REHAB CASE STUDY

Disability Across Six Decades:
Adapting Through Milestones in History

WRITTEN BY: Cathy Carver, PT, DPT, ATP/SMS, and Alice Cherry

Introduction

My name is Cathy Carver, and I am a practicing physical therapist with 30 years of experience at UAB's outpatient seating and wheeled mobility clinic.

I met Alice Cherry in April 2022 when she came to our outpatient wheelchair clinic for modifications to her power wheelchair and seating system. After reviewing her history and speaking with her, I quickly realized how much history she had lived through. Her story deeply interested me, and we began talking regularly. She shared stories of growing up in rural Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement. She later underwent rehabilitation at a time when barriers for people with disabilities were significant, and few laws existed to address them. She witnessed the Americans with Disabilities Act become law and has lived long enough to see both the progress made and the work that remains.

Through her stories, I have carried several powerful lessons with me both personally and professionally. Human kindness often goes further than any law ever will. Listening is always better than talking, especially when helping someone obtain the appropriate equipment to achieve independence. We were never meant to go through life alone, and surrounding yourself with trustworthy people is invaluable.

Cherry and I have more in common than might be apparent at first glance. We share the same Christian faith, the same desire for accessibility and inclusion and a deep love for Alabama. Our differences in age, race, mobility and geography matter little compared with the bond we share and the encouragement we offer one another. It is a privilege to share her story.

For 62 years, Cherry has lived at the crossroads of disability, race, gender and history, navigating a world that was not built for her while helping reshape it along the way. Now 83, she reflects on a life spanning segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, the birth of the disability rights movement and the evolution of Complex Rehab Technology.

Her story is one of resilience, advocacy, humor and an unshakable belief that accessibility is not a privilege. It is a right.



Alice Cherry at a Valentine's dance.

"Although I have been paralyzed for 62 years, I can truly say that I have enjoyed the journey," Cherry said. "It really is a journey."

Early Life in Rural Alabama

Cherry was born and raised in Butler, Alabama, in Choctaw County. The second of four children, she grew up in a close-knit family and attended Choctaw County Training School, a historically Black school during segregation. She graduated as valedictorian in 1961.

Education was her path forward, and she embraced it fully. At age 18, she entered Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, as a biology major. She did not yet know her career path, but she knew she was headed somewhere.

Sudden Injury, New Reality

In the summer of 1964, at age 21, Cherry was working in Atlantic City, New Jersey, when she felt a sharp pain in her back and collapsed.

She was rushed to Graduate Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where a myelogram revealed a congenital malformation of blood vessels. A clot had formed, causing a T7 spinal cord injury. The diagnosis was spinal telangiectasia, a rare vascular condition involving abnormal blood vessels within or near the spinal cord.

She underwent a thoracic laminectomy, but the damage was permanent. Rehabilitation at Magee Rehabilitation Hospital became her new reality and occupied the next six months of her life as she learned to navigate a body that no longer followed familiar rules.

Even then, her goal remained unwavering: return to Tuskegee and graduate.

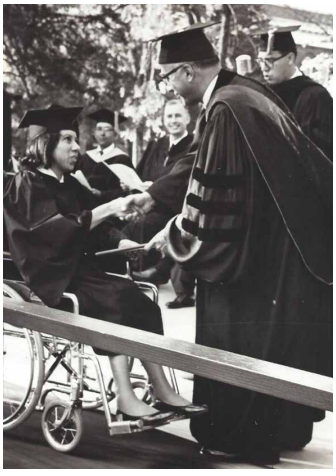
Returning to College Before Accessibility Existed

Returning to Tuskegee in 1964 meant returning to a campus with no ramps, no elevators, no accessible bathrooms and no ADA.

Her mother insisted she return anyway and even persuaded Cherry's younger sister, Debbie, to enroll so she could help. Debbie mostly helped by not helping, which ultimately encouraged Cherry's independence.

Students carried her upstairs. Professors moved classes to first-floor locations. She navigated a world that had not yet imagined how students with disabilities could fully participate.

And she graduated.



Alice Cherry at Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, graduation, May 1966.



Alice Cherry and her late sister, Debbie.



Alice Cherry at work.



