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# SLAYING DRAGONS

BUILDING  
SELF-CONFIDENCE  
AND  
RAISING  
EXPECTATIONS  
THROUGH  
ORIENTATION  
CENTER  
TRAINING



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In his 1919 fable, "The 51st Dragon," Heywood Broun describes the exploits of Gawaine, a young student in knight school who is so timid and fearful that he is in danger of being expelled. Instead, the school's headmaster decides to take Gawaine under his wing and train him to slay the countless dragons plaguing the countryside that year. In preparation, Gawaine studies all about dragons and their habits, and he practices beheading paper and wooden ones on the practice field.

When the faculty feels he is ready to confront real dragons, Gawaine is given a diploma and a new battle-ax. The headmaster calls him to his office for a few words of advice: "Here you have learned the theories of life but, after all, life is not a matter of theories. Life is a matter of facts. It calls on the young and the old alike to face these facts, even though they are sometimes unpleasant. Your problem, for example, is to slay dragons." Unconvinced, the whimpering Gawaine asks for an enchanted cap to make himself invisible. The headmaster offers him something better: a magic word. All Gawaine has to do is say "rumplesnitz" and he can lop off the heads of dragons easily and fearlessly.

The magic word works, at least for the first 49 dragons. Gawaine grows so brave that he even slays one with his right hand tied behind his back. He becomes so confident that, at night, he engages in long drinking bouts at the village tavern. On the day he confronts his fiftieth dragon, his mind has become so sluggish that he cannot remember the magic word. As the beast charges, the word flashes into his mind, but he has no time to utter it before swinging his battle-ax and chopping off the dragon's head.

Puzzled, Gawaine goes to the headmaster's office for an explanation. The headmaster laughs, believing that Gawaine has finally figured out that his own bravery and not the word rumplesnitz is responsible for his success: "It wasn't magic in a literal sense, but it was much more wonderful than that. The word gave you confidence. It took away your fears. If I hadn't told you that, you might have been killed the very first time. It was your battle-ax that did the trick."

Convinced that Gawaine just needs to kill another couple of dragons to get his confidence back, the headmaster drags him out of bed and into the forest the next morning and shoves him into a thicket where a small dragon is hiding. But Gawaine never returns. All that is later found of him are his medals.

Like the knight school's headmaster, we at the Iowa Department for the Blind's Adult Orientation and Adjustment Center give students magic words by which to live: "It's OK to be blind." Unlike those of the knight school headmaster, however, these words do not disguise hollow confidence and insufficient preparation. Instead, we back them with effective blindness training based on an approach that will give students a solid foundation in the skills, positive attitude and self-confidence they need to slay the many dragons

they will encounter as they strive to live independently and work competitively.

We use the words, "It's OK to be blind," to help students to progress through the three stages of adjustment to their blindness: dependence, rebellion and interdependence. Like Gawaine when he first began his knight school training, students enter the center with a great many insecurities, fears and low expectations, ranging from being afraid to cross the street alone to worrying about ever holding a job, having a family or being accepted socially. They will often accept more help than necessary and will avoid such "dragons" as going up and down stairs and crossing streets alone. Once they have overcome some of these fears and have slain a few dragons of their own, they begin to gain confidence and to realize that they can get about safely and efficiently and perform day-to-day living activities competently. Proud of their accomplishments, they often assert their independence by rebelliously swinging their battle-axes against any sighted person who might offer assistance. When students reach the end of their training, however, they see that the magic words take on the substance of truth, reinforced with the skills and self-confidence they need to slay any dragon they may ever encounter. They come to understand the natural interdependence that exists in society and begin to view an offer of help not as an insult but as an opportunity to educate.

The training we provide at the orientation center is based on a positive philosophy of blindness. In fact, this philosophy is the foundation for all of the Department for the Blind programs, including Vocational Rehabilitation, Independent Living, Transition, the Business Enterprises Program and the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. The department is committed to the belief that center training must be an integral

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part of the rehabilitation process, for rehabilitation can only be truly achieved when consumers have reached their fullest potential in personal independence, employment and integration into the community. This approach is powerful, because it gives blind people control over their own lives as well as responsibility for their own successes and failures. This philosophy further contends that the real problem of blindness is not the physical loss of eyesight but rather society's misconceptions about it.

