



Statewide Vision  
Resource Centre

# The Critical Factors: Insights from an Interview with a Successful Person with Vision Impairments

Emily White

Monday 12 January 2015

Concurrent Session 9A



# Background

- Highly successful blind individual
  - Attended blind and mainstream schools
  - Professionally employed since university
  - In a long-term relationship
  - Extensive world traveller
  - All-round lovely human being

Statewide Vision Resource Centre

2

University assignment for the Masters in Special Education (Vision Impairment) at Renwick (RIDBC).

Knew this person from my interactions with her professionally and was impressed at her skills and knowledge as a professional as well as a blind woman.

How did she become so skilled and independent? How could I learn from her? Most importantly, how could I pass her skills, knowledge and attitudes on to my own students? I knew I had to interview her.

Once I got up the confidence to ask her, she couldn't have been more willing or more candid. After this paper was accepted for the conference, I asked whether she would like to be identified. She graciously said that this would be fine.

Thankfully, she is a very visible person in the vision impairment world, between her work at Humanware as their Blindness Products Specialist as well as a vocal advocate for the rights of blind people. She works closely with many

students and teachers here in Victoria as well as around Australia and we are always in awe of her skills, knowledge, and patient approach with all of us. In case you haven't guessed already, her name is Ramona Mandy and if you're lucky, you'll cross paths with her here. While this interview is about her, it is actually more about what I have gleaned from her as a teacher and a professional in terms of how my she's influenced my views about vision impairment and education, as well as my work with students, and less about the fact that she is just terrific (though she is!).

## Familial vision impairment

- Her mother and a sister also have the same eye disorder
- Results in low vision and progressive, total loss between birth and 25 years old<sup>2</sup>.

Ramona always knew that she had vision impairment- “One of the benefits was that Mum was always very open with me”, learning at 8 years-old that she would go totally blind by 28, “[which] wasn’t a surprise since I was forever going to ophthalmologists.”

Each loss “was a little bit distressing... but I always identified as a vision impaired person and... knew I’d go blind.” At 25, surgery to save her remaining vision failed. She remembers thinking, “Well I feel miserable but hey, I know other blind people who coped just fine.”

## Getting on with life

“But [knowing I’d lose my sight] wasn’t a scary thing because I’d seen other blind kids, and so, okay, that’s just my path... so I just got on with life.”<sup>4</sup>

This is what I wish for my students – that they too can come to the same place that she had when she was young. This was facilitated by those around her who supported and pushed her to become the person she is today – but there also is the element of her own determination and efforts.

She “just got on with life” because she had connections to capable blind people who provided support, acceptance, knowledge and skills; the determination to live an independent, full life; and the ability to confidently accept her vision loss.

# Childhood: Acceptance, Support and Preparation

Since vision impairment was the norm in Ramona's childhood home, she learnt to perform activities of daily living with little or no reliance on her vision- she said, "Mum taught me to do things as a vision impaired person... She was just logical in the way she did things... she accommodated my needs but I was expected to do my share."

Though her mother was the first in her family with vision impairment, her vision wasn't poor enough to qualify for specialist teaching, so she "just made do", devising her own strategies. Normal expectations, problem-solving skills and determination to be independent were imprinted on Ramona, who emphasised the importance of teachers and parents of children with vision impairment reinforcing these attitudes.

As Ramona's father was Sri Lankan, the children were teased for their darker skin, so they were taught to "stick up for ourselves... Dad had a strong sense of justice and fairness". This served Ramona well: "Mum was really supportive with self-advocacy... I had to speak up for myself... like ask the bus number when a driver told me to read them and I had to say I couldn't. Yes, I had some low self-esteem due to my disability, but I still knew [being bullied] wasn't right." She considers assertiveness one of her most important attributes.

Her family's acceptance was crucial to her confidence as a person with vision impairment: "I had a really supportive mum... she never tried to hide my blindness, never mollycoddled me, and I see kids who are mollycoddled now."

Surgery that might have reversed her vision loss, or caused total blindness was declined because, "Mum decided she couldn't explain to a four-year-old why she'd suddenly lost her sight". Though her mother "always agonised" over their decision, Ramona supported it: "I was happy to live with vision impairment ... Mum taught us that attitudes were more important than blindness. Mum never spoke around me about how sad it was that I was going to go blind- I see so many parents doing that when their child is right there- what's the child supposed to think about having vision impairment when their mum thinks it's terrible?"

Her childhood acceptance of vision loss meant she was emotionally and strategically prepared, and the support, independence and skill learning provided by learning with others with vision impairment was critical: "Being a fairly good 'partially' and using braille at the Partially Sighted Unit (PSU) at the school gave me the benefit of seeing other 'blindies'- and I call them 'blindies' because that's a term I can own as a member of the blindness community... I got to see lots of strategies, like using your finger over a cup to pour, or echolocation... so I felt confident to use them later... I really treasured that 'special school experience'; apart from having access to all that vision impairment-specific information, I learnt braille everyday whereas nowadays kids are so dependent on their aides..."

"In my twenties, I was really very anti-special/blind schools... But now as I'm older I see the benefit of peer support, and having some things that are just blindness-only, but it needs to be a balance of integration as well." She attended a PSU for mainstream junior primary, a blind school for late primary and another PSU in year 7, but "coped enough" to be fully integrated from years 8-12.