Alice Cherry transfers from her wheelchair to her car.

A Career in Cytotechnology

After graduating from Tuskegee, Cherry was accepted into the cytotechnology program at Thomas Jefferson University. She was the only African American and the only wheelchair user in the program.

She earned a fellowship and monthly stipend. Her first position was at the Naval Hospital Philadelphia, where she worked from 1967 to 1992. The military environment offered structure, accessibility and respect.

When the hospital closed, she transferred to a civilian facility and immediately encountered barriers. There was no accessible restroom on her floor, and it took a year to secure the accommodations.

"It was easier to get things done before the ADA. After the ADA, people got angry when you challenged them," Cherry said.

Driving, Independence and the Cost of Disability

Cherry purchased her first car in 1974. Because state agencies did not offer training for hand controls, she received private instruction. Family members questioned whether she could drive.

Her response was simple: "I don't know how I'll drive, but I'll figure it out."

And she did.

Over the years, she became familiar with the financial realities of disability:

• Power wheelchairs

• Custom seating systems

• Accessible vans

• Medical equipment

• Insurance challenges

"I have a million-dollar body, and nobody's buying you an $80,000 accessible van," Cherry said.

Advocacy Before Advocacy Had a Name

While living in Philadelphia, Cherry joined Disabled in Action of Pennsylvania, a cross-disability civil rights organization founded in 1973. There she found both community and her voice as an advocate.

After returning to Alabama in 1995, she joined Partners in Policymaking Alabama, where she learned about policy, leadership and people-first language. She later delivered a keynote presentation on the parallels between the Civil Rights Movement and the disability rights movement, a topic she knew firsthand.

The Evolution of CRT

Cherry's first wheelchair was a 50-pound Everest & Jennings chair with a foam cushion.

Her assessment of the equipment was straightforward: "Terrible."

Over the decades, she dealt with nerve pain, pressure injuries and shoulder problems, all common experiences for long-term wheelchair users. Her first custom wheelchair did not arrive until around 2000.

Today, Cherry credits UAB Spain Rehabilitation Center and her CRT suppliers with providing the most comfortable power wheelchair she has ever used. "They are accurate, knowledgeable, and they listen. That makes all the difference."

Social Life, Relationships, Humor and the Invisible Label

Cherry describes herself as "100% female" and someone who genuinely enjoys meeting people.

With humor, she jokes that she must have an invisible sign on her forehead that attracts the wrong men. Despite occasional disappointments, she continues to create her own opportunities for joy.

She attends church, concerts and theatrical performances, and recently celebrated her 60th Tuskegee reunion.



Alice Cherry at the 60th Reunion Banquet of Tuskegee Institute.

Accessible Travel

Rolling through the world: A wheelchair traveler's guide to going everywhere anyway

Cherry says: "Let's get one thing straight: I've been using a wheelchair for 62 years, and I've still managed to see more cities than some people who brag about their wanderlust while never leaving their couch. I've traveled by airplane, train, bus, car and minivan, sometimes all in the same week, and I've learned that accessibility isn't just a feature. It's a negotiation, an adventure and occasionally a comedy routine."

Traveling with a wheelchair means developing a sixth sense that combines optimism, strategy and the hope that a ramp is more than decorative. It means evaluating a space almost immediately and knowing that accessibility varies greatly from place to place.

Airplanes: The high-flying circus

Air travel is where accessibility and absurdity often intersect.

"I've been lifted, tilted, rolled and rearranged like a piece of oddly shaped luggage," Cherry said. "I've had gate agents look at my wheelchair like it's a spaceship they're afraid to touch. And yet, I fly, because the world is too big and too beautiful to let a narrow aisle stop me."

Trains: The smooth ride, mostly

Trains are Cherry's preferred method of transportation when accessibility is handled well.

She appreciates the ability to roll directly onto a railcar without feeling as though she is participating in a stunt show. At the same time, she laughs about stations where temporary construction seems to have lasted for decades.

When accessibility works, trains feel like "freedom on rails," she said.

Buses:
The wild card

Buses provide an unpredictable travel experience.

Will the lift work? Does the driver know how to operate it? Will other passengers become impatient?

