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**An Oral History of Curtis Decker
Conducted by Joe Tropea**

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Abstract: In this oral history, attorney, activist, and advocate Curtis Decker recounts a life of civic and political engagement. Born in Albany, New York, Decker attended Hamilton College and Cornell Law School. He came to Baltimore as an Americorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer in the early 1970s. In this interview Decker discusses his work with the Baltimore Legal Aid Bureau, H.E.L.P. Resource Project for Abused and Neglected Children, Maryland Disability Law Center, and his experience as Executive Director of the National Disability Rights Network. He also discusses in great detail his experience in the mid-to-late 1980s working to pass a Gay and Lesbian Rights Bill for Baltimore City. Additionally, Decker discusses his collaboration with Dr. B. Frank Polk, who established Johns Hopkins Hospital's AIDS outpatient clinic in 1984 and who worked closely with Decker in establishing an AIDS research project.

Note on Oral History: Oral history is a methodology of gathering, preserving, and sharing the voices and memories of individuals and communities. As primary material, it documents personal reflections, commentary, and recollections, and is not intended to present a verified or “complete” history of events.

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An Oral History of Curtis Decker
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Curtis Decker was interviewed on Thursday, February 15, 2018, by Joe Tropea and filmed by Daniel Goodrich. The interview took place at Decker's office at the National Disability Rights Network, 820 First St. NE, STE 740, Washington, D20022. This transcript has been reviewed by Curtis Decker and has been lightly edited for clarity.

Joe Tropea [00:00:15] Okay. Today is Thursday, February 15th, 2018. And I'm here with Curtis Decker in his office in Washington, DC. Mr. Decker, do you consent to this interview being taped and recorded?

Curtis Decker [00:00:29] I do.

Joe Tropea [00:00:30] Thank you. Would you please introduce yourself as you would introduce yourself to a stranger? Your title, however you—

Curtis Decker [00:00:39] I'm Curtis Decker and I'm currently the executive director of the National Disability Rights Network, also known as NDRN. And we are a membership association of legally based advocacy agencies around the country created by Congress to represent people with disabilities, and the membership association here in Washington monitors progress in Congress and the administration to ensure that these programs continue and grow. And we also provide a lot of training and technical assistance to the member agencies around the country. There happens to be one in every state and territory, so it's a very comprehensive network.

Joe Tropea [00:01:22] I will ask you more about that toward the end of the interview. But let's go all the way back. Where did you grow up?

Curtis Decker [00:01:29] I grew up in Albany, New York, back in the '40s, and spent most of my early life, all my early life there, and then ended up going to college out in the western part of New York, Hamilton College. And then on to Cornell Law School.

Joe Tropea [00:01:49] And when did you come to Baltimore? And what brought you to Baltimore City?

Curtis Decker [00:01:56] Well, it was an interesting sort of set of events. When I graduated Cornell Law School in 1969, I literally needed another year of deferment to avoid participating in the Vietnam War. And at the time there was a program called VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America, that were looking for attorneys to be assigned to various legal agencies around the country. And I joined and they sent me to Baltimore, Maryland, which I had basically never heard of. And I had actually taken the New York bar after graduating law school, thinking that I would clearly live in New York and, most likely New York City, and do a legal career there. That didn't happen. After a year as a VISTA volunteer at Baltimore Legal Aid Bureau, it was quite enlightening to me to see the issues that were coming into that agency.

Curtis Decker [00:03:04] And I became very involved with representing low-income people on a variety of issues in the poverty arena, food stamps, health benefits, welfare benefits. And I got very involved in helping organize welfare recipients to, so to speak for themselves, in the Maryland legislature and other places, and got quite excited about those issues, which I had not, by the way, been trained at all at Cornell Law School. That was a very conservative, corporate-oriented law school. So this was a totally different view of the world than I had been trained for.

Joe Tropea [00:03:44] I'll jump ahead a little bit, but I want to come back to law school. Did you have to take the Maryland bar?

Curtis Decker [00:03:50] I did not. I was able to—when I needed to be in court in Maryland, there was an ability to be waived in four specific cases. So much of my work was administrative hearings

and, as I said, organizing. It morphed into lobbying in Annapolis on legislation. And so when I did have a case to go to court, I could be what they would call “waived in” for that particular case.

Joe Tropea [00:04:19] So at what point in your life did you become interested in studying the law?

Curtis Decker [00:04:25] Well, again, frankly, it was sort of serendipitous. I went to Hamilton and was a history major and I was pretty much, what do you do next? And I looked at potentially going to school for history and decided that I'd apply to law school. So there wasn't any great burning desire to be a lawyer. I just sort of thought that was the next natural step.

Joe Tropea [00:04:50] To someone who doesn't know much about the legal profession, how would you describe the area of law that you've specialized in throughout your career?

Curtis Decker [00:05:01] Well, it's an area of the law that I thought was slow to evolve. As I said earlier, at Cornell, it was all very much about corporate law, trusts and estates, tax, business.

Curtis Decker [00:05:15] There were no courses in those days on sort of the social issues. I'm happy to say that that has changed dramatically over the last 30, 40 years. And many law schools will have clinics on poverty, on LGBT issues, on women's issues. So that I think lawyers today, law students today, are exposed to the areas of law that I now work in. So I really consider myself incredibly lucky that I had sort of set off into a different direction than I had thought I would go into. And it kind of exposed me to these issues that I had some inkling that I liked. I had volunteered in the summer when I was in college to work with kids in poverty areas in Albany. But this, this work really resonated with me and I felt really connected to it. Which is why, when at the end of my year in VISTA, the Legal Aid Bureau offered me a job, I accepted, and I live in Baltimore part time in this day.

Joe Tropea [00:06:21] I didn't plan to ask you this, but I won't forgive myself if I don't because you mentioned the Vietnam War. Were you aware when you were at Cornell of Father Daniel Berrigan? Was he a presence on campus?

Curtis Decker [00:06:34] Absolutely. In all honesty, it wasn't, as I said, it wasn't—my joining VISTA was not an altruistic effort. It was clearly done to avoid the draft. And, cause I didn't think that was a good place for me to be. And I think there's a certain irony that it actually changed my life dramatically, and I am spending the rest of my career doing that kind of work by having had the VISTA experience.

