

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Jim Stovall is an American writer best known for his bestselling novel *The Ultimate Gift*. The book was made into the movie *The Ultimate Gift*, distributed by 20th Century Fox.

Stovall is blind and is an advocate for people with blindness. He works to make television and movies accessible to the blind as President of the Narrative Television Network, an organization that has received various award recognitions, including an Emmy award, a Media Access Award, and an International Film and Video Award.

Jim was chosen as the International Humanitarian of the Year, joining Jimmy Carter, Nancy Reagan, and Mother Teresa as recipients of this honor. He has also received an Honorary Doctor of Law from ORU for his work with disabled people.

In the book *Forbes Great Success Stories: Twelve Tales of Victory Wrested from Defeat* by Alan Farnham, Malcolm Stevenson "Steve" Forbes Jr., president and CEO of Forbes magazine, said, "Jim Stovall is one of the most extraordinary men of our era."

As you listen to Jim's oral history, you will hear him talk about his blindness which began when he was 17, his walk to the mailbox, and the idea for the Narrative Television Network. Listen to this fascinating story on the podcast and website of Voices of Oklahoma.

Chapter 2 – 12:46 Need to Know Today

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling and today's date is July 16th, 2024. So, Jim, would you state your full name, please?

Jim Stovall (JS): I am Jim Stovall.

JE: Is that your full name?

JS: James Wayne Stovall. If my mother was here, she would want me to say James Wayne Stovall.

JE: Well, then I'm glad I asked you to say it. Where are we recording this interview?

JS: In the conference room of the Narrative Television Network in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Your birthday, please.

JS: August 3rd, 1958.

JE: And your present age is?

JS: 65.

JE: Alright. Where were you born?

JS: I was born in St. John's hospital here in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Alright. Your mother's name -- maiden name.

JS: Florine Finn: F-I-N-N, as in Huckleberry.

JE: And where did she grow up? And describe her personality.

JS: My mother grew up in Springfield, Missouri and she was one of the best people I ever met. I have often told people that if everybody had been raised by my parents, I couldn't make a living doing books and making columns, speeches, and movies; I'd have to go get honest work.

JE: How did she nurture you? Do you think you draw on aspects of her life?

JS: Yeah. A lot of people don't know and I haven't spoken extensively about it. I'm my parents' third child. The first two died. I had a brother that died of cystic fibrosis and a sister that died of leukemia. And for those who have seen "The Ultimate Gift" movie, the character played by Abigail Breslin, dying of leukemia, that was my sister. And so my parents came through that tragic, unbelievable thing of losing two children, then I come along. And in my teenage years, it's obvious I'm going to be blind, and they still, you know, they expected me to do great things. They, you know, they always pushed me to try harder, to do more...

And I remember them, when I was finally diagnosed, I'm going to lose my sight. Mom and Dad took me everywhere in the country to try to get help and, you know, we finally ended up down at Florida State University at the great eye clinic there and the most renowned retina specialists took me in a room, and checked a couple of things out, and he said, "Well, you're going to be totally blind."

And I said, "What does that mean?"

And he said, "Well, you know, you're not going to have an ordinary life. You just won't be ordinary."

And I was crying. I was 17 years old, this big kid, I thought I was going to be a pro football player. And I went out, and there was my mother and father, and they hugged me, and he said, "What'd he say?"

And I said, "He said I'm never going to be ordinary."

And my dad said, "Well, let's go back to Oklahoma and you can start figuring out how to be extraordinary." And that's how I remember my parents.

JE: Let me just say, then -- let me ask you your father's name.

JS: My father was George Walter Stovall. He grew up in Springfield, Missouri, and met my mother there.

JE: Alright. And his personality? What was he like?

JS: My father was button-up, organized. He came here right after he'd been in the Navy, and he went to work for this evangelist that was going to build this university named Oral Roberts. Dad started out working in the mailroom and when he retired at age 81, he was the Chief Financial Officer. And he was the perfect guy to work in that environment because he hated the spotlight, he didn't want to get up and talk in front of people, he just ran things and made things work behind the scenes. I learned a lot from him in the way I run my businesses and do my things.

You know, I think one of the greatest lessons I learned from him is, "If you're not 10 minutes early, you're late." You know, and I don't ever remember -- my dad died at 92. I did his funeral last fall and I don't ever remember my father being late. I remember the minister was there and he said, "Well, the organist isn't set up yet."

And I said, "Well, tell her to crank it up because I'm not starting this late, because Dad was never late for anything and we're not going to be late for this."

And, you know, they were just amazing people that, as I said, if everybody had the privilege of being raised by George and Florine Stovall, I wouldn't have anything to talk about or write about.

JE: Yeah. Well, maybe now I should go back to when you discovered that you were not going to be ordinary. At 17, tell us how it started coming on to you that your sight was being impaired.

JS: My father, early in his life, had been a semi-pro baseball player -- minor league baseball player. His claim to fame: In Springfield, he'd got in a game in Joplin and they were playing against -- Springfield's playing Joplin -- and a guy on the other team his a ball father than Dad said, "I'd ever seen a baseball hit." His name was Mickey Mantle. He was 18 years old. And Dad told the coach, "I think now I'm going to have to go get honest work because -- or do something else -- because I thought I was a baseball player, and that guy's a baseball player."

And it wasn't very long after that that my dad joined the Navy and Mickey

joined the Yankees. So that was kind of an allure in our family. But it first came to me when I was playing Little League baseball. The coach told my dad that, you know, "Jim's not hustling. Late in the game, he's lazy and doesn't play hard." And that wasn't it. It finally dawned on me: "I can't see the ball after it starts getting dark."

And I didn't think much of it. My talent was playing football so I didn't worry much about it. And then I thought I was going to be an All-American football player and go into the NFL and make my living doing that, so I never studied or anything when I was in high school. And in a routine physical to go play another season of football, they diagnosed the condition that would cause me to lose my sight, and it took about 12 years. From the time I was 17, it slowly faded away, and I woke up one morning at age 29 and I was totally blind.

JE: Where were you playing football?

JS: I was playing here in Tulsa at Mason High School, and then I had planned to go to the University of Oklahoma and play for Barry Switzer, and that was my plan. And then that physical shut me down, so I realized I'm not going to do that, but I discovered Olympic weight lifting and I became our national champion and was on the Olympic team as a weight lifter and got to at least finish my athletic career doing that.

JE: But all along here, are you frightened? Depressed or whatever? Because you could see ... Well, everytime I use that word now with you, I'm aware of what I'm saying: "See" that this is not going to end well for me." How did you deal with that?

JS: Yeah. I had never met a blind person at that time, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do. And I had an experience -- I was losing my sight rapidly -- and the first fall I wasn't playing football, you know, I got up, and I was angry and scared. And I kinda had a conversation with God, I'd guess you'd say. And I said, "God, if you're real," which I wasn't sure at that time that he was, and I said, "I need to know today that you've got a plan for me and there's something I can do, because I just lost the only thing I know how to do," which was playing football.

And the Tulsa State Fair, as you know, comes here every fall. And I'd never gone because I was always playing football. And I went -- I could still see well enough to get around on my own -- and two amazing things happened that day.

I went into what was called the old IPE Building behind the Golden Driller. They had an exhibition from the previous Olympic team. And so they had the gymnasts -- frankly, I went to see the girls, the gymnasts down there -- and after I checked them out, they brought out the weight lifters and I remember looking at that and I thought, "You know, I could do that. That's something a guy could do even if he was going blind in the process."

And three years later, I was the national champion and got to at least participate in the Olympics. And I walked on down the midway, and I was thinking about that, and I was kinda reminding God, "You've got 'til midnight to come up with something."

JE: (Chuckling)

JS: And the old pavilion was there before they renovated it, and it had a giant sign that said: "Free Concert!" And, John, I didn't know who was playing or when it started, but "free" really fit my budget. So I went in, there was nobody there. I sat on the front row. And I just sat there and thought about, "I'm not playing football anymore..." I thought about those weightlifters. I reminded God, "You've got about 5 hours here to convince me."

JE: Why did you give him a deadline?

JS: I don't know. I just -- "I need to know now." And when you're a teenage, you do that I guess. I had the patience of a gnat. And as I was sitting there thinking, and praying a little, and crying a little, I was unaware. The arena kinda filled up around me. The first thing I was really conscious of was a voice I'll never forget. It said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the Tulsa State Fair, the one, the only, the legend: Ray Charles."

And they brought Ray out and he was about 10 feet away from me. And Ray was magic. And that told me that there's something I could do. And,

John, it wasn't 12 years later that I'm speaking at a business convention in Madison Square Garden in New York. And I walked off stage after talking for an hour. The promoter hugged me and he said, "Man, that was great. I have another group coming in next week -- 11,000 international business people -- can I get you? Can you stay?"

And I said, "I've got some TV business to do, so we'll stay in New York."

And he said, "Well, while you're here, I've got another act in town."

And I was trying to think of a way to tell this man who was paying me all this money, "I don't get out in public. I'm okay on stage with my people with me, but no." Just to be polite, I said, "Who do you got?"

And he said, "Tuesday night. Carnegie Hall. Ray Charles."

I said, "Yeah. Yeah, I'll do that."

