were home, unemployed, isolated. So we met every Thursday. We would play games. Sometimes it was just more of a support group. People had the opportunity to share their experiences. So many things. It was great. I think people really enjoyed it.

[Interview time 17:03:03]
TP: And where did they meet?

LB: We met at the Ebenezer. The Ebenezer Apartments are on Park Avenue. They had a building with a lot of Deaf seniors in it. That's where we met, in that old building they had. I'm trying to remember how many DeafBlind people were there. Three or four, I think. It was just easier to meet there. They really liked that I was coming there. I remember one woman asked me one day to go out for pie, which meant we had to walk a ways and then we would have to take a city bus. At the time, it was nice outside. I could see well enough. It was nice to be independent and help somebody else be independent. Later, I became an employee of In Touch, doing the same work. Because of that, I met so many more people. I met Cori Berg, who's now Cori Giles. I met Rubin Latz and so many others. I really enjoyed it. I worked at In Touch for seven years and then I was laid off. The organization was going through a lot of changes. The man running it now wanted to focus on serving people with mental retardation and mental illness. I disagreed. I felt we needed to stay focused on DeafBlind people in the community. So that was enough for me to say, "I'm out." I left. Just took a little break. I stayed home, was a housewife for a while – and as time went on, I took a few other jobs. Let's see, I remember I worked at Pizza Hut. That was one of them. There were a lot of different things I did.

[Interview time 19:15]

TP: I'm just wondering, what kind of work did you do at Pizza Hut?

LB: I started out as a dishwasher. Then I learned the sequence that they used for cleaning the kitchen. Then I was moved to the work of preparing the crust – getting it all ready and then putting it into the racks. I think that's about it. I did all of that for them. I worked there for a few years – I can't remember exactly how long. Then I heard about another job that was at the Rogers Truck Stop. It's out there on Highway 101 and 94. I went over there and I came in and asked to see the manager. Now understand this was without an interpreter, of course. I was communicating by writing. So I told him I wanted a job. The manager asked what I had been at Pizza Hut – what did I do – and I said, "Well, they called me a professional staff member" – meaning I was able to do lots of different things. I think he was kind of surprised. He asked me, "Really? You were a professional staff member?" But he told me he would give me a call. Now it just so happened at that time, my husband was out of town hunting. So basically I was stuck at home because he was the one who always drove. But I left the information for the manager. The next day he called me, I guess, but he didn't use the relay service so it didn't work. I got his number and I called back and explained that in order to reach me, he had to use the relay – which he knew nothing about. He asked me if I could come in for an interview. I didn't know how I was going to get there. I finally called a girlfriend for a ride. She came and she brought me to the interview. That was so funny. The interview started – the manager was sitting down across from me and was writing with just a regular pen. Well, at that time, my vision was so bad that I couldn't read a regular pen. So I just reached over and took the pen from him and his notes from him and pulled out a black felt tip marker – it was much easier for me to read – and handed it back to him. That worked out fine. We were able to write back and forth for my interview. The next thing I know, he offered me a job. He said, "Can I start in two days?" I was completely floored. I was so excited to have the job but I had to give notice at the job I was currently working at before I could start. Then I started working at the truck stop. I was there for ten years as a dishwasher, doing general cleaning. I was very good at noticing what needed to be done. My boss would often just watch me in amazement. He couldn't believe what I could do – even with the vision loss that I had. Well, sadly, after ten years, he had to leave. The person who replaced him was not very friendly towards me, or me to him, really. He was just not very open-minded. He laid me off after just one week. All the other girls that worked there were so sad about it, but what could I do? He thought the cooks should do their own dishwashing. I disagreed with him but I just had to let it go – and I left.

