



Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired

Outreach Programs

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Living Life Expansively as a Blind Person in America

George Stern, DeafBlind Citizens in Action Vice President, Lubbock

Abstract: The author highlights how it is the best of times and the worst of times to be a blind person living in America. He shares guiding principles for living a life that is not constricted by other people's expectations and how to be a change agent.

Introduction

Thanks to George Stern for allowing us to reprint his 2017 Commencement speech to the TSBVI Graduating Class of 2017, George Stern is a 26-year-old self-advocate residing in Lubbock, Texas. He's pursuing a major in French and a classics minor at Texas Tech University.

George hopes to apply these studies to a career either in law or with the Library of Congress to help ensure access to the treasury of human knowledge for all people. George is President of the Texas Tech Judo and Brazilian Jiu-jitsu Club, Vice President of DeafBlind Citizens in Action, a Board Member for the Collaboration in Assistive Technology for Students with Sensory Impairments Group through Texas Tech Sowell Center, and he is seriously one of the best cooks in the nation, apparently. George was born in Jamaica, a land of many wonderful things, but not of opportunity, and especially not for people who have disabilities. George left Jamaica when he was two years old after an initial misdiagnosis for pink eye was later revised to be bilateral retinal blastoma, a cancer beyond the capacity of his home country to treat. The operation to remove the cancer was successfully completed at the Eye Institute of Miami, Florida. The operation left George blind.



Figure 1 Photo of George Stern smiling.

George's bilateral hearing loss, which doctors think stems from a chromosomal abnormality, did not manifest until he started pre-kindergarten. His life first as a blind, and now a DeafBlind person, has been guided by two tenets. First, do unto others as you would be done unto. Second (and this comes from his father) labor for learning before you grow old, for learning is better than silver or gold. Silver and gold will vanish away, but a good education will never decay. Learning is George's passion, and consequently, language has become his preoccupation. "I speak, therefore, others know that I am" is an idea at the center of George's drive for fluency in as many languages and modalities as possible, both for himself and for others. I'm very proud to introduce to you: George Stern.

Speech

Thank you for that wonderful introduction. I am very honored that you at TSBVI and that everyone here has invited me to be a part of your graduation celebration. (Aside to guide dog, who is laying down) Fine, you can go to sleep while I talk. I don't care. (To the audience) He is

not the most dedicated audience. But as I was saying, I am honored that you have all invited me here to be a part of your celebration. And it is a milestone. I remember long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away, when I was graduating. And it was a momentous experience, a momentous time.

It is, as they say, a beginning, a commencement. And I've looked at different commencement speeches. And I know they tell you all kinds of wonderful things, like follow your dreams. Follow your passion, find what you're passionate about. So I'm not going to go down that route. I'm going to talk about some other things.

Let's start with some Charles Dickens. It was the best of times, and the worst of times. You guys know that one? Well, let's make it more personal. It is the best of times to be a blind person in America. And it is the worst of times to be a blind person in America. Let's start with the good news. The gospel, as they would say. It's the best of times because technology and expectations, and the economy, and the private sector, and the public sector have all combined in the realization that blindness and that disability in general is not the end of the world. Am I right about that?

We've gone from a century in which people with disabilities were literally warehoused, were not thought to be educable, were even left to die. We've come from that to a place where the major technology companies of this era, Facebook, Google, Twitter, have taken accessibility and put those at the center of their market. They care about us. They decided that we, as people with disabilities, as blind people, are as much valued customers as anyone else. Think about this. I remember when the Facebook artificial intelligence that describes photos first came out. Anyone remember that, any people on Facebook here? So I remember when that first came out. And it was interesting. I would have voiceover read to me the captions. And it would say something like, "Three people. Photo." And I was like, "Yeah. I know it's a photo. Can you tell me more?" And now within the space of just a few months, Facebook is telling me, "Shoes, four people, smiling, glasses, wedding, basketball court." I'm like, "Whoa! Where are we going?" Are we going to get to a point where it says, two people, one has a pimple on his nose? A bit too much information.

So it is the best of times. Technology that makes education accessible, that makes books accessible, expanding rapidly. We now have more companies working on different solutions for different problems than we've ever had before. We have people working on the idea of a more affordable and more portable version of refreshable braille that people can carry around without spending however much the new Apex costs, 6,000, \$5,000. All of that is an expansion, is an improvement.

Yet, it is the worst of times. Why? I saw very recently (I think maybe three months ago) in the New York Times health section an article that was titled, "What's the Worst Thing That Could Possibly Happen?" Guess what their answer was? Blindness. I looked at that and I was like, are you kidding me? We have AIs, artificial intelligences that will soon be giving us way too much information. And you're telling me that blindness is the worst thing that could happen?

