Hadley Presents

Back in the Kitchen After Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss getting back into the kitchen after vision loss, and our guest is Chef Regina Mitchell. Welcome to the show, Regina. So glad to have you.

Regina Mitchell: It's indeed a pleasure to be here.

Ricky Enger: I am so excited to hear your story, because I wouldn't say that I'm an amazing cook, but I learned a bit later in life. And it's something that I've discovered that is a really enjoyable thing for me. I get a lot of relaxation out of it. I get joy from feeding my family, and sometimes there's just something therapeutic about getting into the kitchen and doing a little experimenting. So, I am personally really looking forward to hearing your story, and I know that others will as well. Why don't we start out by just talking a bit about who you are and what you do?

Regina Mitchell: I am a complicated, amazing woman that has probably lived three lifetimes. I can go back in my life and each of those segments amazes me. That it's an amazing different chapter. Chapter one, I was born the oldest of four children, two teenage parents who were absolutely amazing parents. But older in life, the twins, they were 14, I was just barely 15. And the youngest twin passed away, and he passed away from spinal meningitis, which now is totally curable. And so, my mother, of course, it just devastated her. And she went into her room and she didn't come out for quite some time. And so, I stepped in as the older sister. I cooked, I cleaned, I got the kids, I even say, “Now kids ready for school.” I did their lunches, we walked to school, I helped them with their homework. The things that I didn’t know, I called both of my grandparents, my grandmas, and they guided me.

And now growing older, I went to school and I was a very lively, vibrant young girl. I had so many activities to go to, cheer camps. I was just all over the place, and football games, basketball games. They called me “Spirit.” That was my nickname on my letter jacket. And then growing another lifetime, I met my husband in 1982-83, and we just fell in love. He asked me to marry him, and I said, absolutely. We're living in Southern California, that's where I grew up. My husband was called to the ministry and we decided to move to British Columbia, Canada.

And then shortly after that I encountered a horrific situation that caused me depression, I would maybe say. And then my husband said, "Okay, what are we going to do?" And I decided to go to school. And he said, "What do you want to go to school for?" "I want to be a chef." And so, he found an amazing culinary school for me to go to. And so, I found a school in Seattle, The Seattle Culinary Art Institute. And that's where I went for two years. My husband would visit me, and we'd go back and forth from British Columbia to Seattle. I graduated top of my class. And because of my accolades, I qualified for a British fellowship. And that was an 18 month fellowship, which took me, the first trip and stay was in Scotland. And then to London. Then there, Barcelona, Spain. Then Rome, Paris, and then finished into Cannes at the Film Festival. And then back home 18 months later, where I studied under more chefs, and then eventually had my own business where I did team buildings for Fortune 500 companies.

And then from there, I had a few articles written about me, I believe that is where MGM Grand connected me. They called and asked if I was interested for a position at the MGM Grand SKYLOFTS Hotel. It's a boutique hotel, non-gaming, for what they call global nomads. High end clientele, as a butler, which is personalized service, which will include culinary skills, also wine, food knowledge, just everything that a global guest would want. And I said, absolutely. I was one of almost 4,000 applicants, they were taking 16. And so, I moved here. And so, I worked at the MGM Grand.

Ricky Enger: This is quite a story so far. And now we get to the part where it's a different chapter, I think, where you lost your vision. And as much as you're comfortable with, talk about how that happened. Was it a sudden thing? Was it happening slowly? How did that come about?

Regina Mitchell: When I moved here to Las Vegas area, I started working at the hotel and I was fine. I was very healthy. The woman that trained us actually trains the Royal staff. And so, she trained us on everything, even how to walk, how to pack, unpack, everything you can think of. And in learning how to walk, really gracefully, that's one of the things I noticed that my gait was off. Another thing I noticed was when I would put down a cup on a table to serve a guest, it wasn't silent. And you're really not supposed to make any noise when you're in their space. So, I just became aware of some of the things that was happening to me.

We took a trip to Williams, Arizona, to the Polar Express, so people know about the Polar Express, with my daughter. She was probably maybe eight years old at the time. And I noticed on that trip, I had started to get an eye pain and I just thought, "Huh. Oh, well." Because it came and it had gone. On the way back, it happened again. On that Monday, getting ready for work, I went in to get ready in the bathroom, and as I turned on the light, it felt like I was hit in the eye instantly. I literally fell to the ground and just screamed for my husband. And he came in, he took me to the doctor, and they referred me to an optometrist. We went to the optometrist; he did not understand what happened. My retina was fine, everything was fine. He gave me some eyedrops. It was just a little blurry, but he said that it would be from the eye drops.