And they got me on the front row again, and there's me and Ray again, and they took me backstage afterwards. And they said, "He's got to sign a few more autographs," and I'd been blind for a number of years by now -- I didn't know blind people could write.

So, I said, "Well, how does he write?"

And he heard me and he said, "Who said that?"

And I said, "My name's Jim Stovall. I'm blind, too."

And he said, "Son, anybody in your life ever thinks enough of you to want your autograph, the least you can do is learn how to write your name."

And it kinda ticked me off, and so I said, "Oh, man, you're going to have to show me."

And he sat me down and traced it out and showed me how he wrote, "Ray Charles," and he showed me how to write, "Jim Stovall," and in the beginning that's all I knew how to write. I could write "Ray Charles" and

“Jim Stovall.” That’s all I knew how to write.

But he became a friend and I saw him -- one of his last 3 or 4 concerts was at our performing arts center here in Tulsa, and just an amazing... you know... I told him then, we sat backstage before the show, and we both knew he didn’t have long.

He said, “Jim, you think if we get to heaven, you think we’ll be able to see?”

I said, “I imagine so.”

He said, “What do you think angels look like?”

And I said, “Not the ones you used to see at Christmas time.” I said, “If I have an angel that came and helped me out when I needed, my angel probably looks like Ray Charles. Because, man, you were the man.”

You know, I told God, “I need to know that a blind guy can do something, and you sent me Ray Charles. That’ll work for me.”

JE: Yeah. I remember him. Mayfest had special concerts at one time, and he did that. I remember seeing him then. You saw the background of Tulsa, and it was just a magic night. You were probably there yourself, as a matter of fact.

JS: Oh, and he used to do that fun thing that he did at the performing arts center. He would come out and say, “Hey, I want you to know what a thrill it is to be here at Carnegie Hall.”

Of course, we were at the performing arts center in Oklahoma.

And people would laugh, and he would say, “Look, I know this ain’t Carnegie Hall. What you don’t know is I ain’t really Ray Charles.”

JE: (Laughing)

JS: And then he would do his show.

JE: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Chapter 3 – 6:08

9 x 12

John Erling (JE): Take us to that time when you just knew your sight had shut down completely and ... did you want to lock yourself up in your house? Or what happened?

Jim Stovall (JS): Yeah. Yeah. At 29, I woke up and I realized that I couldn't see anymore. I had a little vision and now it was gone. And I moved into this little 9 x 12 foot room in the back of my house then and had my radio, and my telephone, and my tape recorder. And that was my whole world. I really, fully intended to never walk out of that room again. And I sat there for months trying to figure out what am I going to do.

And, as providence would have it, before I lost my sight, that was our TV room that my wife, Crystal, and I had in the back of our house. And one day out of sheer boredom, I knew my TV and my videos are right there across the room and I'm a fan of classic movies. And so, one day, out of just boredom, I put on an old Humphry Bogart film called "The Big Sleep." And I thought, "I've seen this so many times, I'll be able to just listen to this and follow along, and it worked for a while but then somebody shot somebody and somebody screamed and the car sped away and I forgot what happened, and I got really frustrated and I said the magic words: "Somebody oughta do something about that."

You know, John, the whole world, praying for a great idea, and they trip over one about 3 times per week. I mean, the only think you gotta do to have a great idea is go through your daily routine, wait for something bad to happen and say, "How could I have avoided that?" And the answer's a great idea. The only thing you've got to do to have a great business is ask one more question: "How can I help other people avoid that?" And then the world will give you fame, and fortune, and everything you ever wanted if you just care about them and go solve their problems.

And that was the beginning of Narrative Television. I thought, "If somebody would take those movies and add an extra soundtrack with a narrator in

between the dialogue to say, "John walks slowly across the conference room, he shakes hands with Jim, they are seated." You know, just to tell people. And it turned into Old Time Radio. And I found out that there's 13 million blind and visually-impaired people in America. If you put 'em all in one place, it'd be the largest television market in America.

And we started on cable TV and it grew, and now all primetime programming on all the major networks is narrated and most Netflix new releases, and it's changed the world. And I'm just grateful I happened to be there in the right time and the right place.

JE: Okay, and I want to ask you more about that. But your education. I always ask: You went to grade school? Where?

JS: I went to McClure Elementary School, Nimitz Junior High School over off of Harvard, and I went to Mason High School which they closed and it's now Metro Christian Academy. My junior high school and senior high school, they closed both of them. I hope I didn't have much to do with it, but they are no longer there.

JE: So then after high school, what did you do?

JS: Well, I swore, because my father worked there, I would never go to ORU. But I couldn't play football. I waited too late. The only place I could get into was ORU, so I started that Fall. And they had never had anybody like me. They never had anybody who couldn't read, so the plan was that they got students in each of my classes that were going to read my textbooks to me. I'll never forget one of the young ladies. They said, this is Crystal, she's in your humanities class, and she'll read this textbook for you.

And the minute I met her, I told the dean, "We won't need any of these other people; I'll either make it through here with her, or I won't make it." And she became my reader and then my wife, and we just celebrated our 43rd wedding anniversary. She, you know, was my eyes during that time and when I first started in business.

This is when she would want me to tell you in our degree program -- I have degrees in psychology and sociology -- Crystal graduated first in our class,

and I realized that I wasn't as stupid as I thought I was, I graduated second. Which, as I mentioned, I'm kind of a competitive guy being an Olympic athlete that, you know, being second in your class isn't that bad unless you live with #1 and then it's kinda brutal, but over the last few years, I've been working on a new theory: I'm not sure she read me the whole textbook. I have nothing to support that, but it makes me feel better at least at this point in my life.

JE: But you were able to see her, then, at that point?

JS: Yeah. Yeah. And she tells me that she hasn't changed a bit, and I believe anything that she says.

JE: Mm-hmm (In jovial agreement). Are there scenes that you remember before you lost your sight that still resonate with you? Other than her? Other images?

JS: Oh, yeah. My mother told me that one of the things that I did as a kid was a played the piano, and I love music, and I've actually recorded some on several albums for other people. And she said, "You need to write some music that will remind you of things."

So one of the things that I've done and it appears in some of the arena events and my late, great friend Larry Payton, he put together a laser light thing to go with it; and it's called "The Sunset Song," and I remember what a sunset's like. And sometimes I'll sit down and play that piece of music. You know, one of the reasons that I've always wanted to stay in Tulsa is because I love it here, but I know my way around town. I know where everything is. People will pick them up and I'll tell them where to go: "Down here at the corner, turn right here," and then I joked with the last few mayors that I can tell them where to turn on my street because the roads are so bad that if they ever fixed the roads, I'd never get home, John, but I don't think we have to worry about that.

JE: (Giggling) No, no. Alright.

Chapter 4 – 7:57
ORU

John Erling (JE): What year were you lifting weight in the Olympics?

Jim Stovall (JS): I was training in 1978. I was the national champion. And then again in '79. And I was training for the 1980 Olympics and then -- your listeners will remember -- that was when Jimmy Carter decided, because the Russians has invaded Afghanistan, that we shouldn't go to the Olympics. So they canceled it, so I got my national championships, I made it on the Olympic team, and that was the end of my career.

And my '84, we were hosting the Olympics in Los Angeles, but the Russians weren't going to come. They said, "You boycotted ours, we won't come to yours." And in my sport, as a weightlifter, if the Russians aren't coming, there's no reason to do it. They were the best in the world.

So that was the end of my career, but, you know, it was a great thing for me when I couldn't play football, at least I got to be a national champion and be on the Olympic team, and it was great.

JE: Right. Talk about yourself. How tall are you?

JS: 6'4".

JE: See, you're 6'4" and your fighting weight, what were you?

JS: I stayed in a class that was 242. If you get bigger than that, it's unlimited, and then I would be... At that time, Vasiliy Alexi of the big Russians, I mean, he could lift a house and was... Lord knows what he weighed. So I had to stay below that 242 to stay out of his range.

JE: How much were you lifting -- weight?

JS: I lifted 500 overhead a couple of times as my best. And today I'm really happy if I can get my lugged in the overhead bin in the aircraft, you know?

JE: (Chuckling) I lift weights once a week and, so, I'm not going to tell you how much I'm lifting.

JS: Well, add it all up! It won't take you long to get to 500.

JE: Right (Laughing). It'd take me a year. So, then, after college, when did you marry Crystal?

JS: 1981. We graduated in May, we got married in June. Didn't have a clue what we were going to do. Nobody would hire me. I remember, at my last year at ORU, you know, recruiters were coming on campus and offering all of my friends in the dormitory and everything -- offered them jobs. Nobody wanted this blind weightlifter, right?

So I went over to my dad's office over there on the edge of campus and I said, "Dad, I'm not going to get a job," which is really thrilling to any parent. But I said, "I'm not going to get a job, I'm going to be an entrepreneur," which, I didn't even know what that was, but it sounds better than, "I'm not going to do anything."

And I'll never forget: He said, "Come back tomorrow, I'll give you something." Well, I thought Dad was going to give me something like \$50,000 -- something to kinda get started.

So I show up early the next day and he said, "I told you I'm going to give you something. I'm actually going to give you two things. One is that I'm going to give the certain knowledge that if you ever get anything out of this life it's that you got it on your own, because I'm not giving you a dime. But the other thing that I'm going to give you is I don't know anything about being an entrepreneur, but I know a guy. And I'm going to introduce you."

