

AT&T and Aira Present: A Conversation With Belo Cipriani

Pete Lane: AT&T and Aira present another installment in their series, featuring individuals who have influenced the blindness community, through their passions, and through their actions. Today we introduce Belo Cipriani.

Belo Cipriani: About 10 years ago, I lost my sight, in San Francisco. My cause of blindness is a retinal detachment due to an assault. In addition to the trauma of becoming blind, I was also dealing with the trauma of being betrayed by a group of people who I thought were my friends.

Pete Lane: Belo Cipriani, the victim of a tragedy, but let's not dwell on that loss.

Belo Cipriani: I was angry for a while and with the help of my friends, and the support of my family, I was able to see that there's more to life than just being able to do things one way. That I could negotiate life without vision.

Pete Lane: Belo talks about his advocacy for disability rights.

Belo Cipriani: It wasn't until I become blind that I realized that diversity also includes disability. A lot of these companies who have amazing diversity statements don't have accessible website.

Pete Lane: And his sexuality.

Belo Cipriani: As a teenager, the next space was, you know, I came out as being gay. This was the early 90s, before Ellen and Elton. People would then ask me, "Why can't you be normal?" When I became blind, then people would just say life must be hard for you because you're not normal.

Pete Lane: He speaks of his writing.

Belo Cipriani: I have two book projects, that I'm working on now. One is an anthology, and the second one is a sequel to Blind, which is also a collection of essays.

Pete Lane: And his attitude about blindness.

Belo Cipriani: I think that blindness opens up so many opportunities, especially for connecting with people. I think that you don't need sight to have vision.

Pete Lane: AT&T and Aira invite you to enjoy a conversation with Belo Cipriani.

Belo Cipriani: I'm very happy to be blind in 2017.

Pete Lane: Brought to you by Blind Abilities.

Jeff Thompson: Welcome to Blind Abilities, I'm Jeff Thompson.

Pete Lane: And I'm Pete Lane. This morning, our guest is Belo Cipriani. Belo is so many things Belo is an author, Belo is an eloquent advocate for disability rights, and by the way, Belo is blind. Good morning Belo, how are you this morning?

Belo Cipriani: Good morning. Doing well. Thank you for having me.

Pete Lane: Our pleasure Belo, for our listeners who are not familiar with your story, why don't you tell us a little bit about Belo and how we got to this point now?

Belo Cipriani: Sure. I grew up in California, and about 10 years ago, I lost my sight, in San Francisco. My cause of blindness is retinal detachment, and the cause of the attached was due to an assault. I got kicked in the head by a group of men, and that's what set off my blindness. I talk about this a lot, in my first book, my memoir. That's where my life changed. I started learning about disability, and disability rights, and disability technology, and immersed myself in the community. Began writing, and one thing led to the other, and I'm doing a lot more than writing these days, and doing other side projects. But the catalyst was really going from someone who was sighted, and able-bodied, to someone who had a disability, and seeing the contrast in how people interacted with me left me with a lot of questions. I used my inquiry, to really begin this journey.

Pete Lane: Yes. The assault, to which you refer, was quite tragic and devastating, obviously, it brought on your blindness. I'm reading your book Blind: A Memoir.

Voiceover: Beaten and blinded by friends he once trusted, author Belo Cipriani, learns to live and conquer his new world. Follow Belo as he chronicles the two years following his life changing assault, in Blind: A Memoir, available at blindamemoir.com.

Pete Lane: It is available on BARD, that's my vehicle for reading it now. But it was a very poignant story, about how you had developed a tight group of friends, seeming friends, and then, at one point, those friends actually turned on you. Can you talk a little bit about the actual attack?

Belo Cipriani: Yes. The group of men, that assaulted me, we're actually my childhood friends.

Reader: His dark brown eyes looked straight into mine as he pushed me back. Tapping into my martial arts training, I allowed my body to absorb the push, and took three steps back.

Belo Cipriani: These were a group of men that I befriended in high school, and were really the first group of men who I was completely open about my sexuality with. I'm gay, and these were the first group of other gay men, my age, at that time, that I met, so it was a very special type of bond.