Then I worked a couple of years more, but at the time I was finally able to get these wonderful services through a system called CADI (***Community Alternatives for Disabled Individuals***). Do you know about that - right? CADI? Well after a while they wanted to cut some of the CADI services that I was getting. I went straight to the person who was in charge of the program. Most of the support services I was getting were interpreting services. I went straight to the top and I asked this woman why she was going to cut my support services. She said, "Well, because the money needed to be used for the care of children in the state's care because they were in the foster system for different reasons – because their parents couldn't take care of them for some reason or another." I said, "OK," and I tried to be as friendly as possible. I thanked her and I said I disagreed with her decision because it would hurt a lot of people who needed support. I gave her an example. I said to her, "OK, when you go outside, you are able to see everything around you – enjoy the beautiful scenery, see the sights. Well, for a person like me, the only way to have that same experience is by having someone with me. That way, if I have something that I want to see or can just barely make out, the person can describe what it is that I'm seeing. If I'm at a museum, maybe a statue, a nude, or a beautiful park – then I'm able to see them in my own mind. That's the only way I can have the same experience as you." She said, "That's a good point." She got it. She knew suddenly that I could not be left on my own without visual access. She told me she'd think of something. In the end, they decided not to make the cuts. So I've had support services ever since.

[Interview time 25:36:05]
TP: I'd like to go back and talk a little bit to your work with MDBA. You already talked a little bit about that and how you got started with MDBA. You became involved in 1981, right?

LB: Yes.

TP: And you said you were President, correct?

LB: Yes.

TP: How long were you President?

LB: I changed positions several times, so I can't remember exactly how long I was on the Board. I was in the President's position most of the time. When we first started having officers, Les Peterson was President and I was treasurer. Later we decided to hold elections. There was one smart young man named Ted Mahoney. Ted had the vision loss, but he was more oral. Very strong English skills. Very, very bright young man. He and I were both asked to run for President. We had a fierce campaign. It was so funny because we each thought the other one was bound to win. I was sure people were sick and tired of me; they would want somebody new. But in the end, he did win – thank goodness because I could finally take a break. After just a few months, Ted became very ill. He had MS (***multiple sclerosis***) and eventually he was hospitalized. We got word that he was going to be there for a long time. Well, that got everybody going – wondering what MDBA would do. They finally came to me and asked me if I would be willing to serve again as President. I checked to be sure that it was OK with everybody else and then agreed to come back into the position. I went to visit Ted in the hospital. His condition had deteriorated quite a bit and I had no idea how we were going to communicate because he didn't sign. I just knew it was going to be awkward. Well, I got to the room and he had a table set up with a computer monitor and a keyboard. Attached to the keyboard was a cable that ran to a button in Ted's hand. It turns out he was using that to communicate in – I don't know how you spell it – Morse code. Anyway, he would use this button to punch out Morse code and that would be translated into words on the computer monitor. As I stand there, sure enough, up came the words "Hi, Lynette. I'm happy to see you." For me to talk back to him, I could type on the keyboard and that would be translated back to Morse code for Ted to feel in his hand. I remember typing back, "Hi, Ted. You look very, very handsome with a moustache." He smiled at that. Poor man. He couldn't even move from the neck down. I remember his parents were there. He was just so helpless. Eventually he passed away but not before having to really fight to be disconnected from the life support. The doctors absolutely refused to respect his wishes. He had to get a lawyer. They had their whole consultation in the hospital room using that Morse code system. Eventually the lawyer told the doctors they had to turn the machines off. I was there. His parents were looking at him. They looked at me. Eventually I left. I felt bad but I had to accept his wishes. He died shortly after I left.

Later Ted's parents decided they wanted to do something to honor his memory. They came to me and proposed creating a gift of $50 to be given away at the MDBA banquet every year. After some thought, we came up with the idea that people could be nominated for this award. We would take three nominations each year and then the membership would vote on who should get the award. During our banquet in November – we always had what we called the "early bird Thanksgiving banquet" – Ted's parents would send me a check and we'd put it in an envelope with the certificate as an award. It started out pretty casually and it got more and more formal over time. Each year we would explain the history of the award and how it was created to honor what Ted had wanted. We explained everything about what had happened in the hospital – how they had followed his wishes, how he had fought so hard for his rights, and his victory. That's what his parents wanted. We've been doing that each year since. Eventually I was also nominated and I was given the award myself. That was nice. Let's see – and then when MDBA got started – that was in 1980, '79 or '80. We became more formalized in 1981 and we've been going for thirty-one years.

[Interview time 32:31:15]
TP: Wow, that's great. I'm wondering what are some of the most important issues or problems MDBA has worked on over the years.

