LBS2E6- Meet me at the Intersection of... with Timeshia Edwards

Deborah: Hi everyone. It's Deborah Gold here, executive director of BALANCE. Before we begin, I just wanted to hop on and say a huge thank you to all our listeners for loving our content and joining us from around the globe. We are so happy to have you. We would love to keep our podcasts going. If you'd like that too, please consider making a donation, the link can be found in our show notes. Thanks for listening, and enjoy the show.

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Ramya: Welcome to living blind. I'm Ramya Amuthan, your guest host for this episode. The living blind podcast explores the perspectives and lived experiences of people with low or no vision, and it delves into the barriers, challenges, the real life situations that they have for living life to the absolute fullest.

This is the final episode in a three-part series on the intersections of blindness and other lived experiences and identities. This podcast is brought to you by BALANCE for Blind Adults, located in Toronto, Canada. And this season of Living Blind is sponsored by Accessible Media Inc., AMI.

Now a little bit about me. I'm the co-host of Kelly and Company on AMI. It's the live afternoon show on AMI audio, and this show focuses on lifestyle, culture, entertainment, arts, lots of things actually. I'm also the host of the AMI Audio Book Review podcast, which is a weekly discussion where we chat all things audio books.

A really incredible part... I want to talk about right now, a really incredible part of Canadian history. Our existence here in this country is being recognized right now. We're living through it right now in the last two or three years, we've gone through apologies and retractions. We've also gone through a lot of connecting and getting to know and empathizing and celebrating. And I'm talking about. Our indigenous friends and communities here in Canada, our neighbors, uh, the original people of this land, they're teaching us so much, especially about intersectionality. So on that note, I'd like to welcome today's guest for living blind, Timeshia Edwards. And she's going to be telling us a little bit about herself. We're going to get to know her and her story a little bit. Timeshia, welcome to Living Blind. Thank you for joining us today.

Timeshia: Well, thank you so much for having me. Uh, my name is Timeshia Edwards and I am, I was born in a small town in Northern Ontario called Moose Factory Island. Uh, so I am Cree first nations and I lived, um, in the next town over for most of my life, and that was Cochrane, Ontario. Um, I'll just tell a little bit of my story from then up until now. So, um, I was moved to Cochrane, Ontario, um, with my biological parents and I lived. I lived there up until I was about 12 years old. Um, and I ended up in the foster system. My biological parents, um, they just were not fit to take care of me and my five biological siblings.

And during that time I actually attended, uh, a public school in, in Cochrane, Ontario. And going to school in a small town. I had many positive experiences, but also some experiences due to my visual impairment. Um, it was, you know, there was some negativity, but dealing with that, um, was with an optimistic attitude, really helped. And...

Ramya: You're the only one of you and your biological siblings that has, uh, uh, vision impairment?

Timeshia: Yes, I am actually, I, I was the I'm the oldest and I was the, I am the only one who is born with, um, any type of disability. So for me, uh, my main, uh, condition is vision loss and, um, I'm also the shortest of my six siblings... so... and they're all quite tall.

But, um, yeah, so my, in the public school, I was very, very, very lucky. I had a full-time educational assistant and she was wonderful at making accommodations and really trying to make sure that I was thriving and learning a safe and a positive environment. And you could really tell that she was doing a lot, uh, for me to pick up on what I'm learning and for me to really keep up with the rest of the class. And so she taught me how to read and write braille along with a vision itinerant to, uh, commuted an hour, um, to Cochrane Ontario from Timmins. So, uh, it was twice a week, which, you know, was a luxury. Um, and she, along with my EA taught me how to read and write braille. And in grade four I got a computer and they taught me how, you know, to use the tactile resources that I was provided. And they worked very hard to make those tactile resources. Mm, things. You know, they really had to improvise. Um, drawing things out with a glue gun, so the glue is raised and tactile for me to feel, to make diagrams. Whereas in a public school, they would just be photocopied and they'd be handed handed to the classmate. And so it was a really big deal to... for me to have these tailored diagrams, especially made for me. Um, and later on, um, I think as I got older and my academics progressed and they realized that I had so much more potential, the decision was made for me to go to W Ross.

