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**I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania called Greencastle. Greencastle's population was around 5,000 or so. My mom and dad had both grown up in that area. My parents thought they would never have children, because after having tried several years to have children, my mom was told that her uterus was tilted and this would cause difficulty in conceiving children. However, when she was 30-years-old she became pregnant with my older brother. Then, when she was 32 she became pregnant again with me.**

**When I was about 3 months old, my parents noticed that I didn't seem to focus my eyes on toys or follow anything with my eyes. They took me to their pediatrician who told them to take me to the Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia. There, 5 different doctors examined my eyes. One out of the five doctors felt I had some vision, while the other four doctors told my parents I was totally blind. My parents, of course, pursued the doctor who told them I had some vision. When I got a little older he ran more tests, which did conclude that I had some vision. Eventually, after a lot of testing this doctor diagnosed me with undeveloped retinas. He said my retinas were never fully developed at birth. Today, they call this Leber's Congenital Amaurosis (LCA). This is an inherited eye disease that appears at birth, or in the first few months after birth. The characteristics of this eye disease are nystagmus, sluggish or no pupillary responses, and in my case, no peripheral vision at all. LCA is an eye**

**disease thought to be caused by abnormal development of photoreceptor cells.**

**Nowadays, genetic tests and research are currently being performed at the University of Iowa Carver Lab by Drs. Edwin Stone and Val Sheffield. Dr. Sue Rowland at the University of Florida has recently restored sight in an avian model using gene therapy. I am one of the participants in Dr. Stone's research. Eventually, we are hoping that my own skin cells will be able to be transplanted into my retina, which may restore some of the vision I've lost.**

**One of the earliest things I remember, is when I was a young child, about 3-years-old, my mom used a beach ball to teach me colors. The colors on the beach ball were bright and vivid. Because they were so vivid, I could see them quite well. Now, I don't have color perception any longer, but I know what the various colors look like in my mind.**

**I started school at age 6. Back then you didn't go to pre-school or kindergarten, so I started out in first grade. I don't know what preparations went into sending me to school, but my parents had me start school in regular public elementary school. I can still remember that experience quite well. I remember sitting in class and the teacher gave everyone worksheets with circles and squares. I don't remember what we were supposed to do, but I remember I couldn't see the objects on the paper at all. It didn't help matters that the lights in the classroom were not on. I don't know why this was, but I do remember the classroom lights weren't on for some reason. I think I was only in that regular first grade class about a week or so, and then I was taken out. My**

**memory is vague about the timing of everything those first few years, but the next thing they did was place me in a special education class of some sort.**

**I don't know when, but some time during these first couple of years my parents went to Philadelphia to visit the Overbrook School for the Blind. They never told me in detail what bothered them, but they did say that the school reminded them of a zoo and they would not put me in a place like that. I guess they saw kids rocking, and jumping up and down, and in their words, "acting too strange." And they didn't want me growing up learning to be like that. What is funny to me is I remember doing those very things as a child. I used to love to rock a lot, and jump up and down in place, and I would put my fingers in my eyes. Somewhere along the line my folks must have stopped me from doing these things, because as I got older I didn't do them anymore. But I remember rocking, jumping up and down, and placing my fingers in my eyes a lot as a child.**

**I don't remember much about the special education class, except that the first day I was there a little boy exposed himself to me. I can't believe that was my first experience in that class, but it was. He was real friendly to me and talked to me a lot when I came into the class that first day, and part of his friendliness was exposing himself to me right there in class with all the other students and the teachers around. If I remember correctly, this class was made up of kids who had emotional or learning problems. I don't remember how long I was in that class. Obviously, that wasn't the place for me, so the next thing they did was to place me in a class of disabled students. I really liked this**

**class and made some good friends there. There were no other blind kids there, which I remember made me still feel kind of different from the other kids. But, I felt a little more at home there because all of us had some sort of disability. I sat next to a girl, who even as a young child, I felt so sorry for. She was in this stand type thing where she was standing all day. She had braces on her legs and seemed to be in a lot of pain. There was a young boy who had muscular dystrophy, and he knew he didn't have long to live and would even talk about it. Another boy had Cerebral Palsy, and I had a huge crush on him. I did learn more there than in the other class. There was a teacher who came about once a week and worked with me using large print flash cards and large print worksheets. I think I was in this class for about 2 years, but I'm not sure.**

**Next, I was placed back into regular public school in the third grade. I made a few friends in my class that year, but the teacher seemed so cold. And I remember feeling quite uncomfortable with her. One of the things that stand out about that year of school is that, I remember reading the Dick and Jane books for reading class. I learned to read pretty well that year, in spite of the teacher making me feel uncomfortable. I don't remember how she dealt with my blindness, but I believe she treated me just like all the other kids.**

**I hated recess! While all the other kids looked forward to the recess bell, I dreaded it, because during recess I either was totally alone on the playground, or else the other kids were teasing me. One of the favorite games the kids used to like to play with me was to come up behind me and throw**

**their hands over my eyes and say, “Who is this?” “Bet you can’t guess who this is.” One day one of the boys was teasing me so badly that I finally lost it and I grabbed him and pushed him to the ground and sat on him, and wouldn’t let him up. I never usually got in fights, but this kid kept taunting me at recess one day after another and I was tired of it. So, I decided it was time to show him. I used to beg the teachers to let me stay in for recess, but they never would let me. I was probably the only kid who loved rainy days, because on rainy days we didn’t go out for recess and could stay inside and play with toys and games. I always found a toy to play with that I could entertain myself with, if no one else played with me. And I always preferred this to recess outdoors, where I was either all alone on the playground, or trying to play games with the other kids that I couldn’t play well, or being taunted. I think I actually used to pray it would rain for recess time almost every day.**

