**Like Cats and Dogs**

Kenneth Jernigan  
Editor

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the early and mid 1930s, when I was a boy in grade

school, I dearly loved to read poetry--or, more properly

speaking, have poetry read to me. And my teachers often

obliged. One of my favorites was a poem by Eugene Field

called the "Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat." Although it

will never be considered a classic, I liked it. It begins

like this:

"The gingham dog and the calico cat

Side by side on the table sat;

'Twas half-past twelve, and (what do you think!)

Nor one nor t'other had slept a wink!"

The poem goes on to tell how the cat and dog had an

awful fight and concludes by giving the outcome:

"But the truth about the cat and pup

Is this: they ate each other up!"

Thus, we come to the title of this book, Like Cats and

Dogs. Maybe I chose it because I once had a dog that I

dearly loved, or because I currently have some adorable

kittens--or maybe because of the well-known saying about

people fighting like cats and dogs. Regardless of the

reason, the title is chosen, and we come to a question:

Exactly how do cats and dogs behave toward each other?

If they don't understand each other, they fight "like

cats and dogs." But if they have the opportunity to get

acquainted, they can live in harmony and become good

friends.

As it is with cats and dogs, so it can be with the

blind and their sighted neighbors. There can either be

harmony and friendship or misunderstanding and frustration.

This little volume (the twelfth in the Kernel Book series)

is meant to promote understanding, the ultimate framework of

all true friendship and mutual respect.

As with past Kernel Books, the stories here are real-

life experiences, told by the blind persons who lived them.

The one exception is the article by Theresa House, who is

the sighted wife of a blind man. Her parents feared that a

blind person could never be an adequate husband for their

daughter, and certainly not a suitable father for her

children. You will see how it is turning out as they live

their lives and raise their family.

As a matter of fact, marriage and children are major

themes of this book. Bruce Gardner, blind and preparing to

be a lawyer, dates and falls in love with a young sighted

woman. She has questions, and so do her father and mother.

And there is the matter of blind parents and sighted

children. As the boy and girl grow up, how do they feel?

Do they think their parents can take care of them--and how

do the parents feel? What ambitions do the parents have for

their children?

There is another theme relative to children (blind

children). Many are not given the chance to learn Braille.

What does that do to them, and how do they feel about it as

they come to adulthood?

There is more--the article I wrote about the difference

between the sounds and smells of today and sixty years ago,

the story about a blind kitten (told by the owner, of

course, not the kitten), an account of a blind woman's

experience with pouring coffee, and much else. But I think

I have told you enough to give you an inkling of what to

expect.

At the core, all of the people represented here are

talking about the same thing. What they are saying is this:

In everything that counts we who are blind are just like

you. As you read, you will recognize yourself in the story

of our experiences. We laugh and cry, work and play, hope

and dream, just like you. And although we don't forget that

we are blind, we don't constantly think about it either. We

are concerned with the routine business of daily living--

what we plan to have for dinner, the latest gossip, and the

current shenanigans in Washington.

Around fifty thousand people become blind in this

country each year. That means that it may happen to you, a

member of your family, a neighbor, or a friend. So we want

you to know what blindness is like--and, more to the point,

what it isn't like. That is why we are producing the Kernel

Books. We hope you will find this volume both informative

and interesting. If you do, we will have accomplished our

purpose. We want to live in harmony with our neighbors--not

the way most people think cats and dogs live.

Kenneth Jernigan

Baltimore, Maryland

1997

THE SMELLS AND SOUNDS OF SIXTY YEARS

by Kenneth Jernigan

Everybody knows that change is probably the only

constant in life, but I think we don't fully understand what

that means until after we're fifty. At least, that is how

it has been with me.

As readers of the Kernel Books know, I grew up on a

farm in rural Tennessee in the 1920s and '30s, and it seems

to me that almost nothing today is the way it was then.

Since I have been blind all of my life, I am not talking

about how things look but how they smell, taste, sound, and

feel.

Start with smell. The world smells different today

from what it did then. Nowadays I spend much of my time

indoors, breathing conditioned air, whether heated or

cooled. But that wasn't the way it was when I was a boy.

Since we didn't have electricity, we couldn't have had

air conditioning even if we had been able to afford it. So

in the summer the windows were open, and usually so were the

doors. The air was rich with odors--the smell of growing

things, of the barnyard, of the dust and gasoline from an

occasional passing car, and of creeks. These were the

smells of summer, but there were also the smells of winter--

wood burning in the fireplace, the smell of the unheated

portions of the house, and the smell of the country in

winter.

And it was not just the odors of that time but also the

sounds--the mixture of stillness, bird songs, distant

cattle, and the aliveness of the land. Today, whether

indoors or out, one thing is always present--the sound of

motors. There are automobiles, office machines, fluorescent

lights, power tools, lawn mowers, vacuum cleaners, kitchen

appliances, air conditioners, and heating units. When I was

a boy on the farm, I might go a whole week without hearing a

motor--but not today. In the world of the '90s, there is

never a minute without a motor. Sometimes it is an

avalanche of noise, and sometimes only a vibration in the

background--but it is always there--always a motor.

And I mustn't omit taste and touch. At first thought,

it might seem that there would be no difference between then

and now, but there is. It isn't necessarily that I can't

touch most of the things today that I touched in the 1930s.

It is just that I don't. And as to taste, it may simply be

my imagination or my aging taste buds, but it certainly

doesn't seem that way. Food is prepared differently, and

the ingredients take a different path from origin to table.

But what does all of that have to do with blindness?

After all, that is what this book is about. Certainly

blindness and blind people are not treated today the way

they were sixty years ago. The blind of that generation had

almost no chance to get a job, and very little chance to get

an education.

In my case, I was allowed to go to college, but I

wasn't permitted to take the course of study I wanted. I

attended elementary and high school at the Tennessee School

for the Blind in Nashville, graduating in 1945. One day in

the spring of my senior year, a state rehabilitation

counselor came to the School to talk to me about what I

wanted to do and be.

I remember it well. We sat in what was called the

parlor--a room, incidentally, which deserved the name. The

School was housed in an old southern mansion, and the front

parlor, which was used as a general reception area for

visitors, was the very essence of elegance.

The counselor and I sat on the elaborately carved sofa,

and he asked me to tell him two or three areas of study that

I might like to pursue when I went to college. I told him

that I didn't need to pick two or three, that I wanted to be

a lawyer. He didn't make a direct response but wandered off

into a conversation about the weather and the world.

Then he circled back and asked me again to pick two or

three areas. My answer was the same. I told him that I

wanted to be a lawyer. He said that he wouldn't say that a

blind person couldn't be a lawyer but that he thought it

wasn't realistic. I would not be able to see the faces of

the jury, he said, and I would not be able to do the

paperwork and the travelling. I argued, but I was only a

teen-ager--and I didn't have any money.

Ultimately he told me (with big words and gently, but

with absolute finality) that I could either go to college

and study law and pay for it myself, or I could go and

prepare to be something else and be assisted by the state.

Since I was a teen-ager and didn't have any money, I went

and prepared to be something else.

Of course, I now know that he was wrong. I am

personally acquainted with at least a hundred successfully

practicing blind lawyers, and most of them are not

noticeably more competent than I am. But I would not want

to create the wrong impression. This man was not trying to

do me harm. Quite the contrary. He truly believed that

what he was doing was in my best interest. He was trying to

help me. He was acting in the spirit of the times and doing

the best that he knew.

Today it wouldn't happen that way, for although there

are still roadblocks and failures to understand, any blind

person who is otherwise qualified can go to law school. And

there are other opportunities, a whole range of options and

possibilities for the blind that simply didn't exist in the

1930s.

Many things have made the difference, but principal

among them is the National Federation of the Blind.

Established in 1940 by a handful of blind men and women from

seven states, the Federation has conducted a never-ending

campaign to educate the public and stimulate the blind. I

joined the organization in 1949, and it changed my life.

Today the Federation is the strongest and most

constructive force in the affairs of the blind of this

country, but its work is by no means finished. The job that

still has to be done is not so much a matter of legislation

or government assistance as of handling the interactions of

daily life. We have come a long way in public acceptance,

but sometimes the attitudes of sixty years ago are still

with us.

