Interview with Joshua Bryn Jungsworth, Marquette MI, April 10th 2007.
(About being a blind student at Northern Michigan University)

(Someone greets Bryn)
Joshua Bryn Jungsworth: I give them a little basilisk stare until they figure out I can't figure out who the hell they are.
Melinda Stock: How do you stare with the basilisk stare with those sunglasses?
BJ: I still look at them and don't say anything.

MS: When were you born?
BJ: I was born on July 13th 1983.

MS: Where were you born?
BJ: In the town of Carmarthen in southern Wales in the United Kingdom.

MS: Are your parents both English?
BJ: No only my mother, my dad is from Lower Michigan.

MS: When did you come to the United States?
BJ: When I was a few months old.

MS: Did you move up here in the UP?
BJ: No, we lived downstate for several years on a farm that was owned by some friends of ours and during that time my brother (Amos Lake Jungsworth) was born, who I think you've met. And then we moved to, we lived in Wisconsin for a couple years, although not to far from here, it must have been pretty close to the Michigan border because we used to go to Iron Mountain a lot. We lived in an A-frame for two or three years, and then we moved here in the spring of 1988. Right before I turned five.

MS: How did you become blind?
BJ: When I was still in utero (the uterus) my right eye stopped growing basically. So it's about the size of a pea sitting way back in the confines of my skull. And I wear an acrylic one over top of it. My left eye worked quite well until I was about six. But then my optic nerve on that side basically swelled up into a big lump so it stopped working over a period of several months it (the ability to see out of the eye) gradually went downwards kind of slowly. I remember because I was trying to read print, I was trying to learn how to read at that point and I suddenly couldn't do it anymore. And I had to stop learning Spanish and start learning Braille.

MS: Is there a name for what you have?
BJ: Not that I know of.

MS: Ok, how did your schooling before Northern Michigan University accommodate you?
BJ: Every way possible. I was home schooled up until once I could pretty much do whatever I wanted, however I wanted to do it. It was the greatest thing my parent ever could have done for me.
MS: Why did you decide to come to Northern Michigan University?

BJ: Because it was here, and I knew everybody at Northern to begin with. And I didn't know what else to do for myself.

MS: In what ways do you think Northern Michigan University has not been accommodating?
BJ: Oh boy, where do I begin? Everything from trying to find different places on campus, trying to find my textbooks or not which is usual to the case, to, God, it's kind of an unending list. It's a hard one to find a place to start and a place to stop. Because going here has been one continuous uphill battle from day one. And to be perfectly honest, if I had known that the battle was going continue to be uphill this much, through every semester over the past five years, I would have dropped out at least three or four years ago and saved myself a whole hell of lot of money and trouble.

MS: How long have you been coming here?
BJ: Since the fall of 2002.

MS: Now it's the winter 2007. In what ways do you think Northern Michigan University has been accommodating?
BJ: Well, they've tried. As far as I know I'm the only Braille user they've ever had to deal with. And they really have tried there best. Even though their Disabilities Services office is understaffed, under funded, underpaid, and under everything else you can imagine. But they definitely try. They get people to read tests for me, that usually works verily well. Unless there's an essay question in which case I've either got to dictate it to somebody which is ridiculous because it takes way to long and is much of a waist of time and effort with all the technology they have available now. Or I've got to bring my own printer on my back because it's the only one in town that I can link my Braille computer to. Because even though Disabilities Services is required by law to have stuff I can link to, of course they don't. Because required by law doesn't really mean anything.

MS: Northern Michigan University has their laptop initiative program, what do you think about that?
BJ: I think you just heard the sound I just made, I think it's the crock. I had an NMU laptop for a while with it's annoying squawky voice on it. And I think it spent much more time on the help desk than it ever spent on my desk even when I didn't do anything to it. I have a buddy whose way into computers who whenever he hears me snaking about them he like "Oh, well it's all human error." And I'm like, "Well how can it be human error when I haven't even touched it." Yeah, the thing was just constantly clogged, so I eventually just gave it back to NMU because it wasn't serving it's purpose.

