

Friday, 22 Aug 1997

LIVES and ME        PART II

Good Afternoon Doris,

Or at least it was a good afternoon until about a half an hour ago: I had written you part two and was just getting ready to wrap it up for today when I hit A WRONG KEY - the entire message was erased!

I really thought I had this keyboard totally committed to memory as I can't read what's written on it and have to keep my eye focused on the T.V. screen when I'm typing. Oh, the frustrations. Pretty minor thing, though. I just sat back and while letting my personal anger calm down, and my eye to relax a bit, I started thinking about Tia - she, and my friend, Ruby Lindenau, who is also quadriplegic and who can't speak, are reminders to me of what TRUE frustration must really be about. So here I am again, taking the plunge on this letter and determined to make it work.

My friend, with whom I had been living since losing my vision (and who was officially designated my 'aide in attendance' by the VA, which included a small stipend for him by them) decided he wanted to go to graduate school and get a Ph.D. He was accepted at Washington State University, Pullman, Washington - home of the Cougars, where he ultimately received his Doctoral Degree in Sociology. Paul

(Dr. Paul T. Melevin), knowing he would need several years at WSU, bought a house in a small rural community about eight miles from Pullman; a town of a few hundred folk, mostly students and farmers, called Albion. I moved there with him. It was a totally new environment with no paved streets or sidewalks; no stores other than a gas station and a small Post Office with no home mail delivery. The town, being small, with very fine country-type folk living there, was initially a nightmare for me to get around on my own, but within a year's time I could go just about anywhere on my own. I did have to spend quite a bit of time alone since the students were commuters to Pullman and the farmers were busy in their fields. As a result, I had to become resourceful in learning to do for myself during the day.

I learned that the Lion's Club had a Blind Center in Spokane where I could obtain various devices that would help me in my everyday living needs. Things such as special kitchen timers, rulers marked in braille, high liner marking devices so the thermostat settings could be marked to enable me to adjust the temperature (it tends to get very cold in the inland northwest); I also used the high liner (I should explain that this is a liquid plastic material that when applied as a dot, or bump, on something, would harden as it dried and then I would just feel for the little bumps to make the necessary settings. I've used this material a lot and found it useful with such things as the telephone and temperature controls for the

electric range and oven. I'm using these little bumps now on particular keys on the WebTV keyboard to better enable me to keep my fingers correctly positioned).

I would like to give CUDOS to the Lion's Clubs of America. Before I continue with my story about going to Spokane, let me interject here a bit of digression back to 1976. I had to make frequent visits to the VA Hospital in La Jolla, CA, after I was released from the hospital. One of these trips was because my Mom's sister, my Aunt Nannie, wanted me to have a red/white cane. She was afraid that either I was going to hurt myself or someone might hurt me if they didn't realize that I had a vision problem. We went to the appropriate clinic and a lady there, who had not seen me on prior visits, said, while pointing "Read me what you can from that chart". I wasn't even sure she was talking to me as I couldn't see her or her gesturing. Aunt Nannie broke the moment's silence by saying, in a very numerous way "Lady, Jim's blind in one eye and can't see out of the other". We all laughed - it was good. Things settled, we were directed to the Lion's Club where the wonderful people there happily provided me with my first "blind man's cane", as my Aunt called it. I really didn't want the cane because I just knew that any day my vision was going to return. Now, I never leave home without a white/red cane. It most assuredly alerts others that I'm a guy who can't see too well and will, hopefully, give me a little leeway. At any rate, I think the Lion's Clubs

deserve all the credit in the world for their being so caring and helpful to the blind and visually impaired.

Off to Spokane. While at the Lion's blind center, browsing through their stock of helpful devices I was made aware that a local optometrist was a low-vision specialist who would visit the Center once a week to assist low vision persons in their quest to see better. Needless to say, I made an appointment with Dr. Todd Wylie.

Dr. Wylie, knowing that I used a pair of binoculars whenever I wanted to see what was beyond my range (about arms length) tried putting together a system where I would wear a contact lens, as the back part of a monocular, with a pair of glasses with a lens ground to be the front of a monocular: this would give me the benefit of having a small telescope and a very 'normal' appearance to boot! Unfortunately, for me it didn't work.

Dr. Wylie contacted a company in New York who would mount a miniature monocular onto a regular pair of glasses frames. He obtained a 3X power and a 6X power. He trained me to use the 3X for general mobility because the smaller power enabled a better field of vision while walking. The glasses with the 6X monocular enabled me to watch television, see further (the 3X enabled me to make out stuff out about 30 feet, the 6X enabled me to make out objects up to about 100 feet). Additionally, the 6X

monocular, when extended all the way, became a microscope - I was now able to read ink print at about the 20/40 level - WOW! Talk about taking a new path in life. Don't get me wrong with this reading thing: the microscopic action of the monocular enabled me to read letters...the field was too narrow to read more than about three letters at a time, so a speed reader I was not destined to be.

Albion became a wonderful home for me once I started using these new low vision monocular glasses. I started becoming much more independent: I even walked down the railroad tracks because I wanted to go to be able to go to the Mill's pond area on the South Fork of the Palouse River. Lemme tell you, folks around there thought I had gone nuts when they saw me, on my own, walking down the tracks or through a wheat field. I wasn't feeling brave, just free, free to go when and wherever my feet could take me for the first time in a very long time. This aid allowed me to see further, but objects always remained a bit blurry: I've been seen saying "Good Afternoon" as I passed a bush, fence post, etc., from time to time; this used to embarrass me when I realized that it wasn't a person to whom I was speaking, but I got over it. To this day, I still say "Hello" regardless of whether I sure what I'm talking to is animate or inanimate...I'm just a friendly kinda guy.

I play the piano. A lady friend of mind loaned me her grand piano to use for a couple of years

while living in Albion. I wanted to learn to use braille music. My monocular glasses were useless for this purpose. I made enquiries and found that there was a braille instructor at the Tacoma, WA, VA Blind Rehab Center who could teach me to read braille music. The necessary arrangements were made and I left my Albion paradise to attend classes for two months at the Tacoma VA Hospital Blind Rehab Center, as an inpatient. I am happy to report that I succeeded in learning braille music. I am also happy to say that I don't need to use braille because while I was at the rehab center, I was introduced to a device called a CCTV: Closed Circuit TeleVision. This device uses a miniature Television camera mounted over a free moving board where books, pictures, etc. can be placed and then magnified up to 60 times and viewed on a 19 inch television monitor. The VA gave me this equipment and there is literally nothing I can' read from then on. I still have the blurriness, but the magnification is so great that I've even been able to make out the people, and automobiles which are printed on certain dollar denominations. It's slow reading: I read about twenty to thirty words a minute, but this is certainly an improvement over just reading a few letters at a time with the 6X monocular glasses and one heck of a lot faster than reading braille. The CCTV is a wonderful reading/picture viewing device and I have no doubt that any person with any vision at all would benefit from using it.

Doris, this will have to do it for today. At least I didn't erase this second attempt, but my eye is tired and my nose is sore. The Beechers are starting to pinch and I feel a need to breathe through my nose for awhile.

I'll be busy this weekend, but come Monday I'll be writing to you with part III of my saga: It's about time to talk about these Beechers!

My regards to your husband. If you talk to my sister, don't let her see any of my story. Tell her she's got to get on line herself and then I'll forward her copies. You know, dangle the old carrot a bit.

CUL Jim