Within the week I could not see. I started having my coworkers to read things for me, because we were very close, I didn't want my manager to know. So, I struggled for about a week and then I finally went back to the doctor and that's when they referred me to a retina specialist. And he said that there wasn't anything wrong with my retina. Went back and forth for maybe two weeks when one of the younger doctors said, "In my internship, I was at the Jules Stein Eye Research Institute at UCLA, and maybe we should refer you there because we can't help you here."

There, I saw an amazing doctor, Dr. Levinson, he is a uveitis specialist. That's when he diagnosed me with bilateral panuveitis, coupled with, after taking a gallium scan of my entire body, another disease that's called sarcoid. So, it's a very rare eye disease that you would have sarcoid in your eyes. And that in itself is bad. If you had it in your lungs, I'd be dead by now. But in my eyes, and it's a decalcification in the eye, coupled with the uveitis, which is inflammatory cells that's very active in the eyes. And so that's why I see it's very blurry as well as looking like I see through 10 screen doors.

Ricky Enger: And does that change over time? Does it stay pretty stable, or do you have days where you see a lot differently than on other days?

Regina Mitchell: I never know what I'm going to see when I wake up, it could be totally like a white out or I could have some imagery.

Ricky Enger: So, you just never know from day to day what you're going to encounter. And that in itself had to be such an adjustment. Because you're trying to figure out, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to see every day, and so how do I figure out what's next? Because I don't know what's coming next. I don't know what it's going to be like when I wake up." And of course, then you have your career, you're a classically trained chef. What were you thinking as you were going through this, where you're losing your vision, things are all over the place, and here's this thing that you've been trained to do, and now it's a major struggle, I would think? So, what were you thinking?

Regina Mitchell: Well, under my doctor's care, they did not allow me to go back to work. There I was at home and I can't see, I'm not working, so I had so many losses. It didn't take long before I sat here and looked around at my house and said, "What am I going to do now?" And immediately I said, "I'm going to go to school." I made a promise to my husband years ago that I would get my bachelor's, so why not? Why not get it now? I can't go to work, I have time, and I'm going to do it.

And I applied here at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, UNLV, and I got into their biological sciences program. Little did I know my vision was going to be a little problem. And I like to say that my vision, my loss of sight was so sudden, I didn't have time to think about it. So, I just went into life like I still had vision. I gave it thought, but I didn't give it much thought.

I signed up for all my classes and I realized, "I can't see the board, I can't even see my teacher. I need help." And I found myself getting behind. My books were not accessible. I didn't even know what the word inaccessible meant. I didn't even really know what accessible technology meant. So, this was a whole new world for me. I had to learn, for five years of going to undergrad, with the help of amazing disability resource center. The first blind woman I ever met, that was my advocate for a disability on the campus. My teachers, they were very understanding and helped me along the way, because they saw my spirit and my tenacity to not quit. I eventually graduated and finished. But during those five years, even at home, I didn't cook very much. I was very apprehensive.

Ricky Enger: I would imagine so. This is something that you really loved, and you trained to do and used to enjoy doing. And then suddenly the way that you approached it had totally changed. So, I think at some point you must have said, "There ought to be a way I can do this. I want to cook again." And so, what happened when you started to make that decision? How did you start cooking more than a taco or a salad? And what were the people around you like when you decided that you wanted to go full throttle, because I'm sure you did. How did that all work?

Regina Mitchell: I didn't make the decision. Someone made the decision for me. I went into my disability resource advocate on the campus of UNLV into my senior year, and I went in crying profusely saying, because at the same time, I was also, not only was I a full-time student, I'm still a full-time wife, a full-time mom, and I'm a full-time patient because I'm still going to see all my doctors. Now, I began to have integrated care at UCLA because I had many critical illnesses developed. I had lupus. I developed lupus as well as chronic arthritis and rheumatoid arthritis actually coupled with my vision. And so that one of the ways that they could treat all of the symptoms was giving me a low dose of chemotherapy. And so, I was in chemotherapy monthly based on my blood work. And so, I was doing that once a month every month while I was still in school. And so, you have the same side effects, you get nauseous and dizzy and sick. Then I would have an exam or study. So, I was still going through that whole process. And that's when I finally went into my advisor and I just said, "I don't think I can do it. I think I need a break because my body... It's just a lot."