The uncertainty is part of the experience, but Cherry continues to ride because sometimes the bus is the only connection between a traveler and a worthwhile destination.

Cars and minivans:
The classics

Cars and minivans remain dependable, accessible forms of transportation.

Cherry has crossed states, cities and regions using accessible vehicles. The open road continues to bring joy, even when the accessible restroom advertised along the route proves difficult to find.

Why She Keeps Traveling

Cherry continues to travel because she believes the world belongs to everyone, including those who use wheelchairs.

Accessibility is not a favor; it is a right.

Each new destination offers an opportunity to demonstrate that disability does not eliminate adventure.

As she puts it: "Frankly, I'm having too much fun to stop traveling."

What She Wants Readers to Know About Travel

Accessible travel is not about perfection. It is about persistence, creativity and maintaining a sense of humor strong enough to survive unexpected obstacles. It is about advocating for better accessibility while still enjoying the journey.

After 62 years on wheels, Cherry remains convinced that the world is worth exploring. "I can say this with confidence: The world is worth exploring. And I plan to keep rolling through it for as long as there are places left to see."

Faith as Her Foundation

Raised in a Baptist church, Cherry was playing piano for church services by eighth grade, earning her first paycheck.

After her injury, she searched for accessible churches and eventually found a spiritual home in an Episcopal congregation in Philadelphia.

Her prayer has always been simple: "Lord, you put me in this position. It's up to you to take care of me."

Aging, Wisdom and the Long View

Cherry's advice is straightforward:

- Take care of your body early.
- Eat well.
- Move when you can.
- Establish healthy habits.

"People with disabilities age just like everyone else," she said. "We just start earlier."

Supporters and Lessons Learned

Cherry credits people born with disabilities as some of her greatest teachers. She also recognizes her family, professors, fellow students and advocates who came before her.

She describes herself as "an advocate for life," and her actions reflect that commitment.

When Tuskegee University's chapel repeatedly denied accessible seating accommodations, Cherry spent three years advocating for change and ultimately succeeded.

Cherry's Message to Individuals with Disabilities

"You can go on, but you need support. Family, chosen family and real friends. You find out who your real friends are."

And Her Message to Individuals Without Disabilities

"If we live long enough, we will all have some type of disability. Be kind. Prepare. Help make the world more accessible now."

Conclusion

After 62 years of paralysis, Cherry says something few people expect: "I enjoyed the journey."

Her story is defined not by limitations, but by leadership; not by what she lost, but by what she built for herself and for future generations.

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Alice Cherry at the Senior Citizen's Sneaker Ball.



Alice Cherry and Cathy Carver at UAB Spain Rehabilitation wheelchair clinic.



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Cathy Carver, PT, DPT, ATP/SMS, has practiced physical therapy for more than 30 years, spending most of her career in the Wheelchair and Seating Clinic at UAB Spain Rehabilitation Center in Birmingham, Alabama. She has worked primarily with adults who have mobility disabilities across a wide range of diagnoses, backgrounds and stages of disability. Carver has lectured, taught and written about the clinical aspects of Complex Rehab Technology provision for more than a |decade. In 2016, she launched a community disability awareness program, "Come Roll with Me," designed to bridge gaps between wheelchair users and non-wheelchair users while promoting accessibility and inclusion. After meeting Cherry in the clinic several years ago, Carver began learning more about her experiences and realized she had important insights to share about disability, advocacy and the milestones that have shaped both history and society.



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Alice Cherry is a retired cytotechnologist from Butler, Alabama, in Choctaw County. She grew up in a loving home and described her childhood as happy. At 18, she enrolled at Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University. After completing her junior year, she was working in Philadelphia when she experienced the sudden onset of paraplegia caused by a genetic disorder. Her injury occurred during the 1960s, a period marked by racial segregation and significant barriers for African American women. Following rehabilitation at Magee Rehabilitation Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Cherry returned to Tuskegee and completed her degree. She went on to build a successful career while navigating life as a wheelchair user. Throughout the decades, she has refused to let her disability prevent her from pursuing her goals and interests. Her life experiences have given her a unique perspective as she has witnessed the Civil Rights Movement, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the continuing evolution of accessibility and disability rights.