Ramya: Before you get started on your W Ross journey, I wanted to ask in public school, you're talking about all these different accommodations, right? Um, and that were very individualized for you. Did you have a struggle subject that you can remember? Um, one of the more challenging subjects that, that had to, you know, take a lot of accommodation and effort from your support system to help you with?

Timeshia: Yes, actually, that is a very good point. I struggled very, very much with math, uh, still do. Um, but especially in elementary school, uh, with the EQAO standardized testing. In grade three, I know that I probably didn't even finish it. Um, same with, um, I think grade six, I didn't finish it either, and it was just due to the lack of accessibility in diagrams and the way things were presented on the page. Since I'm a total, I'm almost totally blind. I am a braille user. So, um, it was really important to me that, um, I wanted to, I wanted to have things just like everyone else. And those books from EQAO testing and grade three, um, you know, some of the diagrams were shipped down, uh, from down south, from Brantford to Cochran. Um, so that was very, uh, You know, almost a novelty to me to have something that was diagrams were, um, actually made without a glue gun and pipe cleaners.

Ramya: Did you know anybody else where you were growing up, uh, that had low vision or who was part of the blind community? Was that something that was, you know, community for you or were you the only person you knew?

Timeshia: Um, I had, I have a cousin, um, who I later learned that she had a visual impairment as well. And I, I remember meeting her, you know, when I was little and I remembered her. Um, but I, I, you know, we've, we had only met a couple of times and so it wasn't to me, as far as, you know, as her, as in getting to know her very, uh, minimally, I was the only person that I knew that had vision loss. And being in Northern Ontario, you feel so isolated you don't know who, you know people are out there that have vision loss, but you don't know where they are and they feel so far away. It's interesting. You know they're there, and, and having that knowledge is kind of comforting and it's like, oh, maybe I'll meet somebody someday that has vision loss. And funny, funnily enough, I was actually connected with a pen pal, um, who went to W Ross. So it was really cool to be able to exchange braille letters in the mail. And we were both in public schools and later ended up at W Ross. So that was exciting.

Ramya: Karma. So yes, you were telling us about your journey into W Ross. How was that for you initially?

Timeshia: So my journey into W Ross to me to a 10 year old at the time, it seemed very sudden. Um, so I, I want to mention too that I was still in the foster system when I was, um, told that I would be, um, going on this new adventure and starting a new journey to W Ross. So the W Ross... I want to start by saying too, I had a trial period at Ross MacDonald. So a lot of it was okay. Um, in my grade fifth and my, uh, yeah, sorry, my fifth grade year, uh, grade grade five, I had, um, my vision itinerant come up to me and she says, you know, what do you think about attending W Ross? And I said, Oh! Like that, that seems like a dream. Like I've never heard of this place other than, you know, hearing people talk about it and saying, oh my gosh, like, W Ross is such a cool place, you'll go someday. And so I was thrilled. Um, so I went for their trial period and my foster parents made it a cool vacation. So we, we, uh, went to Brantford and going down that was other than, uh, medical appointments, that was the first time of going down south and really exploring. Pretty much where I would spend grade seven onward. Um, so that was pretty cool.

Ramya: And do you remember what you noticed, you know, in terms of the difference in environment... the difference in, uh, people or just, you know, Brantford versus where you grew up, like you said, they made it a whole vacation for you, right? It was like a really awesome trip, but do you remember some of the initial things that you noticed in a change of everything?