Let me illustrate by what at first may seem to be

trivial examples. Over fifty years ago, when I was a boy on

the farm in Tennessee, I often found time heavy on my hands

during the summer months when I was not in school. To

relieve the tedium, I would sometimes ride with a truck

driver, who collected milk from local farmers to take to a

nearby cheese factory.

The days were hot, and when we could afford it, we

sometimes bought a bottle of Coca Cola. (Incidentally, it

cost five cents.) I didn't have much money, but now and

again I had a little, and I wanted to pay my share. One day

I said to the driver (a young fellow about twenty), "I'll

buy a coke for each of us."

"Okay," he said, "stay here. I'll go in and get it."

"No," I said. "I'll go with you."

He was obviously uncomfortable and didn't want me to do

it. Finally he said, "I can't do that. How would it look

if people saw a blind person buying me a coke?"

I was a teen-ager, not yet accustomed to the ways of

diplomacy. So I told him in blunt terms that I would either

buy the Coca Cola publicly or I wouldn't buy it at all.

After greed and pride had fought their battle, he decided

not to have it, and we drove on--after which I was not

welcome in the truck.

But that was more than fifty years ago. It couldn't

happen today. Or could it? Well, let me tell you about an

incident that occurred less than six months ago. My wife

and I were entering a restaurant--an upscale, classy place

with plenty of glitter and lots of manners.

It so fell out that another couple and we reached the

door almost simultaneously. I happened to be positioned so

that it was natural for me to open the door and hold it

while the other couple entered, but the man was obviously

ill at ease. He insisted that he hold the door and that my

wife and I go first. Since I already had my hand on the

door and was holding it open and since I was not in the mood

to be treated like a child or an inferior, I dug in my

mental heals and stayed put. It was all done on both sides

with great politeness and courtly manners, but it was done.

As I continued to hold the door, the other couple preceded

us into the restaurant. But the man was obviously

uncomfortable, showing by his comments and demeanor that he

felt it was inappropriate for a blind person to hold a door

for him and behave like an equal.

Trivial? Not related to the daily lives and economic

problems of the blind? Not a factor in determining whether

blind people can hold jobs or make money? Don't you believe

it! These incidents (the one fifty years ago and the one

this year) typify and symbolize everything that we are

working to achieve.

But again I must emphasize that we are not talking

about people who are trying to cause us harm. We are

talking about people who, almost without exception, wish us

well and want to be of help. Our job is not one of force

but of giving people facts.

And key to it all is the National Federation of the

Blind--blind persons coming together in local, state, and

national meetings to encourage each other and to inform the

public. Sometimes we are tempted to believe that our

progress is slow, but in reality it has been amazingly

rapid. We have made more advances during the past sixty

years than in all previously recorded history. And there

are better days ahead.

It is true that the smells, sounds, touch, and taste of

today are not what they were sixty years ago--but it is

equally true that despite occasional nostalgia, we wouldn't

want them to be. We wouldn't because today is better--and

not just in physical things but also in the patterns of

opportunity and possibility. I say this despite all of the

problems that face our country and our society. We who are

blind look to the future with hope, and those who are

sighted are helping us make that hope a reality.

The City and the Fear

By Marc Maurer

A knowledge of the meaning of blindness is not

automatic; it must be learned--or, in many cases, unlearned.

When childhood fears are added to the mix, the combination

can lead to frustration and anxiety.

Marc Maurer, President of the National Federation of

the Blind, has two young children. Regular Kernel Book

readers have followed the birth of his son David, their

adventures in Cub Scouting, camping, cutting fire wood, and

repairing the roof. Through all of it Marc has simply been

David's father--who happens to be blind. But now David is

approaching his teens. As be begins to absorb society's

traditional attitudes about blindness, how wi11 his father

protect the relationship and keep it from deteriorating? In

his heartwarming account of a family holiday trip, President

Maurer explores this issue. Here is what he has to say:

In the Maurer household there are two adults and two

children. My wife Patricia and I are both blind, but our

children, David and Dianna are not. David is thirteen and

Dianna is ten. We are a family in the traditional sense--we

go places together; perform family projects together; cook,

clean, repair our home, and maintain our yard together;

attend church together; and explore new horizons together.

We almost never discuss blindness. We don't forget it,

but it is rarely a topic of conversation. Of course, in the

planning for our activities, we remember that blindness is a

factor. We do not own an automobile because none of us can

drive it. So travel plans include hiring taxis, buying

airplane or railroad tickets, renting automobiles and hiring

drivers, calling upon friends and colleagues who have cars,

taking buses, walking, using the subway, or some combination

of these methods.

Then there is mowing the lawn and maintaining the yard.

We do this as a family. My part of the job includes

maintaining the lawnmower and other gardening equipment.

We have a hedge, which runs along the front edge of our

property. I keep this clipped, using a gasoline-powered

hedge trimmer. If you touch the trimmer in the wrong place,

it will trim your fingers along with the hedge--so I don't.

I also spend part of my time mowing the grass.

However, this job is usually performed by David. My wife

and daughter undertake to pick up the sticks and stray

papers in the yard. The combination of effort gets the job

done.

David and I mow the grass differently. He is sighted,

and he watches what the lawnmower is doing. I am blind, so

I use other techniques. I often mow under low-hanging trees

and shrubs.

David finds this frustrating because he finds it

difficult to see what he is doing. I can follow the shrub

line or use the branches to tell me where I am and how much

of the space has already been mowed. He uses one technique,

and I use another. Working together, we keep the yard neat

and tidy.

Inside the family there is no misunderstanding about

who is in charge or how responsibilities are determined.

The parents make decisions, and the children must follow

direction. If the children misbehave, they are reprimanded

or punished as circumstances warrant. They are given

assignments and expected to carry them out, and they must

seek permission to go visiting or engage in other activities

away from home. This arrangement is stable,and predictable.

Outside of our family this understanding is not always

shared. From time to time we have encountered remonstrances

from strangers. They tell my children that they must take

care of their parents. They will stop my son or daughter on

the street and tell them to be careful that I don't run into

a telephone pole.

If I do run into a telephone pole, a thing which almost

never happens, the children are sometimes chastised by

strangers for their supposed neglect. My sighted children

have been repeatedly told that they are responsible for

their blind parents.

Sometime during the fall, Dianna asked me if we could

go to New York. I was surprised. I have been to New York

many times, and of course at one level of my mind I knew

that she hadn't but I simply wasn't thinking in those terms.

"Would you like to go to New York?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I'd certainly like to go. Can

we?"

So we planned to take a trip to New York City.

Since I love my daughter, and since I like to please

her, we began planning the trip immediately. The questions

were numerous. When would we go? What would we do? What

would the trip cost? Could we afford it? I considered

waiting until another year. Expenses during the past few

months had been heavy, and I wondered whether the budget

could take any more travel. However, I am particularly fond

of my family, and I want very much to give them the

experiences they want if we can afford them. Besides, I am

aware that postponed promises are, often never kept.

There is always something more important that

interferes, or the yearning that caused the request to be

made in the first place dries up before the promise is

carried out. With all these thoughts in mind, I decided

that we should travel to New York right after Christmas.

The Christmas decorations would still be in place, and maybe

the crowds would be a little smaller after the holiday had

passed.

Dianna was delighted, but David was not. He did not

want to go. He asked if we could invite someone else to go

with us. As the time for the trip came nearer, he became

less and less enthusiastic.

He wondered aloud if there wouldn't be some work

assignment that would prevent me from going so the trip

would need to be canceled. He told his mother and me that

there wasn't anything in New York that he wanted to see. He

said that he would just stay in the hotel and watch

television. He worried about how we would get to the train

station and what we would do to find our way around New York

City. Finally, he became unresponsive and irritable when we

discussed the upcoming trip. I wondered why, and when he

asked once again if we could take somebody with us, the

answer became clear.

David, my sighted son, was worried that he would be

expected to serve as the responsible leader of our family--

that he would be called upon to know what to do and where to

go--that he would be required to make decisions and plan the

trip. He felt that he was inadequate to meet the challenge

and that he would be expected to shoulder responsibilities

that were beyond him. He was worried that he might fail his

parents and that his failure would cause distress or danger.