According to most Americans, yes. And what this demonstrates to me is that for every action — and in this case we have a positive action — there is an equal and opposite reaction. So even as the reality improves, as the reality gets better and our expectations as students and parents and staff, even as our expectations expand, we find that society's expectations may be constricting. And this is not, maybe, something you want to hear at a commencement address, but I will tell you the truth.

Employment, the employment picture for us as blind students, blind people, is bleak. Not because we can't do it, not because we don't have the tools, or the drive, or the imagination, or the will. But because society's expectations, for some reason, continue to exist connected to a reality of two centuries ago. They constrict while our expectations for ourselves are expanding. I recently saw some news about federal legislation that might be getting passed soon that restricts the extent to which companies have to make accommodations. There is other legislation in the field of education that might restrict the extent to which schools have to make accommodations for students with disabilities. So in that sense, it is the worst of times. Each one of you here, whether you are staff, whether you are a parent, whether you are a teacher, whether you are a student, you will have to fight these changes. You will have to fight these constricting expectations. I'm not going to tell you how to fight them. That's your choice. Each of us has to pick our own battles and pick our style of fighting. But I would like to give you some basic principles that I have found helpful in just trying to live my life according to the expectations that I have and trying to live my life expansively rather than according to the closed expectations that constrict us.

Only Make Promises You Can Keep and Keep the Promises You Make

The first one I would like to give you: only make promises you can keep, and keep the promises you make. I don't know if this might be an old-fashioned idea. I'm very old, 26. Old-fashioned idea. But I think the idea of a promise has lost some of its binding quality. That may be the politicians' fault. It may be that we as citizens, as people, as investors or consumers, we hold people in charge less to their promises. That may be. But I urge you, don't make promises you can't keep, because there's nothing that scatters more negativity through the human condition, that hurts people more, that ruins lives more, than broken promises. Whether that be a promise that says 'til death do us part, or it be something simpler like that time you promised your kid ice cream and didn't give it to him. Broken promises radiate pain, radiate loss of trust, radiate a destruction of confidence, betrayal, all these negative things that echo through the ages forever and ever. I'll come back to this, but people remember broken promises. It's a pain that doesn't go away. So that's the first thing I urge you, keep the promises you make. Know what you have control over so that you can make a promise and know that to the best of your ability, you will be able to keep it. Be judicious in your promise-making.

Do More than You Say

The second thing, do more than you say. This is difficult for me, because I'm a talker. I like to talk. I like the sound of my voice. So do you, I know. So do more than you say. Words are cheap. They're very cheap. They only cost air. Action, now, you've heard this, actions speak louder than words. But not only do they speak louder than words, they mean more. So do not be so quick to say what your plans are, say what your intentions are, say what you want to be, where you want to go. Do it. It was the name of an award I received in middle school: Just do it. Don't say it, just do it.

Commit to Being Good

The last thing I want to leave you with is another urging I have for you, a charge for all of us. Commit to being good. I'm going to stick on that first word, it's apparently something we millennials are afraid to do, commit. We're afraid of commitment. No marriage, too much commitment there. No! But I'm urging you, if you commit to nothing else, if you take a while to decide what's your dream job, what career you want to commit to, if you take a while to decide which relationship you want to commit to, if you take a while to commit to anything else, simply commit to being good.

Being good is currently underrated in this society. Everyone's like, yeah, I want to be rich. Okay, fine. Yeah, I want to be powerful. Okay, fine. I want to be right. That's fine, be right, I don't care. But being good, what does this mean? Does this mean, you know, following some specific doctrine? Not particularly, not for me. When I say being good, I mean it's as simple as waking up in the morning, seeing that it's somebody's birthday, and wishing them happy birthday. That's what I mean by being good. Why am I stressing this? I'm going to go back to what I said earlier when we were talking about broken promises. Think about the negative emotions in the world: hate, anger, guilt. Those things last. They don't need maintenance. Nobody ever needs to reinvent tragedy. It's comedy that needs reinvention. Why? Because laughter, joy, goodness, kindness, need constant reinforcement. They need constant vigilance, constant renewal.

Negative things: you remember those things forever. I mean, if you think of it in terms of Star Wars, Darth Vader, the Emperor, their actions, the billions that were killed in that fictional universe, had the most long-lasting impact. Whereas every time the Jedi came along to save the day, it seems they needed to save the day again, and again, and again. Why? Because that's the nature of good. Good never finishes. There's never a time when enough good has been done. So commit to it. We have to commit to being good every single day, at every opportunity the choice is offered, be good, or be bad and feed the negative emotions that are ripping this world apart already. I'm urging you, I'm asking all of you here, wherever you're going from this graduation point, wherever this commencement, this beginning takes you, commit to be good in the small and in the big.

The last thought I will leave you with is this. The best argument for a successful today is a successful yesterday. The best incentive for a successful tomorrow is a successful today. And with that, congratulations to all of you. May the force be with you.



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