LB: OK, I'm trying to think. Honestly, I don't really understand. What do you mean by problems? I'm not sure what you mean. I'm so sorry. I can't remember having any problems. Let's go back a little bit. You mean problems like how to get funding or getting interpreting services?

[Interview time 34:05:22]
TP: Yes, for example, if people who are DeafBlind want services, how was that handled?

LB: OK, OK, I got it now. Sure. One of the biggest problems we used to have was isolation. DeafBlind people had no communication, no interpreters. There were no volunteers to work with them; SSPs or Support Service Providers. I looked around at all this and thought "Hmmm. How can I get some funding for this? How can I find support?" So I went to Frank Zondlo. He said he could see that there was a big need for interpreters just for us to have communication access. He applied for several grants and wouldn't you know it, we got a $5,000 grant form a bar on Sibley Avenue in St. Paul. They gave us some money for interpreting services, particularly for interpreters who would work tactilely with DeafBlind people who needed it. There would be two or three of these interpreters at our meetings and then the people who had some vision could watch a different interpreter. Back at that time, we didn't have the SSPs but as time went on, we had people who volunteered in that function. Some of them were deaf, most of them were hearing, pretty much all hearing for a while, and then we moved on. We asked the members how they wanted to use some of our funds – for education, for workshops, maybe some kind of a good time or fun event. Back then, everybody said that's what they wanted. They just wanted to have a good time with the money. But eventually we had to become a little bit more strict. We had to use the funds primarily for education or workshops. We had so many different kinds of workshops. We had people come to talk to us about guide dogs. Others talked to us about veterinarians – how to care for their animals. A lot of different topics. How to prepare healthy food. So many different things. Then after a while, that money went away and we decided we just had to hire someone to help us. So we hired a consultant. The first person who came to work for us was Cori Giles. That was a long time ago. She was energetic, she was enthusiastic. After she came on board, she realized MDBA didn't have a non-profit status. So Cori and I worked together to get a 501 (c) 3 status in place. We did a lot of different things just to get some money coming in. We sold things. We had potlucks where people would pay to come and eat. Just anything we could do to get money in the door. Things went pretty well and the MDBA members really enjoyed getting together just for a chance to socialize. I think sometimes they weren't that interested in what we were using the money for, but we had to explain that the funds were often restricted – they had to be used for a specific purpose. We couldn't always just use them for social gatherings. We eventually started a newsletter, so those people with really strong English skills wrote articles for that. We always had some events. We had the Thanksgiving banquet every year. That's where we gave out all our awards. We had Interpreter of the Year, Volunteer of the Year, the Ted Mahoney Certificate, and an honorary award. We always gave out those four. And then, things went on from there.

[Interview time 38:50:05]
TP: Has MDBA worked with DHHS to get services?

LB: DHS?

[Interview time 39:16:26]
TP: Yes, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services.

LB: Oh, oh - yes, we have developed a relationship with them. But to be honest with you, most DeafBlind people aren't that interested in the administrative things. I try to get them motivated, but it's hard. All I can do is just take care of myself and stay motivated, but I don't really know what's happening these days. When I finally decided it was time for me to leave the Board of MDBA, people did not want me to. But I told them I was interested in some of my own professional development. I needed to learn more about the computer and how to use Braille. Well, they all pressured me but I told them they would be fine. They just needed to try their best. It was important they learn to do it themselves and not depend on me for everything. So I left the Board for two years. There were a few Board members who were always after me to come back on the Board. I said "no" for a really long time. But then eventually some of them came to me very upset because a lot of negative things were happening on the Board. So, I got back in there and went back to work. I went over to DHS and they outlined all of the steps MDBA had to take and if they didn't do what the rules were saying, they were at risk of being shut down. I had helped found MDBA. It killed me to think of it closing. So I just got down to business. Things were up and down and up and down but better over time, so finally I felt I could retire. I was able to leave. I mean, I was involved for twenty-six years and I left maybe five or six years ago now.

[Interview time 41:39:12]
TP: What do you hope for MDBA's future? What's your advice – what would you give to them for your future?

LB: Sure, that's a good question. One of my visions is that MDBA take on some new services – maybe creating an education program where we could teach people about Deafblindness. Maybe we could teach interpreters to be working as tactile interpreters. I can think of a lot of things. Maybe even become an incubator for DeafBlind people to set up their own business so they can earn their own income. I think of those kinds of things.

