

# LBS3E6 A New Country, A New Life – With Minette Samaroo

## Transcription

### **Naomi**

Welcome to Living Blind. I'm your host Naomi Hazlett, and this podcast is brought to you by BALANCE for Blind Adults, located in Toronto, Canada. This season of Living Blind is sponsored by Accessible Media Incorporated. Here at Living Blind, we explore the perspectives and lived experiences of people with sight loss, and delve into barriers, challenges, and real life strategies for living life to the fullest. This month, I'm joined by Minette Samaroo to share her journey. From Guyana to Canada; From incapacity to capability. From exclusion and isolation, to social inclusion and empowerment. Born with retinitis pigmentosa and having lived with vision loss for most of her life, Minette was born in Guyana, South America and migrated to Canada in September 2014. She is employed at Apple Sherway Gardens as a Sales Specialist. She is currently pursuing a BA in Psychology at York University, and since this interview, has graduated from the Assistive Technology Apprenticeship program here at BALANCE. Since 2017, Minette has worked with the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians (AEBBC,) to advocate for social change. She has designed and delivered consultations and workshops on meaningful employment, accessible education, housing, and customer service. In addition to her work with the AEBBC, Minette is an Accessibility Tester for Fable Tech, and serves as Co-Chair for the Accessible Housing Network and the Assistive Devices program working committees. Her ultimate goal is to remove inequality, discrimination and injustice in order to make this world a better place for each of us. We discuss all of this, and more, within the next half hour. So without further ado, let's get to it.

### **Naomi**

Welcome to the show Minette.

### **Minette**

Thank you, Naomi, I am truly honored to be invited as a guest for the Living Blind podcast.

### **Naomi**

So let's start by talking a little bit about your sight loss journey. So can you tell listeners a bit about what retinitis pigmentosa is and how it's affected your vision over time?

**Minette**

Yes, absolutely. So retinitis pigmentosa or RP for short is inherited retinal disease. So it affects the retina. And it breaks down cells over time causing vision loss. So there are many types of retinitis pigmentosa, some severe, and some not so severe. So I was born with a severe type of RP, where I lost my vision in my late teens. There are people who have RP and lose their vision later on in life, like into their 50s. So for me growing up, I had the vision, like, you know, I could live a normal life during the day, I went to school, played with my friends, and everything was fine during the day. But when it came to the night, like my world was dark, it was like, I couldn't see anything. And you know, as a young child, I didn't understand, you know, what was happening to me. Eventually, my parents noticed, you know, that I was like, not moving about in the evening. And so they started taking me to the doctors. I was diagnosed with RP, when I was eight years old. And even at that age, like I knew, I knew, because, you know, I heard the doctors saying that there wasn't a cure. So I knew, like someday, I will lose my vision. But, you know, when I lost my vision, in my late teens, like nothing, nothing could prepare me for that, like I still, I still like, you know, kind of grieve over that loss.

**Naomi**

So it sounds like it was something that you while you knew at first thought you were having trouble or you weren't able to really see at night, but it sounds like it took your parents a little bit longer to figure out what was going on?

**Minette**

Yes, they didn't know they just thought maybe I wanted to, you know, just not do things in the evening. Right?.

**Naomi**

So like you said, you grew up in Guyana, what was it like growing up with sight loss in in that country.

## **Minette**

So it was very, very challenging. Like, there was no resources. You know, I heard of an Institute for the Blind, which was in a city. And I was like, five hours away by car. And you know, I grew up in a small town, and we couldn't afford to get there. When I was in school, and I needed accommodations, like there was no accommodations, no screen reader. People there didn't understand, like, what I would what I needed, even though like I explained, there was no government funding for me also. Like even though I became an adult, and was no longer under parental support, the government did not support me. I depended on, you know, financial support from family. And I worry a lot because, you know, what, what will happen if, you know, they stopped funding me what happens to me? So I was really stressed and depressed. And, you know, it was it was challenging. There's also stigma, like, you know, if somebody has a disability in in those countries, then you know, you're looked down upon like, you're like a second class citizen.

## **Naomi**

So, I'm just wondering, because you said there is no accommodations while you're going to school in Guyana. I guess I'm wondering, you know, can you tell me a little bit more about that? Were there things that you felt like were not accessible to you in terms of learning the curriculum? And then I guess how did the stigma affect your studies?

