

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-003

Rita Harris interviewed by Stephanie Irvin

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IRVIN: Hello. My name is Stephanie Irvin and I'm going to have a conversation with Rita Harris for Our Stories, Our Lives: an Oral History Project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is July twelfth, and this is being recorded at the Morgan County Library.

HARRIS: Hi. I'm Rita Harris and I will be telling you my story. I was born and raised in a small town in Good Hope, Georgia. And even from childhood all the way up through teenage adolescence through adult, I have always been very, very outgoing. I consider myself as an adrenaline junkie. The only thing I fear is the fear of God. Nothing. I don't have fear of anything else. And I'm saying that to lead up to me being visually impaired.

The year of 2002 is when I became visually impaired. Let me back up a little. From 1997 up until 2002, I notice difficulty in my vision and I had gone to three different ophthalmologists and I was misdiagnosed all three times. And when there was a very significant decrease in my vision, I went to a retina specialist, and that's when I was correctly diagnosed with RP, which is known as Retinitis Pigmentosa. This was in 2002.

Well, from there my life changed drastically. I went from being this total outgoing social person full of adrenaline to being socially withdrawn. And I went through anger, depression, and it was a very, very hard transition from me. I would not go on any social outings or would not accept any invitations. I would always make up excuses to why I couldn't go, because in all honesty, I felt very ashamed of myself. I felt like I wasn't whole. It wasn't me.

And for a long time, I tried to hide it. It was like that. You know, you smile on the outside and you cry as you're dying on the inside. No one knew but my immediate family, which include my husband and my children. While I was in despair for such a long time, and like I said, I was just very, very angry. I was in denial. At first, I was in denial, because I didn't want to give up the things that I loved doing, which was working--I work in the school system assisting children with disabilities.

I loved shopping and I loved driving. I would drive to Timbuktu if I had to get somewhere. Reading poetry, dancing, are all things that I once loved to do, and it all had to come to a halt. I had to stop. So I went from being this totally independent outgoing person to being very dependent. I couldn't--If I was out in a restaurant, I couldn't even go to the ladies room without someone assisting me.

So that took a very, very hard toll on me in my life and where I was in the way I was thinking. And a lot of people didn't understand what I was going through, so that made it worse. I felt like I was in this alone, like I was on an island all by myself, and basically I was giving up. I was giving up on life. It got to a point to where I didn't want to live any longer. But I, you know--And after just, you know, being in that self-pity party and self-pity party, I always say your true personality always prevails, because I knew that is not me. That's not how God wanted me to live.

So I prayed and I prayed and I asked God to help me get out of that situation. Well, a person--a friend of mine--referred me to vocational rehabilitation services, and I was assigned a mobility trainer that came to my home three days a week. And he gave me a cane. I had no cane training, no daily living skills training prior to this. So he gave me issued me a cane and he would train me inside and outside of my home. And once I mastered that, we would leave home and go downtown and work on intersection crossing, going into department stores working on independent shopping. And I did really good, because when I saw the difference that it would make in my life, then those light bulbs started going off in my head again. "Yes! I can do this! I can get back to the way I used to be!"

So I was completely on a mission, and for the ones that know me, they know when I set my mind to going on a mission, I do not let anything stop me or get in the way. I do not take no for an answer. So I was I was headed forward. After about three months of training, he told me--said "You have done exceptionally well" and asked me if I had heard of Leader Dog for the Blind, which is located in Rochester Hills, Michigan. And I had not. Well, he recommended for me to get connected with the Leader Dog for the Blind. So I said sure.

In order to get connected with Leader Dog, I would have to display a certain level of mobility skills and using a white cane, because this was in an accelerated orientation and mobility training week long class that Leader Dog was offering. So we continued to work on it. He had to actually video me--doing intersection crossings, going in and out of businesses using my cane, going up and down flights of stairs, crossing four way stop signs--to prove that I had a certain level of cane skills. Well it was submitted, the application was submitted as well as the video, and I was accepted.