Timeshia: You know what? I would say, the environment was so loud. Um going, you know, there was buses and cars and people, and so many things like... Timmins was an hour away and it was, it was the nearest city and, you know, sure they had city buses and, you know, they had trains and there was a train that would come into Cochrane, but, when you're almost totally blind, you don't see that. So to me, when I was like, oh yeah, there's city buses and there's trains. And it's like, you could hop on a city bus and you can, you can go to the, to a mall? That was insane to me. Like, you know, you would have to take a bus or the train to Timmins an hour away … an hours drive away, uh, transit would probably be longer. And it's, it's a whole day thing, you know, it's, it's a day trip. So to me, going to the mall was it was a special treat. And, you know, so just many things like that, you know, things that they're not necessarily cultural, but there are things that you don't notice, especially with vision loss. Just navigating around that environment and being around so many people and, you know, cities operate differently. So it was, it was a, a big experience for me. So I loved it. It was, it was an amazing, uh, time and, um, I loved it. Uh, I knew that I wanted to go. And so, you know, I, when I came back to public school the week after my trial period at W Ross, you know, I really realized that, wow, I had so much potential and that going there would enhance my academics. I would be able to work on, with my educational experience, now I know what is called the expanded core curriculum. So orientation and mobility, life skills, reading and writing braille technology. All of that, I would have... you know, I, I wouldn't say I've never have received it in Cochran, but I definitely wouldn't have received it to the extent I had a W Ross. So that to me was very eye-opening, no pun intended. To be able to, you know, realize that there was, you know, now I look back and I'm like, wow. Sometimes I think I take that for granted too, is realizing that down here, everything is at my fingertips and there are still people in Northern Ontario who not necessarily are visually impaired, but they had just have a lack of services offered to them.

Ramya: And how does that sit with you? Because I, I think of it the same way, you know, I'm very privileged to be living right in the center of everything in Toronto, and it's not the same for, you know, just speaking geographically for a lot of people who are blind or low vision across the country, let alone in Ontario, right... in remote parts of Ontario. But, uh, you know, even knowing that at one point you were flying back and forth from W Ross to home, to W Ross to home and realizing, recognizing the difference, um, in, on so many levels for when you're in Brantford versus the north.

Timeshia: Yeah. And, and I, I do remember some days just, it was a very... again, I would have to do the hour long drive from Tim... from Cochrane to Timmins. Cause Timmins was also had the nearest airport. So it was that hour long commute, you know, pretty much four times a week. It'd be there and back and you know, it's taking a cab. So, um, I, a cab would be paid for, to drive me to the airport. Then I would take a plane. Then I would take a bus from Brantford uh, airport to the school. So I would leave at approximately one o'clock and get to W Ross around seven o'clock at night.

Ramya: Wow. Exhausting.

Timeshia: When you know what? For a ten-year-old for an 11 year old, rather I was 11 at the time for an 11 year old that's exhausting. Like that is insane to me that, you know, no 11 year old would with sight, whatever really have to face uh, that. And I'm not saying that it was a terrible time. It was definitely the best years I've had in my life. So I'm not, you know, by any means, um, saying that this was hard, it's just, um, like at the time it was pretty, pretty exhausting, but also the weeks spent at W Ross were amazing.

Um, I did have a few added elements too, and I want to mention that all five of my biological siblings and I, we were all in foster homes. So it's on the weekend making time to see them all and keep in touch with them all and also be ready to leave at noon on Sunday, um, and you know, make the seven hour journey to, to school again.

Ramya: So there was a point where, um, you were taken out of the foster care system. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Timeshia: For sure. So I, um, about my halfway through my grade sixth year, um, my foster family resigned just to, due to a lot of circumstances. Um, and I also found out, um, a few months before that, that I was placed up for adoption. So, that was, you know, to me it was, it was very exciting, but it was also, you know, very scary. I didn't know what processes would look like. Um, and halfway, I think it had to be kept a little bit of a secret as to who my, uh, you know, who my adopted family was for a while. Um, and then halfway through my grade seven year at W Ross, um, I was told by my grade six teacher and her husband that they wanted to adopt me. So that was very exciting for me. Um... And they lived down here. So to me it was crazy. Cause I'm like, wow, this Brantford will be my permanent hometown. Like this is, you know, I won't have to fly back and forth to W Ross or, um, you know, like it was a whole new thing.

Ramya: And how did that transition go? Because of course you were commuting back and forth from W Ross to home. Um, and then when you said, okay, now this is home, I feel like there's another level of reality that hits, right? Like it's when you move completely out of town and into the city, you're like, oh man, now this is my real life. Was there exposure to a new side of life with, I'm assuming, the diversity that came in with it?