Reader: I began to shift my body and turn around, and felt the first impact in the back of my head. A cyclone of punches then followed, and I was knocked to the ground. I felt like a sailor in a vast Black Sea, falling under the spell of the familiar song. The hypnotic sound growing louder and louder, as the choir of sirens called for me.

Belo Cipriani: To have them, a decade later blind me was very tough. So in addition to the trauma of becoming blind, I was also dealing with the trauma of being betrayed by a group of people who I thought were my friends.

Pete Lane: Yeah, the story in the book was spellbinding. I have to, again reiterate, it's available on BARD, and I'm sure elsewhere. But it's a very good read, and absolutely well-written, so I compliment you on that. My heart sank when you describe that event. But never the less, you then went on, and actually went through several surgeries. The final one, as I understand it, was the time at which the physician, the surgeon, said to you, "I'm sorry Belo, you're facing blindness without any chance of recovery."

Reader: "Can you see my fingers?" I struggled to swallow for a few seconds, before answering, "No, it's all black. It's darker than last time." I heard him move some tools around and ask, "Can you see the light?" I let out a faint, "No." I then felt his breath on my face as he said, "The main goal of this procedure was to save your eye and maintain a healthy anatomy. Your retina is attached, and you may be a candidate for future procedures. As for now, I suggest you contact the LightHouse for the Blind. I'm really sorry Belo." I felt a sharp pain in my throat, that burned as it made its way down my chest and into my stomach. Dr. Hopkins excused himself. He tapped my shoulder and I heard him close the door behind him. My mom and sister both hugged me. I became aware of the rage making its way through every vein in my body, and stuttered my attackers names, beginning to produce the most toxic tears in my life.

Pete Lane: Talk about that emotional hit and how long it took you to overcome that.

Belo Cipriani: Like you mentioned, I had multiple surgeries. Each time I had the surgery, I kept losing more, and more, vision. So after the first surgery, I gained a lot of vision back. Actually, the vision that I gained back was, I think, about 20/40, 20/50 and that was just in one eye. That gave me hope. I had that for about a month. Then overnight, my retinas detached, and I had surgery to attach them again. Then got some vision back, it was spotty, then they detached again. So I went through the whole gamut of the low vision world, where I could see text, and color. Then, that faded, things turned black and white, and they got really foggy, until I ended up in complete darkness. Which is what I am right now, I'm completely blind.

Pete Lane: So what was it like and how long did it take you to accept your fate? And how did you get to where you are with the acceptance of blindness?

Belo Cipriani: Obviously, when you go through the morning period, when you lose something, or someone, you go through the whole gamut of emotions. I think my first reaction was anger. I was angry. I didn't have a chance to be in denial. I think, I was, maybe in denial, when I was low vision. You know, telling myself, "I'm not blind." I could see a little. I could see colors, but when I became completely blind, there was no room for denial, so I went straight to anger. I was angry for a while. I was there a couple months. With the help of my friends, and the support of my family, I was able to see that there is more to life than just being able to do things one way, and that I could negotiate life without vision was very crucial for me.

I think, also a catalyst, or a big contributor to my being able to get out of this depression, and anger, was just being surrounded by a lot of really accomplished blind people. I would meet them at the LightHouse for the Blind, in San Francisco. I would meet them just riding the public bus, and the train, and just seen that there is remarkable blind people. Engineers, lawyers, doing all kinds of things, gave me hope, and I could then see myself having a life.

Pete Lane: You know, the pivotal point, from what I gathered, in reading the book, prior to the assault, at one point, and I'm not sure this was your intention, but you made a point about ... Well, the whole gang of your friends, we're getting ready to go out, and you informed the guys that you would not be available to do that next week, because you had to study for your SATs. Do you think that was the issue that may have festered with them, that you were trying to make yourself a better life, and going on to college, and studying, and that may have somehow

insulted them, or somehow demeaned them, and that might have led them to the attack, do you think?

Belo Cipriani: I spent a year going through surgeries, and so I spent a good year, to year and a half, in bed, recovering from the surgeries. I think 90% of that time was think spent reflecting on what happened, you know, with these guys, who were my friends. Did I do something wrong? My opinion, on that, changed. Since I progressed, and was able to a distant myself from what happened, I could reflect more clearly. But I think that you outgrow your friends and I think that, that's what I did.

