**IT'S YOUR MOVE, SON!**

by John W. Smith

**From the Editor: Dr. John Smith is a professor at Ohio University. He serves as First Vice President of the National Federation of the Blind of Ohio. Last year, he was largely responsible for organizing the NFB of Southeast Ohio and now serves as its President. In addition to teaching the art of effective communication at the university level, he is a fine musician. He uses both his music and his compelling speaking ability in a ministry that takes him across the country, whenever his professional and family responsibilities will allow it. Here are his most recent reflections:**

I do not usually wax eloquent about life and success, but I do know that one key element of a successful life is making good decisions. Decisions, decisions, decisions--decisions about where to go to school, where to live, what jobs to take. In fact, James Bristol once said, "We are not all called to travel the same road, but we are called to be faithful to insights we have found on the road we have chosen." I am not sure what I think about destiny or pre-destination, but I do believe that our lives or at least the quality of our lives is often contingent on a few life- altering decisions which ultimately ensure the fulfillment or the destruction of our dreams.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them." Those foundations are the crux of this story.

I am a professor of speech communication at Ohio University. I have completed a Bachelor of Arts degree, a Master of Arts degree, and a doctoral degree in speech communication. Today I am a competent and confident man, but it wasn't always that way. There was a time when, like so many other young people, I had serious doubts about my abilities to make a worthwhile contribution to society in general and to myself in particular. For you to understand my story, I must begin at the beginning.

I was born in Chicago, Illinois on the South Side. This is important because the South Side experience for an African American growing up in Chicago has always been unique. When asked about the content and tone of her now famous play, A Raisin in the Sun, Loraine Hansberry said, "The play is about life on the South Side of Chicago for one black family. It is not about anyone else, anywhere else because the unique experience of a black family growing up on the South Side of Chicago was quite intriguing to me." Having grown up in that kind of an environment, I can relate to this comment.

I was raised by my grandparents, who came to Chicago from Tennessee during the great African American migration of the forties, fifties, and sixties. And, like so many others of those African Americans, they came to the South Side of Chicago to find the Promised Land. Karl, my grandfather, worked at several different jobs before finally coming to own and operate a Sunoco gas station located at the corner of our block. My neighborhood was fascinating. We lived between a banker and a doctor. Several lawyers, professors, and one key city administrator also lived on our block; and, with one exception, all were African American.

The South Side of Chicago is famous for its neighborhoods, its genially integrated communities, as well as its fiercely segregated ones. Those blacks who settled on the South Side of Chicago tended to be more upwardly mobile and more willing to assimilate than those who settled on the West Side of the city.

I was born into a middle-to-upper-class family. Because of the hard work of my grandfather, who often worked fourteen- to sixteen-hour days, we never really wanted for anything.

In some ways, my grandparents were Federationists long before we ever knew what that word meant, especially my grandmother Sarah. She encouraged me to climb trees, wash dishes, take out the garbage, clean up after the dogs, cats, and rabbits, and even clean my room. She never saw my blindness as a reason not to treat me like any other kid in the neighborhood. My grandfather was a bit different, because he was gone a lot. He never really knew what a blind child could do, so I could take advantage of his ignorance and absence.

As I grew older, I found that I wanted to prove myself to my grandfather but did not know how. I remember one day he came home early, and my grandmother wanted him to move an old refrigerator from the house to the yard. I offered my assistance, and he told me that he didn't want me getting hurt. I tried to tell him that when he was not there Sarah made us move beds, dressers, couches, and anything else that came to her mind, and I was the best mover in the house. He didn't buy it. He loved me, but he didn't respect me as a man. He always saw me as a blind child. He almost broke his back that day in an effort to keep me from helping him; and, because of his pride, he never let on that my assistance would have been helpful.

In addition to being a proud man, my grandfather was a competitive man. As an African American growing up in the twenties and thirties, he had learned that he had to be competitive in an environment where oftentimes the odds were stacked against him. One way he demonstrated his competitive nature was by playing games. In our house the game was checkers, and my grandfather was regarded as the greatest checker player in the entire city. He had never lost to anyone at any time. I began to notice just how much this game meant to him, and I wanted to prove to him that I could play the game and gain his respect as well. As I look back on it now, I really wanted his respect and admiration, and playing checkers or learning to play checkers seemed to be the best way to get it. I decided to learn to play.

My uncle, who lived with us at the time, was not a very good checker player, but he would and could teach me the basics. Week after week I studied, I played, and I got ready to challenge my grandfather. The night finally came when I challenged him. Because checkers was so important to us, we had almost nightly elimination tournaments. Little by little I became very good at the game until next to my grandfather and without his knowledge, I became probably the second-best player--at least in that household. My grandfather, however, never involved himself in any of these tournaments, because he considered them beneath him. First I beat my brother consistently, then my uncle, and then everyone else in the house; until, after two years, I felt it was time for me to challenge the man.