Even if there were no danger, he thought the trip might be a

failure because he would not know where we should go,

therefore making the excursion to New York a disappointment,

a disappointment that would be his fault

As soon as I -understood the problem, I knew what we

must do. We would travel to New York and have a wonderful

time. We would go together as a family, and we would do it

alone--two blind parents--protecting, shepherding, guiding,

and caring for our two sighted children. I decided not to

tell David that I thought he might learn from this

experience, and ultimately profit from it. Instead I

reminded him about all of the wonderful places there are to

visit in New York. But it didn't seem to cheer him up at

all.

On a Thursday morning, the day after Christmas, we

boarded a train in Baltimore and headed for New York. I had

hoped that the crowds would have diminished because we were

traveling after Christmas. However, this was not the case.

The train was jam-packed. We had hoped to find four

seats together, but no such luck. We settled for two. Mom,

Dad, and David sat in the two seats; and Dianna sat on the

suitcases at our feet. There was nowhere else to go and

nowhere else to stow the luggage. You could say it was

cozy, but you might also have called it cramped.

Fortunately, the train ride from Baltimore to New York takes

only a little over two hours, and the excitement of planning

the next few days kept us occupied.

We had tickets for the Thursday evening performance of

the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall. We

talked about visiting Rockefeller Center to see the tree and

watch the ice skating. David wanted a chance to visit the

toy store, F.A.0. Schwarz; and Dianna expressed a wish to

shop at the Warner Brothers store because she especially

likes Tweety Bird.

As the train halted in Pennsylvania Station in New York

City we stepped out into the cold air, and followed other

passengers up the escalator. As we left the station, I

welcomed the children to the sidewalks of New York--

sidewalks as crowded as I ever remember them in the Big

Apple. We found a taxi and loaded our bags into it. In a

short time we reached the hotel, where we would stay for the

next three days.

Our room was what you would expect in a decent New York

hotel, but David (still mistrustful) wanted to know why it

was so small and why it didn't have fancier amenities.

He had seen the Plaza in a movie, and he thought we

ought to go there. I told him to quit griping and put his

bag away so that we wouldn't stumble over it during our

stay. I also told him to get ready for lunch, but he told

me he wasn't hungry. I got the idea that he was more

nervous than ever. But I was not prepared for his

nervousness and irritability to become the controlling

factors in the trip. I gave him his instructions: hungry or

not, he was going to have lunch; so he had better get ready.

I wondered whether the trip had been a mistake, but we were

in the Big Apple, and I intended to do all that I could to

make our stay there enjoyable and memorable.

So the first order of business was lunch. In the hotel

coffee shop Dianna and her brother both ordered chicken

noodle soup, and they were warmed as much by the familiar

food as by the steaming broth.

After lunch it was time to explore the city. We were

planning to attend the early evening performance of the

Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall, so on our

way to the show, we decided to stop by Rockefeller Center

(across the street from Radio City) to see the enormous

Christmas tree and watch the ice skaters.

I asked the doorman at our hotel to give me directions

to Rockefeller Center. We were on 47th Street, not far from

Broadway. The doorman told me I should walk up Sixth Avenue

to 49th and I would see it. He said we could get there in

about ten minutes, so we started out.

The afternoon was chilly, and there were people

everywhere. Street vendors offered us hot roasted nuts, hot

dogs, soft pretzels, and hard goods such as sunglasses and

electronic watches. But we were not yet acclimated to New

York, so we kept on our way without stopping to bargain or

buy. I was in the lead, walking with David, and Patricia

followed with Dianna.

When we came to the comer of 49th and Sixth, we did not

find Radio City, but somebody told us if we kept on for a

block,

we'd be there. And a block later, there it was. On 50th

Street, we came to the skating rink. The crowds were

enormous, and the line for admission to the rink was

exceedingly long. We watched the skaters and admired the

dazzling Christmas tree, decorated with hundreds of colored

lights and a big white star at the top.

As the afternoon became evening, we joined the line for

the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall. The

story of Christmas is timeless, but there are many ways to

present it. Santa Claus told us that he couldn't do his

work in one night all by himself, so he recruited helpers.

In a few moments, there were sixty Santas on the stage. A

moment later Dianna laughed in astonishment when animated

Christmas trees danced in time to the music. Then, there was

the story of the Christ child. My small daughter confided to

me that she thought the camel (a real one), which was part

of this segment of the performance, looked unhappy and

confused.

David enjoyed the show, too, but he still seemed

nervous. When we started back for the hotel, he thought we

were going the wrong way. He imagined that we were getting

more and more lost in this big strange city, but I told him

we were all right, and sure enough we were soon in familiar

territory.

When he saw the nut vendor outside our hotel he

obviously began to feel relaxed. He said to me that we had

found the place, and without telling him that we had never

lost it, I agreed.

The next day we started out for the toy stores, Warner

Brothers and F.A.O. Schwarz. They are within a block of

each other on Fifth Avenue, and across the street is the

Plaza. This hotel, featured in the movie Home Alone,

fascinated the children; and I promised to take them there

for lunch. We did not merely eat; we dined. The children

asked for spaghetti, which did not appear on the menu, but

the waiter said they would find some. The surroundings were

elegant; the service was impeccable; and the bill, when it

came, was as impressive as everything else.

Then, it was off to the Empire State Building. More

than fourteen hundred feet in height, this tallest of New

York buildings has an observation deck on the 102 floor,

from which we could see a cruise ship in the distance. A

short walk from the Empire State Building is Macy's

Department store, a central feature in the Christmas movie

Miracle on 34th Street. On the way there, we passed more

street vendors. Dianna bought a beret, and David purchased

a Nike watch.

On Saturday morning we set off for the Statue of

Liberty. This symbol of American freedom is over a hundred

years old. We hired a taxi for the ride to the harbor, but

we were puzzled about the place the ferry docked. I asked

David if he saw the spot to board, but he did not. I told

him I would ask some of the passersby where it was. He

argued with me, telling me that they were ordinary tourists,

not public officials. I said that they didn't need to be

public officials to give us information and that they might

know the answers to our questions. When I asked, they told

us what we wanted to know. David was astonished and

relieved to discover that this simple technique worked so

well.

The method for finding your way is much alike both for

the blind and the sighted. In an unfamiliar place it may be

necessary to ask for directions. If the directions are

correct and complete, this solves the problem. If not, a

request for more information may be made. This is how all

of us learn how to get where we want to go.

On our ferry boat ride to the Statue of Liberty, we

were at peace and enjoying the sightseeing as a family.

David had stopped worrying that everything would go wrong.

He had been reminded, not in words but by example, that

blindness does not prevent his parents from managing the

family and protecting him and his sister. He came to

recognize that he was not responsible for his parents but

that the responsibility ran the other way. He felt good

about this, and he relaxed.

In our walk around the base of the Statue of Liberty, a

piece of history and the hope of the future came together.

I could not help reflecting that the lessons learned by my

children on the trip to New York are a small part of the

process that will bring understanding and opportunity to all

of humankind, including not only the blind but also the

sighted.

Through the years, blindness has often been

misunderstood, and that misunderstanding has prevented those

of us who are blind from achieving our full potential.

However, working together, we can change the negatives that

have so frequently been associated with blindness.

Sometimes it is done on the job, sometimes in a television

appearance, and sometimes by what is written in a newspaper

or a magazine. Sometimes it is done by a walk around the

base of the Statue of Liberty on a holiday trip to New York.

You Will Have To Make Other Arrangements

by Bruce A. Gardner

Bruce Gardner is President of the National Federation

of the Blind of Arizona. By all of society's measuring

sticks he is today in every way a success--a leader in his

community and his church, a senior' attorney with a major

corporation, a member of the citizen's advisory council in

his city, a scout troop official, a real estate owner. Just

the kind of man you hope your daughter will find and marry.

You do, that is, until you learn that he is also blind.

Then what? Or what if the gentleman in question has not yet

accomplished these things but offers only his high hopes for

such a bright future? What do you tell your daughter and her

young man? Do you tell them that they will have to make

other arrangements?

These are the questions Bruce faced when be sought to

marry Becca. Here is how he tells the story:

A girl I dated a time or two in college, after I began

using my white cane, asked me to Sunday dinner and church

afterward. As we left her apartment to walk to church, she

turned to me and said, "Why don't you just leave your cane

here. You won't need it at church because you will be with

me the whole time." Although she was a nice young lady and I

could tell that she quite liked me, I felt like saying, "Why

don't I just leave YOU here." She had now confirmed what I

had suspected--that she was embarrassed to be seen with my

cane. She was not comfortable having others know that she

was dating a blind man.

