

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-013

Alina Garcia Ravelo interviewed by Catherine Vanstone

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VANSTONE: Hello, my name is Catherine Vanstone, and I'm going to have a conversation with--

GARCIA RAVELO: Alina Garcia Ravelo.

VANSTONE: --for "Our Stories, Our Lives," an oral history project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is December 14, 2018, and this is being recorded at the Georgia Industries for the Blind in Bainbridge, Georgia. What is your story?

GARCIA RAVELO: Hello, like I say, my name is Alina Garcia Ravelo. I [was] born in Cuba with cone dystrophy. I [was] born with that disability. It's a really not common disability. Not a lot of people have that. What happened to me is I received, like, more light than I'm supposed to, so the light bothered me a lot. I always wear sunglasses when I go outside. Even inside the room, I have difficulty to see well because of the light. The light really bothers me.

I [was] born in Cuba. I went to the school for the blind over there. We didn't have assistive technology, so it was really hard. My classroom was about the size of eight students, more or less. We really had very good teachers, but like I say, no assistive technology. I didn't have anything to help me with the materials or anything like that--just magnifier glasses; that was the only thing.

I went to the high school. It was a high school just for kids with disabilities, different kind of disabilities. The school was very far away. The school had a bus that used to go to our house and pick up us, but I spent every day, one hour and a half, going to the school and come back to the school, another hour and a half.

I started to get interest in going to college and an engineering degree, so I start college in the University of Habana, studying industrial engineering. And that was the really hard part, because when I get out of this school for kids with disabilities was when I start to really feel the real world, put it in that way. Even my parents always treated me like a regular child.

It was difficult when I just started the university. I remember the first day at the school. I was in physics class and the professor started to write on the board, really, really small, and I couldn't see it. The only thing I had at that time was a small telescope that my

doctor gave me. But it was my first day in the school, so I didn't want everybody to know that I was legally blind, because, you know, you are young and you don't want to look weird in the class.

So at the right time, I talked with the professor and I told him, "Please, can you write a little bigger for me?" And he said, "I have to think about it." That was his reaction. When we came back in the room, he started to write even more small. So that day was terrible. I get out of the school and just cry because I was like, I'm not going to get my degree because if all the professors are like him, I'm not going to be able to do it.

But I decided that I was going to start to use my telescope, and I was not going to care about what the other people say about it. So the next day at the school, that's what I did--I started to use the telescope. It was [to] my surprise that that professor started to write bigger in the board. I guess he thought about it. I started to use the telescope when the other--in my room, the other students in the class saw me wearing that. They started to go away from me. They didn't want to be with me. I was by myself probably the first two, three months of the school, because nobody wants to talk with me or anything, I guess because they thought they will have to help me with school and all that. But I started to study so hard and I started to get A's in all my classes. When the other students saw that, they came back. And at that time, they start wanting to talk with me and they want me to explain the classes and whatever.

So yeah, that was hard at the beginning.

The other thing is in Cuba we didn't have markers to write on the board. The school board was like, blue and the board was green, and I'm colorblind so I couldn't see the difference. The contrast was really hard for me, and you cannot find those kind of markers in the stores in Cuba. So my family from here used to send me the markers to Cuba, and I go to the university with the markers in my backpack and give it to every professor every day, because we didn't have any.

I used to take, like, two buses to get to the school and two buses to come back home. And in Cuba, you don't have privileges. You are--if you have disabilities, it's long lines waiting for the buses. You have to wait and the people doesn't care if you cannot see or not. You just have to make your way and just jump into the bus and push everybody like everybody else. (laughs)

But I graduated top of my class, and after that, I started to think that I want to leave Cuba because as an industrial engineer, the school offered me a job in the school, in the university, as a professor, but what I was going to make was twenty-five dollars a month. So it's no way that you can live with that. So the only possibility for me was to stay at home with my mom, my father, and live with them because I couldn't afford to buy a house or anything. Thank God, my father has a good job so he could support me, but I didn't want that for me. So I have family in Mexico, family here in United States, and I started to talk with them and told me that I wanted to come here.

My mom and my dad at the beginning, they didn't like the idea because, first, they want to be with me and, second, with my vision impairment, that was really tough. At the end, I found a way. I went to Mexico, I crossed the border. Because I'm Cuban, I got my paperwork to be ready to work and all that. I moved with my family in West Palm Beach, near West Palm Beach, and I applied for the service at the Division of Blind Services in Florida. And they started to send my résumé to different places. But my counselor told me that she didn't have a job for me, because I was an industrial engineer and she didn't have anything to offer me. And she say, "Well, you know what? You can work in McDonald's." (laughs) But thank God, Georgia Industries for the Blind--and Luis Narimatsu was the recruitment HR person at that time--he received my résumé and they called me, they interviewed me, and I came here for the interview. They offered me a job as a junior industrial engineer. So I moved to Bainbridge by myself. I left my family in West Palm Beach and moved to here. I didn't know nobody; that was a hard part, too, because this is a small town. So coming from Havana to Boynton Beach--that's where my aunt lives--and I was just there for six months, and after that, just come here--I didn't know nobody--was really hard.