Joe Tropea [00:07:06] Were you the type of person who went to anti-war demonstrations?

Curtis Decker [00:07:13] Initially yes, I remember back in 1969, '70, there was a lot of demonstrations about the war. And I was in Baltimore, so I came over to a couple of demonstrations on the mall in those days.

Joe Tropea [00:07:28] I'll leave that area now. I wanted to ask you, at what point in your life did you come out as a gay man?

Curtis Decker [00:07:34] Well, there's various points in one's life I think that that you deal with that issue. I happen to be one of those people who knew I was gay very early. But it was the '50s in upstate New York. There was no, there was nothing in the media or the press. I think it's interesting to see how people today are just totally exposed to the whole range of issues on LGBT, in the media, wherever. So that was a struggle. Very frightening. Very scary. Sort of realizing that you were different. Not really knowing what that meant and being very afraid of that being a very stigmatizing part of your life. And so you sort of hid that as much as you could. And sort of the things you do to, you know, ingratiate yourself with your peers—is interesting. I ended up being the president of the senior class at Albany Senior High School. But it was a whole time very, very nervous, scared about that. I probably actually came out officially after I left, when I came to Baltimore.

Curtis Decker [00:08:49] And for me, I connected that starting to work and realizing that I was a person of worth and not in that sort of very competitive environment of college and law school, realized that this was something I could identify with and be public about. And of course, as so many people who do that, when you finally do that, all your friends say, Well finally, thank God, we always knew. So that was that. And then I think the other point in one's coming out experience is how you deal with your family. Because I lived in Baltimore and my family lived in Albany, I didn't really talk to them 'til I was 36 years old. So, how one deals with one's family I think is always an interesting issue for, for people in the LGBT community.

Joe Tropea [00:09:39] How did you find coming out in Baltimore? Was it difficult? Was it, was there a welcoming community?

Curtis Decker [00:09:48] Well, I've been fortunate in my life and having a lot of friends of all types. And so it was, it wasn't that difficult. As I said, it was almost—people were, you know, claimed they already, they knew, and they were glad that I finally admitted it. So it wasn't that—I didn't have friends who shunned me or dropped me. And again, I didn't deal with my family right away. So, I mean, that can always be a difficult time for some folks who find their families not very welcoming to that issue. So I didn't have that experience.

Joe Tropea [00:10:20] Was Mount Vernon the first neighborhood that you lived in in Baltimore?

Curtis Decker [00:10:21] No, not really. VISTA required you to live with a family. And so I actually, for the first seven weeks of my time in Baltimore, lived off of Pennsylvania Avenue on a little street called Woodrow Street, and moved in with an African American family. And so the recent riots in Baltimore around the Freddie Gray example was right in the neighborhood that I had lived in. So that was sort of interesting, resonant for me.

Curtis Decker [00:10:57] From there, we were given a house in West Baltimore that had been bought to tear down to extend the highway. And then the city, the activists stopped the highway and so there were these houses available and the city gave that to the VISTA volunteers. And then I moved to Bolton Hill for about three years and then eventually bought my house in Mount Vernon in 1974.

Joe Tropea [00:11:25] I wanted to ask you about—so before I do that though, so you probably were in a neighborhood where you saw the aftereffects of the '68 Uprising or Riots, as they called them. I'm assuming this was years after. But you can probably still see the effects of that?

Curtis Decker [00:11:49] Yes, well, remember when I moved in with the family in West Baltimore, that was 1969, a year after the riots. And Pennsylvania Avenue had been one of the affected neighborhoods. So I, very early in my coming to Baltimore, saw the results of the riots. And then even in 1974, many people told me that I was, you know, really making a big mistake buying a house in Mount Vernon because it was downtown and, you know, the city was crumbling and what was I going to do?

Curtis Decker [00:12:20] And I sort of resisted that, you know, attempt. The house happened to be one of those unique Baltimore townhouses that still survive and I decided that I would take the chance. And so I had bought it and I'm still there.

Joe Tropea [00:12:35] And how do you feel like Mount Vernon has changed since you, since you were first there? My understanding is that it was kind of a hub for alternative lifestyle cultures. Hippies hung out on Read Street, you know, I don't know when the club Hippo opened.

Curtis Decker [00:12:58] I do.

Joe Tropea [00:12:59] I don't remember which year, but it was kind of the center of LGBTQ life for Baltimore City.

Curtis Decker [00:13:05] Well, exactly. I mean, the city, the neighborhood itself I think has been relatively stable. Things open, things close. And it doesn't seem to get that umph that the Inner Harbor has. But it also doesn't have, you know, that many serious problems. It was seen, and I think, today, still sort of has a reputation of being the gay neighborhood, which I don't really think so. I think many, many gays have moved out. There was an epidemic of my friends moving to the county and getting farms. Now the bars still exist. And so that sort of still gives the cachet that it's the gay neighborhood. But I mean, I learned a valuable lesson in getting involved in some local politics in that people thought, you know, you could run as a gay person and win. And it turns out, no. There are high rises for the elderly. The way the city is districted, it's connected to a lot of, you know, African American neighborhoods. And so it just doesn't—people think it's the, it's the gay neighborhood. I don't think that's the case anymore.

Joe Tropea [00:14:16] I wanted to ask you about discrimination against gays and lesbians back in the '70s and '80s. You've left some materials at the Historical Society. One in particular that documents the support of the Gay Rights bill for Baltimore City from 1988. There were some really horrible stories, case studies in that report. Things landlords did to people, state hospitals, the way they discriminated on job applications. Can you talk about how real discrimination felt at that point? Back in the '70s, you were there in the '70s and '80s.

Curtis Decker [00:15:03] Yes. Well, I think, you know, initially I think there was always just sort of that undercurrent of fear about discrimination accompanied with a whole, you know, lifestyle of clubs and bars, you know, that, that people gravitate. So it was a very schizophrenic kind of existence of having venues and places where you felt comfortable. But at the same time, sort of looking over your shoulder to whether your employer or your neighborhood or whatever, you know, at any time could turn on you. I was fortunate in working in legal aid in a very progressive area. So that really wasn't a concern of mine personally. But when we were, began to do that work, I tried to document discrimination, to make the case to, in this case, the city council people, you know, trying to get people to come forward and talk about what they'd experienced. Because you really do need those specific stories to, you know, to resonate with people who are very concerned about, you know, taking a stand that would actually, you know, possibly damage their careers. I mean, that's still the case today in Congress and other places where, without those real stories, you don't make that much progress. And sometimes even with the stories, such as what just happened in terms of gun violence, you still can't get many policymakers to go do the right thing for fear of losing their position.

