

20/400 vision, 20/20 life



BY JESSE BATSON

You have no peripheral vision. No depth perception. All you can see are things far in the distance in front of you, but you lose focus in a few seconds. That is what freshman Max Blaschke sees.

"It's like looking through a Cheerio," describes Max.

This is a very simplistic, but true description of Max's eye condition. His mother, Mercy Blaschke, described the condition in a more scientific way.

"They say he has funnel vision, so far away he has this wide angle picture," said Mercy.

When Max was just two weeks old his parents, Vaughn and Mercy Blaschke, were told that Max was blind.

"As a young mom, I didn't want to believe it and plus, I didn't feel that way because I felt that when I talked to him or walked in the room he saw me," said Mercy. "So what he suggested was to go see a specialist and we did and he said 'Yeah something is wrong. Not quite sure yet because he's too young to respond to us. Come back when he's two.'"

During the two year wait, Vaughn and Mercy noticed some unusual habits that Max was forming.

"Mostly we noticed that he bumped into things a lot and he had absolutely no interest in TV," said Mercy. "It could be on, but he wouldn't actually sit and watch it."

At such a young age, other than his clumsiness, Max led a normal, infant life.

"He just went about his business because as far as Max knew that's the way things were so he just made the best out of it for that time period," said Mercy.

Vaughn and Mercy did as they were told and took Max to a specialist at age two.

"So we went back when he was two years old and at that time [the doctor] looked at Max and was able to do tests and better able to communicate with him. They said, 'yes something is wrong. We're not sure (what it is). His vision is not very good.'"

As time passed, Max grew weak. The condition reached a serious level between Christmas and New Year's of 1993 when Max was just five years old.

"He didn't want to eat anymore, wasn't drinking water anymore, didn't want to use the bathroom anymore. I got to the point where he didn't want to walk anymore," said Mercy.

"(He was) sleeping all the time," said Vaughn.

An unquenchable thirst for water and a thrush, an infection on the tongue, caused Vaughn and Mercy to become seriously concerned.

"In that two week period things went down fast," said Mercy.

Starting off 1994 in a hectic way, Max was taken to the hospital on January 2.

"The room was full of doctors and nurses and they were asking us questions," recalls Mercy. "They took us out of the room and hooked him up to a hemodialysis machine at that time."

Following two days of being hooked up to the hemodialysis machine, Max was feeling better, wanting something to eat and drink. Then the seizure hit. This was the exclamation point on the doctors concern.

After extensive testing, a drastic breakthrough was made in Max's case.

"The infection didn't shut down the kidneys, the kidneys caused the infection," said Mercy.

The Blaschke family ended up traveling out of state in May 1994 to seek assistance.

"At University of Minnesota, I felt that they really knew what they were talking about and attacking, because not only did they have the kidney doctors there, they also had the genetic specialists," said Mercy. "They had everybody on it working together."

Another bump in the road was about to be encountered.

"Then in August they said 'he needs to have his gallbladder removed before he has the kidney transplant,'" said Mercy.

