

Blinder Than I

An Awareness Play About Visual Impairment

by
Dan Roberts

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Including
Questions for Discussion
and
“The Rules of Blind Etiquette”

This short play is presented in two versions. The first dramatizes the problems which occur when a group of young people encounter a visually-impaired girl in the park. The second version (which follows a brief discussion) shows the positive changes which could occur if those youngsters were more understanding of the girl's situation.

It is important to realize that the central character, “Ronnie,” is affected by a condition called Stargardt's syndrome, an inherited form of Juvenile Macular Degeneration, which causes a gradual loss of central vision in children and teenagers. MD affects more than six million people in the United States alone, and it is the second leading cause of blindness in older adults. It is often called an “invisible” disease, because the affected person may look and act fully-sighted, since peripheral vision remains undiminished. Tasks such as recognizing faces, distinguishing colors, reading, and seeing details, however, are difficult or impossible without assistive devices, and this can lead to the kinds of social problems witnessed in this play.

Written by Dan Roberts, who is a visually-impaired author and teacher, the presentation is effective for school assemblies at any level and for community groups which are interested in learning not only about blindness-related issues, but sensitivity to others who are different.

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-- Version #1 --

Cast of Characters

(All are in their early teens)

Ronnie
Sarah
Aaron
Adam
Allison
Meghan
Jeff

SETTING: A park bench.

AT RISE: RONNIE is sitting on the bench listening to a CD through headphones. She is wearing wrap-around sunglasses and a baseball cap.

(SARAH and AARON enter stage left.)

SARAH

(To RONNIE)

Hi.

(RONNIE does not hear her, because of the music, and she does not see that SARAH is speaking to her. SARAH waves her hand and tries again.)

Hello-o.

RONNIE

(Removing her headphones)

Oh. Were you talking to me? I'm sorry.

SARAH

I thought you were comatose or something. Are you new here?

RONNIE

Yes.

AARON

Ask her what her name is.

SARAH

You ask her.

RONNIE

My name's Ronnie. It's short for Veronica. I hate it.

You hate Ronnie or Veronica?
AARON

Both, actually.
RONNIE

(SARAH studies RONNIE closely, noticing that she tends to be avoiding eye contact.)

What's the matter with you?
SARAH

(AARON pulls SARAH to the side.)

I think she's...blind.
AARON
(Whispering)

[Discussion Point #1]

What?
SARAH

I think maybe she's blind.
AARON

Yeah, right.
SARAH
(Crosses to RONNIE, leans in, and studies her closely.)

Boo.
RONNIE
(Not loudly)

Cheez!
SARAH
(Startled)

(AARON laughs, as SARAH crosses back.)

That wasn't funny.
SARAH

(Returning to RONNIE)
That wasn't funny. You think you're funny?!

No. I'm sorry.
RONNIE

Why are you sitting here pretending your blind, anyway?
SARAH

{Discussion Point #2}

RONNIE

(Standing)
I never said I was blind.

AARON

(Still grinning)
That's right. She didn't.

SARAH

Well. . . You didn't say you **weren't**..

RONNIE

Why didn't you tell me that you could see?

SARAH

Now why would I say a thing like that?

RONNIE

Never mind.

[Discussion point #3]

(ADAM and ALLISON enter stage left. ADAM carries a soccer ball.)

ADAM

Hey, they're waiting for us over at the field. You coming?

AARON

(Sarcastically)
I don't know. We're having an awful lot of fun here.

SARAH

No, we're not.

ALLISON

Who's she?

SARAH

Nobody. Let's go.

ALLISON

What's she doing here?

SARAH

Pretending she's blind.

ADAM

That's wierd.

ALLISON

(To RONNIE)
Why don't you go somewhere else?

ADAM

Yeah, and you can lose the glasses. They aren't that cool, you know.

RONNIE

I need them. The sunlight is bad for my eyes.

[Discussion Point #4]

SARAH

Oh, give it up. No one here is falling for that act.

AARON

Again.

SARAH

Shut up.

(JEFF and MEGHAN enter stage right.)

