

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-008

Chris Vandeford interviewed by Stephanie Irvin

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IRVIN: Hello. My name is Stephanie Irvin, and I'm going to have a conversation with Chris Vandeford for "Our Stories, Our Lives," an oral history project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services, Georgia's talking book and braille library. It is December 11, 2018, and this is being recorded at GLASS Atlanta's recording studio in Atlanta, Georgia. Thank you, Chris, for being here today.

VANDEFORD: Awesome. Thank you for having me, Stephanie. Okay. My name, obviously you've heard is Chris Vandeford. I have been blind now or started to lose my vision in the beginning of 2015. What I can say is that it definitely took me by surprise when this all started happening. I was driving to work one day and noticed that the tire on a van was oval shaped. So this is a little strange, so you start to worry a little bit. You get to work, and I had my boss and his wife calm me down. I, later that evening, met with my wife discussed it with her and began the plans of what we were going to do.

So the next day we ended up going to an eye doctor out in Lawrenceville--I forget the name; please forgive me for that--but we went out there and not five minutes in they looked at my eyes and said that I needed to immediately go to an eye surgeon at Emory. And we tried to set up an appointment that day, but we were unable to due to being late in the evening, and Emory is one of the top eye facilities in the nation and it's constantly packed, as we learned over the next three years to now, you know.

We went the next day and I was told I was going--I had black spots on my eyes, and it was due to diabetic retinopathy and my blood sugar getting out of control. One thing I can say for people that are listening to this that if you ever go to an eye doctor and they tell you you have something going on with eyes and you should see a surgeon to have laser done to it to get rid of the spots, you should do it because, unfortunately for me, I had probably two to three years earlier been told when I was getting a new pair of glasses that I had spots on my eyes and I did nothing about it. I should have had the laser done. It's not like the surgery that you hear about to fix your eyes. It's to prevent your eyes from basically being ruined, your retina being pulled off. That is one thing that I can pass along to others that keep your sugars under control and, also, when your eye doctor tells you to do something, you should take care of it because it can change in a matter of no time.

Well, we went in to see the doctor, and they told us that I would need the laser done

and also possibility of other surgeries beyond that. Well, they put the anesthesia in my eye with a needle and they also coated my eye just to numb the pain before that. Well, unfortunately they didn't warn my wife, who was in there, who saw the Q-tip sticking out of my eye and turns and looks and says, "Oh God!" It scared her but it made her laugh, too, and it freaked me out, but it's also sort of a little bit of a comic relief right there in a tense moment. But after that, we sat around and we waited. And about an hour later, after the eye had numbed, we went and did the laser surgery.

The laser surgery--I had several of them done over the next three years, but the first one always takes you by surprise because it feels like you're being punched in the face by a professional boxer and your eye's on fire, even if you have the anesthesia in your eye. Beyond that moment and that day and being scared, I slowly got into the habit of going to the eye doctor over the next two to three years, not by choice of any matter or sort like that. They basically did eleven surgeries on my eyes. They put bubbles in there to keep the retina up. They cut pieces of the retina out. They did anything that they could to save my eyesight, but what happened was like a slow train crash or car crash that you can't stop. You're doing everything in your power to prevent it from happening, but nothing seems to be working and you finally get in to a feeling of "OK, we're going to do this surgery. I guess this will--we'll try to stop it this time", but it gets to a point of you don't really have any faith in it because it's just--nothings doing it. And I'm generally a very positive person. I generally always look at the bright side of things, but even in situations like this, if you're going through something similar like this, you're going to have your moments of depression; you're going to have your moments of feeling defeated at times.

I continued on the surgeries and continued on trying to work, but the doctor told me that they didn't want me doing any heavy lifting for fear of popping a blood vessel or for fear of tearing up the eye anymore, creating pressure on it, or anything like that. I did my best. I'm normally an active person, to try to stay busy with your mind with reading which turned out to be a good thing that my brother's girlfriend, Stephanie Irvin from GLASS--I guess the word would be "serendipitous"--was in my life to provide a reader for me, and help my mind keep working during this time that I hadn't learned how to use any sort of screen readers or anything like that; very, very fortunate to have that happen in my life.

