The Only Way Was Forward

After losing his sight during World War II, a young veteran finds his way to Catholic University where he learns to teach children who are blind — changing the course of their lives, as well as his own.

By Regina Conley Bethencourt, B.A. 2013

When Gale Brown, a 20-year-old Coast Guard electronic technician, arrived at Omura Airfield on Oct. 31, 1945, he looked toward Nagasaki and saw only trees stripped of both bark and branches. There were no buildings, just a wall or two in the distance. He was less than 20 miles from the epicenter of the Nagasaki blast.

Brown's health troubles began just before Christmas 1945. While on his way to Saipan (one of the Mariana Islands), his hands and feet began to swell. Lesions and sores appeared on his body and he had pain in his appendix. Treatment with antibiotics in Pearl Harbor, lessened some symptoms and in March 1946, he was discharged from the service. He went home to Hyattsville, Md., married his high school sweetheart, and started classes at the University of Maryland to study electrical engineering.

Within two weeks of his arrival, however, Brown's vision worsened. He was completely blind in his right eye and intermittently blind in his left.

Brown remembers, "I got two or three jobs, but I failed at all of them. Some days I could see well enough to drive but some days I couldn't see anything at all."

In April 1951, doctors at Ohio State University Hospital finally linked Brown's symptoms to Bechter's disease, an immunological syndrome associated with low-dose ionizing radiation. They hoped his condition would not worsen but they had little ability to prevent it if it did.

"I remember clearly the day the doctors sat me down and told me that, barring a miracle, I would soon be completely blind with no hope for a cure," Brown said. "When I reacted calmly, my primary doctor, Dr. Farmer, exclaimed 'Damn it, Gale! Don't you realize what we're saying to you?' I told him I did but that I was also a man of deep faith and would hope for a miracle."

Brown was declared legally blind a few weeks later. Despite testimony by a doctor from the Department of Veterans Affairs that his blindness was a direct result of his military service, his appeal to the VA for disability assistance was denied.

"What could I do?" he said. "The only way for me was forward." He returned to the University of Maryland, advised by his vocational rehabilitation advisor to pursue a degree in sociology. The advisor also suggested that Brown consider a career teaching the blind.

Brown greeted the teaching idea without enthusiasm. He had grown up working in the fields and the coal mines of West Virginia and had always felt a calling to something bigger, most likely in academia. Becoming a teacher for blind children, he thought, would be a waste of his talents.

Right Place. Right Time. Right Man.

When Brown didn't know was that the United States was grappling with an enormous problem. Although new incubator technology had enabled doctors to save large numbers of premature infants, many of those infants developed retrolental fibroplasia caused by an overabundance of oxygen in the incubator. Fibroplasia, which leads to blindness, was at its peak from 1947 to 1953, leaving parents and educators desperate for resources for the influx of visually impaired children.

Special education was hardly an established discipline. William Cruickshank, a professor at Syracuse University, was a pioneer in the field. One of the first to consider the importance of training teachers in special education, he had just established the Division of Special Education and Rehabilitation at the university.

According to Brown's recollection, only two other schools in the country were paying attention to Cruickshank’s research: Peabody College in Nashville, Tenn., and The Catholic University of America.

When Brown heard the words "The Catholic University of America," his interest was sparked. CUA was close by his home in Hyattsville. Perhaps it could offer him a path forward, he thought.

In the summer of 1952, a few weeks after graduating with his sociology degree, he enrolled in a two-semester program for Certification to Teach the Blind. The class consisted of himself and 40 nuns from all over the world.

At CUA he felt the first awakening of what would become his passion and vocation for the rest of his life.
I owe much of my success to the skills I learned while studying at Catholic U,” Brown said. “It was there that I fully internalized the notion of a calling to education. To think that a mostly blind man could go on to have such a meaningful and needed career is to acknowledge that a greater hand is at work, and I am so grateful that that hand led me to CUA.”

Just before he began the program, his doctors, believing that the radiation his body absorbed had settled in his appendix, decided to remove the organ in an effort to curb his impending blindness. He jokes that it was the worst way to start a semester, especially with numbs as classmates. “You know how nuns are,” he said. “They would spend the whole period trying to make me laugh so my stitches would split open.”

A Miracle and a Calling

The removal of his appendix turned out to be the miracle Brown needed. His right eye had deteriorated beyond hope, but his left eye began to steadily improve. He began to read, write, and get around fairly well on his own. But his experience had already planted the desire to learn more about how he could improve the lives of those living with blindness.