So I flew to Rochester Hills, Michigan, for a week. And you have to go alone. No one can go with you. And that was my first time--I had flown many times, but that was my first time flying solo since becoming visually impaired, let alone staying in a strange place for a whole week without someone familiar being there with me. There at Leader Dog, there were six of us in a class, and each one of us had our one-on-one instructor. My instructor was Dr. Linn. He was awesome. He was a veteran.

He--and I didn't realize this at the time, but you're with them spending so many hours that week with them, they're doing more than just teaching you mobility orientation--mobility skills. They're actually observing you, and they're recording your every move, how you walk, the strides that you take, how fast you walk, the way you think. They're

analyzing your thought process, the way you think mentally, the way you are physically, your personality, your character. And I didn't know this at the time, but going on through the week long class, he saw my potential. He saw that I could be stubborn. I could be very adamant. And he pushed me to the limit. He introduced skills and techniques to me that I didn't even know existed and I didn't even know I had it in me to do it.

We would go downtown Rochester Hills, Michigan, to a headquarters building, a place I'd never gone before, and we would walk like three or four different blocks. And learning--He'd tell me the name of the streets. And also, back up, he taught me compass direction which is, at any--when you're walking anywhere, using your mental compass direction--north, south, east and west--at any given time when you're walking, you should be able to stop and point back into the direction of where you started from. And I learned mental compass directions.

So one day we was walking and we had gone about four different blocks. And he said, "Okay your job is to take us back to where we started from." And I said "Okay! I can do that." So I pointed back using my mental compass direction. He said "Wait a minute, you have to take us back a different route in which we came." And I couldn't believe he was asking me to do that. I had to do it. So I gathered my thoughts and I was able to do it using my mental compass direction and all the techniques that he had taught me to learn.

He also introduced night walking, was something I had never done before because it is totally different walking at night. Keeping in mind, I should have mentioned this earlier, that I am not completely blind. I'm visually impaired. I'm legally blind. I am totally blind in my left eye and I only have less than 13 percent left in my right eye. So I have a little bit of vision. I can see shapes. I can't tell colors. I can't see details when I'm looking at a person. I can't see what their face looks like. So I go by shapes and feel and sounds.

But night vision is totally different because that less than thirteen percent that I have in the daytime is completely dark at night and I can't see anything. So that was really challenging for me to learn to walk and go from point A to point B independently, without someone assisting me, was challenging. But I mastered that as well. We also went to malls that was like three or four different stories, floors, and he told us to drop an anchor, meaning when you enter into a large place that have multiple floors, you listen for a specific sound that you can use to know that that's where you entered in, so you listen for that sound when you're trying to get back to the point to go out.

He would give an assignment. For instance, I had to find Nordstrom, which was on the fourth floor, and I had to do this alone. I was able to ask someone for directions, but they was not able to guide me or lead me. I learned to do that, which also I learned to be an advocate for myself, meaning asking for help when you need help, but not allowing someone to take your hand and guide you or pull you because you have to be in control of yourself at all times. They just need to verbally give you directions, and then you take it from there. That was completely new to me, as well. So I mastered that.

At the end of the week, he asked me if I had considered becoming a guide dog handler. And I told him no I had not. I never owned a dog. I didn't know much about dogs, to be honest. And he said, "Well, you have done so well with this. You would be an excellent candidate for a guide dog handler."

I said no, I don't think so. No way, no how, I won't do that. But he ignored me because, again, he saw my potential. The last day of class he arranged for a guide dog trainer to come in and bring a dog, and for me to work with the dog. Well I had one day to see the difference, and immediately I fell in love with it, because I realized that a guide dog will let you know when there's a moving vehicle coming, or won't allow you to bump into something or fall into a hole or step off of a curb. But a cane can't tell you those things. The cane totally depends on the technique that you're using.

But a guide dog, you can you can move more faster, which that is how I live my life: in the fast lane, because I do a lot of traveling as well. So I fell in love with it, and when I had to go back the following day, I went to the airport and all, he asked me then "Would you like to get a guide dog?" I said absolutely. Normally it takes six months to a year to be accepted into the guide dog program, but when I returned home I got a call two days later saying that I had been highly recommended and they had a program set up in Naples, Florida, within the next two weeks, and would I'd be willing to go?