The majority of orientation centers in this country base their training on the notion that the individual who has become blind is "broken" and therefore must be "fixed," both physically and psychologically. The training they provide is based upon the beliefs that the problems of blindness are inherent in the blindness itself, that blindness imposes upon a person severe limitations that cannot be overcome, that visual techniques are intrinsically better than non-visual ones and that the degree of one's success is inextricably tied to the degree of one's visual acuity. Nurses and a psychologist are often on staff, and emphasis is placed on the teaching of skills, avoiding blindness techniques as much as possible and maximizing residual vision through the use of low vision aids.<sup>1</sup>

The training we provide at the Iowa center, on the other hand, is successful because we recognize that the problems of blindness stem not only from the blindness itself but, again, also from public misconceptions about its true nature. Center students must not only learn the blindness skills needed to cope with the physical loss of eyesight, but they must also adopt new positive attitudinal concepts to replace the stereotypes that both they and society accept about blindness. To accomplish these goals, students

receive training that has four objectives:

- Learn efficient and effective blindness techniques.
- Develop self-confidence and a positive attitude about blindness.
- Learn how to deal with public misconceptions about blindness, including those of family, friends and employers.
- Develop strong work habits and appropriate social skills.

**TRAINING IN EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE BLINDNESS TECHNIQUES**

To learn the skills they need to function competently, efficiently and comfortably, our students take eight hours of classes each day covering home and personal management, cane travel, communications and industrial arts. They learn non-visual techniques for cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and sewing. They learn to use a long white fiberglass cane to go up and down stairs, walk along sidewalks, cross busy streets and take public transportation to wherever they wish to go. They practice reading Braille and writing it with a slate and stylus, and they become acquainted with such assistive technology as computers equipped with speech synthesizers. They become comfortable with tactile measuring devices and power tools, and then they choose a project of their own that could involve woodworking, metalworking, welding or engine repair.

The training provided in each of these classes is rooted in the structured-discovery method of instruction. First developed to provide more effective instruction in the area of independent cane travel to blind persons, this approach has been proven to be superior to the guided learning approach used by traditional orientation and mobility instructors, who themselves are usually sighted persons.<sup>1</sup> In guided learning — commonly called route or point-to-point travel — the instructor continually provides very specific instructions and feedback while closely monitor-

ing the student visually. Teachers place strong emphasis on rote learning, ensuring safety and maximizing the use of residual vision. As a result, students do not develop the ability to generalize what they have learned and become too dependent on the instructor for help. Students are not expected to solve the problems they encounter independently or to apply what they have learned in one lesson to another.

The structured-discovery approach to travel training, on the other hand, is based upon the concept of training teachers of the blind to teach their students the same non-visual techniques that have proven to be most successful by blind persons. Cane-travel students are first given specific instructions that will allow them to master such basic techniques as holding and arcing the cane. The focus then quickly shifts to generalized instruction that emphasizes problem solving by providing the students with only minimal information, forcing them to rely upon themselves to explore their environment and gather and process the information they need to move about safely, freely and efficiently. Through this method, students learn more, retain it better and develop greater confidence in their own ability to travel independently.

Through the implementation of the structured-discovery method of teaching, the center emphasizes the use of alternative techniques of blindness, high expectations and the development of self-confidence and problem-solving skills. Blind students with residual vision and sighted students training to be instructors receive lessons under sleepshades, or blindfolds, from instructors who are either blind or who have also received intensive blindness training under sleepshades. Students are encouraged to rely upon their own ingenuity when they encounter a new problem or situation instead of turning repeatedly to the instructor for guidance and reassurance. After being taught a basic set of tech-

niques, they are asked to experiment, explore, solve problems and apply what they have learned in one project to another as they move through a progressive series of more and more challenging activities. Once shown how to boil and drain pasta for one recipe, for example, they are expected to figure out how to apply that training to the cooking of not only pasta but of any food that must be boiled and drained. As a result, they develop confidence in their own ability to solve problems and to use techniques that will be effective no matter what level of vision they have.

#### **DEVELOPING SELF-CONFIDENCE AND A POSITIVE ATTITUDE ABOUT BLINDNESS**

Through learning and practicing their problem-solving skills, students develop confidence in themselves and a more positive attitude about their blindness. As a result, they raise the expectations they hold about their own capabilities, leading to vocational goals that are more fulfilling and more likely to be achieved. The learning of skills and the development of self-confidence and a positive attitude are inextricably intertwined. A student who walks around the block alone for the first time becomes eager not only to advance to crossing streets but also to take his or her children to the park after completing the center's training program.