One night during the checkers tournament, my grandfather decided to get involved. We were playing best-two-out-of-three elimination rounds. After everyone had been eliminated except him and me, we squared off.

There was a thick atmosphere of anticipation and deafening silence in the kitchen that night, since everyone knew what was at stake. In my mind it was no longer a game, but my manhood that was on the line. As my grandfather sat down to play me, he said, "Well boy, you have been looking for this thrashing a long time; here it comes." I was furious at the remark, and I resolved in my heart that I would win that night if it killed me. The game was over in about five minutes, and I never knew what hit me. My grandfather was not only a great checkers player but a master of intimidation. He would talk to me in a condescending tone as he beat me, which added insult to injury. My family tried to console me that night, but I was devastated. I had really thought I was ready for the big show.

This was one of the times when I had to make a decision about how to respond to an overwhelming disappointment. A few years later, it would be going off to attend a college in Indiana and being dismissed after one semester; riding home on the bus that last night of college was one of the most devastating experiences of my life. I had thought I was ready for the big show then, and I found out again that I was not.

Success in life is contingent on crucial decisions at pivotal times, especially those times when we reach a fork in the road. I could have made any one of several decisions: pack it in, giving up on my goal of going to college or beating my grandfather, or I could have decided to keep on fighting. In both of these situations, I decided to keep on fighting. I challenged my grandfather again--forty-two more times! Each of those times I was left with that familiar feeling of desperation and devastation, but with each game I got a little better. My grandfather even began to make comments like, "That's a pretty good move," which for him was quite a statement.

On July 20, 1974, in the forty-fourth game with my grandfather, something life-altering happened. It was a sunny, Saturday afternoon, and many of the neighborhood men were there for our usual summer weekend checker tournament. As usual, it had come down to my grandfather and me. The atmosphere was electric; it seemed that the world was hanging on our every move. I began a series of calculated moves. As the game unfolded, I began to see the vision of victory opening up to me. No one spoke in that room, with

the exception of my grandfather's occasional taunts, "If you study long, you will study wrong," and "Are you sure that's what you want to do?"

Finally the magic moment came, and it seemed that the world stood still. I had reached the opportunity that I had fought for years to achieve. I sat in stunned disbelief and exhilaration, because it was finally going to happen. I had made a series of moves, and my grandfather had responded. Now it was my turn, and I saw the move of moves. I sat there, just taking it in. Then I heard my grandfather's voice, "It's your move, son." I made the move, giving him a jump, and then taking five of his men in one fell swoop.

I would have given anything that afternoon to see the expression on my grandfather's face. Tears came to my eyes then, as they do now when I think of that moment. After the move, he grasped my hand and said, "Good game, son; you win." A tremendous burden rolled off my shoulders, and from that moment to this day, my grandfather has treated me with genuine respect. He has been my strongest supporter. Later, he would tell me that when he saw what I had done, there was nothing he could say except "It's your move, son."

This memory of my grandfather, who unfortunately is now suffering the ravages of that monster Alzheimer's, will remain with me forever. I don't think he ever really understood what a turning point that was in my life. Over the next ten or fifteen years the tables gradually turned, and I became the king of checkers. He became my most competitive challenger. Yes, I made a good move that afternoon, but the critical move had come after game one; the day I made the decision to keep on fighting until game forty-four.

And what about that long bus ride home? You actually already know the rest of the story. When I got off that bus, I didn't know what I was going to do. When my grandfather picked me up that night at the bus station and we were driving home, he said, "Well son, it's your move again." I understood that he meant: What are you going to do? What decision are you going to make? Are you going to beat yourself up? Are you going to give up? Or are you going to decide to keep on fighting?

I have always been glad I decided to go on to college and pursue my dream of being a professor, but I am even more grateful that I made one other great move in my life: joining the National Federation of the Blind. That was an easy move for me, because, in doing so, I joined a group of people who were proven fighters, who were never willing just to take what life hands out. Through hard work, I have now become the First Vice President of the Ohio affiliate of the NFB, the President of my local chapter, and an active member of several national committees.

My advice to everyone, blind and sighted alike, is to choose to live rather than die, fight rather than surrender, win rather than lose at those critical moments we all face. Genuine success boils down to the decisions we make, and the responses we give to the circumstances we find ourselves in; success really begins with the right attitudes. As a Federationist, I have learned that it is respectable to be blind; and that, as a blind person, I am as entitled to happiness as anyone else. Robert Frost, in his classic poem, "The Road Not Taken," says:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both And be one traveler, long I stood And looked down one as far as I could To where it bent in the undergrowth; . . .

And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-- I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

Whether it is checkers or pursuing an education or going after that job that no one thinks you can get, you must decide to achieve; you must choose to reach your potential. You cannot give in to excuses, blindness, or external pressures; because it really is true that where there is a will, there is a way. Or in other words, where there is a positive attitude, there is the capacity to do extraordinary things. This is the spirit, the heart that beats in the breast of every true Federationist; and it is this spirit, this life blood, that keeps me moving down the road of life.