

From 20/20 to Complete Darkness

I have not had contact with people who are blind. I knew who Stevie Wonder was but I never saw him in everyday life. I knew about his music and that he wore sunglasses. Why do blind people always wear sunglasses? I have found that there are many reasons; some wear sunglasses to protect their eyes from sun damage and others wear them because their eyes may not be aesthetically pleasing. I often wondered how or if blind people lead normal lives.

Some people are born blind and learn at a young age to live their lives with a walking cane and/or a seeing-eye dog and they are usually taught to read and write with braille. Some people have a degenerative eye disease that causes them to lose their vision over the course of months or even years. With having failing vision, some of these people can prepare themselves for limited or complete loss of sight. There is legal blindness in which a person can still see but has very, very limited sight. They may still use a walking cane or seeing-eye dog.

I followed and interviewed a friend of mine, Robert Ott, whom I have known for approximately five years. He frequents the restaurant that I work at and over the course of my employment, I have learned a lot about Robert's life and about his blindness. I found that he was born sighted and became blind from an unfortunate event.

During the fall on October 6, 1990 Robert remembered watching the red, orange, and yellow leaves fall to the ground while looking out the window of his dojang (Martial Arts Studio) that he owned in New Jersey. Later that evening he would visit a bar that his dad managed only to have his life change forever. While at the bar Robert was involved in a physical fight to protect his father and other patrons from an intoxicated individual. After the fight, the individual came back with a gun, pointed it to Roberts head and pulled the trigger.

He spent the next few months in the hospital to recover from the incident. He was shot in the left temporal lobe of the brain. The bullet damaged the nerves to the left eye, destroyed the ability to taste and smell, and exploded in the right eye. His doctors did not think that he would survive this accident. Robert's head was so swollen that he did not know that he was blind until he came home from the hospital. He was lying in bed and when he turned to look at the picture of his girlfriend he could not see her. He asked his mom, "Am I blind?" She broke down crying and told him that he was in fact blind.

I arrived at the front door of his new townhome in Olympia on a sunny but windy day. After I rang the doorbell, I was greeted by Robert. He gave me a warm welcome while wearing his fashionable Prada sunglasses. This was the first time I visited him at his new townhome. He said that we would sit in the living room and wait for Christa, his assistant and also my friend. He walked over to the left wall of the hallway and used his hands as a guide down the wall to find the living room. He then veered to the left with arms slightly extended and feet shuffling on the floor until he found the couch. I walked by his walking stick which was hanging on the coat rack. He does not use his walking stick in the comfort of his home.

After Christa arrived with Starbucks, we walked upstairs to Robert's office. As I walked down the narrow hallway leading to his office, I looked at the pictures, awards, and certificates that were hanging on the right and left walls from floor to ceiling. Once in the office I noticed that there were twenty-six more awards and certificates hung neatly on the walls. These certificates and awards were presented to him over the years from various Martial Arts leaders from around the world. Robert teaches and is a master of his own Korean martial art called Kidokwan. This translates to "The family with the way of power". He named his teachings

Kidokwan after his blindness based on the reality that if it wasn't for his family and friends, he would not be alive today.

The first task of the day was to organize some files on his computer. He uses a program called JAWS – Job Access with Speech. This is a screen reader for computers that allows blind and visually impaired users to read the screen with what is called a text-to-speech. This program uses the keyboard to navigate through the home screen, files, folders, and emails. With using the control key and arrows, the computer will read everything that the cursor is on. Robert can use his computer without assistance from people because of this program, for the most part anyway.

Robert had saved a link, which was sent by email, to a Podcast interview that he did with Low Vision Bureau. In the folder that he saved the link, there were also approximately fifteen different files that consisted of clipart from the original email that contained the link. This was very confusing for him to navigate through the folder to find the file with the interview since he can't see what file contains what item. The computer would read the files for him but most of them didn't have names; just numbers to the clipart items. Christa and I deleted the unnecessary files and resaved the link so he could find it on his own.

Robert also uses an iPhone 4s which has Siri installed. Siri is an intelligent personal assistant and a knowledge navigator which works when spoken to. Robert has a screen protector on his phone with raised bumps to signify where the numbers are located on the touch screen. As he navigates through his phone, Siri speaks to him by naming off what button he is pushing or what contact he is looking through. He also sends text messages, something that I didn't think a blind person would do. He speaks into his phone and it will type out what he said. Siri will read it back to him so he could check for errors before sending the message. Apparently my phone has a similar "talk-to-text" feature which I have never used and never knew it even existed.

At the end of our day, Robert wanted us to put stickers on his Comcast remote so he could easily find certain buttons. He wanted fast access to the main power button and the number “5” to change the channels. With the texture of the remote, the stickers wouldn’t stay on the buttons. We then decided to try Gorilla Glue. We applied enough glue to make a raised bump on those two buttons.

Unlike the cellphone and computer, the TV does not talk back. There are fifty-three buttons on a Comcast remote and most are completely useless since he can’t read what is being displayed on the TV screen. “I can push them all day but I still won’t know what the TV is trying to tell me”, he explained as I was gluing the second remote. I found that his favorite show is Criminal Minds, one of my favorites as well. He is very good at voice recognition and can pick out each character on the show. (I came over a week later and the glue is still holding up and working perfectly!)

Robert taught me a lot about his blindness and other disabilities as well. Most blind people do blind activities with other blind people and don’t go out into the world. There would be a lot less ignorant people if they saw more people with disabilities. Here is an example of ignorance: Robert was in a clothing store with his mother when he was recently blind. The store clerk walked over to his mother and asked, “How can I help him?” She told the clerk to ask Robert himself. Some people are uncertain how to socialize with others who have disabilities. They should be treated and talked to just like anyone else.

I enjoyed spending time with Robert. Sometimes I forget that he is blind but I am quickly reminded when he runs into me or steps on my foot. He lives an extremely normal life. There are a few things that he has to adjust to with his new house which includes the various sounds that happen outside and inside. With living in a townhouse he can hear his neighbor’s child running

around and has to distinguish that between his own children's running sounds. He also owns his own vehicle and hires a taxi driver to use his personal vehicle as means of transportation. During my interview, I was shown that blind people can and should live normal lives as if they could see.

“Blindness does not always mean that you can't see. I know plenty of people who can see and yet they are blind.” –Robert Ott.