I decided to do both. I left the cane behind when we

went to church for her sake. Then, for my sake, I left her

behind when we got back.

Shortly thereafter I met Becca, and we hit it off

immediately. She was very comfortable and at ease being

seen in public, going places and doing things with a blind

date. However, unlike so many others I had dated, Becca did

not try to deny that my blindness could have an effect on

our relationship. In fact soon after we started going

together she told me that she did not want to get serious

until she knew whether she could deal with my blindness.

That was refreshing!

About a year earlier I had learned of the National

Federation of the Blind, and I was finally beginning to deal

with my blindness and come to know in my heart that it is

respectable to be blind.

Becca was getting ready to leave on a two-week

vacation, so I asked her to read a couple of articles while

she was gone. I explained that the articles had been

written by Kenneth Jernigan when he was President of the

National Federation of the Blind and that they expressed how

I felt about my blindness. She agreed to read them and when

she returned from vacation, her ability to accept

and deal with my blindness was no longer a concern to her.

Within a few weeks Becca and I were engaged.

Becca's mother happened to be coming to Utah and

planned to stop to see Becca, so we took that opportunity

for me to meet Becca's mother and announce our engagement.

She seemed happy for us, but she made a few troublesome

comments like, "Don't worry Becca, I won't say a thing to

your father."

A day or two later I met Becca on campus after

finishing my shift as the supervisor of one of the breakfast

crews at the dorm cafeteria. I asked Becca what her mother

had meant. Becca said that her father was a little old-

fashioned and that perhaps I should ask him for her hand in

marriage. So I said, "I know where the pay phone is; I'll

give him a call." Still I could tell there was something

more to it. We were going to school in Provo, Utah, and

Becca's parents lived in California. Even so, apparently

her father had heard that she was dating a blind man.

When I made the call it was still early in the morning.

Becca's father (a physician) was just getting into his car

to go to his office, which was at the hospital. When he

came to the phone I said, "Dr. Loeb, you do not know me, but

my name is Bruce Gardner, and I have been dating your

daughter Becca. I am asking your permission for her hand in

marriage."

It would be an understatement to say that his response

was less than I had hoped for. He said, "I do not give

permission to marry my daughter to just anyone, and to me

you are just anyone. You will have to make other

arrangements." He then hung up the phone. I had the

distinct impression that what he meant by "make other

arrangements" was "go marry someone else."

When I hung up the phone, Becca asked me what had

happened. In answer I said, "Get the phone book. I need to

call the airlines; we are going to visit your parents."

Those were the "other arrangements" I chose to make.

The earliest flight we could get was late the next day,

which was a Friday. That gave us time to call Becca's

mother to arrange for me to have an interview with Dr. Loeb

at his office Saturday morning, and to relay to him, at his

request, all the medical details I could provide about my

blindness.

Of course I was scared. What was I to do? What could I

say to this pediatric cardiologist that would alleviate his

concerns about his daughter's marrying a blind man?.

On Saturday morning when Becca and I arrived at her

father's office, we learned that Becca was to have an

interview first.

Only a few months earlier Becca had graduated from

college and begun work as a registered nurse. Her father

was concerned that Becca did not really love this blind but

only felt sorry for him and wanted to take care of him as

she had done so many times before with stray or hurt animals

and birds.

When it was my turn to be interviewed, I discussed with

Dr. Loeb the medical aspects of my blindness, and he told me

the results of his hasty research and conversations with the

ophthalmologists he worked with at the hospital. We then

discussed my plans to finish college and attend law school.

I also explained to Becca's father what my philosophy

was regarding my blindness and asked him to read two

articles written by Kenneth Jernigan, which would explain

how I felt. They were, of course, the same articles I had

earlier shared with Becca: "Blindness--Handicap or

Characteristic" and "Blindness: Of Visions and Vultures."

Of course there was a lot of other NFB literature I could

have given him, but these two articles summarized the issues

well and had helped Becca work through her concerns, so I

used them again.

After my interview, Becca and I went to lunch with her

parents and then accompanied them on their Saturday

afternoon grocery shopping expedition, which was a weekly

tradition. Although I was staying at their home in the

guest room, nothing more was said either about my blindness

or my engagement to Becca.

The next morning, which was Sunday, Becca and I were

preparing to go to church. At the breakfast table Becca's

mother turned to her father and said, "Becca and Bruce are

going to church, and she wants to wear her engagement ring.

So, have you made up your mind yet?"

With that her father turned to me, cleared his throat

and said, "Did you have something you wanted to ask me?"

I just about fell off my chair. I muttered some lame

apology for the awkward way I had asked the first time and

then formally requested Dr. Loeb's permission to marry his

daughter. He got a tear in his eye and a lump in his throat

as he gave me his permission. He then excused himself and

left for work at the hospital.

That was all there was to it. It was clear that he had

read the articles I had given him and that he was impressed

with the attitude I conveyed regarding my blindness.

I have since made good on my plans to finish college

and law school, and for the past fourteen years I have been

successfully practicing law. Becca and I now have six

bright, healthy, happy children, three of whom are teen-

agers. Since that interview Becca's father, I have grown

extremely close to her parents, and my blindness has not

been an issue of concern for either Becca or her parents.

I am grateful to the National Federation of the Blind

for helping me learn the truth about blindness and enabling

me to share that truth with my wife and in-laws.

A WIFE'S STORY

by Theresa House

David and Theresa House and their four children live in

San Diego, California. The House family is in many ways a

traditional American family--David brings in the income and

Theresa stays home with the children. And that's the way

they both want it. It is also exactly the way Theresa knew

it could be when she decided to marry David despite her

family's grave misgivings. Here is what she has to say in

this loving portrait of her family:

I am thirty years old, and I have been happily married

for ten-and-a-half years. I have four wonderful children--

three, five, seven, and nine. My husband David was diagnosed

with juvenile macular degeneration at the age of five. He is

now thirty-seven and has just a little remaining vision in

each eye.

I knew my husband for several years before we actually

began dating. His sister was my best friend in grade school,

and as a teen-ager I was a member of the church youth group

that Dave was in charge of. During the course of our

friendship I was always impressed to see that Dave would

never let his blindness stop him from anything he undertook.

A good example of this determination was the high school

youth group of over a hundred teen-agers that he managed for

nearly four years. Those years are very dear to me.

That group had the reputation of being one of the

biggest and the best among the Catholic churches throughout

San Diego. At the same time that Dave was our church's youth

director he was attending San Diego State University.

After graduating from college, Dave made the decision

to attend a residential training facility for blind adults

in northern California. This was to learn Braille, cane

travel, cooking, and independent living skills.

He believed that it was very important to learn the

alternative techniques used by blind people before he lost

his vision completely. Dave said that he was tired of faking

and bluffing his way through awkward situations using his

partial vision. He wanted to stop pretending that he could

function normally in the sighted world by denying his

blindness.

A year later Dave returned home to San Diego, well-

equipped with the skills of blindness, full of confidence,

and ready to hit the job market.

By coincidence we began dating the same month he was

hired by Catholic Community Services. This was February,

1982. One of the fondest memories I have of the early days

of our courtship was going out on dates riding double on my

moped scooter. Dave did not drive, and I didn't own a car at

the time. I was eighteen, and he was twenty-four. We still

laugh today when we look back at that crazy and romantic

time.

One of the more challenging aspects of our relationship

was my family's prejudice about blindness. My parents did

not approve of our courtship. They felt--and they still do,

even though he has proved them wrong--that a man who is

going blind does not have a bright future ahead of him. All

this only convinced me that people's attitudes about

blindness can be more of a problem than the actual loss of

eyesight.

In 1983 we became engaged with plans for a June wedding

in the following year. My family continued their resistance

to my fiance. When we got married in 1984, we were both

working forty hours a week. I had a great paying job as a

medical unit clerk in our local hospital. Dave had obtained

his broker's license and was in the process of making a

career change from social work to real estate.

A year later David, Jr., was born, and I cut my work

schedule in half, to twenty hours a week. In 1987 our second

son Christopher was born, and I reduced my work schedule to

sixteen hours a week. Then in 1989 our third son Patrick was

born. I decided to stop working completely to be a full-time

mother and homemaker. I made this decision in the confidence

that my blind husband was quite capable of being the sole

breadwinner in our family.