## **Minette**

Yeah, you know, I had like, in when I was writing the exam to go to the high school. I had a really, really wonderful teacher that understood, you know, what I needed. And so like, he would teach me one on one, he would take me outside where it had light. And he would, you know, teach me one on one. And when I wrote that exam to go to high school, like he was the one who contacted the Ministry of Health, to provide a scribe for me to write that exam, because at that time, age of eleven, I wasn't able to read anymore. So I was really happy and excited that, you know, I'm going to high school, but when I got there, like it was, then it started to go down. Where, you know, teachers didn't want to do what my

teacher in the common entrance class did. And even though I told them, this is how I needed to be accommodated, they just wouldn't do it.

**Naomi**

It sounds like, one of the bigger differences is, you know, your story, you had a teacher who took you under his wing and helped you learn, but that's not something that you could necessarily rely on. Maybe, yeah. And then coming to high school, that support was lost, unfortunately.

**Minette**

Yes.

**Naomi**

So you said, you know, you finish high school, and you became an adult'. So at what point did you decide to come to Canada? And what sorts of things influenced your decision to come to Canada?

**Minette**

So I actually did not finish high school, I eventually dropped out, because of lack of accommodations.

**Naomi**

I see. Did you finish your degree? Or is that something that you plan to? Is that something you plan to do in the future?

**Minette**

So I have already completed since I came to Canada, and that's why I, you know, going to university in September.

**Naomi**

I see. So, we'll come back to that in a second. But you said you came to Canada in 2014. So can you tell me a bit more about why you decided to, to do that?

**Minette**

So my mother and sister were already here. And you know, they talked about Canada being an equal opportunity country. So I saw coming here as my ticket to achieving my dreams.

### **Naomi**

So what was that process like? was there any steps that you had to take to come to Canada? Were there any challenges along the way?

### **Minette**

There were many challenges. Because, you know, I was over age. And, you know, my mom could not sponsor me in the regular way. So my sister being here, she, you know, she kept researching immigration laws, and she eventually found this, this process where a parent can sponsor their child, their dependent child, you know, what a disability and that's what was how my mom's sponsored me. But there were like, a lot of challenges. The paper got rejected a few times. But we didn't give up because, you know, I just, I just needed to get out of from, you know, what I was going through. I persevered, you know, my family, persevered. And eventually we were successful.

### **Naomi**

I'm glad to hear it. Definitely sounds like, there was a lot of challenges when you were in Guyana. So along the way, I think you mentioned or when I was learning about you, you've become a Christian along the way at some point during your journey, can you tell me a little bit more about how that happened?

### **Minette**

So growing up, I was very lonely, even though I have four siblings. My parents were, you know, parents who have favorites. And I was not one of them. I was like, always the one who couldn't do anything right. And I was like, alone. And, you know, like, who do you go to when you have challenges when you know your parent is the one who made you feel that way? So I long for someone to love me and accept me for who I am. And when I found Jesus, I knew I found that person. Like, I can't explain but like that emptiness I felt inside me was instantly filled. And you know, since then to now, I'm filled with this inner peace that I know that I am loved, cared for and protected.

**Naomi**

And is this something that you practice on your own? Are you part of a Christian community in Canada?

**Minette**

Yes, I'm part of a Christian community in Canada, and I feel so much connected. As you know, the community connection is vital for, you know, one's well being as well as spiritual life. So yes, I'm part of the Christian community here.

**Naomi**

I'm happy, I'm happy to hear that. So, from my understanding, I'm putting all the pieces together. So you know, you grew up in Guyana, you went to school, unfortunately, high school was not accessible for you. So at some point along the way, you decided Canada would be a better place to pursue the things that you wanted. So now, right now you work as a Sales Specialist at Apple Sherway. So how did you get interested in the position? And how did you get involved?

**Minette**

What involves, as a Sales Specialist, you know, I'm face to face with customers. I do everything as my sighted colleagues, where I, I speak with a customer and I, you know, probe about their needs and passions. And then based on what they say, I run up their product, I scan it, I process, payment, their receipts, and you know, everything just as my sighted colleagues, because, you know, Apple provided that accessibility for me. The reason I, you know, I went after Apple, and I got employed not on my first try, but I on my second try, and I pursued Apple, because Apple is a company that takes accessibility in their design stage, it's not an afterthought, like, you know, accessibility is built in all of their products. And I don't have to pay extra, just because I use VoiceOver.

**Naomi**

Yeah, that actually reminds me that you are also doing an assistive technology apprenticeship. So maybe we'll come back to your role at Apple, but for now, it sounds like learning technology is something that is important to you.