Developing self-confidence and a positive attitude about blindness are critical to a student's progress. Without self-confidence, students will not use the blindness skills they have learned, and without a positive attitude they will cling to the negative misconceptions and stereotypes about blindness. The vast majority of students begin their training with very negative attitudes about their vision loss. Often, many of them sat at home for years — cared for by their friends and families — rather than admit that they are blind, especially if they still

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have some remaining vision. Sometimes they will refuse to recognize that blindness has had any detrimental effect on their lives, even though they no longer read, drive, work, go out or take care of their homes. Many believe that the adjustments they have made — limited as they are — are the best that can be made under the circumstances. Others look for a quick fix, usually through technology, so that they can ignore the devastating effects blindness has had on their lives. Lacking self-confidence, they avoid taking risks because they fear failure and do not expect success.

Self-confidence is a difficult concept to define. Self-confident people have positive, yet realistic, views of themselves and their situations. They trust their own abilities, have a general sense of control in their lives and believe that, within reason, they will be able to do what they wish, plan and expect. They take risks and remain positive even when they fail. Because they accept themselves, they do not feel the need to conform just to be accepted by others.

Adult students at our center have defined self-confidence in a variety of ways, as evidenced in a group discussion held on September 15, 2003. One student said that it is what allows you to walk instead of crawl through life. Another said that self-confidence is knowing that you are capable of doing things with dignity, like taking public transportation and going through a buffet line without a mishap. A third said that it is what allows you to participate fully in school, work and the other things in life. A fourth student put it best: "You know you have self-confidence when you can trust yourself to figure out how to overcome successfully the fears and challenges you must face every day."<sup>2</sup>

The development of self-confidence and a positive attitude about blindness are linked. Students must learn that they and not their families, friends or society as a whole should control their attitude about them-

selves and their blindness. In his 1982 book, *Strengthening Your Grip*, Charles Swindoll described the importance of attitude this way:

"The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failure, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company, a church, a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it. And so it is for you ... we are in charge of our attitude!" (p. 126).

The development of self-confidence and a positive attitude about blindness are the focus of every class in the center. This process is a lengthy one, because it requires students to make a 180-degree turnaround in their attitude. For this reason, students train in the center for an average of six months. They must come to trust the teachers who are demanding so much of them, and teachers must learn to gauge the right levels of sensitivity, encouragement, prodding and confrontation that will help each student achieve this objective.

The story of Janice is typical. Throughout her training, she struggled with the notion that she could become competent as a blind person and as a result had to be told constantly to keep her sleepshades down. For their final cooking project — a seven-course dinner — students are expected to write their menus and recipes in Braille, take the city bus to the grocery store, purchase their groceries from lists they have written in Braille, and prepare and serve the meal for their families and

friends. As she confronted this dragon, a tearful Janice became paralyzed with fear and threatened to pack her bags and go home. Letting her avoid this dragon was not an option, since it would undermine any self-confidence she had acquired and make it easier for her to hide from the next dragons she would inevitably encounter. Reasoning, encouragement, and prodding had no effect on her. Finally, taking the risk that she might run, as the program administrator I resorted to confrontation and called her a quitter. At first she was angry, but after thinking about it for awhile she decided that she had to prove me wrong. She unpacked her bags and successfully went to the store, bought her groceries and prepared and served a wonderful dinner to almost 50 people.

A variety of center activities help students build self-confidence and a positive attitude about their blindness. We tell students that "a class is a class is a class" — that everything they do while at the center, day and night, contributes to their training. We expose them to many ordinary experiences that they thought no longer possible, like grilling steaks, shopping, going to a museum or play, bowling, camping, hiking and canoeing. Just as important as formal classes are their walks to a local restaurant for dinner and their long conversations in the evening about their blindness, fears and plans. Veteran students give tours to prospective students and serve as mentors to new ones. By participating in speaking engagements at schools, clubs and service groups, students become comfortable talking about their blindness and develop the self-confidence they need to educate the public.

