

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-004

Empish Thomas interviewed by Stephanie Irvin

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IRVIN: Hello. My name is Stephanie Irvin and I'm going to have a conversation with Empish Thomas for "Our Stories, Our Lives" an oral history project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is August sixteenth, 2018, and this is being recorded at the Georgia Radio Reading Service in Atlanta, Georgia.

THOMAS: My name is Empish Thomas, and it's interesting how life's journeys take you around in a complete circle. When I was sixteen years old, I worked at a federal government agency called the Office for Civil Rights Department of Health and Human Services. It was one of those federal government jobs that a lot of high school kids did during the summer and also during the school year for an internship where we worked part-time and went to school part-time. And I was a clerk typist. This is back in the '80s, so I'm kind of dating myself a little bit. So this was before PCs and personal computers and iPads and tablets and stuff where someone, or co-workers, rather, I should say, would give a clerk typist their work because they typed it all in longhand, and I would type up everything--memos, correspondence, letters, things along that line--and then hand them back to my colleagues.

Well, in that position I worked with civil rights investigators. And so I typed up investigative reports and things along that line. And I also typed up voluntary compliance reports, things in that area where people would voluntarily comply with the civil rights laws which is the Civil Rights Act of 1964, section 504, Rehabilitation Act of things along that line. I had co-workers who were disabled. My supervisor was in a wheelchair. I had one co-worker who had cerebral palsy, and I had one co-worker who was blind.

Now you may be asking why am I talking about all of that. Well, when I was sixteen years old I was totally sighted. I did not have any problems with my eyesight. I had no idea that later on, ten years later fast-forward, I would be totally blind.

It was just a summer job, and it was a great opportunity to be able to work, get valuable work experience, but I had no idea that that experience at that particular agency would help me as an adult and would further me along my life journey later on. So, as I said before, it's funny how life takes you a whole circle around in the different things that you deal with. So I really appreciate that experience, that time, the folks I worked with because they really helped me later on in life.

Now fast-forward ten years later. It's 1995, 1996. I just graduated from college. I went to school in Tallahassee at Florida A&M University. It's May--yeah, I'm graduating in May--that's correct--(laughs)--trying to remember when I graduated. And I just got my degree. I just got a promising job at a PR firm in Atlanta, Georgia, so I'm very excited about coming to the Atlanta area to work in my field. I got a degree in journalism, specifically in public relations.

And so I'm moving here. I'm very excited starting my career, starting my new life. I'm young. I'm single. I'm ready to go. And within six months' time of moving here, I start to lose my vision. It starts off kind of slow but kind of fast where I have problems with sunlight. I'm like Dracula, you know, I can't deal with the sunlight; I have to wear dark wraparound glasses even indoors. I have to keep the shades down, the curtains. I can't deal with indoor light. And my roommate is telling me, "Empish, you gotta go to the doctor and see what's going on with your eyes."

So I went to the hospital, went to the doctor's office. And they couldn't tell me exactly what the problem was so they referred me to a specialist who referred me to another specialist who finally told me, "This is what you have: You have uveitis which is a condition that causes inflammation in the back of the eye near the retina, and we've got to get you some medication to get the inflammation down."

I had never heard of this condition before, didn't know anything about it, had never had any problems with my eye site prior to that time. Nobody in my family had any types of vision problems. Didn't even wear glasses. So I was quite in shock by this development, but was glad I had found a doctor who knew what it was and could give me some medical treatment.

So I started this journey of taking medication, going to doctors, surgeries, low-vision therapy--all of those kinds of things. I ended up losing my public relations position that I had gotten, and started temping and trying to kind of figure out what to do with my career. I was temping at a corporate company working in H.R. where they ended up hire me on fulltime, and so I was able to get really great benefits, medical insurance, and that sort of thing. And they also provided the accommodations that I needed. And, go back to that job I had when I was sixteen, I remember those laws I used to sit and type all day when I was a clerk typist--that section 504, that Rehabilitation Act, civil rights laws. I remembered all of that--accommodations and things like that--for people in the workforce. And I remember that co-worker that I had that was blind and the types of technology she used. Even though it was in the '80s, a lot of what she used at her job, I started to be able to use, too. And I was able to share with my supervisor that I needed a CCTV, which is a closed captioning device, that I needed magnification on my computer screen, handheld magnifiers, special pins and dark lined paper, even using a white cane because that's what I saw her use. So I knew that a person with a vision

impairment could work, could thrive, could live and function. I didn't know all of the things that she had done to do it, but I saw her do it every day when I was a teenager.