**I remained in public school for my fourth grade year. I remember that my fourth grade teacher was really sweet and kind to me. That year I remember doing a lot of reading in class. I was able to get large print books for reading and I really loved sitting in class and reading. That was the year we learned cursive writing. I could see well enough to see the large, dark cursive letters on the cards they gave us.**

**Something was happening to me physically though, during that year, because I remember I felt so much older and more mature than the other kids I was with in fourth grade. I didn’t realize it, but I was probably feeling older and more mature, because by this time I should have been in the sixth grade, instead of fourth grade. Because of all of the trying**

**to figure out where to place me for the first few years of school, I ended up being two years behind where I should have been. Obviously, my fourth grade teacher noticed my struggles as well, because I remember she talked with my parents and me about this. The following summer after my fourth grade year it was decided that I would take the fifth grade curriculum during my summer vacation, and then go into the sixth grade the following school year. A special education teacher from the agency for the blind came and worked with me that summer. I remember using large print books to do my Math, history and other classes. I must have done okay, because that following school year I started the sixth grade.**

**Another rather traumatic thing that happened to me during my fourth grade year was that my folks decided to take me to a place called The Institute of Human Potential. My mother's brother and his wife had a son who was, what they called back then, mentally retarded. My aunt and uncle always said he was diagnosed at about a four-year-old child's level of functioning. They somehow learned about this Institute of Human Potential, and took their son there for treatment. As I remember, the philosophy of this place was that if a person started over from infancy, the brain would change and the person would develop like he or she should have. Being that my mother was always on the look-out for some cure for my blindness, she and my dad took me to this place in hopes that, although they mainly dealt with retardation, that their treatment might work for me, since my retinas were undeveloped. They talked with the people at the institute and, I guess, they felt their program could be of benefit to me. Or maybe they just wanted the money that**

**my parents were willing to pay for this supposed cure for my blindness. For a week my parents had to sit through lectures about evolution, which to this day I find quite surreal, because my parents were very rigid, conservative Christians. And for them to sit through lectures about evolution, later on in my life it occurred to me how desperate my mom was to find a cure for my blindness.**

**The institute also showed my parents various exercises they had to do with me in order to help my retinas, or that part of my brain, I'm not sure which, to develop. The exercises were horrid to me, and I hated every minute of them. I had to do two or three sessions of exercises a day. During these sessions, I would have to hang from a ladder by my hands for several minutes, breathe into a plastic bag for several minutes, and crawl on the floor like a baby for several minutes. Along with doing my fifth grade work during the summer between fifth and sixth grade, I also had to do this horrid program of exercises.**

**During my sixth grade year of school, my parents wanted to make sure I stuck to this program, so they even somehow talked the school into having me take what the school called adaptive gym, so that I could do these exercises. Several times a week, the gym teacher would have me come to a room where they placed mats on the floor for me to crawl on. He had to time me for so many minutes of crawling back and forth on the mat. Then he had to time me while I hung from a ladder by my hands. He also incorporated other gymnastic activities into those sessions that were more fun, like, the trampoline and doing things with the gymnastic rings, which I loved. I always felt so**

**humiliated the first part of my gym class when I had to do the crawling like a baby and hanging.**

**Finally, some time during my sixth grade year I rebelled at having to do the institute's exercises, and I hid in the bathroom or somewhere when it was time for me to go to adaptive gym. I also begged my sixth grade teacher to please not make me go. I don't know what happened behind the scenes between my folks and the school, but out of the blue, I stopped having to do the exercises at school. And after refusing to do them any more at home, it stopped there also. To this day, I don't know if it was just my refusal to do the exercises anymore, or what exactly happened, but my parents never really told me why they quit making me do the exercises. It must have been because I put up such a fight about having to do them.**

**One of the things that stands out to me about my sixth grade year is that I remember one evening right before school was to start. I was sitting in the bath tub and I heard my mom talking on the phone. As I listened to my mom's side of the conversation, I realized that it must be my sixth grade teacher. And she was obviously petrified about having a blind student in her class, because I heard my mom talking to her about things she could do in class that would work for me. From what my mom was saying on the phone, I knew that the teacher was obviously quite concerned about having me in her class. The really wonderful thing was that, later on, that same teacher told me and my parents that I was one of the best and easiest students she ever taught.**

**In school I was shy and quiet and, generally, very cooperative with my teachers, because I did want to prove myself to them and please them. As a young child I understood that I was a bit different from the other kids, and that my teachers needed to do more for me than for the other kids, so I tried to work hard for them and please them.**

**I did get angry, though, when I felt teachers expected me to be able to do things I couldn't do. For example, one time in third grade I wasn't able to read something in our reader and the teacher became upset and frustrated with me. I felt so angry that she didn't understand that I honestly didn't recognize the words she wanted me to read. I said something back to her, which got me in trouble. Another time that I felt so angry at a teacher for not understanding me, was in high school in Social Studies class. My folks had read the wrong chapter to me, yet the teacher was going to make me take the test on the chapter I should have read. I was livid, because I felt it wasn't my fault that my parents had read the wrong chapter to me. And when I tried explaining this to the teacher he said that was no excuse and I still had to take the test. I knew I would flunk. I said something nasty back to the teacher, and he even left the room for a few minutes. I don't know why he did that. The other kids were totally silent. They couldn't believe that shy me had said what I said to him. When he came back into the room I threw a pen at him. I can't explain these episodes of such anger, but it was always when I felt I was being unjustly accused or misunderstood about something. Later on in my life this anger turned into depression.**

