



theEyesofMe



By Keith Maitland

How do you see yourself, when you can't see at all? At the Texas School for the Blind students juggle all the usual pressures of high school along with the added struggles of growing up blind. Spend a dynamic year with four blind teens learning how to fit in and live independently. Forced to confront the world without sight, they share their inner-visions of the outer world. Ultimately, you cannot understand their perceptions without challenging your own.

FROM THE FILMMAKER

One of the questions that I am often asked about this film, *The Eyes of Me*, is: “Why would you make a film for blind people if they can’t see it?”

Well, I didn’t make the film for blind people; I made it for the sighted person who has never had the chance or taken the opportunity to meet a blind person. That’s who I was when I began *The Eyes of Me*.

I’ve always been intrigued by questions of perception and identity-building, specifically how teens and young adults define themselves within their communities. After a chance meeting with a staff member from the Texas School for the Blind, I realized that I could delve into these questions of perception and identity through the experiences of the students at the school. Meeting Chas (the first blind person I’d ever met) convinced me that I had to make a film that would explore these questions, simply by spending time with him and experiencing his life as it unfolded that year. Additionally, I chose to follow Denise, Isaac, and Meagan, all unique characters with unique perspectives.

The experience of making this film has been an eye-opening and rewarding personal journey. I was surprised to learn very quickly that most of the students at the Texas School for the Blind had been born with sight or some usable vision and that adapting to sight loss was a big part of their teenage experience. There are many ways to lose one’s sight, and there are many types of visual-impairments, but the four characters in the film all had sight and all lost it during their adolescent years. Chas was totally blind by 12. Denise is legally blind and her vision is deteriorating. Meagan lost an eye to cancer at 17 months old, and she lost her remaining vision at sixteen. When I met Isaac, he’d been blind less than a year and was quickly adjusting to

life with a visual impairment and to living away from home. They were all adapting to having lost their sight and they were very much in the process of defining themselves.

How do you see yourself, when you can’t see at all? That was my question. That’s what I hope an audience is willing to ask of these characters. It’s my hope that viewers will take a moment to challenge their preconceived notions about blindness, about perception, and about themselves.

As I said, I didn’t make this film for the blind community, but in making this film, I do hope that this community will see their lives reflected in the stories of Chas, Denise, Isaac, and Meagan. I hope they will see these four unique stories presented without pity and without reverence – this is the story of four American teens, who also happen to be blind.

Perhaps the question persists: Why make the film if the teens can’t see it?

All four of those teens, Chas, Denise, Isaac, and Meagan, though blind, have indeed seen the film. They’ve seen it by utilizing all of the tools that they have at their disposal to understand and perceive the world around them, just as you or I do. I think Meagan says it best in the film, “I still see, just not with my eyes, and lots of people don’t get that. They have to go through it to actually know what it feels like.”

It’s my hope that *The Eyes of Me* will offer you the chance to see things the way that Meagan does. Thanks for coming to see the film.

Keith Maitland



THE FILM

The Eyes of Me paints a portrait of four blind teenagers who are students at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI), in Austin, Texas. Each one's blindness had a different cause, but all have had to learn to cope with the limitations and frustrations, as well as the emotional issues, brought on by losing their eyesight.

Chas and Meagan are seniors who are in a dual enrollment program at McCallum High School, a local public school. Chas's blindness is due to a hereditary condition; surgery he had at age ten to correct his condition left him blind instead. He lives off campus in his own apartment, which he shares with another TSBVI student. After his roommate leaves unexpectedly, Chas struggles to pay the rent and utilities on his own. His sense of being let down is compounded when his mother fails to send a promised bus ticket home. As a way of dealing with anger and escaping from reality, Chas writes rap songs. "Through the Eyes of Me" is the title song of his planned rap album, but it takes him a long time to write this number, which deals with his deep feelings about being blind.

Meagan is a highly motivated and ambitious young woman. At age 17 months she was diagnosed with a retinoblastoma (cancer of the retina), but had some vision until she was sixteen. She was devastated when she became blind, probably a result of the radiation treatment she had as a toddler. An independent person, she didn't like asking for help, and now she is determined not to let her blindness stop her from doing what she wants. She has a boyfriend, she is valedictorian of her graduating class, and she plans to go to college and become a counselor.

