

## FIRST PERSON

Reflections on Faith, Living, and Learning

# Ambitious Vision

Recently appointed to the Oregon Commission for the Blind, a WP graduate student wants to show people with disabilities they too can dream big.

By Patricia Keppler '10

I lost my sight thirty years ago. My eyes had always been complicated. I lost sight in my left eye when I was seven, and the retina in my right eye finally tore beyond repair when I was a college freshman in Oregon. I was very quiet and introverted and my blindness forced me to start communicating with people, which was difficult at first.

I dropped out of college, but instead of going back to my family home in California, I stayed in Oregon. I got married at age 19 and became a stay-at-home mom. My husband and I have been married 28 years and we've raised three children.

In 2002, I began working at Independent Living Resources (ILR), a non-profit organization in NE Portland that helps people with both physical and mental disabilities. I started on a part-time basis and now work as a full-time counselor and recreation coordinator.

**I hope that wherever my fellow students go in their careers, when a person with a disability walks in their door, they'll think, "Oh, I went to class with Patricia."**

We provide skills training, advocacy, peer counseling, and informational referral services. Among our staff, 51 percent have to have a disability. We are people with disabilities helping other people with disabilities.

I have about 60 people on my caseload. I need to identify what they need to become independent. Do they need to learn how to take the bus or cook for themselves? Do they need new housing, schooling, or a job?

Prior to getting this job, I faced significant discrimination looking for work. One woman actually interviewed me in the foyer of her office building because she didn't want any hair from my guide dog in her office. Then she said, "We can't hire you because I'm just not comfortable with you walking up and down stairs. I don't want the responsibility." I was thinking, "That's why you won't hire me?"

Ironically, she was the first person to be outright open. I could've sued her, but at that point, I felt too broken down and relatively worthless, as far as society was concerned. I needed to prove to myself that these people weren't right, that I really could do something.

So, I threw myself into volunteer work. Through the Oregon Commission for the Blind, I helped form the first dragon boat racing team comprised of all-blind paddlers. We call ourselves Blind Ambition. It was through that experience that I learned about my current job.

ILR hired me based on my life experience, but eventually I realized I needed a master's degree to strengthen my career, so I enrolled in Warner Pacific's Adult Degree Program. I finished my bachelor's degree in business administration last December and have continued in the Master of Management and Organizational Leadership program.



The author with her guide dog, Nisha.

I'd like to think my presence in the classroom has been a learning opportunity for everyone. One of my peers once asked, in a moment of sincerity, how I was going to do it. I said, "This is what I do. This is who I am. I work. I raise kids. Just because I can't see, doesn't mean I can't do it. I just do it differently."

I admit I was terrified of doing PowerPoint presentations but I eventually did one all by myself, I'm proud to say. I need electronic versions of all my textbooks specially ordered and ready every five

weeks. However, everybody at Warner Pacific has been wonderful. I couldn't have asked for a smoother transition from class to class.

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I received a phone call this spring from the Oregon State Commission for the Blind asking me to consider filling one of three open positions on the commission. I was thrilled to receive the offer. The commission provides the blind with special equipment and training. It helped fund my undergraduate degree and provided me with an electronic note-taker with a Braille computer display.

I am excited about my two-year appointment because it's going to allow me to be part of setting policy, representing people with vision loss in a way that I haven't been able to before. It's not only a great opportunity to learn how the commission works, but also to set direction for the future.

We have a serious problem in Oregon where too many disabled youth get special education in schools, then just sit at home after they graduate and let their parents take care of them. Once their parents become elderly, or pass on, we end up with 45-year-olds who can't do anything. That life-long helplessness is a challenge.

I want to create programs that will encourage disabled people to develop their own interests and find out what they really want for their lives, including going to college and building careers. It's critical work, and I'm grateful for Warner Pacific's role in helping me realize my dream.

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