Merv Mathews

My name is Merv Mathews. I started work on this site on the 3rd August, 1959. I worked here in the workshop until 6th August, 1999 and then I became a part of Vision Australia coming in for pottery and for wood tuning.

I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa when I was about ten year old. I was suffering from night blindness. I managed to get through my schooling okay but a few years down the track, I got colour blindness. I managed to work in outside industries until I was twenty-four, then I had four years in a saw mill and with the sight that I had, but going from shade into sun, it made it dangerous so I had to get out of that. They sent down here to Taringa and they taught me braille and typing and then sent me out to the workshops.

My sight gradually deteriorated. I had a chance to adjust to living as a blind person. I learnt quite a lot from people in the workshop who had been totally blind, some of them all their life, and I learnt from them how to handle different situations. In the workshop the blind people I was working with, they used to show me easier ways of doing the job after the supervisor had shown me. I used to notice the way they used to get around and it helped me to get a bit more confidence as my eyesight deteriorated. I was trained to use the long cane which helped me travelling to and from work and getting around to the shops and that sort of thing.

The wages and conditions when I first started here, we weren’t getting paid the basic wage. We had to serve a four year apprenticeship which was not very much money, but as you got more confident in the trade they guaranteed a sort of a minimum wage and if you could earn over that, that was all to your benefit, but there was quite a few who weren’t capable of meeting the……. it was fairly hard going.

Piece work… they only got paid for what they made which was very hard ..they used to have to make every move count and some of the trades were very ,very risky and as far as they had totally blind people working either side of a pitch pan which was boiling tar. They used to have to get a knot of the brush material and dip it in, wrap the string around it, I think you call it a thrum, then dip it back into the pitch, and then put it into the hole in the stock and they used to suffer a lot of burns and we were supplied two pairs of overalls a year. And they used to have pitch that’d splash all over the overalls and then as it cooled, it would just go real hard

When we moved to Coorparoo the building is designed in such a way to be a smaller area and will be easier finding your way from one lathe, to one machine to another.