Some people call it bettering myself, because I was trying to pursue education. Regardless, I was outgrowing them. I could have picked up a different journey, for me, I could have gone do something else. But I felt that I outgrew them, and I began to distance myself from them, and eventually ... You know, like I mentioned in my book, they just became people I would sometimes recognize at a festival, or an event, but then didn't really have anything to talk about.

I do want to point out though, that I will never know what they actually felt like, when they were assaulting me. but I don't think it was planned, you know, this was so random. I was out in the city, in a place I normally don't go to, and I just happened to run into them. So I don't think that they woke up that morning and said, "We're going to get Belo." I feel that, maybe they saw me, and didn't like what I had become. We live in a society filled with instant gratification. So they just acted on emotions, without thinking about the repercussions, and what could have happened to me.

Jeff Thompson: Wow. Belo, when you decided to take charge of your life again, in the darkness, as you called it, you mentioned the San Francisco LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Is that where you attended training?

Belo Cipriani: That's where I began my training. That's where I took my first couple steps as a blind person. Then, after the LightHouse, I moved into a living facility, called the Orientational Center for the Blind, because I wanted to accelerate my training. That was a living facility, where I had a dorm. It was, basically, what I referred to as blind college. I had a dorm, and I had classes every day, the whole goal was to get through my rehabilitation much quicker.

Jeff Thompson: So what was it like when you had to accept all the alternative techniques, all the devices, and this whole world? Did it open up your mind to opportunities, and something that I can do this attitude?

Belo Cipriani: I think that when I first started learning, JAWS, and learning to use a cane, I was overwhelmed, and frustrated, and everything seemed so hard. But just as hard as, or as big as life felt, when I was a kid. I think that I kept pushing myself forward and things just became easier. I think, what was very inspirational for me, was to see other blind people who were, for example, in the same program I was, at the Orientational Center for the Blind, in Albany, California, who were further along than I was, and see what they could, kept me going. But definitely, it was frustrating. I stuck with it, so it's slowly became easier.

Jeff Thompson: What was your college experience like?

Belo Cipriani: I actually went back to grad school. It was, obviously, not what I had as a sighted person.

Reader: It was relaxing to shed my dress shirt and ties, for sweat pants and sandals. Madge also seemed to enjoy the large fields, and the other animals, that made up the 50 acre, forest campus. With the exception of faculty and staff, most of the residents would not talk to me, or join me for a meal at the school's cafeteria. Eating alone soon became a habit, and for the first time in my life, I accepted the fact, I would be a loner at the school. When I was sighted, my loud voice and laughter filled every inch of this hilled, and sloped campus. I had friends coming out of my ears and an over scheduled social agenda. I tried to comprehend how I could have no problems mingling in public, in San Francisco, but struggled to get some type of acknowledgement on the college campus. Perhaps being gay, and blind, was too weird for many of the inexperienced young adults to handle.

Belo Cipriani: But I felt that, you know, the connections, and the people I made, when I was attending, you know, getting my master's degree, in writing, where a lot more meaningful. So, while I couldn't make contact with everybody, or smile, or connect how I did as an undergrad, I felt that I was connecting with people in a deeper way. Maybe I wasn't able to strike up a conversation, as openly as I could with vision, but I learned that I could still connecting my own way.

Jeff Thompson: There's really something that is interesting, you once were working for Google. Actually, I call it a headhunter, like looking for employees, and stuff. Then, all of a sudden, you were on the other side of that. Could you go into that?

Belo Cipriani: Of course. So just to kind of take a step back, before I became blind, I worked in Silicon Valley, as a Technical Recruiter. I found this job through

chance. I initially started my career as a Unix Systems Administrator. My first job was at Sun Microsystems. I was placed at this staffing agency. The whole time I was on my project, I kept calling my recruiter, and saying, "Hey, by the way, I met this guy and he's really good at this, and I met this other person who just a great job at this." The entire time I was at Sun Microsystems, working as a Systems Administrator, I had given my recruiter a total of 10 placements. She said, "You're really good at matching people to jobs. I think that I'm going to train you, and hire you, and take you under my wing." That's how I got into recruiting.

