

Speech topic

During my time in K-12 education and my years in college, I've had the pleasure of working with people that have played a major role in my success. I plan on sharing the strategies that I have learned from them and the experiences that I have had on my own that have enabled me to thrive as a student who is legally blind. I am confident that many of my own skills and experiences can be used by others with visual impairments wherever they may currently find themselves in their educational or professional journey.

Biography

Wallace Stuckey was born on August 12, 1999. Shortly after his birth, Wallace was diagnosed with retinopathy of prematurity, an eye condition that occurs when abnormal blood vessels grow in the retina. Blood vessels, attached to Wallace's eyes, grew in the wrong direction. This caused Wallace's retinas to partially detach when Wallace was very young. Due to these detachments, Wallace had low vision from birth. During kindergarten, Wallace's vision further decreased, meaning that he was legally blind. Wallace's current vision is 20/400 in his left eye and motion/light perception only in his right eye.

From a very early age, Wallace's parents and grandparents encouraged him to get involved in many of the same activities that his friends were enjoying. While his vision loss meant that he would engage with the world around him in different ways, it certainly wasn't a barrier that was ever going to keep him from doing what he loved. Wallace learned braille during the summer following kindergarten and continuing through his first grade year. This was an ideal time to learn braille as his fellow classmates were working on their own reading and writing skills. In addition to his braille instruction, Wallace's teacher of the visually impaired and access technology specialist worked with him during elementary school to develop crucial computer skills. These included keyboarding through memorization and navigation using a screen-reader. Wallace also started training with an orientation and mobility specialist in elementary school and honed his O&M skills through his high school years. During these O&M lessons, Wallace learned to confidently and safely navigate some of the busiest streets in his home city of Columbia South Carolina. These tools and training sessions paved the way for Wallace to succeed in the classroom. Through the use of braille materials and enlargement of print materials with the aid of a CCTV, Wallace could learn with and even work to help his classmates. He also became active with his school's outdoor exploration program. Wallace's stepmother worked with the outdoor program's leaders to educate them on how best to help Wallace succeed at activities that one might think you need good vision to do. Wallace joined in hiking, kayaking, and climbing high ropes courses and credits the skills he learned from these experiences with helping him in leadership roles he would hold in later years.

Middle school marked a time of new technology, interests, and experiences for Wallace. At the start of sixth grade, Wallace began using an iPad to complete academic work for his English, history, and science classes. Apple's Voiceover screen-reader and the ability to maneuver the iPad as close to his eyes as needed enabled him to navigate much faster than he did with a computer. After Wallace's successful use of an iPad in the classroom during sixth grade, the school began an iPad program for all students at the start of Wallace's seventh-grade year. Wallace continued to use braille in classes where having hard copies of materials were essential including algebra and French. Being able to feel the content was important in higher level math

classes as new symbols and more complex equations were being introduced. Braille was needed for his French class so that Wallace could master the spelling of words that are often spelled differently from how they sound. During Wallace's eighth-grade year, he joined the school's mock trial team. In the competitive mock trial tournaments in which the school's team took part, students assume rolls as lawyers and witnesses and must convincingly argue their side of a legal case. Wallace served as an expert witness on his school's team and was awarded best trial witness several times by the South Carolina Bar Association, the sponsor of the competition. With the help of his TVI, Wallace also worked to educate his peers and teachers on what it is like to live with a visual impairment. As part of his eighth-grade science class, Wallace, the TVI, and his science teacher designed a series of activities for his classmates to engage in to simulate a visual impairment. These included pouring water while blindfolded and throwing a ball while wearing goggles that simulated various eye conditions.

In high school, Wallace continued to deepen his involvement in extracurricular activities while refining his academic interests. He continued his involvement in mock trial and the team improved every year. They made it to the state competition for the first time during his sophomore year and made it to nationals during Wallace's senior year. Wallace was also elected to student government as class representative during his sophomore and junior years and treasurer during his senior year. In addition to his role on student government, Wallace also participated on the high school Model United Nations team and competed at regional Model UN conferences. Self-advocacy was another important objective for Wallace during his high school years. During ninth-grade, Wallace and his TVI developed an outline of the key points that he would need to share with teachers for upcoming courses. These points covered the accommodations that he makes use of to be successful in their classes. The goal of the exercise was to ensure he received the accommodations he needed while putting the faculty members at ease with his disability. Wallace's coursework also gave him the opportunity to improve his functional vision, learning how best to get the most utility out of his limited vision. He achieved this by maneuvering his iPad and CCTV to interpret increasingly complex maps and graphs. He referred to tactile, braille, versions of many of these graphics also when needed. As the end of high school approached, Wallace focused on what he was most interested in studying in college and the type of university environment that would serve him best. As his interests included US and world history, international politics, as well as his French language studies, Wallace researched some of the best undergraduate programs of international affairs.

In 2018, Wallace was accepted to the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University. While GW's urban campus in the middle of downtown Washington might appear imposing to navigate, a campus in a major city affords many unique opportunities. While Wallace often asked other students about the location of classroom buildings and frequently used Google Maps to traverse campus during the first few weeks of class, Washington's street grid layout quickly made navigating simple. The city's metro system, which includes a rail station on campus, made it easy to visit other parts of DC as well as the surrounding states of Maryland and Virginia. Coming from a very small high school, GW's larger introductory lectures were a new experience for Wallace. But the self-advocacy skills of introducing himself and informing professors about the needs to accommodate his visual impairment were key to his success. GW's Disability Support Services office was very helpful in preparing materials in accessible formats and did not hesitate to intervene in the rare cases in

which a professor was unable to make an aspect of their course accessible. Wallace relied on the skills that he had learned in middle school and high school to keep lines of communication open between professors and the support services office. To succeed, it was critical to inform both about what was working in each class and what was not.

In addition to his academic focus on the history and current events of US-European diplomatic relations, Wallace also completed a number of work experiences, mainly with the US Congress. During his time at GW, he served as a policy intern with Senator Pat Robert's of Kansas and Representative William Timmons of South Carolina. Starting in 2020 and continuing to the present, he has served as a website compliance accessibility analyst for the US House of Representatives. He tests websites of Members of Congress to make sure that they are accessible to all constituents, including those with disabilities. Following his graduation from GW in spring 2022, Wallace is focusing on starting a graduate school program focused on foreign affairs. Ultimately, he hopes to join the US diplomatic corps by being accepted to the Department of State as a foreign service officer.