Book Review


Reviewed by Susan Jay Spungin

As Clifford E. Olstrom states in the Introduction to *Undaunted by Blindness*, the inspiration for writing about notable members of the field of visual impairment came from reading Ishbel Ross’s 1951 book entitled, *Journey Into Light: The Story of Education for the Blind*. A classic in the literature on blindness, Ross’s book was the first comprehensive effort to trace the lives of historically important individuals who were blind from 2650 B.C. to 1950 A.D. Both *Journey Into Light* and *Undaunted by Blindness* are must-read titles for all individuals who are interested in the blindness field. Members of the general population will find something of value in these books, as well. Readers should be sure not to miss the Foreword in Ross’s book, which was written by Helen Keller. Featured prominently in both books, Keller offers a marvelous description of blindness in Ross’s Foreword. She wrote: “blindness clutters the path of daily living” (p. viii), words that instruct as well as educate.

Both these books make significant contributions in the effort to change negative attitudes about blindness that are often held by members of the public. Olstrom offers concise historical biographies of 400 individuals undaunted by their visual impairment (that is, those who are blind or have low vision), thus recounting the abilities of this population without focusing on their disabilities. If you think it would be difficult to name 400 prominent blind people, you will find it interesting that Olstrom originally had 800 notable blind persons he wished to include in the text. It is a fascinating book, enticing readers to learn more about blindness and its impact on individuals. This book is readable and its tone is almost chatty, making it hard to put down.

There are some famous individuals with visual impairments written about in both books, such as Helen Keller, John Milton, and Laura Bridgman, to name a few. For the most part, however, there are more new individuals than old (often unknown by me) included in this book who have great stories to tell. Al Hibber, for example, was a singer from Mississippi who auditioned for and was well received by Duke Ellington. Hibber celebrated his success by going out and getting drunk. The next day, Ellington told Hibber he was ready to hire a blind man, but not a blind drunk (p. 142). In addition, a lot can be learned by reading about the many contemporary individuals included in the book such as Indian writer Ved Mehta; advocate and former president of the American Council of the Blind Otis Stephens; and advocate and past president of the National Federation of...
the Blind Kenneth Jernigan. Of course, Olstrom also included the rich and famous of our times such as recording artists Andrea Bocelli, Ray Charles, José Feliciano, and Stevie Wonder.

You may find that reading Olstrom’s list of distinguished individuals stimulates you to create your own list of people who are blind who should have been included in the publication. If I could, I would add former colleagues and friends to my own list of notable figures, including Karen Luxton, godmother to my children and director of the Baruch College Computer Center for Visually Impaired People.

The biographies are organized alphabetically, allowing readers to easily look up individuals included in its pages. I would love to see a future edition made available electronically, allowing its content to be searched by name or subject area—employment, nationality, education, or inventions, for example. Although it would be a massive undertaking, this and other books of a similar nature could be organized on a web site with a webmaster who has made an ongoing commitment to add new individuals as appropriate. My only criticism of the book is that the ending comes too abruptly—not only because it is a quick read, but because there is no final narrative summary or commentary following the listing of the final name, John Ziska.

Olstrom wrote the book to highlight the accomplishments of 400 notable blind persons. Some additional purposes were described by Carl Augusto, president of AFB, who wrote in the Foreword: “My hope is that in reading these 400 concise biographies, parents of blind children will have hope for their child’s future, employers will be motivated to hire workers with vision loss, teachers of the blind will have high expectations for students’ success and blind people themselves will aspire to any dream” (p. 6).

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COSB Commentary

Council of Schools for the Blind Hires Executive Director

Jim Durst

The Council of Schools for the Blind (COSB) is pleased to announce the hiring of Eugene McMahon as its executive director. Dr. McMahon brings a wealth of experience and expertise to the newly created position, in which he will improve and enhance relationships with the COSB membership and collaborating organizations, assist in the development of long-range strategies that support COSB’s mission, provide leadership in regard to state and federal public policy issues, and represent COSB programs and points of view to agencies, organizations, governmental entities, and the general public. Dr. McMahon has over 30 years of experience as an educator and administrator of programs serving students who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision), including those with additional disabilities. He received a doctorate in education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and he holds numerous certifications and licensures, is widely published, and has made significant contributions to the field of visual impairment.

Dr. McMahon realizes the importance of collaboration and working with other groups, organizations, and individuals to make a difference for the students we serve. In a recent conversation with Dr. McMahon, he said,

These are both exciting and perilous times for children with visual impairments. Exciting because there has been an acceler-