Joe Tropea [00:16:35] So you sort of alluded to the Baltimore police being in the news a lot lately. Do you recall what the relationship may be in the Mount Vernon neighborhood or with a gay community at large with the Baltimore Police Department? Were there issues?

Curtis Decker [00:16:53] Yes, I think there were issues. I think there was, there were always, you know, I think like any minority community, the concerns about it: Are they there to protect you or are they there to harass you? And so that kind of dilemma is, do you call? What will you get? What will be their position, if you call them, because you've been mugged or beaten or bashed?

Curtis Decker [00:17:17] And will they be the bashers? So I think that kind of, I think that existed all through the '70s and I think to this day. And the training of police are now, especially now today it's more about transgendered issues, I think.

Curtis Decker [00:17:31] But, you know, making sure the police are not letting their personal feelings interfere with their obligation to protect people.

Joe Tropea [00:17:42] Can you talk about throughout your career how you kind of shifted from the type of legal work that you started doing and how you graduated toward LGBT rights?

Curtis Decker [00:17:57] Yes. I mean, it is an interesting parallel universe. I mean, I went from representing poor people at Legal Aid to them taking on a child abuse and neglect project, and

became pretty vocal and well-known in Maryland as looking at the protection of children who were abused and neglected by their families. And then I was asked to take over the disability program. So I've been representing all of these groups that I really wasn't a part of. I didn't have a disability. I wasn't abused as a child and I wasn't poor or Black.

Curtis Decker [00:18:30] And so I think it became important to me to also get involved in my own community and sort of take some of the skills that I had developed as an advocate and a lawyer and as a lobbyist to see what I could bring that to bear on something that directly affected me.

Joe Tropea [00:18:49] So the document that I referred to earlier, which I believe is dated '88, how many years of work do you think that—like how long had you been working on that document before it was presented in '88?

Curtis Decker [00:19:07] Well, quite some time, because we actually had an iteration in 1984 where we had a bill in the City Council. Mayor Schaefer was in office at the time and it went nowhere. And so we got a pretty bad drubbing in 1984.

Curtis Decker [00:19:23] And so there was a four-year history of reexamining what had gone wrong and what we could do differently. And some of it was serendipitous and that Mayor Schmoke was elected, and he very clearly said that he would support this. We had Mary Pat Clark became the president of the City Council, and she was a good advocate.

Curtis Decker [00:19:45] And then I came back to the community and said, "I'm willing to commit." By this time, I had moved over to Washington. And so I was working here and set it up.

Joe Tropea [00:19:57] By 1988?

Curtis Decker [00:19:59] By '86. I mean, '88 is when the bill passed, but it was a several year run-up. Every piece of legislation usually has you know, many, many years. I've worked on some legislation with three or four years before it's actually come to fruition. So I said that I would be willing to commit to coming back to Baltimore on a fairly regular basis to sort of lead the lobbying effort.

Curtis Decker [00:20:22] But we had other people who were out there looking for the cases and the stories and trying to put together the document that would hopefully make the case that this was something that was really necessary and that people were really being impacted by this.

Joe Tropea [00:20:40] So I kind of wanted to get into the weeds of that particular piece of legislation from '84 to '88. So on a local level, you were working with particular politicians and I guess I kind of want to ask for your recollections of specific ones. I know some of them were sort of in favor of the legislation. Others had to be dragged. And I mean, if we take, like, Mimi DiPietro¹ as an example, was just against it, like, you know, not afraid to say how against it he was.

[00:21:21] Indeed. And Mimi was an interesting character. I remember him standing on the floor saying, "We are going to—If we pass this bill, we're going to turn this city into San Francisco." Of course, there are a lot of people saying, How bad would that be? And I remember he actually said, "And those San Francisco gays are bad gays. Our gays are good gays. And we do not want to, you know, turn this city into San Francisco." Its like this gorgeous, beautiful city that's really wealthy. And so but we weren't ever gonna get Mimi. Mimi was always going to be, you know, that, that representative of that whole, you know, older, you know, white group. So that was probably someone that we'd have never really focused on.

Curtis Decker [00:22:06] But we had you know, we had some very interesting discussions with different people. Iris Reeves was there at the time. And there is a progressive African American woman who was terrific on civil rights and we couldn't get her for the longest time. And finally,

¹ Dominic "Mimi" DiPietro

there was this amazing moment when she said, “Well, it's not civil rights.” And I think it hit me that she saw civil rights as a Black person of color issue. And somehow we were appropriating that issue. And I think either I or someone said, “Well, OK, Iris, what about human rights?” And she said, “Fine. Call it human rights. I'll vote for it.”

Curtis Decker [00:22:53] And we did. And she did. So it was that kind of trying to figure out where the opposition was. I mean, you had people—I've always used to say we were brilliant in uniting three very disparate factions: Orthodox Jewish community, the Black Muslims, and evangelicals, three groups that probably don't speak to each other. But on this issue, they all came together and there was a hearing on the bill.

Curtis Decker [00:23:20] We put together a hearing within very tight, you know, 10, 12, 15 witnesses that would sort of talk about specific points and specific issues. And we had one father who was terrific. He had twin sons who were fraternal. And one was gay and one was not. And he testified about how, why would he treat one of his sons different than the other? And why should one son not have the protections that his other son had? And I thought that was pretty effective.

Curtis Decker [00:23:51] But the other side had about 150 witnesses. They were lined out the door because it was one religious group after another coming in saying this was just the most horrible thing in the world. It was going to ruin the city and life in general. So I thought we were much better organized than that. And in fact, you know, what we said to people is, You don't think there's discrimination against this population? Listen to these hundred and fifty people who just stood up and talked about how horrible they were and how much they would like to do X, Y and Z to them. They just made our case for us. And people like Kweisi Mfume was very nervous. He had the Black Muslims, [they] picketed on his lawn. I mean, that was an incredible amount of pressure. I was somewhat surprised when I reached out to the Jewish community, which I had fairly good contacts with.