Timeshia: Absolutely. Yeah, I... taking, so I think too... I just had a lot more, like you said, exposure to things, um, and you know, it was kind of normalized for a while. Taking field trips at Ross. Uh, so, you know, getting out into the community and taking orientation and mobility... and so, um, taking the city bus, um, places, you know. It was definitely scary at times, but I think I realize now, and this is the part where I kind of took for granted, especially in grade six, like, wow, I really can take a city bus and go to the mall. Or I can go out with friends and also being exposed to people who had vision loss. That to me was crazy. Like how are there so many people all around Ontario that have vision loss that are at the school? That was mind blowing to me. And so meeting those people, getting to talk to them and realizing that, you know, we all shared some of the same, but also very different experiences. Um, and you know, I have made some amazing friends at W Ross. And having that... um, you know, it's, it's definitely sad there's an added element too of like, okay, now the summer's here and we are in a different, you know, different parts of the province and, you know, we won't see each other for another year. But yeah, in, in terms of exposure, it was definitely a culture shock. Um, I just remember being, you know, feeling like, oh my goodness, what if I get lost? You know, getting lost in a small town is very different than getting lost in a city. Um, still scary, nevertheless, but, um, there's that I, I'm not sure there's small town feeling, I guess. So. Yes, once I, um, it was a slow transition to move down here. I was flying back and forth to W Ross every other weekend, um, to see my biological family. And then I was also, um, staying at my new family's home, um, the remaining weekends. And so, um, eventually I just spent one week there and then another and another, and it just naturally phased in. Um, and yeah, it it's worked out, worked out perfectly and I'm so glad to be... you know, I have an amazing family and to have people that will support me and have things at my fingertips have resources and accessibility, um, options in my hands.

Ramya: And I mean, in kind of, keeping in touch with your roots, right? Or at least catching up, you know, making sure that you're not necessarily, um, losing touch that way. What's significant in that for you? I mean, besides the obvious, which is just that they're your biological family, you want to keep in touch with them, but is there anything else that you really do tap into when you say these are my roots, this is where I came from?

Timeshia: Absolutely. I think it all started when, um, back in public school, you know, I always knew that I was Cree and that, you know, I'm first nations, but it's it, you know, knowing the teachings, knowing the story. Uh, from your culture, knowing your teachings and customs is super important, uh, to me, especially, um, you know, I, I, I'm always curious, I'm always willing to learn and you know, know where my roots come from.

Um, unfortunately, and this is by no fault of anyone. Um, I think, you know, it's just due to the intergenerational traumas of, of my biological family. You know, some of those teachings and traditions and, um, the knowledge of the culture kind of, you know, faded and it's just dealing with life mattered more than spreading the knowledge and, or trying to teach people. And so when I went into public school, um, they actually had, uh, Cree classes. So, um, here in Brantford and in most cities in Southern Ontario, you can take, you know, English or French. Um, and I was amazed that they had an option for Cree. So from grades one to five, I took Cree classes, instead of French classes... which to me, that was amazing. And again, Cree syllabics look nothing like Brailler print letters. I would have, you know, my EA make a tactile syllabic chart for me. And, um, it's now as I got older, I actually recently just found out that they had to keep making the syllabics chart because students would cut it or something would happen to it. And so my Cree teacher actually contacted the woodshop teacher and said, can you make a tactile syllabic chart? And a, uh, plastic syllabic chart that was, it was probably about an inch thick and it had syllabics and Braille writings, all in, um, mini squares and it was a syllabic chart specially made for me.

Ramya: Wow. That's so fascinating to me. I mean, I know that, you know, we, we talk a lot about the kind of accommodations that people get in public school, the expanded core curriculum, as you mentioned earlier on. Um, but it's also really interesting to me. Interesting to me I'm also bilingual. I speak Tamil and, uh, you know, trying to think of what, here, like in, in Toronto, what accommodations to learn Tamil would look like. Uh, just the alphabet itself is a very daunting experience I'm assuming. Timeshia, it's been really great just hearing your story, hearing all the different threads weave in and out. I wanted to talk to you about, or at least hear from you about some of the things going on with you right now. Including your background in recreation therapy. Do you mind telling us what that is and why it's important for you?