My confidence was further reinforced in 1991, when we

decided to have a fourth child. I was determined to fulfill

my lifetime dream of having a daughter. My wish came true

that year, and we named our beautiful little girl Veronica.

For the past five-and-a-half years I have not worked outside

the home because my husband has done such a great job of

supporting us financially.

In our home, raising the children is truly a fifty-

fifty partnership. After our youngest was born, Dave urged

me to find a hobby so that I could take a well-deserved

break from the kids in the evenings.

For three years I took martial arts, earning a second

degree green belt in Tong So Do Karate. I am at the halfway

mark of becoming a black belt, which I intend to accomplish.

Also I am going to college at night, working to become

certified as a floral designer. I plan to operate my own

business out of my home doing floral arrangements for

weddings.

None of this would be possible without the full support

of my husband. Dave serves as an evening and weekend baby

sitter whenever I have outside activities. My husband is no

slouch when it comes to taking on his share of the chores

and responsibilities at home.

Each day he helps me get the children ready for school

by waking them up, feeding them breakfast, and preparing

their baths. This allows me enough time for exercise each

morning. I enjoy jogging. While Dave is getting ready for

work, I make the lunches, help the children dress, and take

them to school.

In the evenings after work, Dave assists me in getting

the kids through their homework. While I am preparing

dinner, he unloads the dishwasher and sets the table. After

supper he clears the table, takes out the trash, and feeds

the dog. In the meantime I am doing the dishes. Together we

tuck the children into bed and then do paperwork, like

paying bills and going through the mail.

My husband has found that keeping household items

organized and orderly cuts down drastically on the

frustration that can accompany vision loss. He has certainly

proven this true by taking charge of the laundry for our

family of six. Dave has used his Braille label maker on the

washing machine and does a great job of keeping the clothes

clean and neatly sorted. My job is to fold and put them

away.

David makes blindness his responsibility and not an

undue hardship on the family. For example, at home he has

the choice of using his cane or possibly tripping over toys,

shoes, or anything else inadvertently left on the floor. (We

encourage our children to pick up after themselves, but in

reality this does not always happen.)

Since I am the only driver in our family, I have been

unanimously elected the family chauffeur. Dave himself makes

it a point not to rely on me as his only mode of

transportation. He makes his own arrangements to get to and

from work, and he uses public transportation whenever

necessary. He also enjoys walking places to stay in shape.

Dave no longer uses large print for reading because it

is too much of a strain and too time-consuming. He says

that, by learning Braille, he has kept himself from becoming

illiterate. There are countless examples of how Dave uses

Braille in his daily life.

I have already mentioned the Braille label maker, which

he uses both at home and at work. My husband orders stories,

called Twin Vision books, which have both Braille and print

as well as the illustrations. He really appreciates having

the ability to read these books to our younger children. To

help our older son, Dave orders a book in Braille that we

can also find in the public library in print. This allows my

son to practice reading aloud while my husband follows along

in Braille, correcting him whenever necessary.

One favorite family outing is trips to the Price Club.

My husband always brings an itemized grocery list in Braille

to prevent us from spending too much money. Dave also

receives the Sunday mass readings in Braille, which he takes

to church each week.

He is a voracious reader, and between Braille and

cassette recordings he manages to read a weekly newspaper,

three monthly magazines, and a couple of books a month. I

firmly believe that my husband is a living example of how

blindness can be reduced to the level of a physical

nuisance. In the event that total blindness comes, I know

that he will be well prepared.

My husband is active in the National Federation of the

Blind, which has over fifty thousand members across the

United States. I can honestly say that the NFB has been

instrumental in making my husband the self-confident,

independent, capable individual he is today. The benefits

and support Dave has derived from this organization have

done wonders for his self-image and self-esteem. I would

highly recommend the National Federation of the Blind to

anyone who is struggling with losing eyesight.

A NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN

by Peggy Elliott

Have you ever felt you knew just about all there was to

know about a particular subject only to find you still had a

lot to learn? This is precisely what happened to Doug and

Peggy Elliott (both long-time leaders in the National

Federation of the Blind) when they brought a baby kitten who

happened to be blind into their household. Here is how

Peggy tells the story:

We have a new little kitten at our house. She's all

black, but she had a tiny white star on her chest when she

was born. It's grown in black now, but we still call her

Sheriff.

Sheriff is four months old. Everything in her world is

a toy to bat, chase, gnaw, or pounce upon. She is endlessly

hungry, begs for everything, steals the two older cats'

food, and sneaks on the table to cadge tidbits from us. Oh,

and I should have mentioned, Sheriff is blind.

My husband Doug and I are both blind. We heard about

Sheriff from a friend who took pity on a starving stray cat

and soon learned the cat was a mom with two little kittens.

When she was tiny, Sheriff put her head on the flank of one

of her sisters to follow her to food and play. The little

sister did not survive, and Sheriff had an incurable eye

infection from birth that left her completely blind.

Our friend told us about his blind kitten, mentioning

that he did not have any takers for this perfectly healthy,

happy, bouncy kitten because she was blind. We knew what

that could mean, and we offered to take Sheriff if no one

else wanted her. We wouldn't give her up now to anybody.

We were worried about stairs, her finding the cat

boxes, and interaction with the other cats whom we now call

the Great Cats in comparison to little Sheriff. Here's how

each of these worked.

At first we kept Sheriff in a room with a cardboard box

across the door. This prevented her from getting out, but

we and the Great Cats could get in. We were worried that,

if we let Sheriff roam, she would fall down one of our two

staircases, both of which have turns in them. We got a bell

on a blue collar so that we could find Sheriff and avoid

stepping on her. We would put the collar on only when we

were taking her out of the room. She got so she purred when

we put the collar on.

We tried to show her stairs, making her little feet

look at the edges and risers. She didn't like the lessons.

We made her go down, one stair at a time, to get the idea.

She hated this. Then, one day about a week after we had

Sheriff, we noticed that she was upstairs.

We had put her on the floor downstairs to play and gone

about our business, keeping an ear on her movements, or so

we thought. Suddenly, she was upstairs. It turned out that

Sheriff knew all about stairs. There was a short flight in

her original home in a garage, and she had used them from

the time she was tiny. She still kind of galumps down the

stairs, being a little too short from nose to tail to walk

down yet. But she obviously will. She's taught us that.

We tried to protect her, to ease her into our home a bit at

a time. She wasn't having any of that.

We talked about this and decided that, even as long as

we have both lived as blind people, we can still learn about

the capabilities of the blind. In fact, both of us have had

experiences where people think we can't do something and

(from what they intend as kindness), prevent us from doing

it. Stairs are one example.

We were recently in Washington D.C. visiting our

Congressman, and we were heading out of the building to get

a cab. As we approached the door, a Capitol guard prevented

us from going any farther, telling us that she would "take

us" to a door without stairs.

We had chosen this particular door because it got us

where we were going. Had we been "taken" to any other door,

stairs or not, it would have been a lot farther from our

destination. We insisted; she relented, and we exited as

planned, stepping down the stairs as agilely as sighted

visitors. I couldn't help thinking of Sheriff and the help

we had tried so hard to give her as I descended.

Regarding accidents, we simply haven't had any. We

don't exactly know how she finds the cat boxes (we have two,

one on each floor). We guess it is by using her sense of

where she is as well as her nose. Early on, we worked very

hard at being sure she was back in her room every two hours

or so when she was a one-room kitten to be sure she would be

near a box she knew. Just like with the stairs, one day

we noticed that a cat was scratching in the downstairs cat

box, and each of us had a Great Cat on our laps. So much

for thinking Sheriff couldn't find the cat box.

How about the other cats? GirlKitty is deeply

suspicious of everyone but Doug whom she loves. Before

Sheriff was even out of the carrying case in which she

entered our house, GirlKitty was at the front door, glaring

through the bars and hissing. In fact, we started calling

her Miss Propane because she put her whole body into the

effort, sounding like one of those propane tanks that cause

lift in hot air balloons. She would even propane at Doug if

he had been holding Sheriff, and she got a whiff of it.

In the early days, GirlKitty would punch Sheriff

occasionally; you could hear Sheriff sort of go flying the

other direction from the one she had been heading in. And

once I think GirlKitty was actually holding her down and

socking her--I was in the next room on the phone and, by the

time I got in there, they were separated. But the thing we

noticed most was that Sheriff never reacted to these

expressions of disgust by GirlKitty. They were usually

delivered right in Sheriff's face. But her body didn't move

at all. We knew because the bell didn't tinkle.

