

*Below, Jason Corning describes his own transition experiences. He discusses the skills and knowledge that he gained along the way to ultimately work for the Department of Defense. November, 2016.*

---



I was born deafblind and was diagnosed as having eye conditions of Achromatopsia and Nystagmus, for the unknown reason. At a very early stage of my childhood, fortunately, I was able to learn how to communicate with other people through one of my parents' friends, who is a sign language interpreter. I need to wear a pair of sunglasses because my eyes are light sensitive. In addition, I am profound deaf in both ears, but I received operation of the cochlear implant on one of my ears and wear the hearing aid on the other. Just as Helen Keller ever puts, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." Although unexpected challenges continue to disrupt plans throughout my life, none of my physical limitation prevents me from accomplishing goals that I have set for myself. More importantly, I am indebted to my parents, who love me and support me unconditionally. Without their dedication, I would not become who I am today .

I enjoy participating in different activities, in which I cannot only get to know myself in a different perspective but also can reach to people and share my experience. When I was in high school, I attend two weeks Teen Youth program held by Helen Keller National Center (HKNC) in New York. During that time, I was honored to be a mentor for two different summer teams, teaching children like me how to be self-assertive and know their rights, despite their disabilities.

During high school, I volunteered to be an IT administer assistant, because I enjoyed the convenience that Technology brings to my daily life and I believed it would work the same way to other students. I learned how to help people solve technical issues, for instance, and I was pretty sure that was my very first experience to develop my customer service skill. Not to mention that I took responsibilities working at helpdesk the night shift so that I could get a chance to understand people better by putting myself

at the frontline. Those were experiences that helped me make friends and as well learned how to live independently.

My education path was not as smooth as many others may have had. To ensure that I was not put into special classes where kids have different needs, my parents took part in a long process of negotiation and debate with my school, asserting that I should receive proper assistance such as interpreters and large textbooks so I could be part of classroom discussions. They actively reached out to external resources and help with hope that I could be as academically successful as the other students. For example, they attended every meeting Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting so they could communicate my needs to teachers. As a result, I could be equally participating in the classes and acquire knowledge just as the rest of my classmates did.



While serving as a trainer and a mentor for Wisconsin Deafblind Education (WDE) organization, I traveled across the country to deliver speeches and raised awareness of deafblindness. It always inspired me when I heard people said: "I never thought about this and now I want to make a difference." I presented as a keynote speaker at PEAK conference in Colorado, a panel member at AHEAD conference in Louisiana, a Keynote speaker and a moderator at the New Hampshire Transition summit, and speakers at several local schools.

Reaching out to people who are in similar situations gave me time to reflect on myself and provided insights into what I could do to make meaningful impacts on them. From my observation, some deafblind youth isolated themselves, feeling they were the only people who suffered from physical limitations. They were discouraged from life and lost confidence to take actions. Too often, I liked to approach to them with pieces of advice, guided them through their emotional discomfort, led them to find some outward connection and helped them make the decision on their goals in the long run. Deeply in my heart, these experiences helped me become a better person in other ways because I learned more than what I gave.

At school, having interpreters facilitated my studies greatly improved my comprehension during the classes. My school allowed me to study at my own pace. Therefore, I usually consulted with my IEP case manager to make sure I caught up with my peers. It made my studies a lot enjoyable as IEP provided interpreters, note takers

and allowed me to have double time to take the exam outside of the classroom. During my junior and senior years, I started to take college level classes in the public high school and technical college. This was an interesting experience to me as I had rarely been to classes with older classmates. Moreover, I did not socialize a lot with hearing people so many of hearing jokes baffled me or made me feel embarrassed until my interpreters explained to me. However, I learned that I had to be responsible for following the syllabus and getting my school works done by deadlines. Planning ahead to make sure I did have enough time to complete my tasks. These experiences turned out to my invaluable skills that are also critical to my job. As a result, earning 12 credits at technical college saved me one semester as a freshman at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UWW).



I always believe that great opportunities are likely to come in an unexpected way if seized at the right moment. Interestingly, when I was young, I was dreaming of going to the University of Wisconsin at Madison for my bachelor degree. However, it turned out that I fell in love with the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater (UWW) immediately during my campus visit to its physically special education study activities. Soon enough, I decided to apply and, to my surprise, got admitted within 2 weeks. I was glad to go to Whitewater because it was a smaller campus compared to Madison, making easier for me to navigate around campus on my own.

I started in a Business Administration major at UWW. After taking a course of Introduction to Business, I realized that math and finance are not my strengths. In fact, it did not take too long for me to figure out what my passion is. Because I interned as an IT System Administrative Assistant in high school, I quickly switched to Information Technology Infrastructure, which resonated with my already acquired knowledge and natural inclination. Another reason that IT major was more appealing to me was that I was very familiar with technology when I was young, a powerful knowledge enabling me to communicate and interact with the external world. The office assisted me in downloading study materials to my laptop and using some special tools such as Zoom-

Text and Kurzweil for reading electronic books scanned by the office. On a regular basis, I had met with my advisor to discuss my plan of studies so I could catch up with peers. The office also accommodated me by providing tutors and interpreter services, which could enable me to participate in class discussions and after class meeting.

