

# THE BLIND & VISUALLY IMPAIRED



Jennifer Butcher a two time Visually Impaired Paralympic Swim Team Athlete. Competed in the 2000 Sydney Paralympic Games and 2004 Athens Paralympic Games.

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## I. Description of Culture

### A. Demographics

- 10 million Americans are either blind or visually impaired.
- 600,000 are legally blind, or 1 out of every 417 people.
- Under the age of 65, there are more men who are visually impaired than women. The opposite is true for individuals over the age of 65.
- More men are born with visual impairments than women.
- In Maine, the largest populations of blind individuals reside in the Greater Portland area.
- Of all blind and visually impaired Americans, approximately 80% are white, 18% are black, and 2% are from other races.

### B. Brief History of Blind Culture

- Throughout history, blind people were completely excluded from the ranks of the normal community.
- In early societies they were reputedly abandoned, exterminated, or left to fend for themselves as beggars on the crazy fringe of the community.
- In the late Middle Ages, provision began to be made for their care and protection in almshouses and other sheltered institutions.
- In the early 1900's, blind people began to emerge from the shadows, and move in the direction of independence and self-sufficiency.
- The Maine Institution for the Blind opened its doors in 1905. Helen Keller helped raise \$1,000 to assist in launching this institution.
- Civil War hero Joshua Chamberlain was one of Maine's earliest advocates for the blind and a member of the Board of Trustees.
- Today, blind and visually impaired individuals are still working to be accepted as "normal" citizens.

### C. Definition of Blind

- Visual acuity less than or equal to 20/200 in the better eye with correction or a field not subtending an angle greater than 20 degrees.
- Physicians tend to rely more on the patient's level of function than their physical characteristics when considering a diagnosis.
- Blindness is physical. Blindness does not indicate a mental impairment.

#### D. Food / Cooking/ Life Skills

- Although the blind & visually impaired enjoy the same foods, house chores, and living skills as anyone else, their method of completing these tasks is very different.
- In Maine, there are various support networks aimed to assist blind/visually impaired individuals in mastering these skills. The Iris Network is perhaps the largest, serving the Bangor, Brewer, Ellsworth, Houlton, Lewiston, Portland, and Saco areas.
- These programs provide education in a wide variety of areas including; adaptive kitchen skills, home management, personal management, balancing checkbooks, grocery shopping, writing correspondence, public transportation, and orientation to cane and dog assistance.

#### E. Dress / Accessories

- The Blind are encouraged to wear non-blending colors when maneuvering in areas of congestion.
- Only those who are blind or severely visually impaired are permitted to carry white canes.
- The use of a long stick as a bumper and probe is recognized world wide as a sign of visual impairment.
- Many blind / visually impaired individuals utilize Seeing Eye Dogs for assistance. These dogs are dressed in jackets which state their role and function for their owner.

#### F. Language / Communication

- Blind and visually impaired individuals face a huge language barrier since they are unable to physically read everyday newsprint, internet information, or educational and leisure books.
- Braille is a common form of communication in the blind culture and is unique to the blind. Braille is a system of raised dots which people can read with their fingers. Braille can be produced in-house if you have the right software, training, and embosser.
- Braille translation software can translate information on a computer screen into Braille that the user reads on an adapted keyboard.
- Moon is a system of reading and writing in which tactile symbols based on lines and curves are used to represent letters, numbers, and punctuation.
- Various cassette recorders /players are used to record and listen to data or information.
- Word of mouth is the most common and useful method of communication. However, blind people do not use body language or facial expressions to relay their thoughts and ideas.

- The blind culture is currently working on policies which would force corporations and organizations to create audio descriptions similar to the accommodation of closed captioning for the deaf & hearing impaired.

#### G. Education

- Approximately 45% of individuals with severe visual impairment or blindness have a high school diploma, compared to 80% of fully sighted individuals.
- Among high school graduates, those with severe visual impairment or blindness are about as likely to have taken some college courses as those who were sighted, but they are less likely to have graduated.