MS: Can you explain what the machine that you have does?
BJ: It basically does all the same stuff. It's primary function is as a note taker, for taking notes in class which I use it for quite often. Although it's very much like a laptop. I put everything on there. I write my papers on there. I write them so that I can plug them into my printer and print them out, at least when my printer is working which right now it isn't. I write my journal on there. I download science fiction stories off the internet and put them on there. I go on the internet and do searches, I get my e-mail. I just got my e-mail fixed so now I can send e-mail again. I keep lists of my friends phone numbers and my teachers' phone numbers and websites

that I go to a lot and oh God, I have everything on here. I even keep lists of stuff I have to do on here and then I cross them off one by one.

MS: What is the name of that machine, what's it called?
BJ: The line of machines is called Braille Note. This one , I believe, specifically is a Braille Note DT18 classic model. At least I don't think it's the new M Power kind. Although actually, I don't know, it might be. I got the motherboard a couple years ago so it might be the new M Power kind, I'm not sure if that's the one I have or not. They keep updating it and I don't know all the names. I don't get the fancy magazines, they don't have them in Braille.

MS: What has been your worst class at Northern Michigan University and why?
BJ: That's gotta be the French 201 that I took twice, I think, and failed it both times. And the reason why that was, I took French 101 and 102 with Jean Lui Dasie and passed both of them, got As in both of those because I was speaking. I couldn't do any of the reading and writing cause the textbook wasn't available in Braille. So, yeah, I couldn't do any of the reading and writing stuff. And also my Braille computer doesn't speak French, so if I started writing French into it, it wouldn't know what to do. But, then for some reason, Dasie doesn't teach the two hundred level French classes. I don't understand why because he's French, and the person who does teach them is not, and she's not nearly as cool as him. But I remember when they changed teachers on me, and the emphasis was all on this reading and writing. And so I just failed spectacularly. I took it again the following semester. By which time I actually did manage to get the textbook in Braille. I think that's the only time I've actually been able to get a textbook in Braille. Then I opened it and I realized that it was almost complete gibberish because French and English Braille are very different. The same alphabet, but French has maybe four or five different accents, and symbols that they use to put accents on different letters, they have several different kinds of them. In Braille there's even more symbols because they use, instead of using a different symbol for each accent and just attaching that symbol to a letter, they actually have a different symbol for each letter that is accented in a different way. Like if you say you put a accent ague on the letter e, they no longer use the symbol for the letter e, they have a different symbol that is a letter e with an accent ague on it. Or if you put a different accent on that letter e it would become another completely different symbol. It's very confusing. Not only that, they have the same bunch of symbols that are used for like and, and 've, and 'ed and 'th and stuff contractions in English grade two Braille. So basically, not only is it really confusing to read but if I wrote any of it down on my Braille computer, and tried to print it to my printer, neither which read French, the printer would end up printing complete gobbilty goop. So basically I failed it again. In equally spectacular fashion. And then I was going to do a directed study equivalency French program with Dasie to get the French credit I needed, for this individually created program I was doing that had French. Then Dasie left because he had a job offer to study under one of the top linguists in his field and went to some university in Pennsylvania. And I had to change my major, which is why I'm now majoring in social sciences.

MS: What has been your best class at Northern Michigan University?
BJ: Hmm. That's a good one. The percussion classes I used to take with Dr. Strain were always good. And I'd always get an A in those no matter what. His Rhythms of the World class was good too. Any class that I've ever taken with Dian Sawder. The French classes with Dasie were fun. I've definitely had some good classes here. It's all about who is teaching them. That's the

biggest thing I've discovered. And there's a handful of teachers here that really make it worth while. Dr. Strain, Professor Dasie, Dian Sawder, Martin Ackets is a good one, Hemo Hawafi is a good one, Aura Syed is a good one.

