

Pittsburgh Oral Histories  
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DP

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at the Plum Senior Community Center

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Interviewer's Note

*A tough man—having seen his share of grief, a bona fide survivor. A man who knows how to live and how to enjoy life and who lays his health and his survival and his blessings at the feet of the Lord.*

Interview

bc: Since this is such good news and you're so positive about this: when did you find out that you had cancer?

DP: Fall of 2006. My wife had passed away in '97 and I...stopped taking care of myself. Since I was by

myself...you didn't have somebody to push you....

bc: I live by myself. I understand.

DP: You sort of take everything for granted. You sort of backslide in life. I just plodded along for a couple of years.

I met another woman and we've been seeing each other for five years. We're engaged. And we get along fine.

bc: I'm going to ask you some, perhaps, stupid questions: when you found out about the cancer, were you scared?

DP: No. When I went to my primary care doctor for a regular physical he says, You better go see a urologist. So I went. He recommended one—it was a new guy too 'cause I used to live in New Ken [New Kensington]. I went to a urologist in Tarentum. [This urologist] says, You've got cancer and the one thing about it—at your age there's no surgery. I thought, Well, thank God for that. And he said, You need 41 radiation treatments. They started radiation treatments and I told my pastor about this and he says, We're going to pray about this and turn it over to the Lord. He says, The doctors, nurses and hospital people will do the work, but the Lord will do the healing.

I'm healed.

bc: How did you deal with the radiation treatments?

DP: I'll tell you what: It made me tired. I ended up with my immune system going downhill and I had problems with breathing. I had pneumonia, had bronchitis, COPD [Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, a form of emphysema]. My fiancée called 911 five times for me between December and now [June 2007] because I couldn't breathe. At first I was on oxygen and that was another thing: my pastor...he said, You look so miserable with that tank. Let's pray and give that tank to the Lord. In a week, after we prayed about it, I didn't need it anymore. I

## Pittsburgh Oral Histories

have one of those inhalers that people carry.... And, just two weeks ago, we went on vacation and, in eight days, I drove over 2,000 miles and it never bothered me one bit. I did the driving. She wouldn't do the driving. We drove four-hundred, five-hundred miles a day. We drove from here to Albany, New York, the first day. Then we drove from Albany all across Massachusetts, visited people there. Then we went up to New Hampshire and up to Maine and came down along the coast to Plymouth, Massachusetts and went out on the Cape.

bc: Did you stop at Plymouth Rock?

DP: Oh yeah. I'd been there before. I was stationed two years at Fort Devins when I was in the Army. I knew some people in Leominster because my first wife...when we got married...she came up there and we lived off-post. She worked in a Five-and-Ten and she met this other girl. This girl got married. We went to their wedding and became friends. They came down here to visit us a couple times; and we went up there.

I hadn't seen them for 30 years and I found them.

My son brought it up on the computer, got their name and address and, when I got to that town, I went to the police station, said,

Where is this?

[The police] directed me right to their house.

We went up and surprised them.

We knocked on their door.

He looked at me; he says: I know you, but I can't remember who you are.

So I told him who I was,

and they were all excited about seeing us.

They said, We go down through Pennsylvania on our way to Georgia; is it very far from Harrisburg?

I said, Well, it's four hours.

She says, Sometime we're gonna stop and see you.

We enjoyed it. We needed to get away—with all the hospital stuff that I was in....

bc: When you were in the Army....

DP: I was never overseas. I was at Fort Devins for two years and from there I went down to Fort Bragg for the last year. I was in for three years. When I went in, the Korean War was just ending up: they were having those truce talks so they didn't send me overseas. They came out with a rule at that time that, if you are the only person in your family to carry on the family name, that you don't have to go into combat. I'm the only one in the whole family that was married and had children that had the P---- name. That why, I found out, they kept me there and sent me to North Carolina....

bc: Prior to my starting the recorder we were talking and you referred to yourself as "a single parent." You said that you were a single parent twice.

DP: Yes, the first time: my wife was 29-years-old; she was having her second child. Ten days after the baby was born—the baby was premature—back then they kept babies in the hospital till they weighed five-and-a-half pounds before they let them go home—and our baby only weighed four—it was about a month before I got her—but my wife...ten days after the baby was born, they rushed her back to

## Pittsburgh Oral Histories

the hospital with a temperature of 104. That same day, at nine o'clock at night, she passed away with pneumonia; and they didn't know she had pneumonia. So, there I was: I had that little wee infant and a son five-years-old. We were building a house—it was about a month from being completed. I had all that.... I didn't know what to do, but my mother-in-law took us in, me and the two kids.

I told them in church: I think the Lord sent me an angel because what young lady would want to get married to somebody carrying that much baggage and become a wife and a mother for two small children the same day. I took them to Sunday School when they were little because that's what my Dad did with me.

I started going to dances and I danced with this girl one night and she started talking to me about my kids. (I don't know her.) She says, I'm your son's Sunday School teacher. She says, I like him; he follows me around all the time. She says, I'll tell you what we do: we're in the pre-school, but when your son's there, we know the baby's over in the nursery: one of us'll go over and play with the baby all Sunday morning. So we started going together.

