

Finalist, Non-fiction

Be the One to Make it Happen

by Nancy Shugart

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It was my senior year in college. I was majoring in music with plans to become an elementary school music teacher. One afternoon the head of the department called me into his office.

I was sure he was going to congratulate me. He had seen how hard I had been working and he knew I would be graduating at the end of that semester. I hurried into his office and sat down.

After a few anxious moments of silence, he leaned forward and said, "Nancy, how much farther are you going to take this? No principal in the public schools is ever going to hire you. Get out of education. Change your major."

My first thought; in fact, my only thought at that very painful moment was "Here we go again." This was not the first time I had been advised to give up, to not aim too high in life.

There was a question that had bedeviled my mind for years. I sought its answer relentlessly. The question – Why do some people accept advice from others to give up on their dreams while others determine they will be the ones to make it happen?

I was eight years old when my parents and I sat in the ophthalmologist's office in Houston, Texas. The year was 1965. We listened intently as the doctor delivered a sobering diagnosis. "Nancy will never be able to see again. The retina nerve in both eyes has deteriorated." the doctor elaborated, "Macular Degeneration and Retinitis Pigmentosa."

I was given a tiny magnifying glass. "You want me to use that to see to read? Are you crazy?" My fearful inner voice was screaming, "The kids at school will tease me."

I would do anything to keep from getting teased. I decided that I would save all of my schoolwork until I got home. Then I would sit in my bedroom, pressing that magnifying glass against the pages of my third grade books. That was how I read everything. It took me forever just to read one page.

In time, however, my inner voice began whispering. "Nancy," it would say, "it's not fair that you have to work so much harder than everyone else."

As I grew into my teenage years, that voice grew louder and it soon became obvious to everyone that I accepted that self-destructing message. The way that I dressed; the clothes that I wore, shouted to the world, "I don't care!"

But deep down inside, I cared a lot. I just didn't know how to help myself.

My anger exploded when the Department of Public Safety said I could not get a driver's license, just because I couldn't see! "Not fair," the antagonistic voice pounded in my head like a broken record.

As my peers began taking Driver's Education in school and I was excluded, my fifteen-year-old mind reasoned, "If I can't take Driver's Ed then what's the point in going to high school?"

Thoughts of dropping out of school had been crawling around in my fearful and hopeless mind for some time. After all, a high school diploma wasn't going to give me my sight back. Most everyone was telling me that, without sight, I would never be able to live the one and only dream I had had since I was in Mrs. Blackburn's kindergarten class in Baytown, Texas. That dream – to one day become a teacher just like her.

My parents were hard-working people. They had both grown up during the Great Depression and had experienced enormous hardships during their young lives. Maybe it was their

unwillingness to give up on me that prompted me to contemplate what they had been telling me – that I could achieve anything as long as I was willing to work hard for it.

I began observing the words and actions of others and, what I saw, made no sense to me. I saw people who, in my opinion, had everything they could possibly need to succeed and yet many were not.

At the same time, I saw people who, in my opinion, had far less than what I had and yet they were doing incredible things with their lives. They seemed to be shouting to me, “Have the courage to hear what others say is impossible and believe you are the one to make it happen!”

I graduated from high school, much to my parent’s relief. Then I did something no one in my family had ever done – I went to college.

College, to me, was a fascinating new world. I met students, and professors, from many cultures, backgrounds, ability levels, and everyone seemed eager to learn about one another.

My challenge, though, was that I was still reading with that tiny magnifying glass. My reading assignments were getting longer and I was falling farther behind.

“It’s not fair.” There’s that voice again. I began hearing it all over again. More than that, though. I began wondering, “How am I ever going to become a teacher when it takes me forever just to read one page?” Thoughts of giving up began creeping into my mind again. I just didn’t know what to do.

I made it to my junior year but, the closer I got to graduation, the more scared I became. What was going to become of my life?

I registered for a Spanish class to fulfill the foreign language requirement of my degree plan. It was hard enough to read English, but it was almost impossible to decipher a foreign language by only seeing one letter at a time.

One afternoon, the Spanish teacher asked me to stay after class. I was positive she was going to advise me to drop the class. After all, it was no secret that I was failing.

She was a young graduate student from Peru. Her dream, as a little girl, had always been to earn a college degree from an American university. I couldn't begin to imagine how many obstacles must have been stacked against her as she pursued her dream.

Impossible was not a word in her vocabulary and she was not about to advise me to give up.

"Nancy," she began. "I see how you're struggling to see the words in your books. Go over to the Financial Aid office and ask them to hire a reader for you."

This was the first time anyone suggested that I might be able to get some help. For the first time in years, I had a glimmer of hope. I hurried over to the Financial Aid office.

Upon hearing my request for a reader, the woman at the Financial Aid office quickly replied, "you don't need us. You need the Commission for the Blind."

The doctors had never told me I was blind. I knew I couldn't see as well as others but blindness? No, I wasn't blind.

I left that office with an overwhelming sadness - maybe it was all the years of getting my hopes up only to have them dashed; maybe it was the exhaustion of attempting to find solutions, only to be let down over and over again.

Is it time to give up, I wondered? Maybe I really am chasing an impossible dream. Maybe I should go back to my dorm room, pack my bags, call my parents, and say, "Come pick me up. I quit."

There had also been, however, insurmountable obstacles that I had overcome up to that point. Was it all for nothing?

I drew upon every ounce of strength I could find and then I made a decision - No matter how difficult. No matter how painful. No matter how hopeless things may seem at times – quitting can never be an option.