Denise and Isaac are freshmen at TSBVI. Denise's blindness is the result of optic nerve hypoplasia, meaning that the nerve never grew

out properly. Before coming to TSBVI she had low self esteem and almost no friends; students at the middle school she attended made fun of her. Now she has found friends, others who are like her because they have also had to adapt to living with visual impairments, and she has become a more confident person. She is thrilled to have a part in the school play, and, at her 16th birthday party, she was overcome with emotion because so many friends had come to celebrate with her.

Isaac's blindness was caused by an accident; his head hit the concrete, and his retina became detached. Because his grandparents, with whom he was living at the time, had no health insurance, the hospital would not allow the surgery to repair his retina. The sudden blindness led Isaac to do some soul searching, and to grapple with what it would mean to live as a blind person. Isaac studied braille at TSBVI and set his goal to become the first blind president of the United States. Unfortunately, he was suspended from the school for inappropriate physical contact with another student. Living with his grandparents in Paris, Texas, he has enrolled in Paris High School where, as the only blind person, he feels isolated.

Adolescence can be a fraught time, when young people are dealing with a range of issues such as self-image, acceptance by peers, relations with the opposite sex, and achieving independence. The four teens in the film are coping with these issues while they are also trying to learn to make their way in the world without the benefit of full vision. As they articulate their feelings about being blind they reveal to the sighted what it is like to live in a world of intermittent light, shadowy images, and total darkness.



INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN THE EYES OF ME

All four characters are students at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired:

Chas is a senior who writes rap music

Denise is a freshman who fulfills her wish to act in a school play

Meagan is a senior whose goal is to get a degree in social work

Isaac is a freshman whose ambition is to be the first blind president

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Braille System

Braille is the system used by blind people to read and write. Developed in 1821 by Louis Braille, a blind Frenchman, braille characters, or cells, are made up of six dots arranged in two columns of three dots each. Within each cell, one or more dots may be raised at any of the six positions to indicate a particular letter, contraction, punctuation, letter blend or digraph, conjunction (such as and, but, for, with), or number. Because Braille relies on tactile perception, Braille readers must develop new skills, such as the ability to create smooth and even pressures when running their fingers along the words. (See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Braille> for a detailed explanation of the Braille system.)

A few interesting facts:

- Canadian banknotes have raised dots that indicate the denomination so that they can be easily identified by visually impaired people.
- Rather than relying on braille, many younger people are using computers with screen reader software, which are more portable and can be used for communicating with friends.
- Braille has been adapted to other languages, including Hebrew, Japanese, Russian, Greek, and Arabic.

Louis Braille (January 4, 1809 – January 6, 1852) was the inventor of the system used by blind people throughout the world for reading and writing. Braille became blind at the age of three when he accidentally stabbed himself in the eye with one of his father's tools. His other eye went blind because of *sympathetic ophthalmia*, a kind of inflammation of both eyes following trauma to one eye. At the age of ten, Braille was enrolled in the National Institute for the Blind in Paris, where he was a talented student and musician. In 1921, Charles Barbier, a French army captain, visited the school and shared his system of "night writing," which he had designed in response to Napoleon's demand for a code that soldiers could use to communicate silently, and without light at night. Barbier's invention used twelve raised dots and a number of dashes. Because it was too difficult for the soldiers to learn, it was never used by the military.

Braille improved on Barbier's system by reducing the number of raised dots to six, which made it easier for the finger to apprehend and move

more rapidly. He worked on his new invention for three years, finishing in 1824 when he was fifteen years old. Braille became a teacher at the Institute, but his new system for reading and writing was not taught there during his lifetime. France officially recognized Braille's system in 1854, two years after his death.

Braille literacy

Not all blind people are able to read braille. A 2007 report from the American Printing House for the Blind indicates that only 10 percent of school-age children use braille as their primary reading medium, a decline from the 50 percent who were able to read braille in 1960. One reason given for the decline is the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which resulted in thousands of children moving from specialized schools for the blind into mainstream public schools. A lack of qualified teachers, inconsistent standards from state to state, and a reliance on assistive technologies for students who are not completely blind have also contributed to a drop in the learning of braille. Because of pressure from advocacy groups, 33 states have passed legislation mandating that children who are legally blind be given the opportunity to learn braille. In recent years, the tendency has been to not teach braille to children who have some sight, and who can use magnifiers or materials with large print. There has also been an increased reliance on print-to-sound computer technology. However, experts in educating the blind point out that braille literacy is crucial to the development of other literacy skills, such as vocabulary and comprehension, which enables vision-impaired children to compete with their sighted peers in school by being able to both read and write. In addition, braille literacy opens employment opportunities to blind people entering the workforce.

