True vision is living life without limits

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With three generations of blindness in my family from a hereditary and degenerative eye disease (myself, my mom, and one of my three children), I understand first-hand the power of limitations – limitations that others place on us and that which we put on ourselves. At one point in my life, I was my own biggest barrier to happiness, fulfillment, and success … and I didn't even know it. For me, it was a matter of learning to get out of my own way! Everything changed with a decision – the decision to stop feeling sorry for myself and do something about it. I learned the hard way and now pass on to others that *it's not what happens to us, but how we respond to our circumstances*.

While this principle is applicable to all of us regardless of our situation in life, it was definitely true for me at age 23 when I lost significant vision and could no longer drive, read standard size print, or walk around without running into things, tripping, or falling down stairs. I lost a coveted corporate management job out of college because I could no longer see to work. In my eyes, my world crumbled. I had just married the love of my life – but felt that I was my wife's knight in shining armor who had just turned into a freakin' frog, and I couldn't do anything about it. I was no longer the person I used to be … or so I initially thought.

That pessimistic attitude and victim mentality changed though with a deliberate decision to persist without exception and be the person I was before vision loss: the doer, the achiever who persevered despite obstacles, despite exhaustion. From that point forward I became open instead of resistant to learning to do things differently to compensate for lost and limited vision. And that's the real story, my "true vision" if you will. I stopped being the victim so that I could, over time, become the victor!

For three years I went through blindness rehabilitation. I learned how to use a cane and get around; memorize environments to confidently navigate them; become an auditory learner instead of a visual learner; distinguish voices; learn how to fake "eye contact" with the limited tunnel vision I do have to make others feel comfortable; learn how to become efficient using voice screen readers and enlarged magnification; and learn how to decipher and decode what I'm actually seeing in my new Mr. Magoo-like world. I then put those new productivity tools to work for me as I went to law school to become a disability rights advocate and return to the workforce so I could go off disability social security.

For the past 20 years, I've knocked down physical and attitudinal barriers while demonstrating to others that a disability does not always have to be disabling. This is the message I've passed along as a disability rights attorney, corporate Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) officer, disability inclusion program manager, disability discrimination investigator, ADA claims mediator, and corporate Equal Employment Opportunity/ADA compliance and inclusion director. I've served on disability organizations' board of directors, been a city commissioner on disability issues, and settled a landmark disability discrimination case. I mentor young professionals and athletes with disabilities, and I was [recently inducted into the Disability Mentor Hall of Fame](http://www.pyd.org/blog/jason-bryn-disability-mentoring-hall-fame-2015/).

I was blessed to have a second sports career in my mid-30s racing around the world on the back of a tandem bicycle for the U.S. Paralympic Cycling Team. In the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece, I placed top 10 in the world in the 4 km pursuit track cycling event and the combined long distance road race and time trial. I hold seven U.S. national championships, and my U.S. tandem time trial record remains today with an average speed over 35 mph for 25 miles.

As BAE System's new Disability Compliance and Inclusion Programs Manager in Workforce Relations and Compliance Center of Expertise (WRC COE), I support BAE Systems' focus on ability – what a person can do and how a person's diversity of experiences adds to our workforce innovation and problem-solving skillsets. We're positioning ourselves for disability to be a competitive advantage in the people marketplace as an employer of choice for people with disabilities. An example of this is our Warrior Integration Program that attracts and retains the talents of qualified employees who happen to be wounded warriors as service-injured veterans.

People often ask me for guidance in how they should interact with a person with an apparent disability – "what should I say, what should I do?"  I laugh and say, "Start with hi"!  It's simple, a person with a disability is…well, a person.

*Another piece of advice I would offer: If you want to help a person with an apparent disability (e.g. open the door for them, take their hand, push their wheelchair), ask them first if they need any help and if so, what help you can provide.*

***What other advice would you offer?***

*If you're interested in supporting the formation of a new company-wide disability ERG as an ally supporter, person with a disability, caregiver or family member of a person with a disability -- please register online at the* [*Multicultural Network (MCN) OneSpace ERG signup page*](http://onespace.baesystems.com/INC/Diversity/Lists/Multicultural%20Network/Item/newifs.aspx?List=9cb9764a-97a6-489b-9268-404215f8d779&Web=d9de70e1-c85c-4eea-becb-3042bd80743d) *and select the "[Pending] Individuals with Disabilities and Caregivers ERG" at the bottom of the dropdown section.  MCN procedures require 50 employees to indicate interest in the ERG for formal formation steps to begin -- town hall meeting of interested employees, finalization of a charter and election of ERG officers (planned for Q1 2016).*