



Jeff, a student at the California School for the Blind in Berkeley, is on his way to a nearby hamburger stand as part of a mobility exercise

Photo by Marie Faust Evitt

Getting around in the city is thrill for sightless teen

By MARIE FAUST EVITT

BERKELEY — For 15-year-old Jeff, being able to walk the three blocks from school to a hamburger stand by himself was a major accomplishment.

It took weeks of practice and coaching from his teacher, but the thrill of setting off on his own was worth it.

Blind from birth, Jeff has had to learn to navigate from scratch. Curved streets, parked cars and curb cuts for wheelchairs are major hurdles.

After further instruction and lots of practice, Jeff will be able to visit the 60 or 70 shops along the busy streets a few blocks from the California School for the Blind in Berkeley. Then he'll work towards a permit that will allow him to travel anywhere in downtown Berkeley and then the whole Bay Area.

But what will happen if the school moves to Fremont in September, as scheduled? Jeff's instructor, Leo Bailey, is worried that mobility instruction, which is so well-suited to Berkeley, will be severely hampered by the lack of city blocks and a downtown in Fremont.

"The greatest loss a blind person has is independent travel," Bailey said.

"That makes mobility training one of the most important phases of his

educational training.

"Mobility helps with the way you feel as a person. I'm not just stuck here in this chair, this room or this school. I don't have to wait for somebody to take me. I can do things.' "

A student can go through school and get a job, but if he can't get to the job, his training wasn't much good, Bailey observed.

practice run to The Station, a hamburger stand.

He had made the run several times before, but because the three-block route includes several curves, it requires lots of practice. Jeff had already earned the right to travel to a grocery store and a 7-Eleven store — which are actually farther away but easier to reach because they are on

Two more intersections, one a busy street without a traffic light, and he was there. He practiced going back and forth across that last street three more times just to get more comfortable.

It is the curves that Bailey worries about in Fremont. Mobility instruction is based on a pattern of a city grid — parallel and perpendicular streets forming blocks. Once you have mastered the concept of following a sidewalk, squaring up on a street corner, listening for traffic, orienting yourself so you are going straight ahead, crossing the street, turning left or right, then those skills can be applied to any city blocks, Bailey said.

The different smells coming from stores along the sidewalk give students further clues as they walk.

Curved streets and shopping centers — the building blocks of Fremont — aren't predictable, Bailey said.

"Mastering curved streets is a complicated skill," Bailey said. "The problem is that you can learn the characteristics of that one route, but they don't carry over. Other streets may curve more or less at different angles."

The same is true of shopping centers. The Hub is laid out one way, Fremont Plaza another and NewPark will be still another.

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Bailey teaches youngsters individually, beginning with concepts such as doors, corridors, streets and blocks.

Indoors, landmarks like a table against the wall, a window with the afternoon sun or a ticking clock give the blind person clues to where he is. Outside, the clues are traffic, smells from stores, texture changes between sidewalks and driveways.

At the School for the Blind, the long cane is the main tool for independent travel.

On a typical mobility lesson, Jeff came to Bailey's office ready for a

straight streets.

"Choose your weapon," Bailey said, as Jeff picked out his long cane for the trip.

With his cane checking the way for each step, Jeff quickly made his way down the front steps of the school, past the fire alarm box and across the first street. At the next intersection he almost headed out into the main stream of traffic instead of the safe block ahead of him, because the street curved. But after a reminder from the student teacher to listen to the traffic, he re-oriented himself and crossed the street safely.

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grade level and then enroll in the local high school or technical school. The children who have handicaps that make it difficult for them to function in an academic classroom take training and development classes that emphasize self-reliance and social skills.

The approximately 35 children who have severe hearing loss in addition to a visual handicap are taught in specialized classes in the deaf-blind section of the school.

Most students live at the school all week. Those who can, go home for the weekends, while children from Southern California return home only for long breaks and summer vacation.

A typical day for the youngsters begins at 6:30 a.m. when they get up and get dressed. Breakfast is at 7:30. They go to class from 8:40 to 3:30 with an hour break for lunch. After-school activities include Boy Scouts, Girls' Club, homemaking, electronics, swimming and just plain play.

Because many of the children have

been blind from birth, teaching them the concepts of the outer world is a big part of the program. They need to understand what streets and blocks are before they can travel on their own. Even something like hair-brushing is complicated for children who have no idea what a hairbrush is, what it does and why it's important.

The students learn mainly by listening and touching. But it is a slow process. Vision is the sense that lets a person take in the whole environment in a split second, and it doesn't hurt. The blind explore by feeling an object piece by piece, and they might discover a sharp point or an unpleasant gushiness, such as the inside of a pumpkin.

Teachers constantly talk to the students, describing new objects and tasks.

They learn not to take anything for granted, as Amelia Wilson, the school's volunteer coordinator, said, recalling the time she described downhill ski equipment. "After carefully and thoroughly, I thought,

explaining the intricacies of skis, bindings, safety straps, buckle boots and both ends of the ski poles, a boy asked, 'But how do they keep you up in the water?' "

Instruction is very slow, with cons-

Two of the children in her class don't have any vision and don't talk; one child has some vision, but is hyperactive.

The three children keep Ms. Peletz busy. "Each one needs so much atten-

Sounds of Silence

Visions in Darkness

tant repetition. Judy Peletz, who teaches three children ages 5 and 6, uses behavior modification techniques for some tasks the children don't enjoy, such as fitting blocks in a pattern. "If they do a task for one minute, they get a piece of food like a raisin or a small piece of cracker. Social praise isn't enough," Ms. Peletz said.

"The kids are not that motivated to explore or play. They have to be taught how to play."

tion. It isn't like you can tell one of them to go sit and work on something for five minutes while you work with the other two. They won't sit."

Her children may be functioning at the level of a 1½- or 2-year-old. In a year, they may progress as much as other kids do in six months. "It's slow, but you do see some progress if you look for it."

The teacher's job is more difficult when the children have been babied at home.

"Some families expect almost nothing from the handicapped kids," Ms. Peletz said. "They just think, 'Poor little blind kid.' And, by the time they get here, they have deep habits. They are turned into themselves, stimulating themselves by rocking."

Ms. Wilson recalled a 7-year-old who had never walked up and down steps or gone to the bathroom by herself when she arrived at school. She still drank from a bottle and was used to being carried everywhere.

"The parents meant well," Ms. Wilson said. "Their instinct was, 'Poor kid, she has to go through life without seeing, at least she can have her bottle.'"

That changed quickly when she arrived at the School for the Blind.

Even though the young students are busy learning to cope with the very basics of life, the teachers feel it is important to spend time acquainting them with the outside world. Field trips to get a Coke or an ice cream cone, a short walk from the school in

Berkeley, take about an hour.

The School for the Blind teachers fear that field trips will be much more difficult in Fremont. "Sure, there are places to go in Fremont, but we'll have to drive there," Ms. Peletz said. "By the time we get the kids ready to go somewhere, make sure they have gone to the bathroom, get them into the van, drive there and drive back, it's going to take the whole afternoon. That's really hard for these kids.

The School for the Blind staff members were consulted about improvements they would like in the new Fremont buildings and they agree the buildings will be an improvement over the current facilities, which need a great deal of renovation. But they argue that the buildings are secondary to the school location, because so much learning goes on in the community.

Ms. Wilson fears that the school will start turning in upon itself because it will be more difficult for the students and teachers to get out.