JEFF

Hey, we can't play without a ball.

MEGHAN

What's keeping you?

ADAM

Uh, meet Ronnie.

(Grins at SARAH)

You have to get closer. She's blind.

JEFF

Really?

SARAH

(Playing along)

Sure. You need to get real close.

[Discussion Point #5]

JEFF

(Crossing cautiously to RONNIE and leaning into her.)

She's really blind?

RONNIE

You don't have to...

SARAH

Kiss her!

AARON

Look out!

[Discussion Point #6]

(SARAH shoves JEFF, knocking him into RONNIE, who falls backward onto the bench with a cry of pain and surprise.)

JEFF

(Recovering quickly)

Hey! Cut that out!

ALLISON

(Laughing)

Aw, she's not blind. She's just pretending.

MEGHAN

That's dumb.

JEFF

Don't you all have anything better to do? I thought we were gonna play soccer.

MEGHAN

Yeah. You wanta come with us?

RONNIE

(After a moment)

Me?

MEGHAN

Yes, you.

[Discussion Point #7]

RONNIE

I would like to, but I really can't.

MEGHAN

Sure you can. Let's go.

(Grabs her arm and pulls her off of the bench a few steps to stage right.)

RONNIE

No!! Stop it!!

(She wrenches from her grip and stumbles, causing her glasses to fall off. AARON picks them up.)

You shouldn't grab me like that! I'll let you know if I need help! Where are my glasses?

[Discussion Point #8]

SARAH

(Suddenly serious)

She really **is** blind.

[Discussion Point #9]

AARON
(Handing the glasses to her, and speaking loudly)
Here they are.

RONNIE
I may be blind, but I'm not deaf.
(She puts the glasses on and sits.)

[Discussion Point #10]

ALLISON
(After a moment of awkward silence)
Well . . . We, uh, gotta be going.
(All agree, simultaneously mumbling various excuses, and exit stage right, except for AARON, who stops and turns to look at RONNIE.)

RONNIE
(Still a bit angry)
Aren't you leaving, too?

AARON
How did you know I was here?

RONNIE
Because I can see you.

AARON
Then you're not blind after all?

RONNIE
Not as blind as **some** people around here.

[Discussion Point #11]

(AARON is confused and a bit hurt.)
I'm sorry. It's not you. You're a nice guy.

AARON
(Sitting next to her.)
So you don't wanta play soccer with us?

RONNIE
I'd just be in the way.

AARON
Great. Then you could be goalie.
(RONNIE smiles.)

Discussion Outline

(Moderator's Script)

(The cast should return to the stage to participate in the discussion. It is also important to have the Rules of Blind Etiquette posted, projected, or distributed for all to read.)

Before we discuss the play, let me ask you two questions.

1. If a person has a loss of vision that cannot be corrected with glasses, they are called "partially-sighted" or "blind." Do you know anyone who is visually-impaired in this way?

Notice that I use such terms as "partially-sighted," "visually-impaired," and "blind." These are acceptable by the blind community, but please avoid using terms and phrases such as "handicapped," "afflicted with," and "suffering from." Some people even avoid using the term, "disabled." *(Explain further, if necessary.)*

Some people can be visually-impaired to the point of "legal blindness" *(Define 20/200 acuity)* and still be able to see a little with one or both of their eyes.

Some people have lost central vision (like Ronnie), peripheral vision, or total vision as a result of certain diseases of the retina. *(Define "central vision," "peripheral vision," and "retina.")* So far, there is no cure for retinal disease, but there is hope for the future.

Some people may become blind from diseases of the eyeball itself, many of which can be treated successfully if caught in time. Other people are temporarily or permanently blind as a result of birth defects or injuries to the eye.

Ronnie has a genetic disease called Stargardt's syndrome, a form of Juvenile Macular Degeneration. It is caused by a defective gene which keeps the cone cells of the retina from removing waste deposits *(define "cone cells")*, and the eventual result is loss of central vision. It affects children, and it can progress to legal blindness before age 20. Again, there is not yet a cure.