Plus, on top of that, I didn't know any English, just a little bit. I'm still working on it. I'm not that good now, but at that time, I just knew the basic sentences. I'm really thankful of GIB because they accepted me, you know, with my English problems, and they really helped me.

I came here. I used to work for the other engineer that was here. I rent an apartment, start to live here. And after that--I think it was two years after that--I bought my house. And now, I got promoted to industrial engineer, not a junior industrial engineer anymore. I start my master's degree and I finish my master's degree this year. And I got my certification in Six Sigma Green Belt; it's for quality. And now I live in my house. I was able to bring my mom and my sister from Cuba. They are here with me now. That's what I have been doing here.

VANSTONE: So where do you find your support here in Bainbridge?

GARCIA RAVELO: Where did I find support? Basically, here at GIB. Here, you know, you can talk with everybody, and everybody is going to try to help you in the way that they can. Luis helped me a lot with assistive technology. Like I say, I didn't know anything about it. So he was the first person that told me you need to know about ZoomText and MAGic and things like that, because I didn't have [any] idea. So he really helped me.

Like I said, the Division of Blind Services helped me to come here, and he paid for the ZoomText for me. That's what really helped me.

VANSTONE: You talked about getting on the bus in Cuba in Havana and some of the challenges of that and the markers, things we take for granted here in America. Growing up--and you said it was--what were some of the challenges as a kid? You were going to the disability school but--

GARCIA RAVELO: Yeah. Really, like I say, my mom and my dad, they didn't treat me like I had a disability. But for example, the kids used to play in Cuba in the streets and all that--I couldn't do that because I wasn't able to see the cars, of course, and bicycles and all that. So I always stayed close to my house. They were playing hide and sight [sic], I think you call it here, and I was just staying close to my house.

In the school, for example, I didn't like the--you know, the buses stopped close to my house but not really my house. So I didn't like--you know, regular kids go to the school. They just walk because they don't have problems. They just walk.

But my mom and my dad, they always go and get me, because, you know, they worried about my visual impairment.

And in Cuba, we don't use a lot of canes, like for the blind. I don't know. I guess because we don't have it. I grew up in the school for the visually impaired, and don't remember kids wearing the canes. Just blind kids. They just don't wear it, I guess because in Cuba we don't have those.

In the school, it was really hard when I went to the university, because the elementary school and high school, the school has those buses, so I didn't have to worry about going to the school by myself. But in the university, it was really hard, because I couldn't see the numbers on the bus. Like, I know I have to take Number Nine, bus Number Nine, but I couldn't see the number, and I couldn't see the color, either, because they go by the numbers and by colors. But I'm colorblind, so I was all the time asking people, "What is that bus? The one that's coming, what is that bus?"

And that bothered me, because people look at me like, you know, you don't have a cane. When you don't have a cane, you look like you are, you know, a regular person. That's why I think that it's important when you go out, you know, if you are able to use your cane so that people are aware that you have a disability. But in Cuba, we didn't have it. So I all the time ask, "What is that number? What is that color?" And the people are like, "Why is she asking me that?" But that was a challenge because I didn't like to be asking people about it.

And because the sun bothers me a lot, that was another thing on top of that. I used to wear regular pairs of glasses, a regular pair of glasses that you can buy in the store, because in Cuba we don't have special glasses. So now that I came here, I have very good glasses that is for people with my condition. And that really changed my life, because now I can go out with my glasses and I can walk. You know, I don't feel afraid and nervous about walking because the sun made me blind. The sun made me like, blind. But now with these glasses, I can do it. In Cuba, that was not possible.

In the school, in the room, more than markers and all that, the professors, when they get to know me and they understand the disability because they never had another student with my disability, it is not very common in Cuba that people with disabilities go

to college. That's not really common, because like I say, we didn't have the help and assistive technology, so the kids just don't go to college.

VANSTONE: So at this point, was it hard adapting to the assistive technology?

GARCIA RAVELO: No, it wasn't hard for me. I really like ZoomText. It really helps me with the computer. I can put my phone on my contacts the way I want it. I really like it. Magnifiers have been helping a lot. So it wasn't really hard. I think it was one day of training and I was fine.

VANSTONE: Just more excitement of having the opportunity--

GARCIA RAVELO: Having the opportunity, yeah.

VANSTONE: --to use it, from before. Your story really goes from not having any assistance outside of family support, the professors once they understood, but no technology, and then coming here and having all these opportunities.

GARCIA RAVELO: And not only that, just the opportunity to find a job and be successful, because in Cuba, yes, I was going to be a professor in the university, but I don't know what else I was able to do, you know, if I want to move to another job. I don't know, because we don't have the assistive technology and we don't have anything like that. So I wasn't sure, if I moved to another job, if they will accept my disability. And here, we have all the opportunities. You just want to get that opportunity and move forward, and you can do whatever you want.

VANSTONE: An exciting story and a very different story from what we've been hearing. So thank you for sharing!

GARCIA RAVELO: Thank you.