

Mary Wilmeth Story
Submitted to the Iowa Department for the Blind
October 3, 2010

I was born in 1947 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My older brother and I were both legally blind due to Leber's Congenital Amaurosis. The vision we have has remained essentially stable throughout our lives. My parents chose to have no more children—they thought that two blind kids was challenge enough. The Grand Rapids Association for the Blind, a small local agency, held regular support meetings for parents, as well as activities for blind children. These meetings were an invaluable resource for my parents. They were encouraged to treat us just as they would any sighted child, and to give us a lot of sensory experiences. This they did. We grew up being loved - and disciplined - just like any other kids. We played with neighborhood friends and spent much of our summers on Michigan lakes and beaches.

I attended elementary classes in a small, self-contained class for blind children inside a public school. My vision was, and is, roughly 20/400. Although I had a good deal of usable vision, the decision was made to teach me Braille—a decision for which I am enormously grateful. I picked up print in my spare time at home. My education in Braille skills was solid. We stayed within the self-contained classroom exclusively until 5th and 6th grade when we visited a social studies class, without doing any of the work. I had no meaningful contact with sighted students in the school. Since mobility training was in its infancy during that time, none of the children received any cane training. That left me to move around in familiar places, or go sighted guide

with others. I didn't mind that so much as an elementary student. However, as a teenager, that all changed.

With my good Braille skills in hand, I attended my neighborhood junior high and high school. Moving about in a large public school is a world away from a self-contained classroom. In high school I guided a totally blind friend—we took most of our classes together. Since I had to work hard to see where I was going, I felt awkward and unattractive. Most students were not mean. They simply ignored me. My parents knew how I was suffering, but they didn't know how to teach me the specific skills I needed to feel confident. There were no itinerant teachers at that time, so I went to my teachers myself, got names of text books and then contacted the state library to order what they had in Braille or on tape. Also, my parents spent untold hours helping my brother and I with homework.

In 1965, I graduated and went off to a small college in northwest Iowa. One of the Commission for the Blind's rehab counselors came to visit me several times during my college years. He patiently explained what the Orientation Center had to offer. But I didn't listen—I had no idea how much I needed the training. I was interested in teaching blind children, because I wanted to give them as good an education as I had received. Practice teaching brought me to an elementary school in Des Moines where Judy Young, an accomplished blind teacher, taught 4th grade. She put a cane into my hand and said something to this effect: "Here is your cane—use it!" My thought was, "Don't think so". I very seldom took it with me at the end of the school day. Gradually, I discovered how uncomfortable I was trying to

move around the classroom. Judy functioned so well. At the end of practice teaching, my sighted supervising teacher said that she would pass me if I would agree to go to the Commission for the Blind as a student. By that time, I knew I needed something.

In the spring of 1969, I came to the Orientation Center, and it changed my life. I donned sleep shades and went out on mobility—in abject terror for several months. Gradually, after a few “cheats”, (lifting sleep shades during a travel route), I became more comfortable. At home, my mother had taught me how to do some beginning cooking tasks, but Daily Living classes opened a new world of accomplishment. One day my friend, Patty, and I decided to make pancakes and bacon for a half dozen male students. Our cooking teacher agreed; but deep inside, with a secret grin, she thought, “I think I’ll let them do it and find out what it’s like.” We succeeded but were exhausted!

I took shop class and learned to operate the agency switchboard. The student body took frequent trips either to NFB conventions to either visit other agencies or to give demonstrations about blindness. Most trips were taken in an old school bus that had been painted white and dubbed Moby Dick. Another student and I brought our guitars along and made up songs about Moby and our long white canes. I could now shop by myself and go to dinner with other blind friends. Several months after entering the Center, I flew home to Grand Rapids by myself for a brief visit. My mother’s comment was: “When you got off the plane for the first time, your head was up and you looked wonderful!” Many of my teachers at the Commission did an excellent job

teaching me essential skills. A few, however, thought that, in addition to changing my attitudes about blindness (definitely a good thing), it was their business to try re-arranging my personal beliefs and conservative worldview. Ultimately, their efforts in that area failed. After the year was finished, I was ready to face the world.

In the fall of 1970 I became a resource teacher for blind students at Smouse Opportunity School in Des Moines. I have always loved working with small groups or doing individual tutoring, rather than working in traditional classrooms. In 1972 I married a young man who worked in the Commission's Business Enterprise Program. In 1980 the marriage ended, and I moved into a new circle of friends.

In 1983 I became friends with my present husband, Bill Wilmeth. A short while after we met, he became my friendly stalker. One day he happened to observe me shopping in the grocery store. I guess he was interested in how I functioned. Afterward, he found me as I was waiting for the bus. He offered to take me to my allergist appointment. The courtship became a marriage in 1984. Bill was always comfortable with me as a blind person. I think that he was a little less so at first with other people watching me as we moved about the community. That quickly resolved, and I use my cane all the time. In fact, when I get off-task with it, he admonishes, "Stick work!"

As Smouse School was changing, I had brief opportunities to do itinerant work with blind students in public schools. I also taught ESL and Chapter 1 sighted students. In 1986 we moved to Kansas City, Kansas, where I worked at the

Kansas School for the Blind for two years. In an effort to help my asthma, we moved to Utah in 1988. I taught at the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind for 20 years. My classes were generally made up of older students with multi-disabilities. I especially loved the areas of technology and daily living skills. I did a lot of digging to find computer programs for students who needed basic skills and leisure activities. I participated in the local NFB chapter for a couple of years. I also joined AER and served as the state chapter secretary. One of my most enjoyable activities was teaching Braille to parents of blind children. It was amazing to see the parents network together and encourage each other. I worked with academic students in a local middle school for 2 years, and a high school for 1 year.

I retired from teaching in 2008 after 38 years, and many students. Now I love to have the freedom to do whatever comes up each day, as I work at being wife and homemaker. Keeping my love of technology alive, I taught a sighted friend beginning computer skills. My husband and I have dabbled in local politics. My life is satisfying and full. I can't thank the Commission for the Blind, now the Department for the Blind, enough for giving me skills that produced the confidence to live the life I believe was intended for me.