[Interview time 1:54:06 – Interview clock reset to zero for taping purposes]
TP: I know you have worked with Dwight Maxa on some issues. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

LB: Yes, I've known Dwight Maxa since way back when – back when I worked at In Touch. We met several times there. He also served with me, let me think, it was a Task Force where we did some work together. He's always been very supportive of DeafBlind people in the community. So we did see each other quite a bit for a while but it's been a long time since I've seen him. Let's see, I think I was fifty the last time I saw him, which means it's been sixteen years since I last saw him. We knew each other mostly from In Touch and then working to get funding for some of the DeafBlind services. That's what we did together.

TP: What kind of services?

LB: Well, In Touch did a lot of different things. Each staff person was working on a different topic or a different goal. For example, one staff person focused on teaching DeafBlind people how to be independent at home. Do their own cooking and cleaning and that sort of thing. Other staff people had their own areas that they were focused on. I was teaching sign language and doing those other things that I already told you about – going to the nursing homes, things like that. So that's what we were always working to get funding for. Cori Giles was working to help DeafBlind people look for jobs. Cori's voicing for me now, isn't she?

[Interview time 4:20:16]
TP: Yes. (***Cori is one of the interpreters voicing the interview for others present in the room.***)

LB: Ah, thanks. Well, I'm trying to remember. There are just so many different things, it's hard to remember them all. [Teika laughs.] You know, I'm old now!

[Interview time 4:35:00]
TP: How long did you work with Dwight Maxa, fighting for what you wanted?

LB: Oh goodness, I cannot remember the exact number of years at all! Maybe when Dwight comes, you can ask him. Maybe his mind is better than mine.

[Interview time 5:06:21]
TP: What kind of actions did you take? For example, did you attend hearings? Did you testify?

LB: Absolutely. Let's see, starting in 1981, '82, I would go to the Legislature. I would testify at committee hearings. I would talk about the needs of DeafBlind people – how they needed training, interpreting services. I just would try to help them understand and later, they gave $200,000 to In Touch although In Touch couldn't get the money directly from the Legislature. It had to be allocated for Deaf services first and then they could give it to In Touch. And they gave smaller grants to other areas of the state. That was a good one. So that's how DHHS got involved with services for DeafBlind people.

[Interview time 6:15:13]
TP: You mean DHHS?

LB: Yes, yes, yes. OK. All right. Well, MDBA was really under In Touch. It was kind of our umbrella organization. I remember thinking we were not learning how to be independent so I told our consultant Cori that I thought it was time we move out from under In Touch and be independent. She agreed. I remember having a meeting with Susan Brooks, who was the Executive Director for In Touch at the time. While she was a little shocked at our plan, she agreed that it might be best if we separate and become independent. It seemed like the timing was good because In Touch was at risk of closing and the last thing we wanted was for our organization to go down with them. So at least if they closed, we would be safe. It was just much better to be independent, but oh, it was so scary as well. We had no experience. But it was a good challenge for me and, eventually, we did well. We were able to be responsible and have our own funding through an RFP (***Request for Proposals***).

[Interview time 8:23:24]
TP: I know that you have done other things as well. Were you involved with MCDHH – or the organization commonly known as the Commission?

LB: Oh yes. I remember Curt Micka invited me to come and observe a Commission meeting. It wasn't the Executive Board, but it was a general Commission meeting. So I came, I watched – learned a little bit about what it was. Curt asked me to speak in front of the group, so I got up and I talked a little bit about the DeafBlind community and MDBA – just a few things. Then, during the break, I went up to several people and I told them that I would <u>love</u> to join the Commission. Everybody looked at me and said, "Absolutely. What a great idea." So I had to wait for a little while and then I was able to apply and was appointed as a member of the Commission. Oh my. I can't remember the year. I don't remember what year it was but when I came on to the Commission, I was such a novice. I remember Curt and whoever the chairperson was at the time asking me what I wanted to do for DeafBlind people on the Commission and I had no idea. I wanted to do something for the DeafBlind community – not necessarily just my organization. They said, “Go right ahead. Whatever you want to work on.” So we set up a committee and that committee consisted of a bunch of different organizations that work with DeafBlind people. What I did at that time, because I wasn’t on the MDBA Board, was go have the President of MDBA there. I asked them again and again what they wanted me to work on and the answer I kept getting was, “We don’t know. We don’t know.” Well, I wasn’t going to make decisions for them because I wasn’t a member of their Board. Finally the Commission just said, “Nail that President down. Get some needs listed from them.” So I did. I did a big sit-down with them. I was able to get a whole list of things the DeafBlind wanted and needed. Then MCDHH could develop proposed legislation and work to find money to support those needs.

