

Edward Bell: Believing is Seeing – Season 1

Episode 8

Amy: Hey, Teddy.

Teddy: Amy.

Amy: Have you ever been in a position of not really having direction and then someone or something happened to give you confidence and that direction?

Teddy: Okay. Yes, many times. You know, I didn't know what to major in and somebody found me. I didn't know, I didn't want to go to graduate school. And outside of Scotty Robertson Memorial Gym, which it's called now, a gentleman had a conversation with me, and each of these times guy said, look, if you're willing to work, we'll help you. And, and I had no idea what I was doing and these gentlemen who I respected and several women on campus as well, you know, coached me up. And so, I've been gainfully employed since then, much to the shock of a lot of people who know me. But yes, thank goodness that people like that have come along. And I mean, me and you work together a little bit, Amy. I think we encourage each other and help each other and there's always the opportunity to do that.

Teddy: You're, you're going to talk today to Edward Bell, and I have in no way been in his shoes. If I would've been dealt the hand that he would have been dealt, I would like to think that I could have summoned the will, and courage, and strength to accomplish this fascinating stuff that he's been able to do and to help so many people.

Amy: Yeah. I think that what we're all going through now having to self-isolate because of Corona virus like that is a really big, you know, lump in the road, I guess. You know, like it, it's been, I know for some people it's been really hard, not only just the work aspect but having to self-isolate, having to prepare, like being scared of either catching the virus or knowing someone that has caught the virus, knowing someone that has died from the virus. Like it's been a really tough time for a lot of people.

Amy: And in another perspective, in another light, I think it's also given people the opportunity to, to overcome and to be more creative and, and be innovative, I guess, is what I'm trying to say. So, I think that sometimes something feels like a disadvantage, and it probably is a disadvantage at one point, it is a disability, but there are ways to overcome it, so that you can kinda like see the bright side.

Teddy: It's funny that you could say, see the bright side when we're fixing to talk to, when you're going to talk to Dr. Bell who is blind, who, who was full sighted. He was full sighted, and he'll tell you this story about losing his vision. And it took him a couple of years getting into, you know, a program where he could learn braille, cook, clean. And again, he met a special person two years after he lost his sight. He was helping summer youth programs, and it, and it gave him the confidence that he could still fulfill his dreams. They weren't their original dreams he thought they were going to be, but the people that he's helped is, um, it's humbling to listen to him and to think of, you know, how much he brings to the Louisiana Center for the Blind and how many, how many people he has, who can't see, he has allowed them to metaphorically see.

Amy: Yeah. And if you, if one of our listeners is getting their bachelor's degree right now, and they feel like they don't have direction, and they just know that they want to help people, this might be a good career path for them.

Teddy: Oh, absolutely. It's just such a magnificent program, the Louisiana Center for the Blind. And Edward Bell is a great example of a guy who had one set of dreams, and an incident occurred, and then he found the help he needed and realized that he could help other people as he had been helped. And he's been doing that since he got to Tech 20, 21 years ago.

Amy: Yeah. So, Edward Bell is the director of the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness here at Louisiana Tech. He shared his personal story of how he became blind and how he relearned how to engage with the world. Like we've been talking about, you know, being blind didn't stop him from living independently, doing the things he loves and living a fulfilling life. And he is passionate about helping other blind people regain their confidence and self-sufficiency. You ready to hear what he has to say?

Teddy: Yeah, I'm going to relisten to it.

Amy: Sounds good.

Amy: Have you always been blind?

Edward: No. So, do you want me to tell you that whole story and that'll kind of get you to, not to where I am here today, but partly down that path.

Amy: Yes.

Edward: Okay. So, I grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I grew up a fully sighted, individual: no disabilities. My hopes and dreams in life were either to go into the military or follow my dad into construction, and doing that kind of blue-collar work was very much in my bloodstream. At age 17, I was out with some folks and ended up in a drive by shooting, where I got shot in the face with a 12-gauge shotgun, which left me totally and permanently blinded.