I think at that moment, wow! I realized I was blind. It took me almost four years to realize, "Hey girl, you're blind." And she said, "I have a place for you. I want you to go to the Blind Connect. It's a mobility and orientation training center. You need to have blindness skills." And I did.

Ricky Enger: And that had to be so hard to finally face that, because all the... moving forward with life, and it's wonderful that you did it. I'm sure you wouldn't change any of that, but to just continue forward, then to reach that point where you say, "I've put so much into this and yet I'm blind. I cannot face that." And then to hear, "We can help you, and there's a place for you."

Regina Mitchell: Yes. There's a place for you and there's people just like you. First of all, on the campus, there's no one that looks like me. Okay. I'm an older student, there's no one walking around blind. So, there wasn't anyone like me. Here, I found a space. I saw people that had canes and dogs, and that was struggling and had challenges, and learning on their iPhones. I'm like, "What? You mean I can actually use my iPhone again? I can actually not struggle with my work, my homework and my schoolwork. I can actually walk with a cane and get around and not feel like I'm going to fall downstairs, and I could go wherever I wanted to go, and read. And I could take in the sounds, I could hear birds, I could hear kids play. The things that I just never thought about before. It was a whole new wonderful world, a whole new community of people that embraced me and taught me. There was nothing that they wanted to hide from me, everything that they had they wanted to give to me.

I had many cheerleaders that was very supportive. I didn't have anyone saying, "Oh, Regina, you shouldn't do that?" Because they just knew me, they knew that there wasn't going to be anything that was going to stop me. And so, I had no pushback from anyone. The only pushback of course was just my safety. And maybe I was going to many places. Like, "You're on the paratransit again?" Like, "Yeah, I'm on the paratransit."

But I had great supporters. My husband, I'm an out of the box thinker, I've always been. And I like to say that he always stands by out of the box. And then of course my mother, she's just such that great, warm support, that nudge of, "That's right sweetheart, you keep going." She's just that cheerleader at the beginning and the end of the finish line.

Ricky Enger: It's incredible that you've had people who were willing to support you. And I think it shows you've been able to do quite a lot. And so, I do want to talk about just a little bit of that. What happened in the kitchen when you really started to get back into it? Were there things that actually weren't that different than you were accustomed to, you just had to get used to it again? And then were there things that were actually really hard that you really had to work at, in order to feel safe and comfortable as you're cooking?

Regina Mitchell: When I enter the kitchen, it's like that friend that you talk to every now and then, just kind of say, "Hey girl, what's up?" And she goes, "Girl, oh, it's cool." That's kind of how it was with my kitchen. I wanted to let her know that I'm back. I had to get reconnected. I went into my kitchen and I just said, "I'm just going to make an amazing meal." And of all the meals I would make, it was moqueca. I wanted to go full on Brazilian fish stew, and I just wanted to go for it. That's lots of chopping, its brilliant vibrant colors, it's using amazing ingredients. It's sautéing, it's simmering, and waiting and processing. It's a lot. So, I did. And plus, I wanted to find out how my skills were. I wanted to test my skills. And I wanted to test the accessibility of my own kitchen.

I also wanted to test how well I navigated my kitchen. And so, from that test, because as chefs and as, also as a scientist, because I did eventually graduate with a degree in psychology and neuroscience, it's all about testing, and seeing the data. So, I went in and I did it. I tested; I wrote down some things that I needed to help me to survive in my kitchen. And I did it. And I found that there was things that I was challenged in. For one, it was my knife skills. However, I found that I still had that muscle memory. But what I now needed to do was to step back a bit because I was just chop, chop, chop, chop, chop, that's what we do. We're done and it's over. But I had to find that it had to be methodical. I had to think about my cuts and I had to be careful that I didn't cut myself.

The other thing I noticed in my kitchen was measuring, especially measuring wet ingredients, liquids. Because we use a wet measure, not a dry measure, totally two different elements of measuring something. As far as cooking, it is a science. And so, I had to figure out, how can I use my dry measure to compensate for my wet measure. So, I had to test that, and it's just simply by adding two additional tablespoons would give me my one cup liquid measure. So, I had to do a lot of testing for myself to compensate for my newfound vision loss. Other things that I found was tools that I had to use in the kitchen to help me. I had to use indicator dots to help me with the microwave because the panel, the flat screen panel on the interface is just not, you can't see it.