I remember one big thing that happened. One year the Commission went out on a retreat. We went up North for three full days. There were a lot of things on our agenda. One of the things we discussed was whether or not we needed to designate a chair on the Commission for a DeafBlind person. That was my proposal. They thought the idea was great. After a lot of discussion, they voted to establish a permanent position on the Commission for a DeafBlind person. I was so excited about that.

[Interview time 12:00:20]

TP: Do you remember any issues that you worked on with the Commission?

LB: OK. I think most of the problems related to people just not understanding what DeafBlind people needed or wanted. We had to do a lot of problem-solving. I remember people not understanding why I needed to have a one-on-one interpreter for the meetings, so I had to explain to them about my tunnel vision and so on. Then, after that, people were fine with it. I also said that if I left, there might not be a DeafBlind person ready to come on to the Commission. They said they absolutely didn’t want that. They wanted to always have a DeafBlind person there so that they could understand what the issues were in our community. They needed to maintain their awareness and they knew it. I don’t know if there’s a DeafBlind person on the Commission. I know Jaime Taylor is there, but not as a member. Right? I don’t know. Maybe Cori or Teika, you know? I’m not sure.

TP: Actually, Jaime is a staff member for the Commission.

LB: Oh, OK. So she didn't join as a member, but she's always there at the meeting? That’s good. I worry because I don’t want that position to be vacant. It can't happen.

[Interview time 14:03:04]

TP: Do you remember in 2002, you were looking at new services that -

LB: When? In 2002?

TP: Yes, in 2002. Do you remember back in 2002 you were looking at new programming to provide services for people who are DeafBlind, through a new system based on what the individual consumer needs were.

LB: 2002. I cannot remember. I know the American Association for the DeafBlind Conference was around that time.

[Interview time 15:07:24]
TP: Do you want to describe your experience with that, in 2002?

LB: OK. Well, the AADB or the American Associate of the DeafBlind has national conferences all around the country. I was the chairperson for the conference in 199 – oh, wait, I think that was 1992. I think it was ‘92, maybe I'm wrong. I thought it was '92, not 2002. I'm so sorry.

TP: No, no, it's fine. Just keep going.

LB: 2002, 2002. I'm sorry, I'm just not coming up with it. It was so long ago, I can't remember. Where'd you find that?

[Interview time 16:09:04]
TP: I have information in my notes that says you were involved in something with the Legislature in 2002.

LB: OHHHHH yes! That is it! I got it, finally!! Thank you, Teika. OK, so in 2002 I was involved with DeafBlind Services of Minnesota, DBSM. Right, right. We were working on a project called Bridging Hands Together. The focus was bringing Deaf people and DeafBlind people together. We were working together looking for support. We were doing some fundraising. At one event, I made this Italian spaghetti sauce and another woman brought in this big pot of food. We were raising money for a DeafBlind camp. We raised $400 one night. That was big money. Let' see – and then we – well, a goal of mine was to go to all of the libraries and convince them that they needed better accessibility for DeafBlind patrons – closed-captioned TV, zoom text, things like that. But I wasn't able to do that. Then another thing was to try to go to the police department and educate them what to do if a DeafBlind person was in trouble – how they needed to hire interpreters and that didn't work either. There were so many things I just couldn't do. I finally said I just wanted to go to the Legislature and testify. I remember Mary (***Hartnett***) wanting to know what I would say and I said, “I can't tell you. I just need to be there.” She said, “OK.” I was really excited to testify on behalf of DBSM. I remember Mary watching me when I got there but I paid her no mind. I was with an interpreter – I can't remember who – but anyway, there I was at the committee hearing. I was called to testify. I got right up there. I said “hello” to each one of the legislators and I said, “I am here to tell you the truth.” Well, that got their attention. I explained everything – how DeafBlind people need SSP services, just how critical it is to have SSPs for us to be able to interact fully and safely in the community. It was important for going to the store, in part to protect us from other people who maybe wanted to take advantage of us and any number of things. I can't remember all I said. But when I was done, I thanked them all and sat back. Mary was so stunned. We got big money out of that one. Oh, man, I can't even remember how much it was.

