

2014 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Vivian Stancil, 67

Riverside, California

Going Great Lengths

If you had told a young Vivian Stancil she would one day be swimming and competing in Senior Games, she would have laughed out loud at the notion. She was always deathly afraid of water, and could have easily quit with the first panic attack that gripped her when she finally did ease into a pool to learn how to swim in her early 50's. But she was determined to lose weight and found the strength within to follow through, and was soon slimming down 125 pounds and joining in swim meets for fun.

Over the past decade, Vivian has collected more than 100 medals in several different swimming disciplines, mostly at local and state levels. Even though the podium has been more elusive on the national stage, she has consistently qualified and competed in six National Senior Games and commands the attention of admiring swimmers and spectators alike whenever her name is announced. The reason: Vivian is blind.

The disability has not been the only challenge in her life. When Vivian was seven years old her mother died from complications during childbirth for twins. The doctors gave her father the unthinkable decision whether to save the mother or the children, and the weight of the choice left him unable to care for his family. Vivian and her four siblings became foster children. Then, at 19 and with two children of her own, a congenital disease deprived her of her sight.

Instead of feeling sorry for her hard knock life, Vivian resolved to get a college degree and became a Head Start early learning instructor. She prides herself for being the first blind teacher in the Long Beach school system, and gives thanks for her marriage of 34 years and that her own children have enjoyed normal, healthy lives.

That's not the whole story, however. Vivian didn't think she would be able to afford to make the trip to Cleveland for the 2013 National Senior Games Presented by Humana. She was surprised to find that she had been nominated and awarded one of two hardship scholarships made available from the David D. Hurford Memorial Fund endowed through the National Senior Games Association Foundation. Humbled by this selection, Vivian resolved to pay it forward. Four months after The Games, she created the [Vivian Stancil Olympian Foundation](#) with a mission to assist seniors and at risk youth to participate in sports and fitness. She's already received enough support to start awarding grants. As our conversation amply demonstrates, Vivian may not have sight but she does possess great vision and the perseverance to continue to realize her Personal Best.

Let's start with the obvious question: How did you become blind?

I went all the way through high school and wasn't having any vision problems. When the problems started I didn't know what was going on and went to an eye doctor, and he didn't even know what it was. He thought he needed to treat me for a nerve condition. He sent me to the Jules Stein Eye Institute in Los Angeles and right away they knew it was retinitis pigmentosis.



Photo: Cathy Wilson

It was really hard on me because I was 19 and had two children at the time. They also told me that it would likely be passed down to my daughter or her children. She's in her 40's and hasn't had any yet. Thank God it didn't happen to her. They said there was no chance it would affect my son and he has normal children. When I went to South Africa on a mission trip in 2000 I found the people related to me very well because there is a lot of that condition over there.

Vivian Stancil Personal Best Profile

We hear you had a difficult childhood before this happened, too.

I lost my mother at the age of 7. My father was in the military overseas. I remember riding in a taxi with my mom going to the hospital but had no idea she was having twins. My father was called back home and had to make a choice. The doctors told him either the twins or she had to die because of heart complications. He chose for my mom to die. That was devastating because I was very close to my mom. I loved my mom.

What a terrible choice to have to make!

Yes, terrible for any man to have to make. So after my mom died, my grandmother wanted to keep all five of us to prevent us from being split up and sent to foster homes. She knew no one would want to take on five kids. But at that time, California did not allow single women to do that. She went back to Richmond, Virginia and was very heartbroken. We all got split up. Two of my brothers and I were taken by a lady but she didn't like the boys and called the social workers to take them back.

Couldn't your father take care of you?

After mom died, he started drinking. I also understand there were some words between my grandmother and him. Then he caught tuberculosis and went into the VA hospital. We were separated from him until we got grown. I never knew anyone from his side of the family.

Wow. What a way to enter adulthood.

I can't tell you I ever had a real child's life. I didn't have much chance to play kick ball or softball and such. I think that's why I do a lot of playing around now and love swimming so much.

But I moved on. I went to L.A. Harbor College for an associate degree, then got my B.A. in education from Southwest College. I also worked on a master's at Cal State Long Beach. After some consulting work I became a Head Start early learning kindergarten teacher and did that until 1996. I was the first blind teacher in the Long Beach school system.

It's amazing to imagine how you managed classes of young children.

My kids were different because they were part of a special program for drug babies. I think because I was blind they were very protective of me. They educated me to some things. I wasn't street smart and had never taken a drug in my life. I used to have share days and this one child brought in something that I thought was powdered sugar. It was two ounces of cocaine and I had to call the police. Another time a girl brought in a bunch of counterfeit money her sister gave her. That was when I said I need to leave and I retired at 49. Really, it was fulfilling though. The paperwork was harder than anything else. And teachers still call me for advice on certain children like this.

So you retired and found yourself with time on your hands. Is that when you started swimming?

What happened is I had gained weight and was 300 pounds. I found out I had a heart murmur and my doctor said, "Vivian, if you don't lose the weight you won't see your 60th birthday." I knew I had to start exercising. One of my friends suggested I run in the L.A. Marathon. I tried it but I was too fat, it was too hard on my knees.

