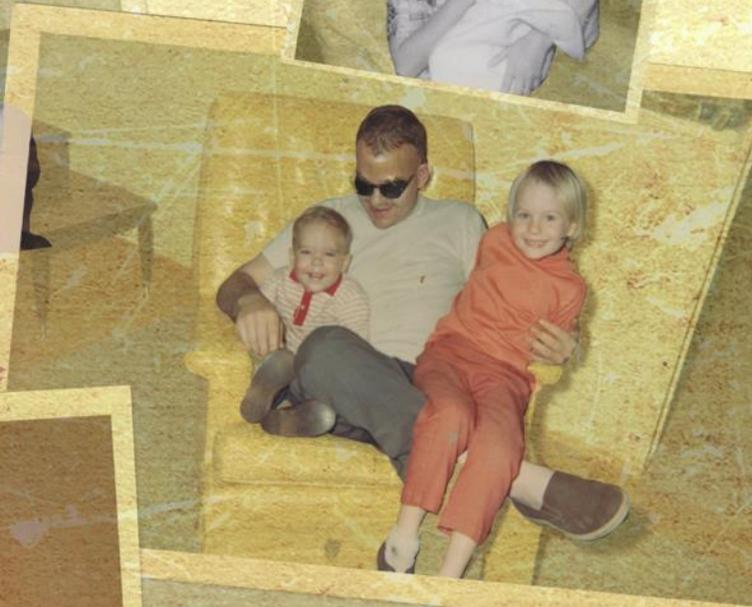
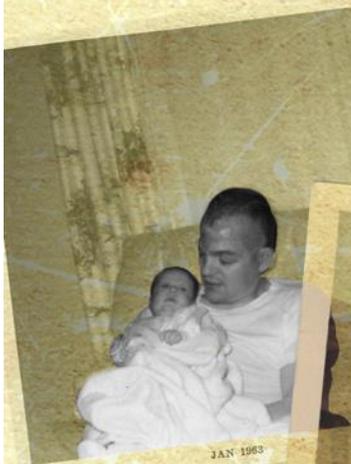


as i saw it



laura schriner



As I Saw It

A Sighted Daughter's Memoir of Growing Up With Blind Parents

by Laura Schriener

Chapter 1:

Serendipity—The Story of Roy and Diane

Roy was only 26 years old when he first arrived at the Orientation Center for the Blind (OCB) in Oakland, California. He entered the blind school so that he could learn how to take care of himself and learn skills to live and adjust to his new life of blindness. My dad was involved in a tragic accident just months prior that left him with no vision at all. It was one of those accidents that happened so quickly nothing could have been done to stop it. Worse, it had happened when he was all alone in the garage. So it seemed like an eternity before anyone heard his screams for help. By the time help arrived, the damage had been done, and his vision was gone. The doctors told him there wasn't any surgery or anything else that could be done to gain even the slightest bit of sight back. His world was total darkness, and he needed to learn how to deal with it.

That's why his doctors pretty much forced him into the blind school so soon after the accident, even though his wounds weren't totally healed. That's what doctors did back in 1959. Instead of getting psychological help to deal with the accident, injuries, and sudden blindness, his doctors thought he needed to keep his mind busy so that he didn't have time to ruminate about the accident and dwell on thoughts of being blind. The doctors believed he needed to keep his mind on constructive things, and wanted him to be around other blind people, instead of spending time alone letting negative thoughts creep into his head. So off to OCB he went.

When he arrived at OCB, he lived in a standard dorm-type room like all the rest of the students. The rooms were similar to any college-type dorm room except each student at OCB had his or her own room, which was about the size of a bedroom and contained a bed that was wedged into one of the corners of the room with a nightstand alongside the bed. The room also had a small closet, a little larger than a typical hallway coat closet, where he could hang his clothes. There was also a built-in chest of drawers where he could put his undergarments, t-shirts, socks, and anything else he wanted to tuck away. The room was completed with a small, table-like desk and a chair. There was no running water in the rooms, so he had to use the community showers and bathroom that were just a few short steps away.

Early in the morning, on the second day in his new surroundings, he was awakened by a tickling sensation across his face. Only half awake, he brushed his face with his hands and noticed that his hands started to get the same tickling sensation. It wasn't long before he realized that the tickling

sensation he was feeling were ants crawling across his body. Ants had crawled onto his body attracted to the still-weeping wounds from the accident that left him blind. Feeling helpless, he called out for help and rushed outside his room in his underwear. Someone immediately grabbed his arm, and for that split second, he was relieved not to be alone. The stranger rushed him into the shower to rinse the ants from his body. Someone from the school came to the room to exterminate the ants. Someone else brought him fresh clothes to change into, while he sat outside until he was sure all the ants were gone from his room so he wouldn't have to worry about them again.