**Middle school was a real nightmare for me. I felt like I didn't have many friends, and also began to feel more awkward and shy about my blindness. I did have a few close girlfriends who really meant a lot to me, but I felt the majority of the girls in my class were stuck up and snippy towards me. The boys had nothing to do with me at all. The school did allow me to leave my classes a few minutes earlier than the other kids, so that I could navigate the halls easier. I would leave class a few minutes before the bell rang for class to let out, and would get to my next class and wait outside until the bell rang. Before the school allowed me to do this, I had a difficult time getting around in the crowded hallways. Often times, when I was trying to make my way through the crowded halls, kids would put their feet out and try and trip me, or throw their books down on the floor where I was going to be walking, so I would trip over them. There was a stairway that I always had problems seeing when I was coming to that stairway, because I have no depth perception. I would slow down when I was coming near the stairs and some kids would actually shove me. Because of these types of things, the school allowed me to leave class a little early to get to my next class. At this time, I didn't use a cane, nor did I know anything about canes at all. When I look back on it I wish I had been taught cane travel, because trying to navigate around school not having any peripheral vision was difficult. And I must have made pretty good use of the central vision I did have.**

**Middle school is difficult for kids as it is, but for a blind girl who felt like the only blind person in the universe, it was a lonely time. I had no contact with any other blind kids or adults during my growing up years. I honestly felt I was the**

**only blind person in the world sometimes. It would have meant so much to me to have known other blind kids or even other blind adults, and to have asked them how they handled dealing with all of the pressures of middle school and trying to fit in when you're the only disabled person in the school.**

**One of the worst experiences I had in my entire school life happened when I entered middle school. I hope and pray no guidance counselor would ever put a student through what I went through those two years of my middle school experience. The guidance counselor thought that it would be a great idea to have each of the girls from my class be assigned a day when they would have to be my helper for the day. He made up a schedule with all of the girls' names in my class on it, and the days they were to help me. This schedule rotated. When the schedule reached the last girl's turn, the same schedule cycle would begin all over and keep repeating until the end of the year. My relationships with the girls in my class were no different than anyone else's. There were some girls I got along well with and who I liked and was real comfortable with, and then there were the girls who didn't want anything to do with me and who for one reason or another I didn't click with. On days when I had girls for my helpers who didn't like me, or who I knew didn't want to have to help me, I would get up and get ready for school feeling so ill on those mornings.**

**I dreaded like heck going to school on the days when I would have the girls who I didn't click with for helpers. Some of them would just leave me as soon as they could, and run off. Others would complain to me all day about how they hated to have to help me instead of hanging with their**

**preferred friends. I hated having to hang with those girls and their friends who I was totally uncomfortable with, and who I knew didn't want to be with me at all. I would look forward to the days when I had my friends as helpers, but those days were always mixed in with so many more of the days with the girls who didn't want to have to help me. I must give some of those girls some credit. Even though some of them didn't want to help me or have to hang with me, they did make a real effort to do what they were supposed to do. But looking back on it now from an adult perspective, I think that was one of the stupidest things that counselor could have done to me and to them.**

**I spent many school days being ill just because of being so nervous. During middle school, my anxiety problems developed. I felt ill and nervous all the time. I constantly sweated; I constantly worried about how I was going to do this or that. I became so nervous all the time that I had a difficult time speaking to people. My mother took me to several counselors, but none of them were able to help me overcome my anxiety problems. My nerves got so bad that I felt something had to change for me as far as school and life in general.**

**It just so happened that one evening, my aunt, who was a school teacher at a private Christian school, came to visit. And we all began talking about the possibility of me attending school where she taught. One advantage would be that the school was a small school, so I wouldn't have to deal with the extreme crowded halls like I did in public school. The classes were also smaller, so the teachers would have more time to spend with me if I needed extra**

**help. My aunt set up an interview for us with the principal of the school. Even though they had never had a blind or disabled student in that school, they were very open to the idea and were more than willing to try and help me out.**

**Another experience I had during this time in my life was with some traveling faith healers who came to our town and held meetings there for a couple of weeks. Of course, my mom, always wanting to find that miracle that would cure my blindness, took me to these meetings with her. She had them pray over me at almost every meeting. Towards the end of the second week of meetings, one of the two faith healers claimed that when he was praying over me he had a vision that told him I was going to be healed of my blindness. After having said this, he prayed over me and anointed me with oil. During his prayer, I thought that when I opened my eyes I would be able to see, but when I opened my eyes and started back to my seat nothing seemed to have changed. My mom kept telling me that now I could probably see well enough to find my seat on my own, so I tried, but I couldn't tell that I was seeing any better than I had before. When this miracle didn't take place that evening, the faith healer said that maybe my healing was going to be gradual, so I should pay attention to the indications that I was seeing better during the next weeks and months. It's interesting how a person can mentally psych themselves up to think something like this is actually happening to them, because for weeks after the meetings I thought everything around me did seem a little bit clearer to me. At my next doctor's checkup, though, nothing had changed.**

**For several years after this, my mom dragged me to various faith healers and some quack doctors to try and find a miracle cure for my blindness. I suppose most mothers with disabled children would try anything they heard about, but I always felt my mom was never willing to quit, and just accept my blindness.**