**Minette**

Absolutely. Access technology is my passion. And it when I read about the Access Technology Apprentice program, I was, I was taking lessons with Doug. And I said, Doug, I want to be a part of this program. And Doug told me to send in an application. And I sent in my application and cover letter, and then he told me that, you know, I am going to be one of the next apprentices. And I was, like, overwhelmed with joy. Because I, as I said, you know, I love access technology and, you know, teaching clients something new and having them see how much that has changed their day to day activities as me it's very, very rewarding and fulfilling. And, you know, I didn't know everything. And I still didn't know everything when I started. But I have learned so much, because when I, when I do my initial intake with the clients, you know, I ask them their goals, what do you want to learn? So for the things that I don't know, I researched, and I try them out on my own. And then I teach them. So like, for example, I always saw PowerPoint as something that is not doable with a screen reader. I was even afraid to try it. But when I have a client who wants to learn PowerPoint, I had to learn to do it first. Right? So I learned to do it. And now, you know, I'm able to access PowerPoint presentations with a screen reader. So I'm motivated to teach as well as to learn through this program.

**Naomi**

It sounds like helping other people is motivating to learn things for your own and explore new things. That's, that's awesome.

**Minette**

Yes.

**Naomi**

So what are some technologies or apps or things like that, that you find helpful in everyday life?

**Minette**

I have my smartphone. I'm using Zoom, WhatsApp. I also have my computers that use JAWS with Windows. I also have a Mac using voice over. So it's important in my day to day life because I work, I volunteer. So I have, you know,

other documents to review, there are edits to be done. And you know, assignments to submit when I'm in school. So it's very, very important that I know, technology.

**Naomi**

Mm hmm. No, it sounds like you have a lot of different experience. Like you said, maybe there might be something with the school that would be better on Windows or other things that would be better on Mac. So it sounds like you were a good fit for the program, with your different areas of knowledge with technology.

**Minette**

Yes, each has their strengths and weaknesses.

**Naomi**

So I do want to talk to you about your experience going to school, but just to go back to your role at Apple Sherway gardens. So, you know, you mentioned it was, you know, working with customers and taking receipts and going through products, I guess, what do you find most fulfilling about your job there?

**Minette**

You know, what I find most fulfilling is that, you know, I, I can work like I am able to, you know, manifest my potential, removing how people see others, you know, with disabilities, you know. I'm able to do the same thing as my sighted colleagues. Right? Once the accessibility and the opportunity is there, I'm there to do. And it's fulfilling, it makes me feel a sense of purpose. Like, you know, I'm contributing to society as well.

**Naomi**

Is that something you feel like you wouldn't have been able to do if you'd stayed in Guyana?

**Minette**

Absolutely. Absolutely!



**Naomi**

Well, that's amazing, I'm really glad to hear it's neat to kind of hear your perspective on, work. I mean, I've talked to people with disabilities who are employed in Canada, but just hearing that perspective of where you were, and where you are now, it's, it's definitely been quite the journey for you.

**Minette**

It has been, yes. And, you know, it was not like, a walk in the park, so to speak. It was like, challenging. But you know what? I found that there's always more than one way to achieve something. You know, one thing doesn't work, then try something else. Like, you know, for example, when I was seeking after my education, and I was told by George Brown, they could not accept me into the academic upgrading program, because they didn't have a screen reader for me to write the assessment test. I went to TDSB. Right? When I was told by one employer, they could not hire me, because they weren't sure that my screen reader would be accessible with their platform, I went somewhere else. You know, I wasn't hired because I didn't have the skill, but because they weren't sure that my screen reader would be, you know, accessible with their platform, and they weren't even willing to try, you know. So there's always more than one way of achieving one's goals and potential.

**Naomi**

I think you're making a good point. I think that as much as Canada has those opportunities, there are still systematic barriers that people face to employment. And it is really too bad hearing your story, because, you know, it wasn't even that some employers aren't even willing to give it a try. Which is too bad because they, they may miss out on somebody who has the right skills to perform the job. So sounds like for now, your response is to look for other opportunities and find employers that understood how to do accommodations. But yeah, I agree. I hope that other employers catch up to places like Apple in the future.

**Minette**

Yes.

**Naomi**

So we were talking a little bit about school along the way. So as I understand you're taking a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at York University. Can you tell me about why you picked psychology, and then tell us a little bit about that transition to post secondary education?

**Minette**

So my reason for choosing psychology is when I was back in Guyana, I volunteered for my church as a telephone counselor. And I found that very, very fulfilling and rewarding, because, you know, all people need is for someone to listen to them without judgment, or, you know, telling others what they've heard. And I was able to listen, and, you know, keep their stories confidential. And when they call me back to say, "you know what, I feel so much better and thank you for listening", I was like, so overwhelmed with joy. I felt that, you know, that fulfillment in doing that. So that's why I chose psychology because the area I'm looking forward to you know, majoring, is in Counseling Psychology.

