

*Our Stories, Our Lives*

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

GLASS-017

Cornelius Butler interviewed by Catherine Vanstone

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VANSTONE: Hello, my name is Catherine Vanstone and I'm going to have a conversation with Cornelius Butler for *Our Stories, Our Lives: An Oral History Project* with the Georgia Libraries for Accessible Statewide Services. It is December 7, 2018 and this is being recorded at the Decatur County Gilbert H. Gragg Library, in Bainbridge, Georgia.

So, Cornelius, when did you--when did your experiences with disabilities start?

BUTLER: Actually, I was born with retinitis pigmentosa. I've been disabled all my life. Fortunately, it's a disease that anybody who has it knows what the outcome is going to be and normally the vast majority of people who have it end up going totally blind.

VANSTONE: So you've--it's what you've always known?

BUTLER: Oh, yes. It's inevitable.

VANSTONE: So tell me about growing up.

BUTLER: OK. I'm from--initially, I was born in Dawsonville, Georgia, but I live in Bainbridge, Georgia. Throughout my life I used the Talking Book service, which is GLASS, to provide me with information on--actually provided me with a method to stay up to date on books and what's going on in the world, because basically, I am fully print-disabled. I do not even use pretty much--going throughout my school career, I pretty much used large print books, but over the years my vision has basically waned to an extent and I've had to rely a lot now like on audio or basically voiceover content, such as like when it comes to like using things like Bookshare, using things like audiobooks, when it comes to my cellphone, my tablet, and things like that.

But going back to that--going through elementary, middle schools, and all that, I basically faced a lot of the discrimination that someone who has a visual disability often faces: I was called "retard." I was put down a lot when it came to--basically because I was different. So I actually had to face a lot of animosity, and I actually rose through it by just basically having a really strong support system when it came to my vision teachers, when it came to my mom, because basically I was raised--my dad actually died when I was 5 years old. So basically, essentially you can say I grew up with a

single mom, essentially, me and my brother. And I'm actually the one that has a disability; he does not have one. He actually is fully--fully 20/20 vision. I'm actually the one that actually has the RP, but basically, I've had a strong support system that's basically been there with me because I know without them it would have been even rougher and I wouldn't even be where I am today.

VANSTONE: And where are you today?

BUTLER: I actually run my own web development and internet marketing company. I also focus heavily on developing websites that are accessible to people with disabilities. It's been my vision to do this, and one of the reasons I do this is because of what I actually have had to endure. And not being able to use regular print, I didn't want people to have to go through some of the same things that I have had to go through. So I basically started a company whose mission is to create a more accessible world.

VANSTONE: That's amazing.

What were some of the hardest challenges you faced and how did you get through them?

BUTLER: Ooh, some of the biggest challenges. So many. (laughing)

Some of the biggest challenges I faced is basically when I was younger I had a lot of self-esteem issues, because I was--when someone is--when people are constantly beating you down and telling you what you won't amount to anything and basically calling out your name because you actually have a disability, because you have a visual disability, it can get to you over time.

So it was rough. I ain't gonna lie to you. It actually was rough, but basically, I'm a very faith-based person and I am a very focused person. And there have been times when I've basically felt like giving up, but I've chosen not to. I've actually persevered. I've actually really pushed myself and I'm very happy with where I've ended up.

VANSTONE: So where did you go to school?

BUTLER: I went to school at Bainbridge High School in Bainbridge, Georgia. Basically, attended Decatur County school system. I was mainstreamed. I was not actually--I had a vision teacher throughout my entire process from--all the way from K through 12. Basically, I stayed with various vision teachers, but basically, I was not actually put in any specialized classes. I actually was mainstream. I actually had regular courses.

Now, I did tote large-print books, which looked like--they were massive, basically. Multi volumes. We got them from American Print House for the Blind and what we (laughing) basically, you had to be very careful because sometimes my books were like five, six

copies, and sometimes if you got the wrong one for the particular chapter that was going to be covered today, had to go all the way down to the room and go get the correct one. So that's another reason why I'm actually happy that there was like more audio-focused books with searchability these days. I didn't have that back then. So I'm very happy.

VANSTONE: How did the vision teacher help you through your schooling and/or just life in general?

BUTLER: She was my rock, really. She was one of my rocks, because she was on the ground there with me basically. A lot of times people don't realize. They feel like your vision teacher's just basically her main job is to basically make sure you have the tools that you need, you know, the books and stuff that you need, but I was actually blessed to have vision teachers who I could basically turn to that were able to counsel me. Basically, when I was actually having a bad day I knew I could always go to them and actually talk to them and tell them about what I was going through and they would actually be there for me. So basically, you could say they're like--they were like a second mom to me. So they--I can actually owe a lot of my academic achievement to them being there. And I actually had about, let's see, at least two throughout my career here. Yeah, Sherri Rye and (indistinct) Ajack were the two I dealt with heavily.

VANSTONE: Do you still stay in contact with them or have you seen them?

BUTLER: I lost contact with Ms. Rye because she moved back--she moved away. She moved to Michigan. I do stay in contact some with Mrs. Ajack, yes.

VANSTONE: Outside of work, what are some of the activities you like to do?