We talked about this as well, relating it to our own

experiences. Eye contact is crucial to cat communication,

but it's very important to people as well.

GirlKitty seemed very puzzled that she was getting no

reaction from her fierce glare and hiss. We have both known

people who were very uncomfortable talking to us. It has

often seemed to us that part of the discomfort comes from

lack of eye contact and uncertainty on the sighted person's

part that we can detect they are talking to us.

In Sheriff's case, of course, it just may be that

Sheriff has better manners than GirlKitty. Anyway, she's

found her own form of revenge. GirlKitty is very food-

focused since she almost died as a baby from lack of

nourishment. For a while, she said horrible things to

Sheriff when the little kitten would try to join the Great

Cats at the dry food dish. So Sheriff figured out that she

could fit under the kitchen stool that happens to sit next

to the cats' food station. GirlKitty can't.

So Sheriff gets under the stool and sticks her head out

long enough to grab some food and then withdraws under the

stool to eat. GirlKitty can't do a thing about it except

stalk off in distaste. We didn't teach Sheriff about the

stool. She figured it out for herself.

And then there's Bob, our large, mellow, kindly, clingy

male. One day early on when Bob was eating, I put Sheriff

on his back. Bob kept eating. Sheriff slid off on purpose.

I put her back. Bob kept eating. This went on for a while

because I was trying to teach Sheriff that one of the Great

Cats was not a meanie. She learned.

When she finds Bob now, she jumps up on his shoulder or

up his side in play. Bobby will sort of run and fight back

appropriately, not knocking Sheriff across the room as he

easily could but batting and taking evasive action as part

of the game. They tussle like that. Then Sheriff loses

physical contact and starts looking around with her paws for

Bobby. (Doug calls her Scatters when she does this--running

back and forth in very short spurts in a search pattern.)

If she doesn't find Bobby and he still wants to play,

he will scrabble his back claws very fast on the linoleum or

hardwood. Sheriff hears this and jumps. They start the

cycle again.

Doug and I have laughed about this as well, having met

people in our lives who are immediately comfortable with us,

realizing that, although we respond to oral instead of

visible cues, we are otherwise pretty much just ordinary

people. Bobby got that idea right away with Sheriff. But

he also tires of the kitten's endless playfulness. When

this happens, he vaults over Sheriff and trots off.

Sheriff is still learning. When she came to us at six

weeks old, she was too small to look at chairs with her paws

and understand them. We would hold her in a chair and then

put her down. She learned to climb up the upholstered

recliner in her first room using claws, but she often

misjudged and fell down before she learned.

She's now four months old and has a much longer wheel

base from nose to tail. She has looked at the kitchen

chairs with her paws, figured out how they are made, learned

that they are comfortable, and now regularly hops into one

or another. That is how she gets on the table. I now keep

the chair next to mine pushed in all the way. Sheriff can

get her head and upper arms up on the table but not the rest

of her. So she sits there when I'm eating, for all the

world like a little cat person except that she'd rather be

on the table helping me with dinner.

And she applied her knowledge about kitchen chairs to

all the other seating devices in our house. You never know

now in which chair or sofa you will find her. We didn't

teach her about chairs at all. By the time she learned, we

had figured out that she did better learning on her own. We

just get out of the way and let her explore. She does just

that.

There are lots of other stories I'd love to tell: Like

the fact that Sheriff gets in the middle of a wide open

space like the kitchen floor and just plain dances--hopping

and jumping and leaping to music only she can hear. Like

the swisher toy we have--long strips of plastic attached to

a rigid stick that you can shake in the air or tap on the

ground, moving it around quickly for Sheriff to hear and

attack, which she does with the same speed a sighted kitten

would. Like the Great Cats hiding when the new bathroom was

being put in while Sheriff hung around outside the door,

listening and smelling and talking with the workers, as

fascinated as the Great Cats were scared.

But I won't. Instead, I'll just say that Doug and I

have been in the National Federation of the Blind for a long

time and worked hard to learn that we can handle daily

living tasks, jobs, home management just like our sighted

associates. And we have both worked hard to spread that

word to our fellow blind brothers and sisters as well as to

our sighted friends. Even so, in the last three months,

we've learned again the lesson of how easy it is to

underestimate the capabilities of the blind. We were taught

this lesson by a little black kitten we call Sheriff.

DICK AND JANE... AND BARBARA

by Barbara Pierce

The story you are about to read is true. Unfortunately

you could change the names, dates, times, and places, tell

it over and over again, and it would still be true. We as

blind people have enough real problems to deal with without

having to continue to endure the needless illiteracy forced

upon us by the failure to teach us Braille when we are

children.

If you sense in my words something less than my usual

good cheer and optimism, you are right; because the teaching

of Braille to blind children is an area in which our schools

have declined over the past decades, rather than improved.

We in the National Federation of the Blind are working to

reverse this trend, and we need your help to do it. In the

following story Barbara Pierce lays out the problem. Here is

what she has to say:

Can you remember the intoxication of learning to read?

I can. When I began first grade, the Scott-Foresman primers

about the adventures of Dick, Jane, and Sally were in use,

and I still remember the picture of Dick standing on his

head in a pile of leaves, feet kicking in the air, while one

of his sisters intoned the page's text, "Look at Dick!

Funny, funny Dick!"

Had I but known it, those early weeks of first grade

were the high point of my reading career. We gathered around

the teacher in reading groups to sound out the words and

falter our way through each page. I was good at it. I

understood the principles of picking out the sound of each

letter and shoving them together rapidly enough to guess at

the meaning. The result was that I was in the first reading

group.

My success didn't last long. By second semester each

page bore many more lines of print, and my mother was forced

to work with me at home after school or before bed to help

me keep up. For I was what they called a low-vision child.

I could see the print with only one eye, and I am

certain that I was legally blind, though no one ever used

that word in my hearing. Mother placed a little lamp close

to the page so that I could see as well as possible, but the

letters were still blurred, and I could never get the hang

of reading an entire word at once.

By second grade I was in the second reading group, and

by third grade I had slipped to the third group, despite the

lamp now clipped to the side of my desk. I had to face the

truth: I was dumb. I lay awake at night worrying about the

increasing number of spelling workbook exercises left undone

because my reading and writing were too slow to complete

them in class.

I still maintained an unbroken string of perfect

spelling tests because my parents drilled me on the spelling

lists every week. The tests were nothing--but the workbook!

I fantasized about what it would be like to go to bed at

night and not stare open-eyed into the black prospect of

mortification when the truth about me and my incomplete work

eventually came to my parents' notice.

It happened at the close of the third marking period,

and it came, as such things do, like a bolt from the blue. I

had actually brought home what I thought was a good report

card--all A's and B's--except for art, penmanship, and gym,

in which I always got C's.

Everybody knew that I was terrible at those things

because "Barbara's blind as a bat." But the dreaded

unmasking of my shameful secret in the spelling workbook

seemed to me to have remained hidden beneath an A for yet

one more grading period. I handed my mother my report card

and ran out to play.

But when my brother and I were called in for dinner

(Dad was out of town at the time), I knew that something was

wrong; Mother had been crying, and she did not sit down to

dinner with us. She said that she had a headache.

It soon became apparent that I was the headache. My

report card had betrayed me after all. In all that hard-to-

read small print at the bottom the teacher had given me a U

(unsatisfactory) in the puts-forth-best-effort category,

where I was used to getting E's (excellent) or at least S's

(satisfactory).

Mother went to school the next day and learned the

horrible truth about me. I was astonished to learn afterward

that the relief of having my shameful secret out in the open

actually reduced my burden. True, I had to make up all the

work I had been avoiding because the reading had become too

difficult. Play time was much reduced, and I had to learn

all over again how to go to sleep without worrying, but

things were never again as bad.

In the following years we tried magnifying glasses for

my good right eye, and the summer after fourth grade I had

to be tutored in an effort to learn to read with high

magnification. In September of fifth grade my new teacher

called on me to read a paragraph in the geography book

during the class lesson. I read like a second grader, and I

was mortified.

The teacher never called on me again. By sixth grade I

was hardly using the glasses at all. I was quick to learn as

long as I didn't have to struggle to make sense of the

print, and it was easier on everyone for the teacher to

assign a rapid reader to work with me on in-class reading

projects.

