

Our Stories, Our Lives

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

GLASS-002

Vashaun Jones interviewed by Stephanie Irvin

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IRVIN: Hello. My name is Stephanie Irvin and I'm going to have a conversation with Vashaun Jones for "Our Stories, Our Lives," an oral history project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is July 24th, and this is being recorded at the Georgia Radio Reading Service in Atlanta, Georgia.

JONES: Hey what's up everybody? It is Vashaun Jones and I am here to tell my story, and it's a very, very interesting one.

A lot of people discuss various things, especially looking at the Facebook and YouTube and all of the social media and, you know, they talk about items and, you know, life. And it's a great journey, and it started for me born three months premature in Portsmouth, Virginia. And I was at a race to come out, I guess. I had nystagmus, or astigmatism, where my eyes would shake. And I was cross-eyed and I just had a lot of eye issues due to premature birth. And, you know, a lot of people they talk about the successes; they say things like "successful business owner" and you, know, they talk about the Rolls Royce or the Bentley or the private jet, and they never see the failure.

They never see the start of that person, how they evolved. And so this is my start. This is my long, long streams of failures to get to this point. And you might say, "Well, what is this point?" Right here today as I said to record my story, at 42 years old I've accomplished all of my dreams. I have all of the toys that I wanted. I have great relationships. I was able to start several successful companies. I've been able to help thousands of people all around the world. I've travel to any place that, you know, I've always wanted to go to that I've seen with my eyes closed, I was able to realize with my eyes open at some point in life. And my goal has always been to help enough people get what they wanted out of life, and I knew that I would always have what I wanted out of life. And that definitely stands true.

You'll hear stories about my divorce. You'll hear my story about bankruptcy. You'll hear my story about never graduating the 10th grade. You will hear my story about being blind and you hear the failures in business that I had to be able to sit here today to tell you that you can do it.

And so what I'm most known in my community of disabled individuals is for the encouragement, the empowerment and the ability to assist with equipping those of us with disabilities to be able to live with greater success, do more, and be excellent at the

things that we want to accomplish in our hearts. Finding or creating work that is meaningful, purposeful, and profitable is my mantra.

It's literally a dream come true for me.

So again, my name is Vashaun Jones. I was born three months premature in Portsmouth, Virginia. I had a total of 16 eye surgeries, none of them actually correcting the issue. And each one with great hope of success, and each one of them failing, just caused more and more problems and I became blind early on in life.

It was exciting because I became blind and then I got my sight back, and that was due to lots of prayer and lots of going back and forth to specialists. And that was like the one time that my surgery was successful but it took a doctor, Doctor Sponaugle and Doctor Valone who are from the UK to literally give me this secret surgery that had been working over in the UK in the United States and they said, "Hey, we can pretty much get your sight back." And they did, and it was stable. And for years I was able to see, but they would always tell me you could literally step off a curb and be blind. And me being a young boy wanting to play, wanting to be out there in the world, wanting to be normal, I went out there and I played sports and I got hit in the eye and I had a detached retina in one eye, and I didn't learn from that, right? Failure--didn't learn from that, and went out again and was playing sports and I got hit in the other eye, and lost my sight yet again. And it was it was one of those things that you like man, I'm plunged back into this world of darkness all because of being hardheaded. And that's kind of the storyline of my life; it's always been pushing the boundaries, seeing that I could do something despite people telling me that I couldn't.

And I think outside of just not listening to my parents and not listening to the doctor on proper care and not playing sports and, you know, from that point, early on, they told me, "You're not going to be normal; you can't play sports like other kids." And I just, just didn't believe it. I wouldn't succumb to that type of mentality. If somebody else was doing it, that I felt that I could do it--not say do it better, but do it different, but still be able to do it.

And that was kind of my first bout with failure, and the second was third grade. Miss Frank, she say, "If you don't straighten up your act, I'm going to fail you!" And I did not believe her. But she was the type of person, she would say, "You catch my drift?"

She was like super old school. And like I said, I'm 42 so imagine me in the third grade it's like like old, old school, right? So I kept playing. I wanted to be the class clown, wanted everybody to, you know, laugh at my jokes. And come the end of third grade year, the joke was on me--failed. So like, you know, how do you how do you recover from that? You know, failing was something that my parents did not tolerate at all! Failure? Man, no! And I was in my room literally the whole summer as a punishment for failing the third grade. I looked out the window and I was able to, you know, see and hear all the kids in the neighborhood playing every day of the summer until I went back to third grade to say, "You know what? I'm not gonna make that mistake again. I'll make

some new mistakes, but I'm not going to fail school--period. Dot." And so it was like my first failure.

