A Blind Senior’s Journey to Independence

by Diane McGeorge

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From the Editor: Diane McGeorge is a Federationist who probably needs no introduction. She has been in the Federation since the 1950s, served on the national board of directors, been a national officer, served as the president of the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado, and founded the Colorado Center for the Blind (CCB). Now she works as a volunteer in the Center’s Senior Program.

One of my volunteer jobs in the Federation is serving as a member of the board of directors of the CCB. At a recent in-person meeting of the board I was invited to sit in on a meeting of the Senior Program, where I heard the story Diane McGeorge recounts here. I was so impressed that I asked Diane to work with Ruben Hernandez to put it on paper. Here is what she has written:

At our training centers we are often asked what students do during training time and what they do in their off hours. The premise of the question, of course, is that there is distinct school time and off time, and, although the Colorado Center for the Blind does have training hours, the division between off and training time is not obvious—learning at the CCB is always happening, and this is the beauty of a program in which a job is more than a job and one in which staff and students together are involved in life-changing experiences.

Ruben Hernandez is an enthusiastic student who participates in the CCB's senior program. His vision loss started when he was an active member of the United States Marine Corps, and after about ten pairs of glasses, each improving for a time what he could see, he was finally discharged. Following his time in the service he became a general contractor, building dry cleaning establishments. This meant performing and supervising work done involving plumbing, electrical wiring, steam fitting, concrete work, roofing, venting—anything that had to do with constructing buildings he did. He also trained and hired his sons, nephews, and brothers-in-law, who all worked for him in the business.

When his sight got so bad he could no longer drive, he hired a driver. Still he was the boss and made the decisions and assignments, and most of the people for whom he worked never realized he couldn't see. Occasionally awkward situations would arise when he would run into a closed door or try walking through a window, but these he laughed off by letting people think he had had a bit too much to drink the night before or by convincing them he was deep in thought working to solve a complicated design problem.

In his mid-sixty's Ruben decided he had lost enough sight that he needed some help. Six years ago he went to the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center run by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Scheduled there for six weeks, he left after three because he was told he was suffering from lymphoma (cancer of the lymph nodes), that he had about a year to live, and that he should spend that time with his family. Sadly, the man who gave him that advice died four years ago; but Ruben is alive and well after two lung surgeries.

Wanting to learn how to type so he could use a computer, believing he could use more training to deal with his decreasing vision, and always on the lookout for activities to stimulate his mind and keep him active, Ruben signed up for the Seniors’ Program at the Colorado Center for the Blind. Like the programs for younger adults, the Senior Program teaches cane travel, Braille, and daily living skills. Ruben was an enthusiastic participant in all of these, and, though he has memorable stories about his formal training and his interaction with other students, the story I want to share is about the day after Thanksgiving when Ruben forgot that the Center would be closed and dutifully reported for class.

Still in the holiday spirit, Ruben starts his Friday morning by reporting to the CCB for senior training. He is sure there will be some kind of Thanksgiving celebration, and the good food and fellowship offer great promise that this will be a memorable day. At this point he has no idea just how memorable it will turn out to be.

When Ruben arrives at the building, he is surprised to find the main doors locked. Undeterred, he goes to the doors on the kitchen side and finds they too are secured, with no evidence of anyone in the building. Worrying that perhaps he has been wrong in assuming the Center will be open for business, he makes a search of the parking lot and finds it empty.

Since this is Denver, he has a fresh snow to contend with, and under it the ever-treacherous ice. Stepping off the curb, Ruben begins sliding uncontrollably downhill and crashes face-first into a ten-foot snow bank created by the snowplows that cleaned the street and the parking lot. After getting up and dusting himself off, he has to find his cane. Where it has gone is not immediately apparent, but eventually he discovers that the snow bank that threatened to swallow him has captured it. Once rescued, together they go in search of more adventure.

Deciding he might as well go back home, Ruben sets off for the light rail. Public transportation is still new to him, but he prefers it to the paratransit and other door-to-door services that have left him waiting while appointment times come and go. He likes the control that taking the bus and the train give him. They run on schedule, which means he runs on schedule, and for Ruben punctuality and self-reliance are what it means to be independent.

As he starts down the steps to the train, he can just make out its approach. Throwing caution to the wind, he increases his speed, pays less attention than he should to what his cane is telling him, and trips down the last two steps leading to the car. This time, when he picks himself up, he finds he has torn pants, sore knees, and a concerned driver who waits until Ruben is on board and seated.

But Ruben's problems aren't over simply because he has reached the relative safety of the train car—it is warm, it is dry, but it soon becomes apparent to Ruben that it is going in the wrong direction and is not getting him closer to home. He ends up at Mineral Station. As Ruben sits there rubbing his knees and looking at his torn pants, the conductor comes along and announces that this car has reached the end of the line. Deciding that the train will eventually turn around and take him back in the direction he needs to go, Ruben waits for the car to move. In a while it does, but soon he hears the announcement that the train he is riding is Train C bound for Union Station, not his destination; he needs to go to Auraria. Getting his bearings, Ruben exits at Englewood and decides to catch the next train. When it comes by, he asks if it goes up by the college, is told that it does, boards the train, and again hears a troublesome announcement: this train is headed for the depot. All of his questioning and planning have once again gotten him on the C train, so at Alameda he exits and waits.