Edward: You know, several days, a week later, after, in the hospital, and the doctor said, you know, I lost my vision, I'll probably never get it back, I was pretty devastated and depressed and assumed that the rest of my life meant, you know, welfare and never fulfilling any of my dreams. So then I, I went to a training center down in the southern part of the state where I, you know, learned how to walk again and read again. I learned to use the cane. I learned Braille. I learned how to cook, and clean, and all those basic skills, and then gained some confidence.

Edward: And I was still very scared; didn't know what to do. Clearly construction and military were out of my plans. And so, then my vocational rehab counselor, you know, suggested that I go to college. And college had never been in my plans, even though my parents wanted us to go to college. It just wasn't something that was realistic because we were, you know, a lower middle-class family. But with the help of the rehabilitation services, I started off in college. Then I also met the person who later became the love of my life and my wife.

Edward: So, she actually was working at the training center that I went to. She was one of the first people that encouraged me and teaching me how to use the white cane for mobility. And then she left that position and moved to California, and we just kept up for a long-distance friendship. And that friendship continued on and blossomed into more of a relationship.

And so, I pursued her out there to California and enrolled in college out there. And, you know, again, just within, you know, a year and a half, after having become totally blinded, I up and move to a new city and a whole new life, and it was something that I never dreamed that person who with a disability could have, could have done.

Amy: Wow. Yeah. That's sweet.

Edward: Yeah, it was. It was kind of neat stories.

Amy: So, it seems like your life changed a lot afterwards. You, you couldn't go into the military or in construction or anything like that. But have your interests grown in different areas? And have you found like a new passion?

Edward: So, interestingly, my wife told me many years ago, she said, 'I believe that as a blind person you can still do things with your hands, do construction, do things, but you're not going to get hired to do that. Nobody's going to hire a blind person to do that kind of work.' And so, as I went through college and finished up my undergraduate degree, interestingly, we, one of the programs here at Louisiana Tech University had just opened up to train people to be orientation mobility instructors, which is those people who teach other blind people how to use a cane. And I think my passion kind of began the first year that I worked in one of the summer youth programs out here working with blind kids who were 9, 10, 11, 12 years old, and mostly kind of like a camp counselor, but also I was teaching them to the white cane and stuff.

Edward: And at the end of the summer, their parents were so impressed and saying, you know, 'Wow, my kid is so confident. They've learned so much in just four weeks.' And it was the first time in my life as a blind person, but even having been sighted, two, three years earlier, that I've felt that I could really contribute something to another person and make their lives better. That I could teach, you know, that I could give some, some skill set to, to another human being. I just, teaching was not ever anything that was in my in my plans or in my bloodstream because I just didn't know about it. And I think that that experience really sort of sparked my interest in the teaching profession.

Edward: And I completed with my master's degree and began working at the Louisiana Center for the Blind here in Ruston, Louisiana in August of 1999. And for anyone who doesn't know the Louisiana Center for the Blind has a as a national and even an international reputation of being one of the best rehabilitation training programs for blind and visually impaired adults, you know, anywhere. And I worked there for about a year and a half, almost two years. But some friends and colleagues suggested that to really make bigger change, broader change, we needed to expand the programming, we needed to expand the type of training that we do. And so, they encouraged me to go on for my doctoral degree.

Edward: And so, we, my wife, and I then moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where I, I spent the next four years earning my PhD, and my wife spent those four years giving birth to our two daughters. And then just at after completing that venture in our lives, the position came open back at Louisiana Tech University. So, it's kind of like Hotel California: Louisiana Tech just keeps calling me back and calling me back. But I came here in June of 2005 to take on the directorship of the Institute on Blindness. And I've been here now, this has been my 15th year.

Edward: My ongoing passion, my ongoing work at the Institute, has to do with the fact that every time I hear a story of a child, or an adult or senior citizen, who is broken and dispirited, who is trapped at home and doesn't feel like they can do anything with their lives. It really

motivates me every day to go out there and keep trying to change that narrative. The unemployment rate in this country is down to below 5%, but the unemployment rate for people who are blind is upwards of 70%. And I know from my own experience, and from many of the folks that I know, that it doesn't have to be that way. That blindness is not a reason that should hold you back from a career, from raising a family, from owning your own home, for going on vacations and for living a normal and productive and happy life.