That led into me, obviously, working my way through different companies, and eventually getting contract recruiter positions at Apple, and Google, and eBay, and Wells Fargo, and so on. When I lost my sight, I actually went back to recruiting, and it was really hard for me to see, first of all, how hard it is for people with disabilities, in general, to find work, and to get hired. But specifically for the blind, how hard it a lot of the job sites are to navigate. So that's something that, for me, being someone who's a recruiter, and thought I had a diverse approach, and believed in equity, how far away I was from actually being true to my mission statement.

It wasn't until I became blind that I realized that diversity also includes disability. A lot of these companies, who have amazing diversity statements, don't have accessible websites. That's something that I really, I think I touch on it in my book, and it was definitely an awakening for me.

Jeff Thompson: I really like that. Diversity includes disabilities. I like that phrase. I had someone tell me, the other day, that she never hired a person because they were sighted. It made me just pause for a second.

Belo Cipriani: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jeff Thompson: Like, what a twist that was, you know? She hires them for what they can do, what they can bring.

Belo Cipriani: I have this phrase, something that I feel very strong about. I say, "There's no greater disability than a cold heart." Anybody could have a cold heart. They could be blind, able-bodied, but if you have a cold heart, you are not letting anyone in, or anyone in. So there's no growth, there's nothing. They're stagnant. It's not even about disability, or ability, it's about having a cold heart.

Jeff Thompson: It's about who you are.

Belo Cipriani: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jeff Thompson: Belo, we've talked about your first book, *Blind: A Memoir*. Is there one forthcoming, that we can anticipate?

Belo Cipriani: I have two book projects, that I'm working on now. One is an anthology, and the second one is a sequel to *Blind*, which is also a collection of essays. They're both, hopefully, if everything goes according to plan, they would be out maybe in a year or two. But something that I'm really fascinated with is, whenever I encounter anybody whose able-bodied, whether it's at work, or the bus, or something, they're just fascinated with how I do to my day-to-day thing. People think it's amazing that I can throw out my own trash.

Hello my name is Belo Cipriani, author of *Blind: A Memoir*. People who read my book often want to know more about a device I mention, in a couple of my chapters, called a color identifier. So what I thought would be a good idea, was to put this clip together, and just kind of show everyone how they work. The color identifier I use, is called a Colorino, which I bought online. I bought it from a website, called MaxiAids. It's pretty light. It has a camera on one end, couple of buttons on the side.

I think that, that kind of inspired me to put together an anthology about people with disabilities. How they negotiate their rites of passage. First day on the job, first kiss, first dance. The project is called the *Land of First: Essays on Rites of Passages, by People with Disabilities*. You know, it's been a wonderful experience, and working with people who are autistic, editing their essays, people with various disabilities. It's really been, for me, again, my light bulb moment, where I realized how much in common I have with other disabilities, who I don't always socialize with. It was a great opportunity to really engage with other communities, within the disability family.

Jeff Thompson: I think it's very interesting how you do bring social life, and your sexuality, as well, into your writings. Talk about how life, as a blind homosexual, might be different.

Belo Cipriani: I think ... Great question, by the way. I think that I've always been part of the other. I grew up in San Jose, California, where the majority of the community I grew up in where either Portuguese descent, or Mexican. I didn't fit really any of those groups. Most of them were Catholics, and I was, you know, my family was Jewish. So at a very early age, I was so used to being part of the other, as a kid. I didn't celebrate the same holidays that my other kids in my classroom did, and often they would

say, "Why aren't you normal?" You know, and I just didn't have an answer at 7, or 8 years old. I would just shrug, and go home, and tell my mom about it, "I'm not normal."

As a teenager, the next phase was, I came out as being gay. This was the 90s, early 90s, before Ellen and Elton John, so it was hard. People would say, people would then ask me, "Why can't you be normal?" Or, "Why can't you try to be normal?" I couldn't. When I became blind, then people would just say, "Oh, life must be hard for you because you're not normal." I think that, that has helped me a lot. You know, growing up, always as a minority, always being part of the other, has helped me stay focused on who I am. Just focus on what I need to do, and not get caught up in-

Jeff Thompson: Put the blinders on, so to speak?