And I'm visually impaired. I'm blind. I'm visually impaired. I'm blind. And, you know, what's the difference? Well blind, for me, I can't see anything; that's the state of my eyesight now. Visually impaired, you know, you still can be cool. You walk around. You don't have a cane. You know, life is almost OK, you know, and I've been able to see and I've driven and purchased cars and all that great stuff. And so I'm lucky in that.

But I would say my second failure--and there was some micro failures you know, down through my journey--but there's a core premise that I want everyone that's able to listen to this has to understand is that failure is inevitable. You're gonna fail. It's what you do with the failure, how you fail forward, that is going to propel you to where you want to be. And just as a side bar, the reason why I get to help so many individuals is for that particular reason. You have to know what you want to be in order for you to be able to make it happen.

And so my next failure comes--major failure, I guess you can call it--was the 10th grade. And I had to make a decision because for me, in the time that I grew up, going to school was a direct correlation to the amount of money that you would make. And I, from the age of 8, has always been taught with both my parents to work, to earn, to earn your allowance, to earn your keep. And my mom always told me, "At 18 you'll have to get out and face the world. And the world is reality, and reality is going to smack you in the face, and you have to be ready for it."

Now in the 10th grade, you know, and I'm a great student, you know, I learned how to learn, number one, and I learned how to, for lack of a better phrase, manipulate the teachers. You know, I knew you know you bring them an apple and, you know, you tell them that dress looks good and, you know, all of that and you stood a better chance of having good grades versus.

So I drop out of high school at 10th grade, you know. And on my high school wall it said, "Believe, achieve and succeed," you know, and nothing in the education, all the IEPs, all the teachers who didn't know what to do with me, you know, they didn't know. They couldn't, you know, just learn this and hopefully life will work out. But I looked at if it was a direct correlation to the amount of money that I was wanting to make in the future. I was already doing it. I was knocking on doors selling newspaper subscriptions in the 10th grade. I was making \$400 a week, you know. And it was hourly--I had to go out and kill it, (chuckles) literally--not literally but, you know, and bring it home. I had to, you know, sell this subscription, right then at the door, get the money, turn it in, and then at the end of the week, I would get a paycheck. And those skills taught me so much more than what I was getting in school. And then, at that time they kept saying, "Well computers are the future," but we had no computers. So it's computers are the future, and this is what you're telling me, but that's not what is happening in school, nowhere. I mean in in Virginia, it was a disconnect for me.

And I always felt that whenever I told this story in life, and this is like the first time, that it would be a failure. And it was actually the most empowering thing that happened in my life because I realize that I control my destiny. A degree didn't control it. A educator didn't control it. I had the ability to go out there and make it happen.

So second failure was super, super empowering. The first one was third grade, and it was never to repeat the same mistake again--that was the lesson out of it. And so you fast forward to business.

I again have always worked in corporate. I work for MCI WorldCom. I was the center director, lead 20, 30 managers, 300 people reporting. You know, and that was great corporate lifestyle was cool. You kind of learn and adapt and speak the language, and do the whole song and dance. And, you know, but it was it was phony. It was, you know, it was it my authentic me. I realized that I would be great at whatever I put my mind to and so I left. And I said--well, my dad always drilled to me, he said, "It doesn't matter whether you taking out the trash or whether you're fixing sandwiches at Subway," he said, "find out what that man is doing to get his supplies and to employ his people, and then you mirror it and you can do the same thing." And so I started a business. It was in collections. And in my book, if you help enough people get what you want, this story is fully fleshed out.

But I realized in starting a business that there was a lot more involved than just saying, "Hey, I have a business name." There was a lot more involved than just having a business; it was experience, it was relationships, it was having a great product, it was being able to assist and go above and beyond. And none of those things I knew; I just thought the act of having a business was going to propel me forward. And so I failed. I failed miserably. I put a lot of money into a great idea. But, going back to my third grade lesson, I never made the same mistakes again. I knew business would work. So I tried it again. It failed. It failed for a different reason. So I tried it again. And it worked.

And it worked for all the reasons that I failed in the past. Lesson: Don't give up on your dreams; they're your dreams, not the government's dreams. So I sold that business because I wanted to do something different. I wanted to elevate because I failed before. I grew something and I'd seen that dream realized, and I want to do it again, but now I want to do it in a different state. I want to do it in a different state of mind. I want to do it in a whole other atmosphere just to prove that what I knew was actually exactly what I knew.

So I go back to Virginia. I open up a business a mile away from the beach. I'm visually impaired. I'm married. I just left corporate at the highest level for the second time. And I start up this business; it was collections. You know, calling people, "Hey, this is Vashaun Jones calling from xyz. I calling about your past due BellSouth Bill. Is this something that you want to pay today in full or should we set you up on a payment arrangement?" That type of work.