A few months later, he had learned to get around a little bit on his own with the use of his cane. Restless one night, because the night-owl lifestyle he had as a sighted man had not really changed after going blind, he ventured out by himself to get something to eat to help him fall asleep. He grabbed his red-tipped cane, locked his dorm room, and ventured out into the cool night air. He headed to the only place he knew was open at 2:00 a.m., the all-night diner that he had been to many times before. It was only a couple blocks away. "I'll grab a burger and come right back so I can make it to classes tomorrow," he thought. Unfortunately, his evening didn't go as planned, and he never made it to the diner. You see, Roy didn't have the best of luck back then, and we've all heard that bad luck and tragedy always strikes in threes. Going blind was tragedy number one, and tragedy number two was literally just around the corner.

Roy was across the street from the diner, and the smell of charbroiled hamburgers lingered in the air as he waited on the corner for the traffic light to turn green so that he could cross the street. The traffic light turned green, and he took a few steps into the street. The car came out of nowhere fast, and there was no time to react. Roy was down in an instant. Thank goodness there was a witness who saw the whole thing. The single witness to the hit-and-run accident ran over to Roy to see if he was okay, but Roy was just lying there, unconscious and lifeless in the middle of the road. The driver didn't see him, nor did the driver stop after he was hit. If it wasn't for this witness, Roy could have been left there to die.

The witness said he had been watching Roy walk down the street for a couple of minutes. He watched Roy step up to the intersection, press the button on the streetlight to go across the street, and wait for the light to turn green. It wasn't hard for Roy to know when the traffic light turned green, because all the traffic lights near the blind school buzzed audibly to let the blind students know the light was green and that it was safe to cross. I know that he paused and listened to make sure that the cross-traffic had actually stopped, too, because that is an important part of learning how to cross the street when you are blind. And now Roy, who had just gone blind a few months earlier, had more problems than just the loss of his sight to worry about.

An ambulance came and took Roy to the County Hospital in Oakland, CA. It's the place where people who don't have insurance, or very little resources to be able to afford medical care, are usually taken for treatment. And that was a pretty appropriate choice for Roy at this time in his life because he hadn't been able to work since going blind. He didn't have any money saved up. Heck, he was just starting to get his life together and only working part-time while he attended community college *before* the accident. Paying for school was just about all he could afford with his part-time job while he was still living at home.

Roy was rushed into surgery immediately upon his arrival at the hospital, so that doctors could repair his shattered leg. The bumper and grille of the car that hit Roy had rammed into his thigh and had broken the strongest bone in his body, his femur. The car that hit him was typical for a car made in the 1950s, one of those very powerful and heavy muscle cars, solidly made of metal bodies and metal bumpers, unlike the fiberglass cars of today. So Roy was pretty fortunate that he wasn't hurt more severely and that his leg could be saved.

Roy doesn't remember anything about the accident. He awoke all alone in a quiet room where he could only hear people talking in the distance. His body ached, and he didn't know exactly what was wrong. He tried to sit up and touch where the pain was, so he could figure out what was going on, but he could hardly move. So he reached his hand towards the pain, but all he felt there was a hard white plaster cast that circled around his waist and hips. He stretched his hand as far as he could and felt the cast go down his leg. He had started to panic when a nurse suddenly appeared in room. She told him that he had been hit by a car but that he was safe in a hospital.

Roy asked her what was wrong, and she said, "Mr. Phelps, your leg was broken badly in the car accident. The doctors performed surgery to fix your leg. You have a cast around your body so that your leg can't move, to give the bone in your leg time to set properly and heal." She also said he was going to be in the hospital until his leg could heal enough to get a smaller cast. He needed to be able to get up and walk around on his own before he could leave. Roy knew that he wasn't going to be leaving this hospital room any time soon.

The days were long, made longer because Roy hadn't had enough time to adjust to the darkness of losing his sight in the first place. There wasn't much to do but lie awake in bed most of the day. He hadn't really learned how to do very much on his own yet since going blind, hadn't learned enough Braille to read any books, and he couldn't even see to gawk at the people who walked past his room. He only had a small TV to listen to and keep his mind busy, and the occasional visit from nurses and doctors who wandered into his room.