Belo Cipriani: Exactly.

Jeff Thompson: No pun intended.

Belo Cipriani: Right? So now, I'm like the Swiss Army Knife of minorities, right? I'm a Jewish, I'm a person of color, I'm blind.

Jeff Thompson: Yeah, you've got it covered.

Belo Cipriani: I think that I always have to be aware of my surroundings, and that's something that I learned as a kid. You know, always be aware of your surroundings. You know, people who think differently than you are, have different background, may not embrace who you are. So I think that, for someone whose blind, and a homosexual, for example, travel is a big thing for me. I love to travel and a country may be blind friendly, but it may not be gay friendly, so I probably would not go there.

Jeff Thompson: Wow. There's so many things we could pursue, with all of this. You got all afternoon? I was going to pursue your association with guide dogs for the blind. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Belo Cipriani: Absolutely. I am on my second guide dog. His name is Oslo. I'm one of the spokesman for Guide Dogs. I did a documentary for them. It's called Harnessing the Power of Partnership, which people could listen to it on YouTube.

The instructor handed me the leash, and it is love at first touch. Because as soon as I reached for the leash, and grabbed its head, I fell in love. Oslo

is 70 pound of a lot of energy, was just ready to take me in, and love me to pieces. It was very magical.

My name is Belo Cipriani, and I lost my vision back in 2007. I was 26. I was two months shy of my 27th birthday. My cause of blindness is retinal detachment. You know, it took me a couple years to get over the grief of losing my sight.

There is a descriptive audio version. I've just been so grateful. Guide Dogs have done so much for me. They do so much for so many people. Guide Dogs is the largest guide dog school in the United States, but they don't receive any government funding. They rely strictly on donors. So, early on, I've been trying to give back. I've been helping them in various projects, and try to promote their good work as often as I can.

Jeff Thompson: That's probably where I first met you, is watching the Guide Dogs documentary, that you did. That was well done, I have to say. My wife went out to Portland, part of the Guide Dogs for the blind, and got a dog, Logan, now. So I like to thank I led her to think that, that was a good place, because, "Hey, check this video out."

Pete Lane: Well, I think, was it, when you were writing Blind, that one of the scenes you described was while you were typing something very poignant, and you were crying. I think you were revisiting, perhaps the assault, and your dog, at the time, actually put her paws up on you, and licked your tears off your face, it was so moving.

Reader: For two years, I struggled with the idea of putting my story on paper. Although, I received plenty of encouragement, I had a pain in my stomach when I tried to write it down, that told me it was not time yet. I now know, there were two powerful forces keeping me from doing what I understood would be beneficial for both my mind, and my soul. The first notion, holding me back, was the hope that I could possibly get my sight back. It was obvious to me, later, that denial was the toughest phase to surpass, in my mourning period.

Second, I was afraid that putting myself back in all of those moments of pain, sorrow, and anxiety, would spiral me into depression. I locked away any thoughts of telling my story. I heard Madge grunt, during my moment of despair, and confusion. I felt her front paws on my leg, and kept my hands on the keyboard. She began to lick my tears and got me to smile. I decided to put the siren song on ice, and dedicated my first piece, Hi Dad, to my new partner, who gave me the best pep-talk ever.

Belo Cipriani: yes it was. It's actually the introduction to Blind. That was my first guide dog, Madge. You know, these dogs do so much more than just guide work. They are your emotional support. A cool fact is, I learned that they can read up to 70 different facial expressions. Which is amazing, I didn't think we had that many. I was kind of stuck on the Seven Dwarfs, right? Sleepy, happy, and so on. But they do so much more than just guide work, and they're true companions.

Jeff Thompson: There's a point where I was reading. Actually, I was watching something. I think a classroom teacher was reading, or someone was reading your book. It's when you first put the cane in your hand, for the first time. Instead of describing the cane, you said that this had become your fate. That was good.