Amy: Can you tell us a little bit about the institute?

Edward: So, so, the Institute on blindness is a collaborative effort between the Louisiana Center for the Blind and Louisiana Tech University. The Institute, we conduct research into the best strategies and methods that foster independence. And we do professional development, and we have several graduate degree programs. This is one of those areas that it's a, it's a good paying job and there are still four to five times the number of vacancies as there are people to fill those vacancies. Very rewarding career and we can teach everything you need to know here at Louisiana Tech University.

Edward: You know, in our programs, as I said, what we're training is people to go out and, and give the skill of independence to blind people. Blind people being role models and mentors for other blind people is a very, very powerful tool, but there just aren't enough blind people around to fill the many training positions we need. And so many of our best instructors we've ever had our sighted people, sighted people who want to help people gain independence. And some of the best instructors I've ever hired have been fully sighted folks who we train on the skills and attitudes they need to have.

Edward: So, this is definitely a profession that is a great profession for any Tech student who has an interest in working with people, who likes to be active, who likes to be outdoors, who likes to work with people on a one-on-one and small group settings. I mean, this is a career that's just a great opportunity for folks who want to do something a little different than just pushing papers or pushing buttons.

Amy: For you, what was that life changing moment that maybe you just weren't expecting when you thought, you know what, my life isn't hopeless, there's something that I can do. And I guess maybe your perspective changed. Or that maybe will take people by surprise?

Edward: Wow, well, gosh, I mean, there's a couple of things that, you know, when I think back and think of things that like I'm proud of, or things that were validations of the things that I've talked about....

Edward: You know, in 2017, so three, three years ago, I had to go to a conference in, in Dublin, Ireland. And I had the opportunity to take my daughter, who was 16 at the time, and my daughter was real big, has been real big into, like Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster and all that. And we actually made a side trip up to Scotland and took a 12-and-a-half-hour bus ride around Scotland to go up to Loch Ness. And as I was standing next to her holding her hand in front of Loch Ness and looking for the Loch Ness Monster like all the other tourists, it occurred to me that, you know, I've achieved something that my father and mother couldn't have even dreamed of in taking my daughter halfway around the world to see something, you know, that was interesting for her. And so, that was a really proud moment for me. And, you know, lots of those, those kinds of, of opportunities have, have been pretty, pretty amazing.

Edward: You know last April, last year when the tornadoes hit Ruston our, our family in our house was impacted by that, too. And it was two o'clock in the morning and we had fortunately gotten up when the alarms went off and went downstairs into our basement. And so, my wife and I, who are both totally blind, and my two teenage daughters, who are fully sighted, were down there, and when the storms came through and all hell broke—trees started falling and one fell through the middle of our house and all the power went out—when the dust finally settled, you know, I'm the one that put on my, my boots and went upstairs to survey the damage and to make sure that the house was safe for my kids. And we found, my wife and I together found, the flashlights for my sighted kids, so they wouldn't be afraid of the dark.

Edward: And then we spent the next, you know, close to a year helping to rebuild our house and dealing with all of the aftermath of all of that. And she and I talked about it a lot, and talked about the resilience that we had built up over many years of dealing with blindness, and how it came into play, that when tragedy struck, we had the skills, and the confidence, and the resilience, to just jump into action and to take care of take care of the situation for our daughters. And not to sit back helplessly and say, 'Well, you're the ones who can see; you need to take care of us.' And that is really what we're working for; is not for people to have to go through natural, natural disasters, but to have the skills and the resilience to be able to deal with whatever life throws their way.