Timeshia: Absolutely. Um, so my passion has always been working with youth for, uh, with vision loss. And, you know, I think it was just because I had never, I feel like I like so many others can be related to, um, especially in, in the blind community and, you know, watching other people with vision loss and hearing, hearing their struggles. I really looked up to, um, people who had careers who had sight loss and really modeling their behavior and, um, kind of growing that same passion of working with all people, but especially people with vision loss. So, um, I originally wavered on, you know, what should I do? Um, choosing my career was... I also had to be cognizant of some of the barriers that I would face in the work field. Um, and so being, um, choosing a career that was, would really benefit me as well as making impact on other people's lives. Um, so recreation therapy was very important to me because it is providing enrichment and quality of life and person based care to anyone. Um, and my program was kinda tailored to seniors, but working with people to make sure that their learning and environment, you know, they were thriving in their environment and providing them with a goal oriented plan of … um, and a goal oriented action plan of, okay, how can we help you? And what sorts of things can we do to help you along in your journey? And we would plan activities and programs for them to do. Um, and these would be structured on the domains of health. So that's, uh, social, emotional, spiritual, creative, and physical wellbeing. It's implementing those, those domains of health into every program to make sure that, you know, we're providing well-rounded care. So taking that program was really eye-opening to me too. I think I had a chance to educate sighted individuals on what it's actually like to hear from somebody who has received some semblance of, of care, um, and services, uh, that they would have, um, that I would have had provided to me. So, um, I think, I I'd like to think that, yeah, I was a good example, uh, for some of my classmates. And, um, this, I mainly worked with seniors for the first couple of years of my programming so I was fortunate enough to work in an adult day program. Um, and I did my practicum there and later, um, applied for a contract as a casual on-call a rec therapist. And I, I did that for quite a few months. Unfortunately COVID hit. So work was kind of scarce for a little while. Um, but eventually that picked up again and I decided to apply for a position through CNIB. And that was for their Come To Work program. And I also applied for the Come To Work program because I believe that it was beneficial to not just me, but everyone in the community with vision loss. Because being able to provide... um, tools and resources and services to people to, you know, help them gain meaningful and gainful employment. And that's still working with people who have vision loss, and that was very, very important to me. So, um, I applied as an intern for the Come To Work program. Um, I got the position. And then, um, a few months later I applied for the program coordinator position, um, just one step above the intern and got it. Um, so that's been, uh, very exciting. I'm very new to the program coordinator role, but I'm, I'm loving it and I'm so excited to carry on in, see where, um, my employment journey brings me.

Ramya: Absolutely.

Timeshia: I'd also like to mention that I work at W Ross as a student support counselor for their short-term program. Um, and that is, you know, my main goal to be at W Ross. And to be able to permanently continue to help youth with vision loss and make an impact on their lives. And be there, be a good example, a good role model for them and to motivate them. You know, that people with sight loss can have careers. They can work. They are just as important as anyone else and to work hard to achieve your goals. And that's what I, that's the main message I want to pass on to these youth because, you know, I don't know where I would have been if in my journey, um, if my role models and my support counselors didn't tell me that. So... that's kind of going full circle. Um, so in working at the short-term program has really given me, um, a lot of experience and a lot of, um, a lot more motivation to kind of start my career there. And so, um, I'm very excited to see where that journey will bring me.

Ramya: Well, as you said, things are just getting started for you in the career front. I'm really, really thankful and appreciative that you've shared your story with us and your message to the people that you work with and the people that you hope to continue working with. So thank you so much, honestly, it's been such a pleasure hearing from you and talking to you today.

Timeshia: Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. And thanks for giving me a platform to share my story and hopefully be an example and a role model for others. And, yeah, thank you.

Ramya: Absolutely. We love sharing our platforms up here, and. That's it for this episode. Thanks for tuning in and getting to know Tamisha Edwards. Her contact info is available in the show notes. Special thanks to Timeshia for being our guest this month, our Producer, Jeffrey Rainey, Executive Producer, Deborah Gold, and the entire team at BALANCE for Blind Adults. If you liked what you heard today, subscribe or follow us on whatever platform you're listening to us on right now. We're on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter at BALANCE for Blind Adults. You can also email the podcast with any comments or suggestions that you may have at LivingBlindPodcast@BalanceFBA.Org. For more information about BALANCE for Blind Adults and our programs and services, or to access the show notes or the transcription of this episode, please visit us at BalanceFBA.org. I'm Ramya Amuthan, and this has been Living Blind. It's been an absolute pleasure to guest host this special three part series on intersecting identities. Thanks for listening.