So just putting simple indicator dots in my kitchen, on my stove, to indicate whether it was high, medium, low. So, I had to organize my kitchen and make it accessible for myself. I had to clear off all my counter space because I found that with my vision, and it's gradually decreasing, lots of stuff on my counter was too much for me, it's better for me to go and pull it out than to have it all on my counter. So, for me, I had to just clear off all of my counter space. Another thing, I had to clear out all of my spices, all of my cupboards, and put them into bins where I could just pull from like all my spices, just put it in a nice bin and then put it back in my cabinet rather than searching and trying to get way in the back of a cupboard.

And then my spice drawer, I had to pull it out as a huge spice drawer. And I had to put it all in alphabetical order, because I do have some vision and I can see it, I took a Sharpie, and I actually wrote on all of the bottles large print. Like lemon pepper, I put an LP. For garlic whatever, I put a big G. So, I had to outfit my kitchen, and that's how it happened. I had to figure out a way to make things work for me.

And then in cooking, because I can't see when something is done, now I have what I call the sounds of kitchen. Intuitive cooking now. My listening, smelling. Because when you're baking a cake, she's got to tell you, she's going to send off a scent of beautiful aroma. And food will talk, food will tell you what's happening. And I realized that, with low vision, that I depended so much, because I've always thought it as being a very visual concept. And now it's a non-visual. I'm taking it into a non-visual world and I'm going to make it work for me.

The sounds and the smells of kitchen getting in tune with those other sensory was very vital. And it became my friend. Just hearing the rumbling of eggs, the boiling, the beautiful caramelization of sugar, I know I can smell it. I can smell when my sugar is starting to go from a simple syrup into a caramelization, into caramel. I now don't have to see that. I can smell it. And so that's what happened. I had to get back in and not be fearful of my kitchen and safeguard myself with the equipment and tools like long gloves for my oven. Sometimes when my vision is really poor, I can use a food processor to chop up my ingredients, and not be too proud to use some of those aides that's going to help me. Although I'm a chef, I can say, "Look, I don't want to cut today, I'm just gonna use my food processor."

Ricky Enger: I love it. And that's all part of getting reacquainted with your kitchen and reacquainted with what you can do, right? Because as you said, you always thought, "Well, this is a visual medium," and you didn't have a reason to think of it otherwise. But it took that, I'm going in, I'm going to see what this is like. And by doing that, you were able to rediscover something that you loved, and you were able to do it and discover different aspects of it. I love as you're talking about using your other senses, because food really is a multisensory experience anyway, and so just using those things to make food, and it's a beautiful description that you give. So, I love that.

So not only are you cooking for yourself and your family, you are looking to share parts of this journey with other people. And so, I want to talk a little bit about that. I know that you do classes with other blind people, and you're also involved in something called the Holman Prize, which is three different people get ultimately chosen for some financial assistance, so $25,000, to make a project come to life. And you've created a video for the specific project that you're hoping will help the community and help other people on their journey of getting back into the kitchen. So can you talk about just the things that you're doing now with other blind and low vision people, and also what it's like being a Holman Prize candidate and what you have in mind for that.

Regina Mitchell: In cooking, I realized that the more senses I use, the richer my world is around me. What I wanted to do, because of the pandemic, everything was shut down, and shortly thereafter, some of the programming started coming about on Zoom. And so, we started resuming, say like the support groups came back on Zoom, and the technology was on Zoom. And I thought, "Well, what about the cooking? How can I make this?" And so, I did some research, and there really wasn't a model that I found that I could use. I did find a lot of discussion groups, which was, oh man, absolutely amazing. A programming of discussion groups that I tuned into, especially with Hadley, has an amazing discussion group.

Then I said, "Okay, I want to do something that is live, real time, that I can have participants watch me do it." A blind chef, and they're blind, so they can make a connection. And that I can do this. I know I can do this. And of course, some people thought, "What? Gina, that's not going to happen." And I just thought, "You just watch."

So, I did, I talked to my colleague and mentor and I said, "Hey, I think I'm going to try this." And she said, "Do it." I thought, "Well, I'm going to just do an eight week beginning course." And I was going to take it back to when I was a culinary student, everything was theory first and then you started cooking. And I thought, I will teach them theory. Basics, blindness skills in the kitchen, organizing your kitchen, safety, food safety, just those kinds of things. And then eventually I would do just a little demo of non-cooking stuff. Like we didn't even touch the oven or the stove. I just did like salads, vinaigrette, pesto sauce, things like that that they can do in a blender. And then eventually my last two classes I did real cooking and that's when they were able to see me cook and got involved and they were just excited. And then into the new year, the series then picked up and it became totally cooking, and I had a menu, and I send out recipes and it's just amazing. I have participants all over the United States now. They tune in and it's just a beautiful concept. The one thing different about this product that I present to my community is that it's not just a cooking show or cooking class, but comes with it is a blind chef, but it's descriptive cooking. So, I am actually telling you how to hold your knife, what tools to use, how to use your tools.

