But the Others Majored in Music

by Hazel Staley

From *the Braille Monitor*, April 2000 issue

Following the comments of the Monitor’s editor below, is the actual piece by this author. I felt its inclution in our senior lititure archive is to show this ladies long time, and continuing enfolvement in her strivings to make a difference in how blindness is perceived by the sighted world, and to help the newly blind learn to live the life they want; blindness is not what holds you back.

From the Editor: The following story first appeared in Remember to Feed the Kittens, the sixteenth Kernel Book. It begins with Dr. Maurer's introduction:

Hazel Staley served for many years as President of the National Federation of the Blind of North Carolina and at age eighty-two continues to be one

of its principal leaders. Here she reflects on what it was like for a blind girl entering college in 1936. Hazel wanted to be a teacher, but in those days

that was not to be. Hazel has worked for more than three decades helping to change what it means to be blind for those who are to come after her. This

is what the National Federation of the Blind is all about. Here is what she has to say:

I lost my sight when I was two years old as a result of meningitis. I was number five in a line of six children brought up on a farm in Union County,

North Carolina.

My parents sent me to the state school for the blind in Raleigh, some 200 miles away. It was not easy for them to send me so far away, but they knew

I would need an education, and that was the only place I could get one.

I finished high school with a fine record. I applied to and was accepted by Flora McDonald College. On registration day I took my place in line with

the other freshmen. When it was my turn, I stepped up to the registrar's desk and gave her the preliminary information that she needed. Then she asked

what degree I would be working toward. I said, "An A.B. degree."

She said, "Oh, Honey, I don't think you can do that. You see, it requires several hours of science lab, and you can't do that."

I said, "How do you know I can't? I haven't even had a chance to try."

She said, "We have had four other blind girls here, and they all majored in music. Why don't you do that?"

I said that I had had a lot of music in elementary and high school, but that was just not what I wanted to do.

At this point the girl in line behind me stepped up and said, "Excuse me. We always work with partners in lab, and I'll be glad to be her partner.

I don't think there will be a problem."

The registrar then said reluctantly, "Well--ah--I'll go ahead and put you down and--we'll see."

I hung around until the girl who had been behind me finished registering and walked out with her.

I said, "I appreciate what you did for me, but I can't help wondering why you did it, since you have never seen me before and don't know me."

She laughed and said, "I just liked the way you stood up for what you wanted, and I really don't see any problem. I believe that, when a person spends

money to come to college, she ought to study what she wants and not what some stranger thinks she ought to do. That just doesn't make sense. You obviously

have dealt with situations before and know what you can do."

The next morning someone knocked at my door and said that the dean wanted to see me in her office. I thought, "Oh, my! They're going to kick me out

for being sassy. What will I tell Mama?"

When I walked into the dean's office, she said, "We had a faculty meeting, and we have decided to put you on probation for the first quarter. If you

do all right, you can go ahead with your A.B. degree."

I thought, "Probation indeed!" The only probation I knew about was what the court put bootleggers on down in Union County, where I was raised. My

first impulse was to tell her that she could take her probation, her lab, her degrees, and the whole blankety-blank school and shove 'em. However, I realized

that there was a lesson here that needed to be taught and that I was the person at the time and place to teach it. So aloud I said, "Thank you. I'll accept

that."

Now I'm about as unscientific as anyone you're likely to meet, but my other subjects came easy. So I zeroed in on science. My friend was right. There

wasn't a problem. At the end of the quarter I made the science honor roll and the dean's list. Four years later I received my A.B. degree.

I entered college in 1936, four years before the National Federation of the Blind was even organized, and it was more than thirty years later before

I learned of its existence. But I knew instinctively that the registrar had no right to tell me what I could or couldn't do.

I had wanted desperately to teach high school English and French. I learned that in 1940 a blind teacher in a public high school from North Carolina

was out of the question; so I turned to social work. I liked social work and was a good worker, but I gave it up in 1947 when I married. My husband was

in military service, and I wanted to be free to go where he was.

In 1969 Federation leaders came to Charlotte to talk with us about organizing a chapter of the National Federation of the Blind. I was excited and

delighted to learn that there were others who believed as I did. I knew that I had to be a part of this group. I became active in our local chapter immediately

and went on to serve as state president.

At age eighty-two I'm still doing all that I can with the organization and will continue to do so as long as I live. I believe that the NFB is the

greatest thing that has ever happened to blind people, and I'm proud to be a part of it. I want its work to continue for future generations of blind people.

To do what I can to make this happen, I have designated in my will a good portion of my estate to go to the Federation. My one regret is that they

were not teaching mobility in North Carolina when I was growing up. This has been a real handicap to me. After I learned about the Federation, I fought

a real battle with our state agency for the blind to get mobility instructors in the state.

We still don't have enough instructors, but the agency's philosophy has changed for the better. I am thankful that in my own small way I have had

the privilege of being a part of the National Federation of the Blind.