

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-010

Candace Rogers interviewed by Georgina Lewis

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LEWIS: Hello. My name is Georgina Lewis, and I'm going to have a conversation with Candace Rogers for "Our Stories, Our Lives," an oral history project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is December 4, 2018, and this is being recorded at Diamond Lakes Bridge in Augusta, Georgia. So what is your story?

ROGERS: My story is what's brought me to this situation approximately fourteen years ago. I knew something was wrong with my body. And I went twice, here in Augusta, to two different doctors, and they said they didn't see anything; it must be mental like I'm going crazy or something because I tell them I feel this and this, but they didn't do tests to try to figure out why I'm feeling like that.

So I'm like "Oh well," and I transferred my job, BellSouth, to Atlanta. I'm loving Atlanta. That's where I wanted to be. And so I'm working at BellSouth, started doing comedy, and doing both of those. And then, all of a sudden at work--you know, I talk on the phone to business customers--and I reached up for something and my arm just felt numb. And I said, "That's weird. How does my arm fall asleep during the middle of the day", you know? So I didn't pay it too much attention. Then I had to reach my arm up again to get something out of a cabinet, and it felt like a ton of bricks fell on my head. And so, you know, I'm thinking well, I'm going to take a Tylenol on my break, you know, and that will take care of this. And then, all of a sudden, I'm talking to a customer, and my speech changed. Instead of how I'm talking now, it was mumbled and jumbled. I was like (babbling) and I could hear the customer saying, "Excuse me? I don't understand." I'm like, "I don't understand either," you know? And so I called my supervisor over there, and she came, and me trying to explain what was going on to her, she could tell something was wrong. So they took me to the emergency room, and he actually did some tests, but he told me I would have to go to another doctor to have a lumbar puncture--I hate needles; I knew that was a needle in your back.

So I rescheduled it like four times because I didn't want to have it done but, when I finally went, the doctor had no bedside manners. He was rude as I don't know what, so that makes it worse, you know? And I was like crying, you know, because it hurt so bad and he said, "Don't you have a child?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "You have a epidural?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Well it's the same thing."

I said, "No it's not."

Number one, I was already in pain when I'm in labor, so that was nothing. I wanted that help. I'm not in pain now. You're causing me pain. So we went round and round about that, and then he said to my doctor that, in my spinal fluid, it was M.S., that I have multiple sclerosis.

And now telling you how I hate needles, OK, so when I went to the doctor he told me, "Yes it's MS, and we have three types of injections you can choose from."

I said, "We can count that out because I don't want any injections. What else do you have? Like a pill or something I could take?" And pills weren't out then.

And so I took the first one--I had to give myself a shot every other day, and it felt like every day because I hated it so much. I just hate needles; I have a needle phobia.

And so that was my life, you know, and I didn't know about M.S., I didn't know where it was going to lead me, what was going to happen, and so I decided to move back to Augusta to where I have family. And so my mom and dad live here--they don't live together, but they lived here, and so somebody could help my son if I need some help, you know? And I learned a lot about multiple sclerosis and what it can do--it doesn't *have* to, but what it *can* do.

So I found--I mean I was fine for years. Nothing was different. I felt normal, you know, but I knew I had this. And so I was doing the same things I used to do. I moved back and everything and it was just hard because I had this like over my head, you know? I'm Candace, but MS is right there, too. And I lived--we lived with my mom for like a year, a little bit over a year because--I'm kind of backtracking--but I had the best M.S. doctor here. So I would enjoy talking with her and she would tell me all the ins and outs. And she cared more than other neurologists because her sister had M.S., so she had her heart in it; she was wanting to find out what can we do about it, you know? And so I went and talked to her about this fear of needles and stuff, and she would try to help me through it but I still--I hated it. I blame it on my dad because he was military so wherever we went, I had to get a bunch of shots. You know, I had no choice that no, I'm not taking them. I had to take them, you know. So I just have a phobia of needles.

And so talking to the doctor, and then when I--I'm going back and forth, I'm sorry, but I--you know, I talk to everybody where ever I am. My mom says I never see a stranger

because I talk to everybody. And so I went to an appointment, and I went and sat down. There's this lady, and we're talking. And she said, "So you have M.S., too?"

I said, "Oh, yeah, that's what they tell me," you know.

And she said, "You look pretty good."

I said, "Well, thank you. You know, you too."

I was looking, feeling normal then, and she asked me if I was on disability. And I don't know why that hit me so hard because I hadn't even thought about disability because I was driving, walking, everything, just living life. And somehow I felt like the devil spoke for me.

I said, "Do I look like I need some disability?" You know?

And she said, "Wow." She said, "Wow, that's too much pride. You know that pride is a sin."

I said, "Really?"

She said, "Have you worked?"

I said, "Yes, since I was fifteen."

She said, "You paid into this." She said, "You don't want your money?"

