



Voices

OF OUR REGION

Interviewee: **Andrew Sydlik**

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Well, my name is Andrew Sydlick and I am 27 years old. I've lived in this area all of my life, really the Greater Pittsburgh area. I'm originally from a little town called Natrona which is at the very edge of Allegheny County - pretty much can't go farther away from Pittsburgh and still be in Allegheny. But I grew up there, with my two parents and I have a sister, a younger sister. And I went to school at Penn State and went two years at the New Ken campus, which was across the river, two years up at the Erie campus. Got my degree in English Creative Writing, then came back here. Moved first to Sharpsburg. Lived there for three years and now I'm living in Bloomfield. Lived here for little longer than, I don't know what it is, 6 months, 7 months, something like that. September 2007. I'm legally blind. I was born with a condition called vertical nystagmus, which is basically that the muscles and nerves in my eyes are weak. They aren't attached as strongly to the eyeball so that means my eyes cannot focus on far away details that well. I'm still I guess trying to think about how this condition has affected my life. I mean I have always thought about it but I guess it's something that's hard to really grasp. For me I feel like it did make me not able to participate in a lot of things. And also, this is the hard thing, was it that I wasn't able or was it that people really weren't willing to make the accommodations to allow me to participate in them, you know? From pretty far back, like I remember second grade, you know at recess I really couldn't, well, I really didn't participate in many activities. You know. Like, one of the kids I talked to, they were playing football and I said "Well, hey can I play?" and he's like "No, this isn't really a game you can play." But I have played football with my friends after that, when I was older. I am able to play to an extent. I'm certainly not going to win the Super Bowl any time soon. But with people who are just playing around and not really being all that serious about it I can play sports. But for people who are really concerned about winning, no I'm not going to catch every football. I don't think my parents knew really how to handle my condition, the situations I would get into, because my dad is the kind of person who thinks oh if you have enough willpower you can do it, right? So, he would always tell me "Well you should be able to do things just like anyone else can. It doesn't matter if you make mistakes." But then on the other hand he wouldn't want me to do some things. I wanted to ride a bike when I was little because everyone I knew did and he actually bought me one like "Okay, well we'll do this." But he never put it together. So, you know, things like that. On the one hand he would push me a lot but on the other hand he could also be very overprotective. The actual schoolwork was not much of a problem because I always had, OVR or it used to be Blindness Individual Services. They would get me large print materials, things like that. When I was in high school they got me CC TV, got me a computer with zoom text on it. I always did very well in school.

What kind of services do you receive at the moment?

Yeah. OVR gets me things, equipment. They've got me things for my job. I have zoom text, they are getting me an update of that for my computer both at work and at home, I can use it on both. I am working part-time for a non-profit called Providence Connections, an Administrative Assistant there. They help low-income and at-risk families. They have day care, after school programs, they have parent classes, things like that. They have a domestic abuse shelter out in Clarion county. I kind of like the idea of working for a cause rather than just making money for a company. There's things like you don't really get good benefits and stuff like that. But I mean, I like that: doing something good for other people. Because I know I have to rely on help from other people. It's like "Wow, I can give something back." That's good for me. I've been a writer since a pretty early age and in 12th grade I had an English teacher that was just really good and she really encouraged me in my writing and made me really get into it. So when I was going to college, for the first two years I was undecided, just getting all of my basic classes. And you know, I went back and forth on it. And I just thought, "Well I really like writing. Why not do this?" At the time I basically thought, "Well, any four year degree is going to get me a job." Some people I think had led me to believe that but I should have thought more about it myself. I thought, well, I could find some kind of work where I'm using writing for it. But I mean, I guess more because it was a personal passion of mine, I went for it.

Where do you see yourself going?

