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WWA Reflection: Losing Sight, Making Scholarship

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Keywords

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When I began working on The Marguerite Hicks Project in May 2019 as a low-vision research assistant, I was faced with my normal obstacles: struggling to find offices, attempting to take photos for our website that often turned out blurry. Now, almost two years later, I realize those were small hurdles compared to the challenges I would face during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project, led by co-principal investigators Megan Peiser and Emily Spunaugle, aims to understand the provenance of Marguerite Hicks' rare book collection and Hicks herself as a collector and scholar. Hicks' collection holds over seven hundred rare books by and about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English women writers. Hicks was a visually impaired woman who lived in metro-Detroit her entire life, from 1891 to 1978. After her husband passed away in 1942, she lived with her partner, Professor Thelma James. Under James' name, Hicks bought much of her collection from various British booksellers, many during WWII, while losing her sight.

My connection with Hicks goes beyond researcher and subject; in her, I find sympathy and solace. I began losing my vision nearly six years ago and now I am close to becoming legally blind. My undergraduate degree was difficult to obtain with my condition, but nothing could have prepared me for six of my eight master's courses going virtual due to a global pandemic. Suddenly, I found myself without the scholarly support system I'd grown accustomed to. And yet, scared as I was, I found it was cathartic to pour over letters of correspondence between a blind woman and British booksellers about purchasing texts regarding femininity, disability, and queer peoples. When I began studying these theories to understand the collection further, I unearthed something in myself: a desire to learn and teach disability studies.

The social model of disability argues it is society who "others" the disabled, not our impairment. Furthermore, one of the field's top scholars, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes physical impairments are on a spectrum and can change over time. In Hicks' time, disability support was non-existent, as the Americans with Disabilities Act was not passed until 1990. Therefore, Hicks had to rely on Thelma to aid her in life and with her collection. Hicks may not have been able to read, or even see, her beloved books. Nevertheless, she kept buying books, ensuring her collection would become complete. She kept going because it was her passion, and her scholarship.

I am not legally blind, and until my vision loss progresses, I will not receive support from my government. In the pre-pandemic world, I had a wonderful academic support system, but the pandemic took that away. It left me with a

computer I barely knew how to make accessible. I knew if I wanted to succeed, I would have to adapt technology to my needs. I came to understand the powerful tool before me, and this aided the project. For example, after teaching myself to use e-readers, I worked to ensure the Hicks Project website (which I built from scratch) was ADA compliant. Though disability support would have helped me throughout the pandemic, learning to embrace my disability revealed a new plane where I could meet Hicks - a plane where disabled female scholars thrive.

Often, the Hicks Project team notes how I fulfill Hicks' dream. She wanted her "dear friends," as she called her books, to be loved by "students of a serious literary nature." Hicks' doctoral dissertation was never completed due to, as she states, her "failing eyesight." Forty years have elapsed since Marguerite Hicks died. Technology has advanced. Disability rights activists work tirelessly to ensure the disabled receive the same quality of life as everyone else. I hope beyond all measure that I will be able to make Hicks proud and go on to pursue doctoral work in disability studies. My work on the Hicks Project has shown me that I am uniquely qualified to pursue a career in disability studies. As a disabled scholar, I have been able to demonstrate the importance of accessibility, while also challenging the damaging misconceptions surrounding vision loss and other disabilities through my research. My low vision has taught me that disability is on a spectrum and it does not define Hicks or myself as a scholar; our scholarship is just informed differently. Hicks' collection is distinct because Hicks valued her books without physically seeing them. My scholarship is unique because it is informed by my disability, which I am constantly aware of. Disability scholarship should be celebrated as it reminds us all that the world should embrace the gifts of and empower those it has marginalized.