APRIL 2024

NDVS/SB OUTREACH NEWSLETTER

NDVS/SB provides individualized services and resources to infants, children, and adults with visual impairment to empower them in achieving their goals.

Navigating Blindness: Meet Family Weekend Speaker Kim Owens

NDVS/SB's annual Family Weekend event will take place Friday and Saturday, April 26 & 27 in Grand Forks. We are very excited to have Kim Owens with us in person to speak about her experience as a parent of a child with a visual impairment. Get to know Kim and her family by reading this conversation with her. Registration for Family Weekend closed March 29, but you can follow her blog and social media at www.NavigatingBlindness.com.

Tell us about yourself and your family.
Hi! I'm Kim Owens, and people may know me from the Navigating Blindness blog and social media. I live in a rural area outside of historic Savannah, Georgia, and I'm looking forward to my first visit to North Dakota to meet all of you!

I've been married to my husband, Chris, a high-school history teacher, for twenty-seven years. We have two adult sons. Our oldest, Cash (26), is a geologist working in Guyana, South America, and our youngest, Kai (21), is a junior in college studying music theory and jazz drum set.

I'm a certified braille transcriber, parent-mentor, and blogger. I'm also chronically ill with an autoimmune disease trifecta. I spend my free time allowing my body and nervous system to heal by walking on the Georgia coast, collecting fossilized shark teeth, practicing mindfulness, and lounging in the shaded backyard with our fur-monsters.

You have a very popular blog and social media presence, and you are currently writing a book. How did all "this" start? Did you think sharing your journey would resonate with so many people?
When Kai unexpectedly lost his sight at the age of ten, I felt devastated, alone, and completely overwhelmed. I didn't know a single blind person. Initially, I connected with other parents of blind kids through Facebook groups, but when Kai turned 16, he and I decided to start sharing our experiences on a blog (www.NavigatingBlindness.com) and our Instagram and Facebook accounts @NavigatingBlindness.

Then, when Kai moved away to university, I started writing a memoir about my personal acceptance process, the steps I took to build a community of support, and the things I learned about advocating for his equal, accessible education.

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After I wrote the first draft, Kai read it and decided to write the epilogue about his experience as a blind adult living independently, navigating with his guide dog, and advocating for his education at the University of Georgia. The book's title is *BLUR*, and my literary agent is currently seeking the right publishing partner.

We had no idea that our social media and blog would have such an impact on our own lives – it created so many unexpected opportunities like chatting with you now, invites to camps and events, and even Kai's first job as a contractor for Vispero/Freedom Scientific.

As for resonating with others, I only knew how much I valued the knowledge of other parents who had literally 'been there/done that,' and Kai and I wanted to do our part to contribute to the ongoing conversation.

What kinds of things will you be talking about during Family Weekend in North Dakota?
I'm looking forward to the opportunity to share the story of Kai's diagnosis, how our family dealt with the news, how we built a community from scratch, and how we advocated for Kai's educational rights. I will also talk about the importance of physical activity, braille literacy, community service, and mentorship. Kai may even record some videos for me to share. Unfortunately, he is unable to attend in person since he will be preparing for finals.

What were some of the hardest lessons for you, as a parent, to learn?
Kai is a daredevil who from the age of 4 was skimboarding and skateboarding. When he lost his sight, he didn't want to lose the ability to do the things he loved, and I didn't want sight loss to take away more than his sight. But, as a parent, letting go is easier said than done. I had a tough time learning to balance my desire to protect him from harm with his need for independence. He continued skimming and skating and added in surfing and snowboarding. Physical activity helped him to deal with the anxiety of losing his sight and learning to live as a blind person. I embraced Mary Oliver's quote, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Pictured above are Kai, Kim, Chris, and Cash

You and Kai both seem to be strong advocates for yourselves and for those you represent (a parent of a blind/VI child and a blind/VI young adult). What do you (or Kai himself) say to those who doubt your son's abilities or who see his blindness first?
As a parent, in the beginning, it was difficult to see the looks of pity when people heard about his diagnosis. It became important for me to learn, grow, and eventually understand that the only thing that limits Kai's ability to succeed is ableism – discrimination in favor of able-bodied people which often shows up in people's ignorant misconceptions about blindness and when institutions fail to provide legally protected accommodations and access.

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Kai takes a very direct approach to blindness and self-advocacy. During an interview where he was asked how he overcame the challenge of being 'different' and needing to use assistive tech and a white cane in high school, he said, “Well, I am different, and I’ve always thought it’s a lot better to be a successful blind person who’s using all the skills I have than to be a failing blind person who’s trying to act sighted.”

You have become a resource for parents yourself, but where do you go when you are looking for advice or support? What websites, social media, or books do you suggest parents of blind/VI children read?

I’m all about relationships. Living in a rural area we didn’t have access to a lot of the services and supports that families from large cities can tap into. Also, due to my health challenges, weeklong, busy conventions are not ideal. For me it was all about building and nurturing 1-to-1 relationships with other parents of blind kids – especially those with children a few years older than Kai – and mentorship from blind adults plus service providers such as TVIs, O&Ms, and braille transcribers.

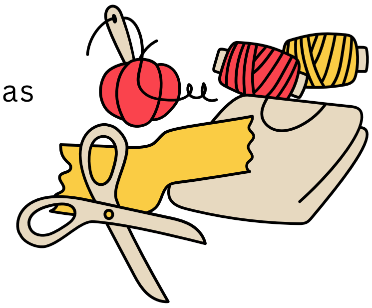
I do read a lot, too. Right now, I’m loving Emily Ladau’s book *Demystifying Disability* and Andrew Leland’s book *The Country of the Blind*.

Anything else you want to share?

I hope that parents will take advantage of our time together by submitting questions in advance so that I can tailor my talk to address their concerns. I also hope that attendees will feel free to ask me anything during our live Q&A time. I promise they are not the first to have the question and no topic is off limits with me. I can’t wait to be with you all.

THE PATHS TO LITERACY WEBSITE SPOTLIGHTS RESOURCES THAT ENCOURAGE AND BUILD LITERACY SKILLS IN CHILDREN WHO ARE BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED. HERE ARE A FEW IDEAS FROM THEIR BLOG ON HOW TO PREPARE CHILDREN TO CREATE, USE, AND ENJOY TACTILE GRAPHICS.

- Notice tactile representations all around you and point them out to your child: cookie cutters, embossed holiday cards, cut-out foam shapes, stencils, etc. Let your child explore these types of items to build image literacy.
- Let your child draw, play, and create shapes with Wikki Stix, pipe cleaners, and magnetic boards with shapes. The Sensational Blackboard, available from sensationalbooks.com, lets you create tactile images quickly and easily.
- Work with your child to create interesting collages by using a variety of textured materials, such as sandpaper, tissue paper, fabric scraps, foil, string, and even household items. Crafting builds spatial awareness, creativity, and confidence.
- As your child gets older and begins to encounter more complex spatial concepts (such as spheres, cubes, or even the solar system), get creative to build 3D models for them as well as tactile graphics. Over time, they will begin to build associations between how 3D objects feel and how they appear in a 2D, tactile graphic form.



Read the full article here.