And he was in the next office. Lee Braxton had a 3rd grade education. He dropped out of school during The Great Depression. He became a multi-millionaire. He gave most of the money away and he worked for ORU for a dollar a year until he died in his 80s. And he, you know, my Dad introduced me and he said, "This man will tell you how to be an entrepreneur."

And most of what I learned, I learned from him. And, you know, years later, I wrote a book called “The Millionaire Map,” and it was my journey from poverty to prosperity, and I talked about Mr. Braxton. And I got a call from The Napoleon Hill Foundation, the “Think and Grow Rich” people. The director said, “I love your book. You do know that your mentor, Lee Braxton, was Napoleon Hill’s best friend. He gave the eulogy at Hill’s funeral.”

And I said, “He made me read the book, but he never told me he knew the guy.” And, wow. But Lee Braxton was a ... You know, we all have those pivotal people in our lives; I’ve had a number of them, and he was certainly one that was in the right place at the right time.

JE: Talk about ORU. Talk about your relationship with Oral.

JS: Well, you know, I first knew Oral as my dad’s boss. My earliest memory is he came to the house and he pushed me down the driveway on my sled when I was a little kid. And then he was the president of the university that I attended. And it was really a dynamic time at the university there in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s when you were doing your Kennel of Care thing.

JE: Yes.

JS: Which was really great. And I think it’s a great form of flattery. It always reminded me of Twain. He had a friend whose book got on the bestseller list, because it was banned in Boston, and Twain wrote to him and said, “How can I get banned in Boston? I need to get banned in Boston?” And, you know, having you talk about Oral, I think, was just one of the great things.

But later in life, Oral and I became friends. We would exchange audiobooks and talk about them; and not religious books, but most of them were historical westerns. He loved Louis L’Amour and we would exchange those and then talk on the phone about them. He became a friend.

And, you know, I didn’t always agree with him on everything. But, you know, John, you don’t have to be perfect to be my friend and he was amazing man. You know, I never questioned that he believed that he was

saying. At some of the most difficult, controversial times, I remember asking my father, "How can you work with this guy? He's off doing these things, or whatever..."

And Dad said, "The only thing you've got to ask yourself is 'Is the world a better place or not because he does what he does?'" And he said, "And I'm convinced that it's a better place and he does it better if I help him, and that's why I'm here."

And I think, you know, when you're young, everything's black and white; and as you get older, you realize the world's in shades of gray.

JE: Right. Then he went up in the Prayer Tower and said his life would be taken...

JS: Yeah.

JE: And how did you react to that?

JE: You know ... I ... I I had problems with it. I believe he believed that, later on. Oral would have done things differently as time went by. He told me late in his life, he says, "Jim, I didn't have a role model; I didn't have anything."

When you see where he came from down in Pontotoc County, Oklahoma in this little, tiny shack and the next thing, he's this international media figure, he just -- he didn't have a lot of rules or guidelines for what he should or shouldn't do. I had challenges with some of that stuff, but overall, if you wanna see what Oral did or where the money went, all you need to do is go out on South Lewis and there it sits.

JE: Yeah.

JS: And, you know, now, generations of young people are all over the world because he did what he did.

JE: And as you know, I've interviewed Oral and he's elsewhere on this website, VoicesofOklahoma. And I grew to respect his talent, and his mind and all, more so maybe after death than when he was here, actually.

JS: Right.

Chapter 5 – 3:40

Walk to Mailbox

John Erling (JE): So your life moves on and you became an investment broker. Would that be a normal way to bring this up right now?

Jim Stovall (JS): Yeah, I mean, yeah. In my 20s I didn't know what to do, so I started with what was then a little regional firm, Edward Jones, and I had the office in Muskogee, Oklahoma. I helped people with stocks, and bonds, and things, and you know, I was still losing my sight rather rapidly and we kinda had a routine around the office so my clients couldn't tell how bad it was -- I don't know why I didn't feel like I could share that with them. But it continued to get worse and worse -- at least the way I was working at that time. I couldn't continue that business. And I had made enough money to where I wanted to go do some other things and then woke up at 29 and had lost my sight and was in that little room, and had the original idea for Narrative Television. Everything grew out of that.

JE: But didn't you come to that little room and you walked to the mailbox?

JS: Yes. One day I got up and I'd been in this room for months, John. And I thought, "I'm going to die right here." And then, you know, I thought about ... "I mean, there's guys in McAlester who did bad things and they've got a better life and I got." Whatever it is out there that I'm afraid of can't be any worse than spending the rest of my life in this little 9 x 12-foot room.

So I decided I'm going to walk to the mailbox at the street. So I walked. From my front door, it was about 52 feet to the mailbox. I went back there several years ago to revisit that. And it took me, oh, probably 20 minutes. I'm shaking like a leaf. I'm sweating, trying to find my way, and I finally get

there and I touch that mailbox, and as I did, my foot touched the curb right there on the edge of my street.

And even though I'd lived in that house for over a decade when I could see, I discovered something right there on that street that had taken me so long to get to. I realized I lived on a magic street because this street goes down to the corner and intersects with another street, and leads to another street, and I figured: "I'll take me anywhere in the world I want to go."

And it did, and it has, and it still does.

JE: Mm-hmm (in agreement).

JS: It all begins with that one step. I mean, I had to get out of my room.

JE: How do you prefer to receive information about your surroundings? How does that come to you?

JS: I have people that travel with me. If you see me outside of my office or my home, I'm either with Mrs. Crystal or I've got about 10 different young ladies that travel with me. And I realize some blind people use German Shepherds; I like young ladies, and that's always worked well for me. And they are very adept at telling me what's around and not letting anybody else know. It's quite a routine. I actually wrote a series of books, "The Jacob Diaries," about a blind character that lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And he's a detective and he has a young lady, Monica, that travels with him, and he has a limo driver, and it's all about how he does things. Some people thought I ought to go to psychotherapy after I lost my sight; I just invented a detective and let him deal with it all and wrote it in a book.

JE: (Chuckling).

Chapter 6 – 6:46
Sight is Convenient

John Erling (JE): But there's so much technology today, tools. How do you use them in your daily life?

Jim Stovall (JS): Well, John, I'm embarrassed to tell you and your audience that, you know, as a best-selling author, I have 10 million books in print, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and when I could read with my eyes like you do, I never read a whole book from cover to cover. I was an athlete and I thought, "That's enough, and I don't need to do anything else."

After losing my sight, I was fortunate to participate in a study that the U.S. Department of Education did to see how fast people could listen to audiobooks and retain the information. And after the study was over, I just kept doing it. And today I listen -- at many multiples of normal speed -- so I'm able to read a book every day. So becoming a reader made me want to be a writer, and a speaker, and all of the other things that I do. And it's opened up a whole new world for me.

JE: Just think that if this blindness had not come about, it may not have produced all the gifts that you have: A writer, who knows? Have you ever thought about what you really would be doing if you hadn't lost your sight?

JS: Yeah, and it's not a good thought. I mean, I, you know... The scriptures say all things work together for good. Napoleon Hill said, in psychological terms, "Every adversity is endowed with the seed of a greater good." Somehow in the process of losing my sight, I captured a vision of what I could do. And sight's a handy thing; I had it for the first part of my life, and it's convenient.

JE: (Laughing) Yes.

JS: But vision... You know, sight tells you where you are and what's around. I can tell you, there's times that that's good stuff to know. But vision tells you where you are and what you could do. And, you know, John, I feel like the

luckiest guy in the world. I don't know anybody I'd trade places with. And I don't think about being blind very often. I mean, every day or two I'll do an interview with somebody like you and I are talking and I go back and revisit it, but I don't know anybody I'd trade places with. I have a great life and I feel very fortunate and I don't think that all the things that have happened to me in my world would have happened any other way.

JE: Yup. It occurs to me to that you have to read ... We read people's faces.

JS: Yeah.

JE: And here I am smiling. You can't see the smile, but I think you understand my laughter.

JS: Yeah, I can hear it.

JE: And so that energizes you, even though you can't see me smiling.

JS: Sure. And you could tell, you know, I spend a lot of my days in arenas full of thousands of people and you could tell what's happening. It just ...

JE: You have a good sense of humor, too, and you can make light of your condition of whatever. Maybe that's the wrong word, "condition," but at any rate, you take humor in it.

JS: Sure. You either laugh or you cry. And at some point, either I control it or it controls me. I think we take things far too seriously, whether it's in our own lives, or the public sector, or anything else. You know, as long as we're laughing, we don't criticize, we don't hate, we don't hurt other people. We all need to slow down and just laugh a little.

JE: I suppose there are misconceptions about blindness that maybe people have that you wish people would understand better?

JS: Yeah. And I give them a lot of grace, John. I realize that for most people I'm the first blind guy they ever met. And, so, they don't know what to do and they're very uncomfortable and they don't want to say or do anything bad.

One thing that's always baffled me a little is that when people find out I'm blind, they talk louder. You know, like I can't hear. Hearing's my good thing, you know? But they just wanna talk louder or they're afraid to say "see," or "look," or whatever, and I say it all the time. And I would tell people that if you're around anybody that has a disability or goes through life differently than you do, treat 'em normal until they tell you to do something different. Everybody's different. And, you know, there are people that deal with blindness much differently than I do.