And it was like a slap in the face. I mean she didn't slap me, but I felt like that. That was my money, and I do have a disability. So I feel like sometimes that helps. You need to hear something like that. So the next day, I went and applied for disability. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't talked to her. I wasn't even thinking "disability."

And so I went and applied. Four months later I got a letter telling me no, I'm not qualified for disability. And I had heard they do that all the time, you know unless they see me and I'm crippled, I'm in a wheelchair or something, you know. So I had to think to myself I don't know a lot about disability. I mean I've been on the debate team and stuff like that; I like to do that. I can't do this fight. I don't know enough to be in this fight. So I was flipping through the yellow pages and like an attorney just popped up for disability and he was right above--his office was right above the social security office. I was like, "Wow!" So I called and hired him, and two months later I had it. So it took me about six months, where some people it takes years and years, you know? And they say, "I don't want to give the attorney my money. That's my money. I'll just wait and get it." To me, my story was they get 25 percent of your back pay. You can't miss what you don't have, to me. So it didn't matter to me. You know, he got 25 percent of my back pay which was

like maybe \$4,000 or \$5,000. I'm OK with that, because he helped me get disability for the rest of my life. That's the way I feel. You know I know that check is coming every month. If I have to pay him 25 percent to get it started, I felt *Oh well*.

It's funny because they said that was so good I got it in two months. My mom said, "Candace, I'm sure you're getting on his nerves," because if I had a question, I called him. If they sent me a paper, I called him. Whatever I didn't know, I called him.

She said, "Well, you just keep calling him."

"Mom, I hired him. He's my employee. He works for me. He gets paid when I get paid." So I didn't feel like there was anything wrong about calling him all the time. If he got on my nerves and he got it in two months to be done with me, thank you. It worked.

So--and with me getting disability, you know, that was like another label over me. And I thought about getting another apartment. And I thought even more I said I've had different apartments here in Augusta and Atlanta. Maybe I was getting ready to get a house in Atlanta but, after all this, I moved out--I mean I fell out of that but I said why not get the house, something that I will own? Because an apartment, I'm renting it. I'm paying their bills. I'm paying their mortgage, you know? Why not pay my own mortgage?

And I would talk to people and say, "This is what I'm interested in."

"Oh girl, you're not going to be able to get a house on disability."

I was like, "What do you mean?"

"Because you're on disability."

I said, "I think if I had a job, that would be harder because a job they can lay me off, fire me, whatever, and my money is gone. But disability, that's coming every month. They know that's a guarantee. As long as I'm living I'm getting that check every month."

And so I talked to my father and one of his friends was a realtor. So we got together and she started showing me houses and things like that and I'm thinking I want a brand new house, you know because I want this and this and this in it.

And my mom told me, "Candace, what you need to think of, you'll probably never get everything you want in a house unless you have it built from the ground up."

And I didn't have the money to do all that. So I made a list of what I wanted and what I was OK not having. And so then, when I looked at brand new houses, I was like hmm. And she said, "Well maybe I'll show you some other houses, you know?"

I said, "You mean some used houses?"

She said, "It's not like a used car, Candace. They're previously owned houses."

I said "OK, same thing."

So I went and looked at a couple of used houses. And, the one I'm in now, it was for me. I walked in. I knew I wanted grapes. I like grapes in the kitchen. It already had a grape border. A nice grape border in the kitchen. I wanted the chair rail, or whatever that chair rail, but the different colors up to a certain point and in the living room it had that already and I like both of the colors. I went in the hallway bathroom, it had a window up top. You know, the only people that could see through it is people that are on your roof or flying or something like that. And I like that. And I was like, "Oh God, but how old is this house?"

She said--she checked--she said, "It was built in 1993."

I said, "Wow."

She said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "That was the year the best thing in my life came to me: My son was born in '93."  
I said, "Okay. This is it. I want this house."

And so she started on the paper and I went to church. You know people say you pray to God; you don't worry about it. When you pray you give it to him. You have to leave it there because you gave it to him. If you worry again, you took it back because you don't have faith that he's going to do what he's going to do. And so this time I went to church with my mom and my son, and I went to altar call. And I went down to the altar, and I prayed. You know, I said "God if this is a house for me and my son, then it will be. If not, I know you have something bigger and better for us so I'm not going to worry. You got it."

And I just got a good feeling. I didn't think--I never thought I wasn't getting the house. You know people would say, "You talk like you already got the house."

I said, "I'm just waiting on the key." You know, that was my answer.

And when I went to closing, the people who owned the house and the closing attorney, you know, we were all in the room, and their family and the attorney said, "People are not usually this happy, you know? They're stressed, you know, about doing this."

I was like, "It's been done. You just want me to sign a thousand papers, that's all."

