

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-006

Bridgette Suttle interviewed by Stephanie Irvin

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IRVIN: Hello. My name is Stephanie Irvin, and I'm going to have a conversation with Bridgette Suttle for "Our Stories: Our Lives," an oral history project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is October ninth [2018], and this is being recorded at GLASS Atlanta, the recording studio in Atlanta, Georgia. Thank you, Bridgette, for being with me today.

SUTTLE: Thank you for having me. Well, I am an adopted and only child of what I thought to be the world's greatest parents. I was certainly reared and trained to be a super-achiever. My grandfather was blind from birth, and my parents and I often joked about how God created and made things because my blindness came later on in life, and it was something that was already very familiar to everyone in our family, so it wasn't it wasn't as big of a deal as maybe it should have been or as big of a deal as others took it.

Again, I was reared and trained to be a super-achiever. I did grow up right here in Atlanta, Georgia. And I often say that, although I was born in New Jersey, I came straight here to Grady Hospital, so I am a transplant Grady Baby. I went to high school here in Atlanta, Georgia; graduated from Riverwood High School. I later went on to Savannah State University in the fall of 1990. By the mid-nineties, I had graduated college; I had a baby and considered myself to be a young, up-and-coming corporate professional. I did eventually settle with a wireless provider as a master corporate trainer.

And my life continued on beautifully until some years later. Probably, when I was about thirty-five, I started to notice some things--noticed things with my vision. I knew some, probably seventeen years prior to that, I had been diagnosed with diabetes--type two diabetes. And from that point of diagnosis, I did absolutely nothing to maintain or control my diabetes diagnosis. And I didn't do anything because I felt fine. When I looked in the mirror, I felt like I looked fine--just really had no idea what was going on the inside of my body. Well, it certainly started to tell on me.

At about thirty-six, my vision started to severely blur, and this was due to an eye condition called diabetic retinopathy which, of course, is a condition caused by uncontrolled blood sugar levels. This eye condition, to date, has rendered me legally blind. After that, at the age of thirty-seven, my right foot was amputated--I stepped on a nail.

By the age of thirty-eight, I was absolutely broken. I was depressed and jobless. And I felt like, you know, how could a person with such wonderful parents and what I consider to be a beautiful life, you know, how in the world could I allow this to happen? I was totally devastated--just not devastated, but also in a wheelchair. And I sat in a wheelchair for three years just kind of allowing life and my weight and the fact that I had walked into the hospital but could not walk out--I had allowed those things to overtake me.

And, you know, the medical profession, they all told me, "Hey! You're healed!" You know, "Everything is back to normal." You know, but inside of my head I thought, well, how do you heal from going blind, like emotionally and mentally? And even, how do you heal from an amputated foot emotionally and mentally and even physically? I couldn't figure out how to get back in the game, and it was a game that, you know, I had been taught to perfect. And so, just there I sat. And, at the time, I didn't know the change that was happening, but there was a change that was coming. And I strongly believe it was due to what I call my "pushy, praying, meddling mama." She refused to allow me to accept defeat for myself.

So what she did is she got me involved with resources, first, through the Center for the Visually Impaired--that's also known as CVI, which is--it was a training and rehabilitation center for the blind. And there, I learned to cope, and I even learned to live with my visual impairment. I participated in various group and one-on-one therapy sessions. I also partook of courses that taught me to do things like launder my clothes, cook and prepare my foods, and even maintain and operate a computer, you know, with no sight.

From there, I learned about another resource, and that was disABILITY LINK. disABILITY LINK was a center of independent living that offers services and resources to people of the cross-disabilities community. So that means, no matter what your disability is, this place has something there to help you. From there, I learned to advocate for myself. I learned to read a situation according to the different sounds and maybe even the cadence of a person's voice. And that is just something that I did not have before losing my sight. So now, what you have before you, you have the voice of recovery right here. You know, this is the voice of independent living; I certainly am hope.

Again, I have a voice, and I'm determined to use it. I have learned to maintain my diabetes through what I eat, what I drink, and through exercise, which is something I absolutely hate, but it is absolutely--it is a necessary, especially in my world and in my life. I have now been walking with a prosthetic for over six years. I am no longer a crippled, below-the-knee amputee; I am now able to stand tall and strong with the strut of a proud peacock. Again, I am recovery. And what I'll say is my sight is extremely bad, yet my vision is crystal clear at this point in my life.

IRVIN: Thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today, Bridgette.

SUTTLE: You're welcome.