JE: Have you ever thrown anybody off by saying "it's nice to see you?"

JS: Sure. I say that all the time. I mean, we don't mean that when we say, "see you," it's just saying, "it's nice to be here with you." Or, "see you later" or whatever, sure.

JE: Your other sense had to become more sensitive when you lost your sight.

JS: You know, I think so. I think you pay attention more. One of the things when I started writing detective novels and I had this blind character... I was in a restaurant over here on Utica Square, and there was some people at the next table talking about something, and I'm talking to the young lady at my table, and then the maitre d comes over at starts talking about something, and you know, I follow all 3 conversations. A lot of the times, I have a high speed audiobook, and I'll turn on the news at the same time, and I'll have a baseball game going on in the background. People have asked, "How do you do that?" And I thought everybody did that.

I said, "You can't listen to 3 things at the same time?" And it just amazed me that ... so, yeah. And I listen to books that most people can't even pick out a word, but if they did it over a period of time and sped it up a little more like I did, I think they could. I think everybody only uses a small fraction of their capacity.

JE: You said you'd listen to many of the interviews we have on VoicesOfOklahoma. You did that on a sped-up phone, didn't you?

JS: Yeah, I did. I did.

JE: So we should let people know that they can do that and, other people who are blind -- I've never thought about trying to reach that audience, but they can, and it can go faster than normal speed. Yeah; and it's wonderful. And there are a few of yours ... I remember Mr. Helmerich when he started talking about the kidnapping, and of course Oral Roberts, and my friend Eddie Sutton, and Ken Trickey -- I loved that one. You know, I would listen to those. Those are people I know, so I would listen to them at normal speed just because I wanted to hear their voice. But, yeah, it's wonderful stuff.

Chapter 7 – 8:16

Narrative TV Network

John Erling (JE): Alright. Let's talk a little bit more about the Narrative Television Network, and where it's produced, and that type of thing.

Jim Stovall (JS): Well, we started in 1988. We started in downtown Tulsa in the basement of a condominium with some borrowed equipment because nobody would sell it to me. And they said that, "It's going to be embarrassing to sell this poor blind guy this video equipment, and then your stupid idea won't work, and then you'll be stuck with our equipment," so they loaned it to me.

And we started. And I had one colleague, Kathy Harper. She was legally blind. I was totally blind. And we were the blind leading the blind there for a while. And we produced our first shows on video tape -- VHS tape. And we would send them out to libraries and that's how we got started, and then we had an opportunity in 1989 to go on to cable television 2 hours a week. And Tulsa Cable was one of our first ones.

JE: Now, what was the content? What were you producing?

JS: Oh, well back then, all I could get was -- I couldn't get the licenses to any shows. So, what we aired were public domain films. I could go get, you know, "It's a Wonderful Life." I could go get, you know, one of the first films we did was, "The Big Sleep," the Humphry Bogart film. I was trying to

watch in my little room.

And, you know, so we had all these classic films and I committed to Tulsa Cable, and then other stations across the country, the other cable operators, that I would deliver 2-hour blocks of this programming via satellite -- everything analog in that day. And we discovered about 8 weeks before we were on the air that our movies were all different lengths and I had to fill this 2-hour block of time.

So somebody said, "Jim, what are you going to do?"

And I didn't know what I was going to do, so just said the first thing that came to my mind: "I'm going to interview some of these movie stars that are in these movies."

And the first -- I'd never done local, or regional, or any TV -- my first interview was Catherine Hepburn in New York City. We had one of her films and she was willing to come on with me, and she became a dear friend later in her life. She was scary in the beginning.

And then I was able to leverage that to tell other people, "Hey, we have this show. We're going to be featuring one of your films. We had Catherine Hepburn last week. We'd like to have you."

And all of the sudden, wow, okay. I got Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Stewart, and Michael Douglas, and on, and on, and on, and on. And that became the beginning of what was Narrative Television.

JE: So they obviously agreed because you were blind and knew what you were doing.

JS: Yeah.

JE: Frank Sinatra. What was he like?

JS: Frank Sinatra was amazing. I met him down in Dallas. He was doing a deal with the Dallas Philharmonic. And he had the top two floors of the Hyatt Regency hotel. And the glass-mirrored thing that's in the intro of the old

TV show, "Dallas". And he had the top two floors, and helicopters around; they'd cordoned off the street.

So I walked in, and I said, "Mr. Sinatra, you've created quite a stir here in Dallas."

And he said, "What are you talking about? I have no idea what you're talking about." He turned to one of his guys -- he had 4 or 5 guys with him all the time -- and he said, "Hey, you know what this guy's talking about?"

He said, "Yeah, I do, Boss, but you don't."

And I realized he'd never been anywhere where Frank Sinatra wasn't there. I mean, if you're Frank Sinatra, I guess you get used to that. But we ... And, John, you've interviewed so many people, you know there's a point where you get passed the formal rhetoric and you touch something, and now you're having a conversation.

JE: Right.

JS: And with Mr. Sinatra, it kinda came down to, you know, I said, "This kid from Hoboken..." I said, "What do you want people to think about you 50 years from now?"

And he thought for a minute and he said, "You know, just that that Sinatra kid came and put on a good show. I gave people their money's worth. I did my best."

And -- but I'll never forget it, John -- we finished the interview. My team, they had all the equipment; we were walking to the elevator, and he stuck his head out and he said -- he called me "Kid" then, when I was young enough that he could do it -- he said, "Hey, kid!"

And I said, "Yes, sir?"

He said, "I hope you live to be a hundred years old and the last thing you ever hear is me singing you a song."

JE: (Chuckling)

JS: And that was my last moment with Frank Sinatra.

JE: That's great. That's great.

JS: And he was everything I'd hoped he would be. And you know, John, you've done it. I mean, there was some people I've met and interviewed, and I wish I never met them because I'd enjoyed their work before and they just weren't what I thought they'd be.

JE: I don't know. Of all the people I've interviewed. It's been 15 years now and you're 295, I guess. I've fortunately enjoyed meeting them all; they weren't different, so it was good to know.

JS: Yeah.

JE: That says a lot about Oklahomans, doesn't it?

JS: It does.

JE: But, when you say you had a film, you had a narrator to tell the person watching what's happening.

JS: Yeah. We take movies, TV shows, educational programming and we have a team of writers and they will take it and they will write a new script to fill in the spaces between the dialogue. And it's some of the most difficult writing you'll ever do because you've got 11 seconds right here to describe the action and what's going on. And you can't step on the lines, you can't interrupt, so you've got to stay within that.

And then we have voiceover people that read those scripts. It takes us about 10 hours to do an hour-long show. Something like that. And we started doing the old movies and then we got to series TV, and then the digital world came along and now every primetime show on all the major networks is narrated. And it's free. There's a button on your TV called "Second Audio Program," or "Languages," or whatever it is on your TV, and you push that and you'll hear the voice of the narrator. You can do to

Netflix and they called 'em "described movies." And there are hundreds and hundreds of described movies that you just, you know, they're there and it's a free service to everybody.

JE: But you led the way on that.

JS: Yeah.

JE: That was your idea.

JS: Yeah.

JE: And, so, how many movies do you have for Narrative TV?

JS: Thousands.

JE: Thousands.

JS: Thousands of movies and TV shows, yeah.

JE: Right. You're a narrator, aren't you, on one of 'em?

JS: Oh, wow. I did a couple early on, but, John, I mean... If anybody listening to us, if you're thinking about a career move and you want to be a narrator, all you've got to do is watch the script and watch the screen. You read the script, you watch the screen. But if you can't see either one, it takes forever to narrate a show. So they would have to feed me the lines one at a time. Yeah. I did a couple of shows, but no. That is not my calling, I can assure you.

JE: Right. I should mention that Susan Crane is a narrator for you and she was a newswoman for KRMG.

JS: Oh, yeah. Several: Steve Cherick, Kevin Myer down the hall at K95, Dick Lofton was here. This is where old radio people go to die, right here at Narrative Television. And, you know, I think they really liked it because -- and still do -- because your voice is heard everywhere in America and

you're helping blind people see. I mean, it doesn't get a lot better than that.

JE: No. And, so, you continue to produce content all of the time now.

JS: Yeah. Yeah. And not as much as we used to because we've trained other people how to do it around the country. And now that it's digital... We used to have a studio downstairs in this building with storage machines that were the size of refrigerators, and tapes, and all this stuff. And then it went digital and now, you know, people can sit at home and do it on a laptop. The world has changed. You know, think about when you first got into radio what it took to do a radio show and you walked in here with everything it takes to do this recording. It's really rather amazing.

JE: Right.

Chapter 8 – 14:03

Ultimate Gift

John Erling (JE): But then another talent of yours is writing. And everybody thinks they can write and not everybody can write. First of all, how many books? 50 books?

Jim Stovall (JS): Close to 60. Something like that.

JE: Alright. Let me talk about The Ultimate Gift. Isn't that what launched your writing career?

JS: My first book was called "You Don't Have to be Blind to See," and it was my story of losing my sight, and building the television network, and becoming an olympic weightlifter. And that kind of got me started. And then the publisher -- it sold really well -- and they said, "We need another book," and so I wrote an interview book with all of the people I'd interviewed for TV: "Success: Secrets of Super Achievers."

