

**Carolyn Hibbs**

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**I am the youngest of six children and was raised on a farm in Madison County. I was born with very limited vision, but did not come to understand just how limited it was until I was in my late teens. I attended classes in the Earlham school district, and am grateful to its staff for their willingness to think outside the box at times to assist me in understanding curriculum content and completing all the work required. It took more than magnifiers and a few large print books to get me through school. Teachers devoted their own time to provide modified materials, read tests, or record typing lessons. There were no teachers of visually impaired students available in the 1960s. I endured much teasing in elementary years and learned to not let it affect me much.**

**I was clever at listening carefully, and then using information I had heard to make it look like I could see things farther away. I developed my own mobility techniques, and counted blocks, and used landmarks as clues to where I was. I used voice and footsteps for identifying people. Developing great memory skills was a big help, and as I reached high school using a typewriter helped with written work. My mom spent many hours reading for me, but she never “did” the work for me. My high school principal allowed me to spend time helping in the kindergarten class, rather than sitting on the sidelines of my**

**ball-oriented gym class; this was a great opportunity for me to learn about the teaching profession. Skipping those gym classes is the only reduction in classwork allowed by my teachers, and I was better prepared for college because of it.**

**I was thrilled to get my first talking book magazines in high school, and listened to them in entirety. I learned to laugh with the crowd even when I had no idea what was happening. It would have been fantastic to have had a mentor or teacher to help me understand the extent of my vision loss, and how to deal with the attitudes of those around me. Having a very accepting and supportive family got me through those rough times at school. I graduated in the top 10% of my class in 1971, and made plans to go on to college.**

**During my late high school days reading was becoming more difficult. The school counselor arranged for me to learn about the services offered by the, then, Commission for the Blind. I wasn't sure that was appropriate for me, but after visiting the facility and meeting other blind adults it was plain to me that I needed skills before attempting college. I attended the Orientation Center for a year and my experience there was life changing. It is impossible to really express the impact that year made on my future. The skills I learned, the hands-on experiences, and the people I met all influenced my life in many ways.**

**I enrolled at the University of Northern Iowa in 1972, and graduated with a B.A. in early childhood and elementary education. I relied on readers for the majority of materials as it was tough to get taped or braille texts then. I used a slate and stylus to take all class notes, and used a braille writer to compose long papers before typing them. This was the technology of the day. I walked the campus before each semester started to learn where my classes were and the best way to get there. I did choose to have a single room in the dorm and that allowed me to work with a reader, type assignments and use the tape player whenever it fit in my schedule. I was active in dorm life and government. I had to do some convincing before UNI professors allowed me to complete the early childhood courses. My advisor became a believer in my ability to be a good teacher, and was glad she had not shut the door to this opportunity for me.**

**After graduating with honors, I was unable to find a teaching job for a couple of years. Then my rehab counselor learned of an opening as an itinerant teacher for visually impaired students with AEA 7 in Cedar Falls. I interviewed twice and was hired with the condition I would complete additional classes to get proper certification in this teaching field. I spent three summers and an internship completing my M.A. degree in Teaching the Visually Impaired at the University of Northern Colorado.**

**I loved my job and the challenges that it brought. It was awesome being able to teach kids skills I wished I had**

**known at their age. I transcribed mountains of braille worksheets using a closed circuit TV or reader. I helped parents understand that vision was only one of their child's characteristics. I helped train the school staff who worked closely with each student. I had to deal with hiring and firing drivers and buying and maintain a car.**

**Computers came into being, and adaptations for the blind brought a new dimension to teaching. I helped staff from Iowa Braille School produce some educational videos that were shared throughout the state. This led me to learn more about this special school, and I applied for a job there and moved to Vinton in 1989.**

**This move showed me first-hand what a difference good skills made in a blind child's self-confidence and success. I also loved this teaching job and I got to teach several subjects over the years. I taught braille, consumer economics, computer and keyboard skills, and all aspects of daily living skills. It was exciting to see students take part in not only the academic realm, but all sorts of extra-curricular and community activities. Making a real difference in a student's life was so rewarding and made all the required paperwork tolerable.**

**It was easy to grow professionally, as there were so many staff with great knowledge and experience to share. Working at Iowa Braille was a highlight of my career and**

**sometimes I reflect on what school would have been like for me had I known about it while I was eligible to attend.**

**Technology continued to advance and so did adaptations for the blind. Before resigning in 1998, I used an Apple computer with a screen reader to complete all my reports and grading records. I also got to learn how to use, and then teach the Braille 'n Speak and Braille Note, to name a few pieces of technology making their way into the classroom setting at that time.**

**I like the technology devices available today and think they have a place. I worry when parents and teachers think a task cannot be done with a piece of technology. Our kids need to have backup skills and learn flexibility in completing tasks. What do we do when the device crashes and has to be shipped off for a few weeks to get fixed?**

**In 1997 I married Mike Hibbs, a math and computer teacher who worked at Iowa Braille for 25 years. We are both retired and are enjoying the opportunity to be more active in our community. We belong to and have held leadership roles in our local Kiwanis Club. We are involved in our church, helping with several aspects of its ministry. I serve as leader of the Mission Team and use my Voice Note for all the minutes. I am a part of our praise team, and lead singing each Sunday. I play guitar and autoharp and share special music occasionally. Sometimes I put together a music**

**program to share at a nursing home. Sometimes I write my own songs to share.**

**We entertain a lot, and that means much time spent cooking and baking. I enjoy finding and trying new recipes, and it makes me smile when I go to my braille recipe boxes and find one that was shared by a friend—some go clear back to my Orientation Center days. I always have a knitting project to work on, and transcribe my patterns into braille for easy reference. Many hours are devoted to reading each week. I use tape, digital and braille books, however, I dearly love reading with a braille book in my lap. Sometimes Mike and I read the same book and take turns reading to each other.**

**When I was young, I didn't understand why I often felt left out, and that many times it was related to not seeing what was happening. I also often wished I knew how to read for longer lengths of time, know what was on the blackboard, or walk to Grandma's house without being afraid of getting lost. I am glad that I got the training to help me learn the skills of blindness. I wish I could have learned them at an early age rather than after high school.**

**I am glad I have been able to pass on these skills to my students and share a positive attitude and image about being blind. I worry that our visually impaired students are being short changed in learning these skills today. The itinerant model does not usually allow for enough direct instruction time to master a skill quickly. I am grateful to**

**have met blind adults living normal lives at a time when I was worried about what kind of life I might enjoy. As my vision decreased over the years each adjustment was easier, because I already relied on alternative techniques in everyday life. Taking a positive approach to blindness has allowed me to fulfill my dream of becoming a teacher and living an ordinary life just like my friends.**