I made my way over to the office of the Commission for the Blind. I cautiously walked in and handed a letter to the counselor, a young woman named Martha Garber. It was a letter the ophthalmologist had given me twelve years earlier that explained what was wrong with my eyes.

She sat quietly, reading, and then said, “Nancy, this letter says your visual acuity is 20/200.”

“Yes, I know,” I answered.

“Nancy,” she continued, “do you also know that 20/200 is legally blind?”

“Blind? I’m not blind,” I answered, almost questioning.

“Yes, you are,” she politely insisted with a surprised tone of voice.

“Do you mean,” she continued, “since losing your sight at age eight, you’ve never received any assistance?”

My mind was overcome with the memories of all the years of struggle, fear, and, at times, complete hopelessness. However, those painful memories were now sprinkled with a hopeful expectation that I might now finally get some help.

We had so many things to discuss; it was difficult to know where to begin.

Crossing streets, finding my way around campus, avoiding obstacles when walking, grocery shopping, transportation – just a few of the endless issues I had struggled with for years.

However, what brought me to this office that day was still at the front of my mind - I need help with my reading assignments.

Martha explained that we had two options. She assured me that they could, indeed, hire someone to read my assignments to me but added, "There's one other option."

I couldn't imagine what the other option could possibly be, short of a miracle cure for the nerve damage in my eyes.

Martha said, "There's a machine in the library called a CCTV." (Today these machines are often called a video magnifier) "Go take a look at it and see if it magnifies the print enough to make reading easier."

Upon arriving at the university's library, I was escorted to the room where this machine was kept.

I sat down at the table, very curious about the machine in front of me. It looked like a television screen supported by legs on either side, lifting it above an attached moveable table.

The librarian asked me to place a book on the moveable table.

I took my dreaded Music History book out of my backpack, opened it up, and placed it on the table.

As the librarian leaned over to turn the machine on, I remember her saying, "A Lions Club donated this to our library."

Within seconds, the print from my book appeared up on the screen in large bold black letters. For the first time in twelve years, I could see to read again.

The magnification level was at least fifty times greater than that of the magnifying glass I had been using for years. I sat upright, with my nose about an inch from the screen, rather than hunched over as I had been doing with the previous technique. I could see an entire word at a time, rather than just one letter at a time.

I sat there for hours, pulling out every book in my backpack, turning their pages, and staring, through my tears, in disbelief...I could actually see words!

I shuttered as I realized that, just one hour earlier, I was ready to call my parents to come pick me up and utter the words, "I quit."

Since that day, even better answers have come into my life. I use text-to-speech software on my computer. It reads everything to me. I can set the rate at which it reads so fast that I can finish reading a document before my friends, who can see, have even started!

Not only can I cross streets safely now with my precious guide dog, Porsche, leading the way, but I now walk with confidence!

I graduated from the University of North Texas, armed with a Bachelor's Degree in Music and a Texas teaching certificate. I moved to Austin, Texas and turned my application in at the Austin Independent School District.

When the new school year began, I heard those words I had longed to hear, "You're hired!"

I'll never forget my first day as a teacher, standing before the eager students. They had no idea what a privilege it was for me to stand before them as their teacher.

I had to learn to do things differently than my sighted colleagues. For example, if I heard talking at inappropriate times during the lesson, I couldn't see who was the chatterbox. If a paper airplane sailed across the room, I had no idea who was the pilot! I knew I had to find a creative way to deal with this while still keeping learning fun.

One day, I announced to my students that I would no longer call anyone down for misbehaving. I wish I could have seen their faces! I'm sure they were all smiles as they thought they would no longer be held accountable for shenanigans.

“However,” I continued, “You will now be calling yourselves down.” I explained without missing a beat. “When I know something is going on during the lesson that has nothing to do with the lesson, I will simply ask, “Who is doing that.” You will have three seconds to say your name. If you confess and say your name, all I will say then is Thank you for your honesty and I will proceed with the lesson. There will be no punishment unless, of course, the problem continues.”

Once the students began taking responsibility for their behavior, the excuses – “But Miss, I didn’t do that” were soon silenced and replaced with “Miss Shugart, it is I and I am sorry.”

In time, I knew that I needed to be more honest with them about just how little I could see. I began opening up more with them and telling them of all the hard times I had faced. I told them about that professor who had advised me to give up on my dreams.

“Why would he say that?” was often the question they would ask.

“I believe,” I said, “that when someone has not had to overcome very much during their lifetime, they never learn just how strong a person with a made-up mind can be.”

When that professor was advising me to give up, I knew he was not saying those words to be cruel or hurtful. He had been an excellent professor, one who had always been willing to assist me with classwork. I believe he was talking to me more like a father would talk to his daughter. He had been a public school teacher for decades before becoming a professor and he knew just how difficult it would be for me.

He also knew that, in 1980 when I graduated, school districts would be hesitant to hire a teacher who is blind. He was trying to spare me the pain of being rejected by a profession whose doors he believed would be closed to me.

I had, however, refused to accept his advice to give up as I remembered the many unexpected answers that had appeared just one step beyond complete hopelessness. I had also remembered all the evidence I had witnessed of others overcoming obstacles that were even greater than mine.

Give up? NO way!

During my teaching career as a music specialist, my hope is that I taught my students, through personal example, the greatest lesson of all – “Have the courage to hear what others say is impossible and believe you are the one to make it happen.”