**During my late teens I began to distance myself from my mother, and we argued a lot, because I felt like she couldn't accept me as I was. She kept telling me that if I just had enough faith, I would be healed. I wanted her to give up on the healing stuff and accept me as I was, but to this day she still looks for that miracle. And because of it, I haven't felt very close to my mother.**

**There were some real positive things that my mom did do for me in spite of her unwillingness to deal with my blindness. She pushed me to do things I would have been apprehensive to do, like, ride a bicycle and a moped. She figured out that if I followed her or my dad on bikes or on mopeds, that I could ride with them. When I was younger, I even used to ride a bicycle around our subdivision, because there wasn't much traffic in the subdivision that I would encounter. And if I did encounter traffic, it was people who lived there and knew me, so they would watch out for me. I have to say my mother pushed me to do all kinds of things I probably would have been much too timid to try if left to me. Although I had no peripheral vision at that time, I could see well enough to see roads and such. So, I did ride bicycle a lot as a kid.**

**I started ninth grade at the private, Christian school where my aunt taught, and for the most part, things went much**

**smoother for me. It didn't take long for me to make some close friends. None of the kids were unkind to me. The teachers all seemed more than willing to work with me. I didn't have many books in large print, but with the help of my teachers and my close friends, I somehow got through school and even managed to graduate with honors. Even though this school experience was much better for me, I still had problems with nervousness and being extremely shy. I still had to navigate the halls without the aid of a cane. Most of the time my best friend would walk in front of me, because we figured out that if I followed her I could do fairly well. She and some other friends would copy their notes for me using a felt tip pen when the teachers wrote things on the blackboards.**

**One teacher during high school who really stands out to me, and who I feel badly that I didn't appreciate at the time, was my math teacher. We couldn't get any of my math books in large print, so my math teacher would copy my homework problems with a felt tip pen. She would make copies of what she would be writing on the blackboard for me in felt tip pen; so that I could see the example problems she was talking about. I wish I could thank her for all that time and work she put into helping me get my math education. My Spanish teacher did the same thing. She would copy the Spanish vocabulary words for me in felt tip pen each week. Friends and my parents would spend hours reading my text books to me, while I took notes. My parents and friends would drill me for tests.**

**There were only a couple of things in high school that troubled me about being visually impaired. One was that I**

**couldn't participate in many of the ball games they played during gym, and I really wished I could have. Gym was one of the times when I felt most different from all the other kids. I would have loved to play basketball or volleyball, but I couldn't. The other thing that really bothered me was, while all of my friends were dating, not one boy ever asked me out. In fact, the boys didn't seem the least bit interested in me at all. I always attributed not being asked out to being blind, because I was told that I was a very pretty girl by several people. A few years ago, when my daughter saw a picture of me during high school, she couldn't believe that was me. She said I had such a great figure and was so pretty. Still, the boys never asked me out nor paid any attention to me. And this really hurt me. I had a few boys in my class who would pick on me sometimes, but no one even ever hinted that they were interested in me at all. I felt so envious of all of my girl friends who were going out on dates.**

**Toward the end of my senior year the school held a banquet for the seniors. This was the equivalent of a public school prom, so we were encouraged to bring dates just as you would to a prom. I felt hurt and miserable because I had no one to go with me. Around this same time, our church had a mother-daughter banquet and the youth group boys helped to serve the meal. Out of the blue, my mom got this idea that she was going to ask one of the youth group boys to take me to the banquet. I begged her not to say anything, but once my mom gets an idea in her head, there's no stopping her. She walked right up to this boy while he was serving a table, and asked him if he would take her daughter to her school banquet. The boy must have felt put on the spot, so he said yes. Later on that evening, after we got**

home our phone rang. I happened to answer, and it was the boy's father saying his son wouldn't be able to take me to the banquet for some reason or other. I felt so humiliated that my mother had done this in the first place. My mother has always had this, what I call, "nervy" type personality, where she just doesn't comprehend that some things you just don't do. What she did to me that night was one of those things. I never have understood how she could, and still can sometimes, humiliate me so much and not think one thing of it. This type of thing has always put a distance between her and me as well.

She constantly told me when I was young, that she was trying to do everything she could to build up my self-esteem. But it seemed to me, that most of what she put me through did nothing but diminish my self-esteem, and made me feel insecure and worthless. By taking me to one faith healer after another, and one quack doctor after another, it caused me to feel like she couldn't accept me as I was. Often times, I would hear her crying hysterically to my dad about my blindness after she thought I was in bed asleep. I knew this because I would sneak out of my bed and listen at my bedroom door to hear what she was crying to my dad about. And it was always about how hard it was for her to see me suffering with my blindness, how she just couldn't take it, and why didn't God heal me. I felt like she was so over obsessed with finding some miracle cure for my blindness. All I wanted to do at this point was to accept my blindness, and do what I had to do.

