

Blind Ambition

Angela Frederick has soft blue eyes that gleam when she laughs and crease at the corners with each sincere smile. Their only flaw is they don't work properly. One can only detect light and the other can't see anything.

Frederick, a University of Texas graduate student and doctoral candidate for the sociology department, has what is called retinitis pigmentosa. It is basically an eye disease where there is damage to the retina and slowly causes loss of sight. Or what she recalls her doctor describing as looking like "a thick thornbush pattern all over the retina."

She started to lose her eyesight at 3 years old, but remained with stable vision until she was 12 years old. She grew up legally blind.

Born and raised in Shreveport, La., Frederick expresses her belief that the education system in Louisiana is deplorable and undeniably one of the worst in the country. Being a blind child within that community proved to be even more challenging.

"No one wanted to identify me as a blind child," she says.

Learning through the public school system postponed her much needed knowledge and acceptance of living with blindness. They did not teach her Braille and she was forced to use large print books, which she explains as being excruciating to read. "It's ironic that now my whole career is about reading and writing and research, because reading was such a painful experience for me as a child until I learned Braille," says Frederick.

Frederick was finally given the opportunity to learn Braille and other vital information for living with blindness when she was invited to participate in the first children's program at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. This would be the first time Frederick encountered another blind person. She was 13.

"This was the first time that I met people that called me blind. And I hated being called blind. I associated everything bad with that word. But then here are these people saying I'm blind and that's okay. I would say that was *the* turning point in my life," she declares.

While at the program, Frederick learned how to read the entire Braille code in an impressive one-month time. It typically takes adults three to six months to do so, explains Frederick. She was also taught how to walk with a cane and use a screen reader, which she still utilizes today. But most importantly, she began to feel comfortable with her blindness and was able to meet many successful blind adults. Once her program ended, she went back to public school with a new, motivated outlook.

Although the school was initially resistant, she was given the tools needed to succeed in a mainstream classroom and she began to soar academically, after having struggled with her grades. Once witnessing how much Frederick's grades improved, the school began

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asking her for advice on teaching other students with disabilities. “I just felt much more confident in myself academically and socially, and they saw that.”

Failing to be taught Braille in school was not unique to either Frederick or the education system in Louisiana. Even today, only 10 percent of blind children in the United States are taught to read Braille, according to the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). Being in the minority of that percentage contributed to the success Frederick continued to experience after graduating from high school.

She went on to receive her bachelor’s degree in 2000 from Guilford College, a small liberal arts school located in Greensboro, N.C. Frederick then moved to Minneapolis, Minn., where she completed a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer in a low income neighborhood. AmeriCorps VISTA is a national service program designed to fight poverty by fighting illiteracy, improving health services, and strengthening community groups, according to their website. After her service there, she worked at a student loan company for about two years, which made her decide she wanted to go to graduate school.

Hearing many good things about the Austin community and availability of resources on campus, coupled with the fact that the University of Texas was closer to home and much warmer than Minneapolis, Frederick decided to pursue her master’s degree at UT in 2003. She earned her degree in public affairs and elected to continue with her education. Frederick is currently working toward her doctorate in sociology.

Her dissertation, of which only a conclusion is left to write, examines the stories that women in politics tell to explain their decisions in whether or not to run for public office. This interest in politics was sparked when the NFB had her walking down the halls of Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., talking to members of Congress, as a highschooler.

Although she is near completion, her doctoral process hasn’t been easy. When Frederick started teaching three years ago, she was initially panic stricken as she realized that all of the equipment and technology in the classrooms are operated by a touch screen. She explains that the devices are so complicated they are inaccessible to blind people. However, the liberal arts department researched the options and ordered a screen reader for her to ensure she had the tools necessary to teach a course.

UT attempts to help accommodate blind or visually impaired students and faculty like Frederick. They are able to receive class materials in Braille, large print, and electronically. Assistive technology like screen reading software and speech to text software are additionally available. This is imperative for the 40 students who registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities office in 2010, identifying themselves as living with a visual impairment.

While her technological problems were resolved, she encountered other issues as a teaching assistant. “If there were two TAs in the class, students would literally form a line to talk to the other TA and no one would want to talk to me,” says Frederick. “It was

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a very hurtful experience.” She believes teaching her own class helps with this as it forces students to become comfortable more quickly.

Brian Rocheleau, aka Rosh, is working to make people more at ease when encountering blind people through his Blind Cafes. There, sighted guests are escorted into a pitch dark room by a blind wait staff. The participants then get a feel for what it’s like to be visually impaired as they eat a family style meal, talk with the wait staff, and listen to a music performance. Frederick participated in the event as a waitress in March 2011 when Rosh approached her on the UT campus. “Frederick offers her unique perspective as a blind person during the Q-and-A of the event where the blind guides engage in an intimate and very organic discussion about blindness,” says Rosh.

Monica Villarreal, a nutrition major that Frederick mentors, believes similar approaches should be taken on campus. Although she believes there is a tendency for sighted students to isolate from a blind person, she explains her understanding as to why this is a likely occurrence. “People have no idea what to do because there has been very little blind awareness campaigns on campus to truly educate the population. It is for this reason I decided to form the Longhorn Organization of Blind Students- to promote blind awareness and narrow the gap between sighted and blind people.”

This social barrier is something that Frederick has often encountered. “I always have to do the reaching out. I always have to do the convincing that I’m normal and worthy of friendship. There’s just this hurdle that I have to jump...always.”

But even as Frederick gets closer to acquiring her doctorate, she faces more hurdles.

While her immediate future is concerned with finding a teaching position on a tenure track, further down the road she looks toward starting a family with her husband, Daniel. And despite the excitement of this prospect, Frederick must think about the problems she may have to encounter.

“One real fear I have of having kids is that I’ve heard so many horror stories of Child Protective Services,” says Frederick. “I know blind people who have been at the grocery store with their kids and although nothing happened, somebody saw them and thought, how can this blind person be responsible for kids? They called CPS and [the family was] put under investigation. The prospect of that is terrifying to me.”

But Frederick, now 35 years old, won’t let that scare her into relinquishing all duties and parental control to her sighted husband.

“I do not want my kids to think ‘Oh, daddy’s in charge.’ Trust me, I am the boss at my house,” she giggles as her delicate blue eyes glitter in that familiar, gleeful way.