Then I wrote, "The Way I See the World," and then I did a book with Steve

Forbes and Donald Trump, before he got political. And, you know, "Great American Success Stories," and there were 12 of us.

But then they kept calling wanting more books, and I kept thinking, "Don't you have anybody else that wants to write a book besides me?"

And so I figured I better make up a story. So, I figured, I'm just going to have to make something up. So Michael would pick me up every day at my house in a limo and I'd sit in the back. You know, I do something different everyday, or else I get bored if I do the same thing every day.

And he said, "What are we doing today, Boss?"

And I said, "I'm going to write a novel."

He said, "Do you know anything about it?"

I said, "About as much as I know about these other books that I've been writing."

So I came in here and there was a lady down the hall from where we're sitting right now, Dorothy Thompson, she typed my first 40 books. You know, I'd talk just like I'm talking to you and she'd type them out and that was it.

And I said, "Dorothy, we're gonna start a book." And the only thing that I had was the first line of the book: "It was my 80th year of life on Earth and my 53rd year in the practice of the law, that I was to undertake an odyssey that would change my existence forever."

And I said, "Okay. That's the first line of this story. And if I can figure out who said that and what is he talking about, we're gonna have a book."

And, John, between my meetings and phone calls here at the television network, over the next 5 days, I wrote that novel -- never an edit, never a rewrite. The way I dictated it to Dorothy is the way 5 million people have read that book around the world, and that was the beginning of writing

fiction and non-fiction, and I do about half of each now. And, of course, that was the beginning of the movie.

JE: I just sit here in awe. That's a miracle. That's miraculous that you could just dictate that to her and, then, how long could you do each session. I mean, you couldn't do the whole book, but did you take 8, 7 hours? Physically, we get tired; mentally, we get tired doing this kind of work.

JS: Yeah. 3-4 hours a day is about all I can write.

JE: Alright. So then the stream of consciousness just started rolling.

JS: Yeah.

JE: Okay. And the part of *The Ultimate Gift*: It's Jason, I believe, isn't it?

JS: Yeah.

JE: He's the lead character. My wife and I watched the film the other night and found it very interesting. So, as you start talking, does it just spinning with you -- and the one idea comes to you -- and, is that the way it works?

JS: Yeah. Hemingway said in his "A Moveable Feast," which was -- everybody who thinks they want to be a writer ought to read Hemingway's thing -- but he said, "Create compelling characters and see what they go do."

You know, I would create these characters and sometimes they go in places that I didn't even think they were going there, and they end up differently. And it's really rather strange because I'll dictate for a chapter, Dorothy will read it back to me, now Beth does, and we go on. I never go back to that.

And then, years later, well that particular book, *Ultimate Gift*, Tom Bosely from *Happy Days* and *Father Dowling*, he did the audio book on that. And I was going to meet him. He was here in Tulsa doing a Broadway show, "On Golden Pond," and so I thought, "I'd better listen to this," so I was on a flight back from Los Angeles to Tulsa and I put on that audio book and, John, I didn't remember. There are huge parts of that story that I don't even

remember. I got emotional. I mean, I'm tearing up listening to my own book. And the flight attendant said, "Are you okay, sir?"

I said, "There's been a death in my family. Red Stevens died."

JE: (Laughing)

JS: You know, I just ... You know, but, it comes from a different place and I don't think about it, and it's just gone.

JE: Red Stevens, of course, is a character in that film, "The Ultimate Gift," which stars James Garner, Lee Merriweather, Brian Dennehy, Abigail Breslin, and, so, did you ever meet James Garner?

JS: Oh, yes.

JE: Oh, you did.

JS: I had interviewed Paul Newman for Narrative Television. I wanted Newman to play that part. And I called him and he said, "Well, I've actually read your book, Jim, but my health's not good and I promised Redford that I'd do my last movie with him."

And I said, "Well, if you'll come do my film, I'll write a part in for Redford." I said, "You'll need to pay him. I ain't got any money on this Redford deal."

But it turns out that his health wasn't good enough and, at that time, somebody had written this book -- some lady. It was when Oklahoma was having their centennial, and they picked the top 100 Oklahomans and somebody had a weak moment and I got in, and James Garner was in it. So, I actually got to meet him. And after, you know, I realized that I can't get Paul Newman, I called James Garner and I said, "Will you do this film?"

And he said, "Yeah." He said, "I've been making movies 50 years. This will be my last one. This kinda says what I wanna say as I leave the stage."

And so I had to tell him. I said, "Well, I hope there won't be any hard feelings, sir. You may have heard -- I offered it to Newman."

He said, "Son, I got rich and famous doing stuff Newman didn't wanna do. Let's make your film."

And that was my introduction to him and he was magnificent, and if you watch that movie, in that last scene where he says goodbye to his grandson, I was there when he shot that. He called the crew around and he said, "Guys, I'd like to do this all in one take, all the way through." Which, normally, that'd be 3 or 4 takes or more. He said, "I wanna do one take all the way through." And he said, "This is going to be my last scene in my last movie, so let's get this."

And, wow, the director said, "Action!" He nailed it, and it was quiet. The director was even afraid to say, "Cut!" And Mr. Garner turned to me, he said, "Jim, you happy?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "I guess I'll go home."

And that was James Garner.

JE: From Oklahoma, by the way.

JS: From Oklahoma. Norman, Oklahoma.

JE: Right, yeah. That's great. So, the concept of this book -- I'm going to zero in on that. And, by the way, I will tell our listeners that all you need to do with your smart TV is say, "Ultimate Gift," and it will be there instantaneously. You don't have to do anything else. Just pick it up by saying, "Ultimate Gift" into your smart TV remote.

But the idea was, "What would you be willing to do to inherit a billion dollars?" And Jason is the character. Then you came up with all these gifts. Talk about how your mind came up with this.

JS: Well, John, at the time, I decided: "I've got to write this." I told you when I started Narrative Television that I had one employee -- one colleague -- at

the time, and she was legally blind and she was a single mom. And she had left her job at a law firm here in Tulsa to come and work for me, on my mythical network that didn't exist. And I always treasured her loyalty and questioned her wisdom.

But she was a single mom, and about that time, she was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. And she had a 12-year-old little girl and she made me the guardian of her 12-year-old little girl. And, so, Kathy, the mother and I, spent many days talking about, "Well, when she goes to high school, make sure she knows this, and when she's dating, tell her that; and when she goes to college..."

So, the thought of somebody preparing to pass along their wisdom after they're gone, kind of came from there. So I had this character, Red Stevens, and the gifts were just things I had learned from my parents and grandparents: Family, friends, money, love -- all the things that make life good. And I only made the guy a billionaire to dispel what I call "The Big Lie." And The Big Lie tells us, John, that we'll be happy and healthy and everything will be great if we just had enough money. And some of the most miserable people I know have a lot of money. And, you know, I've been rich and I've been poor. Rich is better. But it won't make you happy.

JE: Well, there were The Gift of Friends, The Gift of Learning, Gifts of Problems, Gift of Family, Gift of Laughter that young Jason had to accomplish that, and it was difficult for him to do it, and ultimately he received the inheritance of -- what was it? \$100,000,000?

JS: Yeah. And then we made two more films in that series. But that was the beginning of everything, and if your listeners go watch that film, as you described to them, near the end of the film, Jason, the hero, goes to meet with some bankers about a project he's doing and he has a limo driver -- and watch that scene carefully, because that limo driver's me. And I do a part in all of my films.

When we were making that film for 20th Century Fox, the producer called and said, "I need to meet with you. I'm going to be in Vegas. I'm going to be at an event; I'm speaking." So they flew to Vegas to meet me and I was on stage that night, and he said, "Wow! You could be in the movie!"

I said, "I'm not going to be in a movie. I wrote the book."

He said, "No, think about it."

I said, "Okay. I'll play anything but a blind guy. I'm not going to play a blind guy in a movie."

He said, "Well, you've got a script. Pick the part."

Well, here's this limo driver with two lines. I thought, "Well, there's no way the limo driver is going to be blind, so I've been the limo driver 4 or 5 times, and then I was a bartender in one with Raquel Welch. And then we're making a film here this year that's a baseball theme and I'm going to actually be the umpire. Having a blind umpire, I think, is just great.

JE: (Chuckling) Right. So, how do you come to the attention of 20th Century Fox?

JS: I'd love to tell you it was by ... A couple of things happened. Before that book came out, I had a number of other books, so I'd met a lot of authors. So I had several people endorse some of those books. Paul Harvey endorsed the sequel and several other people were great. But Mark Victor Hansen, who wrote the Chicken Soup for the Soul books, was the best-selling author alive at that time, and to this day, as we speak. He sold half-a-billion dollars in books.

I asked him to write an endorsement for the book and he read my manuscript, and on the back cover it said, "I see this story becoming one of the great films of all time." Well, Mark had so much clout, I think, in Hollywood, I think people started thinking about it.

So it wasn't long after it came out that I got contacted by a major studio. Well, my lawyer said I should quit saying who it is, but, well, it was Paramount. Our lawyers need things to do. And they called me and said, "We'd like to option this film."

I said, "Okay."

And they optioned it for a year and, at the end of the year, they finally had a script. And they were going to make my "Ultimate Gift" into an R-rated film. And, you know, I have no problems with R-rated films, John. "Saving Private Ryan", you know, films like that -- Schindler's List -- they need to be R-rated films. I have no problem with that.