Finally, at the close of seventh grade, my parents

faced the painful truth: if I were to have any hope of

literacy, I would have to learn Braille. Print was no longer

an option. I worked to learn Braille in a summer of weekly

lessons taught by a woman who used Braille herself, though

she admitted that she was not a good Braille reader.

She assured me that her husband could read Braille

rapidly, but I never heard him or anyone else read Braille

efficiently. People told me it was important to use my

Braille and that practice would increase my speed. But by

that point in my education I had already worked out

alternative ways of getting my reading and writing done, and

I was no longer eager to crawl down a page of text as we had

done in early elementary school.

I practiced writing Braille with my slate and stylus

because I knew that in college I would need a good way of

taking notes in lectures, but I never made time to learn to

read Braille properly.

Now that I am a member of the National Federation of

the Blind, I know hundreds of people who read Braille easily

and well. Some of them could not see print when they were

beginning school, so Braille was the only option for them.

But many more could make out print when they were learning

to read, even though as adults they cannot see it.

They were lucky enough to be taught Braille along with

print, and they simply and naturally learned to decide which

method would be most useful for each reading task. As a

result they now read Braille at several hundred words a

minute.

I have never regretted learning to read print. Everyone

should know the shapes of print letters, but I will always

bitterly regret that I was not taught Braille as a small

child.

Today I am struggling to gain the speed and accuracy in

reading Braille that I should have had by the time I was

ten. I have now been working at it for six years, and my

reading speed has tripled, but I must face the fact that I

will probably never read as well as a bright ten-year-old.

Setting aside the fact that the adult brain does not

master new skills as rapidly as does a child's, I cannot

bring myself to practice reading aloud to my long-suffering

family. The time for taking advantage of such an opportunity

is childhood, and I cannot inflict my stumbling reading on

my husband.

If my mother could speak to parents who are facing the

dilemma of whether or not to demand that their children

learn Braille, she would urge them to decide in favor of

Braille. No matter how clearly a youngster can see print at

the moment, if the vision is fragile or problematic in any

way, Braille will often become invaluable in the future,

even if print too continues to be useful.

All young things need space to stretch and grow within

their God-given abilities. Blind children must be given a

chance.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

by Ron Schmidt

Here is the other side of the coin. As you read this

story, think about what Barbara Pierce wrote in the previous

one, and think about what you might do to help us end the

needless waste and pain. As is right and proper, we who are

members of the National Federation of the Blind are taking

the lead in doing for ourselves in solving this problem, but

we can't do the job alone. Ron Schmidt is a husband, father,

breadwinner, and Braille reader. Here is what he has to say:

I have been totally blind since age two. So luckily, no

one tried to decide for me whether I should use limited

vision for reading print. My mom read everything she could

to me in my first six years of life, but it was never

enough. Helping my dad run a busy dairy farm didn't give her

a lot of free time to read to me, but I was eager to hear

stories, as all kids are, and to learn as much as I could

about the world I couldn't see. Reading other people's words

(pictures of places and events and feelings) gave me a

wonderful feeling of learning and understanding.

The most exciting event in my life as a child occurred

when I went to a school, and my teacher said she would teach

me to read and write Braille. Finally I would be able to

read all I wanted, and about anything I wanted to know more

about.

It was so much fun and so exciting that I never thought

of it as schoolwork. By the third grade I had already gone

through the Braille reading books our school had for

children up to the sixth grade. I borrowed all the books I

was interested in from the state library for the blind, and

throughout the thirty-five years from then to now, I have

been thankful every day that I learned Braille.

Through junior and senior high school and later in

college I tried to get every course book I could put into

Braille. It usually meant getting lists of books from

teachers six months ahead of needing them. But all gladly

tried their best to do it for me. It was always so much

easier to understand and retain more of what I read by

reading it myself with my fingers than to have it read to me

by readers or by my use of recorded material.

Braille also allowed me to participate in reading aloud

in class with my sighted classmates and to talk about what I

felt with my family and friends. My roommates in college

were always envious of my being able to read in bed late at

night without any lights on, which they couldn't do without

disturbing others who were trying to sleep.

As I write this, I am just turning forty-five years of

age. For thirty-eight of that forty-five years I have relied

upon the reading and writing of Braille for my happiness and

success in school, college, career, and life overall. I read

Braille books to my twin girls now and have since they were

one year old, starting with the Twin Vision books. I

demonstrate Braille to their schoolmates and explain how it

makes it possible to learn.

Getting my present job as a reservationist for the

Homestead Resort depended (and, for that matter, still

depends) on my being able to Braille pages of room and condo

rates and other information, which changes regularly and

which I must have at my fingertips to communicate to

prospective vacationers when they call our office.

I use my Perkins Brailler, and my wife reads what I

need while I dash it off at night and have it fresh at hand

for the work the following morning. I doubt that I could

have convinced my employer of my ability to handle the job

efficiently enough to have been hired without the ability to

use Braille.

There is nothing that makes a person feel more assured

and independent than being able to write and read his or her

own material--whether for work, education, or leisure. I

urge anyone with children who have little or no eyesight to

do all they can to get their youngsters to learn Braille. It

is easier at a younger age, I believe, and can make a great

difference in school and the rest of a child's life, just as

much now as it did for me more than thirty years ago.

DELIVERING THE COFFEE

by Mary Ellen Gabias

Mary Ellen Gabias has held a variety of responsible

jobs. She has worked for a state legislature and has been

an administrator of a program which helps blind people find

employment. Today she is a wife and mother with three small

children. In her story, "Delivering The Coffee," she

reminds us that it isn't always the great events of life

that make the difference. Here is how she describes her own

personal journey to confidence:

I was lucky. My parents always believed I could do

great things. When I wrote my first composition in

elementary school, my mother was very proud. She said that

I could work hard and become a famous writer. She had it

all planned. I would write "the Great American Novel" and

make enough from it to support her and dad in their old age.

I began learning French in Grade 3. My parents

imagined me working as an interpreter at the United Nations.

I became a political junkie in the seventh grade and

began working on political campaigns in high school. My

parents reminded me that I should not forget good ethics

when I was elected to Congress. My parents definitely

believed that I was capable of doing extraordinary things

with my life.

It was the ordinary things that gave them trouble. I

was expected to dust furniture, but my mother gave up on

teaching me how to sweep floors when I couldn't get the hang

of using a dustpan. I took my turn washing and drying

dishes, but my sighted brothers were all expected to clear

the table. It just seemed so much easier to do that job with

sight.

I learned how to measure, pour, stir, and chop. I did

not learn how to use the gas stove. In fact, my mother

always thought I would have to marry a rich man, who could

afford to hire a cook and housekeeper. Either that, or I

should stay single and live at home.

My parents were quite progressive compared with some of

the other adults I knew. They expected me to be responsible

for myself and my actions. They pushed me to do more than I

thought a blind person could do. They stood up to other

adults who called them cruel for letting me play tag and

roller skate. All in all, they were terrific.

But they had never heard of the National Federation of

the Blind. They had very limited contact with blind adults

who were earning a living and managing their own lives. The

local agency for the blind had a very custodial approach.

They organized picnics, but the people with the most sight

served them food and cleaned up afterwards.

The totally blind people were taken to a bench and

encouraged to sit there and wait to be served. My parents

knew that I could do more than the agency thought a blind

person could do, but they didn't know how much more.

I was a very typical adolescent. I felt ugly and

awkward, and I was sure that every blemish on my nose made

me a social pariah. With their usual patience and

understanding, my parents reminded me that I wasn't the only

kid who'd ever had a pimple. Blindness made me stand out

more than any adolescent wants to stand out.

My parents helped me to understand that being different

from everyone else could be tremendously positive, provided

the differences were based on excellence and achievement. I

came to believe that, if I were only good enough at

everything I tried, people would forget I was blind and

treat me like everyone else. I became very active in

the Junior Achievement program. High school students in

Junior Achievement work with representatives of local

companies to form their own small businesses. The

businesses make a product or provide a service throughout

the school year. If they are successful, they make a

profit. If not, they go the way of many failed small

businesses. Needless to say, the whole program is permeated

with the spirit of friendly competition.

I was in Junior Achievement for three years. I worked

hard and entered every competition for which I was eligible.