So my supervisor, I was very fortunate to work in an environment where my supervisor and my employer as a whole were very open-minded to working with me and helping me to stay in my position at work. But my vision got worse. So those low vision devices that magnification on my computer, the CCTV, those special pins and paper, it didn't work anymore. I magnify my screen and I magnify my screen, and it's not working. And so now I'm having to go to my supervisor and say, "Hey, you know, I need to go through a rehabilitation program. I need to take time off from work and learn more skills so I can come back to the job and continue to work." And she was still very responsive to that, very supportive of that. So I took off a year from my job and I went through a vision rehabilitation program where I learned how to use screen reading technology. I learned how to use a white cane. I learned some braille. I learned daily living skills. A mobility instructor came out to my job site, taught me how to catch the bus, how to get into my office building, how to get home safely from work--all of those kinds of skills so that I could be able to return back to work and keep working.

I went through all of that, came back to work successfully then I got downsized. (laughs) Well actually we all got downsized, so it wasn't anything personal. So then I'm out of a job, (chuckles) not sure what to do next. This is 1996--no, 1999. So I said, "Well what do I do with myself?" I was working. I'm now totally blind. I've lost all my vision. I'm what now, twenty nine, twenty eight years old and I'm not sure where to go next. But I still had a love for writing and journalism. I didn't really get a chance to do much in it because I lost my vision right out of college. So I decided that's what I wanted to do, but I wasn't sure how well I'd be received because now I'm blind. And who's going to hire a blind journalist? I didn't think many people would really be receptive to that. So I went into freelancing where I could work from home and kind of do it a little bit behind the scenes. I went online; I learned about freelancing gigs; I set up a Web site and I started pitching stories to editors in magazines and newspapers and kind of building up a little bit of a freelance business. And I was quite successful with it. I had a little part-time job at a small nonprofit, so it didn't quite, you know, financially it wasn't all of my earnings, but it wasn't half bad. For a couple of years I did this along with the work I did with my nonprofit, and it was a great experience for me; it was a great esteem booster--it helped me to feel really great about the fact that I could do this work. And it allowed me to use my degree that I had worked so hard for; I was actually able to take advantage of it.

And then a lot of the editors I worked for had no idea that I was blind (laughs) which I thought was kind of interesting. So, but then the market crashed--it was 2007, 2008--the economy tanked. Things were going kind of crazy. A friend of mine told me about a position at a nonprofit at a vision rehab center--the very place where I got my training. And I went there to work for several years--about ten years, actually--and I started doing public relations, marketing, public outreach to the community telling them about the

agency and how they could access services and the programs that we had to offer at the time, and did a little bit of journalism there as well. So I stayed in that position for several years.

And so here we are today and I'm back freelancing again at home. So I've come back around full circle again, as I shared before. It's funny how life is--you go around in these different circles on your life's path and life's journey of constantly coming around and around again. And you learn these different valuable lessons about how life can take you topsy-turvy. But you come back around and you learn new things and you meet great people networking and building great relationships. And I've been really fortunate to have that.

Now outside of my work, because work is not all the things that I do, I'm a great lover of books. I grew up going to the library all the time. My parents were great lovers of books and reading newspapers, magazines. When I was in third grade, my dad bought me my very first set of *World Book* encyclopedias. I don't know if you guys remember those, but I had a set of *World Book* encyclopedias is when I was in the third grade.

And so I still love books and literature. I subscribe to the NLS talking book library, Bookshare, audio books--so I love the library. I'm in part of two different book clubs--one, we go out to eat once a month; the other one is that my local community library where we meet once a month. So I'm always reading and checking out different things. I'm a big lover of movies. I particularly love audio-described movies, so I'm at the movie theater on a constant basis all the time trying to check out the latest and the greatest flick that's out. I love Netflix audio-described movies as well, too. So I check those out at home if I'm not able to get to the local movie theater.

And I love spending time with my friends, both sighted and blind. I've built up some really great relationships over the years, so I've been able to really enjoy spending wonderful time with friends. And my family, as well, has been very supportive of my life and the different things that I've been involved in.

Lately I've gotten involved with my local city council--not so much being in a particular position there, but more so getting involved in the way of just becoming more aware and becoming more educated in how city government works. Sometimes you're not always able to impact government on the higher levels, but local level government, you can make a difference.

And so I've been able to get to know the mayor of my city, my city councilwoman--I've gotten to know her and attend her meetings. We've had many conversations about changes that can take place in my city, and really making a positive role and a positive impact there which has been really encouraging to me to learn more about how to advocate educating myself on how local city government works. I never would have thought I'd be involved in something like that, but I made a decision this year to really

get involved in that. And it's been a really great experience for me. So I'm real excited about that. Each day I try to learn something new, reach out to someone new, and take advantage of all the opportunities that exist for me. So it's been a great journey.

IRVIN: Well thank you so much for sharing your story with us, Empish.

THOMAS: You're welcome.