I was raised Methodist, but, when I came to know the Lord, I started going to the Baptist church. Now I'm going to an Independent church in Monroeville. It's a small church; it's only been there seven years. We're in a warehouse.

bc: So apparently your Faith has sustained you through a lot of stuff.

DP: Oh yes it has. I don't know what I'd do without it. I was involved in a Youth Ministry for a while, went to nursing homes and sang Gospel Music and ministered there myself [as a lay minister.] Two women that played the piano...they would call me and tell me that they were going to a nursing home...Do you want to come with us...and I'd go and sing.... I had songbooks that my daughter had typed up some of the old hymns from the church...and she typed the words...and we'd pass them out. (And most people, back then, knew those songs.) "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and things like that.

I worked at Allegheny Ludlum 43 years.

I worked as a pipe-fitter for 14 years in the steel mill.

bc: Where were you born?

DP: I was born in New Kensington, PA. I lived there 72 years and then we bought this place over in Murrysville, PA. Me and my fiancée. It's in a retirement village: you have to be 55 or older to get in there. Cloverleaf Communities. They're all modulars...on a slab...you know, double-wides. We have a clubhouse where we have activities. Once a month, Saturdays, they have a dinner; bingo once a week. They play shuffleboard and cards, pool; they have an exercise room.

bc: You're obviously very social so it's satisfying for you to have all these events.

DP: The Country group that comes here [to the Plum Center] I sing with them sometimes. I've been singing with them for years.

bc: What did your father do?

## Pittsburgh Oral Histories

DP: My Dad he worked several jobs. When I was young, he worked in a steel mill called Penn Iron & Steel. He lost his job because they shut down. What they made were these round bars that are used on [railroad car / boxcar ladders]. They made that kind of steel; that was their main thing. If I remember correctly, it was during the Second World War that they shut down; and he was out of a job for a while. But, Alcoa was hiring during the War off the street because a lot of their people had gone in the Service and he got a job there. As soon as the War was over and those guys came back, he became a janitor for West Penn Power at their office and that's where he worked the rest of his life.

I remember we weren't too well off when I was little. I was born in 1930, which was during the Depression and the first experience I had was the disaster of us losing our home and that was in New Kensington. During the Depression we lost our home. We moved into a row house in the slums on Second Avenue in New Ken. The only way we heated our house was—we had a pot-bellied stove in the middle of the living room and that heated the whole house. About five years later we moved into a better neighborhood. Then we moved one...two...three...four times and we finally bought a house. When he worked there in Creighton, PA—it must have been five miles—he would walk to work in the morning 'cause he had to start at six o'clock. We didn't have a car. He'd leave the house about 4:30 in the morning. He would walk from New Kensington to work because there were no streetcars running at that time of the morning. He caught a streetcar home after work. That's the way people lived back then.

bc: You went to school in New Kensington.

DP: Yes. I went to elementary and junior high. I went to Parnassus Junior High. I went to trade school and I finished my high school at New Kensington High School.

bc: What did you study in trade school?

DP: Pattern-making. Woodworking.

bc: Did you ever get to use it?

DP: That was my hobby after I retired. When I moved, I couldn't take my tools with me so I gave them away. I miss it—oh do I miss it. I don't care to watch television that much so what I'd do, I'd go down [to my shop] and tinker. One of the projects I loved to make—I made four of them—these wooden ice-boxes. They sell them at crafts shows as a cabinet. They're usually made out of oak, but I made them out of soft wood and then I'd stain them oak. It took me about three months to make one. I had a list of the pieces that went into making it. I'd buy the wood and cut them all out. I'd sand them first before I put them all together to get them nice and clean. When I finished them, all I had to do was touch 'em up if I had any glue showing. Then I'd stain them. I'd send away for the original brass hardware for them. And they looked like the old icebox. I also made some stuff for the [Plum] Community Center: the stand that the band uses to put the sheet music on. I just made it out of stuff that I had around my shop and brought it out here and gave it to them. And trash bins, like you see in a crafts show. It's a box with a lid on it. I made several of them. They raffled one of them off as a fund raiser. I made deacon benches, shadow boxes.... I was in Indiana visiting my

## Pittsburgh Oral Histories

daughter and we went to this Amish place and they had these shelves over the commode. I drew a quick picture of it so I could remember what it looked like. [I made several for family members.] After I retired I built a car-and-a-half garage and that was my workshop in my backyard. When I built my house, the downstairs was finished, but the upstairs was unfinished. I finished that myself. Of course my father-in-law was a carpenter and he got me into doing that kind of work. He got me started and I just went ahead. When I wanted to do anything, I just did it. I bought a kit from "84 Lumber" for the garage and I just put it together.

bc: Were you drafted?

DP: I was on the verge of being drafted. I had my physical. Because the war was almost over, you might take your physical and then maybe six months later you'd go in. I got tired of waiting and I enlisted. That's why I was in [for] three years instead of two. I got married after I was through with basic training.