Originally the doctors thought that Max's donor would have to come from a

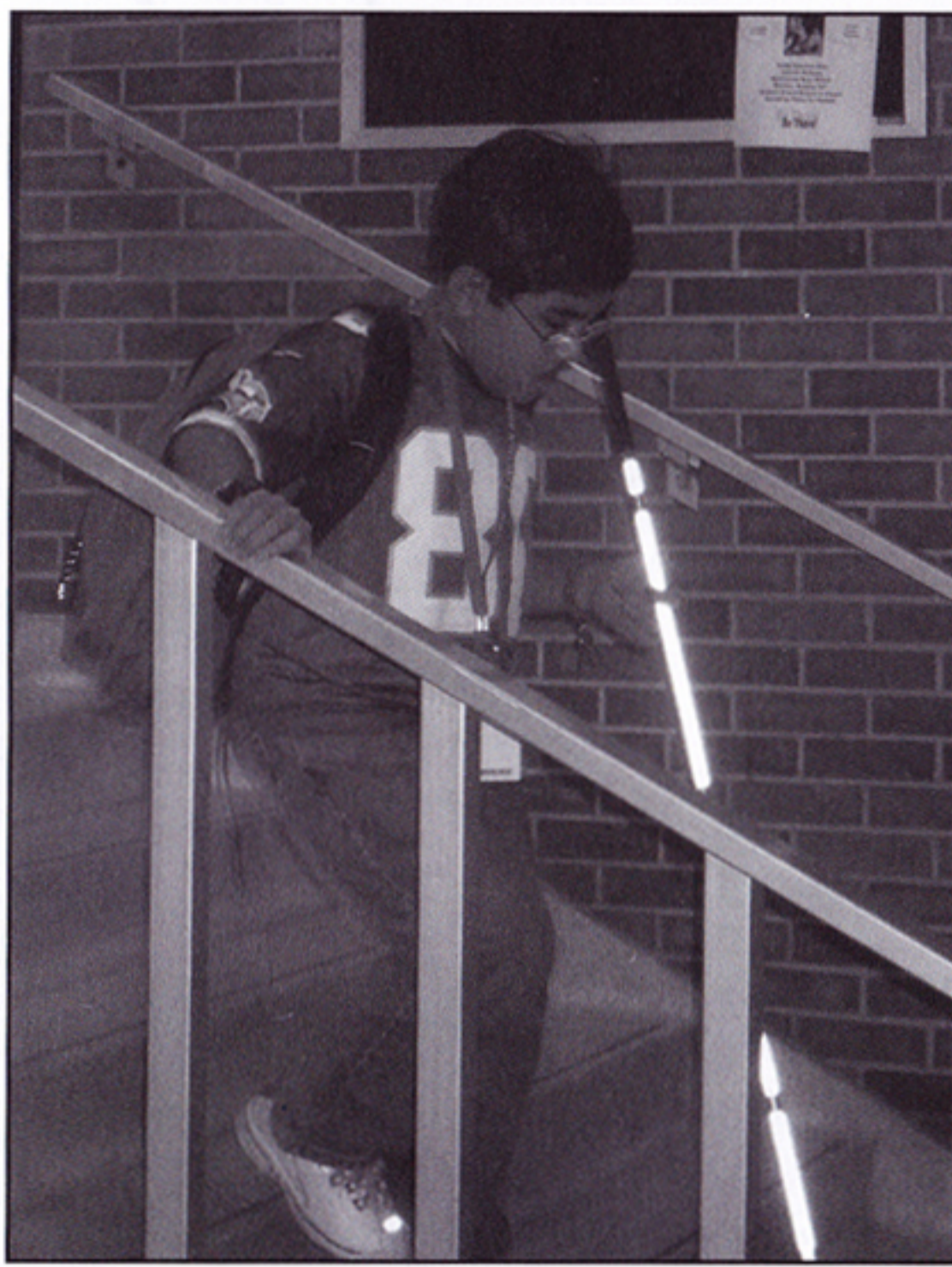


Photo by Jesse Batson

Heading to his third period class, freshman Max Blaschke descends a flight of stairs without trouble.

"There's always a positive side to everything."
 — Max Blaschke

cadaver. Positive results came back on blood tests, however, allowing Vaughn to give his kidney to Max.

"There was no second thought about that at all," said Vaughn. "It's one of those things that you come across that just has to be done. The quality of his life depended on it."

Certainly the operation was a scary thing for Max to go through, he didn't let his situation get his hopes down.

"Max never complained the whole time," said Mercy.

Although Max never voiced any of his concerns, he certainly had them.

"I had some idea what was happening, but I was very scared because I was wondering 'what if this doesn't go right.' Then what happens?" said Max.

Actually, the operation was a blessing in disguise, giving Max a new kidney and stabilizing his eyesight.

"In fact the medications he's on to keep him from rejecting his kidney could be keeping his eyesight stable," said Mercy.

Not only was Max's eyesight stable, but also Max's younger brother, Gage, was found to have escaped the eye condition.

Once the kidney transplant was complete, doctors dissected the removed kidney and found that it had caused the

Retinitis Pigmentosa that Max has.

For Max to live as normal a life as possible, he was faced with the task of using a cane and learning brail, which presented no problem for Max.

