

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-016

Robert Woodward interviewed by Catherine Vanstone

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VANSTONE: Hello, my name is Catherine Vanstone, and I'm going to have a conversation with Robert Woodward 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 the Decatur County Gilbert H. Gragg Library in Bainbridge, Georgia.

So, Robert, what is your story?

WOODWARD: I grew up here in Decatur County, born in Bainbridge, and then spent the first five years of my life in Mexico Beach. Then we moved back to Bainbridge.

As the year of my graduation approached, 1969, it was the middle of the Vietnam War, and that's when my blind story starts. I had plans. I had been appointed by Maston O'Neal, our congressman at the time, to the Air Force Academy and my plans were to become a jet pilot and go to Vietnam and kill communists.

God had other plans for me. The week before I graduated from high school, I was involved in a water-skiing accident out on Lake Seminole and consequently lost the sight in my right eye. I didn't realize it at the time, but the week after graduation is when I went to the eye doctor because I thought I needed my glasses changed, and he said I had a detached retina and that I needed surgery immediately and at the time there was only three places in the country that could do the surgery: One was Emory, one was MIT, and one was a medical school in California. So my parents chose Emory, of course. (laughing)

This was on like, a Thursday. They operated on Tuesday. They were not able to save my right eye, so I was blind in that right eye. They told me that I would eventually lose my sight in my left eye, but they didn't know when. The Air Force does not accept half-blind jet fighter pilots. (laughing)

So my scholarship to the Air Force Academy was gone. I decided that since I couldn't fly, that I could build them though. So I consequently--I hadn't applied to any other schools at the time, but I applied and was accepted at Georgia Tech. I was the, I guess you would say, "valedictorian" here at Bainbridge High School. I received an [award] for the most outstanding student.

I thought my future was planned, going to the Air Force Academy, but then everything got disrupted. After a year at Georgia Tech, I decided that I did not want to be an aeronautical engineer, but I didn't know what I wanted to be.

I came home and I had become a hippie by that time. And my father convinced me that if I would cut my hair and go back to college, that he'd buy me a new car. And so I took him up on the offer and I went to ABAC [Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College]. At ABAC, I met a young lady who eventually became my wife. And I kept trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I first majored in forestry. I switched to library science. I switched to social science education and then history, and I was almost graduating by then from the University of Georgia with a degree in social science education. But my girlfriend at the time was planning to stay in Athens and work on her master's degree. So I said oh, "I can't leave Athens," so I changed majors again.

But going back, because of my blindness I was able to go to college on a Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation scholarship. They paid my tuition and they bought my books and supplies. I did part-time jobs to pay the rest, because my family could not afford it. So that was part of the reason I kept going to school, because I didn't know what I wanted to do.

And then from being [an] avid American wanting to fight communists, I had become very much an environmentalist. And so I changed my degree to environmental health. And I was--by that time, I had more creditable hours than any student who had not graduated at the University of Georgia. My degree required 195 hours and I had 315. (laughing)

I was sitting on the steps of the microbiology building one afternoon and my major professor, Dr. White, was walking up the steps and said he wanted to see me after class that afternoon. And I said, "Yes sir, we need to talk about what I'm going to take next quarter."

And he said, "Okay, but you'll understand more when you come in this afternoon."

I found out that afternoon that he had already signed my papers that I had graduated. (laughing)

He said that I was educated enough. He also introduced me to a man who worked for the Georgia Department of Public Health, and he wanted to talk to me about going to work as a health inspector up in Whitfield County, Dalton, Georgia. And I said, "Sure. I'll talk to you about it. I'm not sure what I want to do."

Well, this was in the early part of December 1975, and I went to see the man, thinking it was an interview for a job, and he showed me where my office was and asked me when I could start. So I never had an interview. I did not "officially plan to graduate from the

University of Georgia." They just mailed me my diploma. (laughing)

But I graduated. I went to work for the state, and the state decided after about a year that I needed more education, so they sent me back to school and I became a certified emergency medical technician. What it was, was they needed an ambulance inspector. So after a year of school--I was still working for the state while going to school--I became the ambulance inspector for all of Northwest Georgia, from Atlanta north to Chattanooga and west.

A few years later, I decided to quit the state and move back home and I did. And I went in to work in construction and started building houses here in Bainbridge. After a couple of years, that same man that I met at the university called me one day and said he needed me back and that there was a county in Atlanta called Gwinnett that was, at the time, the most rapidly growing county in the United States and they had a food service program that was deplorable and he needed help.

I said, "Okay, I'll be there."

I went and became head of that operation, but then the state also knew of my EMT experience, so they put me in charge of all of Northeast Georgia ambulance inspections, from Atlanta, all of Atlanta, east to Augusta and down to Savannah. So I worked as a health inspector in Gwinnett County for three days a week, and then I covered all of Northeast Georgia for two days a week checking ambulance services.