And by this time, my adrenaline is going again! I'm going back to my old self! You know, it's only poppin' now! I said sure. So two weeks later I flew to Naples, Florida, to train for my guide dog. And it was amazing, because you don't know. It's almost like carrying a child, and you're giving birth and you don't have the ultrasound to know the gender of the baby. It's a total surprise when the baby gets here. Because they don't tell you the breed of the dog, the color, the dog's name or the gender. They don't tell you anything. That first day--the first two days, you are in class, orientation class, where they are talking verbally, explaining everything to you.

The second day, we went to our hotel rooms, and the trainer came in with our dogs. And it's one on one, because you're in your individual room with your trainer. And that's how you meet your dog. And when I--My dog's name is Madden, and when I saw him--he's a chocolate lab. He was three years old at the time--He was two years old at the time. I've had him for three years, so he's five years old now. And I honestly--I don't know who was more nervous, me or the dog, because this was new to him. He was going to be leaving the trainer whom he had known for the past year going with me, a new owner, and to a whole different new environment. And I didn't know anything about dogs, so this was just totally new to me.

And I always tell people when they ask me that when we met and the trainer left out the room and Madden sat on the floor and he held his head to the side and looked at me, and I sat down on the floor in front of him and held my head to the side and looked at him. And I said, "Oh boy, you don't know what to do with me and I don't know what to do with you, but by the grace of God we're going to make it through this thing."

But we did. We worked vigorously eight hours a day together training. We would walk at least four or five miles per day in training. He was trained, but I had to be trained. I had to learn all the basic commands--stay, calm, forward, left, right. Had to learn his pace of walking. He had to learn to adapt to my pace of walking. But one of the good things is I learned one of the reasons why they observe you so closely is because when you're matched up with the guide dog, they match the dog perfectly to fit the client and their lifestyle.

For instance, I'm always on the go, always on the move, so I'm moving fast. My days could be very unpredictable, so I have to have a dog that can adapt to a change at any time. And there's no telling what I'm around. He has to be able to handle loud noises, 'cause I'm very adventurous, and I have a personality. I have a very strong-willed personality, very adamant, and so I have to have a dog the same way, and vice versa. Because with my dog, he has a strong-willed personality. Someone who is easygoing and laidback, he will just completely take advantage of him. Just like a child will. They learn what they can get away with. So he has to have someone that can really handle him as well as me as well.

Because, for one thing, if he senses danger--for instance, if we're walking and there's something he senses of danger, then he is so adamant he will just put on breaks. And with me being strong-willed, then I would say come on boy, let's go. We gotta go. Let's go. But with him being the same temperament as me, he wouldn't budge. And I learned that he's letting me know that there's something unsafe for me and that's why he refuses to go forward. So it kind of works--You know, it's a twofold situation. But he is awesome. We go everywhere now together. Because of him, I have gained my confidence back, my self-esteem, which leads to that independence. And I have to give my guide dog, Madden, a lot of that credit.

Because of him, my life has totally turned around. I thought it was good before I started losing my vision, but my life is actually absolutely wonderful now. It's better than ever. I have a new life. I'm involved in so many things because of my newfound confidence and independence. I am--I have a bucket list, and I have been chipping away at that bucket list and I'm almost to the end of it. I have gone--Since I got Madden, I have gone to Italy. I've always wanted to go to the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. I did that. The gondola boat ride in Venice. Going to Hawaii. I've always wanted to fly over an active volcano. I told you, I am adventurous. I did that. Let's see. I've gone horseback--I do horseback riding. I'm trying to name them all. Kayaking, tandem bike riding, and this is all since I've lost most of my vision.

I'm trying to think of anything else I'm leaving out. Bungee jumping, ziplining. Madden and I actually went to Orlando, Florida, alone, because we travel solo a lot. And I had gone to Universal Studios before, you know, with my family when I had sight. But I just wanted to do something challenging, so I went to Orlando, Florida, alone--just Madden and I--and we went to Universal Studios, just the two of us. By ourselves. And it was so much fun, but I really--We wrote rides together, and the ones that he couldn't ride, they

will accommodate and they had the kennel cages brought up right there and had someone to watch him. But he was able to ride with me the King Kong ride. He was able to ride Earthquake--I mean, he rode a lot of rides with me. That's why I had to have a dog that can handle adventure and noises.