Belo Cipriani: Thank you. As a blind person, you know, someone who was sighted, and then became blind, I was very focused on visual things in life. Colors and shapes. When I became blind, I became very tactile, obviously. But I felt as though, when I got my first cane, and I grabbed it. It made it tangible. It made it real. I think, for me, that's how I function now. I touch things and they become real. Not just physically, but in my mind.

Jeff Thompson: So Belo, what suggestions would you have for someone who is facing vision loss, or transitioning? Like, from high-school, to college, to the workplace. You know, the challenges that they'll have. What kind of advice would you have for them?

Belo Cipriani: I think that ... And I get this a lot, from the sighted community. A lot of sighted people have said to me that, "Oh, I could never do what you do, if I were blind." There is this notion that blindness is just the end of the world. I think that, for a lot of people, who lose their vision, that's all they know. That they think that blindness is the end of the world, and it's not. I'll tell you first thing, that blindness does introduce some inconveniences, some nuisance, but that's all there is. You find your work arounds and there isn't just one way of being blind.

What I've discovered, just in my last 10 years of blindness, is that there's always something. You know, I'm very short, so I've always wanted to be a little taller. People always want to be thinner, or whatever. For me, blindness, yeah, you know, having vision would have made things more convenient, but it wouldn't make things better. I'm actually do a lot of lectures, at colleges, and I was point this out to students. That, say that you become able-bodied. Being able-bodied is not a recipe for happiness.

Jeff Thompson: Just like money.

Belo Cipriani: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's what I would tell someone who lost their sight. Just remind them that it's not the end of the world. Blindness is nothing but an inconvenience. But most of the time, it's a lot of fun, and once you figure it out, how it works for you, then things happen. I often come across a lot of blind youth, who feel that they're not a part of the popular culture, or that they don't see themselves anything mainstream. For them, all I say is, "Isn't it great that you can be the first?" I mean there's so much opportunity out there. I see that as a plus. You don't see yourself out there, that means that the odds of you reaching out and becoming that, it's good. You have good odds.

Jeff Thompson: Belo, as you know, this podcast it is sponsored by AT&T and Aira. The focus is on the AT&T #ExperienceMore campaign. How would you define that concept for blind individuals?

Belo Cipriani: I think that as a blind person, we're able to experience through our other senses in more detail. You know, we can smell things, probably a little more intensely, than people who are sighted. We have our own language, with Braille. I think that we have all this cool technology too, now, that we can use. I think that we're able to experience so much more. I think that blindness opens up so many opportunities, especially for connecting with people. I think that you don't need sight to have vision.

What I've been playing with lately has been the Braille Smartwatch.

Jeff Thompson: oh yeah, the one with the cells on it.

Belo Cipriani: Exactly. They mailed me a version to play with and it's amazing.

Jeff Thompson: I think it came out the beginning of this year, right?

Belo Cipriani: It came out in April. I'm just pleasantly surprised with how much it does.

Jeff Thompson: So at like 9:30, it would be 0930?

Belo Cipriani: Correct.

Jeff Thompson: Obviously.

Belo Cipriani: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jeff Thompson: So can you describe it? Is that all that's on there, are the Braille cells?

Belo Cipriani: It's just the Braille cells, but the dots move and it actually also spells out words. So you get the different menus and read messages. Because it's only four cells, there's a button on the side of the watch, that you use to scroll up and down.

Jeff Thompson: That's interesting. That's really neat. I love innovative things, like having people try them, and share that. I've heard about it, but I haven't heard much about it again, so it's nice to hear about it. That's made by who?

Belo Cipriani: Dot Corporation.

Jeff Thompson: That's right, Dot Corporation.

Pete Lane: Let's talk a little bit more about technology. Are you a Mac or PC user?

Belo Cipriani: I use both, for very different things. I find that for anything related to writing, the Windows environment's a little easier for me. However, for anything web related, I prefer the Mac. I'm an iPhone user. I use every piece of tech I can, for just about anything. So I'm using apps, everything in my house talks.

Jeff Thompson: I thought it was interesting that you used it for the writing, but that's probably because of the word processing?

Belo Cipriani: Yes. Exactly. I'm working with Editor, so track changes, they're just more accessible for me, on the Windows platform.