Edward: You know, I said my dad did construction when I was a kid. And construction has always been a hobby of mine. Even when I was a kid, I enjoyed it. And one of the things that I learned at the Training Center, which may sound a little bit bizarre, but even today, they have an industrial arts program. Well, most people are not going out of here and becoming cabinet builders. That's not the purpose of it. The purpose of the program is to teach them some skills, teach somebody how they can actually run power tools, and I'm talking big table saws and radial arm saws and stuff, and do it safely. And I learned those skills. And over the years I've built, for my wife, a cedar chest and a coat rack, different kinds of things. And the, the biggest thing that I've done in the past year, other than putting our house back together, was we enclosed our carport into a garage, and I made it into my woodshop. So, I've got a miter saw, and table saw, and router table, and all kinds of different tools, and I like to build things. It's my hobby.

Edward: In July, my 15-year-old came back from a summer camp. She just had it in her head she wanted a loft bed. And so, I said, 'Alright, let's do it.' And so, we got somebody to take us to Lowe's, and bought some two by sixes, and boards, and stuff. And over the next two weeks, I built her a loft bed. So, she climbs up. It's like a bunk bed, but underneath there's not a second bunk, she put her computer desk and has a computer there. And then she climbs up in her loft bed. Sure made her happy. You know, she loves her loft bed there, but it's me, you know, something that I'm proud of that I have the skills and the confidence to put something like that together. And it's my hobby. It's my thing that I enjoy doing.

Amy: Yeah, that's really cool. So, how do you experience the world differently being blind? Because you talk about going to Dublin and when I imagine why I'd want to travel to different places, to be honest, I think of the things that I want to see. So, what makes traveling really interesting and cool for you, and how is your experience, being blind, like different?

Edward: Yeah, that's a good question. Many, many years ago, we, my wife and I, went with some friends to a zoo, and we're doing, on a one of those trolley cars that goes around the whole zoo. It's a sightseeing thing. And I remember a passenger saying, 'Well, you know, what are they getting out of this? They can't even see anything.' And part of it is, it's the experience.

It's having that experience that you can think back and remember, you know, especially traveling somewhere internationally. Part of it is, it's the culture, it's the people, it's the accents, it's the food, it's the smells, it's the experiences, just how different things are.

Edward: And so, how we, how a blind person, does things is remarkably similar to how a sighted person does a lot of things. My daughters are both pretty funny. Their friends will come over for dinner, they'll talk, and their friends ask them all the time, 'How does your dad cook?' or, 'How does your dad grill or use a knife?' And my daughter just shrugs her shoulders and says, 'He just does.' Because she's seen me her whole life, you know, cutting up vegetables, cutting up meat, grilling on the grill, you know, doing all the normal things. We can teach you these techniques, we can teach you how to do them safely. But they're so second nature once you've learned them that, you know, there's not that much of a mystery. They're not that complicated.

Edward: But, you know, and when one of my daughters were born, both daughters were born, you know, people would say, 'Oh, gosh, it's so sad you can't see. You can't see how beautiful your children are.' It's like, but you can touch them with your fingers, and you could feel them. But if you've never held a baby, your own baby, the sheer joy and pleasure, the human experience, human emotion of that has nothing to do with sight. Has nothing to do with vision at all. And it's hard to kind of translate, you know, do I know what my daughter's look like? I think I have a pretty darn good exam-, you know, good idea. After 16 and 18 years of, of living with them day in and day out, I think I know. But I, but more importantly, I know what their personalities are, and I know what their hearts are. And you know, really that ultimately is what matters the most.

Edward: Yeah, I think it's some experiences are a little bit different. But you know, I think in a lot of situations, whether it's crossing a street, or watching a movie, or traveling to a foreign place, vision is a very, very powerful sense, one of the most powerful senses we have, but I think it gets a lot more credit than it deserves, in some cases. There's so many sounds, and tastes, and smells, and textures in everything we do that, you know, you're hearing the same thing that I'm hearing, you're smelling the same thing that I'm smelling, but your vision sort of takes credit for everything.

Edward: And a lot of times when you're walking up to an intersection, and I've seen this happen a lot of times, the sighted person will turn and say, 'Oh, be careful, there's a car coming.' Well, I heard that car probably before you saw it, and you heard the car, too. That's why you turned to look at it because your ears heard it first. But then as soon as you saw it, then you associate, oh, I saw that car coming. Thank God I saw that car coming. Well, the truth is you heard it probably before you saw it.

