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SURVIVING THE SIXTH GRADE CHALLENGE

by Robin L. House

Editor's Note: Robin House serves as a board member of the National Association of Blind Students and a board member of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri. She completed her student teaching in December 2001. In May she will receive the Outstanding Student Teacher award from the University of St. Louis in Missouri.

"I feel sorry for you. They won't be afraid of you, and they won't listen to you," said my seventh grade son, Jason. "You're quite brave," said the principal at my children's school. These were common reactions when I told people that I received my student teaching placement in a sixth grade classroom for the fall semester. Similarly to most prospective student teachers, I was, admittedly, nervous about the unknown, but I was also ready and prepared.

When I talked with my cooperating teacher, he explained some of the logistics of our classroom. There were 24 students in our class, and 13 of them had IEPs. I would be working closely with the math and reading resource teachers as well as all three sixth grade teachers since the students switched classes for Science, Language Arts and Social Studies. I also discussed my blindness with my cooperating teacher. Though he initially seemed uncertain, our discussion alleviated the concerns he had expressed.

I experienced every aspect of the teaching profession during this 16-week placement. Continually managing and correcting students' behavior is essential in establishing an effective classroom. Though I could not see who hurled

spit wads, rest assured that students would give clues. Based on the discussion, I was able to catch the culprit and refer him to the office. His punishment, serving three days of detention, stopped that problem. When students moved on to rubber bands, paper clips, and the "pencil break" game, good listening skills, close attention, and engaging lesson plans helped me in solving and preventing problems.

Learning and accessing new curriculum was another task I faced as a student teacher. I needed to familiarize myself quickly with the new math and science curriculum that the school district had adopted. By using the services of a reader, I tackled the new teacher's guides and assessed Students' written work. I also used Braille to make note cards for myself, which outlined my lessons. After papers were graded, I would attach them to Braille name cards with a paperclip for ease in distribution.

Our classroom and school community were closely tied together because of the terrorist attack of September 11. We all worked closely to strengthen the spirit of patriotism. Each day began with the Pledge of Allegiance and either the "Star Spangled Banner" or "Proud To Be An American." Throughout the semester we implemented service projects to collect money to help others. The students wrote about their feelings and thoughts, which helped them to process the events. The renewed sense of patriotism reminded us all of the timeless importance of peace.

I am excited and proud to say that I have completed the numerous requirements to be a certified elementary school teacher in the state of Missouri. It was exhausting work because I

balanced it with a family of my own and a night course, but I enjoyed seeing students engaged by learning.

Additionally, I gained a deeper appreciation for the teaching process at work. Throughout the course of my student teaching, my son Jason listened to my classroom adventures with interest. He understood that the students' behavior was not related to having a blind teacher, but they were simply being sixth graders.

DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

by Cheralyn Braithwaite

Editor's Note: Often the experiences we have as blind students shapes the philosophy we believe as teachers. Cheralyn serves as treasurer of the National Organization of Blind Educators, and many of the activities she incorporates into her Special Education classroom come from her own experiences as a blind student.

I remember sitting in classes, not being able to read the chalkboard, and saying to myself, "you are so stupid, you are so stupid, you are so stupid." I know the frustration of sitting in a classroom knowing that I could understand things if they were presented in another way. I remember feeling like no one understood me because I couldn't see the way they could. With the help of special education in my own life, I learned that every student could learn the same concepts as their peers if they are just presented in the proper way. Now teaching students with severe intellectual disabilities, I find myself presenting concepts in several different ways that allow learning and application to occur.

The environment of my classroom is relaxed and safe, and it includes a lot of humor. My students see that I do things a little differently than their other teachers because of my blindness. I ask them several questions as they work. This helps me assess their understanding or comprehension. I use adaptive technology that allows me to access a computer (district and school e-mail, the district grading and attendance system, the Internet, etc.). When we leave the classroom, I use a long white cane. I often use a reader when print material is my only option. Seeing me do things differ-

ently from their other teachers, helps my students understand why they might have to do things a little differently from their friends.

Peer support is a large part of my classroom and overall program within the school. My students are in my room 3 of 7 periods out of the day. However, they have a good deal of peer interaction because I realize that I, alone, cannot teach everything my students should know. They need the experience with their peers to learn "it's not cool " to say or do certain things. Several peers are assigned to me as Teacher Assistants. They function as role models and friends while in my room. Throughout the day, these peers, as well as several others walk my students to class, eat with them at lunch, help them with their locker combination, etc. I won't be with my students forever, but they will always have peers. Teaching my students to interact with them is a top priority in my classroom.

Computer and board games are often used in my classroom practice. I am very particular about which games are available at which times of the day. However, time is given throughout the day to play games. The games reinforce the subject matter students have just learned, but it also gives them the chance to learn to work together with their peers. Some of my students don't learn as well as others in traditional classroom instruction. These hands on opportunities provide them the instruction in an alternate format.

To me, school isn't about sitting in a desk, copying from the board. It's feeling safe and learning to work together. It's about learning concepts in several different ways and applying them in several different ways.

It's finding success for all students because no child should have to sit in shame saying to him or herself, "you are so stupid." This philosophy of education came to me with the aid of the philosophy of the National Federation of the Blind. I've come to understand that blind individuals can, and DO, compete on equal terms with their sighted peers in education as well as the work place.