"We [worked] three times a week for an hour and he went through the brail books faster than any kid I've ever run across," said vision mobility instructor Marge Robertson.

Max even used brail, along with his healthy sense of humor, to play a prank on his parents. On the first day he learned brail, Max brought home a worksheet Robertson had given him to study.

"We asked him what was on his paper," said Vaughn.

With a twinkle in his eye, Max recited an elaborate story as an answer to his father's question.

"So we had asked Marge about it a while later and she said, 'no that was only the alphabet,'" said Vaughn.

"He knew that we didn't know what the heck was on that paper. He had made it up," said Mercy.

Cane travel was the next logical step for Max. "He picked up the tech-

niques, left, right, how to stay in step and how to get the arc right, things like that," said Robertson. "But learning north, south, east and west, and getting orientated that way...Max took a little bit longer."

There is no doubt that much of Max's life has been about learning skills of survival, but Max has led a fairly normal life throughout his years in school. With a profound love for music, Max joined chorus at Edison Middle School.

'Some current, some jazz, a little hip-hop here and there' are Max's favorite kinds of music.

Being physical and playing sports is not something Max is able to do, but he has unique ways of being an avid sports fan. Often times, for example, Max will bring a set of headphones to the Canaries games, so what he cannot see, he will hear on the radio.

Football, baseball and basketball are all out of the question, but Max is able to play one sport: bowling. He is taking lessons and is looking forward to that perfect 300 game.

Playing *Tetris* on the computer with his brother Gage is another way Max passes the time.

"We challenge each other by doing single games on it and whoever has the highest score wins," said Gage.

His time isn't usually spent watching television, but when he does watch TV, Max favors *Survivor*.

Most of the time you will find Max reading. The Harry Potter series is a favorite in that category.

"He loves to read," said Robertson. "He always has, even when he was in his early childhood. All the other kids would go play. He would go and read."

Reading may be more difficult to do, however, with all of Max's new extracurricular activities. He is currently involved in oral interp, the Cadette Choir at Lincoln and the Singing Boys of Sioux Falls.

The Singing Boys of Sioux Falls is a group of singers, which requires auditions before joining. Because of Max's vocal talent, he didn't have to go through the audition process.

"After Mrs. Hansen heard me doing scales at the beginning of the school year, she recommended it for me," said Max.

Oral interp is another activity that Max excels in.

"I look at this as something fun," said Max.

Despite only knowing him for a short time, oral interp instructor Karen Hayes already has a good idea of how much Max enjoys being involved in the activity.

"Max has absolute enthusiasm," Hayes said. "He is absolutely excited about the activity."

The piece that Max is reading for oral interp, *The Games People Play*, deals with how violent today's games have become.

"It's basically about how games from when our parents were young, always quiet board games where everyone could get along, and how today's games have all these fighting features where you can chop other player's heads off and that sort of thing," explained Max.

Competing in his first novice oral interp competition against O'Gorman, Max received two superior ratings out of two rounds. Because of Max's two superior ratings, he attained a purple ribbon.

With so many things on his agenda it's seems easy to forget that Max has Retinitis Pigmentosa, but this disease may make its presence known once again.

"What I know about Retinitis Pigmentosa is that it doesn't hit until late teens or your 40s, so we still don't know what's going to happen," said Mercy.

Despite the possibility of going completely blind, Max remains positive in his outlook on life.

"There's a positive side to everything," proclaimed Max.

Looking further ahead in his future, Max looks to continue his involvement in chorus and oral interp. Following high school, Max plans to attend college. With the support of his parents, nothing seems to hold Max back.

"He's got this wonderfully positive family that believes that Max can do anything and I think Max knows that he can," said Hayes.

Robertson pinpointed the direct point of strength in Max's life.

"I think Max's strongest advocate and best friend is his mom," conceded Robertson. "She's always been the strong one. If mom wasn't in the picture, then dad would take over, but mom's there and that's the way it should be."

Max and his family, especially his mother, clearly have a special bond. Mercy describes it best:

"Max is my role model," said Mercy. "I tell people that all the time. He is what I want to achieve — his attitude, just everything about him."

Good luck to you Max and welcome to Lincoln!

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