2. Are the characters in the play bad, or are they just unaware?

Mostly unaware. They cannot be expected to know about Ronnie's condition, unless someone teaches them. Their only real mistake then, is that they see her as being different, and they don't try very hard to understand.

Let's talk about the play, using the Rules of Blind Etiquette as a reference.

Discussion Points #1:

Speaking "through" another person is condescending and insulting, as if the visually-impaired person is also mentally-impaired. *(Rule of Blind Etiquette #3)*

Aaron felt very awkward about saying the word "blind" aloud. Use of the word is not a problem for a visually-impaired person. *(Rule of Blind Etiquette #6)*

Discussion Point #2:

Why did Sarah think that Ronnie was pretending to be blind?

Macular Degeneration is often called an "invisible" disease, because people who have it appear to be fully-sighted. It is one of the leading causes of blindness (affecting more than 6,000,000 people in the United States alone), but the people who have it are difficult to identify, because most of them do not need a cane or a guide dog for mobility, and they can usually move around independent of help from other people. One of their biggest problems, then, is social. Not being able to see centrally, they have trouble recognizing faces, counting change, reading, driving, and other skills that are expected by normal society.

Discussion Point #3:

What did Ronnie mean by “Why didn’t you tell me that you can see?”

Ronnie should not have to announce her visual impairment any more than Sarah should have to announce her sightedness. Ronnie does not expect to be treated any differently because of her condition, so there is no point in bringing it into the conversation, unless the subject comes up.

Discussion Point #4:

Research has shown that ultraviolet rays from direct sunlight are harmful to the retinal cells in people with Macular Degeneration. Those with Stargardt’s syndrome are especially warned to avoid sunlight by wearing UV-protective sunglasses (preferably the wrap-around type) and headwear which shades the eyes. Not all blind people need to wear sunglasses, but this kind of eye protection is necessary for those who have progressive retinal degeneration.

Discussion Point #5:

Viewing close-up may help Ronnie to see details better, but only because it would help her to use her peripheral vision. She has little or no central vision, which is quite different than simply being near-sighted

Demonstration for audience participation: Close one eye and hold your fist about twelve inches from your face. While staring at the center of your fist, hold up a number of fingers with your other hand. Can you see how many fingers are up? [Answer: Yes.] Can you see your fingerprints? [Answer: No.] This is how people with advanced Macular Degeneration see the world. It is called “eccentric viewing.”

We should not assume (as the characters did in the play) that close-viewing or magnification will work for every type of blindness. There are some people who can only see with the center of their visual field (“tunnel vision”), there are others who have random blind spots or wavy distortions, and there are yet others who can see nothing at all.

Discussion Point #6:

Why was Aaron’s warning ineffective?

A warning such as “Look out!” gives no clear instruction to a visually-impaired person, and only results in confusion. (Rule of Blind Etiquette #9)

Demonstration with volunteer audience member: Blindfold a volunteer, then stand next to him and yell, “Look out!” Obviously, he will not know how to react, which makes the point in a humorous way. Repeat the demonstration, this time saying firmly, but calmly, “Duck.” Hopefully, he will respond correctly and help to demonstrate the importance of choosing the proper words.

Discussion Point #7:

Meghan did not make it clear that she was addressing Ronnie. (Rule of Blind Etiquette #2)

Discussion Point #8:

Never assume that a visually-impaired person wants your help, and **never** take hold of them without their permission. (Rules of Blind Etiquette #9 and #10)

Demonstration with audience volunteer: Show proper techniques used to guide a blind person who has asked for assistance.

Discussion Point #9:

As in Discussion Point #1, it is also a mistake to treat a visually-impaired person as if they are hard of hearing. (*Rule of Blind Etiquette #1*)

Discussion Point #10:

How did Sarah and the others come to the conclusion that Ronnie was not pretending?

Best answer: They could see that Ronnie's irises were noticeably dilated, which results from little or no light input to the retina. She would also look off to the side of an object in order to see it with her peripheral vision.