When the next car arrives, he asks a fellow passenger if this train goes to the college, is told that it does, boards the car, drifts off into thoughts about this most eventful day, and doesn't pay attention to where he is. Jarred out of his reflections when a fellow passenger tells him he has arrived at the college, Ruben jumps off the train, looks around, and soon concludes he is not at Colfax but some place entirely unfamiliar. Remembering what he has heard about the value of asking questions, Ruben decides his best source of information will come from inquiring about his location from passing cars on the street. He approaches stopped vehicles for information and finds them unwilling to open their windows and engage in conversation. "This is Denver, and I think they have the idea I want to attack them," he says. Finally someone cracks a window about an inch, and he asks where Colfax is. He is told that it is on the other side of the college and that he must travel through the campus to get where he wants to go. He knows no landmarks; pedestrian campuses offer fewer of them than traditional streets, and this is the day after Thanksgiving, so no students will be there to offer helpful directions. Add to all of this an overcast sky that means it is getting darker and making it harder for Ruben to use what little vision he has, and you begin to get a picture of what he refers to as "quite a little challenge."

With only one alternative open to him, Ruben starts his trek across campus, realizing that, though he has been proudly carrying his cane, he has only a few weeks of instruction and that most of the teaching he has received has come from the VA and the rolling canes they assigned their students. He now holds an NFB cane, but he is still so new to training that instruction in its use is still sometime in the future. Eventually he comes to a major street, sees a light off to his right, proceeds to the end of the block, and meets a girl on a bicycle asking if he needs help. He tells her he needs to find the bus stop on Colfax. She tells him he is on Colfax, that he is close to the bus stop, and that she will be glad to show him where it is.

Ruben catches the bus; he takes it to Pierce; and, when he gets off, he now finds it is completely dark—not overcast dark, but night-time dark. Never has he traveled by himself at night, always making certain that any night trips occur in the company of someone with sight. But this is not an option, so he decides that he must see for himself just what this cane can tell him.

The street he is traveling is not ideal for an introductory cane travel test. The part he must initially travel has no sidewalk, and fresh snow is on the ground. If he ventures too far left, he runs the risk of being hit by traffic, and if he drifts too far to the right, he will slide down a steep embankment, which at times resembles a cliff. Swinging the cane to the left to find a walkable path and to the right to ensure he does not slide down the embankment, Ruben walks until he eventually reaches a sidewalk. He finds the street crossing he needs, locates the ramp used for entering his building, takes the elevator, finds his room, and opens his door. He enters, drops to his knees, kisses the floor, and yells out, "Darn, I can do this!"

Of his adventure he says, "I learned three things that day: Don't get in a hurry—that's why I fell; pay attention to what you are doing—that's why I got on the wrong tram; and, most important, learn to trust what you get from that cane. I never had that confidence before. Now I'm not one to brag, but I tell people that, if I can do it, they can do it. What they need to do is get over their poor-me syndrome. Your eyes aren't going to get any better, so you might as well take advantage of what time you've got, and learn what you can. When you finally become totally blind, then you'll know what to do. I tell people that my life has taught me that you have to fight what you have to fight, whether it is seeing flashes from a foxhole and hoping that the blast doesn't get you or taking on the problems of blindness and learning how to handle them."

What I find so moving about Ruben is not just his story but the man it reveals and the influence he has on others. He does not preach; he would not claim to teach. But example is a tremendous teacher, and the words he uses have meaning because they capture that example and make it come alive for others. At the CCB we have helped Ruben, but he has been much more than a student, amplifying what we say and what we teach in ways we could never hope to do on our own.

One of the things I love about the Senior Program is the gratitude that is evident in the people we serve. I'm not saying that our younger students don't appreciate what they get from us; I am saying that they often take the programs we have for granted, just another in the array of services they have a right to and can expect. Perhaps this is because of our emphasis on the strides we have made in creating laws and the services we pledge to provide; perhaps it is because they have had to fight less to get what they have needed. I'm no philosopher, so I'll leave it to others to figure out why our seniors seem to be emotionally moved and spiritually uplifted by their programs and are so willing to embrace attitudes, tools, and techniques that give them back freedom they thought was forever lost to them. Teach a senior he can do a thorough job cleaning his apartment, and you have given him back the respect that comes from knowing he can invite anyone at any time to the place he treasures and not be ashamed of how it looks. Teach the same skill to some of our young folks, and they act like you have saddled them with yet another unwanted chore.

In my almost sixty years in the Federation, I've been a part of many a battle to help blind people, but nothing I've done has been more enriching than the role I'm able to play now in helping our blind seniors. Some of my feelings about this no doubt come from my husband Ray's love of our Senior Program and my desire to carry it forward because of him. But the experience of giving back the independence and self-reliance for men and women of a generation known for both is difficult to put into words, so I have left it to Ruben through his story to explain once again why I am proud to be a Federationist.