

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services Oral History Project

GLASS-011

Daryl Rootledge interviewed by Carol Waggoner-Angleton

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WAGGONER-ANGLETON: Hello. My name is Carol Waggoner-Angleton and I'm going to have a conversation with Mr. Daryl Rootledge for *Our Stories, Our Lives: An Oral History Project* with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is the seventh of December, [2018], and this is being recorded at the Augusta-Richmond Library main branch.

Well, Mr. Rootledge, we're very interested to hear your story.

ROOTLEDGE: OK. My name is Daryl Rootledge. I was born in 1969 in New York, the City of New York. I grew up with [an] illness called "aniridia," which destroys some of the development of the eye during birth. My father was--my father was in active duty of the US military during the time of Vietnam where there was very high heroin drug use in the early to late '60s. That was a result of being born with aniridia and also with an addiction to heroin, which led to a lot of complications with my vision as a young child growing up.

As a young man, I had some vision and got a chance to experience sunshine and got a chance to experience what real moonlight was, and there's some people in the world that don't get this opportunity to even see the beauty of this world. And we find ourselves, as human beings, taking the beauty of this world for granted, because sight is truly a gift that God has given mankind to cherish the colors, the flowers, and the beauty and the uniqueness of things that were built and developed by the hands of man, guided by the wisdom of God.

Growing up, I had struggles with vision coming and going. Over a course of years, I've had sixteen surgeries, ranging from cataract removal to corneal transplant to exploratory surgery to detached retina surgeries. The list would have went on and on, but at some point you get very tired of waking up with the disappointment of still not seeing.

Still had an interesting childhood. My brothers and sisters, you know, they didn't give me any slack. You know, I have two sisters and one brother who is older. They didn't give me any slack. Growing up in the household, my mom and dad didn't give me any slack, you know? I had to still pull my load and didn't mind if I was visually impaired or the language up to date, blind. They really wanted to make sure that I stayed as normal and as grounded as possible. So I didn't have many pity parties. I wanted to have some pity

parties, because there was a lot of things that I couldn't do being visually impaired. Sometimes after a surgery I would have pretty decent vision and I would get a chance to ride a bike, and then the next month the aniridia takes over and I'm not riding a bike. It was a depressing thing, but it was something that my siblings helped me get through over the course of time and life.

I went to public school, elementary school, and I went through to my first year of high school in public school. When I went to my first year of high school, I was having incidents of misjudgment with stairs until one day I just misjudged the turn on the stairs and had a fall and my mom said, "That's it, that's it, we're going to go to the New York School for the Blind."

I went to the New York School for the Blind. It was kind of different, because I was so used to being around sighted individuals, so used to doing extra work in order to keep up. And what I mean by extra work, I mean if somebody hit a baseball, I had to really concentrate being visually impaired to try to hit the same baseball. I had to really listen and pay attention and create different nuances that helped me to adapt to the kids playing football around. I had to do a lot of listening, and some kind of way I got through it. I got through it and I had a pretty decent drama-free childhood. When they went outside to play, I went too. I was there too.

Sometimes my vision was pretty good where I could kind of get around, and other times I had my best friend, Jerome Martin. He--I would hold on to his shoulder and we would go. We would go. I fall, I get up, and these were the challenges that took place in my youth.

But when I went to elementary school, I had to come up with solutions. So I worked with an itinerant teacher and I worked with my teachers in elementary school to create large letters. I had a recording device that helped me to get the notes that the teacher put on the board, and I had a person who was my itinerant teacher who read everything on my recorder where I could get assignments, and I found ways to adapt.

So you know, my story is that of encouragement, because I want people to know that it is important to not give up on yourself. Self-belief is the most important thing that you could ever deal with when you're dealing with life issues and life struggles. Blindness just happens to be one.

There are several different stories that you can find out here, from multiple sclerosis to GCDD, Georgia Council for Developmental Disabilities. There's a lot of things that's happening in this world, but my story tells people who are blind and low vision that there is hope. There is a rainbow and a pot of gold at the other end if you persevere and do the best that you can to achieve all your goals. They're reachable.

And then I set up a system where I could get into the hallways by not giving up on

society. This world has people and things that are bad, but for the most part people are still good. They still have a great heart. Be encouraged to speak to people who are your peers, because they will help you out and they helped me out a whole lot by going from class to class in the beginning of high school and elementary school, helping me out with getting gym equipment and playing games and still becoming active in the sect that we call society mainstream education.

I was very fortunate to not give up and to be encouraged by my teachers and peers to be normal as can be.

I went to high school and I had this same system in place. The teachers were familiar with me. I joined the track team and found ways of doing the two-mile run. I did a tandem run with another gentleman and we teamed up together and we won a state championship for two-mile run. I had a wristband on my wrist that tied me to his wrist and hey, we ran. We ran. We got it done. So it's a real encouraging thing to know that being blind is not the end of the road.

I went there to--from Westbury Senior High School to New York School for the Blind, and that's where I learned my--some of my life skills that I would need being a blind individual. Growing from an adolescent to [an] adult male. I learned braille. I also learned home cooking skills and independent living skills, how to prepare my own food, how to live in a home environment by myself. I also learned academics that allowed me to graduate with honors and to get prepared for college.

When I graduated from New York School for the Blind I was well prepared. I was well prepared with braille, being able to communicate. I was well prepared with independent living skills and my most important thing, but maybe the least to some people, is my mobility skills. My ability to be independent and travel and go to the places that I want to go when I'm ready to go. I was not a dependent person. My mobility skills that I learned allow me to become independent, and that's very important when you're blind and living the life that we have to live in the society that we live in.