MS: Can you tell me, all those people, what they teach?
BJ: Lets see Aura Syed teaches political science. Hemo Hawafi is the Nutrition Department I think. Dian Sawder is in the English Department so is Martin Ackets. Dr. Strain is in the Music Department. I think he is the Percussion Department. Professor Dasie was in the Modern Languages Department, but I don't think he's around anymore. Yeah, there's a bunch of good teachers who work here, that have made it a lot easier for me. Chet DeFonso is a good one, he's in the History Department. Yeah, it definitely helps to have teachers who know what I'm trying to do hear, as opposed to teachers who don't, like (Bill) Burgmann.

MS: And what are you trying to do hear?
BJ: Graduate, so that I don't have to be hear anymore.

MS: And when will you graduate?
BJ: Knock on wood loudly. In May, hopefully, in just a few more weeks.

MS: May 2007. And after graduation what do you plan on doing?
BJ: Probably locking myself in my attic with my saxophone, for quite some time. And then whenever I come out probably whenever I come out, probably going and swimming in the lake.

MS: Can you tell me about your trip to Africa?
BJ: Oh boy, yes. That was in March of 2002. It had to do with, there's a man called Ryan Edward, who I've know for several years now, through some friends that we have. And he has a business venture called Like Water. As in, it looks like water, Like Water Drum Works. You go to likewaterdrumworks.com you can find out what his zone is. And he's basically, this guy, he's from Ann Arbor. And He learned how to play the djembe drum and some other African instruments from some folks from the African nation of Guinea, a number of years ago he learned how to do this. And he's gotten good enough at it that he's turned it into a whole business. And he's got a group of people that play traditional West African djembe drum music with him. And they go around different places in Michigan, and through out the Midwest. They've done workshops here at NMU, at North star Academy which I think is in Ishpeming. I don't know. They don't make Braille maps of this area. But he's been at the Hiawatha festival and the Blitz fest and some of the other festivals I've been at. And he goes around with his group, and they play at schools and they do all this stuff. He teaches all this stuff. He gives drum lessons. They do performances. He imports drums and other instruments from Africa, and puts them together and sells them. Anyway, one of his ventures, in 2002, his newest venture was to take a group of students, maybe a dozen or so who are interested in learning to play more djembe drum over to learn from these folks that are there that he knows. And I heard about it through, he knows some folks here, out by Big Bay that I've known for a really long time. And he came up here to visit them and they told my family about this trip was planning. And so I got in on that and went there with the whole bunch of other people. And it was one of the coolest things that has ever happened to me. I pretty much just hung out and played music the whole time. And a large portion of who I am and the zonefulness that I have acquired since has been due to this.

MS: So what did you do when you were in Guinea?
BJ: Played lots of music, played lots and lots of music. And when I wasn't I was singing or listening to them playing music. Because they were even better at it then me. And I drunk a lot of really nasty gin.

MS: Do you think people treat you differently because you're blind?
BJ: No doubt about it.

MS: In what ways?
BJ: Well, it kind of depends on the people. Little kids are often, I'm not sure if it's that they're scared of me, or if they just don't notice me at all because I don't move fast enough, and I just turn into part of the background. I think I do that a lot, for a lot of people. A lot of people think I can't do stuff. A lot of people just have no idea on what a blind person can and can't do, so a lot of them think I'm mentally disabled as well as physically. And it makes it really hard to get a girlfriend. That's about the long end short of it.