And it was exciting because I was back killing it and bringing it home. What I produced, the work that I put in, was the result of what I got back. A lot different than going to work and working for someone else and fulfilling their dream. It was like I could literally sit here and say, "I want to make a thousand dollars today." And I could sit down and map it out. So if I'm going to work 10 hours, then need to make \$100 an hour, you know, da da da da. And then you make \$200 a hour and you're like, "Man, I'm ahead of a game!" You know, and this is where the whole bonus-ing comes in, right? You had these goals and you set them and then you like overachieve them and like everything you overachieve were bonuses. So I got in that particular realm, used to bonuses, extra, you know. The check and all that was good. But you know, and you just get used to it.

All right. Working for someone else never really worked for me. And I sell the business and I get a divorce. You know and the divorce was like super cool. It was like, "Hey when we met each other 10 years ago, we were just latching on to life and, you know maybe this, like, was a mistake." And I'm like, man, my parents never got divorced. I mean they're together now, 36 years later. You know, and I feel that ping of failure, you know. And so I get the divorce and I'm at this crossroad because now I can't see and I'm divorced and I'm blind and I'm about to lose it all--I'm talking about American Express cards and Mercedes Benz and all this stuff that life dictates to you and say you're supposed to have and if you don't, then you're a failure. And I'm blind. So I haven't--Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder were the only blind people successful that I knew, and I didn't even know them. And so I'm like homeless in this whole thing.

When you kind of look at it, it's like this world that you're just thrust into and you're literally just trying to feel your way around it. And I came across the National Federation of the Blind. I came across the Georgia Library for Accessible Services and Stella Cone. And literally those two entities along with the Center for the Vision Impaired and Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Savannah Center for the Blind and Low Vision and, you know, all the blind people that I came across changed my life. Changed my life because I wanted to learn this thing called "blindness" so bad that I wanted to become a master of it. And once I became a master, I said, "I want to teach other people how to take this disability, this failure, this thing that's looked at by the world's optics as something that needs to be pitied, and I want to turn it into something so powerful, that it cannot be ignored."

And I said to myself and I say to everybody I came across I said, "I'm going to learn one thing from every disabled person that I came across, and that's what is going to help me to help other individuals master their life." And so you have all these failures that amount to experience in life that allows you to be able to help someone because you went through the experience of being homeless, the experience of divorce, the experience of bankruptcy, the experience of educational systems, the experience of life. That's what allows you to help someone. If you never bump into anything, you'll never be able to guide anyone. And so that's the story of how I got here.

The question is what is the story of Vashaun Jones ten years from now? I'll be 52. I would have would have made tons more mistakes. I love making mistakes. I love failing.

I love when people say that I can't. It's empowering to be able to sit here and tell a story of failure so that someone else listening can look at it and say, "I'm going to fail, too." And just don't make the same mistake twice. Don't give up on your dream. If it's not working, find a way to make it work. My daughter, Ivy, graduated from Clark Atlanta--proud father, husband, two daughters. They told them her commencement speech, or told all the students, "Find a way or make a way." Life is not going to stop for us. It's not going to be accessible unless we make it accessible.

I remember Georgia Library for Accessible Services and Stella Cone and me having that first conversation like, "Man, we got to make all the libraries all across Georgia accessible!" You know, and she's like, "Well yeah, we got it. It's accessible. We'll have JAWS in every library." And, you know, and then I realized that, oh I'm like you know along with GLASS, that I'm like the only one that really wants it because nobody's going to the libraries to get all of this free education. And so my life has never been about me. You know it's always been about showing people that you can do it and whatever that "it" is, whatever it is.

You know, I have tons and tons of stories and I guess, you know, in the business side you would call them case studies--people that you've been able to help, you know. I don't know. It's right now for me, for Vashaun Jones for me to tell my story, it's like so--(sighs) --it's like being on a beach all day and you have nothing but time to think and solve and implement and ask people, "Hey, can you help me with this? This is the idea that I'm having." That's what excites me.

When my parents come to my house 42 years later--and mind you, I left home at 17. I left home at 17. I was at that point probably make an 800 bucks a week, couldn't tell me anything. And I said, "I will not come back home until I've made it in life." And to have my mom come a week ago in 2018, July, and she's walking around house. She's like, "Vashaun, you know, everything that a person wants when they retire," she's like, "you got it now. You can just retire." And I'm like, nah, you know, my mentors Zig Ziglar and Dave Ramsey, you know, they didn't retire. They died empty. You know they died giving and giving and giving.

You know and that's all I want to do I want to help enough people get what they want because I know a man with experience is not at the mercy of someone with an opinion. And I know that through helping you I'm inadvertently helping myself. And together, we can change the world. Thank you.

IRVIN: Thank you for sharing, Vashaun.