Curtis Decker [00:24:43] And, you know, generally speaking, the Jewish community is pretty progressive and liberal and in other cities they were very strong on helping pass Gay Rights bills. And what I discovered was that Baltimore happened to be the second biggest entry point for immigrants from Russia, which are incredibly Orthodox Jews. And so the Baltimore Jewish community has a very, very huge Orthodox population. And the larger Jewish community said to me, We support you, but we don't want to split our community, and we need to stay together as a united community to protect Israel. And so we can't go out on a limb. And I was like, totally shocked. And so what we had to do is just go around to the more liberal synagogues and get individual letters from individual rabbis to support the bill. But I couldn't get the Baltimore Jewish Council or some of the, you know, the umbrella organizations that would normally be out front on any other kind of progressive issue because of this—under this very huge influence of the Orthodox community in Baltimore.

Curtis Decker [00:25:59] One of the really interesting stories I thought we did in the process is just three readings. And if you get through the first two readings, the third reading is basically pro forma because they've already committed and made their—taken their chances. If they're going to get clobbered for voting for this, they've already sort of staked out their premise. I went in on Monday morning to Mary Pat Clarke's office to just check in. And I was going to come back to DC and then come back late that evening for the vote with the final vote.

Curtis Decker [00:26:32] And then we were gonna have a big party at the Hippo to celebrate because it was a done deal. And I came in in the morning and she said, “Don't leave. The Archbishop has weighed in big time and he's trying to marshal last minute opposition.” The two fellows, Bill Cunningham and Jody Landers, were over in northeast Baltimore, have been jumped on by the evangelicals. They're waffling. We need to spend the day really fighting these forces.

Curtis Decker [00:27:04] So that day that was going to be just a simple little pro forma vote turned into quite a very anxious and very busy time to try to hold these folks together so that they would not waver because the pressure was intense.

Joe Tropea [00:27:22] You mentioned Mary Pat, who's still on the scene in Baltimore, still involved. And I was kind of somewhat shocked reading through this. You know, how many names are still, you know, Carl Stokes only recently got out [of politics].

Curtis Decker [00:27:35] And Ricki Specter—

Joe Tropea [00:27:36] Ricki Specter is still on the scene. Do you recall anything in particular about dealing with them?

Curtis Decker [00:27:44] Oh, yes. Well, Ricki Specter, again, was under incredible pressure from the Jewish community. That's her district up there in northwest Baltimore. And she was very, very reluctant, scared, nervous about going out there. And so there was a lot of effort, people you know, a lot of people in the Jewish community, LGBT people who were Jewish, going to her and trying to get her over the line and resist this really serious pressure that she got.

Curtis Decker [00:28:13] The sort of, the funny story is that the City Council meets at six o'clock, which in May was pretty still, you know, very bright. Still, the sunset wasn't till like 8:00. And the Orthodox community came to Ricki and said, This is Shavuot, a very obscure, I think, Jewish holiday. And this is an abomination that you are going to vote for this Gay Rights bill on this important Jewish holiday. And so here Ricki comes into Mary Pat's office and says, "We cannot vote tonight on this bill."

Curtis Decker [00:28:55] And so what we did is they convened at six o'clock, adjourned and came back at nine o'clock at sunset and voted on the bill. So we didn't vote on the bill on Shavuot.

Curtis Decker [00:29:09] So thirty years later, every time I hear the word "Shavuot" I kind of like break out in a sweat because that was another last-ditch effort to try to derail this bill.

Curtis Decker [00:29:21] And so it was those kinds of—that's sort of the interesting sort of stories that probably don't show up in any kind of writings about all of the twists and turns that something like this takes.

Joe Tropea [00:29:31] And that was on the third reader?

Curtis Decker [00:29:33] On the third reader. You know, this was—so, again, we said, What do we do? And I said, "Well, come back to my house. Everybody just come back up to Read Street." [We'd] bring the food that we were all going to have at the Hippo and hang out, you know, go back at 9:00, have the vote, and then go to the Hippo at 10 o'clock and have this big party. And that's what we did.

Joe Tropea [00:29:54] Do you recall how the vote went?

Curtis Decker [00:29:56] Off the top of my head. Well, we didn't get Tim Murphy, who never voted. We didn't get Mimi. I know I think we had the three—

Joe Tropea [00:30:10] Can I stop you? This just gave me a message that it has stopped automatically. Why would it do that?

Curtis Decker [00:30:17] It got bored with me, if you didn't. Could I get some water?

Joe Tropea [00:30:23] Yeah, I'll bring you that.

Curtis Decker [00:30:26] Yeah, and I don't think I remember exactly. I'll have to look at that. I remember certain ones we didn't get. We never were gonna get.

pause in recording

Curtis Decker [00:30:46] Is this okay?

Joe Tropea [00:30:48] Yeah, yeah, it's great. I think we're good.

Joe Tropea [00:30:52] Alright, so I won't ask you about how the vote went. But there was a celebration after?

Curtis Decker [00:30:58] Yes. One thing I wanted to—just to give you some background and how I got sort of involved in this, because I think it's an important part of the story. As you know, you know, in the late '70s, '79, '80, we began to hear about this disease that was affecting gay men. And at first it was almost, you know, a flip kind of thing, oh, gays have their own cancer. And then it grew and grew and became really devastating. And it started to happen in Baltimore as well. Now, we were a little bit out of the mainstream of New York, in San Francisco, but it started to affect a lot of the people that I knew. And I was approached by a doctor, Frank Polk, who came to me in 1982 and said, "I know that you're very well-known in the gay community. And I have a research grant at Hopkins and I need to find 1,200 gay men to be a part of this study."

Curtis Decker [00:32:04] And I basically just laughed and said, "Well, there's no way you're going to get 1,200 gay men to come to Johns Hopkins and admit they're gay and participate in this study." Because we had just had an experience about a year before where the gay community center decided to have our very first fundraiser, and we were able to secure the brand new recently opened Aquarium². And we were very excited about having this first-ever fundraiser and sell tickets. And a lot of us went out and got all of our friends to come. And people converged on the Aquarium for this great event.