Everything I do is descriptive. So that that person that's sitting in that Zoom seat that has absolutely no vision should be able to follow along with me. And that's the whole thing. That's what you're not going to get on a YouTube channel, because as we know, if I go to a YouTube channel, I don't even know what they're doing. There's nothing descriptive about it. So that's what I bring to my community, is allowing them to be able to come into their kitchen, to be a friend with their kitchen, and to step in just like I had to step in with confidence, with independence, and to cook and eat amazing food. There's no reason that because we, our sight is impaired, why we can't eat amazing food and cook amazing food. There's no reason why we can't use leaks and ginger and purple potatoes and all these amazing ingredients. There's no reason why we can't make our own vanilla extract, compound butter, simple syrups and infused sugars and salts. So, I'm able to, as a professional classically trained chef, bring them into a whole new world of amazing food.

With the Holman Prize, herein lies my project. I thought here's an opportunity for me to totally give back to my community. By first of all, developing and publishing a cookbook designed by and written by a chef who is blind. I want to make it into braille, large print, and also an audible format. In that cookbook would be descriptive language. Meaning, your techniques are very descriptive. Unlike any recipe you're going to find, along with the tools that you use.

When you get a recipe, it says, "To combined gently." What does combined gently mean? What tools are you using? Well, this will say, "Using a whisk in your right hand or dominant hand, turning the bowl slightly upward, whisk until you can hear the patter against the bowl. As the egg whites are thickening, your whisk will become slower."

So, it's going to give them descriptive communication. Additionally, with that, I would like to do, with the recipes, audio descriptive five minute how-to instructive videos along with the recipes. So that way, when you're in the recipe, you can click on a link. If you have any issue in that recipe, you can click on the link and there will be a short description with me doing that same thing. And so, you'll have that instructional video. With that, a website with those videos attached, along with the YouTube channel where that class participant and blind centers across the United States could have access to in their home management and culinary programs, so that when they're teaching students in these culinary programs and their cooking classes, the basics of cooking, no matter where they are, a novice cook or someone who's in the program that has been cooking, that they can click on that video and show the students. And lastly, is that I would like to be able to present these to major food networks, to let them see that this is a need in the community so that perhaps these can air on a public channel.

Ricky Enger: I love this idea, and I know that so many others will as well. It's something I can say from experience that would be incredibly necessary. Because when you are reading recipes, they always talk about, "Do this until it turns brown," or "Do this until you see something become shinier or whatever." And so, they talk about these visual things, and I'm just thinking, "How would I know?" And so having these things described is going to be so helpful because it makes it accessible to the person who's cooking. It makes them understand this doesn't have to be visual, there are other ways to do it and here's what those ways are. So, we will have a link to the Holman Prize video that Regina has produced in the show notes. And if you want to go on YouTube and like that, it does really help tremendously as she moves, hopefully from a Holman Prize candidate to a Holman Prize finalist, and eventually winner.

If you're listening to this beyond the time of this recording. So, we're recording in March, and up through April is when things are happening with the Holman Prize. But that doesn't mean that anything Regina is doing just goes away after that whole process is done. So, do you have a place where people can find out more about things like these Zoom classes that you were initially conducting? And if you're continuing those, where can people go to find out what you're doing and just get some ideas about what it is that you're sharing and doing?

Regina Mitchell: I have an Instagram, I post almost weekly, sometimes twice a week, all my classes and recipes and pictures. So, it's Regina D Mitchell.

Ricky Enger: Awesome. And we'll have the link to that Instagram in the show notes as well. Regina, it has been amazing getting your story. I just love it. And as we wrap this up, is there one final thing that you'd like to leave our listeners with that we haven't yet covered?

Regina Mitchell: There is. And I will say to my beloved community, it takes time. And we can get back in the kitchen and we can make amazing meals. But not only can we get back into the kitchen, but we can get back into our lives. We can navigate our spaces and we can show ourselves that we are amazing individuals. We can show others that we can eat and have great meals. And I just want to say that we do not have to let blindness be our characteristic, it's just not. We are more than that. So, get up, get into the kitchen and take it slow.

Ricky Enger: Thank you so much for joining us and for sharing your story and your passion. I love it.

Regina Mitchell: Thank you.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say, share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents, or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's, P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.