

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-014

Gaylon Tootle interviewed by Kamesha Bradham

December 10, 2018

BRADHAM: Hello. My name is Kamesha Bradham and I'm going to have a conversation with Mr. Gaylon Tootle for "Our Stories, Our Lives," An oral history project with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is December 10, 2018, and this is being recorded at Walton Options Independent Living. Okay, Mr. Tootle, you can go on with your story.

TOOTLE: Okay. I was born in a small Southeastern town to two blind parents. My parents were both--they--my father never finished high school. My mother she went to the ninth grade. and we grew up in a situation where there was you know there--it was totally not designed for us. My parents recognized that early on. So what they did was they sent me off to a blind school in Macon, Georgia--Georgia Academy for the Blind. And they put me on the bus at the age of six years old. My mother put a tag on me with the address where we were going, and I would get on a railway bus, and we would ride off to Macon. And it was probably one of the best things they ever done for me because, as I said, they recognized in that small, rural town where we were born that it was not designed for folks with disabilities or anything like that. But they were, as I said, they didn't have a high school education, but they were smart enough to recognize that they wanted to put their child in a better situation than they had.

They had two kids that were blind--my younger brother and myself. And then we had four other brothers and sisters. One of the great things about the blind academy was that they taught us braille and they taught us how to travel. And so at an early age I learned what I needed to learn in order to be independent. It's possible. Now, the education component of it was great. They prepared me to go off to the University of Georgia, which I did. And I can remember picking tobacco, loading watermelons, and all that kind of stuff. And all of that kind of stuff was the driving force behind me wanting to get the heck out of there and go to a place where, you know, I could make a living. I thank my parents for, I love them for, and I know it was hard because my mother used to cry every time she would put me on the bus. She'd make me cry because she cried. But all in all, after my graduation and they saw what they had done and how they had made my life so much better, you know, they were--we used to laugh and talk about it when we got older.

Went off to the University of Georgia. And from there, I went to Fort Stewart, Georgia, worked with the military; I worked with the Department of the Army for twenty years.

Spent ten years down at Moody Air Force Base, worked down there for ten, and thought I was going to retire until I moved here and got married. Got a great situation. The mother of my son--I met her at the University of Georgia--we had a child while we were in school. And we separated for thirty years, and then we got back together kind of like a fairy tale.

My life as a blind individual has been great. I live the life I want. I'm the president of the National Federation of the Blind here in the CSRA area, and I'm also the vice president of the National Federation of the Blind Georgia Affiliate. So I've been very active in the advocacy side of things, working with the National Federation to educate the public as well as our own people about blindness and letting them know that they can live the lives they want. Now, for years I did not participate in the blind movement as we called it, because I was one of those guys who also wanted to fake it till I made it. I did not want to come across as being someone who was special who needed special treatment. So what I would do a lot of times in my younger days is I would pretend that I could see different things. You know how it is when you're young: You want to be with the in crowd. I wanted all the women I could have. So I faked it. I wanted to participate in all the, quote, "normal things." And I didn't start recognizing that it was cool to be blind until I probably got about forty years old, forty-five years old.

And then I started looking at statistics where a lot of our blind kids, they were going to school but they weren't really getting an education. And when I say an education, an education so they could go off to college or anything like that, and so I started wanting to give back. So I joined the National Federation of the Blind and that's where my giving back started, and I found out that I like the advocacy side of things. I majored in political science and English in college, so politics and speaking out and wanting to be a part of movements, that was kind of in me. So the National Federation was a great place for me to land. I've been blessed with this job here. Probably the best job I've ever had. Now I worked for the Army, I was an O3 Charlie, which was a support specialist, and I worked in ammo and I ended up family counseling. It's a heck of a move, but that's how it happened through reductions in force. You know a lot of people, when they work for the federal government, when you say "reduction in force," that kind of shook a lot of people. That was one of the best things that ever happened to me because I ended up moving from a mundane, rudimentary job to a counseling job which allowed me to work with people and again that's what I like.