But my "Ultimate Gift"... They had young actors who entered the story coming out of the shower is what they were doing, and I said, "Look, I've got 3 guys in their 70s and one in their 80s in this movie. You don't have to show them taking a shower. We assume the old guys took a shower, but this young girl -- we gotta...? There's no reason to do this."

And by then we had 2,200 public schools in North America use that book as part of their curriculum. And I said, "I am not going to have a movie that these kids can't go see."

And they said, "Well, if you don't take this deal, you'll never work in Hollywood."

And I said, "Well, okay. I never thought I would anyway." And it wasn't two weeks later that I had another offer, and I gave them 6 months. I would not have thought it possible, but they came up with something worse. And so I was pretty well resigned that I wasn't going to have a movie.

And then a guy named Rick Eldrige called me. And my strategy for getting into the movie, John, happened because somebody read that book on a flight out to Los Angeles. They left it in the seat pocket in front of them. The people didn't clean it out and a guy by the name of Rick Eldrige, who was a movie producer with Disney, and was just starting to do some of his own films, he read that on a flight back to Charlotte. He called me and said, "We'd like to make this into a movie."

And that was the beginning, and then 20th Century Fox came in, and was my partner in distributing that film, and that was the beginning of the films.

JE: Finding that book in the seat. Now, we talk about God moments...

JS: Yeah!

JE: That was a God moment, wasn't it?

JS: Yeah.

Chapter 9 – 5:00 Famous Blind Friends

John Erling (JE): So how many movies have been produced off your books?

Jim Stovall (JS): 9. We're working on the 10th right now. It's called "Will to Win," and it's one of my homecoming historical books. I've written a series of books that all take place in modern-day high schools and the namesake of the school kind of gets involved. The first one was Harry Truman in "One Season of Hope," and then "Top of the Hill" with Napoleon Hill.

And this one's called "Will to Win," and we'll shoot it at Rogers High School and it's about a young lady who wants to play softball and wants to go to college on a softball scholarship, but they cut the team due to budgetary constraints and she goes and plays baseball with the guys. And it's based on the true story of a young lady named Sarah Hudeck down in Texas did it. She actually played 2 years in college for baseball.

So I wrote this story about her and she's living with her grandmother, her parents have been killed, and she's a Native American, and her grandmother is a traditional Cherokee Indian and she's trying to be a 21st-century teenager. She gets kind of frustrated and, at certain times in the story, Will Rogers shows up and kind of helps her out. So we've had a lot of fun with that. And we'll shoot it here, and I'm looking forward to it.

JE: Yeah. By the way, we'll tie this to ORU. Some of you, when you drive by ORU, you'll see a building there that says "Stovall Business Center," and didn't you donate that building to the university?

JS: I donated two. That one is the administrative center where all the administrative people from the university work and then across the street, over on Delaware, is the Stovall Center for Entrepreneurship. We funded a degree and we have kids from all over the world who come to get a 4-year degree in entrepreneurship and start businesses.

JE: Yeah. (Chuckling) I asked you earlier and I don't think you answered it when I asked you: What do you think you would have done if you had not been blind?

JS: The only think I had done was... I did construction work. I shoveled concrete.

JE: You had no direction, did you?

JS: No, none. I was a football player.

JE: Yeah. Right.

JS: I thought I could play in the NFL. But, no. I had no idea what I could do. No. All this came to me. I lost my sight and got a vision.

JE: Right. Exactly. So, some famous people. You've talked about Ray Charles; you met Stevie Wonder; you met...

JS: Yeah. Stevie's a great friend. We were honored at the same time in New York by the American Foundation of the Blind. And it was a big gala evening; I'm supposed to do the speech and Stevie's gonna play some music. Well, I got there early for my walkthrough and as I'm introduced, I play the piano a little. And, John, how many times in your life do you get to play Stevie's piano? So I sit down and start playing when he comes out. And he said, "Hey, I promise I won't make no speeches if you quit playing that piano." And we became friends and saw him not long ago. He was playing here in Tulsa and we met at the airport and spent some time together. He's just an amazing, amazing talent.

JE: José Feliciano.

JS: Yeah. Same thing, just...

JE: You met him?

JS: Yeah. Yeah. Met him out in LA. Just a great, great talent. You know, really bridged. People look at it now and they don't realize what a big deal it was for him doing ... you know, kind of the hispanic community to mainstream music. Really amazing.

JE: Andrea Bocelli?

JS: Yeah.

JE: Have you met him?

JS: Yes.

JE: Wow. Where? And what was...?

JS: We were in Boston and they were doing a thing there. You know, I am drawn to people who have lost their sight. And we had a brief moment, nothing big. I met Ronny Milsap in Branson and we spent time together. I have a lot of blind people that want to come here because it's just ... nothing works like when you're struggling, to see someone that's gone that way and... you know.. I could have had 10,000 people tell me when I was a teenager, "Jim, you can make it." That does nothing compared to: "There's Ray Charles."

JE: Yeah. This is one I know you didn't meet, and that was Helen Keller.

JS: No.

JE: But I bring her name up because I would imagine you've read some of her material. Wouldn't you draw some inspiration from her?

JS: Totally. Her grand-niece has been here a number of times. Her name is Keller Johnson. She was named -- her first name -- for Helen. Keller Johnson, she runs the Helen Keller Foundation and we've done some work

together. Totally inspiration because for someone like me to think, “you’re also deaf,” I cannot imagine that.

JE: Mm-hmm (in agreement).

JS: And, yeah. Totally inspirational person.

Chapter 10 – 7:13

A Writer and Speaker

John Erling (JE): Somebody’s listening and what would you tell them about how to adjust to the vision loss? What would you say to them?

Jim Stovall (JS): Well, whether it’s a vision loss, or somebody’s lost their job, or they’re going through a divorce, I mean... My problem is no bigger or greater than anything else. We’re all only as big as the smallest thing that it takes us to divert us from where we ought to be. Whether you can see or not, whether things have gone well or not, you have to go back and think about the big dreams and the things you wanna do in this life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “There’s nothing capricious about nature.” That means, “It’s not trying to fool you. If there’s a big dream inside of you, something you’ve always wanted to do, you have the capacity to do it or it wouldn’t have been there.”

JE: Yeah.

JS: And so the question is never “can we,” the question is, “will we?” And you have to start with the thing ... there’s a way to get from here to there.

JE: You know, those with sight, we say we can “size people up.”

JS: Yeah.

JE: We can figure them out because we're looking at them, we see their clothes, or maybe their mannerisms and so forth. You have to do that through the sound of their voice.

JS: Yeah.

JE: And how they use it, right?

JS: Yeah. And, by the way, when you're sizing people up looking at them. I mean, I've worked with too many great actors in my movies -- these people can... People that can transform themselves like that, you need to, you know, you really need to sit down and talk to people before you figure out who you're dealing with.

But, yeah. I know by listening to people what I have and, you know, a lot of people like to get together for meetings. I prefer to talk to people on the telephone, John, because on the phone, I'm even-up. I've got a level playing field with folks. And that works for me.

JE: Right (Chuckling). That just dawned on me now.

JS: Yeah.

JE: Alright. So we're talking about all your gifts, but not everybody who can write, produce as you've done is a good public speaker, so there's another gift that you have and when did you sense that, "Oh! I'm making people laugh! People are interested in me." How did that happen?

JS: John, we started Narrative Television and we got a National Emmy Award for our first season on television. And, out of that, I was asked to be the keynote speaker at the National Association of Broadcasters. And I'd never given a speech, but I was trying to sell all these people -- stations owners and cable TV operators -- on carrying Narrative Television, so I figured there's going to be thousands of 'em all in the room at the same time, so yeah. I'll make the speech. I thought it was just a big sales pitch for me.

And I got up and talked about some of the things that you and I have been talking about here. And at the end of the speech, three separate people

came up to my assistant and said, "We'd like to hire him."

When we got back to Tulsa, I called a guy and he said, "I'm having our national convention; we'd like to hire you. Would 5 be okay?"

John, I didn't know if he meant hundred, thousand, or \$5. But I thought, "I'm going to find out more about this." And then I found out, you know, it wasn't long until, you know, I'm getting paid more than a family of 4 was earning in Oklahoma for a whole year.

JE: What did "5" mean?

JS: "5" meant "thousand" and that was the beginning.

JE: \$5,000 for that first speech?

JS: And now, John, you can go look it up online: It's \$35,000. You know, I was out on the road last week.

JE: And how long will you speak? Half hour? 45 minutes?

JS: Ehh, 45 minutes last week. But I, you know, I started doing that. And I found myself -- I got booked on a tour of the west coast with 10 or 12 dates with Dr. Robert Schuller and Dr Denis Waitley who had written "The Psychology of Winning."

And I was backstage with those guys, and Schuller's the one that really twisted my arm to write my first book. He came up to me with that Schuller voice that he used to talk with -- sounded like God, probably, talking to you. He said, "My friend Jim: I believe you should write a book."

I said, "Man, I can hardly read a book, why would I want to write a book?" And it made no sense to me.

Then the emcee introduced me and I did my hour, and when I came off stage, Dr. Waitley was there and he said, "Hey, while you were out there, we got it all worked out."