[Between graduating and enlisting] I worked at Allegheny Ludlum. I started right after I got out of school. I started as a laborer on the railroad gang, fixing their tracks and things like that. Allegheny Ludlum had four or five locomotives with cranes that loaded and unloaded their cars. They had, I think, five or six diesel engines that ran all through the mill. It was a pretty good-size plant. They also had a plant in Natrona that the engine went back and forth from Brackenridge to Natrona on the siding and took stuff up and brought stuff back. They merged with J & L Steel [Jones & Laughlin]. My son, he's 52-years-old, he's retired with 32 years because when they merged with J & L, they phased out 300 people at Brackenridge and he was one of the oldest in the mill. He's working. In Mississippi. He went to Mississippi two weeks before Katrina hit. He was in Gulfport. He evacuated but he's working at a casino there now. He's driving an "access" bus at the casino.

My life has been, sort of, heartaches and problems. I've lost eight people out of my immediate family in my lifetime. First, in 1947, I lost my sister. She was 25. She had heart problems. Ten years later I lost my Dad to prostate cancer. In 1960 I lost my first wife. In 1963 I lost my mother. In 1972 I lost my second wife. Once again I became a single parent: I had two little girls—ten- and twelve-years-old to take care of; and my son was a senior in high school then.

In 1953, when I married for a second time, her parents were involved with Gospel singers and they started taking us to these different places where they had Gospel music. We went to Johnstown. We went to Erie. We went all over. I really got into Gospel music. One Sunday we were going up to Indiana in the afternoon and I was sitting in my living room and [evangelist] Rex Humbard was on TV. I'm sitting there waiting for my wife to get ready and he was talking about sin. The way I was feeling at the time—inside—I felt that he was talking about me. And that day, in my living room, I gave my heart to the Lord. When I went up to hear those Gospel singers [that day] I went forward to the altar and pledged my life to the Lord and my life has never been the same since. Every time I needed Him, I

## Pittsburgh Oral Histories

knew He was there. I knew definitely that He was there. He has touched my life many times.

I'll tell you what happened to me—the day before President Kennedy was shot—I was cutting my grass in November. I had planted my grass in my backyard. I raked the straw off into a pile. When I went down to where that pile of straw was, I was lighting a cigarette with my Zippo lighter. It flipped out of my hand and went right into the pile of straw and here the gas can had upset in there and it exploded in my face. I had second- and third-degree burns. I didn't have any hair. I went into that hospital, and my in-laws and all started praying for me. They sent my name into Rex Humbard—all those places that have prayer—and the first week my arms looked like a skinned animal. The next week—I was laying there in bed—I was in my room, a private room. I could feel something in my room with me. I could feel something under the bandages. They took off the bandages:  
All new skin!  
In just one week!  
And I don't have any scars!

bc: Since you retired, you've been doing a lot of traveling. Where have you been?

DP: We went to Florida several times.

We've been going on a lot of bus trips. We've been to Myrtle Beach four times...Nashville...Gatlinburg...Branson.... What these buses do...they take you to maybe a show in the afternoon and then in the evening you have a dinner and a show.... I've driven to a lot of places as well. We've been to Skyline Drive.... Just recently we took a bus trip to Lancaster: we saw "In the Beginning." We've seen "Noah" there. "In the Beginning" it took your breath away. [All of a sudden these actors, portraying angels, would come flying onto the stage on wires. The theater accommodated 3,000.] The day we were there there were going to be four shows and each one of them was sold out, packed....

bc: How has Western Pennsylvania changed in your lifetime and has it been for the better or for the worse?

[DP is wearing a t-shirt that has the slogan: "Love My Country. Don't Trust the Government."]

DP: [Indicating this slogan, he says,] This includes not only Western Pennsylvania; this includes our entire system. About 20 years ago we went to a seminar—the men's group [at church]. This man at the seminar said that Nixon was corrupt and that, if it wasn't for good people still praying for our country and God answering their prayer, that it would destroy itself from within from corruption. And I believe that.

Another thing: I lived in New Kensington and they called that "Little Chicago." It was bad. Manderino ran the place. He was Mafia. This actually happened: one of them died and he was laid out at this funeral home. My brother-in-law was on duty as special police at the funeral home. There was a limousine came in there one night. Manderino pulls in and says, Where do you park? [My brother-in-law saw who it was and] says, You park anywhere you want. Frank Sinatra, Sammy

## Pittsburgh Oral Histories

Davis, Jr. and Dean Martin came in to pay their respects at 2 o'clock in the morning.

My Dad told me this years ago. When I got out of the Service, I wasn't registered to vote. And he said, You've got to go register and vote. I said, I voted when I was in by absentee ballot for the President. And he said, I want to tell you one thing: "Most politicians are so crooked, when they die, they don't bury them, they screw them in the ground." My Dad told me that in 1955. And I believe him. I've met three or four guys that ran for office—one term—and they said it was so corrupt, they couldn't stomach it. They were honest men. One of them was my dentist and he said to me, "I couldn't handle it. I could not handle the corrupt stuff that's in politics." And it is. It's all greed and corruption as far as I'm concerned. Look at this thing in our state with non-smoking.... When we were on vacation, we were in seven states—New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire and Maine. Every one of them was non-smoking. In Pennsylvania, why don't they put it on the ballot and let the people decide?