I graduated in June of 1977. Graduation was one of the highlights of my life, because I felt like I had worked hard

**and actually accomplished something that, at times, I never thought I would ever accomplish. After the graduation ceremony was over and things settled down, I began feeling apprehensive, because I didn't have any idea what I was going to do now. Sometime during that following summer, someone from the Pennsylvania Commission for the Blind came to see me to talk about options of things I could do. It was determined that since I had learned no blindness coping skills, I should probably go to a rehabilitation facility where I could learn daily living skills, mobility and other blindness coping skills. I had never used a cane nor learned Braille. The only special tools I had during school were to have large print books for some of my classes. During my fourth grade year an Itinerate Teacher had taught me to type, which turned out to be one of the best things I would ever learn. The woman from the Commission told me about a rehabilitation facility in Cleveland, Ohio; where they had you live in your own apartment while you were learning your blindness coping skills. I loved the idea and really pushed hard to go to that facility for my rehabilitation training.**

**In the fall of 1977, my parents drove me out to Cleveland, Ohio to start my rehabilitation training. I had mixed feelings about leaving home. On one hand, I was excited about leaving and starting a whole new life of my own; and on the other hand, I was scared I wouldn't make it on my own. The rehabilitation agency I attended in Cleveland is called the Cleveland Society for the Blind or The Sight Center. At that time, they were having their clients stay at an old hotel that had been converted into apartments not far from the center. Because I couldn't see well enough, I had no idea the apartment building looked as run down as it must have, nor**

**did I have any idea the neighborhood looked questionable. All I could tell was that we entered a large building, went through a lobby where a young man met us and introduced himself as the center's house parent. He told us where my apartment was and said he would be back later to show us around the building. We walked into a hall and onto an elevator, and up a few floors and walked down a hallway to what was my new home for a while. When we entered the apartment it felt homey to me. There was thick shag carpeting on the floor, even in the kitchen and dining room. I wasn't sure how I'd like having thick shag carpeting in my kitchen. Also, the kitchen was quite old fashioned and could have used some remodeling. But this was my own place, and it felt exciting just to say it was mine for a while. My mother didn't let on to me how horrified she was about the living conditions there, because she said nothing to me at all. But, later I learned that when they left she had a difficult time leaving me there, and cried most of the way back home to Pennsylvania.**

**Looking back on some things I do have to wonder why, to this day, so many centers for the blind are located in rough, run down parts of town. I don't understand why the administration of these centers doesn't seem to give a darn that their clients have to travel and live in such dangerous situations. I think I can be thankful that I really couldn't see how bad the neighborhoods were where I was expected to take mobility lessons and live. Although the neighborhood where the apartments and the society for the blind were located was considered rough and crime ridden, I can say that the people I met in the neighborhood while I was living there were very friendly and kind to us blind folks. Most of**

**us blind people were the only Caucasians in the neighborhood, yet the local market owners and their help were extremely kind and helpful to us when we'd come in to buy our groceries. If we appeared to need help people on the streets would stop and ask if they could help us. My folks later told me that many of these people were rough and scary looking, but when you can't see and people are kind and friendly to you, it doesn't matter what they look like. In some ways, I think, if you can say there are good things about blindness, this is one of them, and that blind people can't judge people by how they look, or feel afraid of someone who just might turn out to be the kindest, friendliest person.**

**In my opinion, the training at the Sight Center was the best thing that ever happened to me. Meeting and being around other blind people changed my life and my outlook about myself tremendously. It was wonderful to find there were other blind people who experienced and felt the same things as I did. Learning how to do all the activities of daily living, and learning how to travel around on my own was almost like a miracle to me. Once I had this taste of freedom and independence, I knew I never wanted to give it up.**

**Classes at the Sight Center were structured somewhat like classes in school, where you'd have a schedule to follow and you'd go from class to class each day. The classes consisted of shop; arts and crafts; communications class, which was where you learned Braille and also learned how to use other adaptive equipment, such as reading aids; mobility; daily living skills, which consisted of homemaking, cooking, cleaning, sewing and other household skills. Once**

**a week, the house parent would take the clients out for a special activity of our choice. This was usually going out to eat, going to a movie or a concert or play. I loved the outings so much.**

**During my time at the center, I literally met my first real boyfriend. Guys had never taken an interest in me during my school days, but now, here was a guy who was really attracted to me and who wanted to get to know me. Because of this relationship and all the other wonderful experiences I had at the center, I started feeling like a whole person. I began to come out of my shell of shyness. When I went back home to Pennsylvania people couldn't believe how much I'd changed, and how much more self confident I was. My stay at the center was for three months, and during those three short months so much happened to me that changed my life forever.**

**Some time during my stay at the center I had come to the conclusion that I wanted to become a rehabilitation teacher working with the blind. I wanted to do what the people at the center did and help other blind people realize what they could do if given the right training.**

**It turned out that the Cleveland State University there in Cleveland, where the Sight Center was located, offered a special degree program in rehabilitation work with the blind. So, I decided I would attend school there. I was excited about this, because I could attend college at Cleveland State, and also still be involved with activities at the Sight Center, which had come to mean so much to me.**

**I came back home to Pennsylvania in December of 1977 and spent the next several months at home. During this time I had asked the Commission if I could have a Home Teacher come in and work with me on sewing and some other skills that I wanted to learn better. They did have a Home Teacher come out to work with me once a week; and I was able to tackle some sewing by hand, and some more cooking skills.**

**Also during my time at the Sight Center I had decided that I wanted to work with a guide dog; that the cane just wasn't for me. While at the Sight Center I had met a few people who had guide dogs, and I was impressed with how much freedom and independence the dogs gave their owners. To be able to just walk up to a building and right to the door without having to grope around trying to find the door, to navigate across wide parking lots and open spaces without feeling disoriented and lost, to be able to walk fast with confidence were all things about having a guide dog that really appealed to me. When I arrived home from the Sight Center I immediately applied to Pilot Dogs in Columbus, Ohio and was accepted for training within a couple of months. So, in February of 1978 I went off to get my first of what would turn out to be several guide dogs.**

**Unfortunately, my first experience with a guide dog wasn't exactly what I had hoped, because it turned out that the yellow lab I received had some issues of being too high strung and too nervous. And I ended up having to return her later on, but I didn't give up and did take training at Pilot again later on with my second yellow lab, which turned out to be a very calm, smart, wonderful guide.**