I thought they meant the ground transportation to the plane. I said, "So what'd you boys work out?"

He said, "Well, while you were out there Schuller called his publisher over at Thomas-Nelson and I agreed to write the foreword, and we need your manuscript in about 90 days."

That's how I became a writer.

JE: Yeah.

JS: And I came back here and I wrote the only thing that I know, which was the story I told you about losing my sight and Narrative Television and everything else, and it came out in a book called, "You Don't Have to be Blind to See." I never thought I'd write another one, and they kept wanting more, and more, and more.

But the speaking thing -- wow. The first time I went on stage and realized this works for me, there's not a greater feeling in the world than to touch people in that way and have the privilege of being there and doing that. And to feel 12, or 14, or 20 thousand people react to something is ... it's a humbling experience.

JE: Yeah. I watched you online and your speech is in the same style that you're talking to me right now.

JS: Yeah, yeah.

JE: Because some people will (in a bravado tone) "Get into that speech! And da-da-da-da," and you're just talking to them.

JS: Yeah. When I started losing my sight and I was in that little room I told you about, there was a little lady that lived on the corner of my street and I'd just gotten to my mailbox and I was trying to figure out how to get out of my room. And they were having a thing at Mabee Center called a positive thinking rally here in Tulsa.

JE: Mm-hmm (in the affirmative). I remember those.

JS: She said, “I’m taking all of my children and I bought an extra ticket. Would you go with us?” And, wow, I wasn’t getting out and doing much, but I went. It didn’t occur to me until I got there, I thought, “You bought an extra ticket? Don’t you know how many grandkids you got?”

But, anyway, I get there and I heard Zig Ziglar, and Paul Harvey, and Ira Hayes, and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. And then the lunch speaker, they said, “It’s a new guy nobody’s ever heard of.” And it’s Dr. Denis Waitley, the guy I did my first tour with. And they said, “You wanna go to lunch or listen to this guy.”

And I said, “I’ll stay and listen to this guy.”

And, John, he reached back and he rose in that arena and did something to me -- turned a switch that’s never gone off. And I thought, “Man, maybe I can do that for somebody somewhere.” And, so, everytime I walk out on stage -- I did it last week for General Tommy Franks’ leadership thing -- I always think, “There’s one guy out there that’s like I was. And I’m just talking to that one guy.”

JE: Mm-hmm (in agreement). Yup. That’s what they tell us to do. For sure.

Chapter 11 – 5:19

Writing Notes

John Erling (JE): And right now, in addition to the other things you are doing, you told me about you’re writing a newspaper column?

Jim Stovall (JS): Yeah. About 25 years ago, a guy named Ralph Schafer here in Tulsa ran the Tulsa Business Journal, and he had read my first book and he said, “Could you write a column?”

I said, “Maybe if you told me what one was I could, I don’t know.”

And he said, “Write down 700 words of anything you’re thinking about.”

So we did and faxed it over to him 10 or 15 minutes later. And he called and said, "Where'd you get this?"

I said, "Ralph, you called me and told me to write it."

He said, "You wrote this after I called?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Do that every week."

So every week, I started writing a column for them, and then after a couple of months, I called and I said, "Ralph, who owns this? Do I or do you?"

He said, "It's yours."

So I started adding more newspapers and magazines across North America, Europe, and Asia, and now they still get it. They told me 3 million people each week read that. And it's just whatever I'm thinking about. You know, the principles that you and I are talking about. And that continued and there's been 6 books of those compiled and released of my "Winner's Wisdom" columns. And they come out every week and that got me to the exalted thing like you of being in radio.

JE: (Laughing) Yeah. "Exalted."

JS: That's it, man.

JE: (Laughing) You do make me laugh. So then what kind of things are you talking about? Let's bring you current. Didn't you say you just had a column you did this week?

JS: Yeah. It's called "Building Bridges."

JE: And what is that all about?

JS: It's about the fact that you'll be the same person you are today 5 years from now, except for two things: The people you meet and the books you read. And you need to be doing both on a regular basis. And, you know, it's about building bridges, building relationships. And bridges are like, you know, there's pedestrian bridges, bicycle bridges, car bridges, and some will hold a train, but you've got to build a strong bridge to do that and we should always be in the habit of meeting people. I recommend you doing that by catching people doing something right, and call 'em or write 'em and say, "Hey, I'm a fan. You did a great job."

JE: Mm-hmm (In agreement)

JS: John, that's why I'm here today with you. I heard you on the radio with Dan Potter not long ago and I wrote you a note. And that's why we're sitting here today.

JE: Yup. Yeah, you did reach out. And then that email I got was from Beth. She wrote it for you?

JS: Yeah.

JE: Yeah.

JS: I mean, yeah, I dictated it to her and she wrote it, and I probably do that two or three times a day.

JE: Writing notes to people?

JS: Yeah.

JE: Complimenting them about what they've done?

JS: Well, yeah, or encouraging them. I mean, as we speak, we're a couple days after the assassination attempt on Mr. Trump. I wrote a note yesterday to Mr. Trump and, you know, just, "we're thinking about you, praying for you." No matter where you are politically, that was a horrific thing. And I requested the information and I'm writing to those Secret Service guys

who surrounded him. You talk about a hero, I mean, those guys -- when the bullets start flying, they get in the way, and that's some amazing folks.

JE: You know, that's a great thought to write to the former President and write to the Secret Service. How do you think, though ... ? I mean, I'd shut that down in my head because I'd think, "Well, they'll never get it." You don't think that.

JS: Mm-mmm (in the negative). Well, I mean, maybe some of them don't, but you'd be amazed who does. Right behind you on that wall are letters and photos from the last 6 Presidents of the United States. I wrote to them.

JE: Is that President Biden?

JS: Yeah.

JE: Right over there.

JS: Yeah.

JE: Oh, you know what? I did that thinking you could see.

JS: No, but I...

JE: Is that you?

JS: I know exactly where they are.

JE: And there's George Bush.

JS: Yeah.

JE: And over here is George H. W. Bush.

JS: Yeah.

JE: And so, yeah. Yeah. I like that idea that we send notes to people. We don't do that anymore. Or words of encouragement. We should do that more.

JS: Yeah. I think it's a lost art because last week I read -- one day I read "The Compiled Letters of Noel Coward," and all these letters he had written to people throughout his life. And I thought, "We don't have that. They're not going to do, 'The Combined Texts and Emails of John Erling,'".

I mean, we don't write those thoughtful, long, correspondences with people anymore. And I think it's sad.

JE: You do a radio show every week?

JS: I do two a week. One out of New York with Michael Pelca and we go on a lot of radio stations. And one with Angie Austin out of Denver and we talk about the column every week. You know, radio is a wonderful thing. That's how I met you. I grew up with you. When I first heard when I was a teenager, I needed to hear someone like me, not talk.

Chapter 12 – 7:35

Oval Office

John Erling (JE): As we think about the future, and you're only 65 years old, by the way. You have 20-30 years yet of producing. Where do you see yourself in another 10-15 years?

Jim Stovall (JS): I still want to, you know, I mean, Narrative Television is now almost universal. I'm excited about that. I want to continue my work at the university and the Stovall Center for Entrepreneurship. I've got a list of books and movies that I want to do that I keep, and we go over it the 15th of every month and I have more books and movies listed on there than what I've done, so... If I live to be 100, I'll still be writing on those. And you just want to do it better, you want ... You know, I think every writer visualizes someday, at the end of your live, you go to Heaven and there sits F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway and all these people and they say, "What did you ever write that was any good?"

You know, you want to write that one great American novel, or that one

thing. And I've written pieces of it, I mean, there are parts of my work that I would put at that level, but I would like to write... I wrote a thing called "Keeper of the Flame" that was not nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, but there were 4 other people nominated and when I read there books, I thought, "I would like to get to that level, and do it well, and continue to do it."

And three of my great mentors have had so many. But, you know: Paul Harvey, Art Linkletter, Coach John Wooden all did some of their best work in their 90s. I cannot imagine. I'm like you: The thought of retiring ...

JE: Mm-mmm (agreeing that retirement is not appealing)

JS: I mean, I enjoy having my free time, but, you know, after a couple of days... I interviewed the golfer Lee Trevino. And he talked to me and he said, "Man, after a season of playing every week in a different city..." He said, "I come home, I throw my golf clubs in the garage, I tell my wife, Claudia, 'I'm not playing anymore.'" And he said, "I sleep about 24 hours straight through, talk to my kids, and then all of the sudden, I've got to get on the golf course somewhere." He said, "I've got to go play golf."

And I just love what I do. I remember asking Catherine Hepburn in my very first interview. I said, "What do you think you would have done if you weren't an actress?"

She said, "I would have had to have found a way to support my habit, because I do this out of an innate need to be an actress. Thankfully they pay me for it, but if they didn't, I'd have to get a job." But she said, "I do this because I need to do this."

JE: Yup. Okay, so then here we are in 2024. Our country today is in a state of turmoil, and we've got left and right, and we're fighting amongst each other probably like never before; because there were so many unifying things that happened in the history of our country: WWI, WWII, and all of those kinds of things, and we came through all of that. What would you comment on? What would you say to the nation to heal it?

