



2003: Opening a New Way

A MOMENT OF LOVE AND TRUTH

Daniel Kish, our Executive Director, sat at his desk very late one night wrapping up business for the day, when he encountered this excerpted Email from a mom in Canada.

Hello,

I am the mom of a little boy named Justin who will soon be 4. Justin loves sports, is very bright, and is totally blind.

Justin has begun using FlashSonar. When he had just turned 3, we were walking passed a fence. He reached out to the fence and said "look at the wall, mom". He also often acknowledges parked vehicles without having touched them.

I have read the article by Daniel Kish and Hannah Bleier entitled "Echolocation: What It Is, and How It Can Be Taught and Learned". The article has greatly intrigued me. I also saw a documentary about a man who used echolocation by clicking his tongue, and his abilities were amazing. I've looked over your site, and the possibilities mentioned have me very excited.

Justin can run like the wind, his face wreathed in smiles, pure joy in his heart. It breaks my heart when I hear that "cracking" sound when his head connects solidly with something. He's definitely picking up speed these days, and the bumps on his head are getting larger! He is so very curious to learn all about his world. I really don't want his enthusiasm and love of life dampened by fear of injury or discouragement over what people tell him he cannot do.

We really want to find out how we can teach Justin to use echolocation!!! I believe that if he can learn echolocation at his young age, many of these concerns can be overcome. Am I dreaming, or might this be possible??



An early lesson in FlashSonar involves detecting a small panel.



Walls are like big panels in this game where Justin reaches out to "push off" before he "crashes".

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Our little guy is such a passionate and spirited little person, and seeing early signs of his potential to use this ability with proper instruction has me hopeful and somewhat frustrated over finding someone who can help us. Justin does have an orientation and mobility instructor, but her knowledge of echolocation is limited, which I think is the norm.

Are there ANY books or ANYONE who might work with us? Any information or assistance will be more appreciated than words can say.

Sincerely,
Tricia

Though this letter was unusually passionate and articulate, it expressed concerns and sentiments common among our students - Is there a way to help blind people see their way to freedom? Daniel's response was immediate.

Dear Tricia,
Thank you so much for your thoughtful and passionate letter. I am impressed by your eloquence, and very moved by the expression of your heart. I am very tired, and it is very late, and I have much to do before I bring my day to a close. Most of my correspondences will wait until morning, except this one.

I broke my first teeth at the age of 6 on a pole. I shattered my dental work on the corner of a storage shed at 14 running track. Though my echolocation was good, I'd received no instruction, and didn't have the benefit of technology. My spirit of free movement was never broken. FlashSonar training will certainly reduce risks, but not eliminate them. Nothing eliminates them; sighted kids get hurt all the time. Call me when you get a chance.

Daniel



Once he knows where the wall is, Justin can throw a ball at it...



*... and have it bounce right back!
The ball is wrapped in a plastic bag so that Justin can chase it while his aim is improving.*

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In less than 3 months, Daniel was on Canadian soil working with Justin and his family. He returned to find this letter:

Dear Daniel,

Thank you so much for coming! The experience was enlightening and inspirational. The video you sent prior to your visit gave a very good idea of what you are capable of teaching. To meet you and see how echolocation can work firsthand was incomparable!

We were excited to learn that there are echolocation exercises Justin can do to develop his skills, even though he is only 4. I'm starting to ask more of him, such as leading him close to our car in the parking lot, but not necessarily facing it or on the right side, and asking him to locate it. He seems quite able to do so consistently. Also, we were in a busy restaurant, and I asked him to go and find the door. I told him it was where he couldn't hear any people talking. He went straight to it. Watching you move skillfully, gracefully, quickly and independently throughout your day demonstrated to us what our son may one day be capable of with proper training. Yesterday we were at a playground that we have not been at before. Justin reached out to a tree trunk (didn't touch it) to his right and asked "what's that?" It was very cool.

Perhaps most memorable was the demonstration of echolocation that you gave to Justin's grandparents - in the dark. As you walked quickly over the landscape, identifying objects and describing things as you went, we struggled to maintain your pace as we couldn't see where we were going!



Keeping track of the walls around them, maintaining his orientation is a "walk in the park"



Mountain bike riding is a more advanced skill that builds on the lessons previously learned.

World Access for the Blind

Although our time was short, the rapport you established with Justin came quickly and strongly. We will always have fond memories of that first visit, from roasting marshmallows to reading bedtime stories.

Families and professionals in our area are now eagerly anticipating the workshop you will be doing next autumn. Thank you so much for walking into our lives!

Sincerely,

Tricia

A 3 day workshop with parents and professionals in their area was scheduled soon after for fall of 2004, and arrangements are being made for more work with Canadian families.



Playing kickball or catch in the park is nothing but fun for these Team Bat members. The game was refereed by blind Instructional coach Hector Elias



Instructional coach Juan Ruiz, retreats when two of his students join forces against him in a game of swashbuckling. The "swords" are flexible tubes loosely wrapped in plastic to make them audible.

The gratification expressed by Justin's family is not theirs alone; it is ours, also. It is fundamental to what we do, and why we do it. We thank Justin and his family, and every student, blind and sighted, with whom we've had the honour to work, and from whom we've had the privilege to learn. It is our reward to bring a new light to show a new way for blind people throughout the world.