National Rep. 2020 Gary Wunder

Wunder was born three months prematurely in 1955, the oldest of four children. His family lived in Kansas City, Missouri, and Wunder remembers that, since he had been blind from birth, he managed to persuade everyone in his family except his father to do precisely what he wanted. It would be many years before Wunder could appreciate his father's instinctive understanding that Gary had to learn to do things for himself.

Wunder tells with amusement the story of his dawning awareness of his blindness. When he was quite young, his home had sliding glass doors separating the living room from the patio. When those doors were closed, he could not hear and therefore did not know what was happening on the other side and assumed that no one else could either. One day he found several soft drink bottles on the patio and broke them. His father then opened the doors and asked if he had broken the bottles. Gary said he had not and that he did not know how they had been broken. His father then astonished him by saying that both his parents had watched him break the bottles and that his mother was now crying because she had thought surely her baby couldn't tell a lie. Gary's response was to say, "Well, she knows better now."

Wunder attended grades one through five at a Kansas City public school. When he was ten, a boy who attended the Missouri School for the Blind persuaded him that he was missing real life by staying at home. At the school, his friend told him, kids rode trains and buses. They could bowl and swim and didn't have to listen to parents. As a result Wunder did some persuading at home and was on hand for sixth grade and some necessary but painful lessons about that real world.

At the close of seventh grade Wunder returned to public schools, having learned several vitally important lessons: he knew the basics of using a white cane; he recognized that his father's demands on him had sprung from strong love and eagerness for his son to succeed; and he understood that people beyond his own family had worth and deserved his respect. But he had also learned that the school for the blind was not the promised land, and he was delighted to be once more in public schools for eighth grade and high school. He was elected to the National Honor Society his senior year but struggled with the mechanics of getting his work done. Braille was not readily available, and readers were hard to recruit without money to pay them.

Wunder planned to attend the University of Missouri at Kansas City in order to live with his grandmother, but, after a taste of freedom at the orientation center in Columbia, Missouri, the summer before college, he decided to enroll at the university's Columbia campus, where everyone walked everywhere and where he could contrive as many as three or four dates an evening if he hurried from place to place.

Wunder enjoys recounting the adventure which persuaded him that a blind person should always carry a white cane: "I was having dinner with a young woman who lived near me, so I had not brought my cane, figuring that I wouldn't need it. To my consternation and her distress, my plate of liver and onions slid into my lap. She asked if I wanted her to walk me home so that I could change. I was already so embarrassed that I assured her I would be right back and that I did not need her assistance.

The busiest intersection in Columbia lay between me and clean slacks, and after I successfully survived that street crossing, I swore that I would never again be caught without my cane."

Wunder decided to major in political science and philosophy because he felt compelled to avoid the science and math that he loved but feared to take. During his sophomore year he met a professor from Central Missouri State University who suggested that he was ducking the challenge. Together they explored the question of whether or not a blind person could follow schematics and read voltmeters. The answers seemed to be yes, so Wunder transferred to Central Missouri State, where he graduated in 1977 with a degree in electronics technology.

He had done well with the courses, but he did not see how he could run a repair shop with its responsibility for mastering hundreds of schematics for appliances. He could teach electronics, but the professors from whom he had learned the most were those who had firsthand experience.

He didn't want to be the theory only kind of teacher.

Wunder looked for interim jobs after graduation while he tried to decide what to do, and he discovered the hard way that blind job-seekers have to be better than the competition in order to be considered at all. He vowed to become so well trained at doing something that would-be employers could not ignore him. He enrolled in a ten-month course in computer programming offered by the Extension Division of the University of Missouri. No blind person had ever entered the program before, but Wunder completed it successfully and was hired immediately (in the fall of 1978) by the Pathology Department of the University of Missouri Hospital and Clinics in Columbia. Years and promotions later Wunder is now retired from his job as programmer analyst-expert in the Information Services Department of the hospital.

Wunder first learned about the National Federation of the Blind the summer before his senior year of high school. He says, "In the beginning I thought this talk about discrimination was a pretty good racket. No one did those things to me, and I assumed that all this Federation talk about jobs being denied and parents having children taken away from them was an effective way of raising funds. I didn't realize that my father's name and reputation in my hometown were protecting me from the worst of real life. So far I had gotten what I wanted, including a motorcycle to ride on our farm and my own horse. It was some time before I recognized that these talented and committed blind people whom I was getting to know in the Federation were trying to teach me about the world that I was going to inherit. They frightened me a little, but more and more I wanted to be like them."

In late 1973, several months after Wunder started college in Columbia, a Federation organizing team arrived to establish a new chapter, and he took an active part in the preparations. Wunder was elected president, and when he transferred to Central Missouri State two years later, he organized a chapter in Warrensburg. In 1977 Wunder was elected first vice president of the NFB of Missouri, and in 1979 he became president. Except for one two-year term he has continued in that post ever since.

Wunder was elected to the board of directors of the National Federation of the Blind in 1985 and in 2002 was elected secretary of the organization.

Looking back over the years of his involvement with and commitment to the Federation, Wunder says: "Despite all I learned from my parents about honor, responsibility, and the necessity to be competent, what I could never get from them was a sense of where blind people fit in a world composed mostly of sighted people. Friends and loved ones had always told me how wonderful I was (wonderful for a blind person, that is), but until I came to know members of the National Federation of the Blind, no one had the experience or knowledge to say how I could expect to measure up alongside the sighted. The NFB was the first place where I didn't get a round of applause for performing the routine activities of life. If I wanted my Federation colleagues' recognition and admiration, I had to merit them.

It sounds contradictory, but while I was learning that I wouldn't be applauded for insignificant accomplishments, I was also learning that I didn't have to possess special compensatory senses or talents to make my way in the world. When you believe that your only opportunity for success lies in being a musician but you know that your only musical talent is in listening and then you suddenly find that you are capable of doing the average job in the average place of business, your sense of freedom, hope, and possibility knows no bounds."

Since his retirement Gary has not slowed down. In 2010 he took on the job of editor of our own Braille Monitor the nation’s leading publication on blindness issues. Gary now lives with his wife Debbie in Columbia, Missouri.