



# Alternative Vision

Story and Photos  
by Michelle Paulman

**A** taxi driver tells the following story to his passenger:

*These two old women were talking when they see this blind woman. One of the ladies says, "Look at that poor, young handicapped girl."*

*So I said to them, "She's not handicapped; she just can't see."*

*And the ladies say, "Oh, yes, she is handicapped."*

*About that time, the blind woman, who overheard the conversation, walks up to the ladies and says, "He's right. I'm not handicapped; I just can't see."*

The passenger, Dan Virts, laughs at the story. Dan is legally blind. He wears sleep shades as part of his training at the Nebraska Services for the Visually Impaired. He is going back there from grocery shopping.

Being blind doesn't mean being incapable, according to Dan. "You can do anything if you set your mind to it," he says.

Dan does many things as part of his training at the center. In typing class, he works on a computer that speaks the words he types and prints on a braille printer. He uses unmodified, electronic tools to make projects in shop class. He rides the bus to the store, class and home, and he learns to

navigate intersections by cane during travel class. For homemaking class, he cooks, cleans and sews. And he does all of this in sleep shades.

According to the Services, the shades are an educational tool used to build students' confidence in their other senses and, if they have some vision left, to integrate non-visual techniques with their remaining vision in case their eyesight is unreliable in certain situations. Students may remove the shades during lunch and when they go home after classes.

But he does not feel it is the end of his life. "There's no sense in being negative."

Dan said he has learned to use his other senses and can do what sighted people can, if he puts his mind to it.

He said he makes mistakes like everyone else. It's not because of his blindness, he said, but because he is "just not paying attention" to what he is doing.

"You've got to fail," he said. "It's part of the learning process."

Dan, 43, hopes to go back to school when he finishes his training this month and find a job as a computer programmer. The Services for the Visually Impaired will inform him of possible jobs and send employers information about blind people's capabilities to prevent them from discriminating against the visually impaired.

Dan's training at the center lasts from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. He stays in a student apartment during the week. On weekends, he goes home with his wife, Jackie. During the week, he invites friends over for supper, watches rented movies with other students, or listens to books on cassette tapes from the National Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

Dan maintains a positive attitude about his condition. "I'll live one day at a time," he said, "... just like everyone else."



To Dan, the sleep shades emulate the inevitable total darkness that will come when he loses all his sight. A diabetic, he began to have eye trouble in 1976 when his right eye hemorrhaged. It healed, but in 1983 his left eye hemorrhaged, the retina pulled away, and a surgeon replaced the fluid in his left eye with a synthetic substance. From there, his problems "snowballed," he said. He can now see only highlights, shadows and some detail in bright light.

"It's a tragedy at first," he said.



Clockwise from top: Dan and his travel instructor Larry Mackey walk along Capitol Parkway. Larry, who is also legally blind, was teaching Dan how to navigate the intersection at 27th Street and Capitol Parkway. John Moore, a Hinky Dinky employee, helps Dan with his grocery shopping. Dan tells time by feeling the position of his watch hands to the braille dots by the numbers. A talking computer tells Dan what he has typed and prints on a braille printer.