In my senior year the other students in my company elected

me executive vice president. I was very excited. This

proved to me that people would forget I was blind if I was

good enough at what I did.

Our company produced a radio show, which was aired on a

local station. It was a lot of fun. Everyone had a turn

being disc jockey for the week. We sold radio advertising.

We produced a company annual report. Our officers competed

with the officers of 93 other companies for the title of

"Officer of the Year". I won. Out of 94 executive vice

presidents in northwestern Ohio, the judges chose me. What

more proof did I need that blindness could be forgotten?

Then the wind was knocked out of my sails. I was told

that I could not attend the National Junior Achievement

Conference along with the other contest winners. They were

afraid to be responsible for a blind person. They said I

could go if I was willing to be the only student among the

2,000 who attended from around the country who came with

their parents.

The conference organisers said they might let me eat

with the other students, provided the food was not "too

difficult." I could not stay with them on the college

campus where the conference was being held. I would have to

stay in a motel with my parents. I learned the hard way

that others do not forget about blindness, particularly when

they do not understand it.

I was not willing to attend the conference under such

humiliating circumstances. My confidence was badly shaken.

If being the best wasn't good enough, what could I do?

I first heard about the National Federation of the

Blind when I was a university freshman. I read Federation

literature with increasing excitement. Here were blind

people succeeding despite obstacles thrown in their way.

They weren't asking anyone to forget that they were blind.

They were not asking for special favors or to be taken care

of by others. They were prepared to do their share of the

work and to help take care of others in need.

As I met other members of the National Federation of

the Blind, I began to understand what real self confidence

means. I did not have to struggle to be perfect at

everything I tried in order to feel acceptable to others. I

needed to strive for excellence because doing my best was

the right thing to do.

I met people who were doing things which I admired.

Some were succeeding in careers I never dreamed possible for

a blind person. Others were doing the ordinary work of

everyday living with skill and grace.

Sometimes it is the small moments which make the

largest impact. I was attending the Federation's National

Convention during the summer when I graduated from college.

The Presidential Suite was a place for convention delegates

to gather, make friends, and conduct business with the

President.

There was always a pot of coffee on hand to serve

visitors. I dropped by the suite to say hello to friends.

Someone asked for a cup of coffee and the person in charge

said to me "Will you get that, Mary Ellen?"

That simple request threw me into a dither. I was an

honors graduate of a large state university. I'd travelled

by myself across the country. But, I had never before

carried a steaming cup of coffee across a crowded room.

Yet someone had asked me to do just that. I was afraid

I might not put the right amount of cream and sugar in the

cup. I was afraid I might burn myself when I poured the

coffee. I was afraid I might bump into someone and dump the

whole cup on them. But I was at the Convention of the

National Federation of the Blind. This was not the place to

use blindness as an excuse for failing to try. Besides,

where else would I get more understanding and support if

things didn't go well?

I delivered the cup of coffee. Nothing went wrong. In

fact, I doubt if anyone else realized what a moment of truth

this small act had been for me.

I was quite ready to heave a sigh of relief and rest on

my laurels. Then three more people asked for coffee.

Before long, I'd gotten over my nervousness. By the end of

the afternoon, I felt quite experienced. I did drop a cup

and realized the world did not come to an end. That was

just an ordinary part of doing an ordinary job.

More than twenty years have gone by since that

convention. I still enjoy writing and speaking French,

though I've long since decided that the life of an author or

interpreter is not the life for me. I'm still a political

junkie, and I spent more than two years working for a state

legislature.

Now I'm a wife and mother. I'm teaching my three-year-

old son to pour his own apple juice. He's learning the

ordinary skills of daily life from me. Now I'm the Mom who

encourages my children to dream great dreams and work hard

to achieve them. It's amazing how extraordinarily

satisfying ordinary things can be.

ON WITH THE SHOW

by Patricia Maurer

Blind or sighted, all mothers tend to have one thing in

common: They want their children to have better

opportunities than they themselves had--no matter how good

their own were. In "On With The Show," Patricia Maurer

reminisces about her own childhood and shares her hopes for

her daughter. Here is what she has to say:

Almost everyone dreams of doing something--something

spectacular and out of the ordinary. Parents dream that

their children will have opportunities to do things that

they as children couldn't or didn't do. As a child I wished

I could sing and play the piano and clarinet, but I didn't

seem to have a talent toward singing or playing musical

instruments.

My parents gave me the opportunity to take piano and

clarinet lessons, and I sang in the school and church

choirs. I could see only a little then and am nearly

totally blind now. The teachers and my parents were not

sure that I could get very far with my music, but everyone

was willing to try.

I wore glasses, which helped me to see a little better.

I used a magnifying glass clipped to my glasses to read

print and musical scores. When reading music, I would read

a line, looking very closely at the page. Then, I would

memorize that line. Learning each piece was very slow and

tedious. I did not seem to have any talent for learning to

play these songs just by listening, although I did try

playing by ear.

As you may know, there is such a thing as Braille

music. To use it one must read it first and then memorize

it, so that it may be played on the piano or on another

instrument. I did not learn Braille as a child. I wish I

had.

Recently, my daughter Dianna, who is sighted, began

taking piano lessons. She practices each day and, her

teacher says, reads music easily.

When it came time for her first recital, we arrived

early and sat in the front row. Although I suppose Dianna

was a little nervous, she did not appear so. When it was

her turn to perform, she walked to the stage, seated herself

comfortably at the piano, and played "On With The Show," the

piece she and her teacher had chosen. How different the

recital was for her than my recitals had been when I was a

child!

I especially remember one time that I had worked and

worked on a piece on the clarinet. Right before I was to go

on stage, I could not remember my piece. If you have ever

played the clarinet you know that becoming nervous

definitely does not help your performance. To bite down

hard on the mouthpiece produces a very squeaky sound. When

I began to play there was only a series of squeaks. I was

embarrassed and wished I were not there at all. My parents

did their best to comfort me, but I am sure they were

embarrassed, too.

I do not know if I would have done better if I had not

been so nervous about going to the stage. Maybe it would

have helped to have learned as a child how to travel with a

cane and, more importantly, to learn that it is okay to be

blind--that one does not have to pretend to be sighted.

However, learning these things was not an option for me.

There were not people around who could teach me. My parents

did the best that they could, but they are the first to say

how much better it would have been had they known about the

National Federation of the Blind.

This incident, although embarrassing, has not damaged

me for life. There are hundreds of children sighted or

blind who are now adults and who can remember not doing so

well at recitals--embarrassing themselves and their parents.

My daughter is not blind. She learns quickly. I know

that today there are children who are blind who can

competently walk to the piano or play the clarinet. They

have had training and opportunities. There are still others

who are afraid and need the chance to learn and succeed.

As I listened to my daughter play, I was so proud.

Proud of her and proud of our family. We work together to

see that she has a chance to learn. She will take that

opportunity and do well with it. I also thought of my

parents, and I thanked them for giving me the opportunities

which they gave me.

Dianna is committed to doing well with the piano, and I

am committed to doing my best for her.

So, "On With The Show." Who knows what the next

recital will bring?

You can help us spread the word...

... about our Braille Readers Are Leaders contest for blind

schoolchildren, a project which encourages blind

children to achieve literacy through Braille.

... about our scholarships for deserving blind college

students.

...about Job Opportunities for the Blind, a program that

matches capable blind people with employers who need

their skills.

... about where to turn for accurate information about

blindness and the abilities of the blind.

Most Importantly, you can help us by sharing what

you've learned about blindness in these pages with your

family and friends. If you know anyone who needs assistance

with the problems of blindness, please write:

Marc Maurer, President

National Federation of the Blind

1800 Johnson Street, Suite 300

Baltimore, Maryland 21230-4998

Other Ways You Can Help the

National Federation of the Blind

Write to us for tax-saving information on bequests and

planned giving programs.

OR

Include the following language in your will:

"I give, devise, and bequeath unto National Federation

of the Blind, 1800 Johnson Street, Suite 300, Baltimore,

Maryland 21230, a District of Columbia non profit

corporation, the sum of $\_\_\_\_\_\_ (or \_\_\_\_\_ percent of my net

estate" or "The Following Stocks and bonds:\_\_\_\_\_\_") to be

used for its worthy purposes on behalf of blind persons."

Your Contributions

Are Tax Deductible