

## Grace Wembolua - A Winning Mindset: Lessons From The Paralympics Transcript

**Grace Wembolua:** At first (with the fire) I got really scared and that's when I went to hide. But when the flames started coming towards me, I was like 'oh my God, I'm scared and I want to go and see my mum'. So I literally just walked into the flames. And that's when I started getting burned. I woke up three months after in hospital and my dad was sitting next to me, dressed as a surgeon. He was the only person who was allowed to visit me because I was very fragile and I asked him right away 'where is mum?' He started crying. 'Where's Timothy?' who is my little brother. And he cried also. And that's basically how I knew that they were gone. I remember feeling my legs very heavy and I didn't understand what was going on. I tried to lift them up but they were very, very short. So I asked him 'what's going on with my legs, I can feel them very heavy, why do I not have my feet?' And he explained to me that I have a new body now and I would have to learn to live with this new body. So it was very hard to process this as a four-year-old.

**Andy Stevenson:** Do you look back now as an adult and think about the survivor element? The fact that everybody else in that building died.

**GW:** A lot of time I wonder how I survived because I was in that fire for three hours. I remember passing out and there are parts of my body that are not burned at all. My face was completely safe, my whole left arm is and a bunch of other parts. I really wonder how did I pass out? If I was in a different position, I would have been dead. Maybe if I had been asleep, I would have died also. But I think I just had a lucky star with me that night.

**AS:** And how did your injuries change the way you interacted with other children when you were growing up?

**GW:** I'm sure you know but kids are very curious and it's a good thing, but at the time it was very tough. My accident had happened so recently so I was not ready to talk about it. Whenever I would go to the park or even to school, kids would ask me 'what happened to you?'. I was really excited to meet kids but always very, very anxious about how to explain what happened to me and how much to say. My adoptive mum just said 'say whatever you want to say. If you say that you don't want to talk about it, I'm sure they won't force you to'. And so I would just say 'I got burned'. Kids have this amazing capacity of moving on very quickly, we would then just play.

**AS:** I'm sitting here nodding my head. I was born with no hands and I have an artificial leg myself and there's a definite distinction between children, and they just accept it, but the next phase, the teenage years, can be difficult because it's an image conscious time. How was that teenage phase for you?

**GW:** Oh my God, it was definitely the most complicated period of my life and I think that's where my journey with accepting my body started. Teenagers are more judgemental and they are growing into their own bodies and minds. On the days that my legs would hurt me a little more, I would just say 'Oh I have a problem with my knee', so nobody knew. But one day they said 'okay, we have gym class and we are going to start by doing swimming' so I was like okay, I'm not going to be able to hide myself so I need to tell my friends. So I said 'I need to have an important meeting with you guys. Okay, I'm sorry but I'm missing both of my legs and I have a lot of burns on my body.' And they were just like 'okay, so?' and I was almost disappointed. I made a whole deal about this and was so nervous, and now they were just telling me it basically didn't matter, they didn't care and

if I needed any help, they would help me out. And we went to class and just had a blast together.

**AS:** It's remarkable you were able to hide it for so long from them. Do you wish you had maybe told them from the start, would life have been easier?

**GW:** Definitely!

**AS:** I'm interested to know if it was the burns you felt more self conscious about, or your prosthetic limbs? Or can you not choose?

**GW:** At first I was more conscious about my prosthetics but nowadays, it's more the burns. Because if I don't tell people I have prosthetics, they won't know. But when summer time comes, I have no choice but to see a t-shirt and people are going to see my burns. I'm more self conscious about my burns, 100%.

**AS:** There's a great article with you in Marie Claire and one of the lines that stays with me is 'you had to learn how to face the gaze of others when your body is diminished'. How does it make you feel when people stare at you?

**GW:** It makes me very uncomfortable. There are days where I'm like 'okay, I'm going to go out today and I'm going to wear a skirt or a dress, or even just a shirt'. But because I'm already in that good mood and will reveal myself to the world, I already expect looks. But on days where I'm just going to the store and doing something basic, I see people staring at me and I just want to be like everybody else. There was one time in America and as soon as I got into a store, the first person I saw was a burns survivor. And I was like wow. That's actually the first time I had met another, the only other I met was through Instagram. And he asked me if I was in pain with my scars, 'no, what about you?'. And he told me the only time he is in pain is when he looks at himself in the mirror. I never want to be in the position of people looking at me and stuff, it's something that I work on every day. It's almost as if I'm challenging myself. On days when I could stay in my comfort zone, I come back home and I just think 'it's just me, I survived.'

**AS:** This whole issue is wider than disability, isn't it. They might be stared at or mocked because they might not be seen as thin enough or wear the wrong clothes. People can be very nasty in person and social media. Why do you think it is that people do stare and mock others for the way they look?