Another friend suggested swimming. I always loved the sound of running water, but I was terrified because I did not know how to swim. But I was not going to give into fear and tried it. When I started swim lessons I clung onto the pool edge for dear life. I was crying and could not breathe. My coach Bob Hirschhorn yelled, "Vivian! Get off the wall! You're not going to learn how to swim that way." I got so mad, and I wanted to leave and get on with my business. But at the

same time I was still fat and wanted to lose the weight. Then, my heart told me God has not given me a spirit of fear but the power of love and a sound mind. I said "Lord, help me get over this fear" and somehow I did. I've been loving it ever since. And I've lost a lot of weight and my heart is fine now. My coach was tough but he was also an inspiration to follow through.

How did you get into competitive swimming?

My parks and recs coach sent me to Long Beach State College where I worked with my masters swimming coach. He worked with me very well. At first I was swimming with my head kept out of the water. And there's a certain way you have to take your strokes and breathe, you know. It took six weeks until I caught onto it.

My first competition was at the Long Beach Olympic Pool, and then I went to Pasadena for the state competition. Somebody there told me I should go to the Nationals. I did, and I can tell you that I loved it. I can remember everything about my first trip, and I remember every state that I've been to since. I remember when I went to Pittsburgh in 2005 I got lost and couldn't find the front door to the swimming venue. I wanted to get into the water so bad I climbed through a window and fell in. And I made it to the pool and had the best time of my life! (Laughs)

Well, that brings up a question that you probably hear a lot: How do you know when you are getting to the wall to make your turns?

It is a question I am always asked. First of all, any meet I go to I have to get there early and try out the pool and get a feel for it. They're not all the same. I count my strokes, and also the lane lines usually make a noise near the ends.

Have you ever lost count during a competition?

Oh yes. Matter of fact, I was in a competition in Palm Desert and thought I was in another pool and I turned around too soon. I heard all these people yelling "No! No! No!" so I turned back around real quick. The judges later told me they thought I was putting on some kind of show for them. That was the funniest time! (Laughs heartily)



Photo: Claire Eggers/Brooks Institute

Sounds like you always have a good time.

I do enjoy myself. I really feel like the people in the National Senior Games are family of mine. Even if you don't win, they are all rooting for you all of the time. Even though I can't see their eyes I know they support me and I feel very close to them. We are all there for a reason, to be active and enjoying life. At the Nationals I always get a bunch of ladies to go with me to the Celebration of Athletes and we cheer and have the best time.

We hear you are a pretty ferocious advocate and recruiter to get others involved too.

There are about 30 senior centers in and around Riverside. Every time there's senior games I put flyers around. I always ask people about getting into this. I don't accept it when people say they "can't" do it. You don't use the word around me. I just tell people "give it a try." If you don't want to go national, you can do it at the local level.

When people see me now, I want them to see my handicap and say if she can do it, then perhaps I can do it too. You should never let life's little challenges stop you from being all you can be.

Last year you were a recipient of one of the two NSGA Hurford scholarships awarded before each National Senior Games that helps cover expenses for athletes with financial hardship. Now we hear you have started your own foundation to help others?

Yes. I wouldn't have been able to go last year without the help, and I was very touched by that. I was appreciative and cried for a couple of days. And there are many others of all ages who cannot afford to do things like this, even locally.

The Senior Games helped me, and I want to pass it on and help others. That's a big part of the reason I started the Vivian Stancil Olympian Foundation last year. I would like to be a lifeline to help people in my region, both seniors and youths, to pursue athletics. There was a woman who came to our office last week to ask me how she could learn to swim. She couldn't afford lessons so we gave her a scholarship for lessons. I'm so grateful to all the people who have come forth and backed me on this.

It's great that you want to "pay it forward." You already have an office?

We share an office with another organization called CIONO. It's a prayer ministry. We collaborate with the city of Riverside and give out food, new clothes and toys to people needing emergency care. I started it with five other women and it's been going for 16 years now. Once I retired from the Long Beach School District, I said to myself, "What am I gonna do with my life now that I'm out here?" We decided to reach out and help with the community. We have nonprofit status and solicit help from companies and individuals.

You were also one of 20 senior athletes whose essays earned them assistance with entry fees to their state Senior Games in a contest Post Shredded Wheat conducted with NSGA this year.

Oh yeah! I was laying in bed listening to KFWB radio and I heard this announcement about a contest and I heard "National Senior Games" and I got so excited. I wanted to tell my husband Turner about giving it a try but I knew not to bother him then. "It's one o'clock in the morning-here she goes again." (Laughs) The next day I entered and it was such a surprise when these two nice ladies called and told me I won.



Well, Post made those selections so it's great that they think you are special too. It's really impressive what you have been able to accomplish, even if you were not a blind person.

People look at me and see a blind person. They wonder what is it that a blind person can do? You're supposed to sit at home and listen to TV and have other people wait on you. Well, I'm not like that. If you can show me how to do it, I can do it. I'm a good house cleaner, I'm a good cook, and I love to entertain. My friends all know how particular I am about how things are set up.

Sometimes people want to limit me because I have a disability. I'm just different, that all. I've always liked to give a helping hand more than being helped. So that's what I'm doing.

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