He rarely had visitors, partly because he didn't know very many people at the blind school, and partly owing to the fact that his family lived far away. His mother worked two jobs to support herself,

and she was just barely making it on her own. So it was hard for his mother to take any time off to come see him. His father wasn't around anymore. His older brother had joined the Air Force and was out of the country. His older sister wasn't able to visit, either.

There was no one else in his room, because the hospital didn't want to put anyone sighted next to him since he had so recently gone blind. He was pretty much alone in the quietness of his room for most of the day, at least until his leg healed enough to change to a smaller cast so he could move around on his own. For the most part, the days in the hospital were spent alone in silence with only his thoughts, scattered and uncertain thoughts about this new life of darkness he had yet to figure out, and now a badly broken leg.

* * *

Diane arrived at OCB a few months before Roy. She was finally at the place in her life where she would learn the skills she needed so that she could live on her own and take care of herself. I can only imagine what a stressful but exciting time it was for her. I mean, when she was through with school, she would have her first apartment and live without the help of her parents, siblings, or anyone else. She was going to be making her own rules and be able to do things the way she wanted. Who wouldn't be excited, right? She was already kind of living on her own in the dormitory at other blind schools, but this school was very different from those she had attended when she was younger.

Diane was an adult now, and instead of learning history and math or any of the other academic subjects they taught at the other blind schools, she was here to simply learn life skills, the ones that would allow her to live independently. Going back to live with her family after this was not an option that she wanted; she was determined to make it on her own. From this day forward, her life was going to be different too. She was going to have to learn to accomplish things truly on her own for the first time in her life, and she felt she was up for the challenge.

One of the first people Diane met at the blind school was another student named Josie, who was born blind just like Diane. They were around the same age and hit it off instantly. They were like two peas in a pod. It was just one of those easy relationships that was meant to be. They started off as best friends the moment they met, and their friendship has never ended.

One of the early classes they took together was mobility training. This class was intended to teach them how to get around on their own. It would help both Diane and Josie build the confidence and skills they needed to be totally independent travelers, to go where ever they wanted when they wanted, without having to take someone's arm for help. What they were going to learn in this class was not small stuff by any means. This training would allow them to travel in public by themselves, walk around town to go shopping, navigate restaurants to get something to eat, and travel using the bus and taxi system all by themselves instead of waiting or relying on sighted people. Even some sighted people

are afraid to learn these things on their own, so I know that for the blind, the thought of doing it all by themselves was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. They were about to embark on a journey to learn some of the most important skills needed for their lives ahead.

Josie and Diane were paired together as mobility partners by their instructor, Pete. They were similarly skilled: both able to get around a little on their own before coming to this school, with a similar overall mobility skill level. Since they were both born blind, they had learned to do some things on their own when they were little, and had adapted quite a bit. They were each able to easily get around the dorms by themselves so that they could visit the other students in the building, and they had no trouble walking to and from the cafeteria on their own. It was the perfect pairing to start their training together.

They had two mobility tasks each day to accomplish together, and Pete was responsible for giving them these tasks. Good ole' Pete, they used to call him. Pete loved all his students, and all the students loved him. He was well-suited for the role: kind and reassuring as he gently taught them how to get around on their own. His sense of humor helped them smooth over some of the toughest and most frustrating times, when they just didn't think they could do it. Diane and Josie were lucky to have such a caring person teaching them how to get around.

The mobility challenges started out small at first, like getting around the school together with their partner to find the different buildings on campus. They had to repeat the same tasks until they were both comfortable with completing them. Once they were comfortable, though, the tasks became just a little bit harder. After learning the campus, they headed off campus to learn more.

The first off-campus task was to walk from campus to a store or restaurant nearby. Then, they graduated to being dropped off a couple of blocks from school, and challenged to find their way back. I don't want you to think that the blind students were just dropped off somewhere, and then someone was waiting for them back at school. The tasks were gradual so that each of the students would feel comfortable before moving on. Students were told at what intersection they were being dropped off, and they knew in which direction the school was located. It was easier than you might think to keep track of the streets around the school, because the layout of the streets formed a grid. The alphabet street names all ran parallel to each other in one direction, and the intersecting streets were all numbers. When the students were dropped off, they would get instructions as to which direction they needed to walk, and they would know how many streets they needed to cross, based on the intersection named.

