



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Sierra Green, Archivist

Chevon Hendzel

As a founding member of the Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action Consortium, the Heinz History Center has had an unparalleled opportunity to learn about and preserve local disability history. Chief among the lessons learned is the importance of preserving historic records that reflect the voices of individuals with disabilities themselves. This embodies the oft-repeated adage in their fight for civil rights: “nothing about us without us.”

The stories of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities were an early focus of the Consortium. One of the first families to donate their papers to the Detre Library & Archives were the Hendzels. The materials in their collection emanate from Chevon “Vonnie” Hendzel. Vonnie’s collection provides us a rare opportunity to witness firsthand the services for people with disabilities that were only just emerging in the mid-20th century. Her collection presents a personal lens to study the strides made during the early years of the Disability Rights Movement.

Vonnie Hendzel was born in September 1961 to Charles and Rose Marie Hendzel in the Elliott neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Acting against medical recommendations at the time, the Hendzels insisted that Vonnie remain at home with the rest of their family rather than be sent to an institution for people with



Studio portraits of Vonnie (left) and Denise (right) Hendzel, 1963–1964. From Vonnie’s birth, the bond between these two sisters was such that separating them seemed inconceivable.

All images HHC Detre L&A, Chevon Hendzel Papers and Photographs, MSS 1220.

intellectual and developmental disabilities.

As a child, Vonnie learned how to walk and talk despite her initial prognosis in an era with few early intervention services for children. One of six children, she enjoyed exploring the neighborhood with friends and her siblings. Throughout her life, Vonnie fostered a love of traveling, clothing, hats, shopping, dancing, art, and water. Vonnie also loved to prank family members and she enjoyed laughing.

Vonnie could not attend the same parochial and public schools that her siblings attended. Prior to the seminal Right to Education Consent Decree in 1972, school districts throughout Pennsylvania could turn children with disabilities away, thereby denying them a public education. This lack of services did not stop the Hendzel family from pursuing other opportunities that existed for Vonnie. From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, Vonnie received educational instruction through local organizations, including the Easter Seals Center and the United Cerebral Palsy Association (now Community Living & Support Services).

Vonnie became one of the first students to attend Conroy Education Center, a school created by Pittsburgh Public Schools to comply with the 1972 court decision. As such, Vonnie’s school records reflect how educational opportunities evolved during a pivotal era in the history of Special Education. For the first time, the names of the same teachers, therapists, and other support professionals reappeared in Vonnie’s school records—month after month, year after year—reflecting an unprecedented consistency in her education.

As Vonnie reached adulthood, she wanted to experience independence like her siblings. Due to her parents’ age and failing health, the Hendzels explored group homes. Such an arrangement would provide Vonnie with the support she needed while still living in a community setting close to her family. In October 1993, Vonnie transitioned into her first group home in Brookline. This home was established as part of a court-ordered mandate to match formerly institutionalized residents with people such as Vonnie who grew up in a familial setting. As a part of the



ABOVE: Vonnie Hendzel in driver's seat of her sister's car, c. 1998.

LEFT: Vonnie's first formal school portrait, c. 1969.

Deinstitutionalization Movement, efforts like this were underway throughout the state to transition people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who had been institutionalized back into the community.

Sadly, Vonnie's collection reveals that her experiences during this era were not without

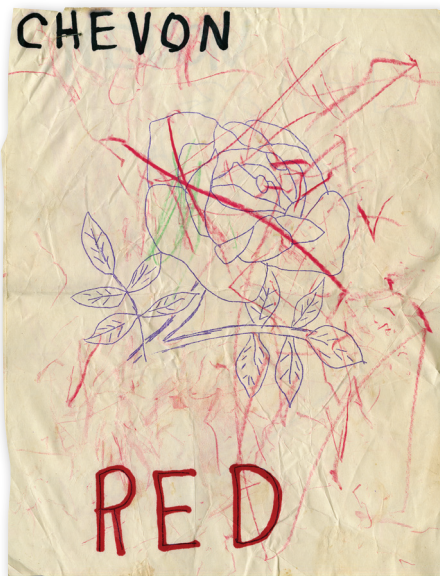
pain and distress. Based on documentation collected and generated by her sister, Denise Hendzel, we learn how Vonnie suffered injuries and was the recipient of improper care while in group homes. Vonnie and her family once again had to grapple with the shortfalls and imperfections of the services

that were offered to them at the time.

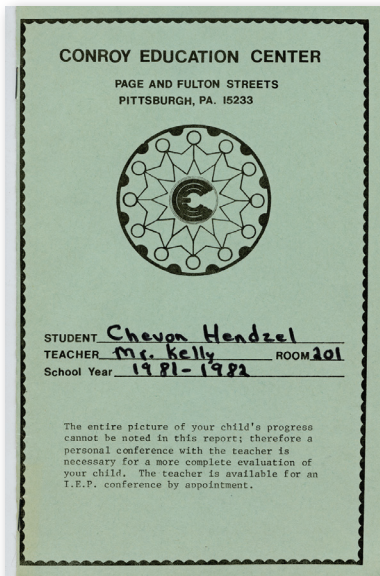
Beginning in 2003, the Hendzels found a sustainable model that allowed Vonnie to live with her sister Denise full-time. Through a family provider program, Vonnie's loved ones formed what became known as "the Crew." Members of this crew were compensated for the around-the-clock care that they provided Vonnie so she could live comfortably at home and remain with her family.

Chevon Hendzel passed away in January 2016 at the age of 54. In a way that merits scholarly inquiry, Vonnie's life and her collection illustrate the dramatic changes over the past 50 years in education, housing, and care for people with disabilities. The Chevon Hendzel Papers and Photographs are open for research at the History Center's Detre Library & Archives.

The donation of this collection was made possible by Denise Hendzel and the ongoing partnership with the Western Pennsylvania Disability History & Action Consortium. Visit www.wpdhac.org to learn more about the Western Pennsylvania Disability History & Action Consortium.



Artwork created by Vonnie Hendzel, undated.



Vonnie Hendzel's Conroy Education Center report card, 1982.