Curtis Decker [00:32:44] And the press was there with klieg lights and cameras. And about a third of the people who bought the tickets left and didn't go because they didn't want to take the chance of being seen by, or be filmed, or be on the press, which [was] another example of the kind of discrimination that the community felt, that they couldn't even be comfortable going to this fundraiser.

Curtis Decker [00:33:08] So based on that, you know, I thought that Dr. Polk was on a fool's errand, frankly, but I joined with him and we began a two-year journey to get people to come to Hopkins. We—many stories there, but we finally did it. I remember going to the Hippo on a Saturday night with Dr. Polk and asking them to turn off the music at 11 o'clock and saying, "This horrible thing is destroying our community. You've got to join this study." And people would scream, Turn the music on! You're bringing us down, we want to dance! And, you know, and so it was, it was really tough, but we got them there. But the point of the story is that dealing there and I demanded there be an advisory board for this study because I didn't trust Hopkins myself. It had sort of a reputation. By having worked with Legal Aid, the Black community thought that Hopkins was this experimental, often, you know, not very open place. And having that experience, I said, I want to make sure we have some control over Hopkins as we come in and give them all of this incredible personal identifying information. But as a result of that, I was appointed to Governor Hughes's AIDS task force and then later on by Governor Schaefer, who then fired me and then reappointed me.

[00:34:23] But through that experience is when I saw a lot more of the discrimination and of the HIV/gay relationship. And that's when I decided that we needed to have a civil rights bill in the city. And that's when I got involved in 1984. But it came out of my experience of having dealt with the HIV crisis.

Joe Tropea [00:34:42] So I want to ask you about that study. I did read a little bit about that. So it started, you recall the year it started?

² Baltimore's National Aquarium

Curtis Decker [00:34:48] I certainly do. As I said, I had started working with Frank in 1982. We did the first visit in 1984, and I just went to my sixtieth visit back in December. So this study, which was a four-year study, has been so incredibly successful that the NIH has continued to fund it every four years. And so it's been going on for over 30 years.

Curtis Decker [00:35:14] But many, again, many interesting stories. At the end of the fourth year when we thought we were ending, we were going to have, again, another party to celebrate the fact that—Hopkins was actually quite amazed at the attendance, the compliance was higher than any other research study that they had ever conducted. So they were quite blown away by that.

Curtis Decker [00:35:36] And we decided to have this party. I was chairman of the advisory board. We were in Turner Auditorium at Hopkins. And we were giving out prizes and I'm on the microphone talking about how this is a great tribute to the gay community and how dedicated, devoted we are to try to, you know, take responsibility and deal with this issue. And what I don't know is that that's being piped downstairs into the area where we're gonna go downstairs and have refreshments. And all of the caterers and staff were down there hearing all of this talk about gay, AIDS, HIV. And when we came downstairs for the refreshments, these people had gone out, literally run out into the community, and bought every imaginable pair of gloves that they could find.

Curtis Decker [00:36:25] And when we came down to have chicken wings and carrot sticks, the staff was all standing there with every kind of imaginable glove you could have, which initially was funny until it kind of hit us about what was going on. And I ended up going to the vice pres—the president—of Hopkins, Steve Muller³ at the time, and said, "This is not going to happen. You know, if you get all this federal money and we will kill this study if you don't fire people, if you don't do something about protecting this community in any of the things you're doing." Because those were the days when orderlies would come in—if someone was in a hospital and had AIDS, they would literally push the cart with the food into the room and not go in to the room. So that's what sort of got me into this whole issue about the incredible discrimination. And of course, people assumed if you were gay, you had AIDS, and people made that connection all the time. So there was a very strong connection between the AIDS epidemic and the need for LGBT protections.

Joe Tropea [00:37:34] I want to ask you more about the public's general misunderstanding and all that disinformation. But it's interesting. So you had this first event at the, at the Aquarium, and a third of the crowd leaves. But by the end of four years, you're having an event at Hopkins and things had changed to the extent that at least people felt comfortable staying. Was it that the press—was it more insular because it was protected by Hopkins and done more on campus than a public space?

Curtis Decker [00:38:06] Possibly. But I guess I would say we were terrified. Our friends were dying— (emotional pause). So I think that was a catalyst for getting people together.

Joe Tropea [00:38:30] So there, I believe I was in high school at this time and I remember the crazy things people, that the misunderstanding of how the disease worked. Do you feel that—how long from the time that the community notices people are starting to die, how long did it take for people to really gain any understanding? So you have a catering staff that runs out to buy gloves and is in hysterics over what they've heard. How long did it take before people started being reasonable and trying to understand? On Johns Hopkins campus, an institution of higher learning where you think awareness might be higher than in other places.

Curtis Decker [00:39:25] Well, I would argue that to this very day that we haven't gotten there fully. I mean, when I was working on the Americans with Disabilities Act here in Washington, 1989, '90, there was a big push to not cover HIV food workers. And the line they were using was "blood in the salad." If the Americans with Disabilities Act protects HIV-infected food workers, they'll cut themselves, bleed in the salad, and everybody else will get AIDS. So that was 1989, '90. And now we're, you know—and, you know, to this day, I don't think we have full understanding. HIV is still a

³ Steven Muller was president of Johns Hopkins University from 1972 to 1990.

very stigmatized—even though it's now become a chronic disease. And, you know, the chances of, you know—and people don't die from it, et cetera, et cetera. There's still, I think, are fairly, even within the gay community, there is still the stigma of being positive versus being negative.

Joe Tropea [00:40:33] I want to go back to the study just to sort of place it in the context of the field of research. You say it's still going on. I imagine it wasn't the first major research institution working on AIDS, but it was an important study?

Curtis Decker [00:40:52] It was. Well it was partly, it was called the multi-cohort study. The NIH had funded five centers: New York, LA, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Chicago. And the Pittsburgh-Baltimore, where they were, they said they were trying to look at high incidence cities and low incidence cities to try to see—again, remember, we're in the early '80s. There is, they have not discovered HIV. We have no idea what is causing this thing, there is much less any kind of treatment. And so one of the first things, and I think this study, all these, the five studies contributed to—we were going through the study, we had actually had three visits when Gallo and Montagnier had discovered that it was HIV and that it was bloodborne.