But we continued on with the surgeries and nothing was working. I would recover for a month or two, go back to work, and something else would go wrong; we would have to have another surgery. And this went on for about two years until I had to make the decision after one of the last surgeries, after I had some vision in my eye, and then I had a wreck; I had an accident, and it was raining and I ran into the back of somebody. I had to make the decision that I couldn't drive anymore. And when you get to that point in your life, you feel like things are going OK. You're keeping it under control, your depression, you're keeping under control how you're feeling. You're trying to put on a good face, but once your freedoms start getting stripped away, you don't drive any

more. You don't--you can't read a book. I used to love the feel of a book in my hand and turning the pages and speeding through a book and reading and never stopping. I was a huge comic book fan. I have three cases of comic books--no, make that five--that I can't enjoy any more--not just for the art, but for the stories and how they compare to the real world out there and sort of escapism in the same sense.

But losing the ability to drive and get yourself around and starting to depend on other people really was one of the straws that broke the camel's back there for a while. After that happened, getting to work was more difficult. My wife would take me, but it was becoming more and more difficult. I was having to put my face closer to the computer screen, and I couldn't lift stuff at the warehouse because of ruining my eyes. And people start looking at you differently, or you feel it.

You know, somebody can tell you--my wife, for the longest time, says, "No, that's just in your head." Well things change.

Another bit of advice I can have for somebody that may be listening to this that, yeah, I may be sounding a little bit down now telling you this, but it's also to tell you it may not be--it may not be the easiest thing in the world; it may be the most difficult thing you can go through in your life. But, by the end of this, I'll be able to tell you that there's things that you can do to make your life better. You can get through this. You can survive, and you can create a life.

But continuing on from what I was saying is you feel like people that were in your life to help you, that were going to be there for you, abandoned you. You're going to learn that some people can't handle you being blind. They can't handle dealing--I guess is the best way to say it--dealing with your blindness, or it's not so easy for them anymore to come and go. You feel like sometimes you're a drag on them in your own mind. But you also learn that there's people in your life that you didn't think would appear that will show up that will be there for you, that will keep lifting you up when all you want to do is be down. Also this--you going through your blindness, however you lose it--mine was diabetic retinopathy--you're going to find new people in your life if you look for them, if you put yourself in situations to meet them. I would say once you go through the initial shock, the initial depression, to put yourself out there, to put yourself in situations that you've never put yourself in before. Be involved with organizations like the visually impaired blind society, or the National Foundation of the Blind. Put yourself out there with other people that are going to teach you how to get through this.

But getting back to what I was saying is I went through everything and basically after finishing up my last surgery, giving up my driving, starting to get used to how people are going to treat you, I began to try to put myself in situations that would benefit me in the future because I want to still build a life for my family, for me and my wife. I'd love to still have kids. I want to get a house. I want to do all this stuff. But I can't do that just by laying around and being depressed and "woe is me."

So after we got through all of that, and continued on, I called in to--who did I call in to? I ended up calling a gentleman who directed me to Center for the Visually Impaired. I somehow ended up getting the number because I was trying to find a way back in to the workforce. His name was Adam Hinchliffe, and he worked for Voc Rehab, Georgia Vocational Rehab. He now works for CVI and he's a fantastic gentleman with a quality organization. But he told me that I would have to throw myself in to the work; I would have to put everything into it to learn the skills to be able to move forward and to be able to get to where him and others were, where they were contributing members of society, and also making it so people didn't look at a blind person, or looked at blind people as "OK, they're blind, so they're not usable; they're not worth anything." Very good on my soul, very good on getting me moving in the right direction.