Blindness – Definitions and Causes

Total blindness is the complete lack of form and visual light perception and is clinically recorded as NLP, an abbreviation for "no light perception."

Legal blindness is a level of vision loss that has been legally defined to determine eligibility for benefits. The clinical diagnosis refers to a central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, and/or a visual field of 20 degrees or less. Often, people who are diagnosed with legal blindness still have some useable vision.

Visual impairment or low vision is defined clinically as a visual acuity of 20/70 or worse in the better eye with best correction, or a total field loss of 140 degrees. Loss of vision may be severe enough to hinder an individual's ability to complete daily activities such as reading, cooking, or walking outside safely, while still retaining some degree of useable vision.

Major Causes of Blindness

- **Cataracts** are characterized by opacities and clouding of the eye's lens, which block the passage of light through the eye. Some people are born with cataracts, but generally the incidence increases with age. They are not painful, and the only symptom is blurred, dimmed, or double vision. Not all require surgery, but those large enough to cause serious visual problems require surgical removal of the lens, implantation of an intraocular lens, and corrective glasses or contact lenses.
- **Macular degeneration** is an age-related condition affecting



the eye. At the inner surface or lining at the back of the eye, the retina functions a little like the film in a camera. The macula is the part of the retina which forms the center of the "picture" and the sharpest image. Degeneration or breakdown of the retina may occur, especially with increased age. While the macula, or center of the retina may degenerate, peripheral vision usually remains good. Magnifiers may help, and a few people may be helped by laser treatment to seal off blood vessels which have grown beneath the retina or to repair the macula's weak spots by removing worn-out tissue and allowing new tissue growth.

- **Glaucoma** is the second leading cause of blindness in the United States, the leading cause of blindness among African Americans, and the leading cause of preventable blindness in the U.S. With this disorder, the transparent fluid inside the forward part of the eye does not drain normally and excess pressure is built up within the eye. If the pressure is not controlled, the delicate structure of the eye is increasingly damaged, resulting in blurred vision, a narrowed field of sight, and eventually total blindness. Early symptoms may include blurred vision, halos around lights, and reduced side vision. In acute glaucoma, there is great pain, as eye pressure rises quickly from blocked drainage canals. In the more common, chronic type there is no pain and vision loss is gradual. Many cases are controlled very well by medication, but surgery is sometimes necessary. Early detection is important.

- **Diabetic retinopathy** is a condition associated with diabetes. Changes in the tiny blood vessels of the diabetic's retina can cause blindness. Abnormal blood vessels are formed, some may burst and the retina may even break loose from the back of the eye. Laser treatments to "seal" blood vessels or reattach the retina may help if undertaken early. Diabetes is the leading cause of new cases of legal blindness in the United States among working-age adults. Some diabetics, however, do not experience vision loss.

- **Retinitis pigmentosa** is the name given to a group of hereditary retinal diseases characterized by progressive loss of visual field. Frequently beginning as what is called "night blindness," this condition brings degeneration of the retina and the choroid (a related vascular area), usually involving an abnormal development of excess pigment. It is hereditary, and the most common pattern of development is as follows: At approximately age ten or twelve, the child begins to experience some difficulty in seeing at night and in poorly lighted areas. His visual field also begins to narrow, frequently resulting in what is commonly termed "tunnel vision." The visual loss is progressive, so that the individual is usually legally blind by young adulthood and slowly loses more and more vision thereafter. Many adults with retinitis pigmentosa have a very tiny field of vision; they can see well within this tiny field of vision under good light, but it's so small that it's of little use. Total blindness often results, and there is no known treatment.

Sources: Lighthouse International (www.lighthouse.org) and Blind Net (www.blind.net/g2000000.htm)

Other Causes of Visual Impairment

Abnormalities such as *optic nerve hypoplasia* affect the nerve bundle that sends signals from the eye to the back of the brain. This is the cause of Denise's blindness.