We're here, we're Center for Independent Living here in Augusta and, as I said, it's probably the best job I've ever had because I work with disabled people. Our consumers all are disabled and I like seeing an individual come in and, you know, they may be all torn up or not knowing what's next and you know two or three, six months later, you know, I see that change, that movement and I enjoy that. I mean I don't think that, you know, I'm not too much like any other guy, person. I love life. I volunteer, you know, for different things. I coach recreation football and basketball for years, and I coached with the recreation department. So there wasn't nothing special about it. I coached regular

kids. And I was good at that. I was a winner. I like to win. And so it was one of the best times of my life: coaching recreation football and basketball, young kids from the age of nine to twelve. And I attribute a lot of that to the fact that I was a wrestler. I wrestled at the blind academy. I started out in the fourth grade, wrestled throughout high school, went to the University of Georgia, wrestled there, wrestled AAU. I did about seventeen years' worth, so I've always been a natural competitor. Somebody tell me that I can't do it, I'm going to tell them that I can. And not only will I tell them, but I will show them. I believe in me. And that was one of the greatest things about coaching recreation sports: You get a kid who comes in and he can't even hold a basketball or football, and by the end of the season, you know, you see that kid, you know, he's maybe not the star but, you know, you see the confidence level improve; you see the inner strength. And I think I attribute a lot of that to the fact that I was born blind, and I've always felt like, not so much that the deck was stacked against me, but that the system wasn't designed for me. I was poor; I was black, blind, in a small little town where, when I was born, we had separate this, separate that, you know, and I was always a fighter. And my mentality has been that I'll kick the door in because I want to get in, and I want to be a part of. And, as I said, my life as a blind individual, I can think of a whole lot of other things I would rather be--I mean that I *wouldn't* rather be--than blind.

Matter of fact, right now, if somebody offered me 20/20 vision, I would turn it down because I'm cool where I'm at. I've been this way all my life. Hasn't stopped me from doing, you know, I'm not a millionaire. I'm not a rich guy, little bitty rich guy, but so most of America so--and we know there are only what, maybe 10 percent? So I feel like I'm just like any other individual. I've got what I need and it's great to know that we have places like this, like GLASS, like you know, because what they do is they allow my people accessibility to information, knowledge, and power. We live in a world where technology is here, so, you know, I just about can do anything that you guys can do. So I feel like, you know, it's really nothing special to be blind. It's just one of them things. We've got people walking around here, quadriplegics in wheelchairs and, God knows, I would rather--I wouldn't want to be in that place. We have people who are deaf, can't talk. Certainly would not want to do that because I've got a lot of things I want to say, so I want to be able to hear. So I'm blessed. I feel I'm blessed that I'm where I'm at and, again, I promote independence, living the life you want. And blindness is a characteristic that certainly doesn't define me; it's simply a part of who I am. And, as a blind individual, every day I raise the bar on what it means to be blind. So that's--I'm a happy guy. Content with where--who I am. And I'm just going forward, living the life that I want, and that's it.

BRADHAM: Okay. Can you think back at any challenges that you faced while growing up?

TOOTLE: Oh yeah. I think one of the biggest challenges was wanting to be accepted. And, you know, kids can be cruel. So one of my biggest challenges coming along was, you know, when folks say stupid stuff and with the temperament that I had and the

physical attributes that I had, you know, I would probably--I was one of those folks that, you know, would take it to you if you crossed the line. And when I say "crossed the line," if you said something, it was stupid. So one of my biggest challenges was to understand that human beings, human nature, is what it is. And a lot of times, people, they make fun of or say silly things about stuff that they simply don't understand. So maintaining a temperament of "Hey, we're just trying to get along"--I had to work on that.