Jeff Thompson: Yeah exactly. I use pages for some stuff, but I have Microsoft Office in my computer too. It's nice that they're starting to bridge across, and having their software available, and accessible, on the Mac. So I'm liking this competitive world out there, between Microsoft and Apple.

Belo Cipriani: Yes, I am happy with those changes too. The iPhone is just my best friend. Now, I'm using the Alexa, the Echo, by Amazon, and that's just wonderful. I was able to connect it to some of my appliances, and get them to work using Alexa.

Jeff Thompson: That's great. Yeah, it's all becoming hybrid now. You're starting to get like Walmart, mixing it up with Google, and Microsoft. Yeah, they're all like joining forces, cats and dogs together.

Belo Cipriani: Yeah, definitely. You know, I grew up watching The Jetsons, right? And some of the technology, that we're using now, to me, resembles some of the things they had, right? Especially artificial intelligence, but, no, I've

been happy with the improvements a lot of these companies have made, and I'm very happy to be blind in 2017.

Jeff Thompson: That's a great statement.

Pete Lane: Yes it is.

Jeff Thompson: It's a good time to be blind-

Pete Lane: Great attitude.

Jeff Thompson: With all this technology.

Pete Lane: We're speaking with Belo Cipriani. Talk about how people can find you. I know you have your own website, which would be BeloCipriani.com. Where else can we look for you?

Jeff Thompson: I am on Facebook and that URL is facebook.com/BeloCipriani. I'm on Twitter, my handle is @beloism, and that's spelled B-E-L-O-I-S-M. I just started an Instagram account a couple weeks ago, so now I'm on Instagram. My handle, for Instagram, is also Beloism. B-E-L-O-I-S-M.

Pete Lane: Good. And what about your blog? Don't you have an active blog, at this point?

Belo Cipriani: What I'm doing now is, I have a nationally syndicated column, called Seeing in the Dark, and it's published by several news websites, and papers, across the country. It's also published in the UK and in Australia. Yeah, I started this blog on my website. The blog just kind of took off, and I had a couple of editors wanted to run the blog, so then I turned it into a column. All that means is, now that it's a column, I have to pitch ideas to someone else, to an editor, and get them approved.

Pete Lane: Meet deadlines?

Belo Cipriani: Meet deadlines, make sure that I'm following style guides, and so on. You know, it's been very effective. Seeing in the Dark appears in the Daily Reporter, Diversity Rules magazine, South Florida, Gay News. Huffington Post runs it. The Spout, in the UK. There's a couple different ones, that are running. So, you know, I talk about disability. I tend to focus on information that is useful to people with disabilities. So new tech, new policies, resources.

It's interesting that I started off as a writer, who wrote about my stories. Now, I'm mostly writing about other peoples stories. I just really became inspired with talking about people with disabilities, who have passed on, who are part of history, but not always well remembered. That's really where my interest is right now. I'm hoping to, hopefully, start a book project about that. But so many people, with disabilities, who have lived before me, who have just paved the way and made it easier for me today.

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian, martial art, that's from Brazil. It's the national sport there. I've been training for a little over ten years. I've been training with Mestre Acordeon, here, for about a year. My favorite thing about capoeira is the community. You get to play music, you get to work out, you get to talk to people. It's not just a workout, it's a community.

Pete Lane: You're into a martial art, Brazilian martial arts, are you still into that?

Belo Cipriani: Yeah, it's call capoeira. It's actually the national sport of Brazil. I'm still training. Not as much as I'd like, but I'm still doing it, you know, I'm out there on a part-time basis. I started training capoeira when I was a kid. You know, my dads family's from Brazil, so it was introduced through family members, and I did it on and off, as a kid. I didn't think I'd be able to go back to capoeira, after losing my sight, because it's done to live drumming. So the music is very, very loud. But I found an instructor, Mestre Acordeon, whose in Berkeley, who developed this technique to work with me and help me get back into my training.

Pete Lane: Yeah, I remember a scene, in your book, about how you were, I believe, competing for your yellow/blue belt. You were kicked by your competitor who happened to be a girl. You didn't expect it and your comment at the end of it was, you realized that you were not focusing 100% on the sport at that point, because you had been kind of distracted with other things going on in your life.