In a discussion group we call the "Business of Blindness," we deal directly with the subjects of our philosophy and of skill and attitude development. An essential part of center training, the group discussion provides students with an open environment where they can talk about their hopes, fears and problems and

where they can challenge the prevailing negative myths about blindness and the devastating impact these myths can have on their lives. "Business class," as one student put it, is "the glue that holds everything together."<sup>2</sup> Most important, it is where they will come to accept their blindness and truly believe those magic words: "It's OK to be blind."

As the center's program administrator, I serve as facilitator for the class. I liken my role to that of an orchestra conductor, but sometimes I feel more like I'm sitting on the lid of a pot ready to boil over. I must maintain an atmosphere of openness and respect so that students feel comfortable talking freely and sharing some of their most intimate feelings with each other. Through questions, comments and active listening, I guide the discussion of that day's topic. My goal is not to give them the "right answer" but to teach them how to discover it for themselves. After all, when they complete their center training, they must be able to solve similar problems on their own.

To achieve this goal and maintain interest, I use a variety of formats and media. I invite competent blind persons to talk about their jobs and the effect center training has had on their lives. We watch movies and go to plays featuring blind characters and we read articles and short stories that I have gathered from magazines, journals, newspapers and the Internet. To expose students to a variety of blindness techniques for reading, I read to them in Braille, use readers and play cassette tapes.

The subjects we discuss come from a variety of sources. I maintain a large outline of resources and am always on the lookout for new items to add to it. While I try to plan ahead, a topic may come up that needs to be discussed immediately, such as a student's negative encounter with a sighted family member. We may have an expert explain Social Security incentives or a blind person talk about consumer organizations. Each

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October, we talk about Iowa’s White Cane Law and the effect of similar legislation on their lives. We explore the purpose of center training so students will have a better understanding of the program and their involvement in it.

Gradually, students come to understand that once they have developed self-confidence, a positive attitude and good blindness skills, the real problem of blindness is not the loss of vision but, again, the misconceptions both they and the public hold about it. Blindness is no longer the controlling factor in their lives, and they begin to make important life decisions based not on it but on their interests, talents and abilities. Instead of being ashamed of their vision loss and the blindness skills that represent it, they view their blindness as another one of their personal characteristics, like their height, their age or the color of their hair.

**DEALING WITH PUBLIC MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BLINDNESS**

As students begin to learn effective and efficient blindness skills, develop self-confidence and overcome their own misconceptions about their blindness, they become frustrated by the negative treatment they receive from family members, friends and the general public. They grow angry when their spouses do not let them go down the basement stairs to do the laundry, a friend asks them not to take their cane on an outing or a waitress speaks to their companions rather than directly to them. Students come to recognize that there is not only a need to change these notions and their manifestations but that they share in the responsibility to help bring that change about.

In the center, we provide students with a variety of ways to learn how to deal appropriately with negative attitudes and reactions toward their blindness. In Business Class, we explore the origins of these misconceptions and talk about the

best ways to deal with them. Our students are often surprised to learn that their own behavior can perpetuate or help dispel these myths. We encourage family members to visit and sometimes even to attend classes under sleepshades. Giving tours of the center and participating in speaking engagements gives students opportunities to practice educating the public about their blindness. Training is frequently provided in such public settings as malls, restaurants and parks so that students will become skilled at handling negative public reactions to their blindness.