Amy: What are some very common questions that people will ask you about being blind?

Edward: Well, I mean, probably the, the single question that everybody always asks is what, what do you see? Do you just see blackness? And that's actually a really, really, um.... It's not a complicated question, but it's, it's kind of, it doesn't have a really good answer because if I'm sitting here in the studio, do I see blackness? Well, I suppose on one hand, maybe I do just see blackness. But on the other hand, I see a table in front of me, a microphone in front of me, you sitting over here to my right, and the four walls, because my hearing picks up on these things, my brain knows that they're there. And so, my, your brain kind of forms that into a mental image. You know, when I'm walking through campus, I form a mental image of what's around me. So, I see everything in my mind's eye. Maybe I just see shades of gray, I guess, if you will, but everything has sharp focus in terms of what I'm envisioning around me.

Edward: But I would say that the biggest, you know, the other biggest misconception that folks have is that is that, you know, if you cannot see, then you don't know what's around you and you're somehow therefore vulnerable. I can remember my daughter's being two years old and three years old, and strangers walking up and saying, 'Oh, they can see. They must be such a good help to you guys.' Like, how many two-year-olds, three-year-olds do you know that are very helpful to their parents? Right? I mean, they're two, they're three. We didn't have sighted kids so they could be our sighted guides, you know, all through life. And you know, we spend as much time cleaning up after them and, and tripping over their toys as any sighted parents did. I mean, it's not. But it's just a misconception that folks have that to see is to be independent, and to not see is to not be, and it's just a misunderstanding.

Amy: Yeah. What's it like parenting, as two blind people having sighted kids?

Edward: You know, another really good question. And, you know, we've been fortunate here in Ruston, that the community has seen enough blind people that mostly they don't freak out too much. And I remember my wife being really, really scared when we had moved to town. She wanted to do a birthday party for my daughter when she was three years old. She thought surely, none of the other parents would bring their kids for fear that, you know, blind parents, you know, didn't know what we were doing. So, she was very pleased when there was a whole bunch of kids that showed up and it was a great party and stuff. And then over the years, over all the years, the number of times that, that parents of other kids, you know, asked my wife to babysit their kids and stuff was surprising.

Edward: You know, when they were really little, we did very simple things that any parents should do. You childproof your house. You put the little covers over the light sockets. You put the little latches so they can't open the refrigerator by themselves. You know, you do various measures like that, and you're constantly.... She, my wife, and I were kind of joking that as they got older and bigger and bigger and bigger, you had to just keep moving things up to higher and higher shelves so they couldn't reach. But you do those kinds of things.

Edward: We did a little bit with like, maybe, especially if we're going to go out, put bells on their shoes so you could hear them. And we also especially, and I think this is advice for every sighted parent out there, when you're walking through Walmart parking lot, hold your kid's hand. Because you don't ever know if they're going to dart out in front of a car. So, you don't take the chance. We never took chances. We always held their hands and made them stay close to us. You know, there's a lot of just basic techniques for, you know.... Any parent knows when their kid cries, are they are they distressed? Are they hungry? Are they tired? You know, that's just a parenting skill that you learn.

Edward: So, I would say mostly, the skills haven't been too, too difficult, or too, too different. Our kids, like any other kids, tried to sneak in and get more dessert or cookies or something and you, you know, blind parents have.... My wife says, I don't have, the eyes in front of me don't work, but the eyes behind my head work just fine. So, you know, you, you listen for them. You know what, you know, any parent knows that when your kids are being too quiet, they're up to no good, right? So, you, you know you check on them. You do those kinds of things.

Edward: But I would say that mostly, as a blind parent, probably the biggest obstacle we ever faced, beyond just kind of public misconceptions, was really just transportation—getting them to school, getting them to appointments and all that. And for that, we've always just hired college students on a part time basis to come in and babysit, or to drive us from, you know, place to

place, or to take the kids to school. And so, you know, we, again, problem solved and figured out ways of doing that. And even till now, that's, even though my daughter started driving last fall, we still have a college student that pretty much takes her to school every day, for now. You know, being parents, taking care of that responsibility for them. But I would say, I would say transportation really has been the only thing that was really a challenge as a blind parent.

