

Our Stories, Our Lives

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

GLASS-015

Luis Narimatsu interviewed by Catherine Vanstone

December 14, 2018

VANSTONE: Hello. My name is Catherine Vanstone, and I'm going to have a conversation with Luis Narimatsu 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.

So Luis, what is your story?

NARIMATSU: First of all, I want to thank the library for considering me for this project. That's very interesting when--you know, when a lot of people lost their sight and their experiences dealing with blindness.

I was born--actually, I was born overseas in a little place called--you know, a country called Panama, and if anybody knows anything about history, they know the United States went down there in 1903 to build a canal.

So my dad was in the military in World War II, went to Korea, and then was stationed in Panama, so I was born overseas. Born and raised in a little place called the Panama Canal Zone run by the United States. And went to school and college down there and had two jobs, was working for the military, had my own business, going to college, and then--actually I was a DJ. So worked late at night, came home in the morning, went to school, went to my other job, and did that every day for three or four years until, you know, I was studying accounting. My major was accounting, and I started noticing at night, I started getting headaches, and then when I drove at night I started seeing halos around lights on cars and started getting headaches. I'd wake up and go jogging. I've always been a little big boy, so I used to go jogging at lunch time, and I thought maybe, you know, going jogging, you know, in the hot sun and working at night and these headaches. I started realizing I needed more and more light to see spreadsheets when I was doing accounting homework. I needed--one day I got home in the afternoon from work, and I decided I was going to go lie down and take a nap, see if I could shake my headache, and when I woke up, I had no central vision. It was like if you're driving in the car and someone splatters soap suds on the windshield and they spread out. That's where everything in the center was gone.

Went to the eye doctor, they looked at me. They said, when I went there, my pressure in my eyes were sixty-four in one eye and sixty-five in the other, and if anybody knows

anything about pressure in your eyes, the normal pressure of the eye should be around twelve to fourteen to sixteen. That's normal pressure. I was up in the sixties. They diagnosed me with glaucoma. I did a couple of studies and realized it was a strange form of glaucoma. It's glaucoma that usually doesn't happen because glaucoma usually happens in older adults, not young. I was about twenty, twenty-one years old when I was diagnosed.

Came to the United States. My dad brought me right away to Miami to the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. They did testing there. They didn't want to do surgery on me because they said if they touched my eyes they could just damage more than what it was already damaged. Eye doctor back in Panama told me, "Get ready. Prepare yourself. You're going to go blind. Five, six, ten, fifteen years, but you will go blind."

That was a rude awakening for me. They tell you you're going to lose your sight and I was not going to be able to recover what I had lost. They had me on all kinds of medications to keep the pressure down. The pressure was under control, but the damage was already there and it was going to be progressive. So there went my ability to drive. My DJ musical job started to be affected, because I wasn't able to--you know, I was in charge of everything. I managed, I set up, I did the music, everything, and I was not being able to do that. So it started to get tough. It's hard to depend on all those friends that you had when you were famous and everybody liked you because you were a DJ? All of a sudden, you didn't have those. All of a sudden, they were busy and then next week someone else was busy and before you know it, they just tell you, "No, I can't, I'm busy right now. I can't help you."

So I went through that phase where my friends started disappearing little by little. People that hung around me didn't want to hang around me, because I wasn't cool anymore. I was the one that needed to be helped out now. So that was very depressing. Had to drop out of college for a bit. I did graduate, but you know, after that I was trying to continue my studies and that was tough. I was still trying to deal with the emotional issues of having three vehicles in my front yard and I couldn't drive any of them. I think that was one of the toughest things was to lose my independence.

So that was tough. I got depressed. Very depressed. Started going to less places, because I couldn't see well. I used to go to the clubs and hang out, and I stopped doing that because I used to bump in to things and play it off. I didn't look for any kind of blindness skills training. I was trying to play it off like--I was low vision, legally blind, and I tried to play it off for a while, and that started getting bad and, you know, bumping into things and knocking things over. And I just started just going into a little shell, to the point where I didn't leave my house very much. I just went around the neighborhood where I had a couple of friends who hung out with me and that was it. Got very, very depressed. I considered doing--you know, I considered a couple times just calling it quits and ending it all right there, because I just--I felt I wasn't, you know, I felt I would never be myself again.

Then one day, I don't know. One day I woke up and something came to me. I started thinking about all the people in the world that were blind and who were successful, and I said, "I want to be like them, but what do I do?"