**GW:** Because as disabled people, we are a minority. There are a lot of disabled people in the world but how many other disabled kids did you have in your classroom when you were a kid? I'm sure not many. For a lot of my friends I am their only disabled friends. And kids are more bold. I think for adults they don't really know the appropriate way to approach somebody who is disabled and for people who mock, they speak to their own insecurities. When people are insecure within themselves, to see a person different and cast aside, to see them more confident than them that they wouldn't do, it makes them act like ignorant people. But as long as you are comfortable within yourself, whatever other people feel about you will not matter. I use it to show people that different bodies exist and by going out, I can show people what a burn survivor is. So the next time they go out, they won't stare at a kid or at a teenager. Then that is a mission I have succeeded.

**AS:** I like you have this every day. When it's children I don't mind at all because they're curious. I'll hear 'mum, that man has no hands' and you get used to it. I would much rather the child asks, and sometimes the child does, and the parents get so embarrassed. But when adults stare, a nudging the person next to them or laughing about you to your face, that's the line.

**GW:** Yeah. If kids can come and ask me a question, as adults we should be able to communicate. I would rather an adult ask me 'hey, do you mind if I ask you this question?' or staring at me because that's just rude. But we lack representation in society. When I see brands like Barbie using Paralympians, or Barbies in wheelchairs or with a prosthetic limb, I think it's amazing and I hope more brands jump on that wave of inclusivity.

**AS:** How have you gone from the teenager who took a while to admit to her friends she had prosthetics to somebody who is now featured in Marie Claire magazine and is proudly showing off her body. It's hugely significant, so how have you made that transition?

**GW:** It was pretty hard and it pretty much came out of nowhere. With social media being such a big part of life as a young woman, I was like 'okay, maybe I can start sharing my journey on there'. I had some journalists asking me for interviews and from there Loreal asked me to be an ambassador and we did many interviews. And I had a platform to educate people about differences. As a little girl I always wanted to become famous or to be a star, and I never thought it possible or saw anybody looking different on TV or in magazines. When these opportunities started coming my way, I thought maybe it was my time. There is a model I look up to named Winnie Harlow, she has vitiligo and she is gorgeous. I didn't know a person who was famous or doing interviews with magazines or working with such a big brand like Loreal. I just told myself to use the opportunity to meet people, enjoy what I've been wanting to do for ages and educate people around me and spread love and positivity. It's not just about disability, it's about inclusion. There are pictures I post on Instagram that is myself in a swimsuit for the first time in years. There's females who were 50 that messaged me and told me that after their pregnancies, they never got the body back they had before and were always self conscious about it and thought they'd never be good looking enough to wear a swimsuit. But seeing me having the courage and the bravery to do it, they told me that it would be the first time this summer that they would go back to the beach with their kids. It's about empowering people. If you don't feel like you fit in society, I want to show them that in a society where you're meant to fit in, we are a rainbow of different colours and shades and bodies. I just want people to feel empowered and brave whenever they see me or my story.

**AS:** How does it make you feel when a lady gets in contact with you like that and says you're the reason she will wear a swimsuit in summer?

**GW:** I'm just an emotional wreck! I know how hard it is. It is very vulnerable for them to open up to me like that so I feel blessed. I just wish I could hug them, I'm their first cheerleader!

**AS:** Let's talk about social media as I know that's had a big impact on you. Particularly Instagram, what impact has that had on you and how you feel about your body?

**GW:** Well I think ever since I started my Instagram journey, I became much more confident. I was never that confident because I was the only one different and I never had anyone to look up to. But now that I had someone looking up to me and encouraging me, it just made me much more confident and I'm more outgoing. Before whenever I had to meet people or get into a new environment, I would think what do I need to wear, do I tell them how different I am right away? And now I don't need to wonder anymore. And I think it just makes life much easier also because it's less draining on my mental health. The more I'm vulnerable to the world, the more good is coming back to me. There are days and months I don't feel 100% and won't post. But people

understand that, they try to cheer me up and I come back stronger. So I feel that my Instagram is my diary because people know my whole life on there.

**AS:** So you still have moments where you're critical of yourself or you have those same self-conscious moments that you used to have?