**During part of the summer of 1978 I went through a college preparatory course that the Pennsylvania Commission for the Blind offered. They had you actually attend classes at a college campus, as well as taking some courses specially designed to help blind people learn to cope with college life. The main college coping skills classes were a discussion type group; study skills used by blind people, and mobility. That experience was bitter sweet for me, because while I learned a lot about coping with college life, I hated living in a co-ed dormitory. And also during this time, my naivety concerning relationships with men was taken advantage of by a male student who was also in the college prep program. Once that incident took place, I broke down emotionally and didn't do very well in the prep program. I ended up leaving the prep program a little earlier than I should have originally. In January of 1979 my parents once again drove me from Pennsylvania to Cleveland, in order for me to begin my college career at Cleveland State University.**

**Like I said before, I didn't like living in the dormitory at all when I went through college preparatory classes. So, before I went to school at Cleveland State University, I asked the Sight Center if it would be possible for me to rent one of their apartments while I attended school. I had already heard that they had done this for a couple of other CSU students. They were willing to rent to me, so I even had my own apartment while attending college. The apartments were brand new, because they had built new apartments right at the center itself just recently after I had left the rehabilitation center before.**

**Cleveland State University, like most other larger schools had a disabled student services center, with a Director who helped disabled students coordinate their classes and anything else pertaining to disability and college life. I enjoyed meeting the various other disabled students at Cleveland State. Some of them I already knew from being with them at the Sight Center.**

**I was rather intimidated by the Director of Disabled Student Services. I think one of the main reasons was because he liked teasing me about being from a small town. One thing I didn't like about his teasing, though, was that he kept insinuating that I was such a small town girl, that I was going to have a tough time making it at Cleveland State. His teasing turned out to be quite prophetic, because I, unfortunately, didn't make it. And I didn't last long in college. I don't know why, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't keep my grades up where they needed to be. I really admire blind folks who make it through college, because of how hard it was for me. If I knew some of the things then that I know now, I think I could have done much better in school. Now, with all of the helpful technology and now that I am more mature and wiser, I wish I could still pursue my dream of being a rehabilitation teacher. But I'm now in my 50s, so that isn't feasible any longer.**

**I stayed in school for several months, but just couldn't keep my grades up. The Pennsylvania Commission for the Blind contacted me and said that because I was doing so poorly they felt I should leave college. And they weren't going to offer me any more support. I was devastated. Especially, because the Rehab. Counselor who said this to me was not**

**only a Counselor, but also a relative. They said they were closing my case, and I was on my own as to what I was going to do next. The people at the Sight Center were very kind and allowed me to stay on there for a while, and take some more rehabilitation classes there, while I tried to figure out what I was going to do. In the meantime I had met a man named Dave, who I was quite attracted to who lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. We began a relationship, which ended up changing a lot of things for me.**

**I also became friends with a girl with cerebral palsy, who was working at the Center for Independent Living, there in Cleveland. She introduced me to some of her other friends who worked at the center, and I ended up getting a part-time job there. My duties were to call various apartment management and other rentals, and make sure they would be open to having disabled people live in their facilities. Most of the places on the list I contacted were places which had, for one invalid reason or another, turned down disabled people who had tried to rent from them. And we wanted to find out why, and to try and change their opinions about renting to disabled people. It was an interesting job, but I couldn't believe the outrageous excuses I would come up against as to why landlords refused to rent to a disabled person. In some cases, their concerns were legitimate. Such as, their apartments weren't wheelchair accessible, or the only rentals they had available at the time when the person came to them were on upper floors; and the person couldn't manage stairs. Other excuses, however, were just plain stupid; such as the man who told me he would never rent to a blind person, because a blind person would most likely start a fire in his place. That one really angered me,**

**but I had to stay cool and try with logic to change his opinion.**

**In the meantime, while I was working at the Center for Independent Living, my relationship with the man in Cincinnati became more serious. My job at the Center for Independent Living ended. So, having nowhere else to go, I ended up moving to Cincinnati and moving in with Dave. Dave was also blind, and had a part time job playing music in clubs on the weekends. We were soon married. Our relationship was sometimes good and sometimes quite stormy. Dave drank quite a bit on the weekends while playing music; and I hated it when he would get so drunk. Once he had a few drinks in him, he would flirt with the women at the clubs. Also, I didn't realize it at the time, but he was heavily addicted to tranquilizers. So, mixing the alcohol and the tranquilizers really messed him up. I don't know whether you would have considered him an alcoholic, but he couldn't seem to stop drinking. His father, brother and sister were all alcoholics, and I believe he would have been considered an alcoholic, as well.**

**In 1985, Dave and I had a son, who is named David after his father. David was the joy of my life. David's coming into my life made me realize, though, that I needed to change the way we were living. I didn't want my son to grow up around drinking and drugs. Although Dave and I both tried harder to make things between us work, our relationship went downhill. And in November of 1988, I left him when our son was about three-years-old. For a while, I lived with a friend there in Cincinnati, until the divorce papers were all filed. And then I went home to Pennsylvania to live with my**

**parents for a while, until I could figure out what to do and where to go.**

**During this time, not only did my marriage break up, but my dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It worked out rather well to be at home with my folks, because I got to spend some quality time with my dad before he passed away from the cancer. He also got to spend some quality time with his grandson, David. One of the things that stands out to me about that time, was that David's grandpa taught him how to ride a small bicycle with training wheels. David would ride down the hill and Grandpa would follow behind him.**