I've gone to Atlanta Motor Speedway and did the Richard Petty driving experience where I got in a racecar and had a racecar driver to drive me. I've done that. Oh gosh, what else? There's so much. I feel like I'm leaving some things out. I travel all over. I am looking forward this month to going to Africa. Madden won't be able to go with me, but because of my independence I'm able to do it. I will be going to Africa to do mission work, and I will also be going to visit the school for the Blind as well.

I am Vice President of Madison's Lions Club. I am on the ADA committee at Hartsfield Jackson International Airport, as well. And Madden and I just completed a project with Hartsfield Jackson International Airport, where I told my story and I was creative with it because, by the way, I do poetry as well. And I wrote my journey. It's called Journey to Light, my story of my time being vision impaired. I put it in poetry, and it was chosen, so Madden and I will be on a display, a twenty four foot wall on the international concourse F at the Atlanta airport where there's pictures of us and graphic art, designs of Madden and I, and the poem. And it will also be printed in Braille form as well. So that's exciting.

I do motivational speaking. I go into classrooms and do presentations on the visually impaired, because my main thing is encouraging, encouraging, encouraging, because no matter what your obstacles are, you can overcome those obstacles. You have to believe in yourself, where I--My motto is you reach for the stars. You don't allow your disability to handicap you. And you don't have to have a disability to reach for the stars. You can do anything you set your mind to. You just have to be dedicated and determined. And you also have to have that mind of persevering. And you can do anything you set your mind to. Because I look at myself where I started as to where I am now, and I just thank God for my mindset, my willingness, and my confidence and gaining that independence back. And that's what I try to instill in everyone. Only entertain positive, because positive would take you far. Negative would take you nowhere. It will keep you in that hole, in that place of darkness, whether you're sighted or visually impaired.

Now I'm trying to think if there's anything else I'm leaving out--the most important thing! Through my whole ordeal of difficult transitioning from becoming independent to dependent, God placed it in my spirit to start--I had a vision to start an organization. The organization is called Living Life Team Incorporated. We are 501c3 organization, and it is an organization that supports the blind and visually impaired, because I felt as though I was alone, I was ashamed, and I want to help others go through that transition with less difficulty, so they feel like that there are others that understand. I'm not in this thing alone. So that's what I did with Living Life Team. It has been in existence since 2016.

Now we have grown tremendously. We have a great group. We have a board of directors and I have about a total of 15 blind and vision impaired individuals that come

very month. We meet on the second Thursday mornings every month at the Morgan County Library. I bring in different resource speakers, different activities, sports. We go on trips. We go on field outings as well. We have wonderful social gatherings. We do open topic discussions. We do goal-setting, so anyone who is having difficulty or dealing with some things, then we come together collaborative as a group to help that person work through what it is that they're going--what their struggles are.

And we really become one family. You know, when one's going through something we all do. So we try to come together and help. We have a great, great group. But Living Life Team is a wonderful organization. I practically eat, sleep, and breathe it. It is my baby. Everything I do, I'm representing Living Life Team. No matter what I'm doing. When I go to Africa, I'm going to a school for the blind and I'm going to be representing Living Life Team as well. That's Living Life Team.

Is there anything else I'm leaving out? I hope I'm not leaving anything out. There's so much going on in my life right now. I do motivational speaking. I also had an opportunity on last month to go to a Montessori school and talk to the students as well on being visually impaired and overcoming challenges as well, so that was that was really interesting. We have a web site, which is [www.livinglifeteam.net](http://www.livinglifeteam.net), as well as a Facebook page, which is Living Life Team as well.

Thank you.

IRVIN: Well, thank you for taking the time to talk with me, Rita. You're a very interesting person. You have a good day.

HARRIS: Thank you.