Preparing His Granddaughter for A Life Without Sight

by Jon Tevlin

From The Braille Monitor, December 2017

From the Editor: This article first appeared in the Star Tribune on June 27, 2017, and is reprinted with its kind permission. David House is sixty years old and totally blind, having had retinitis pigmentosa his whole life. He is a retired commercial real estate broker and has been happily married for more than thirty-three years to his lovely and loving wife Theresa. The Kernel Book Like Cats and Dogs contains a story about their family by his wife titled, “A Wife’s Story.” David joined the NFB in 1993 and is active in his church. He has four adult children and two beautiful grandchildren. One of those grandchildren is eight-year-old Lily, who is in third grade at Valley Christian School in Missoula, Montana. Along with her general education classes, she takes Braille three times a week and uses her talking computer at school. Her afterschool activities include weekly gymnastics and piano lessons, swim team practice at the YMCA, and earning a blue belt in Tae Kwon Do. Lily was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa at age five and has been learning blindness skills ever since. Here is the story of a grandfather helping his granddaughter to get a solid footing in the blindness skills she’ll need because of their shared condition:

David House brought his 8-year-old granddaughter, Lily, to Minnesota this month for a three-week stay. She got to visit the Mall of America and a petting zoo, and on Tuesday she even got to play softball with some new friends. It was a chance for the two to bond and, more important, a chance for David to help teach his granddaughter how to be blind.

Lily is attending the Buddy Summer Program at BLIND Inc., housed in the former Pillsbury mansion in Minneapolis’ Whittier neighborhood. Blind or sight-impaired kids come from all over the country to work on both the practical and emotional aspects of being blind.

David, fifty-nine, learned he had retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative disease, when he was five years old. The disease is inherited, but the gene is recessive, so both parents have to have the gene in order for their children to have the disease. David’s wife does not have the gene, and none of their four children has the disease. David and his three sisters, however, all have the disease, which is rare.

“When Lily was young, I was certain she didn’t have it,” said David. “It was a long shot. When it was diagnosed, I was pretty shocked and depressed. Lily is at the onset stage, so I wanted to get her here as soon as possible to start to deal with being blind. [BLIND Inc.] is one of the top places in the country.” The agency let Lily into the program even though she’s a year younger than its youngest participants, mostly because her grandfather also came to take adult refresher courses.

In an upstairs room Tuesday, Lily was learning to use a talking typewriter to craft sentences. She wore a Pokémon T-shirt and, at times, a blindfold. Students who can still partly see wear blindfolds to get them used to not being able to see at all. Lily took commands from the computer, successfully writing out, “I ate a fish salad.”

It wasn’t easy. “Agh, that tortured me,” Lily said. “Get me away.”

Another student, Charles, stopped by to visit. He had just taken the “travel class,” learning to get around the neighborhood with a cane. He named all the adjacent streets and their direction from the building. I asked him how he knew the difference between north and south. “You go outside and face the building,” said Charles. “That’s north. Never Eat Soggy Worms—north, east, south, west,” he said, pointing to each direction.

In the afternoons, the kids have “talk times” where they can discuss their frustrations, uncomfortable situations and strategies to overcoming life as a blind person. They also take field trips and engage in activities such as rock climbing and horseback riding. “My favorite was actually the Nickelodeon Universe at Mall of America,” Lily said.

David was downstairs, working on his computer skills. “She’s probably better at computer skills than I am,” he said. “I’m better at Braille. Just wait until you see me in the fire juggling class.”

It’s that persistence, humor, and positive outlook that he hopes to pass on to his granddaughter this week and from now on. Lily lives with her grandfather part time in Missoula, Montana.

Despite losing his sight over a number of years, David graduated from San Diego State University with a degree in public administration. He got married and had children and built a very successful business, running cafeteria vending machines.

“My goal is I just want her to have her skills exceed her blindness,” David said. “I have to get her prepared for a life without sight. My goal is to have her take over my business someday.” Back home, Lily is on a swim team, is on her way to a black belt in karate and takes piano lessons. “I don’t want her to have a different life just because she’s blind,” David said. “Even as busy as my business is, I thought it was important to be here with her.”

Lily wanted her grandfather to go on the MOA field trip with her. He said if she’d let him skip the field trip, he’d take her someplace special. “She outfoxed me,” said David. “After she went to the mall on Saturday, I asked her where she wanted to go that was special. She said, ‘Back to the mall.’”

“I want to teach her that nothing is insurmountable,” David said. “With the blindness itself, if you have the right psychological and emotional attitude, you can conquer anything.”