**It turned out that a friend of mine in Cleveland, Ohio was living in the downstairs of her parents' rental home, and they wanted someone to rent the upstairs apartment. So, this seemed like it would be the ideal thing for David and me. I began making plans of how I would move to Cleveland and take computer training at the Sight Center; where I'd heard they had a pretty good computer training facility. Now that I had somewhere to go and something to do, I could hardly wait to get started. In February of 1989 David and I moved to Cleveland into my friend's parents' upstairs apartment.**

**Like I said, I had high hopes of taking computer training. I contacted the Ohio Commission for the Blind to ask them if they would open a case for me and help me get computer training. They replied to me with such hostility that I was utterly astonished and taken aback. I just couldn't believe how nasty they were. To this day, looking back on it, I still don't understand why they treated me as cruelly as they did.**

**They connected me with a Rehab. Counselor, who promptly told me that my file with the Commission for the Blind, both in Pennsylvania and there in Ohio, was already, “too thick.” And, that there was no way they were going to help me again. My heart fell. I remember just sitting and sobbing after I’d hung up the phone. I had such high hopes of taking computer training from the Sight Center, and really doing something worthwhile. What I didn’t understand, and still don’t understand about that whole thing is, that the only thing I’d really asked any of them for help with was to attend college; which didn’t work out. But for them to treat me so cruelly, didn’t then, and still doesn’t, make sense to me. I thought they’d be glad that I wanted to try something else, and do something worthwhile.**

**Not only did I meet with hostility from the Commission for the Blind in Ohio, but I also met with hostility from the Department of Human Services when I tried to apply for food stamps. Since I wasn’t working at the time, and was only getting SSI, I really needed food stamps to keep David and me going. I went to the DHS office and filled out all the paper work. But later on, when I called them back to check on the status of my case, a cold, rude, hostile woman came on the line and told me they would not be giving me food stamps. I was floored. I felt like everything was falling out from under me. I couldn’t do the computer training I’d wanted to do, and now the food stamp people were telling me I couldn’t get food stamps.**

**On top of all that, I’d thought that when I moved back to Cleveland I would be able to pick up with my old friends there and hang out with them like I used to when I’d lived in**

**Cleveland before. But they had moved on in their lives, and things just weren't the same. Even my close friend, whose parents I was renting from, didn't have time for me. And I began to feel so lonely and depressed. I became ill, which, now when I look back on it, was probably totally emotional fatigue. I had a horrible cold I couldn't shake, and didn't have energy to do much of anything. It was all I could do to get off the couch and take care of my son.**

**When I had still been married to Dave, I had made contact with a man from Iowa, named Lloyd Tietz, through the News Reel magazine, which is a cassette tape magazine for blind people to share ideas and other interesting information. Lloyd had contributed an article in this magazine about Bible correspondence courses he was taking. I had contacted him about the courses to learn more about them, because I thought I might want to take these courses for myself. That initial contact led to Lloyd and me staying in touch by correspondence through cassette tape letters. Then later we began talking on the phone occasionally. We developed a close friendship, because we had a lot of the same interests.**

**When I was in Cleveland having such a difficult time getting food stamps, Lloyd offered to send me some money to help with groceries. Also, the friend whose parents I was renting from asked her church to help me out with some money for food. So, between what the church gave us and the money that Lloyd sent to us, David and I had plenty of food to last us for a while. I was truly grateful to Lloyd and to the church and my friend for the help.**

**I was so astonished and devastated by the strange hostility I had met from the Ohio Commission for the Blind and also from the Department of Human Services people that my nerves were frayed, and I felt like I was on the brink of having some sort of nervous breakdown. I had a little boy I was responsible for and a hostile x-husband, as well as no support from the agencies I had counted on for help.**

**One night it just all hit me, and I felt like if something didn't give I would lose it. I called Lloyd, who seemed to be the only real friend I had at this time, and asked him if he could come and help me out, because I was afraid emotionally I was falling apart. In March of 1989 he made arrangements to come to Cleveland from Vinton, Iowa, where he lived. When he arrived, I was so relieved to have some support and help. At this point in our friendship, we knew we might be a little more interested in each other than just friends, but I was in no hurry to get into another relationship. However, when Lloyd and I met in person, all I can say is something happened. And we knew there was more to our relationship than just friendship. While Lloyd was visiting me, he and David formed a close bond as well. Lloyd was shocked at what a rough neighborhood I was living in. In all honesty, I had no idea the neighborhood was as rough as it was. I did hear arguing going on in the streets at night, but I guess I figured that was typical of the city.**

**Once again, I was frustrated and devastated when my friend's parents said Lloyd couldn't stay at my apartment with me, and that he would either have to find somewhere else to stay, or else leave. I didn't know anyone else he could stay with, so he ended up having to leave. While he**

had been visiting me, I began to feel better physically and emotionally. I was just starting to get over the illness I'd had, and was getting back my physical strength, when he was forced to leave. I was so angry and upset, because before he came, none of my friends acted concerned at all about what I was going through, and that it was causing me to become ill.

Lloyd and I decided that in April, while David was visiting his dad, I would come out here to Vinton and visit him to see what things were like here. When I came, I fell in love with the town. I found the people here to be so friendly. And what I needed, more than anything in my life at that point, was to be around friendly, supportive people. One thing I remember that I really loved about Vinton was all the huge trees. It made the town seem so forest-like. I had grown up in a family that did a lot of camping and had learned to love the forest. Unfortunately, because of a couple of severe wind storms and an outbreak of some sort of tree bug, Vinton has lost many of those beautiful old trees I loved so well.

