

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services (GLASS) Oral History Project

GLASS-001

Stuart Levenson interviewed by Stephanie Irvin

June 28, 2018

IRVIN: Hello, my name is Stephanie Irvin. I'm going to have a conversation with Stuart Levenson for Our Stories, Our Lives, an oral history project with Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is June 28th and this is being recorded at GLASS Atlanta. Hello, Stuart, thank you for joining today.

LEVENSON: Thank you. Very nice to be here.

IRVIN: So tell me a little bit about yourself.

LEVENSON: Well, I was born in Savannah, and that's where I got all of my education through the--actually, through the 12th grade. Then I went to a--now they call them "community colleges." It's called Armstrong State College. Now it belongs to the Georgia Southern complex. Until--I did that for two years and then decided I wanted to leave because everybody I knew was leaving, and I wanted to come to a small school somewhere else. And I found Oglethorpe University here in Atlanta where I have--where I was in 1963 through my graduation in '67, and then I just never went back. I stayed in Atlanta.

IRVIN: And are you a patron of GLASS?

LEVENSON: Oh, yes. I have been a patron of GLASS since before there was GLASS, probably since about 1956.

IRVIN: How did you become a patron of GLASS?

LEVENSON: That was so long ago, I don't remember. I'm sure someone told my mother that there was such a service. You know, as a visually impaired person, you always hear about talking books. And I'd always heard about talking books. Probably I got informed about the talking book program through the eye doctor that I had in Savannah back then.

IRVIN: What was it like being a visually impaired individual in Savannah?

LEVENSON: Well, back then it was much more difficult than it is now, because there were none of the programs that exist now to assist a visually impaired student. My eye doctor--later doctor told me that I was going to be in a very difficult position. I wasn't

totally blind, nor am I totally sighted. I was in the middle, and the middle was slowly going to go away. So the school system, the board of education was not prepared for anyone with a slight limitation of any kind.

So I came along. When I entered the first grade in Charles Ellis Elementary School, I remember still being there for one week. The superintendent of schools met with my parents and said no, we couldn't do this, because they weren't prepared to keep me as a student. They had no idea what to do with a blind person. Absolutely no idea. And the only solution was to go to the school for the blind and deaf in Macon, and my parents weren't going to do that. Not then. They tried later, but I threw a temper tantrum and wouldn't go.

IRVIN: Well, how did you end up liking the school or disliking the school?

LEVENSON: Which school?

IRVIN: The one in Macon.

LEVENSON: I didn't. I didn't want to--I didn't want to go away from home. A very well meaning minister came to our house one night and tried to convince my parents that that was the place for me to be. I probably was about in the 9th or 10th grade, and being a precocious kid, I overheard most of the conversation and I threw what could be classified as one hell of a tantrum. I wouldn't go because I didn't want to leave home. And so I never went there. I continued in the--what now is called "mainstream" of the education process through graduation from high school and then into college and so forth. It's the funny thing about it is that when I was in high school in the 10th grade, the--a student in one of my classes, my history class, just happened to be the son of the very same minister. And we had long talks about why I didn't go to the school for the deaf and blind in Macon. And he said, well, it wasn't--even the kid knew better--that it wasn't set up for everybody. I decided early that it wasn't set up for me and I wasn't going to do it.

IRVIN: You had mentioned you went to college. How has that experience, moving into college?

LEVENSON: College was interesting. I remember the first day I was at Armstrong. It was then Armstrong College. It was in the downtown area. Now they call it the historic district of Savannah. Armstrong took over several of the old mansions and turned them into classroom buildings. And I remember going to my English class. I had to take remedial English. Unfortunately, I took remedial English twice. I flunked it. And I took remedial math twice. I flunked that, too.

But the first day I remember going to class and the instructor gave us--after we'd sat there for an hour. She gave us the homework assignment, which was half the book. And I remember leaving and I said, "Oh, that's for the whole quarter." She said, "No, that's for Monday." You got to be kidding!

But college was interesting, because I learned quickly that you had to obviously adjust to it. But as a blind person or partially sighted person, you wouldn't adjust the same as everyone else did. You had to make your own way. And I did. I hired readers to read to me my textbooks and other material that I had to read. I paid them the munificent sum of--ready for this? One dollar an hour. That's what the going rate was back then. And I had quite a few interesting readers. I had elementary school teachers. I had a good friend of mine who was a fireman and we would read in the park in Forsyth Park in Savannah on the days when he was not being a fireman. It was 24 hours on, 24 hours off. We would sit by the fountain feeding the pigeons, and he'd be reading to me books. And then on other days I would go to one of Savannah's plantation homes out on one of the islands near Savannah, and I would sit on the dock and be read to. I was read to in some very interesting places. But I learned to deal with it as best I could, and so did my instructors. They learned to deal with me as best they could, and most of them did pretty well.