BUTLER: Well, actually I'm a hardcore techie. I'm actually really geeky, so one of the things I love to do in my spare--one of the things I have to do as part of my work is I actually do coding, quite a bit of it. And for fun I like to go to the beach. My favorite beach, unfortunately, doesn't exist anymore right now. Well, it doesn't exist like it used to. Like we used to go to Panama City Beach and Mexico Beach, and our area, you know, got hit by Hurricane Michael. We were really devastated, and we're all in the recovery process right now. Hope to return there again someday, but I'm giving it time to recover. But spare time is basically, most people find me to be boring in my spare time, because I like to read. I like to listen to audiobooks. Not really that exciting. I'll go listen to an audiobook on the beach. That's pretty much my idea of fun. And I'm a news buff, so I watch a lot of your traditional news stations. And I'm loving--I recently got my first smart speakers, so I'm loving them. I've got both of them. I've got--I call her Madam A because I know people who hear this are going to basically--I don't want to trigger her. (laughing) And I also have the Google Home. So I'm actually really discovering a whole new way to listen to audiobooks.

VANSTONE: You talked about your support system growing up. Do they play just as important role today?

BUTLER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I'm very family-oriented and I'm very close with my mom. Basically, as she's been there with me through thick and thin and yeah, my support system is still--whenever I'm having a bad day, they're the people I can go to and complain to and they'll just sit there and listen to me. They always have encouraging words to say and I'm proud of them and I know they're proud of me and it's worked out pretty well. (laughing)

VANSTONE: And you mention your family in that they're--is the family the close-knit part of your support group or does it extend outward?

BUTLER: Oh no, it extends farther outward. I basically have a very close-knit group of friends. Someone who I dated for basically more than ten years, she's always going to be a fundamental part of my life and she's very close to me right now, even today there's someone who--basically I can always say I can count on no matter what (laughing) basically. But I do have a very large network of people around me.

VANSTONE: Has there been anything that's surprised you over the years? I mean, you've talked about some of the hardships, but any things that are positive or anything that sort of surprised you throughout life?

BUTLER: Something--one thing that actually has surprised me is that basically no matter how much negativity that you encounter in life, there's always going to be a group of people that want to see you succeed. It may not be a large group at times. It may be just like a small group of people that's always--don't basically give up on humanity. There's always going to be a group of people that want to see you do better. There's always going to be a group of people that's going to push you. I've been blessed to meet some of those people throughout my life. I've met the negativity too, (laughing) unfortunately, but I must say that basically the positive people that I've met, they're still a part of my life and I continue to meet positive people. I'm all about positivity. That's what I really am about. Basically, I really want to live a positive life.

VANSTONE: Just to go back to the coding, I'm sort of jumping around here.

BUTLER: Oh, no problem.

VANSTONE: Where did you learn to code?

BUTLER: Actually self-taught. And (laughing) actually self-taught. I have some education in it at our local college, but primarily self-taught, because see, we --you can actually say I graduated from a ghost college, because my college does not exist anymore. The facilities are still there, but the college I actually went to was Bainbridge

State College. It does not exist anymore. We're now Southern Regional Technical College and we were starting to get some of those coding-related classes like Visual Basic back then, but basically some of the things I know we didn't teach here. So I basically just self-taught. Trial and error. Yup. So basically, yeah.

VANSTONE: Do you think the technology opening doors for you and--did that help develop a love in wanting to learn how to code?

BUTLER: Oh, yes. I'd say the technology industry basically in our society--well, actually in any society is a great equalizer. Some of the things that you can actually do with technology, you pretty much can write your own future essentially. Code allows you to literally basically create something from scratch that did not exist. And I'm loving where things are headed with artificial intelligence. I'm actually teaching myself some--basically how to do AI-related projects and I'm basically going to be using that as a jump board to be able to make more money over time. Because basically, I really do think--and especially in our community, the disability community and the blindness community, I really feel that basically AI is going to be able to play a major role in lifting up people who basically have visual disabilities. And the reason being is, for example, let's say that you actually have--one of the things I'm actually experimenting with is basically technology that's going to automatically describe images for people who are blind who use--who visit websites that are based off of the WordPress platform. Which you know WordPress is the largest web development platform on the planet right now basically, but a major issue with the internet is basically lack of accessible sites. So with WordPress being a significant chunk of the web, we're going to take advantage of the fact that it has a very powerful API where you can build on top of it, which is application program interface, you can literally basically build a system that's going to be able to auto-describe images, similar to what Facebook does with its auto-tagging. And what it's going to allow you to do is basically automatically describe these images so someone who's blind is going to actually be able to know that that is a vehicle, that's a red car, with a person sitting in it on the corner. They would be able to actually know that. And see, that's going to basically do a lot to really make things equal.

VANSTONE: Technology--we've talked about how--technology's role as an adult and Talking Books as a kid. Was there any technology that stands out, outside of Talking Books, when you were a kid that made your life--made a world of difference?

BUTLER: Oh, yeah. One of the things that--while I was actually in school, basically when I was there, they actually bought me--it was called a Talking Language Master. It actually helped me do a lot of my work when it came to my English-related work when we had to do like definition work, we had to do English related look-up work. It's actually a full-scale system that they actually bought for me. The school system bought it for me, and I still actually have it today. It played a pivotal role. And I also used some other AT when it came to doing--being able to do my work. I actually had a CCTV where I could basically put my books under it and it basically would auto-enlarge it. So I could

basically easily read. I actually had that in elementary, middle, and high school actually. I had access to one.

VANSTONE: So which elementary school did you go to?

BUTLER: Elcan-King Elementary.

VANSTONE: And then middle school?

BUTLER: It was Hutto Middle.

VANSTONE: Hutto.

BUTLER: Sorry, I'm jumping around a lot. Oh, bless you.

VANSTONE: Are there any other stories, you want to share anything special?

BUTLER: Not off the top of my head.

VANSTONE: We've covered a lot.

BUTLER: Yes.

VANSTONE: You shared a lot. So well, I want to thank you for coming in today and sharing your stories and what growing up here in Bainbridge was like visually impaired and the way technology is taking you in the future.

BUTLER: Thank you.

VANSTONE: Thank you, Cornelius.