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Personal Narrative:

*Coping With and Overcoming Adversity*

Eng. 102

By Richie Heinlein

When I was in second grade, I was diagnosed with a major eye problem called Borderline Albinism. Albinism makes one very light sensitive and poor sighted. Because of this I started to wear glasses, thick ones at that. Having a disability had a huge effect on my time in school, needs required and the way people treated me.

Being visually impaired required certain needs that were not always met. It became evident I needed large print books but the school wasn't ready for that need at all. When I finally got those books, they were big enough, but they didn't have the vocabulary words in bold print or colored, rather, they had them in italics. Italic print is one of the worst styles for me to see. Teachers were also using a crank machine to run off purple ditto sheets for the class. I told the teachers I could not read them properly, but in spite of this they continued to hand me the dittos to work with. This practice continued through the freshman year.

Eventually the school system wanted to put me in the Learning Disabilities section because of my being slower than my class by about three times. However, my dad insisted that I stay mainstreamed. I adapted by using what survival skills that I could muster. I was trying to be friendly to my classmates, even more so than before I was diagnosed with my disability, but by then they started making cliques that I was not a part of. Because of this, I tried coping in other ways. I isolated myself more than other kids because they did not want me around. Having no friends made things hard on me, as they were still making fun of me. I also tried coping by trying to make people laugh, but my jokes weren't very funny to my classmates. The teachers were not helping the situation either because when I told them what was going on, they thought I was a

tattletale or that I was bringing it on myself. It seemed as though I was miserable no matter what I did.

In later years, it got worse. In grade school, I was even more cruelly made fun of. People were actually hurting me. One student even stuffed me in a locker. Some people in my class would knock my books on the floor, and then kick me when I tried to pick them up. Still, I was trying to be nice and was acting a little daffy trying to make friends. Even after this, I was trying to be myself.

Eventually, I started playing sports so I could cope with what was happening to me. First I tried my hand at track. I wasn't that good and realized it was not for me. I eventually found tennis. I wasn't very good, however, I still felt comfortable with this sport. Even after I started playing sports, the students were still not very nice to me. In fact, a couple of them said "Why even show up at all?" This hurt me badly- so much so in fact that I cried a little. Still, I was trying to be congenial and act natural.

I joined the chess club to enjoy myself and have fun. Chess came easy to me because I was trained by my brother and enjoyed it. My brother and I went to tournaments. It seemed like we both ended up getting the same record nearly all the time. I won a few matches, but I was never a match for my brother. This was the normal thing for my brother and me throughout my Jr. High to high school life.

In eighth grade, I had a shop teacher who did not understand my disability. He did not comprehend how a person could not draw a straight line with a T-square; I was failing the course because of it. My dad had to physically come into my classroom and talk to the teacher about the matter in private. After this, the teacher was more understanding and gave me a C\* modified for the course.

In contrast to my problems in eighth grade, there were two teachers that helped me greatly. My Science teacher encouraged me by telling me not to give up while the Social Studies teacher got me involved in school activities such as recess basketball teams. I made my first free throw during my time with these teams which was a major encouragement to me. During the time I was involved in the recess basketball teams, I made two friends. These were the first true friends I made that were actually students.

My high school years were about the same if not worse. By this time, I was getting discouraged because I could not make more friends. Eventually, I met a girl who was sitting at the outcast table like me. We became fast friends. She started talking about wanting a ranch when she grew up (I hope she got it). This friend of mine talked to me everyday at lunch. I expressed my wanting to work with children and she would talk about her dream of wanting a ranch. Unfortunately, sometimes I didn't see her so I was lonely on those days.

Outside of school, things weren't much better. My home-life was deteriorating. My grades began to slip. I was still trying to cope through sports. I played in high school tennis. Luckily, everyone was able to play. However, the coach wasn't helping me out much. In practice, he spent very little time with me personally to make me better; instead he was always with his top three players and left the other players virtually alone. Despite this I tried my best.

At the same time that I started playing high school tennis, I was taking P.E. The P.E. teacher in contrast to my tennis coach was a major encouragement. The teacher saw that the students didn't like me too well and that I was being made fun of even in class.

Instead of yelling at the kids or disciplining them, he allowed me to serve as umpire in our kickball games. The teacher wanted to prove to all the students that a disabled person is still a person and deserved respect. That was a lot of fun. I was very fair in my umpiring. I was never mad at any of the students. However, I was very sad that I couldn't make a friend except the teacher.

When I was in my sophomore year of high school my parents divorced. I went to Kentucky and enrolled in high school. There I was finally able to make friends. My first friend here was a major encouragement. He told me to keep going. At this time, I was crushed because of the divorce and having to leave my classmates and the school I was at despite how I was treated.

Later on that year, I played tennis for that school. I got virtually the same treatment as in my previous school. However, this was a little bit worse because I had absolutely no personal care. This time, the coach was spending time with his top two people and no one else. I was the last person on the team and couldn't get higher. Despite this, I still did my best and played three seasons.

Soon, graduation came. I went to my old school's graduation. I was expecting more of the same from the students. I came to find out that I did not recognize any of them. The students of the graduating class all apologized for their behavior. I was very surprised at this, but I finally had closure to a bitter past. I went to my own graduation at my new school with a group of people I hardly knew, but that's ok.

This disability has a lot of meaning for me and everyone else. For me, it means that I have to never give up and keep on going. I will keep playing sports and be friendly to everyone. This is not so much a coping method now, but a way of life. For everyone

else, I need understanding from people and help when I can get it. I won't be ashamed to ask for it. To survive, I must have help. It is necessary for everyone to have help sometimes. The kind of help that I need from everyone else is just somewhat different.

The impact that I can have on everyone is great. I amaze people when I tell them that I can do a lot of things. This is true especially when I tell people about my 5 seasons of tennis for my respective schools. I also give them first hand experience about the more glaring details of my disability such as my cane or my thick glasses. I show them the cane and ask them to wear my glasses for a few seconds so the weight is felt and so on. If a person was even thinking about making fun of my kind, this might change their minds. The impact on my life from this makes me work even harder to help all of the people that I can.

In conclusion, my past may have been a bitter one and I have had every reason to be mad to this day at people who don't see who I am. I am not mad in the least. I will talk to everyone that I can about my disability, so maybe not many more people will have to endure what I have had to endure. I take peace in the fact that I make friends easily now and plan to make many more in the future.