So I just started looking for help. When I put that in the hands of the good Lord and said, you know, "Please, I need some help," and I put it in his hands, and all of a sudden people started appearing in my life. Strangers started appearing in my life to help me out. The first one was the person who is my wife today. Out of a prank phone call that she was making with her friends one night. Started a friendship and I ended up telling her that I was vision impaired and she helped me to go the United States Embassy and go to the library and I started looking up places where I could get some rehab. And I wrote a couple--she helped me write a couple letters to people, to agencies up here in the States to see who could help me get some rehabilitation. A lot of these places went and referred me back to a little place back in Panama, out in the country. So I decided to give it a try.

So I went to a center for adults. And for those who don't understand, outside of the military bases in Panama, we're talking about a country that back then it was like a third-world country. And this rehab center was out of the center of the city. It was out in the country. And people that went there were a lot of people from--blind people that are from the country. People that, you know, they cook with wood stoves, they don't have electricity, they don't have irons. So my rehabilitation consisted of learning how to cook using wood stoves, ironing with--back in the 1800s when you ironed with a big old giant iron that you heat up over the stove. Learned how to do that.

But I think the biggest thing I got out of there was learning how to be independent with a cane. That was my--that was my biggest gift they gave me. They taught me how to use a cane, how to get around with a cane. And that was for me--when I was able to use that cane, that gave me--that opened so many doors. I finally learned to embrace my blindness and started seeing that it could be--blindness could be my asset. Could be something that was helpful for me. Instead of, as I thought, something that was holding me back, it actually could open doors for me.

After that I went back home. My dad got really sick. I had to go back home and help my mom take care of him. He was in the hospital. My sisters came down. He was--and my brothers. All my siblings were living in the States. I was the only one still living in Panama with my parents. So when my dad passed away in May, that December my brother came down to see me and he brought me a computer, and he goes, "Here Luis, I brought you a computer for you to use," and I sat there and I looked at him and I smiled.

"That's great, but I'm not going to use it? I can't see the screen."

And he goes, "We'll figure something out." My brother was one of those computer wizzes, you know, back in the '80s. He came up with stuff and he managed to rig that computer so when I touched the letters on the keyboard it would say something.

thought, "That's nice, but how am I going to be able to use it to apply to other things that I used to do before?"

My sister was living in the States and one day she called me and she said, "Luis, I went to the library and I saw this guy! He's blind and he was using a computer. Do you want me to talk to him and ask him what he uses?"

And I said, "Please do!"

And so she did and he told her, "Tell him to call me," and, you know, she relayed that I'm in Panama overseas, I don't have no work, I don't have no money. I can't--you know, I don't have the money to make a phone call, you know? Back then you had to pay for those phone calls. You didn't have cell service or anything like that.

And he said, "Don't worry. Tell him to call me collect."

And I did. And he was living in Ohio, and he told me, "What do you want to do on a computer?"

I go, "Everything I used to do before."

One of my backgrounds in college was accounting and computers. So I was learning how to program and stuff like that on computers back in the old days when computers were just coming out.

And he goes, "Okay, I'll tell you what. I'll talk to--I have a friend that lives in Florida, and I'm going to ask him and see how we can help you out."

And he talked to his friend. He goes, "Call me back in about a week," and I did.

And he goes, "I talked to my friend in Florida. He is very excited about helping you out. He told me to give him a call," and I did.

And I called this guy in Florida and he tells me, "You know what? I was born in Panama. So I know exactly where you were born and I was born in the same place. I know all your neighborhoods. As a matter of fact, my cousin lives about two streets down the road. I'm going to tell him to go by your house."

And about a week later, I had a knock on my door and the gentleman comes in and he goes, "Hey, my cousin Teddy--Ted told me to come and see you and to talk with you," and he came in and sat down and he read Ted's story about all the accomplishments

Ted had. Ted was an engineer and was a motorcycle racer and all this stuff that he had done before he lost his sight due to an accident and all the stuff he had done afterwards. You know, he was a Special Olympics skiing champion and gold medalist and this and that.

So at the end of the day he goes, "I'll tell you what. Let me get a hold of Ted and we'll see what we can do with you."

Two weeks later, I have another knock on the door and it's Bert. Bert is Ted's cousin. He came back. "Luis, I got you a box. Ted sent you a box." And inside that box was the JAWS screen reader program. And that's an external box and all the training cassettes I needed to learn a computer again.

And he goes, "Here, Teddy sent you this. He says he's very happy to be able to help." And then I started corresponding with Ted after that. I'd record microcassettes, you know, back in the day when you had the little teeny microcassette recorders, and I'd record back.

So Bert came back. Bert happened to also be the director of the Panama Canal Company, the IT department in the Panama Canal Company, so he was way up there in the Panama Canal Authority. And he brought his engineers. They hooked up all my software and all the peripherals that my brother had left me, and they made that thing talk to me. And I had WordPerfect on there and Lotus and I learned and I taught myself how to use a computer.