Curtis Decker [00:41:38] So two things happened. One, we didn't need all the other bodily fluids that we were providing. But this was a very stunning moment. And for me, was that Frank Polk came to our advisory board, which I was chairing, and said, "So I have a question to ask you. We have gone back and tested the blood of everybody in this study from the first study, the second visit, the third visit. I know the HIV status of everybody in this study. What do I do with that information?"

Curtis Decker [00:42:11] Now, in retrospect, you know, I think maybe it should have been, oh of course you tell them. But in 1985, when there was no AZT, there was nothing. We didn't really—we were probably one of the first groups in the country that had to think about, what do you do with that information when there's nothing that you can do with it? Now, I would argue in retrospect, the fact that they could have infected more people because we probably—we did take the position that people could ask and we would tell them, but we didn't mandatorily, you know, tell them.

Curtis Decker [00:42:45] One other thing I would say in thinking about this is because, is my, I would have—I would surmise that these 1,200 men who were coming to this study from '84 on, I think that was an empowering experience for them. And so that's what made, I think, more people much more comfortable to come out and then lobby and be open around the civil rights bill. So I think there's a connection there that we went from 1980, when people were afraid to go to an aquarium dance, to 1985 and '86, where people were willing to come out and demonstrate and lobby for a civil rights bill.

Curtis Decker [00:43:27] And, you know, certain people did that on their own. But I think the group of men who participated in the study, you know, maybe not even realizing it. And certainly changed—made me much more of an activist and made me get out there. And I think a lot of other people became more comfortable with being gay by being, participating in the study. So I don't think that was, that wasn't the point of the study. It was definitely a research study for, you know, medical reasons. But I think, and I don't know if we've ever even written about the sort of the empowering of those people by coming forward. And it was an incredibly invasive story. Every aspect of your life is, you know, drug use, sex. Now, it's morphed into almost an aging study about, how do, you know, can you care for yourself as you get older? It's been a remarkable experience.

Joe Tropea [00:44:20] That would be an interesting topic to research.

Curtis Decker [00:44:22] It would actually. I was just thinking about that. I wish someone would go back and said what, how did that impact on the civil rights movement growing out of that horror?

Joe Tropea [00:44:33] Do you recall how far the study's reach was? Was it mostly men from Baltimore, or was it all of Maryland? How far?

Curtis Decker [00:44:40] Well, it actually, it's an interesting question. We had gotten to about 800 of the 1,200, and Frank was the most amazing man, who I loved dearly. He got nervous and so he opened it up to Washington. And so a good third of the study participants are from DC. But again, the compliance, you know, these people schlepping up from DC twice a year with their little bags full of stuff and subjecting themselves to this incredibly invasive—it takes a couple of, several hours, of your time. So that's how we got the full 1,200, because I was, I guess I was right. Getting 1,200 men out of Baltimore was going to be tough.

Joe Tropea [00:45:27] Thank you for sharing all of that. That's an amazing story. Can you tell me about how you think LGBTQ activism has changed from the '80s to today? It's a very general question, but—

Curtis Decker [00:45:44] Well, it's incredibly well-organized and well-funded. I, in the '90s, kind of came on the board of HRC half the time, the Human Rights Campaign. And it was a very small, fledgling organization. And now it's this huge, you know, group with their own building over on 17th Street. And there is, you know, Lambda Legal Defense and Glisson and all kinds of—we do a lot of work with the various transgender associations. So, you know, clearly it's grown. It's organized. It's NGLTF. You know, there's just a whole plethora of LGBT organizations that are working on every level: state, local and federal. And I was very involved in the hate crimes legislation, federal, the Byrd Shepard Act.

Curtis Decker [00:46:31] I was there to make sure disability stayed in the Hate Crimes Act, but obviously worked very closely with all of the gay organizations and also the race organizations to make sure that bill passed, which it did finally. And so it's gone from, you know, sort of a volunteer kind of base to, I think, a very well-organized, well-funded effort. Thank goodness.

Joe Tropea [00:47:00] Have you been active in this struggle for transgender rights? In addition to that I know we're not supposed to get too contemporary in this, but I think it'll be interesting for people in the future reading about how you feel about now. Do you feel like with the current administration transgender rights are in jeopardy?

Curtis Decker [00:47:19] So I can make this historical because this is one of my favorite stories. In 1973, I was at Legal Aid and a person came into my office and said that they were a transgendered person and they had been, they were on Medicaid and they had all of their drugs and hormones and therapy had been paid by Medicaid because it kind of like wasn't really—it was kind of hidden in that Medicaid didn't know that those particular hormones were for that particular issue. But now she wanted to have the surgery, and Medicaid denied it because it was elective surgery.

Curtis Decker [00:48:03] And I took the case and I did a Medicaid appeal in 1973 to say that I thought Medicaid should be able to cover transgendered sexual conversions, transgendered surgery. Probably took them about five seconds to deny it, and I lost.

Curtis Decker [00:48:22] But another important lesson for me was several weeks later, my boss came to me and asked me what was going on in the waiting room. And I went out and this person had gone back to her community, which I didn't really know existed in 1973. And I believe said, "There's a guy at Legal Aid who treated me with respect, listened to me, and fought for me." And all these other people came to me, you know, to talk about their particular issues. And what it taught me then, and I think I carry to this day, is that you don't often have to win your case. You really, especially with, you know, vulnerable people, people who are stigmatized, if you treat them with respect and listen to them and try to help them, that's almost as important as winning.

Curtis Decker [00:49:09] So I am, 20 years later, 30 years later, I came on the board of the Free State Justice, which was the transgender legal clinic. And people asked, around the board meeting, and asked why people were there. And I said, "I'm here for revenge. I want to win that case from 1973 that I lost."

Curtis Decker [00:49:29] And I think that was just fairly recently a case saying that Medicaid had to pay for that surgery. And I think some prisons actually pay for it and the military will pay for it. At least they were. So I got involved with transgender issues inadvertently from the early '70s and as a result of the state. And then I was on the board of, most recently, the Free State Justice, that provides legal services to the transgender community. So I think that's, that sort of seems to be the cutting edge, the new frontier. And certainly with all of the attempts at bathroom bills and like that, that's sort of become the rallying cry for people who are, you know, against these kinds of things. But I also think that's just exactly that. I think it's a way of trying to backtrack on LGBT rights totally by singling out that particular population.