IRVIN: What happened once you graduated from college?

LEVENSON: Therein lies the problem. When I was growing up, I was never told that I would never find--I couldn't go to work and support myself. So here it comes. In August of 1967, the reason it was August of '67, I dropped one course at Oglethorpe. And so I had to take one course in the summer. Here it was in August of '67, and I was out of school. I had a piece of paper in my hand that said I had completed all the academic requirements and therefore I was let out, as it were. And now it was up to me to decide what to do next. Well, I didn't want to go back to Savannah, because my family, God bless them, were really good. But what would have happened is they were--especially my parents--extremely protective. And I knew that if I went back to Savannah, I would wind up working in one of my uncle's businesses. He had a liquor business. I probably would be selling bottles of booze, which I wasn't willing to do.

So I came up with the idea, aha, graduate school. So I went to Washington to look at American University, which accepted me, and I looked at Washington and said, "I don't want to live here." So I enrolled and was accepted to Georgia State and went to school there for three years, taking one course per quarter. But in those three years I decided you can't go on like this. So I was looking for a job.

Now, in the '60s, finding a job for a visually impaired person was not what it is today. I knocked on doors. I filled out applications. I used to say that the shredding of my job applications, if you threw the shredded paper out the window on Peachtree Street, I could probably have my own ticker tape parade. I had people--what they call--what this one advertising agency called us, "community influential," important people in the community looking for me for a job. The State of Georgia, the Department of Rehabilitation Services tried to find me a job. They suggested that I go to work in the vending stand program, and I refused to do that. I was a headstrong kid, and I wouldn't do that because I said I was educated and I had a college degree and I wanted to do something else.

Finally, the secretary of a very important person in town, Richard Rich, who owned Richard's department store, his secretary and I became really good friends. She knew a federal judge and the federal judge said that he knew of a program that the Social Security Administration was starting for blind people to put them to work in general information. You would learn all there was to know about Social Security and you would be on the telephone talking to the general public. So they said would I like to do that? Well, by then I would have done anything.

So I went to Florida. The VR, vocational rehabilitation people sent me to Florida for a screening. I spent four days in Daytona Beach thinking I was in heaven, and then I came back here and they said they'd let me know. Well, I had been told that so many times that I just--oh, there goes that idea.

In May, they told me that I was accepted and that I would spend the summer--June, July, and August--in Miami learning how to work for the Social Security Administration. I was accepted into the second class, the second class of students. They had one in '69. This was in '70. And that I would learn all about Social Security and I would come back in September and I would work in Atlanta and I was absolutely astounded. I couldn't believe it. So the State of Georgia would pay for three months of my upkeep. That meant that they paid the hotel bill, and it was really a cheap hotel, believe me.

And at the end of that time, Social Security did not hire you at that time when you were in training. They didn't hire you until you went through the training. In September I went through training. I then came back here and swore an oath and then I was officially an employee and working on 730 Peachtree Street, where I worked until they moved out of that office and they moved over to 805 Peachtree Street. Then they moved out of that office, moved to 55 Marietta Street, and they finally moved to the office they're in now, which is 401 West Peachtree, which is the Summit Building.

So I was there for 36 years. I would have been longer because they said that after you worked for 40 years you got a free trip to Baltimore to meet the national commissioner. I said, oh, that was fun. Well, I took it for 36 years now, and I said that was enough. And by the time I left, they said well, they didn't even give that anymore. So I left. I decided I had already met the national commissioner when she came to Atlanta.

IRVIN: What surprised you most about entering the professional world?

LEVENSON: What surprised me the most was that--and this is very trite--at the end of May--I went to work in September of the first year. At the end of May, I didn't get out for a summer vacation. You just kept right on working, through June, July, and August. I mean, those were no different than any other months of the year. You just continued right on. They would give you the paycheck every two weeks, and there was no difference. You just kept right on going.

Also, the world of work was what you made of it. In other words, I think I worked reasonably well. I saw people who didn't work very well, who didn't do what they were supposed to. Some of them were fired. It is possible to get fired from the federal government. It is not easy, but they can do it. But if they set their mind to it, they can really do it.

But when you're working, the fun is over. School is nice, it's fun, it's enjoyable. But in the world of work, you're responsible for everything you do. You can't go running to mommy and say, "I didn't mean it." No. That's over. You do everything you're responsible for, for yourself, your own living situation. You pay your own bills, you rent an apartment, and it's just the real world, as it is.