Moreover, I was very actively involved in different organizations at UWW such as Information Technology Association, Resident Hall Association (RHA), and National Residence Hall Honorary. I did not go to many parties, but instead joined organizations to expand my networks. I traveled to other universities with RHA to address presentations and my performance won me top 10 at state and regional level and top 35 at the national level. Serving for RHA helped me build up my leadership skills and get to meet new people.

While studying at UWW, although my application to study aboard in the United Kingdom was turned down because the partner school could not provide accommodation, UWW Travel program offered me another chance to go to Ireland, in which I would attend a travel study course. I spent an amazing three weeks in Ireland with Spencer, my first service dog I received right before going to college. In Ireland, people reacted differently to service dog than people in the US. In the US, people tended to have more limits on the service dog, especially in the public place for health concern. On the contrary, people in Ireland seemed to not worry or limit us from doing anything. My bus driver, for instance, gave me a blanket for Spence so he could sit on the seat with me. I had so much fun during those three weeks.



One of the important experiences in college was to do an internship. During summer 2007, I applied for an intern through American Association for People with Disability. I was assigned to work for Department of Homeland Security (DHS) where I served as a Disability Program Specialist and Section 508 Compliance Officer. Frankly, I didn't expect that I was going to work for the government but my time there turned out to be valuable to my future career. I thought I would work for the same agency after graduation, but I was actually offered a job by Department of Defense (DoD), still my current employer. In order to relocate to Maryland from Wisconsin, my parents and I flew to Maryland few months ahead before I started my job. We tried to get familiar with the new area, learned how to use local transportation. Overall, my transition to Maryland was very smooth.

After graduating from UWW, I continued to pursue a master degree through its online program. However, I came to realize that the amount of reading and time sitting in front of the computer all day put a strain on my eyes while working full time. Luckily, I found out that my agency sponsored my graduate studies so I decided to transfer to Carey Business School at John Hopkins University (JHU). I successfully received my master degree this past May. JHU offered interpreters for each class and the one-on-one session with instructors. Despite interpreters having difficulties delivering abstract ideas such as data analytics and excel, I was able to keep up with classes through independent studies, which allowed me to review course materials with my instructors in an extended time. Additionally, JHU provided transcriber service as a note taker for all my courses and Adobe Connect (AC), which connected me to instructor's laptop so I could see what was displayed to the class, such as videos, slides, documents and charts.



When I am employed with DoD, I have a large monitor and a desktop with zoom-text installed, which enables me to zoom in text-context on my monitor. Likewise, interpreter service is provided but only in the events of meeting and training and are required upon requested. While working with DoD, I have built many experience and skills as a government employee. I have experienced different positions and now is a team leader at my current job. Since I received my master degree, I am now looking for more opportunities that can help advance my career.

Besides works, I have been actively involved in activities within the deafblind community. I was elected by the Maryland Governor to serve on Governor Advisory Board for Telecommunication Relay and Maryland Council of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. During my stint, I was the chairperson who led the rest of council members while the transition of onboarding new director. Apart from government entities, I was also the president of Metro Washington Association of the Deafblind (MWADB), taking responsibilities for organizing events, recruiting new members and creating a system to coordinate Support Service Provider (SSP), which provides interpreter service upon requested and arranges transportation service. On the other hand, I was the president of Baltimore Association of the Deafblind (BADB), which is dedicated to providing similar services in Baltimore area.

In May 2014, I married my husband, who is hearing and sighted and whose name is also Jason. He is very supportive and wants to see me become successful in my career and the community. While serving as the president for MWADB, my husband was the Publicity Coordinator in the organization, coordinating with communication and distributing news among members. Our family enjoys outdoor activities such as camping and hiking. The past May, we went on a cruise in Alaska with Niko, my second service dog. We were drawing a lot of attention on board because everyone was curious how a big dog like Niko could travel on board. Our journey was amazing.

In conclusion, I really enjoy giving presentations in hope that more people can be aware of deafblindness in their daily lives. I am looking for more opportunities so I can reach out to other groups of people; therefore, the knowledge of creating a friendly social environment to deafblind or any other people with mentally or physical limitation will be cultivated, spread out and valued. Currently, my husband and I are working on a few deafblind projects, with the goal that we can make a difference in lives of deafblind teenagers, who have struggled with learning important skills and finding a job. A dream of mine is to tell my story at one of TED's speech so we can prove to the world that sky is the limit, and we should never give up our own dreams.