And it felt so good because I have heard that all my life. You know, you give it over to God, you just let it go. And that's hard. That is *hard*. For the first time in my life I did it with the house. I've been in that house almost thirteen years, you know? And I'm happy about that. I'm extremely happy. I'm not paying nobody rent. I'm paying mortgage for my house. And I love when people ask me, "Are you a homeowner?" At first I was like, *Am I a homeowner?*--because I don't own it; it's not paid for yet. But I'm paying the mortgage on it and so now I just say, "Yeah. Yeah. I have a home and it's in my name." And I say that so I feel good about that.

But during these twelve, thirteen years, my M.S. progressed. My walk started giving me problems, and I ended up having to get a walker which I never thought I would have to do, but my mom's boyfriend, man friend, he had one that he didn't use anymore, so he just brought it to the house and told me that was for me. And so I had a hard time with that, but I realized it helped more than it hurt, so I started using that.

And then it continued to progress. I was going to work one day. I was driving, and I got to a traffic light that I have been like every day, you know, and I couldn't tell if it was red, yellow, or green. And I prayed for somebody to come blow the horn telling me to go or something but nobody did. And so I just talked to god. I said, "God I have to be to work in like twenty minutes, you know, can you please take the wheel you know, and get me there safe and sound?" And then I just pulled out and turned and got on the expressway and made it to work. And when I got in to my job and the room that I work in I just got on my knees and talked to him and said, "I'm sorry for taking my vision for granted." You know, I just thought that was something I would always have.

And so I drove a little bit more, but then I realized it's not fair to the people that can see driving for me to be driving and having trouble. So I just told myself I'm not going to do it anymore because, if I drive--because I have a car--I had a truck and what if you hit somebody and you killed them? That's like a drunk driver, you know? And I always talk about that. And so I chose myself to stop driving. Nobody told me I couldn't drive anymore. I just told myself that I would not be able to live if I hurt somebody because I was still driving and I know I shouldn't. So I stopped driving and that was so hard, you know, because whew, very humbling having to ask everybody for a ride here, a ride there--very humbling.

And then somebody told me, "Well now, there's a bus that will come to your house and pick you up and take you wherever you need to go."

I was like, "What do I look like riding this little bus?" You know what I'm saying? So I had to let me pride go because that was something to help me. So I signed up to ride the bus, and I've been riding the bus for years now. And I appreciate they come straight to my house, pick me up, and take me straight to work or to the doctor, anywhere I need to go, you know in Richmond County area.

And so a lot with this illness is pride. Having to get over, having to let go of pride. Not being able to drive? Oh my God! Not seeing like I used to see? Humbling. Humbling! But I thank God I'm doing better with it now. And I felt like I'm doing better with it now. It's just a struggle. You know, you just have to get up and go, and take every day as a day--a new day. And so I speak sometimes at the M.S.--some of the M.S. function is to tell people how to stay positive and just keep looking for another day. And one thing I say--and I offended somebody one time and I didn't mean to offend anybody--because with M.S., we're all different; we all have different problems; you know? And I said the main thing that helped me is that, "OK, Candace, you're going through all this, but I promise you somebody has it worse and would love to take your space. So you need to get over it and just keep on going."

And the person said, "Are you talking about me?"

I said, "I don't even know your situation. I'm sorry. I'm just saying that I know if you watch the news, you see people that have it a lot worse than you. Everybody thinks whatever they're going through is the worst. Somebody got it worse. Somebody got it worse."

And I'm happy I talked to my uncle. Gosh, about four or five years ago we had a family reunion in Mississippi--deep, hot July in Mississippi! And heat can cause me to have a relapse if I get overheated, you know? And so my uncle, he came up he said, "Candace, how you doing?"

And I said, "Today is a bad day."

And he like jumped on me: He said, "I don't ever want to hear you say that!"

I said, "Excuse me?"

He said, "The fact that God woke you up, you're already on top of things. A lot of people didn't wake up this morning." He said, "What I want you to say, and promise me you'll say this--"

I said, "What is it?"

He said, "Say 'It's a good day!' Maybe not as good as yesterday, but it's still good."

And so now that's what I do and I pass it on to other people, you know? You may be going through something, but it's still good because God woke you up. You watch TV and watch the news--everybody didn't wake up. So if you're above ground you just take it from there, you know? And so at first I didn't think--I said yeah, "Okay, okay." But I took it in, and I believe it. The fact I wake up and I'm able to get out of bed myself, that is a blessing. A lot of people can't do that.