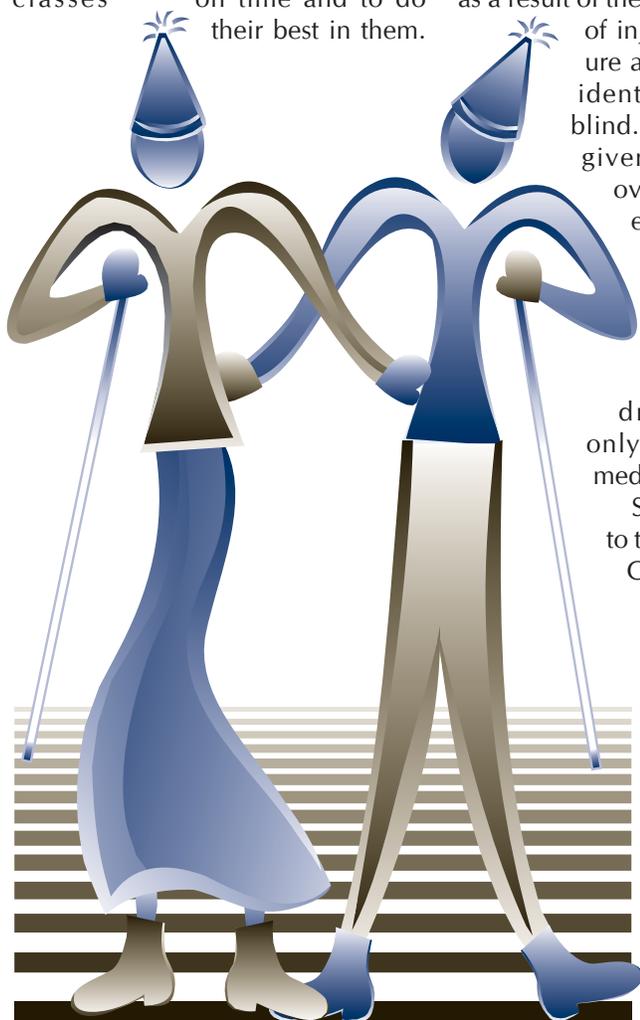
The ability to cope with these uncomfortable situations tactfully is critical to future success in job interviews and in workplace situations. Most of the students who come to the center are vocational rehabilitation consumers of the Iowa Department for the Blind and will either go to school or to work upon completion of their training. At least twice a year we hold a "Job-Seeking Skills Seminar" for students to explore careers that meet their talents, interests and abilities. They also learn techniques for dealing appropriately with blindness issues in the resume, in the job interview and on the job itself.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF STRONG WORK HABITS AND APPROPRIATE SOCIAL SKILLS**

Many students come to the center with low expectations about themselves and what they will be able to accomplish as a blind person. Lacking self-confidence, they sometimes avoid the risk of failure by procrastinating, getting too involved in the problems of other students or refusing to try at all. Burdened by the low expectations of their families and teachers, students who have been blind since an early age have often not been expected to support themselves at all and so were never taught the strong work habits and socialization skills necessary for them to become fully integrated into the lives of their families, workplaces and communities. Unless they receive

training that raises their expectations, students will leave the center only to live on the edge of life, going through college with few or no friends, surviving on Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance, and unable to develop the social contacts so important for success in the workplace.

Center training helps students build their expectations in a variety of ways. We constantly remind them, both subtly and overtly, that they will not just work but that they will do so successfully and at their fullest potential. We treat them like adults, giving them keys to their own private rooms and to the building that houses the center. We teach them how to manage their own budgets and medications and to contact staff that live in the building only for emergencies. We expect them to attend their classes on time and to do their best in them.



When necessary, we teach them such social skills as table etiquette, ballroom dancing and communicating in social situations. Fashion, makeup, hair styles and other aspects of grooming may also be covered.

We also raise expectations for students through what we call “the three have-to’s” of the orientation center. In order to participate in training, students must agree to take all of the classes, wear sleepshades if they have any residual vision and carry their canes at all times. Students who do not agree to these requirements can choose from other training options, such as individual and group training in their home communities or attendance at another orientation center that they feel better meets their needs. These have-to’s are designed to help students confront and overcome the biggest dragons they face as a result of their blindness: the fear

of injury, the fear of failure and the fear of being identified by others as blind. If students are not given opportunities to overcome their deepest fears, they will never believe they can and they will suffer the fate of Gawaine — being eaten by a small dragon that leaves only their meaningless medals behind.

Students are required to take all of the classes.

Orientation center training is like a jigsaw puzzle — the pieces must all be in place before the whole picture can be seen. Not taking a class is like losing one of the puzzle pieces and therefore losing the total effect of the training. If students were allowed to pick their

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classes, they would choose the "safe" ones, like Braille and computer. They would avoid the classes where they fear injury, like burning their hands on a hot stove, cutting off their fingers with a power saw or losing their lives to a speeding car. Students receive individualized instruction within each class to meet their needs. A young blind man who has never been in the kitchen must learn both how to cook and how to use the blindness techniques for cooking. A newly-blind woman who has prepared meals for her family for years, on the other hand, needs only to learn the relevant blindness skills. A diabetic student who has been sedentary for years may need frequent rest periods as he builds up his stamina.