**GW:** Yeah the thing is I truly think I am still afraid people are going to judge me but I'm my toughest critic. There are times I'm scared about going out with my friends and them being ashamed of me. But my half-sister, she is very, very beautiful and she is Miss Paris, she is the definition of beauty standards and she always tells me 'I am the one who should be ashamed because you've done so much in life and I haven't done so much as you'. The fact she is looking up to me, I just realise that what I do, I can hide myself for three months but it won't bring a solution. I'm still going to be Grace with two prosthetics and my burn scars. I try to be consistent with my journey so to every day make a little effort, I can't remember the last time I went out in a long sleeved shirt when it was warm. And to me that is a massive achievement. In 2016 when I competed in the Paralympics, I wasn't as comfortable as I thought I would be. So I just force myself and I go with the quote 'fake it til you make it'. The more people see you confident, the more they will look up to you and treat you as if you are normal, if I can say, not pay attention to your differences.

**AS:** As we know, social media isn't always a nice place. Does that make an impact when people are nasty to you or about you on social media?

**GW:** At first it was hard for me to read some nasty comments and then I would even respond, I would spend so much time and it was draining. So I stopped and sometimes now, followers will shut them up for me and now I just block them. It's very easy to block people and it brings me such a peace of mind, now I just block them!

**AS:** I guess we're so used to the idea of social media being all about airbrushing and filters, not showing people the real you or the real life. How do you feel about that unhealthy view of reality?

**GW:** It's sad. I know how to make the difference between a picture that is very edited and Photoshopped and a picture that isn't. But I think younger people are not always able to make that difference and it makes them insecure about themselves. That's the part of social media I do not like but my advice is just follow people who inspire you. Do not follow people who make you self-conscious about yourself, because it is actually more draining on your mental health than what you can imagine. I just try to hop on the wave of body positive, try to make social media a healthier environment when it comes to filters. Even some celebrities are starting to show stretch marks and days they don't have good skin. Just accept yourself as you are.

**AS:** When it comes to your body confidence, are there techniques or strategies you use to keep that confidence high, even on days where you might be feeling a little bit low?

**GW:** It might sound crazy but on days I feel low, I try to talk to myself. I talk to myself a lot in the mirror. I've started this exercise where you have to write down 10 things that you like about yourself and out of those 10 things, try to embrace one of them or all of them during that day when you feel low. I just think it helps. And taking pictures helps me out because at first you're uncomfortable, when they look good you will feel good about yourself. Maybe wear a good outfit that makes you feel good.

**AS:** And what are the bits you especially like about yourself?

**GW:** Oh my God... I like my face a lot because people have always told me that my face tells a lot. When I'm happy, you can tell, when I'm mad you can! In general I would say I

love my scars. There are some I'm more uncomfortable with but there are some that I really love.

**AS:** That would potentially surprise and shock people. Could you explain that a little further?

**GW:** Some of my scars I love because I remember how tough and painful the surgery was, and at the time I hated the process. But now I find them like art, if I can say. Some are just shaped in a weird way or differently from others on my body and because they are different, I learn to love them and find them really cool. I truly think I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for these scars.

**AS:** And how has being a Paralympian helped you create a profile where you are in a position to help other people? Has playing in the French wheelchair basketball team changed how people view you?

**GW:** Yes, definitely. So when I first joined the national academy in 2012, we were the only disabled sport, we were surrounded by able bodied athletes. When the first game I happened I realised they'd see me vulnerable without my legs, my scars, how will they react? And after the game I was talking to one of my friends, let me go shower and put my legs on and I'll come back. And she said 'what? You don't have your legs on right now?!' and I was like, 'you were here for the whole game and you didn't notice I didn't have my prosthetics on?' People were so focused on the performance that they don't pay attention to what you are missing.

**AS:** And that's the point of the Paralympics isn't it, it's elite sport.

**GW:** Exactly. You know that sometimes as a Paralympian I don't feel valued because we are not represented in the media but when around you people just focus on the sport and are impressed and amazed, this is the power of being a Paralympian. In society we are described as disabled people, but we are actually more able than we think and what society actually thinks. That definitely helped people change the way they viewed me. Even my family, they would ask me questions about my health, 'how are you doing? Are you in pain?' and it was very caring, but I just wanted to talk about another topic. When I became a Paralympian, it became 'How's your season going?' That's an amazing feeling.

**AS:** When do you think the tipping point was where Paralympians came into the main stream a little bit more? Was there a particular moment in time?

**GW:** I think after the Paralympics in London, things changed a lot for athletes and Paralympians. They did such a great job of media coverage, you know. That's when I really started playing Paralympic sport in 2012 and people were already very receptive. In France for the 2016 Paralympics, people were hooked on it. I was living in Bordeaux where the mayor printed entire billboard where my picture was on it, and my picture was on buses and it was saying something like 'Gracy's going and we're going with her'. I'm a female, I'm black, I'm disabled. It's a lot of things people would see as a disadvantage but for a whole city to support and post big, big pictures of myself with a message of encouragement, it was mind blowing and it really changed the way people were seeing disabled sports.