Some of the barriers were--I think one of the reasons that I did not have as many barriers probably as some other blind folks was that my daddy put me in a tobacco field at the age of six years old. He said, "Hey, listen. You know, this is what they do here. This is how we're going to buy school clothes. You're going to buy your school clothes. This is how we're going to survive." So, you've got to get in where you fit in and this is what--so I worked in the fields. And he always stressed that this is not where you want to be, so you want to make sure you do your school work, do well in school. So with him putting me out there, and when I was fourteen, he told me that you know you're going to go out like your older brother and you're going to hang out, you know go to--we used to call them cafés and gyp joints, you know, he made me participate in life; I couldn't sit around inside the house.

You know, as I said, he was blind. At one point he could see. He got shot when he was like eighteen years old. This guy shot him in the face. And so he had seen before so he knew what sighted life was all about and he did not want me to be in the house, a vegetable or just, you know, sitting around. So, as I said, he made me get out, and I appreciate that. It allowed me to mingle with other folks. And as I said, I hung out at the gyp joints just like everybody else. Now we didn't have all that kind of technology back then so, you know, again, we had to do what we had to do. I had to put my face up on the papers to read them. And like I said, I learned braille and various--and then I was always aggressive. I could always advocate for me even before I knew what the word "advocate" meant. You know, I knew that I was one of those guys who would, you know, you're not going to do me. And if I felt like you know that I earned it or if I had a right to it or whatever, I just wanted to be treated like everybody else. Wasn't looking for nothing special.

So the barriers that I faced--another barrier--probably one of the more bigger ones I faced was me coming to grips with who I was as a blind person. You know, in school I would like to sit in the back of the class, like everybody, you know, like where the cool folks sat, you know? Couldn't see the board, but I'd rather take a B--rather make a B than an A because I didn't want to be up on the front row acting like I need--like I was special ed, needing special attention. So I guess that was another big barrier, coming to grips with the mind--getting my mind right. It cost me, too, because I could have did a lot better in college, especially, if I would have, you know, taken advantage of the opportunities that was there like using the disability office or instead of you know sitting up front--instead of hanging back there with Dominique Wilkens and them guys, because all of us went to school together so we were all buddies and, you know, they

were bigtime jocks. And I, I know I should have been up front of the class but I wanted to be cool so I would hang out there with them. And like I said, it took me three times to pass math 100 because I was too bull-headed. So that was a barrier; that really was: Coming to grips with who I was and what I was as it relates to being a blind individual.

But most of the barriers that I faced, honestly, were the barriers that I put there. Because of my mindset wanting to be cool, wanting to fit in, wanted to be that guy, and it cost me. But you know, all of us probably could be at a different place, but there was something or someone that came along and would get us off track. And I'm sure I can be a lot further along than I am, but I am comfortable in my own skin. And you know, when you change your life because I'm a man who believes in God, got saved, and that helped me be comfortable with where I'm at and who I am. But basic barriers, as I said, were ones that I placed there. And I thank God that I moved past that.

I carry a cane now. I didn't carry a cane for years. And whereas I can see, the cane is an identifier and it gives me confidence. I'm out there--you know, you're out and you can't see a sign or the bus comes up and you can't read the banner so, you know, there were--in the old days I would say you know I might walk up to a young lady or something because I preyed on them: "Can you tell me what that sign says--where that bus is going?"

Now a lot of times they'll look at you: "Man, you can't read the sign? You can't read the bus?"

With that cane there--I carry my cane--people are more apt to help, they're understanding. And so I had to learn that. And it's--to be blind is--in my scheme of things, I don't even think about it as far as I'm concerned. I advocate hard though for my other brothers and sisters in the struggle who are blind because I do know that blindness is looked upon by a lot of people as being something that's mental. And when they think with that mindset, they cripple our people. So I'm about the business of educating the public about blind folk, blindness, and giving back whereas as I said, so they don't end up like me, you know missing out on some things in life because of pride or because of a mindset that's only conducive to low expectations. But that's me, my life story.

BRADHAM: Okay. Thank you so much.

TOOTLE: I don't know how disjointed that was, but that's it.