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

by Tami Dodd Jones

Editor's Note: Tami Jones serves as Secretary of the National Organization of Blind Educators. In the following article she presents the challenges and rewards of teaching blind and visually impaired children.

When I began college I had very little idea of what I ultimately wanted to do. My goals were simple—work hard, do well, and have some fun along the way. Now that I am a teacher, my goals are remarkably similar—work hard to keep on top of new developments and technology in the field, do the best job I can for the students in my charge, and get as much enjoyment as I can from the experience. There are great rewards like knowing that because of your expertise, students have a better chance for success in school and in their later lives. There are even greater challenges that I feel anyone contemplating a career in education of blind and visually impaired students should consider and work hard to overcome.

The first big challenge is mastering the essential skills of blindness. In order for your students to become successful with these skills, you must first become successful. Total mastery isn't always easy or even possible, but it is important that you keep working at it, even after you have left school and begun working. The old adage "If you don't use it, you lose it" really applies, especially with Braille. Those of us who rely on Braille in our daily lives have an advantage, but even I, who have used it since I was nine, find myself using it less for little things as technology becomes more advanced and available. I must constantly find occasions to use skills such as slate and stylus and abacus to keep my hand in, so to speak. Don't second-guess what your students may need; give them the best chance possible to succeed in their future lives.

The next big challenge is organization. If you're like me, this doesn't come naturally, and you have to work at it constantly. Since most teachers of the blind are now itinerants, at least

for part of their day, it is crucial that you have what you need when you need it, whether this is lesson plans, student handouts, or IEP goals. Everyone has to develop their own system for keeping track of what they must have based on their own particular needs and the frequently changing nature of their jobs and schedules. One year, for example, my job was almost exclusively itinerant consultation. I visited about thirty schools during the course of a month, none of them more than once or twice a week. I had very little time in my office for gathering materials, so I developed a system whereby I placed materials I needed to take to a particular school on a special table. The leftmost pile was for Monday, the next for Tuesday, etc. Any materials that could not be delivered within the week could be mailed, or sent with colleagues—speech teachers, physical therapists, etc—who would be visiting that school sooner than I could. That way the students or teachers got the materials as quickly as possible.

The third big challenge is flexibility. Very few jobs stay the same. Those of us in Education are expected to "go with the flow." It seems like every other week memos are sent out to itinerants directing us to policy changes. We not only have to keep track of these changes, but we must find ways to implement them while providing the best level of service possible for our students. Schedules can change with little or no notice when special meetings are called, and office time cannot always be relied upon.

Without a variety of skills—the ability to use a Braille writer, slate and stylus, Braille note taker—I would find it difficult to keep up. I work where I can, when I can—in the car, in teacher lunchrooms, in school office reception rooms. I've brailled important information on everything from index cards to legal pads to lunchroom napkins—whatever works.

The key to teaching is to be prepared for the challenges, so you can reap the rewards. I can't tell you how exciting it is to listen to my student read "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" with little hesitation and few mistakes, or find out a student I taught several years ago

graduated with honors. I know I make a difference in my students' lives, and that makes all the effort worthwhile.

SLEDDING

by Allison Hilliker

Editor's Note: Allison Hilliker is a Federationist who serves as president of the Michigan Association of Blind Students, and she is a board member of the National Association of Blind Students. As part of her study of elementary education, she gained practical experience in the classroom. Here is what she says about her experiences with second grade students to subscribers of NOBE-I, a listserv sponsored by the National Federation of the Blind and the National Organization of Blind Educators.

Every day is an adventure. The kids see me as a teacher, and the classroom teacher has been giving me ever-increasing levels of responsibility. Last Thursday, however, was a day that tested my philosophy and confidence. That was the day that we all went sledding. Now, this really hadn't been something I had planned for, but when the situation arose, I had to find a way of dealing with it.

Having grown up in the Midwest, I have been sledding a number of times. I knew that it was something I could do as a blind person, but I also realized that the teacher and students didn't necessarily understand that. The teacher confirmed my suspicion when, without asking for my opinion, she announced to the class that before heading outside they would all sit in a circle while I explained how best to do things

for me. When they had gathered around, I took the chance to re-explain how I use my cane. I also reassured them that I could do much by sound. I tried to make everything seem as normal and as easy as possible, but without asking me again, the teacher next tried to assign one of the kids to guide me around outside. I politely explained to both the child and the teacher that a guide would not be necessary. The explanation seemed to suffice, and I headed towards the hill, using my cane and following the sounds of talking and laughing children.

The hill on the playground was pretty chaotic. All I can say is, thank goodness for the blindness skills I've obtained; otherwise I would have likely never managed. There were kids, sleds, snow, and ice, everywhere.

After some hesitancy to have me climb the hill by myself, they became used to it. I sledded down that hill with the kids and things went fine. The best part of the experience was when a couple of the girls in the class begged me to race down the hill with them. When it was all over, I was tired, cold, and sore, but happy that things had gone well.

Not one person offered to guide me on the way back into the school, so I felt that I had done some educating. I helped the kids gather their sleds, and we walked into the school together. I like to think that everyone, kids and teacher, learned a little bit on that afternoon.