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FREEDOM FOR THE BLIND:

THE SECRET IS EMPOWERMENT

A BOOK REVIEW

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Available at no cost, except for a fee of \$5 for shipping, from the Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program at University of Arkansas, P.O. Box 358, Hot Springs, AR 71902. Telephone: (501) 623-7700. The entire book is also available online, at: www.nfb.org/books/books1/free.htm.

James H. Omvig's book, *Freedom for the Blind*, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), has just been released. According to Omvig, the book offers "a non-traditional perspective on the methods and issues that a truly successful employment training program for the blind should embrace."

Freedom for the Blind points out that, as America begins the 21st century, between 70 and 80 percent of its working-age blind people are unemployed. Of those who are employed, far too many are severely underemployed or are destined to be locked in at entry-level jobs for a lifetime. Omvig asks, "Why?"

The author contends that, putting to one side all of the rationalizations, there can be but two possible explanations for this dismal statistic: First, either people who are blind, no matter how thoroughly trained and adjusted to their blindness they may be, are inherently incompetent; or, second, there is something inherently wrong with America's blindness system — the complex of programs for educating or rehabilitating people who are blind.

Omvig concludes that the problem is *not* with the people who are blind. The evidence that properly trained blind people can live independent, successful, competitive, normal and happy lives and can assume their rightful position of full membership in society is too overwhelming to conclude that, as a class, people who are blind are inherently incompetent. Therefore, Omvig reluctantly and cautiously draws the conclusion that the problem has been with the blindness system itself — that educational and vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs for people who are blind historically have not been what they could and should be.

Also, he says that the blind have been thought of by society — and have learned to think of themselves — as a group apart, a helpless and hopeless lot, having neither the right nor the ability to work for their daily bread or to earn their self-respect. As a group, people who are blind have thought of themselves not as unemployed but as inferiors who are unemployable: He sums it up by describing the blind as a "visible minority!"

Omvig believes that there are additional facts and circumstances at

the root of the unemployment problem: Too many VR programs or residential orientation and adjustment (O&A) centers have also unwittingly embraced society's negative view of people who are blind and have perpetuated these myths and misconceptions in the minds of their VR customers or students, and those customers have been the losers. Such programs have utilized what one might call the enabler model of service delivery.

However, *Freedom for the Blind* contends that there is good news! The age of enlightenment is here, and a new model — a proven cutting-edge formula for success — exists. It is the *empowerment model*.

The book proffers the view that every blind person — man or woman, young or old, educated or not — needs personal empowerment to be whole; and with empowerment comes the freedom people who are blind have the right to expect. It suggests that every progressive VR program or residential O&A center should therefore adopt the empowerment model and do its best to empower every VR customer or student whom it serves. In regard to O&A centers, Omvig says that a resi-

dential training center's overarching purpose should be to function as an "empowerment station."

The empowerment-station model of an O&A center is one that recognizes that all offered services must be aimed at teaching its students a new and constructive set of attitudes about blindness and "unlearning" prevailing views that are wrong and harmful. Further, such a center will help each blind student strive to achieve the following four personal objectives:

- The person who is blind must come to know emotionally, not just intellectually, that he or she can truly be independent and self-sufficient.
- The person who is blind must learn and become competent in those skills — the alternative techniques of blindness — that will make it possible for him or her to be truly independent and self-sufficient.
- The person who is blind must learn to cope on a daily basis with the public attitudes about blindness — how he or she will be treated by other people because of their misunderstandings and misconceptions.
- Even when the individual who is blind has adjusted emotionally to blindness, mastered alternative techniques and learned to cope effectively with the demeaning things other people do or say, the person who is blind must also learn to "blend in" and to be acceptable to others in order to be successful. He or she must be punctual, reliable, neat and appropriate in appearance and possessed of good social and table manners and the like. Thus the schools and agencies must do the best that they can to achieve this desired result.

Omvg's thesis is that *freedom should be accessible to everyone* and that it is possible, with a willingness to think outside the box, for the traditional VR program to learn to empower and to move its customers toward successful, high-quality employment and increased integration into society. A proven cutting-edge formula for suc-

cess exists and is available for the taking. The blind customer who has received cutting-edge VR services has a markedly higher chance for vocational success than the norm, according to Omvig.

The book details the philosophies, training techniques and the methods that go into the empowerment model and also explains the role a state's separate agency for the blind could play in the process. Given the right kind of training, the average blind person — not merely those whom some observers mistakenly perceive as the "superblind" — can compete on terms of true equality with his or her sighted peers and can become a taxpayer rather than a tax user. Omvig believes that, far from wanting to whimper, "I wonder what it would feel like to be free," the empowered blind person will want to climb the highest mountain and shout, "I am free! I know what it feels like to be free!"

Omvg is a blind attorney and rehabilitation professional from Tucson, Arizona. He spent most of his professional career working with the blind, and in retirement he continues to do consulting, evaluating, writing and teaching in this field today.

He became blind as a teenager due to Retinitis Pigmentosa (a degenerative, retinal disease referred to as RP). After several years of struggling with extremely limited vision while in the public school system, he transferred to a residential school, the Iowa School for the Blind. He graduated from high school in 1953.

Eight years of idleness followed Omvig's high school graduation. Then, in 1961, he became one of the early students in the Adult Orientation and Adjustment Center newly created and directed by Dr. Kenneth Jernigan at the Iowa State Commission for the Blind. He went on to complete college and law school, and then he worked in Washington, D.C., and New York City as the first blind attorney ever hired by the Na-



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