**Naomi**

It sounds like, you were able to listen to people and you have, you know, in addition to your technology skills, it sounds like you have skills to work with people and that people respond to your approach. So sounds like psychology is a good fit for you.

**Minette**

Yes, that's why I chose that.

**Naomi**

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Naomi: How has it been, you know, applying to York University and and pursuing your undergraduate studies?

**Minette**

So it's been a bit challenging, going through all the different, you know, items on a checklist. It's been, you know, some are easy, some are challenging. I'm getting there. But there's still a lot that needs to be done. I do have a Student Accessibility Counselor that I'm talking with. However, you know, there still needs to be more to be done to make the process truly accessible and seamless.

**Naomi**

Thank you for sharing that. I think it's a similar idea as with employment. You know, we're coming a long way. You have in Ontario, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. And there's been more and more of a push, along with, you know, disability rights activists to make processes accessible, but not quite there yet in every respect. So, you know...

**Minette**

No, yeah.

**Naomi**

Sorry, go ahead.

**Minette**

Now, it seems that when, you know, when a system deals with one person, and that person passes on, and the next one comes along, it's like starting over. You know, I'm sure that there are people with vision loss who have attended York already. But it seems like I'm starting over. You know, I'm I have to tell every step of the way, what I need, and nobody seems to know or understand. And it's frustrating.

**Naomi**

For sure. I hope that things change in time. That actually brings me to another topic of conversation that I wanted to touch on for today. Because from what I understand, you're getting involved in advocacy efforts as well. Is that right?

**Minette**

Yes.

**Naomi**

So why don't we start with the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians? How did you get started with them and what sorts of work do you do with them?

**Minette**

So I started volunteering with the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians, when I started to look for work in Canada here. So every application asked for work experience. And so, you know, how do you get work experience if nobody hires you? And then I was, I was advised by someone to, you know, volunteer, and that counts as work experience. So I got involved. And, you know, little did I know that that would become the most rewarding and fulfilling work that I can ever do. Because I, you know, got involved in accessibility, advocacy, and that's where I got my, you know, advocacy skills from where, today I am advocating, you know, for accommodations at school, at work. And you know, in every aspect of life, you have to advocate you have to speak up and let someone know what you need. And the one thing I want to get across is that, you know, people need to ask not assume like, because we are the ones who know exactly how we need to be accommodated. And sometimes even if we are not asked, we need to speak up. And, you know, my work with the Alliance has taught me that and has enabled me to speak up when I need something and I see something's not working.

**Naomi**

I'm glad to hear. Is there anything in particular, like an achievement that the alliance has done, that you're proud of?

**Minette**

Yeah, we've done a few City of Toronto funded projects, which is an employment project where we design and deliver training workshops to employers and employment agencies and how to work and accommodate people with disabilities. So we went to businesses, and employment agencies and one of the businesses we went to was Microsoft. And even though Microsoft is an already inclusive employer, like they learned something from our workshop that they didn't know. We also did another project during the COVID-19, where we were

able to give people with vision loss assistive technology, like smartphones, to stay connected during the pandemic. And we also delivered training workshops and accessible customer service, teaching businesses how to accommodate people with disabilities during the pandemic. You know, how do you tell someone with vision loss to stand on the mark six feet apart? Right? How does, how does someone with vision loss know that? So we, you know, we deliver accessible customer service to businesses, and we also deliver accessible education workshops for students as well as educators on Universal Design Learning, which, you know, you design something for someone, but then when it's universally designed it, it is for everyone, it benefits everyone. And, you know, the one thing that I want to get across is that disability touches every demographic and socio economic status. And it eventually affects most people in their lifetime, through age, illness, or disabilities. So the accommodation one makes today can benefit them tomorrow. And accessibility does not cost anything more, for the most part, when it's from the design stage, you know? It is when it's an afterthought than it costs.

### **Naomi**

That's a good point. So the whole idea of including people with disabilities in the design process resonates with me, as an Occupational Therapist. I've heard people say the phrase, "nothing about us without us", and I do find it frustrating at times when I'm working with clients, to know that they have really important things to say, really creative ideas about how the world could be more of an accessible and inclusive place. So I wanted to thank you for sharing that point Minette, because it's really important to involve people. And, you know, if, if our society involved more people in the design process, I'd probably have less work to do myself. So I appreciate the work that you and others at the Alliance are doing to try to call people in and say, you know, include us and we have contributions to make.