So in November, after testing with CVI, Center for the Visually Impaired of Atlanta, I began--I began working with them. I worked on braille. I worked on that with Anna Trotman. I worked on my keyboarding with Greg Akins, who was the president of the National Federation of the Blind who got me involved with that, Earnest, Rasheeda, everybody at CVI who taught me my cane skills, my PC skills, my braille, Lynn Miller. Several people over there that are very interested in helping the blind out. I threw myself in to my work and into preparing myself for the next step. It's been a huge journey for me to even get to this point because you think you're going to just go through life and work hard, move on to the next thing, but you don't expect something like this to jump out at you. And organizations like GLASS and CVI, they have really helped me prepare myself after, like I said, the initial shock and depression, to move forward.

My grandfather went blind, but for different reasons; he had a heart attack, and he went blind. And I always told my family that I hope that never happens to me, and you see what happens, you know, under different circumstances. But I'm rambling on a little bit.

After I went back to CVI and I've been working on that, I finished up all my classes. I've built relationships with the instructors, the directors, and started building roads to other jobs, to connections, you know? Started talking to people because that's the only way you're going to move forward if you're going through this. If you're going to move forward in life, not just in your daily living skills but in trying to find work and trying to make it better for people in our situation and to be a part of the solution, you're going to have to work hard at it and deal with these things that come your way.

I have gotten myself an internship there now, and I'm working with teaching Android users--Android phones--to people that don't know how to use smartphones and stuff and it's been very rewarding. I've been very fortunate to be happy with the work that's come my way through CVI. I'm hoping that once I finish school--I'm going back to Georgia State, and I'm going to get my certified rehabilitation counselor degree and, hopefully, move into a position with vocational rehab, CVI, the VA or something like that after about two or three years of school and can go from there.

Also, what's been rewarding for me too, is the National Federation for the Blind--or, excuse--of the Blind; Anna would correct me on that one. It's been very rewarding being involved in that and getting started with trying to work with them on better legislation for the visually impaired and blind, and working through that process and meeting new people and figuring how to live in this world as a visually impaired person.

I would say that, even though this has been sort of like a, like I said earlier, a little bit of a down--talking down about this stuff, it's not easy; I'm not going to lie to anybody out there that's listening to this. It's not easy, but it can be done. And I've seen people that have it worse than I do who are blind, deaf, who have multiple sclerosis--they have all sorts of different diseases--that, every day, get up and go to work. They do what's necessary to get through the day, and they don't complain. They may have some aches and pains here; they may have days that are just rough. But it's just amazing for me, for someone that was just for a hot minute there was depressed about it and worried about things, to see these people do this, and do it well. It's been very rewarding for me. For that, working with NFB, CVI, and GLASS and meeting all the interesting people that come into my life, and I can say that you, the listener, can do this, too.

One thing else I can say is please, please watch your sugars! Take care of yourself as far as what you eat. Monitor it. Don't just blow it off. Somebody can be diabetic and they can be the skinniest person in the world and still have high sugar and still have high risk for problems such as your muscles, such as losing your eyesight or other body parts. But monitor that religiously.

I would also say throw yourself into the life. Get out there because if you don't involve yourself with organizations and you don't involve yourself with people around you, you're not going to get the skills to move forward and you're not going to--you're only going to get more and more depressed and you're going to have problems with that, and you can have a happy life. I have been fortunate enough to be surrounded by good family and friends who have supported me, but you need to work at those relationships too, because this is a learning experience for them. When I first started that, I didn't think that it would be. I think people would just adjust, and I'd be the one going through the tough parts of this, but I've learned a lot from this experience as far as personal relationships and knowing that it's not just difficult on you, it's difficult on the ones that love you and the ones that want the best for you. But you can help them get through it by helping them understand situations. Sometimes people can be ignorant about situations unless they're going through it or unless they're told, and that's why I say advocate for yourself and advocate for those that are blind and around you and in the same situation as you.

Other than that I would say just keep your head up; it will get better. And if you ever need someone to talk to, look me up on Facebook or, you know, contact people at CVI or Stephanie at GLASS or Lamar behind the glass here; I'm sure they'll be willing to

help. There's plenty of people in this world that are willing to help you out. You've just got to know how to ask and to put yourself out there. But other than that, Stephanie, that's about all I have to say.

IRVIN: Well thank you so much for joining us today, Chris.

VANDEFORD: Okay. Thank you.