At first, the students were monitored without their knowledge during the whole trip. As their skill levels improved, the students were monitored less closely. Their tasks were based on their proven abilities, but Pete also sometimes pushed them out of their comfort zones a little more when he thought they could handle it. Pete drove an old beater of a car that sounded like no other. The rattling and

rambling noises that Pete's car made could be heard blocks away before his car could actually be seen. The blind students could identify it quite readily. When Pete dropped off Diane and Josie for their mobility tasks away from campus and told them, "See you guys when you get back to campus," they knew he wasn't telling the truth. After all, they could hear his car when he drove by, checking on them. They'd hear his car in the distance and when it got close enough, they'd yell out, "Hello, Pete!" He would yell back, "Doing great, ladies. I'll see you back at school." Pete was usually never very far away when they were first learning how to get around. And that's what made him such a great instructor: all the students felt assured that he had their backs, and he would come to their rescue if they really needed help.

Diane and Josie became proficient in their mobility training, and Pete had started to give them tasks using the public transportation buses. Pete always told them which bus they were to get on, gave them Brailled cards with instructions, told them where they were getting on the bus, and then would tell them the destination, which was usually back at the blind school. He would drive them to the location to catch the bus, and wait to make sure they got on the right bus. Sometimes, he would sneak onto the bus just to watch them and make sure they were okay and doing the right things.

Diane and Josie would get on the bus and tell the bus driver where they needed to get off. They'd always try to sit close to the front so they could hear the driver. The bus drivers announced the name of the next stop just after the bus started in motion from the previous stop. So Diane and Josie would listen to the bus driver call out the stops to know when to get off. Every once in a while, bus drivers didn't call out the stops, so Diane and Josie would have to tell the bus driver where they were going. Usually, the bus drivers were pretty good at keeping track of them, but every once in a while they'd find out the bus driver forgot and they had missed their stop.

Mobility tasks got more and more involved, sometimes having to take multiple buses. They would have to get off of one bus by themselves, and make sure to catch the correct connecting bus. Sometimes it was at the same bus stop, other times they'd have to cross the street or walk a block or two to catch the next bus. The Oakland bus system was great, because if they happened to miss one of the buses, another one would usually come around just a few minutes later. Diane and Josie were getting pretty accustomed to traveling together and had become very proficient using the busses.

One day, they got a task that was like no other they had before. Pete said, "Here you go, ladies, your task for today," as he handed Diane and Josie some bus money and the Brailled index cards with the written details of their task. Pete told Diane and Josie that they were going to visit a guy from school who was in the hospital. He told them:

“One of the students from school has just been involved in a horrible accident and is going to be at the hospital for quite some time. His family lives far away, so he is all alone. His name is Roy Phelps. I want you two to go visit him, be a friend to him, and see if he needs anything.”

So off they went, just like with any other task they’d had before. Josie and Diane got on the bus, and when the bus driver called out, “County Hospital,” they got off the bus. They listened to where all the other people were headed, and followed them inside the hospital. Inside the hospital, they asked for directions to Roy’s room. When they got into the elevator, one of the gentleman asked them, “What floor, ladies?” and they rode the elevator up to the floor he was on. They walked out of the elevator and headed down the hallway toward Roy’s room.

Roy was lying in bed when he heard a *tap-tap-tap* sound coming from down the hall outside his room. His ears perked up, because that sound was a very familiar sound—he knew it from the blind school. It was the tap of a cane, which could only mean another blind person was here at the hospital. “I wonder if they are coming to see me,” he thought to himself, yet wondered who it could be, because he didn’t know very many people at school yet. Then he heard a laugh. It was the same laugh that he had heard at school—it must be one of the girls at school that he had heard many times in the hallway, but it belonged to a girl that he did not know. He thought to himself expectantly, “It sure sounds like her.” Little did he know, that it was the same girl—the girl whose laugh Roy developed a crush on even though he had not even met her.

“Roy,” they called out when they got to his room.

“Yes,” he said.

“It’s Diane and Josie from school. We came to visit.” The nurse in the room showed Diane and Josie to the chairs where they could sit down. They spent hours chatting about school, and all that was going on while he had been out. They told jokes and were having a good time visiting. Roy was having a great time. It wasn’t every day that two single girls came to his room to visit him. He was having such a good time he started to forget about his leg.

Josie and Diane stayed for a few hours before they headed back to school on the bus. Roy could hardly believe that the girl who he had heard laughing in the hallways at school, the girl whose laugh he had just about fallen in love with, had just come to visit him in the hospital. Her name was Diane.

Diane and Josie came to visit Roy a few more times over the next three months, which was how long Roy was in the hospital. It was these early visits in the hospital that sparked a love that was about to blossom!