Reflections on the “How I see It” Campaign

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Most recently, the Foundation Fighting Blindness ran a campaign to raise funds towards the research of retinal degenerative diseases. In order to portray the “difficulties and challenges experienced by those with vision loss,” This campaign featured individuals with sight attempting to do their favorite daily activities wearing a blindfold. “We hope it will give people a better understanding of what it is like to live with a blinding disease and ultimately inspire them to join us in the fight to find a cure,” said Bill Schmidt, the organization’s Chief Executive Officer (blindness.org). The campaign concluded on World Sight Day, October 13

Many blind people as well as the National Federation of the Blind were upset by what they saw as the Foundation Fighting Blindness playing on common fears and the misunderstanding of blindness to raise funds for its coffers. Of course, the campaign participants were frustrated by not being able to use sight and ultimately failed at the task. They attempted such things as cooking, cleaning and eating. One particularly harmful suggestion was that people put on a blindfold and attempt to care for their child for one minute. Mark Riccobono, President of The National Federation of the Blind, which has been working tirelessly since 1940 towards the full acceptance of blind people as working, contributing members of our society, immediately sent a letter to the CEO of the Foundation denouncing the campaign for playing on the fears and misconceptions surrounding blindness. President Riccobono concluded his letter by inviting the CEO of the Foundation to meet with him to discuss the campaign on a leadership level.

The campaign also under minds the fact that, with proper training, blindness can be rendered to merely a nuisance. The individuals participating in the campaign, who had never been trained in the skills that independent blind people use every day to go about their lives, were unable to do the things that they did with sight. In addition, with respects to childcare, this campaign could seriously harm the rights of blind parents. President Riccobono wrote in his letter, “That even one family might be harmed because a social worker or neighbor watches your video and begins to question the competency of a blind parent is unconscionable” (nfb.org). In fact, there have been several examples in which caseworkers have removed children from their homes, just because they could not imagine how someone who is blind could possibly raise a child. The federation has had to fight alongside blind parents in court for the return of their children, who were taken from them by uninformed Children Services caseworkers.

In hopes of combating the perpetuation of the fears and misconceptions about blindness, the NFB also asked its members to write about or video themselves doing the things they do every day and to share it on social media. Mr. Riccobono wrote in his letter about how he and his wife Melissa, also blind, are independently and competently raising their three young children by knowing well the techniques that blind parents use to care for and play with their children. I also know two blind parents who face discriminatory behavior when they go out in public. For example, their little girl is often asked, “Do you take good care of your mommy?” This campaign will further damage the lives and opportunities of blind people by reinforcing the false belief that blind people cannot possibly take care of themselves, let alone a child.

Anyone who spends a lot of time around a competent blind person knows that, with the proper training of nonvisual techniques, a blind person can live a truly productive life and contribute to their society, just like anyone else. I am completely aware of this, having learned many nonvisual techniques to manage my life as someone who is blind. As a successful blind person, I find the publics’ misconceptions about blindness to be frustrating and that they are being encouraged extremely insulting. Every time someone suggests that I take the elevator instead of the stairs or talks down to me like I am a child is a reminder that I will always have to fight the obstacle of ignorance in working towards my goals. I work hard to maintain my image as someone who is independent and successful and it just sickens me that an organization would play into these fears to raise support. It is also harmful to the campaign participants. Should any of them ever experience severe vision loss, which is more and more likely with age or in an accident, they are driving home their belief that they could never make it without sight. This, of course, is false.

The NFB does not oppose medical research to help cure or prevent blindness, but playing on the misinformation of blindness as a vehicle to raise support is unacceptable and is nowhere near the truth of what it is like to be blind. I cook, clean and work, along with thousands of other blind people, accomplishing all by utilizing nonvisual techniques.

I have been asked to write about when it is appropriate to use a blindfold. While it is foolish to believe that you can experience the true meaning of blindness just by wearing a blindfold for a minute, they are useful in blindness skills training programs. Several blindness training centers around the country, including the Colorado Center for the Blind in Denver and Blind, Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota, train their students the techniques of blindness by requiring that they all wear blindfolds, to ensure that they are not able to use any remaining sight to complete their work at the centers. These centers instruct both people who have been blind for a very long time and those who have just become blind on daily living skills, travel/mobility, Braille, carpentry and other things. To achieve mastery of these skills as someone who is totally blind, it is necessary to do them without using any sight. Blindfolds are also used for training future teachers of the blind, so that they, too, can gain the full experience of learning and utilizing nonvisual techniques.

Utilizing blindfolds to train people to use nonvisual techniques is completely acceptable; however, it is a completely different story to ask a fully sighted individual, who has no idea of what it is like to be blind, to attempt completing a task without their sight. This will have the effect of reversing years of work done by competent blind individuals and the National Federation of the Blind to fight these misconceptions. For some groups, such as blind parents, these misconceptions can even be damaging. To the sighted reader, I hope that this paper has been educational. To the blind reader, please go about your life and be patient with those you encounter. Every day provides us with a myriad of opportunities to educate our sighted counterparts. There are many, many misunderstandings about blindness circulating and it is our job to combat them.

Works Cited

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