In the late '80s, the vision in my left eye had started to deteriorate. And driving in Atlanta, one eye to start with and then with a diminishing left eye, can be quite dangerous and I decided that I needed to quit. I retired from the state in '93 with a medical disability because of my eyes.

My vision decreased, and I finally went to an ophthalmologist surgeon in Tallahassee and he diagnosed that my left eye had then become detached. My vision was down to--I could tell light from dark. I shouldn't have been driving, period, but I continued to do so. But he convinced me that I needed to stop, that that was the end of it. They operated again and saved what vision I had left in my left eye.

I moved back to Faceville and that's where I became acquainted with the GLASS program. I've always been an avid reader. That was the only thing that kept me sane during those first months when I couldn't work, I couldn't do anything else. So I started doing the Talking Books program thing, but I found that they just put me to sleep. I can't just sit and listen to something without some visual input.

Through several operations, through doctors at Georgia Baptist Hospital in Atlanta and a doctor in Panama City, they were able to restore the vision in my left eye enough that I can read large print.

At that time, I started walking from Faceville to Bainbridge, which is close to fifteen miles, and I would come to the library and I would check out two or three books and I would go by a local establishment here in Bainbridge and drink a beer and then I would walk back to Faceville. And that was my weekly routine. I had a friend who would bring me to town on Saturdays and we could get groceries.

But I got my driver's license back.

The library has been a salvation to my sanity. As Catherine knows, I am a frequent visitor, at least once, twice a week. I try not to take too many books, because somebody else may be needing to read them also. So usually I limit it to two, unless it's a holiday weekend and I know I won't make it all weekend with just two books. So I'll go to three.

And that's my story. The large print program has been a lifesaver to me. I've been able to financially help that program. And it means so much that I do not want this library GLASS program to close and move to Atlanta. And I have fought in many ways, both statewide through the Blind Federation and the Georgia Council for the Blind and GVRA and the library system, advocating to keep this library open. Thank you. (laughing)

VANSTONE: Thank you.

WOODWARD: If you want to ask anything else, that's it.

VANSTONE: So I do have one other question, though your story is fascinating. When you did get your license back, did you start working again or--?

WOODWARD: Oh yeah, I forgot that part of the story. (laughing)

Actually, before I got my license back a friend who is blind was telling me that he worked at the Georgia Industries for the Blind, GIB, here in Bainbridge. And he says, "With your education, we need you."

And I thought about it and I was bored at the time and I said, "Okay."

So I applied, and of course they accepted me, because that's the mission of GIB: to provide employment opportunities for any blind person. I went to work as a standard production worker. Two years later, I had moved from several different jobs. There's different jobs within GIB production-wise and I had mastered, I guess, all of them. The only thing I can't do is sew. I am not good at the seamstress job.

But then I became a production supervisor, and when I retired two years ago now I was production manager. GIB had--and GVRA had helped me again go back to school and get my master's degree in business administration. So again, I was thankful for the state

for educational assistance. I did this at the University of Virginia, which involved flying to Washington. It was a correspondence-type deal, but I flew to Washington for a week every six weeks, and I did that for two years and the state of Georgia paid for all of these expenses. So I was obligated to them again for an additional degree. (laughing)

So all of my degrees from Georgia, my EMT schooling, and University of Virginia have been helped by GVRA in one form or another. The program has been renamed several times as the state reorganizes. We've been the Department of Public Health, then we've become Vocational Rehab. GIB was once part of the Department of Labor. And now we're back with the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. So that's the last part of that. (laughing)

VANSTONE: So is reading about the only--do you have any other hobbies or outside interests outside of reading?

WOODWARD: Other than animal rehabilitation. I started a non-profit little farm called Woody's Gopher Hole Farm and I rescue gophers, tortoises. There's about 50 that live on my farm. But then I branched into other animals, all domestic animals. I'm on the board of directors of the Humane Society and animals that the Humane Society accepts are dogs and cats. They don't know what to do with rabbits and pigs or donkeys or horses that have been mistreated. Sometimes even a cow, goats that somebody has escaped and is bothering some neighbor.

So I started taking in these. And I've had--I have had up to like, fifty animals. I'm now down to about twenty, but there's still goats, llamas, an emu, more goats because they keep having baby goats, and donkeys. Donkeys have become a problem for people and they just abandon them. I've taken in horses from the Humane Society in Tallahassee. Then they would find them a home later, but that's my passion is from my environmental sentiments and recycling and so forth, now to animal rescue.

I also work with Saint Francis Wildlife Sanctuary in Tallahassee. I volunteer down there one day a week, so another passion is animal cruelty and preventing it and rescue. (laughing)

VANSTONE: Well, I'm glad you're there to help them. Well, I want to thank you, Woody, for coming in and sharing your fascinating story and your many degrees with us. (laughing) So thanks, Woody.

WOODWARD: Thank you.