

Boot camp for the blind: learning to live unassisted

By Frank Greve
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OCOEE RIVER, Tenn. — As two men waded with their rubber raft into the thundering Ocoee River for a run down its serious rapids, the younger man crowed, "If we survive this, we'll be heroes!"

"Yeah," the older replied, "but if we drown, they'll call us dumb a--- who got what they deserved."

The older man is Jerrel Lambright, 57, a bass-voiced once-and-future undertaker. Like the other man, Harlon Cowsar, 35, a once-and-future college student, Lambright attends the tiny Louisiana Center for the Blind in Ruston, La. With most of its 20 enrollees, they recently bounced, bucked and furiously paddled their way down 5 miles of the Ocoee's Class III and IV rapids. Which they couldn't see.

"I think it's more exhilarating NOT to see what you're getting into," Cowsar, of Springfield, La., said afterward, showing precisely the pluck that the center promotes among its students.

The school's purpose is to build the skills and confidence that free graduates to regard blindness as "not a tragedy or a debilitating disease, but a characteristic or maybe a nuisance," director Pam Allen explained.

The approach, which draws students from across the country, is gaining favor for the best of reasons: its success. While nearly three-quarters of blind adults are unemployed, 9 out of 10 of the Louisiana center's graduates find work or enroll in college. Two other centers founded on the same two- to three-month boot camp approach, Blind Inc., in Minneapolis, and the Colorado Center for the Blind, in Littleton, enjoy similar success.

The private, federally subsidized schools train students to get around with canes, read Braille, shop, cook, clean and master software that turns computer-screen words and some images into audible speech.

Confidence-building is the essential spice in everything, which is why Allen's students spent three days in leafy eastern Tennessee riding rapids, hiking, teetering with arms outstretched across cables strung between tree trunks and skimming 1,000 feet down a mountain on a zip line.

"You know how they tell you never to look down? Well, we can't!" Luke Cassi, 19, a brush-cut former high school jock from Ravenna, Ohio, said after his zip-line adventure.

Being blind may make it better, Cowsar ventured: "It's less anticipation, more adrenaline."

All the derring-do "gives people bragging rights when they get back home — that and ammunition when people tell you you can't do something," said Jerry Darnell, the school's pony-tailed shop instructor.

In fact, virtually all the school's students bit on every excursion challenge.

"If you start saying no to the little things, it makes it easy to say no to the big things," Darnell continued as, behind him, a young man dropped his cane in a memorable spot and started up eight flights of stairs to the top of a water slide.

All the risking and winning made for happy campers, for the most part. Their success wasn't inevitable — a counselor dislocated a shoulder on the slide — but it was enough to give the group an intoxicating brimful of esprit de corps.

At the same time, the fallibility of blind life, whether it was cigarettes being lit in the middle or a bowl of citrus Raisin Bran produced by mistaking a gallon of orange juice for a gallon of milk, was evident enough to require self-deprecating humor of anyone at the drop of a hat. Tact, too, was instinctive in a group where it was hard to be certain who was listening.

As for the challenges to courage, they drew whoops and screams but bore something of an amusement park's unreality, some students said.

For a real adrenaline rush, Cowsar said, riding river rapids didn't hold a candle to the first time he heard the sound of oncoming traffic while crossing a major intersection in Ruston — just as he realized that he'd veered off course and missed the opposite curb.

The right response, he now knows, is a quick course correction based on the direction of the traffic noise. (Veer away if it's in the lane parallel to you; toward it if it's in a perpendicular lane.) Straight traffic crossings are a skill that everyone at the Louisiana center learns by navigating the university town and rail hub, which has a population of 20,000. Indeed, "cane travel" is the only way to cover the half-mile from the apartments, where students cook and clean on their own, to the center downtown.

Some orientation is duh-simple, such as determining the distinctive smells of shoe stores and pharmacies. Then it gets harder. How do you distinguish, for example, between streets and parking lot entrances and exits? (Answer: Parking lots typically have pavement seams where they intersect with streets.) How do you know when you're in an alley? (Answer: By the echo that a tapping cane tip makes when walls or fences are nearby.) The biggest challenge is hearing a nearly silent electric car. (Answer to date: Listen for tire sounds. The National Federation for the Blind is working with automakers to find a better one.)

Cane travel, home economics and deftness with computer software for the blind are among the center's requirements of all students because they're liberating. And liberation is the heart of the matter.

"My schedule depended on when people were available to take me somewhere, so I was always living on somebody else's time," said Deja Rolfe, 23, of Salt Lake City. In her second week in Ruston, "I walked 12 blocks to the city market, something I'd never have done back home."



Paul Shepardson during team building rope drills in the woods of in Ocoee, Tennessee August 29, 2006. Students who are partially blind wear eye shades so as not to have an advantage over the others. (Chuck Kennedy/MCT)

Her classmate and mentor, Terri Meas, from Sacramento, Calif., said she'd denied her virtual blindness for years by, for example, patronizing only familiar places and reading at home with a super-magnifier the books that were a blur in class. That didn't work so well at Sacramento State, said Meas, 23, and she found herself depressed and housebound after friends moved to Davis and Berkeley and her boyfriend went to Las Vegas.

Meas now plans to join her boyfriend, now fiance, and study social work at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Merrily, she lists cities that she's navigated alone since enrolling at the center: Monroe, La., Oakland, Calif., Las Vegas, Chattanooga, Tenn., and Baltimore.

Cassi, blinded by a genetic disorder just as he graduated from high school, found another kind of liberation. He spent much of the year after graduation, he said, "partying,

grieving, not working and going nowhere fast." Now, "I've gotten on the right path. I've gotten serious. Everything in life that I want to happen is happening."

Lambright, blinded five years ago by glaucoma, said he quit his undertaker job because he couldn't do the paperwork. Then, he said, he found himself stuck at home in Field, La., near Lake Charles, "overmothered" by a doting sister and daughter who poured his coffee, cut his meat and "didn't want me to cook anything unless it was in the microwave."

In a month or so, he'll go back to his old job and life armed with new computer skills — plus new confidence in handling a skillet.

None of this is easy, and as in Marine boot camps, most recruits are raw. That was evident as one new student helped to prepare the group's dinner by mutilating a cucumber while another

discovered the water-to-powder formula for Kool-Aid.

Yet before they graduate, these apprentices will have to budget, buy and prepare a five-course sit-down dinner for four to eight people, then clean up.

In shop class, instructor Darnell trains students to use every power tool that a blind person is warned to shun: radial arm saw, table saw, drill press, lathe, router and the like. The graduation requirement is to make something that uses most of them. Grandfather clocks and hope chests are common. One father built a jungle gym for his kids.

In cane travel, the final exam is some kind of advanced scavenger hunt. The students are given a handful of addresses in, say, Shreveport, 75 miles west, and told to use only public transportation to bring back

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