MS: Was there any difference between they way people treated you in the United States and the way they treated you in Africa?
BJ: I think in Africa they didn't know quite what to do with me. It took them a while for them to figure it out. For the first couple of days I was there, I think they thought I would break, at all kinds of random moments. But then they saw one of my friends, who was another UP person who I went over there with. It was this girl named Kim. It was funny, all the Africans thought that she was my little sister even though she's like a foot and a half taller than me, and probably weighs thirty pounds more than I do. It just kind of stuck, and we've sort of been siblings ever since then. We were kind of watching each other's backs. And then after the Africans saw her pick me up and toss me in the back of the truck, then I think they realized that I was not made of glass. And so then they just kind of treated me like anybody else. Because I'm so little, and a lot of them are so huge it was funny because they'd want to pick me up and carry me around all the time. Like if, one time we were all walking to the Niger River to go swimming so we all had our swimsuits on and we were all bare foot. And we got to like a big log jam in the trail, with a bunch of logs and pokey grass and stuff. And the one African guy, my friend Jimmy, who I was walking with, he just picked me up and put me on his shoulders like a little kid and carried me over whatever it was and set me down on the other side. They use to do that a lot. And then Kim used to mess with me. She use to pretend to run me into trees and stuff. And then all the Africans would get really pissed. There was this one African girl called Fatu, who lived just down the road from where we were staying at. She was about my age, and I think she had a crush on me. And she kept bringing me mangos every day. And she was all about these mangos. And she'd keep bringing me more and more mangos every day until the last day I was there she brought me this gigantic bucket of them. Even though I would never be able to eat all of them before I left, so I gave them to my drum teacher's family, I think. But I remember one time, me and Kim and this girl were walking along. Kim pretended to walk me into a tree, and Fatu got so mad, and started going off in Susu, her native language, she didn't speak any English. And she just started going off, I imagine she was just ripping Kim a new one, in whatever language she was going off in. But I couldn't tell since I didn't speak it. I could tell if it was French or Susu

cause she was so mad, she was starting to slur her words and go into both of them at once. That was crazy.

MS: Can you explain how you get to classes at NMU?
BJ: Well, usually one of my roommates or my friend Steve will drive me and then show me where the room to the classroom is and I walk in the door and I sit down in a chair. Or if I'm on campus and have to find my way to another class, it's usually a bit more complicated. I basically have to walk out the classroom door. Start off in some random direction and hope that someone asks me where I need to go at some point and I can be like, "I'm looking for such and such a place." Cause I really have no idea.

MS: So you never ask for directions, you just hope that someone will ask you?
BJ: Usually someone will beat me to it. If I wander around for ages and nobody asks me where I need to go, and I can't figure it out, then maybe I'll ask somebody for directions

BJ: I wonder if anyone will ever have to read this for doing research in the archives like I've been doing, with these interviews with these World War II vets. I think this is part of the same collection actually. The Northern Michigan University Oral History Collection?
MS: Yep.
BJ: That's the same thing I've been using a primary source for my paper. Except that it's all interviews with these really old World War II guys. That's funny. I wonder if anyone will ever put me into a paper. That would be cool

MS: So what paper is this that you're doing?
BJ: The one for Burgmann's class (HS 200, Historical Thinking and Writing), about World War II guys.

MS: And how did you decide to do the World War II guys?
BJ: Because the oral history collection was about the only thing in the archives that I could use and the World War II guys were about the only part of that collection that I was interested in. Basically.

MS: So do you feel that you are able to take care of yourself, like can you cook for yourself and stuff?
BJ: I could if I knew how.

MS: Do you know the way out of the house that you live in?
BJ: I live there.
MS: So yeah.
BJ: Yeah
MS: Did it take long to adapt to it?
BJ: No. Not when you're living there. By contrast I've been coming to this campus for five years and I still can't find a God damned thing anywhere.

MS: Wait, you lived on campus at one point, didn't you?

BJ: For several years. This campus was designed by a drunk idiot though, so trying to find anything around here, especially when you can't see, and none of the sidewalks are straight.

MS: So what was your experience living in the dorms like? What dorm did you live in?
BJ: Spalding. I lived on the first floor of Spalding Hall. I lived in the Stay Tooned house. There were cartoon characters painted all over the walls. And I believe the door number of my room was coming out of Pink Panther's saxophone. Which I always thought was cool. It was even funnier a couple years later, when I actually started playing the saxophone myself. I wasn't living in the dorms at that point.