Discussion Point #11:

It has been said that what a blind person may not have in the way of sight, they often make up for in insight. This is what the characters in the play lack, which--by Ronnie's way of thinking--makes them just as "blind" as she is.

Discussion Point #12:

What caused Ronnie to reject Aaron at the end of the play?

Best answer: He was beginning to pity her. Ronnie feels fully capable of meeting the challenges in her life, and she doesn't have room at this time for people who feel sorry for her.

Now we're going to perform the scene again, but this time you will see how it might turn out if the characters all understand more about people's feelings, and--in particular--the problems of a person with loss of central vision.

(NOTE: For information on Macular Degeneration, including a glossary of terms and definitions, a description of the anatomy of the eye, and photographs of how visually-impaired people see, visit the Macular Degeneration Support web site at www.mdsupport.org. Any of the material may be freely reproduced for the purposes of this presentation.)

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-- Version #2 --

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: The same

(SARAH and AARON enter stage left.)

SARAH

(To RONNIE)

Hi.

(RONNIE does not hear her, because of the music, and she cannot see that SARAH is speaking to her. SARAH waves her hand and tries again.)

Hello-o.

RONNIE

(Removing her headphones)

Oh. Were you talking to me? I'm sorry.

SARAH

I thought you were comatose or something. Are you new here?

RONNIE

Yes.

SARAH

What's your name? I'm Sarah.

RONNIE

I'm Ronnie. It's short for Veronica. I hate it.

AARON

You hate Ronnie or Veronica?

RONNIE

Both, actually.

(SARAH crosses to the bench and looks at her closely.)

SARAH

Ronnie? You can't see me, **can** you?

RONNIE

Not very well.

I didn't think so. Are you here alone?

SARAH

Not now. *(Smiling)*

RONNIE

How did you get here if you can't see?

AARON

(Glancing around the park)

I can see enough to get around.
(Then, with a bit of embarrassment)
And my mom's over there by the fountain.

RONNIE

(ADAM and ALLISON enter stage left. ADAM carries a soccer ball.)

Hey, they're waiting for us over at the field. You coming?

ADAM

Who's this?

ALLISON

Ronnie.

SARAH

Hi. *(Standing)*

RONNIE

Hi. Wanta play soccer with us?
(Tosses the ball, hitting her in the side of the head.)

ADAM

Ow!

RONNIE

She can't see. *(Reprimandingly, as he retrieves the ball)*

AARON

Oops. That was really cool.

ADAM

You didn't know. Just warn me next time, okay?

RONNIE

(Rubbing her head)

(MEGHAN and JEFF enter stage right.)

MEGHAN

What's keeping you guys?

JEFF

(Taking the ball from AARON)

Yeah, we can't play without **this** thing.

ADAM

We've been talking to Ronnie. Don't throw that at her.

(RONNIE laughs.)

JEFF

Why? What's the joke?

RONNIE

(Winking)

Your friend here just made a pass at me, but I rejected him.

(JEFF looks quizzically at her, then at ADAM)

ADAM

That was her feeble attempt at humor. I threw the ball to her, but she didn't see it, and it hit her in the head.

JEFF

She didn't see it?

(To RONNIE)

You'd have to be blind not to ...

(He catches on, as everyone else stands reactionless.)

Oh.

ALLISON

(To JEFF)

Duh.

(All laugh, including RONNIE.)

JEFF

I didn't know! I'm sorry, okay? Ronnie, you wanta play soccer with us?

RONNIE

I would like to, but I really can't.

MEGHAN

Sure you can.

RONNIE

I can't play soccer very well.

AARON

And you think **I** can?

JEFF

Yeah, you could play with your eyes **shut** and be better than **him**.

RONNIE

No, I really **can't** play soccer very well. I've got like two left feet.

MEGHAN

(Smiling)

Now **that's** a **problem**. Come on over to the field, and I'll give you some pointers.

RONNIE

Okay, but I warned you.

(All start to exit.)

Oh. Hold up a sec. My mom's reading over there by the fountain. I guess I should tell her where I'm going.

MEGHAN

(Looking toward the audience)

There's a woman over there, but she isn't reading anything.