# Young Adulthood: Advocacy and Education

School wasn't perfect- she wasn't accepted into her desired university courses due to poor scores largely resulting from a lack of timely braille material and lowered expectations. At her blind school, all students learned at the slowest student's rate, which she found frustrating.

When she was mainstreamed in high school, she advocated for the PSU students there who weren't being taught at the level of their sighted peers to the principal. The head of the PSU was notified, and "tore strips off me... I learnt it's important to know the systems that are in place, how to be assertive in a good way". She had difficulty socialising in high school- locating friends outside class was hard and she needed time to organise her books and brailled for her next class- so she made friends with other blind students with the same issues. She experienced bullying as did the other blind students, though she asserted herself and reported it.

She met her partner John at 22. He and their families convinced her to attend university after believing the work would be too hard due to her high school experiences. She ended up completing an honours year "for that extra bit, because I was competing against sighted people- that kind of planning is very useful".



She believes, "A good education is number one- a tertiary one is essential, it comes with opportunities for integration, employment, confidence- you read more books, become worldlier."

# Adulthood: Strategies, Humour and Guide Dogs

Statewide Vision Resource Centre

7

Regarding the impact of her vision impairment on her professional and public life, she says, “I am an ambassador every time I step outside... you’re going to talk to people more, so you’d better be good at it. I try to make people comfortable with humour.” She employs a range of strategies at work and in public, including listening carefully to passers-by to determine who to ask for assistance, knowing what information she needs to request and using a range of technology. She and her blind friends occasionally share strategies and systems they employ to stay independent.

When asked how they’ve managed the impact of her vision impairment on their relationship, her partner John laughed, “It’s meant I’ve lived with a lot of [guide dogs]!” Ramona stated, “There is compromise... our activities are modified... but still quite a good quality... [when we travel] we plan itineraries we can both do... We talk about how we’ll manage something... and we have our own activities... I guess I am dependent on him in some ways- he’s my dressing mirror- and as we’ve grown together I’ve learnt to ask for what I need. We’ve worked out our own strategies... he’ll say ‘hands in’ if I’m leaning on the table and the food’s arrived.”

# Insights

- Importance of teaching at mainstream levels
- Parents need support to teach blindness skills
- Students need exposure and opportunity, to be allowed to fail, to have input
- Give students networks and role models

Statewide Vision Resource Centre

8

She advised, “Special schools need to teach at [mainstream curriculum] level- there’s so much more integration now but not enough time to learn blindness skills. Parents need support to teach these skills. Kids need exposure and opportunity, and to be allowed to fail- it’s not that they failed but got up. They need input into their program... ask how they feel when assigned to run with someone in PE they dislike. Give them networks. Role models are very important, but so are inner abilities.”

## “COPE”

- Confidence
  - To ask questions, that it’s okay to feel around
- Orientation
  - To the environment, systems
- Peer Support
  - To be around others with VI, get tips
- Expectations
  - Make them high but explain why and give support to reach them

She devised an acronym, ‘COPE’, which stands for:

Confidence- to ask questions, that it’s okay to feel around;

Orientation- to the environment, to systems;

Peer Support, where you can go to be around other vision impaired people, get tips- but we can’t live there because it’s insulated; and

Expectations- make them high but explain why and give them support to reach them.”

# My Reflections

- Reinforced my beliefs about good practice
- Demonstrated in literature (1, 3, 5)
- More opportunities for student input
- Improve problem-solving skills
- Support families to teach life skills
- Acceptance of vision impairment through role modelling

Ramona's story, advice and insights reinforced many of my beliefs about good practice for teaching children with vision impairment. I found her story an example of the power of encouraging and teaching confidence, vision impairment-specific skills, problem-solving skills and assertiveness, and having connections to the blind community.

A range of respected sources reference these as critical for educators and families to develop independence and employability (American Federation of the Blind, 2013; Holbrook, 2006; Wolffe, 1999).

I would like to create more opportunities for student input by developing learning goals together and seeking feedback, and improve problem-solving skills by teaching thinking skills and offering open-ended questions. I need to offer increased support to families to teach life skills through information afternoons or home visits. Other priorities include teaching my students to accept their vision impairment through role-modelling and using Ramona's strategies for navigating, socialising and daily living.

Academic success is only part of a full life, and I want my students to find success in their private and professional lives like Ramona has. Her life is full

indeed- of travel, friends, wide-ranging interests, fulfilling work, a healthy relationship. I am fortunate in my work to use her as a role model for my students, who would be wise to follow her example and grow up to be the sort of person she has become.

# References

1. American Federation for the Blind (2013). The Expanded Core Curriculum for Blind and VI Children and Youths. Retrieved from <http://www.afb.org/section.aspx?FolderID=3&SectionID=44&TopicID=189&SubTopicID=4&DocumentID=2117>
2. Genetics Home Reference (2013). Aniridia. Retrieved from <http://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/condition/aniridia>
3. Holbrook, M. C. (Ed.) (2006). *Children with Vision Impairments: A Parent's Guide* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.
4. Mandy, R. (2013). Personal communication, March 9.
5. Wolfe, K. (1999). *Skills for Success: A Career Education Handbook for Children and Youth with Visual Impairments*. New York, NY: AFB Press.

Any questions for me? We have a little time.

Many, many thanks again to Ramona for her kind generosity and openness in sharing her story with me and now with all of us. I am hopeful that my students will follow her excellent advice and example, and work to achieve to be as successful as she has been in all areas of her life.