Retinal detachment is a disorder in which the retina peels away from its underlying layer of support tissue. This occurs due to inflammation, injury or vascular abnormalities, or a hole, tear, or break in the retina. An injury caused Isaac's detached retina.

Retinal blastoma or cancer of the retina is the reason for Meagan's blindness.

Hereditary conditions of different kinds can lead to blindness. Chas lost his sight because of a condition unidentified in the film.

Some Well-Known Blind Public Figures

Many historical and contemporary figures have been blind, and many of them have accomplished their major work despite being visually impaired. Here are a few those individuals:

Musicians/singers

Ray Charles was blind from glaucoma after age seven.

Andrea Bocelli was almost blind at birth; he became completely blind at age 12.

Stevie Wonder became blind from retrolental fibroplasia in infancy.

Ella Fitzgerald became blind in old age as a result of diabetes.

Artists/actors

Sammy Davis, Jr. lost an eye in a car accident.

David Duchovny is blind in his right eye due to a basketball injury.

Peter Falk lost an eye at age 3 as a result of a tumor.

Claude Monet's blindness was caused by cataracts.

Scientists

Galileo Galilei became blind in old age from cataracts and glaucoma.

Bernard Morin, a French mathematician, was blind from age six.

Writers

Helen Keller's deaf/blindness resulted from fever at age 19 months.

Jorge Luis Borges became blind in old age from a hereditary condition.

John Milton, the "blind poet," became blind at age 42.

James Thurber became blind after a childhood accident.

Public officials, entrepreneurs

Joseph Pulitzer became blind at age 43 from retinal detachment

Moshe Dayan, former Israeli Defense Minister and Foreign Minister, was blind in one eye.

David Patterson, governor of New York, was blinded by an infection in infancy.

Athletes

Marla Runyan, an Olympic long-distance runner, was diagnosed with Stargardt's disease (congenital juvenile macular degeneration) at age nine.

Erik Weihenmayer, the first blind person to reach the summit of Mount Everest, was born with retinoschisis and became totally blind by the age of 13.

Sources: http://www.disabled-world.com/artman/publish/famous-blind_shtm and http://www.islestsofhope.com/family/famous_blind_people_1.html



Guide dogs – Some basic facts

Only about five percent of all blind people choose a guide dog as their primary mobility tool. The reasons vary from individual to individual.

The three most commonly used breeds in guide dog work are the Labrador retriever, the golden retriever, and the German shepherd. Other breeds that can be used include the standard poodle, smooth-coated collie, Doberman pinscher, and occasionally, the boxer.

All guide dog training schools require that a prospective student handler be able to travel independently and safely before they will be considered for a dog. If the handler is unsure as a traveler, the dog can lose confidence, or try to usurp the handler's authority.

A blind person who wants a guide dog must attend guide dog school for about a month to learn how to travel with the dog in all kinds of environments.

The downsides of having a guide dog include the issue of shedding, the time it takes to build a good working team (blind person and dog), the extra care and expense of the dog, the occasional illegal denial of access to the team (by restaurants and other public facilities), and the grief when the dog dies or retires.

Adapted from "The Guide Dog Experience" by Dana Ard <http://www.nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/fr/fr22/fr06sum16.htm>

TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE EYES OF ME

A screening of *The Eyes of Me* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Blindness and other vision impairments
- Disabilities study & advocacy groups
- Education services for the visually-impaired (public & private)
- Adolescent development
- At-risk youth development
- Braille
- Assistive technology for the visually-impaired
- State and federal policies and laws pertaining to the vision-impaired



