Rachel Bodek Personal Essay

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“Insight beyond Eyesight”

“When You Learn, Teach,

When You Get, Give” (Maya Angelou)

“Giving is a Gift to Oneself” (Rabbi Yechiel Spero)

The above verses are my mottos, my ambition, my messages for life, although it took a long journey for me to come to appreciate their deep meaning. And, it’s still a work in progress….

I started wearing eyeglasses at a very young age. Up to the age of ten or so, with frequent prescription adjustments, my vision was relatively correctible. I had enough sight to read standard print and go about my daily living activities with minimal difficulty. As I approached my teen years, my eyesight began to further deteriorate to an extent beyond correction with glasses. I was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP), the same eye condition as my father and some of my siblings. At age thirteen or so, I was officially legally blind.

I struggled through my adolescence with emotional crises of regular teen hood compounded by my visual impairment. It was extremely difficult for me to accept that I would never see ‘perfectly’ again, be stigmatized as ‘disabled’, and have to be dependent on others in so many ways. I felt hopeless and despondent. These issues (which I could only identify years later in ‘20/20 hindsight’) define some characteristics of my personality: yearning for perfection and desire for independence. I couldn’t see how I could have a future with a lack in these abilities.

It took a lot of strength and courage, support from family and friends, as well as professional intervention, for me to come to terms with my vision loss. I began to change my outlook on what a meaningful life is all about. Once I determined that I could strive for aspirations despite my vision impairment, I started exploring options of building my future, of persevering. I eventually learned how to use assistive technology and equipment as well as to read and write Braille. I studied conscientiously in high school and excelled. Nonetheless, the private religious high school I attended was not New York State accredited, so I took the initiative to work on obtaining a GED (grade equivalency diploma). With the guidance and assistance of my Teacher of the Visually Impaired I studied for and passed the GED exams at the end of twelfth grade.

The year after I graduated high school I married my husband who is a paraplegic due to a neuroblastoma that occurred during his youth. My husband and I share the value of being independent and as productive as possible despite our disabilities. We are proponents of focusing on abilities and trying to make the best of what life throws at us. This is easier said than done of course, but being where I am today is the finest evidence that we’ve invested tremendous effort to live by this principle.

I attended SUNY Rockland Community College and graduated with my Associates degree in Human Services. At that point, my goal was to become a Social Worker and help others who face challenges. Once I earned my diploma, I applied for a position as a Medicaid Service Coordinator. After facing discrimination where one agency refused to hire me due to my disability, I applied to another agency and got the job. I advocate for my consumers with passion as I can empathize with their needs and challenges and go to great lengths to assist them as much as possible. Additionally, have gained a vast pool of knowledge and experience as a case manager, but this was not my ‘end goal’, just a stepping stone for my future aspirations. I applied to SUNY Empire College in order to obtain a Bachelor’s degree in Community and Human Services.

My studies at Empire were put on an extended hiatus after my second semester for auspicious purposes: I gave birth to twin boys in 2007. Although I returned to work immediately after my children were born, my college career was put on hold for a while. Ultimately, I returned to Empire and graduated with my Bachelor’s degree in June of 2014.

“God has given each one of us a task, which we can perform better than anyone else. We must find out what that task is, and how to do it in the best way possible”… “What really counts in life is the quiet meeting of every difficulty with the determination to get out of it all the good there is” (Helen Keller)

At this point in my life, I thought I had met my share of challenges and felt content and proud that I had overcome them with flying colors. But in a matter of time, God chose to test us once again. The most difficult test of all was yet to strike. The older of my twins has been diagnosed with RP and is already legally blind. Observing him struggle is a cause of daily pain and heartache. This hurdle seems insurmountable. However, I keep telling myself to move on and try to make the best of this situation. And yet again, I have had to figure out a strategy to deal with the circumstances in a proactive way. While advocating for my son and researching appropriate resources and services, I’ve encountered many obstacles and am constantly acquiring new information in this field. In the interim, through networking with other parents and professionals, I became involved in bolstering the support system for parents of the visually impaired. Another mother and I have coordinated a support group for mothers of visually impaired children called ‘Insight Beyond Eyesight’. This has become my focus and mission and has brought about a diversion in my scholastic and career objectives.

In addition to my former goal of obtaining a Master’s degree in Social Work, I have considered the possibilities of doing Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling or becoming a Teacher of the Visually Impaired. After some research, I have decided to pursue the degree that would fit into my busy schedule best and would work out logistically. I started a Teaching degree at Dominican College in the fall of 2014 but the time frame of the classes didn’t work well with my schedule. Thus, after completing six credits at Dominican College, I transferred to St. Thomas Aquinas College in the fall of 2015, as their schedule of classes works out better for me. Eventually, I would like to go for certification in Teaching the Visually Impaired.

Furthermore, while advocating for others and myself in reference to accessible transportation, I have become an active board member of the local paratransit service in Rockland County called TRIPS. At our board meetings I get to bring up concerns and suggestions to improve the TRIPS service as well as the public transportation locally for individuals with disabilities and senior citizens.

Throughout the years, I have been invited to speak to classes in schools and to groups and events in the community. I relate my story and try to convey some messages as to what helps me overcome my challenges, and simultaneously encourage others to believe in the potential capabilities of those with disabilities. Giving these types of lectures are important as I feel that the attitude of the community makes a remarkable difference as to the success of their disabled counterparts.

I have read many biographies of individuals who are visually impaired, and others who have prevailed over hardships and obstacles. Many of them have mastered outstanding feats and reached great heights. I would love to emulate some of them and make the world a better place. But I’ve come to realize that the best I can do is contribute my share on a modest scale. My hope is to acquire the skills and knowledge to teach and advocate for children so that they can recognize their capabilities and achieve their dreams. As Helen Keller so eloquently remarks: “It is not required of every man and woman to do or be something great. Most of us have to be content to take small parts in the drama of life”.