

When I was seven years old, the way I saw the world changed forever. Literally. School had just ended for the summer, and my mom was starting to notice something was off about me. I could hear people whispering from far away, but I didn't seem to notice balls flying towards my face when I played catch with my brothers. When someone pointed at an eagle wheeling through the sky, or boats making their way home across the water, I would glance around and then nod that I saw while looking in the wrong direction. So, my mom decided to take me to an eye clinic when we went down south for summer vacation. I, of course, didn't think anything was wrong. An hour later, I came out with my first pair of glasses. The first thing I said: "Mom... the trees have leaves!" I had never seen the leaves on a tree before.

Eleven years and six pairs of glasses later, here I am. I have learned since then that I have countless problems with my vision: nearsightedness, farsightedness, convergence insufficiency, muscular weakness, spasms, perception issues, a lazy eye. I've had to do therapy that's left me in tears and hear multiple doctors tell me, "There's nothing we can do to fix it." To compound these problems, I live on a small island in Southeast Alaska where there's no eye clinic. To have access to specialized healthcare, one must either travel by boat or airplane to the nearest city or wait for a traveling optometrist to come through town.

As a young child facing these challenges, I was left with few answers and a lot of frustration. I had so much fear for my future; the threats of falling behind in school, not being able to live the same life as other children, and maybe even becoming blind constantly loomed like monsters in the back of my mind. As this was happening, though, so was another major change in my life. I was learning to play the clarinet. And, as it so happened, my region's honors music festival was being hosted in my town that very year. Out of vague interest, my parents took me to the concert; the music was wonderful, but what really caught my attention was a particular musician. She was visually impaired, so she read her music off of an iPad that enlarged it for her. She was also a clarinetist. I was instantly inspired. Not only did she share my condition, but she played my instrument too! I have never even learned that clarinetist's name, but the moment I saw her was a formative moment in my life. She proved to me that I, like her, didn't have to be limited by what I could see.

Of course, this shift in thinking doesn't mean that my challenge has gone away. No matter how much I fight, I will never be able to play most sports, drive on highways, or even go without glasses for a day, tasks that most people accomplish with ease. I still struggle to read text when I'm tired or under stress, which makes doing homework and taking tests much more difficult. However, I'm learning to overcome this obstacle every day. It teaches me how to outwork everyone around me, how to adapt to difficult changes, and, most importantly, how to never give up. I may have not wanted this challenge, but if I had the chance I wouldn't choose to erase it; it shapes me every day into the person I'm becoming. My limitations have taught me to reach beyond both my physical barriers and my mental ones, and the more I grow, the more I realize that this challenge is a blessing in disguise. As it turns out, I don't need to change *what* I can see. I just need to adjust *how* I look at it.