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. In what ways are blind people treated differently than sighted people? How are the characters in the film treated by sighted people? How do the characters in the film respond?
2. What teenage issues are explored in the film? How do each of the characters deal with these issues?
3. What are some stereotypes about blind people? Do the characters in the film confirm or dispel these stereotypes?
4. What measures can public schools take to help students with disabilities fit in socially and forge relationships with their sighted peers?
5. Why do you think the filmmaker used animation in telling parts of each of the young people's stories? What was the effect on you as some of the scenes blended into animation?
6. Why is writing the song "Through the Eyes of Me" important to Chas? Why do you think it was difficult for him to write about his blindness?
7. After Isaac's accident, did the hospital have an obligation to repair his detached retina? Legally? Morally? Why or why not?
8. What issues in the film are reflected in your community? What lessons can sighted teens apply to their own lives?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Volunteer to read to a blind person or to record printed material on audiocassettes. Lighthouse International provides a list of volunteer opportunities, which can be tailored to your specific talents and available time. Visit their website (www.lighthouse.org) for specific information.
2. Ask the local affiliate of the National Federation for the Blind to suggest appropriate projects for high school students and young adults seeking to do public service.
3. Lions In Sight is a program of the Lions Clubs International Foundation, which funds vision screenings, medication, and blindness prevention worldwide. Visit the Lions Clubs website (<http://www.lionsclubs.org/EN/index.php>) to find a local chapter and learn how you can participate in a community project to support their In Sight activities.
4. Support your local or regional guide dog training school, either by volunteering or by fundraising. Visit http://www.nfb.org/nfb/guide_dog_schools.asp to find the facility nearest to your community. Or, consider becoming a puppy walker and help raise a dog that will enter the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind's training program. Check their website for details (<http://www.guidedog.org>).

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.communitycinema.org. For local information, check the web site of your PBS station.

RESOURCES

<http://www.lensshopper.com/eye-anatomy.asp> - This interactive graphic shows the anatomy of the eye and how each part functions.

<http://www.nfb.org/nfb/Default.asp> - National Federation of the Blind is the largest membership organization of blind people in the United States. The NFB works to improve blind people's lives through advocacy, education, research, technology, and programs encouraging independence and self-confidence.

<http://www.navh.org/> - National Association for the Visually Handicapped is a health organization devoted to serving individuals with visual impairments or eye diseases that could lead to serious visual deficiencies. Its mission is to foster self-esteem, independence and dignity by providing the "hard of seeing" with services, visual aids, and other resources that enable them to lead normal lives.

<http://www.lighthouse.org/> - Lighthouse International is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving vision and to providing critically needed vision and rehabilitation services to help people of all ages overcome the challenges of vision loss.

<http://www.acb.org/> - American Council of the Blind is a national membership organization that strives to improve the well-being of all blind and visually impaired people through public education and a variety of other resources, including Braille Forum, a monthly publication and ACB Reports, a monthly half-hour radio program.

<http://www.blind.net/blindmap.htm> - Blind Net provides a comprehensive list of information on blindness, eye diseases, civil rights, and resources for the blind.

<http://www.lionsclubs.org/EN/index.php> - Lions Clubs International is a service organization dedicated to serving members' communities, meeting humanitarian needs, encouraging peace, and promoting international understanding. Lions In Sight is a program that supports services to the vision-impaired in the U.S. and worldwide.



<http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/symptoms/vision-problems/overview.html> - This New York Times health guide article on vision problems contains a list of definitions and symptoms, as well as recommendations for eye care and medical office visits.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Braille> - This Wikipedia article provides detailed information about the braille alphabet.

<http://www.nbp.org/ic/nbp/louis/index.html> - The Louis Braille Bicentennial website has information about Braille's life, a special traveling exhibit, celebrations around the world, and resources for children and teachers.

<http://homepages.cwi.nl/~dik/english/codes/braille.html> - Charts on this site, such as scripts for the Blind, show the braille alphabets for several languages.

<http://www.blindmusicstudent.org> - National Resource Center for Blind Musicians provides information and referral services for visually impaired students of all ages, and their parents and teachers. It also highlights learning opportunities for blind students headed to college and maintains a network of visually impaired musicians willing to share their expertise in braille music, technology, and coping strategies.

<http://www.loc.gov/nls/> - The home page of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, part of the Library of Congress, lists numerous resources available to the visually handicapped.

<http://www.gdui.org> - Guide Dog Users, Inc. is an independent resource network, providing information, support, and advice concerning guide dogs, guide dog training, and access laws to its members, the media, and the public at large.

<http://www.guidedog.org> - The Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind, Inc. provides guide dogs free of charge to blind people who seek enhanced mobility and independence.

THE EYES OF ME WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN MARCH 2010. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema.