About six months later, I applied for a job with the military again and I was reinstated working for the 94th Signal Company as a telephone operator. I worked there six years until they closed the canal down and the United States closed all bases. And I had to come, of all places, I ended up in Georgia.

One of my good friends, my supervisor, had moved to Georgia and he said, "Come on up here. I live over here in Warner Robins. There's an air base here. Stay with me. You can see if you can get a job on the base. It will be a snap. You already worked for the Department of Defense. Hey, come on up."

And I did. Me and my wife, we didn't have any children, we sold a lot of stuff, boxed some other stuff, sent it in the mail, and we came up here in 1999 a couple of months before they shut down the canal. I lived in Warner Robins about a year and a half looking for work and I couldn't find work. Lot of job interviews. I did start working for--I did start doing some contract work for the vocational rehab services, teaching people how to use computers--blind people how to use computers.

And then one day my counselor says, you know, "Luis, there's a little place down in Bainbridge, Georgia, and they hire people who are blind, but I don't know if--with all this,

you know, your background and your experience and your education, I don't know if you want to do that."

I said, "Yes, I do." I don't care. I was ready to wash dishes. I was ready--but I didn't care. I just wanted to be able to work and I wanted to have that feeling. And my wife, when we got here, she had to go to work because I didn't have a job. I had Social Security, SSI. The first time I ever applied for, you know, for assistance from the government. And then you know, I went to get some food stamps and they gave me twenty-four dollars a month because my wife was not a citizen. So here I am living off of \$500, off my savings, and trying to find a job, you know, barely getting... She had to go flip hamburgers at a mall.

You know, we were very--what, 1992? Came up in 1999. 2000. We didn't have any children. She was--we had difficulty having kids, and God and behold, here we are, me without a job and I'm sitting at home cooking and cleaning while she's working and boom, she gets pregnant. Lord have mercy. And so--and she had a bad pregnancy, because my daughter attached in the wrong place and it was a high-risk pregnancy, so she had to quit her job, and here we're thinking about what we're going to do, and all of a sudden, the good Lord answered my prayer and said there's a place down in Bainbridge, you want to go down there, and I said yes I do.

So she wasn't able to make that first trip with me. That was October of 2000, and I came down and I toured this plant here in Bainbridge. One of the things that struck me was the folks here. The folks were happy and excited, and I said, "You know what? If they can be happy here, why can't I?" That was in October, November. On Thanksgiving Day, with a couple of volunteers from the Perry office, VR office, I was heading down south to Bainbridge, Georgia.

Doesn't that sound like a country music song? Heading down south on my--it's so weird. I was in my little red pickup truck pulling a U-Haul. I had fifty dollars in my wallet. I said, "One day I'm going to write a country song about that, you know?"

And then I started thinking, "Well, that red truck is a Nissan, it's not a Chevy or a Ford," so there went my country song.

But anyways, I ended up here in Bainbridge, Georgia, in this little town called Bainbridge and the rest is history. I came in here and I looked around and I saw this scene, the things that the blind people were going through and the things that I could--I could either complain about how bad things were or I could make a difference. And one of the things that I saw was that blind people would have to go home to get someone to read their mail or something. I went and told the director and I told him, "Hey, if you give me the tools, I can teach these folks how to use computers."

Back then we only had two computers in this plant. And he goes, "You sure?"

I go, "Yeah, that's my background. I can teach these folks how the computer--" and he allowed me--he got the computers and he allowed me to set up the training module and all the training material, and I started training people, all blind people and sighted people how to use computers.

So I trained over 126 people at this plant how to use JAWS and all that stuff. And ZoomText and sighted people how to maneuver through Windows and better do tasks, basic, simple tasks, the beginning tasks that they could later use their eyes to do on their own. A lot of those folks right now are supervisors. I have two supervisors I taught computers that are out there. A lot of my blind people that I did teach are either not here or either in some kind of upward position in an office.

But I did that, and I thought to myself--I remember when Ted did that for me. He sent me that box of tools for me and he told me, "Luis, these are the tools that are going to open doors for you. As far as you take them, that's up to you."

And I always told my students the same story. I always tell them, "I'll tell you what Ted told me: These are tools that will open doors for you and it's up to you how far you want to take it."

And just so people out there who don't know what I'm talking about, Ted, I'm talking about Ted Henter. Ted Henter is the one who invented JAWS, the screen reader. Back when I met him, he was struggling--they were a struggling company. He had not gone to Windows. So when he sent me that software, he said, "Luis, I'm not rich but I think these are tools that will help you out." So I have a lot to be thankful to Ted and his cousin for what they did to me.