RONNIE

She isn't?

MEGHAN

Nope. She's just standing there smiling at us.

RONNIE

(A bit embarrassed)

Oh. Okay.

(With a gently exasperated sigh)

That would be my mom.

(She waves at her mother, as MEGHAN'S expression says, "I understand how mothers can be," and they exit.)

--End of Version #2--

Follow-up Discussion

1. What improvements were noticed in the second version? Possible answers:

- The characters spoke directly to Ronnie and addressed her by name.
- Sarah knew enough about blindness to recognize that Ronnie could not see her, and she did not shy away from asking her about it.
- The characters spoke to Ronnie with normal volume.
- Meghan did not try to take hold of Ronnie to guide her to the field.
- Both Jeff and Aaron realized their mistakes with Ronnie and apologized without becoming overly self-effacing. In other words, their reactions to Ronnie were normal, which avoided unnecessary embarrassment for her.
- Everyone maintained a relaxed spirit of humor, easing what could have been a series of awkward moments.
- The characters were sophisticated enough to realize that Ronnie could indeed play soccer in spite of her impairment. Jeff's misunderstanding of her comment, "I really can't," was simply a misinterpretation; and no one was surprised to learn that the real reason was her "two left feet."

2. What about Ronnie's mother? Was she there for Ronnie or herself? Did she appear to be overprotective? Would your mother have done the same thing? Do you think her presence was detrimental to Ronnie in any way?

This question will generate much lively discussion among young people.

3. What "Rules of Blind Etiquette" were not encountered in the play, and why?

Rules #11 and #12 are important for people who have little or no vision at all and must relay upon a cane or a guide dog. Remember, however, that people like Ronnie are able to see peripherally, so they do not usually need to rely upon mobility aids. While this seems like a blessing, having no visible indication of their condition can cause awkward social situations which can sometimes be difficult to explain.

Rules #4, #5, and #7 are also important mainly for people in the totally-blind community. While able to handle their lives very well by learning alternate strategies, these rules are simply decent social courtesies which will help to make things a bit easier.

4. What can we learn from this play that will also help us relate to people who have physical impairments? Possible answers:

- Try to learn something about their condition by asking them about it, asking someone else about it, or looking it up.
- Try to imagine ourselves in their place (empathy).
- Remember that "impaired" is **how** they are, not **who** they are.

- Keep in mind that an impaired person has most likely come to deal with his or her condition very well, and it is our challenge to try doing the same.
- Remain positive in their presence, but also remain realistic. They are.
- Be honest, but tactful.
- Allow them to do for themselves.
- Understand if they are moody at times, but watch for signs of depression.
- Like Ronnie, keep your sense of humor, because laughter truly may be the **only** medicine.

THE RULES OF BLIND ETIQUETTE

Suggestions which will help you relate to a visually-impaired person

1. Speak in a natural conversational tone. It is not necessary to speak loudly or to over-enunciate.
2. Address us by name when possible, especially in crowded places.
3. Address us personally, not through someone else.
4. Greet us when we enter the room so that we know you are present.
5. Indicate the end of a conversation when you leave us so that we aren't left talking to the air.
6. Feel free to use words that refer to vision. We also use the words "see," "look," "watch," etc. And remember, we are not insulted by the term "blind."
7. Do not leave us standing in "free space" when you are serving as a guide.
8. Be calm and clear about what to do if you see us about to encounter a dangerous situation.
9. If you think we need help, ask first. Don't assume that you should help.
10. When offering assistance, never take us by the arm. If you offer your arm instead, we can follow slightly behind and anticipate changes.
11. Never take hold of a white cane.
12. Never pet or interfere with a guide dog while it is on duty.

(Source: Carl Augusto, President, American Federation for the Blind in New York, and David McGown, executive director of the Guild for the Blind in Chicago.)

For information on the many support services and resources available to people with macular degeneration and related retinal diseases, visit **www.mdsupport.org** on the Internet or write to:

MD Support
3600 Blue Ridge
Grandview MO 64030