MS: So what were you doing, how was living in the dorms?
BJ: Well, we live in a little cement cubicle. Luckily I didn't have a roommate, because then he would have had to live in that cement cubicle too. And then we'd go eat in the cafeteria. I did that a lot, which was good, because there was food, and it was free, and there was lots of it. So I wasn't hungry very much, that was nice. I didn't know anybody in my hall. Everybody I knew lived in Gant. Which is the next one (hall) over. I had a ton of friends who I knew before I started college at the same time as me, who then introduce me to a whole bunch of other people who also lived in Gant who were already living there, or just arrived or whatnot. And a lot of whom I'm still friends with. Although none of them live in the dorms anymore.

MS: So could you find your way around the dorms pretty easily?
BJ: I could usually find the cafeteria and I could find Gant Hall and I could find my mail box. That's about it.
MS: Could you find your way from the dorms to the academic mall and your classes?
BJ: That depends, I could usually find the library, although I didn't have any classes there. I could usually find West Science or Jamrich, although finding the correct room was usually a bit hard because all the rooms are the same and all the corridors are the same and everything's the same.

MS: Is it hard for you to memorize what some of your stuff looks like?
BJ: I don't know what it looks like, I've never seen any of it.
MS: When you're describing some of it, you know what it is.
BJ: Of course I know what it is, I'm probably holding the freaking thing.
MS: But how do you remember what color it is, and everything, and like the members of people in pictures and stuff, so you just memorize that?
BJ: I memorize lots of stuff.
MS: Do you think that you being blind has effected your family in anyway?
BJ: Well, they know a lot more about blind people now.
MS: Can they do the same activities that they would otherwise?
BJ: I would imagine so, I can't see why not, especially since I don't live with them anymore. Although I think the person who was most effected by me being blind was probably this girl that I dated four years ago, who is now going on to be a visual rehabilitation counselor, at Eastern Michigan University in Traverse City.
MS: You're no longer together?
BJ: She had to go way downstate to go to this college place.
MS: What was her name?

BJ: Erin
MS: Do you know her last name?
BJ: Erin Canalous. I just got a message from her earlier today actually.
MS: Is the only reason why you're not together because she had to go downstate?
BJ: Probably, actually.
MS: So was she studying to be that (a visual rehabilitation counselor) before she met you?
BJ: No, she was just starting to go to NMU, and she hadn't quite figured out what she wanted to do yet. And then we went out for like a summer, and then she went off somewhere and then a while and then later she called me and told me that, that was what she was going to do. And so now she has to learn Braille and stuff. And she keeps calling me up and asking me all sorts of questions. It's fun.

MS: Well, is there anything you'd like to add?
BJ: Well, just that I pity the next poor blind sucker that tries to go to NMU, that's for sure. Unless they (NMU) seriously gets there act together, which I seriously doubt they're going to. Because I've been trying to convince them to do it for years and years and years. And they've never listened to me. I remember several years ago I went to the dean of students actually. I went to see him with the purpose of asking him I could make the Disabilities Services office completely Braille compatible. Which even if I couldn't do it myself, I know the folks who could and I know where to get a hold of them and how to get the Disabilities Services people in contact with the sort of people who could tell them what they need, where they can get it, and how to use it once they have it. Basically the Dean laughed in my face, and told me that in a couple of years they wouldn't be using paper for anything. So then that was the end of that. I think it was to sensible, and he laughed at me. And then I kind of stopped pursuing it and I think that's the biggest thing I learned in college. Is no matter how awesomely cool you think what you're doing it, and how great you think you are the system really doesn't give a damn. They're not here for you, they're here to make money off of you.
MS: Well, thank you for letting me interview you.

Bryn Jungsworth 23 April 2007
Hanging out in his room