I don't know. I see myself flailing my arms around lost! Like I said, the grant writing path is where I would like to go. If not, trying to stick with non-profits in some capacity. Maybe doing communications, doing things like writing newsletters which I have experience in that. Or public relations or HR. Something where I'm able to use communications related skills. If I could do anything, what I would love to do is just make money off of my writing but that's a rare thing to be able to do. Although I guess one thing I found is that I know a lot of people with disabilities will work from home but I don't know if I would want to do that. I like being out, interacting with people. I guess the other dream job maybe would be editor. Like editor at a literary magazine or something like that. A publishing house. That would be pretty cool. I don't really think that I have a mentor or hero like a lot of people do. I don't know that I was really inspired by any one person. My progression into independence has been kind of a gradual thing, one step here and one step there. There were a few people that I think helped me along. Like I mentioned my 12th grade English teacher and she was pretty important. And a couple of my friends. I have a friend that I made in college and we've stayed in close contact and just got closer and closer since then. He's been pretty important to me. He's always been very encouraging and supportive. There a couple other friends I have who have not dealt with a physical disability per se, but one friend who has a lot of mental problems, even attempted suicide a number of times, but I have maintained contact with him and so he can sort of relate to what I go through because of the struggles he goes through. And I guess I would also say like, authors that I really like and musicians. Hearing about their stories and being impressed by their works has really

inspired me too. Franz Kafka is one of my favorite authors. His life aside from his work is just very interesting. You know he went through a lot of struggles with self doubt, feeling alienated from the rest of society and reading about that and then looking at the amazing things he did. Ray Charles, another one who I can honestly relate to more on a physical level. But I mean he did things that no other musician did at that time and it's still never done. He was like such a genius and he was one of those rare people where his genius, it did not hurt at all his social aspects. He would just ask for what he wanted. He wasn't afraid to do that and it was really just incredible what he was able to do. I guess one thing that I would have to say is, with me, there is always this thing going back and forth between wanting to understand and identify with having my disability and then trying to distance myself from that. So to get involved in the advocacy sometimes there is this hesitation like well, "I'm not part of that." Which I realize that's not how it should be. I think that has changed a lot now and now I am more interested. For example, the whole Port Authority thing, which just really pissed me off and it's not necessarily a disability issue but a lot of people with disabilities it is important to them because they have to rely on Port Authority bus. And some of them might take Access but for me it's just too expensive to do that. People try to fight for it and then they hardly ever get what they want, or really need, and then it's just like maybe it is worth it because if you don't do anything about it you're not going to get anything at all. And if even if you get one or two compromises maybe that's better than not getting anything but its just like is all that frustration and anger and bitter feelings is that really even worth it? I don't know. I guess at this point in my life I think I'm thinking more about how being legally blind really affects me, affects my sense of identity, affects my sense of independence. These are things that, like I've said going back and forth, between distancing myself from it and wanting to understand it. That's always kind of made me kind of hesitate on it. Now I'm really starting to explore it a lot more and not be as afraid to think about it. And also, being more confident in myself, recognizing that I don't have to feel shame in identifying with being legally blind, you know. So I just wanted to participate in this and I think it's a really cool project. You know, I'd like to see more things like this. I mean, I feel like also, like just with the advocacy thing, I mean, there's not really... I don't know of at least a lot of projects and things that are centered around disabilities. You know, you have for almost every other minority, from race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, you have tons and tons of books and music and festivals that are centered around those things. But disabilities seems to really not have a lot of things like that.

This is called "Being Blind".

I can't tell you what it's like being blind.

It's different every day.

Close your eyes and grope

You still won't understand.

I don't move in ever darkness

Of patches of light and shade.

That kind of blindness is rare

And then so is mine.
I see the faces but not the smiles
The signs but not the stops.
Thirty feet between you and I makes us strangers.
Blindness is inconvenient and heavy
Loaded with shopping bags wrapped around my arms
Instead of stuffed in the backseat.
My hourglass trickles more slowly
Emptying by the Port Authority schedule.
Some places can't be captured by this defective camera
Because the rundown buses simply don't go there.
But parts of blindness aren't so bad
Without a car I'm not polluting the air
Or being robbed blind with insurance.
And I get spared from the ugliest people.
I may stumble over a curb
O a child's toy on the sidewalk
But we all stumble
And often it's our feet not our eyes that are unsure of the world.

I would just say don't be afraid to think about having a disability. Don't let it limit you. At the same time, don't try to think of yourself as someone who doesn't have it but just keep going on and trying to get what you want because like we mentioned before persistence, that is a key to so many things. No matter what obstacles you face, I mean, other people who don't have disabilities also encounter many obstacles that they've been able to overcome. So no matter what just keep going at it and you'll eventually get it. Maybe not tomorrow but eventually you'll come to some type of resolution that will make you happy.