IRVIN: How do you feel your work experience was different as someone who is partially sighted?

LEVENSON: It was very different. First of all, now, let's forget about computers and let's forget about the electronics that we have today. When I went to work, let us say you called my office and you wanted to file for benefits. What I had to do was the forms were there and you know as well as I do--the government does nothing better than create forms. They create forms for the sake of creating forms. You took a form and you put it into a typewriter and you learned how to fill out the form on the typewriter, filling out the spaces so that someone was able to read what you had written. Not in longhand because you couldn't do it. You had to learn to--you had to push the spacebar over so many spaces when you got to this part of the form. You had to turn the little wheel to go down so many clicks to get to the next line. You learned all of this.

Now, no big deal. Now you sit down in front of a computer. You press the button, the keystrokes. The computer comes on. JAWS, in my case that's what I used. JAWS comes up and it tells you where you are and you know what to do next. You press the Spacebar or the Tab key or whatever, and you go to the next available block and you fill in that. And then you go to the following block.

It's a lot different. In some respects it's easier than it used to be. Most of that stuff now is all on computers and you don't fill out a paper form. You fill out the form on the computer and you press Send and it goes off to who knows where. And that individual gets a phone call of their application.

IRVIN: Tell me more about how you use technology in your everyday life.

LEVENSON: Oh boy. Well, back in 1989, a little before then, Social Security had on all of our desks what are called "dumb terminals." In other words, this was a terminal, i.e., monitor. You could do nothing with it except read it, if you did see it. And mine, fortunately at that time, my vision was such that I could see it. And you could read the screen and know what was available.

Now, you couldn't feel anything out, but what you could do is read what was someone's information, basic information that they had with the Social Security Administration.

In 1989, they decided we would all get personal computers, so we all went to training and learned how to work a personal computer. I think that was the greatest help. Now, I have a computer--well, I've always had one since then. I had my own.

I love email. I think email is the most wonderful thing God ever created. So I use email to communicate with my friends and whatever. I use it a lot more than I use the telephone. It's wonderful, you can email anybody all around the world. I know people in Australia and people in Israel, and if you want to ask them question, you just call them up on your contact list and ask them the question and they answer you.

You don't have to worry about the time of day. You don't have to worry about the day of the week. You don't worry about anything. All you have to worry about is did you spell the word correctly, and I'm notoriously bad speller. God bless spellcheck. So I use email quite a bit.

I use the telephone. I am addicted also to the telephone. We have now what is called "flat rate long-distance," which means I can call anywhere in the continental United States, Alaska, and Hawaii, and it doesn't show up on the bill.

I'm used to three minute calls and a call before 11:00 is more expensive than after 11:00. Now you don't have to worry about any of that. If I want to talk to someone--well, somebody in Honolulu, which I did recently--there's a member of the group that I eat dinner with--he's 94, and we became acquainted and his two sons are really nice people. Well, he became acquainted with a fish. In Hawaii, there is a fish called the--let's see if I can pronounce this correctly--Humuhumunukunukuapua'a. That's a rockfish. It's the state fish of Hawaii. And it got to be a joke. Every time we would crack a joke about something, we would say the name of the fish and everybody would laugh.

Well, somebody said that they had been to Hawaii and they found that name of that fish on a baseball cap. Well, that's all I had to hear because I wanted to give this particular friend that baseball cap with the name of that fish on the front of it.

So two weeks ago, I spent one entire evening calling all types of gift shops and hotel gift shops and regular gift shops. I found it! And he now has the hat, on the front of which says Humuhumunukunukuapua'a.

That I deal with the telephone. I can find, do a lot of things with the phone that most people can't, because I've learned how to use it and what you can and cannot do with it, with the exception of directory assistance, and you don't want to hear what I think about them.

IRVIN: Tell me more about your friend circle.

LEVENSON: You mean--I don't call them "friends," I call them my support group. When you are visually impaired, you develop a support group, friends. You have to. You have no choice. If you don't, you slowly go crazy.

Now, I don't mean it literally, but I mean, when I was a kid I went to a private school. Remember I told you I had gone to elementary school for one week and they said they weren't able to take care of me, so my parents found a lady who ran a one-room schoolhouse. I could be president and I went to a one-room schoolhouse, and I went to that lady's house. She would have homeschooled her kids, but her kids had grown.

So I went to this private school until the seventh grade when I refused to go back and they put me in the public school system. That's another story. But anyway, so the situation was that you had to make. I had no real friends except those people who lived in the neighborhood. The people down the street had a couple of kids. Two blocks over they had a couple of kids, you know. If you want to make friends in your neighborhood, have kids. They can do it.

