NFB Philosophy, a White Cane, and a Determined Old Street-Dog

by Pat Munson

From *The Braille Monitor*, December 2012 issue

From the Editor: The following article first appeared in the summer/fall 2012 issue of the newly named Blind Senior Perspective, the publication of the NFB Seniors Division. Pat Munson, the newsletter editor, wrote it for a White Cane Day writing contest some years ago. Although the events described took place decades ago, they are still both instructive and inspiring. This is what Pat said:

I yanked myself out of my chair and marched to the door. I grabbed my long white cane and opened that stupid door. At that moment I hated all my friends because one by one they had all told me that they were not going to drag me around one more time. They had seen other blind students on our college campus getting around just fine with a cane, and they said I could do the same.

But those friends had not met my pals from the school for the blind who constantly made fun of blind people who used canes. They shuffled around as best they could but thought they were really cool without that dumb long white cane, which just told all the world that the user was blind. They had gained their spectacularly sad attitudes from their teachers and others at the school, and so had I.

Everything was against me on that fateful day; no one was there to help me cross four streets and board the first of three buses that would get me to the school where I was to student teach. Even the weather was at its worst. I had not yet opened the door all the way when the wind grabbed my cane and almost whipped it out of my hand. The door slammed behind me and so did part of my negative attitudes about blindness. There at the door I made up my mind that I was going to make this trip by myself or die trying. My career as a teacher would never begin if I did not have the guts to get to that school and act like a competent blind adult.

By the time the first bus arrived, my dress, shoes, long hair, and makeup had been ruined by the wind and rain, but what did that matter? My body was still intact, and that wonderful long white cane was doing what my friends used to do for me. It was providing me with a tool of independence. I remember finally climbing up those school steps and rejoicing that I had made it. I looked as if I had just climbed out of the shower, but my goal was to meet the faculty and my master teachers, and I had made it there to do just that. I took off my dripping coat in the office and hung it up. I rang out my long soggy hair and entered the faculty meeting. Later the teachers told me that they had never seen anyone with such a determined look on her face. They did not know about the NFB.

I did complete that student teaching and got a job, but only because of the work of many in the National Federation of the Blind. Until a few years before, those in charge of teacher credentials had maintained that normal vision was required to teach in the public schools in the United States. NFB members knew this was simply wrong. Many, many members of the NFB introduced legislation in every state, eliminating the vision requirement, which took years.

I was one of the first to take up that white cane and march by myself into a job in competitive employment in the public schools in the USA. As a member of the National Federation of the Blind I gained a job, blindness skills, and the philosophy to lead a normal life in the mainstream of society. Sometimes it is not easy to be a Federationist when sighted folks endlessly insist they know what is best for us, but I love being a part of the mainstream, so I do what I must to change people’s attitudes about what it actually means to be blind. I am like a very determined old street-dog, but I have an NFB smile on my face! As Dr. Jernigan said many times, “We know who we are, and we will never go back.” Now I wish I could thank all those NFB street-dogs who helped me become what I am.