Reader: The drumming, clapping, and singing began to speed up, and I yawned twice before shaking Claribel's hand. I was too tired to attempt any acrobatics and limited my movements to basic kicks. Unfortunately, Claribel was full of energy, and after a few sequences of kicks and flips, I started to cough as I struggled to keep up with her. I saw the petite Filipina girl jump in the air, and too tired to register the kick, I was startled by her foot slapping my chin. The crowd of men and women, who circled us gasped, and I began to feel my skin burn. Mestre Vaginho had the same shocked look I must have had. By the curl in his lower lip, I could tell we were both thinking the same thing. How could someone

training for as many years as I, and holding a yellow belt, not duck, or flee, from such a commonly used kick?

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mestre Vaginho coming toward me, and in a few seconds, he placed his arm around me. "You are a good Capoeirista, but the last year, you've become distant. It's almost as if you're checked out," he said in his heavily accented English. I remained quiet, knowing perfectly well he was right. The last year of clubbing and drinking had displaced my goal of getting my blue belt.

Belo Cipriani: Yeah, I was hanging out with that group of friends.

Pete Lane: Right. Clubbing and-

Belo Cipriani: Clubbing and doing all these things. That kept me away from my training.

Jeff Thompson: Speaking of clubbing, you mentioned Minneapolis earlier. We have a lot of listeners in Minneapolis. I'm from Minneapolis. What restaurant would you suggest for people in this area? What's one of your favorites? Restaurants, nightclubs?

Belo Cipriani: You know, it depends on people's mood. So if you want something a little low-key, there this really great Irish Pub, in Saint Louis Park, called McCoy's. They serve food, they have a full bar, very nice. I really like that place. If you like a busy crowd, and you don't mind the noise, there's always Chino Latino, in Uptown, which I like a lot. As far as bars go, I've been to a couple of different ones. Of course, The Gay 90s is really popular, but I tend to, if I'm gonna go out, just hang out with friends, for a happy hour session, we tend to head out to the 19 Bar, which is on 15th Street, and the Eagles nice.

But yeah, I know, Minneapolis is a very foodie city, so I almost feel guilty just naming these places, because there's so much to do.

Jeff Thompson: And with the Super Bowl coming here, you probably have enjoyed all the construction going on downtown.

Belo Cipriani: Oh my gosh, yes, yes. Well, it's also at the airport. You know, I fly out a lot, so there too. But no, I love Minneapolis, and this is where I actually half of my family is. I have family all throughout-

Jeff Thompson: Really?

Belo Cipriani: Yeah, all throughout the western suburbs, and throughout the city, so it feels like home. For sure.

Jeff Thompson: Well, great.

Pete Lane: Yeah, really good.

Belo Cipriani: I am working with a winery, called 100 Percent Wine. They're called 100 Percent Wine because they donate 100% of the profits to agencies that help people with disabilities find jobs. It's a non-profit. What they're doing is, you know, employment is a big issue for people with disabilities. You know, whether you're deaf or blind, it's a big problem. And this winery is hoping to solve that problem by helping the agencies fund better program, and better equipment, and better training.

The winery, again, is called 100 Percent Wine. They have three varietals. They're based out of St. Louis, Missouri. Their website is drinkwinehelppeople.org. People could check them out online, and see if the wines available in their area.

Jeff Thompson: Well, we'll make sure we get all these links into the show notes.

Pete Lane: We've been speaking with Belo Cipriani. Belo, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thanks so much for taking some time out of your day for us.

Belo Cipriani: Thank you. This was great.

Jeff Thompson: Thank you Belo.

Pete Lane: This concludes our presentation of a conversation with Belo Cipriani. Brought to you by AT&T and Aira. Produced by Blind Abilities. Stay tuned for more, similar interviews, with individuals who have influenced the blindness community through their passions and their actions. Check out the #ExperienceMore campaign at experiencemore.att.com. You can also check out Aira at aira.io, that's A-I-R-A-I-O. We'd like to thank [inaudible 00:37:58] for this amazing music. You can find [inaudible 00:38:02] on Twitter. Thanks for listening and have a great day.

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