I went to college after I graduated with honors. I went to NYU and I studied clinical psychology. And I graduated from NYU with my master's in clinical psychology, and then I said, "What else can I do? What else can I do? Can I do something else? Yes." I said okay, so I went to the University of Alabama and studied rehabilitation therapy and became a rehabilitation therapist and counselor for the blind and physically handicapped in Alabama. Got my master's in that and then my understudy degree was in theology where I have a master's in theology. I just continue to persevere, and my story is a reflection of someone growing up in the city and being blind and also having different society strikes that they place on what you can be and what you should be and what you can achieve, but that didn't apply to me being blind. That didn't apply to me being in the city. It did not apply to me because I don't use those nuances as excuses for success. Success is determined by the determination and the wit and your ability to

fight through adversity, and as a blind person, I challenge you to be able to say, "Hey, I want to be the difference and not the problem."

And doing that, I was able to go to college and get the help from my peers, join fraternities. A fraternity, Kappa. First blind person to do that in New York. So I didn't put boundaries on myself and I had my braille skills. I had my audio skills that I learned more of in college and I began to achieve success in that.

After I came out of college, I met a young lady and experienced the nuance of being a father and being a husband. I have a daughter. Her name is Javashia Rootledge and she's my little princess. Her mom passed when she was four years old and I raised her as a blind parent.

One of the bills that we're championing here in Georgia is House Bill 891. It supports the right for blind parents to parent. We have that ability to do that. Just because you're blind doesn't mean you can't be a successful parent and take care of your child. I've raised my daughter from four as a blind individual to now being twenty six years old, graduate of Spelman, and she's a physical therapist now in Alabama. With my pride and joy she has, my little heart, my grandbaby and she's eight years old and she'll be nine and we just love each other.

So it's important to know being a granddad and being a father and had the opportunity to be a husband and do it all blind using all of the braille and large print and audio material to read to my grandbaby and to also read to my daughter. Using scanning technology to scan my daughter's homework in where I could read it and check it. So it allowed me, with technology and with braille and large print technology, the ability to become a successful parent and grandparent.

When society says how in the world are you doing this? How can you do this? Perseverance and the will to be successful in life and not give up. Also, my faith in God and my ability to minister this to blind and the physically handicapped individuals all over the world allows me the ability to tell my story and be very candid about it, because hopefully with this story being told it will give people the opportunity to know that success is just one step away. Just reach out and grasp it because it is there for you to have and to achieve. Print material and large material allows you the ability to read and to get out in to the world and hear and also read about stories and places that you just imagined in your mind. Braille is a successful thing when you're doing business and you're communicating. It allows you to become a part of mainstream society. And the reason why I keep reiterating about braille and print material and audio material because you want to be successful in the society and in the community that you live in. You don't want to be a hindrance, because most people say, "Well, what can a blind person do?" Just as much as somebody that's sighted can do. With the proper opportunity, anything is possible. Anything is achievable.

After college and having a family, I worked at vocational rehab for the blind and physically handicapped in Alabama. I had a side practice of counseling that I did for the University of Alabama Medical Center where patients came in and I had my braille and I had my charts and I had a nurse who helped me fill out the physical forms that needed to be filled out, and I got the job done there with counseling and therapy.

Doing that also and becoming an active member of the National Federation for the Blind, our motto is "To live the life that we want to live," but we have to be a part of it. We have to be in the room when there's discussions about people who are blind and the things that they need to make their life and lifestyles better.

Went in to ministry and I have my own ministry here. One step closer to God. Minister to a lot of people about change and change in the heart and the power of Christ and his love. Being blind, doing that, a lot of people wondered, "Well, how did you get a chance to read the Bible? Large print, audio, braille. It all goes back to [an] accessible format that's created to help us to live better, successful lives.

The story I always tell people is that Jesus told a story about a blind man. The disciples asked him a question. They said, "Lord, why is this man blind? Did his parents sin? Who sinned that caused him to be blind?"

And Jesus simply said, "No, not the parents. No one sinned. He's blind to show and prove the glory of God."

So--and that's been an important thing in my life that I can't sit and have a pity party about being blind, because Christ said it's for God's glory, and I want to be that example of God's shining glory in the society that we live in that from darkness can come light. A shining light as an example that success can be achieved if you apply yourself and read the accessible material that's available for you. Educate yourself on things that are available for you to help you achieve a higher quality of life because God wants you to have life and he wants you to have it abundant and just so many other achievements.

Being a homeowner here in Augusta. At first, I could not read the material that they had on the house and had to go back and fight for the rights for accessible material, large print, braille, but perseverance. I won. They had the proper equipment for me to have accessible reading material and now not only do I own one property but I own two properties in Augusta. It's just--sky's the limit if you apply yourself.

And my story has lead me to so many places. To travel to Jerusalem, to learn Arabic, to learn Hebrew fluent, to travel to South America, to travel to Somalia, Sudan. Just to go to different places in the world as a blind individual. A lot of places that you go there's braille. A lot of places that you go there's braille magazines and large-print magazines and you can just get out there and live the life that you want to live as a successful person. I've traveled and I've educated myself. I've served God. I have been a father. I

have been a grandfather and still is a grandfather and still is a parent. So life is achievable, a successful life being blind.

And that's, you know, the gist of my story and the success that I achieved. Overcoming surgeries after surgery. Overcoming the depression state and having supportive family and supportive peers, supportive teaching staff, and supportive people in the community that seen my goals and helped me to achieve my dreams. So the promise is put your hands out and try. Just take one step towards success and watch the outcome. You will definitely be blessed and be encouraged to live a happy successful life and my story proves that success is in the hands of the beholder.