### II. Family Relationships & Roles

- Blind culture is perhaps most importantly linked due to the common struggles of equality and frustration in modern society.
- Currently, approximately 42% of blind and severely visually impaired Americans are married, 33% are widowed, 13% are separated or divorced, and 13% have never married.
- The inability to get a job and the instability of their jobs makes it very challenging to be financially stable and provide for a family.
- In blind culture, men and women share the same family responsibilities and divisions as individuals without visual impairments.
- Currently, many blind mothers and fathers are experiencing challenges from social service agencies who feel they are unable to adequately care for their children. This has heightened awareness and determination to take action on the part of the blind and their family and friends.
- Blind and visually impaired individuals often share emotional problems such as depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety. The reasons for these emotions are alien to the larger community.

### III. Concept of Work & Leisure

#### A. Employment

- Training centers are on the rise for blind and visually impaired individuals' interested in gaining skills necessary for quality employment.
- Currently, many jobs available to the blind and visually impaired pay minimum wage.
- However, some blind and visually impaired individuals are employed as lawyers, psychologists, farmers, and secretaries.

- Approximately 46% of visually impaired adult Americans are employed.
- Approximately 32% of legally blind Americans are employed.
- Approximately 25% of totally blind Americans are employed.

#### B. Leisure

- Many blind and visually impaired individuals find socialization and family time to be very important.
- Blind individuals find relaxation through crafts and share a love for the arts.
- As a culture, blind individuals enjoy teaching others how to read and write in Braille.
- There are numerous sports activities available to participate in such as rowing, sailing, swimming, alpine skiing, softball, baseball, tandem cycling, Judo, and cricket.
- Goal-Ball, Futsal, and tandem cycling are unique to the blind culture.
- The United States Association for Blind Athletes (USABA) was established to support and promote the United States Paralympic Teams. Similar to the Olympic Games, blind athletes compete in events to win medals and the honor of being the very best in the World.

### IV. Health & Wellness

#### A. General Information

- Many blind individuals have a tendency to rock back and forth when they are seated or standing.
- Young children often press on their eyes or place their hands on their face when they are speaking to people.
- Most people with visual impairments, young or old, seek out alternative forms of stimulation since visualization is not an option.
- Exercise is valued to maintain physical health and happiness.

#### B. Challenges to Health Care

- Many blind and visually impaired individuals do not have health insurance beyond minimum state based services.
- Health insurance does not typically support the necessary medications and adaptive equipment for total mobility and function in society.
- Relying on public transportation and rides makes it difficult to schedule or change appointment times and locations.

### C. Suggestions for Health Care Providers

- Always introduce yourself immediately when you enter a room. If others are to enter, introduce them and their role as well.
- Always ask a person who is blind or visually impaired if they need assistance; don't just assume they do.
- Never touch or grab them without warning or explanation.
- Use descriptive words when talking; don't rely on hand gestures or visual descriptions.
- Don't try to avoid using words such as see. They use them also, and will not be offended.
- A blind individual's sense of smell, taste, touch, and hearing did not improve because they are blind. However, they rely heavily on these senses getting more information from them than typical.
- State law allows guide dogs to accompany their owners at all times in all environments. Always approach guide dogs on their right side (so the dog stays between you and the patient).
- Remember to speak in a normal tone. Blind individuals are not typically hard of hearing.
- The blind and visually impaired prefer well lit rooms, color contrasts between the floor, walls, and furniture, and floors that are slip and hazard resistant.
- Don't think of an individual as a blind person. Just think of them as an individual who happens to be blind.
- Individuals who are blind see their blindness as an asset, not a weakness.

### Maine Resources / Contact Information

- Iris Network- Portland, Maine

The Iris Network  
189 Park Avenue  
Portland, ME 04102

Voice or TTY 207-774-6273 (in the Portland area)

Fax 207-774-0679

Toll Free: 1-800-715-0097 (in Maine only)

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