Joe Tropea [00:50:23] So there are still certain southern states, southern states that are, that are fighting things like which bathrooms people can use—

Curtis Decker [00:50:33] Wedding cakes.

Joe Tropea [00:50:35] I wonder to what extent should we be worried about our current administration, which seems to have a retrogressive view of how it should work in the military. Is this something people are worried about?

Curtis Decker [00:50:50] Absolutely. And, well, they should be. About everything. But clearly, in this arena, there are some serious problems. We made great progress in the Obama administration through executive orders, through policies. I was just recently called by the disability divisions that I work with, saying, and I remember talking and saying, "Well, are you getting any direction from the White House about disability?" And they said, "No, no, nothing happening. Oh, they did tell us to take any reference to sexual orientation or transgender to, out of any of our materials."

Curtis Decker [00:51:30] They were going to do a survey on disability. And one of the questions was, are you gay or lesbian or transgendered? And to me, that was, there are various issues about disability and LGBT rights. And I did several LGBT disability forums at the White House under the Obama administration.

Curtis Decker [00:51:50] And now this administration is scrubbing everything that they touch to make sure that this is sort of put away. So I think there's great concern. And then, of course, you know, the whole military transgender thing and, you know, just one thing after another. And certainly the vice president had an incredibly horrible record on these issues.

Curtis Decker [00:52:14] And for people who think it'll be great to see President Trump go, you better be careful what you wish for. Yeah, we're all very concerned about it, which is why some of these civil rights protections are so critical to this day, because we're easily, easily can fall back, I think, into some other bad situations.

Joe Tropea [00:52:37] If we're okay on time, I want to dip back and you mentioned a name that I had meant to ask you about.

Curtis Decker [00:52:43] Sure.

Joe Tropea [00:52:44] It sounded like a much more interesting story. I wanted to ask you about working with then Mayor Schaefer, who of course went on to be Governor. And the particular Baltimore City Council legislation that we had been speaking about, what was it like working with Mayor Schaefer? And you mentioned that at some point he fired you and reappointed you and that sounds like a fascinating story.

Curtis Decker [00:53:07] Well, frankly, working, we didn't really work with Mayor Schaefer on the bill. He was just totally against it and not, and you know, as a single man, I mean, the stories were legion for years about the fact that he, in fact, was a closeted gay man. And I think for me, it was

like, I don't care. I need him. I don't need him to be gay. I don't need to be out. I need him to support this bill and he wouldn't.

Curtis Decker [00:53:34] So it pretty much, you know, and it wasn't critical because what happens in any of this legislative arena, if a member of Congress, a city councilman, a legislator, if they think they're going to take a very hard vote on something that's really going to potentially damage their survival and it's not going to pass, why do it? It's just, it's a no brainer in their DNA that, you know, if it passes, then at least I've gone out on a plank and something's happened.

Curtis Decker [00:54:13] But if it's not going to pass, why am I, you know, jeopardizing my career and having the mayor, then Mayor Schaefer, against it? We knew he wouldn't sign it if it passed. So that, that all those people on the fence, I'm not touching it. Now, it totally turned around when we had Mayor Schmoke, because when Mayor Schmoke said, "I'll sign a bill if you bring it to me," that gave us and them the ability to say, This can happen. So now your vote really is critical. And that's, at least for the middle-ground people, you know, that's having that leadership is incredible.

Curtis Decker [00:54:51] So maybe Schaefer was a serious, serious detriment to us in 1984 and then he becomes the governor. And I've always said somewhat facetiously, but true, that this is a man who hated, didn't care about social services, really didn't care about education, didn't really care about health. He cared about building stuff and, you know, the Inner Harbor. And so what does he do?

Curtis Decker [00:55:13] He gets to be the governor who does education, health and, you know, social services, all the things he's least comfortable with, he's now in charge of. So it was kind of like a Peter Principle to the max.

Curtis Decker [00:55:27] And then, of course, he's dealing with this HIV crisis. And so he creates a governor's task force. And I'm on it, Frank Polk is on it, a variety of other people. And we were fighting, and at that time, there was all this, we've got to test everybody and, you know, mandatory testing. And my position was, no mandatory testing unless there's civil rights protection, because if you're going to find out everybody's HIV status through some government, you know, mandatory law, that means they then now are going to be subject to discrimination. And you have to have protections for that. So for me, they were always linked and we got pretty testy and pretty outspoken. And so he fired us. And then I guess there was a fairly big outcry. And then he reconstituted. I'd been on Governor Hughes's taskforce, and then I carried over to Governor Schaefer's and then got bumped, but then got back on. So it was quite a contentious relationship with him. And he would see me and we would go back and forth. But he was not, unfortunately, a friend of the gay community.

Curtis Decker [00:56:34] And I mean, there certainly were stories. I mean, I think in his later life, he was—people told me that they had spent time with him and, you know, in social settings where I guess it turned out that he might have been. So, again, I don't know that that for me as a mayor and a governor, I wanted him to be a leader on these issues. And it didn't really make a difference what his sexual orientation was.

Joe Tropea [00:57:01] And then toward the end, did he start sounding more like a Tea Party type guy?

Curtis Decker [00:57:05] He was a very complicated man, I guess. Beloved by lots of people. I had very good friends who just thought he was—and to this day, people talk about, oh, we need a Mayor Schaefer in Baltimore to clean up the alleys. I mean, you know one of his favorite things was to go up and down the alleys and call the housing department or the public works and say, "Get over here and clean up this alley."

Curtis Decker [00:57:31] I'm getting off the track. But remember when I told you I was living in one of those houses that was bought to be torn down for the highway. When I came to Baltimore, he was a proponent of putting the highway through the Inner Harbor. And people like Barbara Mikulski

and others fought him and stopped the road. Then they built the Inner Harbor, and he gets all the credit for, you know, the huge renovation of the harbor. People forget that he was very much about, you know, in the late '60s, wanting that road to go through where now all of that incredible development is. So—

Joe Tropea [00:58:08] Like in Wilmington, Delaware.