Amy: Yeah. Okay, that makes sense. How can people be courteous or how can, how can sighted people help blind people in on an everyday basis? So, is it helpful to, to guide them? Is it helpful to open doors or to, like, let them know where seats are or things like that, or is it demeaning?

Edward: So, here's, here's what everybody needs to know about that. What you should do with each and every blind person you come across is common courtesy. Say hello. Is there anything I can do to help you? How's your day going today? That's all you need to do.

Edward: Where Ruston is a little bit tricky is because the Center for the Blind is here, most of the people you see are in training. And so, they're going out specifically to do travel assignments to learn how to cross streets, to learn how to find businesses and things like that. And sometimes they'll say to you, 'Thank you, but I'm,' you know, 'I'm on an assignment. I don't need your help,' or, 'I can't have your help right now.' That's because they're out there learning. So, hopefully they say that to you in a respectful manner, and then I would say then respect their wishes and, and, let them be. If they want to be guided, that's their choice, but you can't make that choice for them. You can offer the help.

Edward: But courtesy really is the only rule that really applies is just say hello and be polite. Obviously, if somebody is really in danger out in the street, it's not inappropriate to help get them out of the street, help to get them to a safe spot. They are here in training. Sometimes mistakes or miscalculations happen, and they get into sticky situations. And helping somebody who's obviously in a tough spot, you know, you can do that, but again, offer the assistance and respect what happens.

Edward: A lot of times, you know, you might see somebody who's in a parking lot wandering in circles lost. And they may be lost. But it is the process of them finding their way that is the learning opportunity. So, just because you see somebody who's clearly maybe confused or disoriented doesn't necessarily mean that they need help. But you can still always offer, say, you know, 'Is there anything I can do to help you?' The common courtesy. I mean, just common courtesy and mutual respect is really the only things that I think are really relevant.

Amy: What is the weirdest question anyone's ever asked you?

Edward: The weirdest question. Wow. Somebody, I mean, somebody asked one time about like.... Oh, I, okay, okay. Probably the weirdest question I ever got is, are blind people afraid of the dark? I don't know. I assumed some might be, I guess. I mean, you know, blind people truly are a cross section of society. So, I mean, I guess some blind people may be afraid of the dark.

Edward: You know, I guess one advantage to being totally blind is that it doesn't bother me whether it's dark or whether it's not. You know, my kids, sometimes they'll walk into the kitchen and I'm in there with a sharp knife cutting vegetables and the lights are off, and they're like, 'Dad turn the lights on.' I'm like, 'Well it doesn't matter to me.'

Edward: But, yeah, there's, there's been some weird ones, definitely some weird ones. One of the experiences a lot of the students at the Center for the Blind get is they go to the Mardi Gras every year. And it's actually done specifically because it's a, it's a very, uh, intensive training exercise to be dealing with the crowds, and Mardi Gras, and all the drunken people at Mardi Gras.

Amy: I am afraid to go to Mardi Gras.

Edward: Oh, it's, it's, it's, it's crazy, and you get every kind of public reaction to blindness there that you can conceive of. From people thinking that you're faking it, 'Oh, nice costume pretending you're blind,' being insulted that you're pretending to be blind, people wanting to lay hands on you to heal your blindness. I mean, there's just every, every conceivable reaction you can imagine. So, but it's a good opportunity because those are the kinds of reactions that you do get out there in public. And so, you have to learn how to deal with those things in a appropriate manner.

Edward: Whenever you meet a blind person, there really are no dumb questions. There's, I've not, I've never had a dumb question that is asked honestly. What I get a lot of is dumb assumptions.

Amy: Well, thank you so much for being on the podcast. Thank you for answering all my questions. It was a pleasure.

Edward: Appreciate being on the podcast.