At the time when I visited Vinton, there were several blind folks living here who had attended the school for the blind. They made me feel welcome, and I enjoyed spending time with many of them. Because I fell in love with the town and with the people here and, of course with Lloyd, I decided the sooner I moved here and got out of Cleveland, the better. In June of 1989, Lloyd made arrangements to move me and David out here to Vinton, where I've been ever since. We were married in July of 1989. And in April of 1990 our daughter, Christin was born. Vinton turned out to be a great

**town in which to raise a family. I have many fond memories of years spent with family and friends here.**

**In the early 1990s, I met with a Counselor from the Iowa Department for the Blind, who opened my case. And, I finally was able to take the computer training I had wanted to take years ago in Cleveland. There were no rude comments about how thick my file was from years back. They opened my case and we got started right away. I began by taking a basic computer course at Kirkwood Community College, here in Vinton. Back then, we were using DOS and the Artic Vision screen reading program for DOS. Once I completed the basic computer skills class, I went on to take a class in Word Perfect, which was the preferred word processing program back then. I hoped to eventually get into some type of transcription work.**

**Next, with the financial help of the Iowa Department for the Blind, I took a medical transcription correspondence course. I took the medical transcription training via correspondence, because while I could have taken the medical transcription training through Kirkwood or another school in Cedar Rapids, I would have had a difficult time getting transportation to and from school, from Vinton to Cedar Rapids. The medical transcription course took me about nine months to complete and I was really proud, because I finished with a high "A" grade. The reason why I was so proud to have completed this course with a high "A" grade, was because I had to use printed materials for most of my course work. Back then, I could see well enough to use a CCTV. I made great use of that tool to do my worksheets, and to look things up in my print textbook. I was also able**

**to get a taped copy of the textbook. I had to use the CCTV and the print copy to see the spelling of terms and anatomical drawings of the body. I also used the computer to do practice transcription. The school provided actual dictations of doctors that we used for our practice transcription course work.**

**I had high hopes that since I graduated from the medical transcription course with a high “A” grade, that it wouldn’t be difficult for me to find a medical transcription job. My Rehab. Counselor from the Department took me around to various hospitals in Cedar Rapids; and we also went to two or three places here in Vinton, where I told them I was looking for medical transcription work. Unfortunately, nothing came of the contacts we made.**

**By the late ‘90s, you could sometimes find jobs via the internet. So, I began looking for work via the internet. I sent resumes all over. I also sent resumes out to all of the doctors’ offices I could locate in the Cedar Rapids/Waterloo area, but I never got called in for an interview.**

**Since Medical transcription wasn’t working out for me, I used the internet to look for other possible work from home opportunities; but most of them seemed crooked or phony. I did have a couple of opportunities to do trial transcriptions for a couple of on line medical transcription contracting companies, but it turned out that even though I did pass the trial tests, they were looking for people who had some in-house experience. As I found out, it wasn’t going to be easy to find work from home transcription if you didn’t already have at least a year or more of in-house experience.**

**Around 2004, I learned of an agency on line that specifically helped disabled people locate work from home. So, I signed up with them and spoke with one of their job counselors. He informed me that my medical transcription training would already be considered out-of-date, and that before trying for medical transcription work I would need to take training over again. This greatly disappointed me. So, I finally quit looking for medical transcription work. I concentrated more on just finding any possible work I could do from home.**

**I almost landed a customer service job I could do from home, but it turned out that the screen readers we are using to access the Windows operating system would not work with the type of software the customer service company was using. In the process of applying for various customer service jobs, I found that most companies use software that will not work with our JAWS screen reader. This is a huge disappointment, because customer service work from home has been a growing field, and would be perfect for so many blind folks.**

**The past years I've been searching for work from home, because once again, finding transportation from Vinton to Cedar Rapids, or Waterloo, is difficult. We have our own home here in Vinton, so we are more or less planted here. I love our home, but often times I wish we could move to a larger town where work and social opportunities are easier to find; and where you wouldn't have to worry so much about how you're going to get transportation to and from work.**

**I'm now 53-years-old and my kids are both grown. I really loved being a stay-at-home mom while my kids were young. I'd still love to be able to work. I'm hoping that someday I can find a transcription job, or some other job I would enjoy. I don't want to just waist my life away or sit and vegetate.**

**For now, I try to keep myself busy and content by spending lots of time on the computer. I love the internet. I am involved in several email groups, where people share all types of information and resources with each other. I love recording materials from tape into digital format for myself and for many of my friends. I also greatly enjoy writing, and reading books from the library for the blind, as well as books from other sources. I enjoy cooking and baking.**

**Some of the friends I've made here in Vinton have either passed away or have moved on. So, for a social life, I'm involved in various telephone chat groups for blind and disabled people. As for community activities, other than attending various churches, I haven't really found anything that interests me. Here in Vinton, we have the usual small town type of activities, like, garden clubs, card clubs, civic groups and such. But nothing of that sort really interests me much at all. Again, I feel that if I were in a larger town I could find more of a variety of activities that would interest me. But my husband is a small town person, so I'm trying to be content with the small town life.**

**I am so grateful to the Iowa Department for the Blind for all the help and support they've offered me over the years since I've lived here in Iowa. They've been so supportive in helping me along the way with computer classes, and with**

**medical transcription, and even a couple of part-time jobs here and there. They've helped my husband get his part time job at Pizza Ranch, and had also helped him take IT training classes.**