

Blind student researches negative reaction of people

By Robert Dorfman

Like Moses parting the Red Sea, Jane Carlson can split up a group of people by merely walking in their path.

Carlson can also change people's behavior just by her presence.

Carlson is blind. Being blind is neither mysterious nor powerful, yet the general consensus of the Lincoln (and most likely anywhere else) is that Carlson should be avoided, almost feared.

Encouraged by her Sociology 153 teacher's assistant Rumaldo Lovato, Carlson and two of her friends conducted a study designed to get reactions from others about blind people.

Surprising to Carlson's friends, but common to Carlson, the study brought out negative attitudes that people have about the blind.

Some behavior was blatant, some hidden.

"My friends and I went to Gateway shopping mall and switched among ourselves the use of the walking stick," Carlson said.

They found that quite often the assumed blind person could not get the same service as one who had sight, and too often, the blind person was ignored service altogether.

Other store owners, Carlson said, would overcompensate when dealing with the handicapped person to the point of patronization. One waitress at a local restaurant wouldn't even speak to Carlson when asking for her food order.

"The waitress assumed that I could not order for myself," said Carlson. In addition, waitresses would raise their voices when speaking to her, as if she were hard of hearing, Carlson added.

"I even have a professor who grades me much easier than he does his other students. This is not going to help me in later life," said Carlson.

"When walking down malls, ladies will get their kids out of the way, for fear that I would attack them. Other people practically break their necks to remove objects from my path," she said.

Gary Doty, another blind student at UNL, is currently undergoing legal battles with Hollywood Roller Skating Rink, because he said he was denied skating privilege for using his cane. The Lincoln Police allegedly had to physically remove Doty from the premises.

Doty said that restaurants are "funny." "Some employees ignore me completely, while others cannot leave me alone."

Both Doty and Carlson are members of the National Federation for the Blind, which seeks to give the public a better understanding of blind people.

"People are prejudiced against the blind because the public is ignorant that blind people can do anything they want to," he said. "They have never been around a blind person."

"Blindness is a physical characteristic, not a symptom of mental incompetence."

When she earns her degree, Carlson plans to become a social worker.

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