

My Experience with Braille is About Two Separate Lifetimes.

At 4 years of age I lost the sight in my left eye due to a freak accident and lost most of my sight in the right eye due to an infection. I was OK in kindergarten but when I went to first grade the nuns kicked me out. I couldn't see the blackboard.

So my mother and doctor put me in the Chicago Public School Braille class. I learned Braille, how to type it and could read it with my fingers and my eyes. Since I could see a bit, and my classmates were all blind, I got extra jobs to do like get silverware and such at lunch. I was pretty happy there. But my mother didn't like the fact that I walked around using my hands, even though I could see. She started a crusade to get me out of the Braille class and into the Sight Saving class, which was for high partials. I believe I was legally blind but my mother got the doctor to diagnose me with 25/175 vision, which got me out of the Braille class.

I actually continued with Braille for another year. My mother wanted me to play the piano and she found a teacher who used Braille music. But that didn't last long because it was faster for me to 'read' the Braille instead of feeling it.

In the Sight Saving class I learned how to write, print and type. For the next 11 years I used print and I completely forgot my Braille training. Even though I was probably legally blind I could read anything if I held it close enough. Therefore I could read my texts and type my papers with my large print typewriter. We had the same teacher for homeroom and study hall. She would read to me if necessary, and print out tests for me since I had trouble reading handwriting.

In my senior year of high school I got hit in the right eye with a basketball and displaced the lens. This made it much harder to read and I had to resort to a magnifier.

When I went to college I was on my own. After 2 years the doctors decided to remove the displaced lens and I saw the best since I was 4 years old.

I functioned well for the next 25 years. I graduated from I.I.T., got my teaching certificate, and later earned my Master's degree in physics from DePaul University. I taught math and science for 39 years. I married and had 3 children. But in 1985 I started to lose my sight again. I couldn't read without a magnifier, and quickly became legally blind again. For about 6 years I hid this fact from my employer and colleagues. In 1991 I went to Johns Hopkins' Wilmer Eye Clinic, in Baltimore, to get another diagnosis.

Now I had macular degeneration. My doctor sent me to their Low Vision Clinic where the social worker asked me if I wanted to continue teaching. She encouraged me to seek out the NFB, which I did. The Division of Blind Educators of the NFB gave me courage as well as assistance. For the next nine years I taught as a blind teacher. I used a cane and CCTV in my classroom. I also started to relearn Braille. I never got too far and only knew the basics. So fifty years later I was back where I started!

I often think I would have done better in school, especially college, if I could have read Braille. I retired in 1999. My eyesight has continued to worsen, and I am a slave to this computer! I don't really know why my mother was against my staying in the Braille school system. I suspect she wanted me to appear normal. I regret my lack of Braille skills, and often feel frustrated. I envy people who read Braille fluently and quickly.

My life has been productive. I know I was a good teacher, husband, and parent. I still work many volunteer jobs for church, the NFB, and my condo. I have been vice-president for the Illinois Affiliate and the Chicago Chapter of the NFB. I have been the senior warden at my church several times and now act as my condo's treasurer. I do fundraising for the NFBI and my church. I helped write the first budget for the state affiliate. But I often wonder what if I had mastered Braille.

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