To help dispel the "can't see, can't do" fallacy, students who have any residual vision must receive their training under sleepshades. In order to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the blindness techniques they are learning, students must practice them constantly under sleepshades until these skills become habitual. When they take their sleepshades off, they can then combine the non-visual techniques they have mastered with visual ones to their greatest efficiency. They will also come to understand that the problems faced by the partially and totally blind do not differ significantly. Without the use of sleepshades, they will constantly want to rely on and attribute any successes they may have to their remaining vision, no matter how poor and inefficient it may be. Those students who have the most success are the ones who have the maturity to see the relevance of sleepshade training to their lives, come to understand that the degree of their success is not contingent on the degree of their vision and replace "can't see, can't do" with "I can do it — I just have to figure out how."

Finally, students must carry the long white fiberglass cane — better known as the Iowa cane — at all

times. To become proficient travelers, students must constantly practice using their canes. By doing so, they also become desensitized to public reactions to their blindness and to being identified as a blind person. The cane then becomes for them both a tool for safe travel and a symbol of pride and independence. Because they can be easily hidden away, folding canes and cane holsters are not permitted.

Students do not receive training at the center for any fixed length of time. While the average stay is six to eight months, some students stay fewer months and some stay more. Students themselves are responsible for evaluating their progress and for determining when their training is complete. As the center's program administrator, I meet with students and their vocational rehabilitation counselors at critical times during their stay to discuss their progress and goals and to determine if any modifications in their program need to be made. Students usually decide to leave the center when they can competently and efficiently use their blindness skills, when they have the self-confidence to put those skills into practice, when they thoroughly understand and have a positive attitude about their blindness, and when they are aware of and able to deal effectively with public misconceptions.

**THE BOTTOM LINE**

The success of the orientation center and its program can be measured through statistics, through continued relationships with the center and through the long-term positive effects the training has had on the lives of former students. After completing their training, students may attend college or a vocational training program, enter a new career or return to a former job. The center is an integral part of the services offered by the Iowa Department for the Blind, and the department's success in providing meaningful services that lead to

jobs for consumers is also the success of the center itself. The figures for the 2000, 2001 and 2002 federal fiscal years tell the story. In those years, 171, 175 and 140 vocational rehabilitation cases respectively were closed successfully rehabilitated (Status 26). Consumers who developed Individualized Plans for Employment during those years had an over 83 percent chance of successfully getting a job. They could expect to earn an average of over \$12.40 an hour, and about 68 percent of them would become the primary source of support for their families.

The program's success can also be seen in the relationships that develop when students begin their training and continue long after that training has ended. New students notice quickly that, when they enter the center, they soon become members of the orientation center's "family." This membership continues after they complete their training. Center staff often contacts former students to see how they are doing, and former students frequently contact staff to talk about their latest news or get some advice. Students who have shared the center experience sometimes become lifelong friends. The center itself promotes this unity through a quarterly newsletter detailing the activities of the center and its graduates and through the annual Orientation Alumni Day. Each fall, students host a day of activities for former students culminating in an evening banquet and dance. An average of 200 people attend each year, and many of these are some of the center's strongest supporters.

Most important, though, the center's success can be measured in the long-term positive effects the training has had on the lives of former students. Participation in the orientation center is a life-altering experience for most students. When they complete the program, they find that blindness is no longer the controlling factor in their lives. They

have internalized the truth that "It is OK to be blind," and they know they are well equipped to slay any dragons they might encounter. One former student put it this way:

"I had decided to come to the Orientation Center after completing my high school education. I was led to understand that by attending this program, it would help me to raise my GPA [grade point average] in college. After being in orientation for a few weeks, however, I had discovered that my motives were in the wrong place. This program's purpose is not to prepare me for college, but to prepare me for life and how to live it as a confident blind person. This program works on the attitudes of blind people, helping them to become confident, capable people by letting them know there is life after blindness. Although I have been blind since birth due to cataracts, this program has helped me form a different attitude about my own blindness, as well as other blind people. I have learned that it is OK to be blind, because I know that it does not make me any less of a person. The classes in the orientation center are made up of Braille, home ec [economics], shop, technology and travel. All of these classes combined are not merely to teach the techniques of blindness, but to build confidence by the use of them. My stay at the center has not been an easy one, but it will be one I will take with me and use for the rest of my life."<sup>2</sup> **R**

## NOTES

1. This information is based on the author's understanding from years of experience touring orientation centers for blind adults and studying the subject; thus, no specific source is given.
2. For reasons of confidentiality, the author is unable to give the names of center students who are quoted in this article.

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