[Interview time 19:59:24]
TP: But that's not the only thing you did! You also worked with the State Rehabilitation Council. (***She signs “Board”, but it's a council.***)

LB: Oh, yes.

TP: So how did that happen?

LB: OK. Well, first, I had been all over SSB for years and years and I never got any response. So after a while, I just got fed up. I decided to write a letter to the Governor. I typed it out and then I had someone help me revise it. I asked the Governor for an appointment. Well, I heard nothing and nothing, so I decided to contact his assistant. It was a man named John Burns. And I did it by phone which was the first time John had ever experienced a TTY. I introduced myself. I said I was Lynette Boyer, I was DeafBlind, I lived in Elk River, and he said, "I know who you are. You're the one that sent us the letter." Well, we tried to have a dialogue over the TTY, but it was such a challenge. Oh. It was the typing, the language we were using was so different. We just kept misunderstanding each other. So I finally said, "Email me." And I gave him my email address. Then, later, he sent me this email full of language and words that I totally didn't understand. I had a woman come over to talk to me and explain what some of the terminology was so I could write an appropriate response. After a few exchanges back and forth, John finally got it. That was the first time they had dealt with a DeafBlind person who used ASL (***American Sign Language***) as a first language. They'd only dealt with people who were strongly English based. So the Governor decided to appoint me to the State Rehabilitation Council. I think that was in 2000 – I'm not quite sure. No, no, no, no. That was back in – that was way back. That was in 1996. Somewhere around there – I can't quite remember when I started on the Council. I was pretty excited about it, although the first time I went to a Council meeting, I was a little bit awkward. Everything was conducted in English. They all talked at the same time. It was so hard. There was so much education I had to do and I finally just hired Paul Deeming from DBSM to explain to them (***that***) I was missing everything in the meetings. Paul had to explain how communication could work. They couldn't overlap. They couldn't all talk at the same time or talk so fast that the interpreter couldn't possibly keep up. They got better and better over time. Only one person speaking at a time. Each person identifying themselves before they spoke. It got much better. I served one term and applied and was appointed to a second term. I was about to finish the second term but the Governor couldn't find anyone to replace me. So I volunteered to stay until last year when they finally found a replacement for me. That was Jaime Taylor. But I wanted to keep serving on the DeafBlind committee for the Council, so I asked the chairperson if they wanted me to still serve on the committee. They said, "Absolutely." I think they really wanted me to stay on in part because Jaime is so new and she just doesn't have the leadership skills that I do yet. So I'm serving as the chairperson for that committee and Jaime is learning. But she is still really new, so I will continue to support her. We're coming up for the time for re-appointment in this fall and I haven't quite decided yet whether I'm going to continue to serve or not. They want me to stay. I don't know. I do appreciate it though. The person who's the chair of that committee works with SSB (***State Services for the Blind***) on issues related to employment, communication on the job, all kinds of issues. Although less and less, these days.

[Interview time 25:32:03]
TP: If you decide to stay, what are your goals?

LB: You mean if I stay another year?

TP: Yes.

LB: Oh, I don't know, I wouldn't decide that really until next year. Let me think. What are the issues we worked on? Well most of the Council – see our focus has been on a survey. We identified three areas of focus. The first is hearing aids/cochlear implants. The second is employment and things related to communication with SSB. We decided eventually to focus on that communication with SSB and employment issues. The communication thing was mostly related to communication through phone and through email. For example, people would be out of the office and not responding to email. Well, there's no way that DeafBlind people would know that person was gone. They were upset that emails weren't being returned. So we need to be told directly about things like that. Let's see, we focused on that kind of communication. It's a little confusing. Employment, I think we're done with that. And then in the fall – oh, man. I need some help. Cori, Alan – what is it we're working on in the fall? Just so many things. Oh, right, right, right. The simplified English thing. OK, OK. Well, we're starting on a project pretty soon with SSB just to get all their materials simplified. They're supposed to send us the language they're going to use in their documentation and in all their materials and then we will take it and simplify the written English on it just so that it's a little bit easier to understand. But we're also going to have it in ASL. In my opinion we need to keep the English version because we can use that for more formal things like giving things to the Legislature and then the ASL version can be there for a DeafBlind person to read if they don't understand something on the English side of the page. The important thing is to get the language simplified and accessible. But as I said, we're waiting for SSB to send the materials and I guess we'll get started after that.