I see Ted every July when I go down to the Zonian reunion. We have a reunion in Orlando where all the folks from Panama get together and I see him, and I always make sure I give him a hug, him and his wife, and make sure to let them know that I'm really thankful for what he did for me. He didn't know who I was. I mean, he was a total stranger and so was his cousin, and he gave me that opportunity to be where I'm at today.

So I did the learning center and I was working production and they allowed me to come to--to take a lot of classes with NIB, the National Industries for the Blind, had some leadership courses and some business management courses. I took all those and the next thing I know, I'm in a corporate office helping Ms. Betty do recruiting, public relations, recruiting. I did that for a while. And in 2015, I was awarded by National Industries of the Blind Milton Samuelson Career Achievement Award, which for me was a big thing, you know, that--I have awards on the wall, you know, that I've won throughout my years working for the military and when I was here at GIB, I was nominated for employee of the year here and there, about six times. I have been able to travel all over the United States because of that.

But winning the actual national award was a big thing, because that not only told me that I was good but that those people like Ted Henter and my wife and other people that I met along the way, Professor Lopez at the center for adults who gave me the benefit of--you know, allowed me to do things, a lot of things in my training as a blind person that those people, you know, it was--those are the people that that award is for, not for me. So you know, one of the things that I always say is I am here because of people that have been able--that have given me that opportunity and have seen in me that I may have the potential to do something. I'm not the smartest or the best or the giftedest, but I always say if what I do can open doors for other people with a lot more talent and a lot more things, then that's all I care.

I will never be able to pay Teddy back for the things, Ted back for the things--I call him Teddy. But I'll never be able to pay him back. You can make a check for a computer and for software, but for what he did for me--so what I do is I try to pay it forward in anything that I do. When the phone rings and someone is on the other line saying, "I'm trying to find a job, I'm blind," and you know, I sit there because I remember when I was that person on the other side of the line looking for that help. So I make sure I listen to them and I try to give them the best advice of how to handle that and where to go and who to talk to.

At the end of the day, if GIB is one thing they want to do, that's fine.

So now I'm a director here at GIB, one of the directors. I'm a services director. I run the services department where I have a call center--two call centers. I'm over the warehouse side on Robins Air Force base. I'm always looking for new contracts where I can bring talented blind people in to do services or work on the plant.

So I've had a very long and interesting double-triple life. I had to invent myself a couple--reinvent yourself. But that's the thing about being blind. You know, I tell people blindness--the way I view that is that--and I tell people, you know, "Use your strength to leverage your challenges to your greatest asset," and to me my--blindness was my challenge, but it's also my greatest asset, because if it wasn't for my blindness I would not be where I'm at today. I would not be able to travel all over the country and represent GIB and represent NIB, meet all those legislators and all those things I do when I deal with public policy and go to Washington, DC, travel all over the country to talk about GIB, talk about NIB, talk about opportunities and just talking about in general about things that people who are blind who think that I went blind or I won't be able to do anything else. That's not true. There's--I tell people, "Open the door and look outside. That all belongs to you. It's just a matter of you wanting it bad enough and going get it. Just like Ted told me, here's your tools. How far do you want to take it?"

And so for me, my blindness is my greatest asset. Just two things, I like to run my mouth. If you all can tell I haven't shut up yet. I like to run my mouth. And my weakness

is mobility. As I've gotten older, mobility has not been, you know--you don't get around too much here in Bainbridge. There's no sidewalks. You kind of depend on people.

So running my mouth and traveling has always been beneficial, because you get to meet people.

"Sir, do you need some help?"

"Sure," and then you get to make a friend, because that person helping you, you can talk to them and they're going to go help somebody else. Next time they see another blind person, you know, "I remember I met Luis." And I've made a lot of friends like that on planes and at airports and all places because it's all about networking. But that's kind of like my story of my blindness and my experience.

I always tell people I am... I am the end result of the vocational rehab system here in Georgia. I know there's a lot of people who have had challenges with them. But for me, my experience with them, from when I got here in 1999 to where I'm at here in 2018, when I got here in '99, when I moved down to Bainbridge, I just had a couple of dollars in my wallet and they started me out with paying for my house and utilities and stuff like that to where I'm at today as a director. It's because of those folks at VR who had a passion and for what they do and saw in me someone that they could--they were willing to give their Thanksgiving to bring me down here and my family and my wife, you know, so that I had the opportunity to bring in a check. My first check I remember was for a couple of days. It was like for twenty-four bucks and that was like one of those happy days of your life because you're finally making a paycheck again. So for me that was--that was a very emotional day. A lot of emotional days in my life.

VANSTONE: Yes, a lot. And I want to thank you for sharing your fascinating story. I think it's a great lesson on paying it forward and helping others.

NARIMATSU: Thank you so much, Catherine.

VANSTONE: Thank you.