In the fall of 1952, Brown began working as a home teacher responsible for teaching blind adults how to read and write in Braille in five counties across Maryland. At the time, the vast majority of blind children studied at specialized schools. Since their social experiences were primarily with other blind children or visually impaired educators, they developed “blindisms,” habitual movements that might appear strange to sighted people, like rocking, pressing the eyes, or head shaking. Knowing that the children needed to learn how to function in a sighted world, Brown began to explore the idea of integrating fully blind children into the regular public school system. He met resistance on two fronts: public schools worried about mainstreaming a large influx of completely blind children, and existing schools for blind children that felt threatened. As he was working on ways to integrate his students, Brown met Susan Burton, a teacher for the deaf for visually impaired students at Hyattsville Elementary School. One of her student's doctors believed the little girl, Donna Jean Evans, would most likely be completely blind within a few years. Burton met with Brown to ask him to teach Braille to Evans to prepare her for the future.

The Maryland School for the Blind caught wind of Brown’s class. School administrators challenged his qualifications and requested that all blind children be sent to their school. To prevent Brown from continuing to teach, an administrator at the Maryland School for the Blind called a meeting with Brown, the assistant superintendent of schools, the state supervisor of special education, and the supervisor of services for the blind. Brown heard nothing about the results of the meeting until the assistant superintendent called to tell him that if he heard anything more from folks at the school for the blind, he had the superintendent’s permission to tell them “to go straight to hell!”

Changing Lives

Brown’s career was moving, but his life was far from easy. Brown’s blindness and financial hardships led to unresolvable problems in his marriage. In June 1955, his divorce was finalized. A week later he began the second half of his coursework at Catholic University. His certification from CUA made him the first teacher of the blind certified by the state of Maryland.

Meanwhile, a determined mother had been badgering the Prince George’s County School Board to allow her son, Johnny Wilkinson, to enroll in public school. They resisted. She would not accept no for an answer. “There’s always a first,” she insisted. After several conversations with Mrs. Wilkinson, the supervisor of special education gave in, telling her, “There’s one man who teaches partially sighted kids at Hyattsville Elementary School. He knows Braille, so we will give it a try on an experimental basis.”

In 1956, when Wilkinson was just five years old, he became the first fully blind child to attend public school in Maryland and one of the first in the country. “I remember the first day I met Mr. Brown,” Wilkinson said. “Like any first grader, I was nervous and scared but Mr. Brown made me feel so comfortable. I forgot I was there by myself. I was so motivated being able to go to school with regular kids. I would go home and practice my Braille, I wanted it to work out so much. By Christmas I could be entirely with my first-grade classmates and allow her enough Braille that I could send all of my friends Christmas cards.”

Wilkinson was a model student and gave the school board the evidence they needed. His success paved the way for another child or visually impaired student, and existing schools for blind children that cost him his sight. Instead, he says he focuses on the lives he never would have been able to touch had fate not played out the way it did. “I am so thankful for the opportunity to have an influence in the lives of these children. Could anyone hope for greater rewards in this life?” CUA

Finding Love Again

In 1957, Brown was called to West Virginia to conduct a diagnostic program at an institute for the blind. There, he met 21-year-old Delores Hintz, who was studying Braille at the institute in order to learn how to better care for her five-year-old blind niece. They were married the following June. The first of their four children was born a little over one year later.

“She took a chance on my old, divorced, and handicapped self,” Brown said. “But she never seemed to mind.” Delores joined him in his mission to educate the blind and taught Brown’s class whenever he was away or sick. Together they taught children with a range of special needs for a combined 41 years. Brown, who reached the age of 90 last year, and Delores have been married 58 years and live in Beltsville, Md. They have four children, 18 grandchildren, and five great grandchildren.

Looking back, Brown says he bears no resentment toward the Department of Veterans Affairs or those who made the miscalculation that cost him his sight. Instead, he says he focuses on the lives he never would have been able to touch had fate not played out the way it did.

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Inset photo (page 33): Gale Brown served in the Coast Guard during World War II (circa 1944).

Group photo (page 31): Brown was the only male to study at Catholic University Visually Handicapped Institute (circa 1955).

About the Author: Regina Conley Bethencourt (pictured with her baby, granddaughter, Gale Brown; and Jeanette Gerrard and Johnny Wilkinson) earned her B.A. in history in 2013. She says it was not until researching this story about her grandfather and interviewing him about his experiences that she truly understood the grit, determination, and hope that made him the man he is today. Bethencourt was editor of The Tower and a member of the University Honors Program. She married her high school sweetheart, Tónis Bethencourt, who received his B.A. from CUA in 2013 as well. They have an eight-month-old daughter, Isabella. Regina is the marketing and communications director for Yiena Center, a leadership organization for women.