JS: Well, I'm an optimist and all you've got to do is look back at the history. When people tell me that this is the worst time we've ever had, they forgot the Civil War. That was kind of a serious thing, and a lot of other things. We've come through some difficult times. I remember, you know... There was a contentious time in the late '90s with Bill Clinton and all the things, and then 9/11 happened. And I'll never forget, on the steps of the Capitol building, our own conservative, Jim Inhofe, is holding hands with Hillary Clinton, singing "God Bless America," with all of the other people. And you think, "Okay."

We will still come together when we need to. It's like when I was a kid. Me and my younger brother, we would fight like cats and dogs right up until somebody else bothered us. I think we need to remember that it's about policy. It's not about politics. I've been on a number of committees in Washington throughout the years, and I always tell them, "Could we do this in a business-like fashion?" Everybody's arguing about the method. No, let's start with, "What do we want to get accomplished? What's the mission?" And if we can agree on that, now we're just talking about, "How do we get this done?"

Because, when I first started in television, in order to get clearance in Washington, I did a show with Jim Hartz -- a Tulsa legend -- called "The Washington Reporter," and they let me co-host with him while I was trying to learn how to do this.

My very first guest was Ted Kennedy and, you know, I'd always thought, just from the media, that this was Satan incarnate. I met him in makeup and I liked the guy. And I didn't agree with his method, but his vision for our country was not a lot different than mine.

And I've been to the White House and met with several presidents, and ...

JE: Have you been in the Oval Office?

JS: Uh-huh (in the affirmative).

JE: With whom? Which president?

JS: It started with Obama was the first one and then Mr. Trump.

JE: Hmm.

JS: And Obama invited me. One of his advisors had seen me speak in Dallas and they said, "We'd like you to come and talk to us." I said, "Are you sure you've got the right guy?" And, you know, when I got there, I said, "It's an honor to meet you, sir." I said, "I'm not sure why I'm here."

You know, I told him: "I didn't vote for you, I don't agree with a lot of your policies..."

He said, "Well, we want your opinion."

And I said, "Well, I am the world's leading authority on my opinion."

JE: (Chuckles)

JS: "So, if you want it, you'll get it, but please remember that you asked for it." But what he was trying to do was get ideas about "How do I communicate my message to people across the aisle?"

And at the time we were talking about the K4 and Head Start Program. And I said, "Well, I heard your message -- your speech -- on that, and you said, 'Well, every child is entitled to this.'" I said, "Sir, we have a constitution. We're entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

And he said, "This is who we are."

I said, "We all get to decide who we are. We all get a vote." I said, "If you want to sell that to people across the aisle, your own budget office had a report that said for every dollar we spent on Head Start today, we save \$10 in the next generation on prisons." I said, "Sell that to the Republicans and it'll sell; it makes fiscal sense." It doesn't matter how we feel.

You know, it's like how people argue right now over the climate thing: "Is it real? Are we causing it?" It doesn't matter. We all want clean water and clean air. Let's get back to the basics and then we've gotta realize that we

have to be willing to fight for and defend people that we think are wrong. I mean, I don't agree with them, but they have the right to be what I think is wrong. And that's what makes our country great. And I think it'll always be that; I just do.

Chapter 13 – 7:23

April's Eyes

John Erling (JE): So then how would you like to be remembered?

Jim Stovall (JS): My legacy are the books and movies I've created and the kids that have come through the Stovall center; the things we have done through our philanthropy; and it's not about me. It's about those things, creating a difference that will continue and, so, I'm a guy with a simple message: You change your life when you change your mind. The biggest dream you've ever had in your life is alive and well. And the only thing you have to do is go into that little voting booth in the middle of your soul that only you and God know about and vote "Yes" for you and your big dream. And once you do, you'll find out that God voted for you a long time ago.

JE: Yeah.

JS: He's just been waiting for you to show up. It's just all right there. I mean, you change your life when you change your mind. It's that simple. People that will do that, you know, right now, as they listen to us, I mean, 20 years from now they'll remember today. They won't remember you or me. They'll remember, "That's the day I said yes to the big dream."

JE: Yup. I want to talk to you about, again, just a little bit, about Crystal because -- I should have asked you about this before -- when she was with you as you were losing your sight, did you ever think that maybe she would leave you because of that?

JS: There was a time that I wasn't sure we would have a relationship because I loved her so much, I wanted Crystal to have someone better than a life with a blind guy, but she convinced me that, you know, that she wanted to

spend her life with me. And the fact that I was blind was just one thing. And then she gave me the greatest gift anyone could ever give anybody: That I've come home and tell her I'm going to do the most outrageous things, and she believed every one of 'em. And they come true.

That part of our life started at ORU when I was in the chapel of my sophomore year, and they have a guy who came from Africa who dug water wells and -- nothing memorable about it, that was just his thing he did so that people would have clean water.

And at the end, Oral got up and said, I think we oughta take up a collection to help this man with his mission in life. And I thought it was a great idea, except ... John, I had \$17 to my name. It was in my pocket. I had a 10, a 5, and two 1s. That was everything I had in the world.

So as the basket comes around, I grab a 1 and I'm going to throw it in there, and I promise you -- the basket gets about 2 people from me and Oral said: "Stop!"

Boy, when Oral said "Stop," everything stopped like an EF Hutton commercial. Man, everybody just stopped. And he said, "Somebody here needs to hear this: Either give your best and expect the best, or keep your money. You'll need it."

And hardest thing I ever did: I put my \$1 back in and I got out my \$10. And I threw it in there. Well, after chapel, I met up with Crystal; and we weren't quite a couple yet. We were going to have a date that evening. And she said, "What did you think of that message?"

I said, "Well, I got good news and I've got bad news. The good news is that I helped that man with his water well. The bad news is that we're getting ready to have a \$7 date."

Well, she was very gracious then as she is now. She said, "Why don't we just eat in the dining room and go for a walk?" So we did, and we ended up in an empty lecture hall in the graduate center and she said -- second time today somebody said something that changed my life -- she said, "What do you think we're going to do when we get out of school?"

Well, John, there had never been any real 'we's in any of our conversations, so I took this as a very positive omen. And I could still see enough to write a little bit then. So I jump up and I started writing on the marker board. And I said, "Well, what we're going to do... I'm going to start a company, and then I'm going to become a millionaire, and then I'm going to write a book, and then I'm going to make movies..." And I wrote down all of these outrageous things, and then the last thing on there, I wrote: "Someday I'm going to find something I care about as much as that little guy cared about his water wells, and I'm going to give somebody a million dollars," which is pretty bold for a blind guy with \$7 in his pocket.

But, John, they all came back together. I mean, just like I'd written it in a movie script -- every last one of 'em.

JE: Mmmm. So you've given somebody a million dollars?

JS: We gave a million-and-a-half to start the Stovall Center for Entrepreneurship at ORU, and then after we gave that money, the next year, I told Crystal, "That felt good," so I started looking for another thing. And I consult with a lot of corporations in America and one of them is a debt collector out of New York; they consolidate debt.

And while I was up there, I just asked them -- one of the computer guys -- I said, "Can you segregate that out? Like, a million dollars worth of medical debt?"

He said, "Yeah."

I said, "Do it."

He said, "What are you doing?"

I said, "I want to buy it."

He said, "Are you going into competition with us?"

I said, "No, I'm your consultant. Trust me."

So they gave me this list and I said, "Here's a million bucks. Write those people -- 1,184 families -- write them a letter saying their debt is forgiven. And then I said, "Before I go, though, give me 10 of their names and numbers. I want to call somebody, just to have the experience."

So, John, the first guy on my list: a truck driver from Valdosta, Georgia. I called him, I said, "Sir, you probably got a letter saying your debt has been forgiven."

He said, "I sure did."

I said, "Well, I'm the one that had them send you the letter, and I wanted to let you know that I'm thinking about you and I hope things are better in your life."

And he was thanking me, and we're talking, and then I could hear on his end of the phone that somebody came into the room where he was, and he said, "I'm on the phone right now, this is the man that paid for April's eyes."

JE: Hmmmm (In delight).

JS: I said, "Sir, what was that?"

And he said, "My wife came home and I was telling her I was talking to you."

And I said, "No, no. Tell me about April's eyes."

He said, "April's our 7-year-old little girl and she has this eye disease, and she needed 3 operations, and our insurance paid for the first one, and they paid for part of the second one, but they wouldn't do the third one until we paid off the second one. So my wife and I were working two jobs, and we were selling everything that we had, and we were in trouble, and then we got your letter, and my little girl got her last operation." And he said, "Mr. Stovall, you'll never know what it means to save somebody's eyes." He had

no idea who I was, of course, but I said, "I think I've got a little bit of an inkling, yeah."

JE: Hmmmmm (In delight).

JS: And so, you know, we just continue to do philanthropy and Crystal's now in charge of the Tulsa Ballet's capital campaign; they're raising \$16 million dollars. And I'm putting together a \$5 million dollar venture capital fund for the entrepreneur center at ORU. Yeah. You know, the most fun you'll ever have with money is giving it away.

JE: Yeah. Well, you are a gift to society. You liberally use the word gift in your books and all, but you're a gift to society and you're a gift to Voices of Oklahoma. So, thank you. This has been mesmerizing on my part. To God be the glory, great things He hath done in your life.

JS: Thank you, my friend.

JE: You bet. Thank you.

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