

Lessons From The Blind Visionary | Positive Impact Magazine

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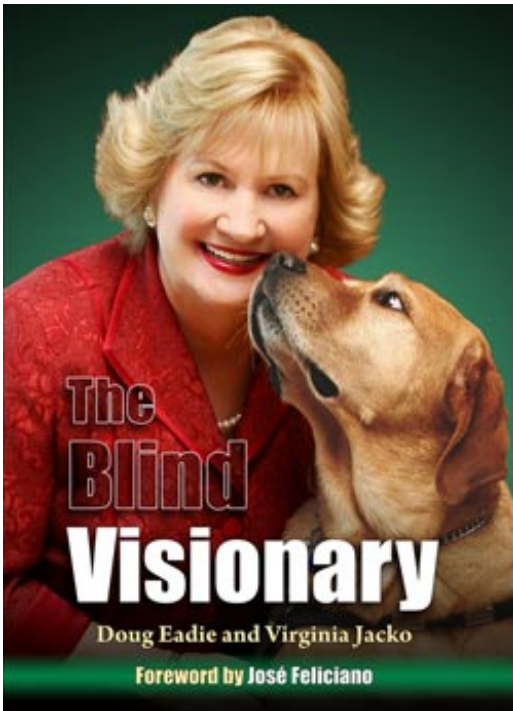
April 20, 2011

By: Doug Eadie

JUST A PRETTY BIG BUMP IN THE ROAD

"I've never been the kind of person that dwells on problems; I've never sat around saying "Woe is me, why did this happen to me?" You've got a problem, figure out how to deal with it and get cracking – that was my modus operandi before I started going blind, and it didn't change with retinitis pigmentosa! Over the years I've seen plenty of people turn bumps in the road into mountains that stopped them cold, but life is filled with bumps, there's never going to be a bump-free journey. To me, losing my sight was a pretty big bump, but still just a bump.

Honestly, I never for a moment – after I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, or before that when all I knew was that I was having increasing difficulties with peripheral vision – thought about throwing in the towel."



The Blind Visionary Cover

That quote is from my friend, professional colleague, and co-author Virginia Jacko, speaking in our book *The Blind Visionary*, which tells Virginia's amazing true story. Drawing on lessons learned during Virginia's incredible odyssey, she provides readers with practical advice for meeting challenges, overcoming obstacles, and building fuller, more satisfying personal and professional lives. The Grammy-winning artist José Feliciano, who happens to be blind, beautifully sums up Virginia's journey in his Foreword: "[I]t would be difficult to make up a story that so vividly demonstrates triumph in attitude, courage, creativity and tenacity over adversity. . . . Virginia's story is about mustering the courage to take action – to embrace change in the face of a devastating blow."

THE DARKNESS CLOSES IN

Virginia's odyssey began at Purdue University, where, after taking time off to raise her three children, Virginia went back to work as a part-time business manager in 1979.

She soon became a full-time administrator and put her drive, intelligence and organizational savvy to work, rising rapidly through the ranks. By the early 1990s, Virginia was a senior financial executive at Purdue, reporting directly to the University's president and provost and working with vice presidents and deans. Life was sweet for Virginia and her husband Bob, a professor of engineering at Purdue. But things were about to change dramatically: Virginia Jacko was slowly but surely going blind from a condition known as retinitis pigmentosa.

It wasn't until 1998 that Virginia's condition was diagnosed, but prior to the diagnosis there were increasing signs that something was seriously wrong. For example, Virginia began to have trouble driving at night and would now and then lose track of the tennis ball on the court, but the process was so gradual that Virginia and Bob never imagined she was losing her eyesight. However, Virginia was a determined woman. She kept working at full capacity in a very demanding job despite the growing darkness, memorizing financial reports at night so she wouldn't "look blind" by

having to hold the sheets close to her nose during meetings. Her husband Bob would scope out rooms on campus where she'd be speaking to get the lay of the land so Virginia could have a mental vision of the various settings and thus feel more at ease.

STARTING ALL OVER AT THE BOTTOM

But the growing darkness was finally too much to handle without special help. The turning point was a meeting with Purdue's new president in November 2000. When Virginia arrived at his office, she learned that he had new, all glass furniture, which she couldn't possibly see. Fortunately, the executive assistant gave her a tour of the office while the president was out, and Virginia made it through the meeting without a mishap. But she knew she couldn't continue at Purdue.



Virginia at the Blind Babies Christmas Party at the Lighthouse

Once back in her office, Virginia called her husband Bob to see if he could get the sabbatical they'd been talking about at the University of Miami. Learning that it was a go, she made the life-changing decision to start all over – in her mid-fifties! – as a vocational rehabilitation student at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. As she arrived at the Lighthouse to begin her training in January 2001, Virginia was naturally scared, but determined. "...I said to myself, 'I don't know where this journey's going to take me. I don't know for sure where I'm going, where this road's going, but I embrace it.'"

Over the course of her three-month training program, Virginia learned practical skills for living alone as a blind person, such as how to organize her clothes in the closet and cook her meals. She also received mobility training and became familiar with the latest computer applications for the blind. Within four years of completing her training, Virginia – after getting a guide dog, volunteering at the Lighthouse, and joining its Board of Directors – became the first blind president and CEO in the Lighthouse's proud 75-year history. She's been a phenomenally successful nonprofit CEO, working with her board to more than double revenues and launch a number of innovative new programs. Bob continues his career at Purdue so they live apart, but they spend as much time with each other as possible.

BLESSED BY HER BLINDNESS

As we wrote *The Blind Visionary*, Virginia and I talked on several occasions about the meaning that can be found in her blindness. You probably won't be surprised to know that Virginia thinks of her losing her eyesight as anything but a cruel blow of fate. No one could say it better than Virginia herself:

"I feel blessed by my retinitis pigmentosa – by being blind. I didn't ask for it, and I suppose the great majority of people would see it as a curse, or at best a very mixed blessing. . . .Well, I've really found my bliss at the Lighthouse. I've found tremendous passion. I can't really say whether I'm called in some way, whether what's happened is part of some kind of divine plan for my life; all I know is I'm blessed to have a passion. . . ."

TO ORDER THE BLIND VISIONARY

The Blind Visionary is available in hard and soft cover and as an ebook and audiobook at www.theblindvisionary.com/store.php, www.DougEadie.com/store, and www.Amazon.com. The

Blind Visionary audiobook is also available as a digital audio download from these major retailers: iTunes; Audible.com; Simply Audiobooks; Learn Out Loud; and Open Book Audio. The Braille version is available at the American Printing House for the Blind (www.apr.org).