[Interview time 29:17:13]
TP: Obviously you are busy with a lot of different things, but you have also gotten some awards for your work. I want to know more about your Hall of Fame award in 2008.

LB: Yes, yes. I got an award from MCDHH - oh, oh you mean the Hall of Fame award, the one from the School for the Deaf in Faribault? Well, they heard about the work I had done over the years with MDBA and MCDHH, being on the AADB board, working as the treasurer, testifying at the legislature, being an outspoken advocate for people. My husband was the one who knew. He gave them all this information behind my back. And then Mary Hartnett was sending letters to Sharon Plett and a bunch of other people in support and finally they decided to give me the Hall of Fame award. I'm very grateful. I think altogether I have ten – I got one from MDCHH for never missing a Commission meeting. Then MDBA gave me their Honorary award. They also gave me an award thanking me for all of my years of service. That was a great award. It's really nice. A big plaque written in Braille. And the American Association of the DeafBlind, AADB, gave me this enormous award. There's so many. Let' see. The Ted Mahoney Certificate. And MCDHH – well Mary – gave me one for the leadership role I'd taken on the Commission.

[Interview time 32:09:05]
TP: You have been and continue to be an activist even now. What advice do you have for others in the community who also want to become activists and advocates? What is your advice for them?

LB: You mean advice for the community? The DeafBlind community? Hearing people? Deaf people?

[Interview time 32:41:03]

TP: Yes, DeafBlind, Deaf people. If they want to see things get better, or to improve and so on, but maybe they're fearful or nervous, how can you help them know what to do? What do you want them to know?

LB: Well, the advice I give people is that they need to show our need for support. People don't understand the needs of the DeafBlind community – the need for financial support and that the exchange can be mutual. We can all benefit. And I know how hard life can be for people who are DeafBlind, but still I try to encourage them as best I can. I heard that at the meeting two months ago, a lot of people were expressing some fear. I couldn't go because my husband was sick so I had to miss the meeting, but MDBA decided to host a leadership workshop. I had to stay home, but I heard that the workshop was focused on trying to convince people that the members could no longer afford to be passive. They had to take some leadership in the organization. There were budget cuts on the table. The organization might close. And I know people were scared, so that's why they offered the training. The President told me later, even though they were scared, it went well. Fingers crossed, they'll be able to take things from here. But we're not sure what's going to happen next. I don't know.

[Interview time 35:17:02]

TP: If they're afraid, what can you tell them to help them?

LB: OK. Well, mostly I tell people, "If you're afraid, the biggest thing you need to do is – don't be ashamed of being new. It's OK to be afraid. It's OK to not quite know what you're doing. There are people available to take you through the process – to help you learn. But you have to reach out, to ask." Some DeafBlind people are just so terrified that they're going to look stupid or dumb or embarrass themselves, that they absolutely won't commit to the process. I tell them, "When I first started back in 1979, I was a nervous wreck, but I didn't care because I knew I needed to learn this stuff. It was too important to be embarrassed about it. I asked people for help, for patience, and it all went from there, and it turned out just fine." I say, "If you need help, ask for it. There are people who can help you. Ask me. I can help." Because DeafBlind people think maybe they're not smart enough to advocate for themselves. But I tell them the same thing I tell the legislators – "DeafBlind people are very smart and we are not playing games!" That gets their attention for sure.

[Interview time 37:01:15]

TP: Wonderful, just wonderful. Thank you very much for your time. This was a wonderful interview. Thank you.

LB: You are welcome. Thank you for asking me to come for the interview. I enjoyed it.

[Interview time 37:25:00]

TP: Thank you again.