Curtis Decker [00:58:12] Or in Albany, New York, Governor Rockefeller built a highway right along the Hudson River. I mean, it's ridiculous and what can now have been a waterfront kind of thing has got this gigantic concrete highway. So anyway, so Schaefer was quite a complex man with varying kinds of things. But I probably would get beat up badly if I say—there were those people who really thought he was just terrific.

Joe Tropea [00:58:38] So sort of wrapping it up, before we get off on the Mayor Governor Schaefer tangent, you started talking about how you, how your career sort of gravitated toward working with the National Disability Rights Network. You identified a connection between your civil rights activism, gay activism and this. Can you talk about your work here? What the role of this organization is and how you see yourself?

Curtis Decker [00:59:14] Well, again, I think my career has been one of these kind of serendipitous things. Not always, you know, starting out with goals and accomplishing them. I was winding down my child abuse project in Maryland where we were, you know, I thought did some really good work about passing legislation on forcing mandatory reporting of child abuse, neglect and, and creating various service programs to help abused, parents of abuse—parents who were abusing their kids. And I got a call saying there's a new entity that's just being created by Congress called the Protection and Advocacy Agency.

Curtis Decker [00:59:53] And it's, there's one in Maryland now, and we need someone to take it over and run it. And I said, "Well, I don't have any real experience with the disability community. I don't have a disability." I didn't really have many, any, close family or friends. And that's often the way people get into the disability advocacy world is through their own experience or, you know, family contacts. And they said, We don't care. You have a reputation being able to build up programs like the child abuse program.

Curtis Decker [01:00:22] So I said, okay. And again, this luckily, it coincided with the passage of some very strong disability civil rights legislation. I found the issues very interesting, very challenging legally, and began to, you know, going out to Rosewood state hospital. It's been interesting to—

Joe Tropea [01:00:42] I'm sorry, it stopped again.

Curtis Decker [01:00:56] Are you okay, David?

Joe Tropea [01:01:00] This is really my last question.

Curtis Decker [01:01:01] Okay. Wrap up—

pause in recording

Joe Tropea [01:02:42] Sorry, minor technical glitch here.

Joe Tropea [01:03:14] Alright. Okay, sorry about that. So we were talking about how you came to be here at the National Disability Rights Network.

Curtis Decker [01:03:19] Right. Well, as I said earlier, the, you know, I was asked to take over this new entity, and it coincided with coming on board of some really good legal protections for people with disabilities, and that sort of, you know, fit nicely into what I've been doing, you know, representing initially poor people and then abused children and then seeing the disability

community as also another vulnerable, stigmatized group. And so it just seemed to fit nicely. And then, again, I'm kind of a consistent guy in my approach to stuff. When I was writing the child abuse program, we had formed an association of these federally funded child abuse programs. And when I came to Maryland, I came to the disability rights. Now it's called the Disability Rights Maryland. At the time, it was called something else. I asked around to some of my colleagues saying, "Do we have a national association in Washington that's representing us since we're totally dependent on federal money?" And the answer was, not yet. So I helped, along with the others, created the NDRN and then because I was near Washington, started coming over almost as a volunteer.

Curtis Decker [01:04:39] And then they were able to start raising money and I became a consultant. And then eventually they said, Well, you either had to be full time or, you know, we'll get somebody else. And by that time I'd really gotten into this issue around in Washington and had some success in getting one additional program through Congress added to the network. And I had been and, you know, to me it all is of a piece—that it's all about, you know, trying to protect people from discrimination and trying to make sure that people can live their lives fully and be integrated.

Curtis Decker [01:05:16] Integration in the community is a big issue in the disability world because of the historical reliance on congregate institutions like Rosewood in Maryland that were horrible. But I think there's an analogy to the gay community who are, you know, who aren't able to, and many people not feeling able to be out and be who they are and be public with who they are. So there's, I think there's a fair amount of connection with abused children or the stigma of welfare recipients, which is now coming back again. And, you know, so to me, it's been kind of a consistent career. And I've been fortunate to be able to meld those things together and sort of have a foot in each camp. And it's very fun, as I said earlier, with a Hate Crimes bill where I'm working side by side with the other LGBT groups. I have to be bringing the disability perspective in there. But it was a—to work with that crowd was great.

Curtis Decker [01:06:16] And then obviously during the lobbying for the ADA, you know, fighting the—it was clearly a strategy by some people to use the HIV/AIDS crisis as a wedge to try to stop the passage of the ADA and being able to talk about that issue from a very personal experience. History sort of all came together. So I consider myself a very lucky person professionally and personally, that these parts of my life have sort of come together in a kind of nice synergy.

Joe Tropea [01:06:50] How long have you been here with the NDRN?

Curtis Decker [01:06:53] Well, I started, as I said, consulting with them in 1982 and then became Executive Director in 1986. So this is, what, 32 years? It's a pretty robust organization. It's nice to have a lot of staff that can do a lot of things that I used to do myself alone. And the agencies have grown considerably. We're on the cusp of a new program, hopefully tonight, that will infuse some more money into my clients so they can expand the representation of individuals with disabilities. So it changes. And the changing administrations, while it can be nerve wracking and, you know, it's disconcerting, it also forces you to rethink strategies and figure how you're going to position these issues to a different set of people who may not have the same sense of ideas or commitment that the last group did. So that's a challenge that kind of makes it still fresh and interesting.

Joe Tropea [01:07:52] Is there anything I didn't ask you about that I should have asked you about?

Curtis Decker [01:07:56] No, I'm pretty sure you—I mean, covered a lot of the stuff that I've been able to be a part of, and I feel lucky to have done that.

Joe Tropea [01:08:04] Well, thank you so much for sharing this. And thank you for your time. We really appreciate it.

Curtis Decker [01:08:10] You're welcome. I'm very thrilled that the Maryland Historical Society is, you know, trying to build up an archive on LGBT issues. And I think it's a great effort.

Joe Tropea [01:08:19] I'm thrilled as well.

Curtis Decker [01:08:21] Good.

Joe Tropea [01:08:23] Thank you very much.

Curtis Decker [01:08:24] Thank you.

end of interview