Well, now when I went to high school, junior high, high school, and college, I have quite a few friends all around the country, actually all around the world. They are my support group. I had this one particular friend in Dallas, Texas. I was out there visiting once 20 years ago, and Harry said, "You know, when you make friends with Stuart, it's permanent. You never let go." And he's right. I never let go. I have friends that have been friends for 50 years because I like people and I just think that all types of people make the world more well-rounded.

And everybody's different. My friendships are sort of compartmentalized. I had a birthday party about 15 years ago for my 60th birthday and my best friend who threw it said he--it was a surprise party--it took him three months to get ahold of all the people that he had to come, because he said your friends work, you had separate friends at work, had separate friends from your Lions Club, separate friends from this. He said, "It was hard as hell to round up everybody." But they all mean--they're all very important to me.

IRVIN: What are some of the hardest challenges you faced? And how did you get through them?

LEVENSON: The hardest challenge I had to face then and still have to face today is transportation and just some things that I have to do during the day. Someone said blindness is nothing more than an inconvenience. Those are the truest words that have ever been spoken.

For example, when you are in your home and you drop something on the floor, you look down and you see it and you pick it up. Not me. Nuh-uh. A lot of times I will go down on all fours, hands and knees, and with my hands have to figure out where that item is. And it's never where you think it's going to be!

Going to different places--like here at the library, when we finish this I will go to the MARTA station across the street with assistance and pray that I remember enough about that MARTA station that's over there to get on the train and go out to the closest MARTA station to me and then take Uber to my apartment.

If I want to get something--there are some shirts that I want to buy. Now, one of my suppressed desires is motorcycles. I happen to love them. There's a psychologist who says, "You always love what you can't have." Well, I can't go out and buy a motorcycle and drive it. No, that ain't going to happen.

But I am the best advertisement Harley Davidson has. Well, there's this place in Marietta, a dealership that sells shirts. There's one in Roswell, too. But I want some shirts, but I want them from the place in Marietta. For weeks I've been wanting these shirts. I have yet to find someone who will drive me to Marietta to go pick those up. I will eventually, but it just it just takes a while.

If I want to go to the market, it's difficult to do. I have to plan in advance who's going to do this and when they're going to do it and how much time they have to do. Like last night, I was at a concert and I asked this friend of mine who wanted to go to the concert. I said, "Do you mind stopping at Publix on the way back? I need to pick up a few things."

I have to divide what I want, because I can't spend a lot of time in a market because people just don't want to do that. They'll come and go quickly or whatever. But they don't want to spend the time you normally would spend in a supermarket looking for things. I have to do it quickly. It's almost like a surgical strike: Come and get what you want and leave.

Same thing with any department store. I love Lenox Square. I used to walk all over the place when I could see better. Can't do that anymore. So I miss it. Though, transportation and getting things is about the thing that I miss the most or find hardest to deal with.

IRVIN: What do you find has changed the most from when you were a child who was visually impaired, as to when you are now an adult who is visually impaired.

LEVENSON: Technology. Technology now is absolutely incredible. Technology in the '50s was basically the radio, the television, the typewriter, and that you that was it. Technology now, being able to communicate in many different ways.

Radio and television, that's still around. I have two TV sets. They're glorified radios. I can't see the screen anymore, but I listen to them, and I wouldn't know what to do without them.

Cellphones, what we now use as a cellphone and take for granted, in the '50s and '60s, you would mention that and people would laugh at you and say, "Buck Rogers! They'll never do that kind of thing in this century." Technology has made life so much simpler.

Now, I don't deal with the internet all that well. I tell people that I've tried to order a shirt from Target when I was learning how to do that kind of stuff. And by the time I got to the end of the cart, the check was in my cart. I don't know how I did it. I wound up buying four shirts. Of course, I eliminated that and didn't buy any of it. I don't shop on the

internet because I don't know how to do it very well. And besides, if I want to buy a shirt, I like to go to the store and pick it out and look at it as best I can see it and buy it.

I don't want--Amazon is good. That's fine. Let's not shortchange them. They're good for what they're worth. And I've used them. Other friends have ordered stuff for me, and I love getting packages. But nothing to me takes the place of going to a store, whether it be Macy's or Target or Wal-Mart or Saks or any place and going to the stores. I used to know all of the sales clerks at Lenox Square. They would save me stuff that they wanted me to look at. Not anymore. It's just a whole different world.

IRVIN: Well, thank you so much for talking with me today, Stuart. It's been a pleasure to have you.

LEVENSON: I'm just getting started.

(both laughing)