You know and I think about this one lady. I formed a group called the M.S. Brothers and Sisters of the CSRA, and she's one of the sisters. And she always grabs my heart because she has it so much worse. And I think about her and I'm like, "How dare I complain?" She's bedridden. You know, she has to have people do everything for her from MS. That could be me, you know? She has--this was so hard for me: She has to have somebody bathe her, and I just couldn't imagine somebody having to bathe me. She has to have somebody feed her like she's a baby, pretty much. You know and she--it's just whew. I'm like, "I could be there." So since I'm not, I need to do better and appreciate it more because who knows, tomorrow that could be me you know? So, but my heart just goes out to her and hate when--I wouldn't say I "hate," but I don't like the fact that I'm not driving because when I was driving, I would go and see her often and just sit and talk with her, and I'm not able to do that now and I hear things that she's going through and I hate that I'm not there to talk to her and stuff like before.

But I try my best to do whatever I can for people going through. And when I find out something, I don't keep it a secret like a lot of people do. It's like crazy because when you get your award letter for disability saying okay yeah, you got disability; you got approved. They should have a letter with that telling you all the things you can do that are out there for you, but that would be too right, I guess. So the only way you find out is to know somebody that knows something. But when I find out, I'm so happy to pass it on. I said I'm not going to keep this secret; that's not fair at all. And I've been blessed with so many things because I'm disabled. Disability don't tell me that. Social security doesn't tell me that. I have a brand new roof that I got for free. A brand new heating and air unit I got for free. I have a ramp built on my porch and some shower rails put in for free. Social security wouldn't tell me about it. And so if I know anybody, I see anybody that is disabled and think that they may be in need, I'm so happy to tell them because I feel like I'm paying it forward. Some people, it's crazy to me--they act like they're scared to tell somebody like they're going to come and take whatever you got back, which makes no sense, you know? But just don't like to pass it on. And I feel so happy from that.

Like somebody told me about three years ago that with me being disabled, I thought he said I get into the movies free. But my guy, my mister, he was with me, he takes me--I'm so blessed--he takes me to all my meetings and appointments and stuff. And he said "No, Candace, that's not what they said."

I said, "Well, what did he say then?"

He said that whoever takes you to the movies, like your caregiver, they get in free. I said but the caregiver's not disabled. I don't understand. He said because you are disabled and we're taking time to take you to the movies and stuff so that's like a treat to us that we get in free.

I was like "Whatever. You don't even know. You didn't hear it. You didn't hear it."

And so we went out; we was going to a movie. We had been before and I just said, "All you have to is say 'ADA' and you only buy one ticket. There's two of you, just pay for one ticket." And so we went out to eat and then we knew we were going to the movies and we had a little debate about it.

He said, "Yeah let me go ahead and go to the movies for free."

I said, "It's not--you're not free. It's good for you because you don't have to pay for my ticket."

He said, "I don't pay for my ticket, Candace."

I said "No, no."

So I thought I'm going to show him. We got to the movies, so I went up and asked the lady. I said, "Could you please straighten out this debate? OK, I'm disabled. OK, I come and I use the ADA and I get in free, right?"

And she says, "No. No ma'am. Your person who brings you gets in free."

I said, "Okay can I talk to somebody else then, because you're not working with me. You as a woman, we're not eye-to-eye."

He's like, "See, I told you."

I said, "Whatever. First of all, what you should tell me is 'thank you' because if I wasn't disabled and didn't know about the ADA, you'd buy two tickets. So you're welcome!" [laughing] I said, "I don't ask to go in and spend all the money on this expensive candy and stuff, you know? I have stuff in my purse that I can snack on and stuff so you're welcome. How about that?"

He said, "But you know what the lady said."

I said, "I don't even know what you're talking about, but you're welcome. [laughing] You only paid for one ticket instead of two."

So it's crazy because I look, it's like a blessing in a way because I get things I wouldn't get if I wasn't disabled. So I try to just be--just have to deal with it and go with it, you know? And I got a scooter, you know that I drive. It's kind of like the ones in Walmart and Lowes and stuff at the grocery stores that people sit in that can't walk as well, but I have one of my own and it's better. It looks so much better. It moves so much better than those, and I didn't have to pay for it. And the good thing I was thinking, "Oh God, I

got to buy a lift to sit it on to attach it to his car if I need to take it anywhere." But when they came and brought it to the house, they showed us you take it apart in four pieces; it can fit in your trunk. And then when you get where you need to go, you take it out and snap, snap, snap, and you put it back together. And I call it my Escalade because my next car--I'd already said my next car was going to be an Escalade. And since I don't drive anymore, that's my Escalade. And I get it and drive it, and I just love it.

So that's my life with multiple sclerosis and being legally blind and all the good that has brought me. I don't think about the bad things it's brought me anymore; it's brought me a lot of good. And like I said, as far as the doctor told me I was legally blind, I still don't understand that. And he started laughing at me because I asked him, "Well, who's illegally blind?"

He said, "What? There's nobody that's 'illegally' blind, Ms. Rogers."

I said, "Well I don't believe that because I see how a lot of people drive, and they cause all these accidents and stuff. They're illegal. See, I don't get tickets. I'm legal."

LEWIS: Thank you.