



First Person: CARRIE

The Face of “Different”

It was a bright sunny day outside. The kids were going out to play, but a few of us were staying inside. I started to draw after staring at a friend's face. It was just a line with some curves. “That's different,” remarked a classmate. “Wow, that's really good,” said Mr. Tom. “Thank you,” I replied.

At that point, I realized that I was good at something and at the same time realized that there was something “different” about me. I was drawing someone's face as if it were a silhouette. It was different from my classmates' drawings. These words of encouragement and approval would have seemed small to most, but to a 6-year-old they were awesome. I was just drawing what I saw. How could that have been different from anyone else, or even that good?

I was born with oculocutaneous albinism, which is the lack of pigment in the eyes, the skin, and the hair. A common side effect is a visual impairment, but this varies in severity from one person to another. The idea of being visually impaired and able to draw astounded Mr. Tom. He was surprised by my ability to depict how I saw the world. I enjoyed arts and crafts time during elementary school and still amazed many teachers by this talent. It was as if I was redefining their perception of my abilities.

In second grade, there was a test to see how many addition problems we could solve correctly in two minutes. The teacher remarked that I would need extra time. Full of embarrassment, I wanted to prove her wrong. And I did. The same type of situation occurred in middle school. The challenge was reading maps for geography class. The maps were small with many black lines. “How is she going to do this with a visual

impairment?” many remarked. I could see shapes and color. So I colored them in and then labeled them as I studied. It made things more difficult and was a different approach, but it worked. The test came back with a 97, and I was excited.

There were many times that I needed to take a different approach in my study tactics. I was more successful in class with teachers who were open-minded or who accentuated my strengths and minimized my weaknesses. My senior year in high school I read the book *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Reading a novel was difficult because it took me longer to read than most students. I would feel discouraged and defeated, therefore losing motivation in the class. My teacher asked me to draw or paint how I envisioned the main characters, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The two characters are really one person but with a different look and contrasting personalities. She was pleased by the end result and distributed the grade on the ability to envision the description rather than the test alone.

There is not a map or a face that can guide and show a teacher how to educate a student with a visual impairment. I learned by doing and trying things by myself and with others. I was not the face of “different” as a child. Different is not a face to identify or a point to relate to; different is the line with curves between two points. Different is the process in which children as individuals learn, create, grow, and therefore succeed. It is the path and our attitude that depict our face. “We are all ‘different,’ and I thank you!”

—Carrie Willoughby