

Harry Epstein

I have been blind for 9 and ½ months. On January 24th 2007 I had what was supposed to be fairly routine surgery for a non-cancerous tumor between my optic nerves. The results were catastrophic. I was totally blind and was given no hope for seeing again.

I had survived, but to what?

I was a bit numb. Maybe it was from shock or the anesthesia. As the numbness faded I became calm. Everyone around me was devastated and hurt. I felt their pain, but had none myself. I cried for them and their pain.

The feelings of hurt soon faded and were at the same time overwhelmed by the love and support of my wife, family, friends, colleagues, and clients. I felt a love and warmth I had never really experienced before.

At the same time I started to walk the hospital halls with the aid of a support cane. Virginia Jacko, and her dog Tracker, were among my first visitors after surgery. A few days later Carol Brady-Simmons, Director of Children's Programs and Vision Services, came and brought me a white cane and gave me some mobility pointers.

Jerry Neibert, one of my great colleagues from PMA, and his wife Candy also came by to show their support. Friends called, sent me messages, and others stopped by to see me.

Over the next two months I became progressively weaker and almost died from other complications of the surgery. The third month after surgery was dedicated to regaining some strength and taking short walks. I wasn't sure of the road ahead, but was committed to continue.

In early May I started rehabilitation at Miami Lighthouse. I thought that three days a week at first would be enough. I was weak and in need of intensive training. I quickly became enriched by the support and instruction I began receiving. I started going to the Lighthouse 5 days per week. I would collapse and sleep when I got home, but I had a burning desire to learn and conquer my new world.

My classes included: Personal Management, Communication Management, Orientation and Mobility, Computers, and Braille.

Personal Management included cooking, cleaning, handling money, and most everyday tasks we take for granted, like choosing clothes or taking our medications

Communication Management included using talking books, reading magnifiers and other devices available to make normal tasks a little easier.

Orientation and Mobility involves learning how to walk safely with the aid of a white cane and understanding where you are and where you want to go. It can be very difficult to master.

Reading and writing Braille isn't for the weak at heart either. Trying to feel the shapes of up to six dots per character with the tip of your finger is truly an art. Most people don't know that we read Braille from left to right, but write from right to left. Writing Braille is the act of pushing out the dots so that they can be read and, therefore, must be the reverse of reading.

Computers consisted mostly of learning how to use JAWS. JAWS is a software application that reads and speaks what is on the screen, or things behind the screen, so that we can understand what is going on in the computer.

Learning the personal management things was not difficult for me although they are very important to having an independent existence.

Orientation and Mobility was hard. I think I learned the most in this class. John Clapp, my instructor, and I started very slowly at first. We covered walking halls, drinking fountains, cane basics and awareness basics. We soon progressed to going outside. First we walked one block and later more. After a while we used the bus and walked as much as a mile in the summer Miami heat. It really helped me regain more strength.

Going for a leisurely walk is actually hard work for the blind. Uneven pavement, slanted walks and driveways, crossing streets and going into stores can be quite a challenge. Actually, every step presents a potential hazard. After working with John for 3 months I had an informal final exam.

The test began at 9:30 am at the reception desk. I put on my blindfold, so I could not use any visual cues since I have regained some limited sight, and grabbed my compass. I left out of the north exit and walked three blocks crossing three busy streets. I then found the bus stop for the bus downtown and took the bus to Brickell station. From there I found the Metrorail station and managed to get up the two escalators to the platform. I took the southbound train to Dadeland North and got off to go to the mall. At Dadeland Mall, I did some shopping at Target and Sports Authority before making my way back to the train and back to the Lighthouse. I arrived in time for lunch at noon.

My training has gone so well I have already been approved to get a guide dog early next year.

Jin Ho Choi was my instructor for both Braille and computers. He taught me to read and write grade 2 Braille. It includes short form words and shortcuts for commonly used sequences like ation, etc. I am still very slow, but literate in the blind world of written materials.

I am a project management consultant, primarily in the construction industry, with PMA my very supportive employer of 17 years. As such, I use the computer a lot. Learning how to use JAWS was easier for me than other students. Jin didn't have to teach me how to use Word, Excel, or what different Web attributes were. I am fairly good on the computer again, but there are still many programs that are better left to the sighted, and web pages are not very friendly or accessible to the blind user.

People always ask if my hearing is much better since becoming blind. Sadly no, I am still a bit deaf, but I listen a whole lot better. Actually I have learned to pay attention to my other senses. It is amazing all of the things most sighted people miss in this world.

Being able to see is a great thing. The problem is that seeing distracts most people from understanding what they are really looking at. Becoming blind has increased my vision. I think that I actually see things more clearly now that I have lost my sight.

I survived my surgery and its complications, but the Lighthouse has enabled me to show the world that the blind can do almost anything. It is not enough to survive, with the help of the Lighthouse, anyone who is blind can learn to thrive.

I think it is helpful to demystify the world of the blind. What we really need is more support for fantastic programs and institutions like the Lighthouse. It is not enough to survive being blind, it is imperative that we teach blind people to thrive.