### **Minette**

You know, you may not realize this - or others might not realize it, but people with disabilities are excellent problem solvers, because we have to, we have to find ways to adapt, you know, day to day tasks to, you know, for our own needs. Right? You know, growing up in Guyana without technology, I had to just

problem solve, you know, how do I do one thing in a different way? So I had to think, and find ways to do things without technology, like, I used my memory a lot, right? I memorized phone numbers, for example. I couldn't go here, take a pen and paper and write down a phone number that I need to contact someone important. I memorized it.

### **Naomi**

So, although you have the strategies of memorizing, at the same time, you're making me think about assistive technology, right. And so if you have sight loss, and maybe you have some difficulties with memory, there are different options out there. But I just feel like there's so much more potential we have with technology and design to be more inclusive, so that people don't have to put it on themselves to try to problem solve, but to your point, it's true. The important thing I want people to know, with listening to this podcast is people don't sit around and wait for things to happen. People are resourceful. People come up with ideas and strategies. And I think it's really important, especially if you're not a member of that disability community, to really sit down and listen to what people are doing and what's working for them before you suggest strategies. So I know we've been talking more about the design piece, but I wanted to mention that as somebody who works in a helping profession as well, and I'm sure Minette, you know, as a, as an apprentice in this Assistive Technology program at BALANCE, I can imagine that that's something that's important for you to explore with the client as well.

### **Minette**

Yeah, because each person's, you know, learning needs is different. So I have to adapt to teach each person the way they learn best.

### **Naomi**

For sure. I think, actually, you also have done accessibility testing. Is that right?

### **Minette**

Yes.

### **Naomi**

Can you tell us a little bit about your work as an Accessibility Tester? Who you've worked for? What sorts of things you've tested?

**Minette**

Yeah, so I'm an Accessibility Tester for Fable Tech Labs. And Fable Tech is the first company that has given me my, you know, my paid first paid job in Canada. So we evaluate websites, and also mobile applications. Here we check for, you know, accessibility with a screen reader, because I use a screen reader. So we check for, you know, the structure of a page. Does it have headings to separate the different, you know, sections the different elements? Does it have unlabeled buttons or links that, you know, it just says, "click here?" You know, we don't know what that is. Are the form fields labeled, or, you know, when you encounter an error, when you're filling up a form and it says, you know, information missing in red? How do I know that as someone who cannot see, right? It should say information, for example, email information incorrect, that I know I need to go to the email and correct my email information.

**Naomi**

So essentially, the work with Fable is making sure that websites and the internet are accessible for people with vision loss or with other disabilities.

**Minette**

Yes.

**Naomi**

So I feel like we've covered a lot of ground today. We've talked about education, we've talked about employment, we've talked about advocacy. Do you have anything you want to tell listeners who are listening to this podcast and thinking, you know, "I want to work, I'd like to go to school." Or maybe even "I'd like to get involved with advocacy or with technology?" What advice do you have for people listening to the podcast based on what you learned along your journey?

**Minette**

I believe everyone has dreams and potentials. And while there may be challenges along the way, I want to encourage everyone to don't give up. You

know, as I mentioned earlier, there's always more than one way to achieve something. And you just have to keep trying. You know, reach out to others who have been through that journey and then have their support. And, you know, I'm here as a resource also, for anyone who wants to, you know, be encouraged or need advice on how to achieve and meet their potential.

**Naomi**

Well, that's a good note to end the show on. Where can people get in contact with you if they were interested in speaking with you about some of the things we talked about today?

**Minette**

So I am on LinkedIn, also on Facebook. So just look for my name Minette Samaroo. That's M I N E T T E. Last Name. Samaroo, S A M A R O O.

**Naomi**

Great. Thank you. So thank you so much Minette, for coming on the show. It was a pleasure speaking with you, and I wish you all the best with your future education and employment goals.

**Minette**

Well, thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

**Naomi**

Thanks Minette. And that wraps up this episode of Living Blind for February 2023. We're glad you could join us. I really hope that you enjoyed this interview with Minette, as she took us on a journey through her life story and her lived experience. I know I certainly did. Hearing her journey from where she started, how the odds were stacked against her, and how resilient she is throughout all of her endeavors was really a pleasure to listen to. Special thanks to Minette Samaroo, our Producer Jeffrey Rainey, Executive Producer Deborah Gold, and the entire team at BALANCE for Blind Adults. And also let me take a second to thank you, the listener! Our audience has been growing steadily over the past few years on podcast, and we're already seeing viewership on our YouTube channel since we started uploading shows two months ago. Feel free to



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