



Being blind will never hold me back!

Caroline Casey has been legally blind since birth, but incredibly only found out when she was 17. Far from letting the disability limit her life, she's made it an asset that has given her undreamt of opportunities...

What do you mean, I can't learn to drive?' I asked incredulously. It was my 17th birthday, and I'd just told my optician that after my routine eye check-up I was off to collect my provisional driving licence. I was so excited. I'd dreamt of driving – window down, Led Zeppelin on the radio – and here was this person telling me that could never happen.

The optician looked over at my mother, confused. 'Haven't you told her?' he asked. My mother shook her head. And that was how I first discovered I was legally blind.

I had been born with ocular albinism, a genetic condition which means I only have 10% vision – I see the world as though I'm looking through an out-of-focus camera lens. I think my parents intended to tell me eventually, but because I was coping so well they never found the right moment.

I was diagnosed at one year old and they wanted me to have a normal life, so I was enrolled in mainstream education as a sighted child rather than being sent to a school for the disabled. It was the right decision and I coped well. Yes, I needed glasses, but I just thought I was short-sighted. I was terrible at sports that involved a ball, and at school discos I didn't have a clue what the boys looked like, but I knew from my friends that everybody felt odd and dorky and weird at that age – I was no different. So when, at 17, someone tried to tell me that I was different, I simply didn't believe it.

Winning ways

When I went to college, I kept my vision impairment to myself. It wasn't easy. I couldn't tell the ladies' loos from the gents', or read a book spine if it wasn't on a shelf at eye level, but I managed. I was like a duck – calm on the outside, paddling like crazy underneath. If someone had boobs, I'd follow them to the loo. If I couldn't find a book, I'd ask a guy and flirt my way through.

There were embarrassing moments. I'd hug strangers, thinking they were friends, and I'd still accidentally find myself in the gents' loo. But it taught me that when you live with a disability, you become resilient and inventive in coping with it.

Confidence has always been an issue for me. It's hard to walk into a crowded room or bar when you can't see any faces, but my parents taught me to be strong and just get on with things. So when I graduated as an

archaeologist and was told that although I had the brains for it, I didn't have the eyes, I travelled the world and back, went to business school and landed a job with a top management consultancy. I didn't tell them I was vision-impaired, they hired me purely on merit and for two years I excelled.

Disaster strikes

Then in 2006, when I was 29, I temporarily lost my vision significantly. My company sent me to a specialist who told me that I'd overused my eyes at work. Time, he said, to think about working differently. I was devastated. It was like I'd finally admitted that I couldn't see, and as a result I lost confidence. But reaching my lowest point started me on a new journey.

I remembered when I was growing up that the optician had asked me what I wanted to be. My answer: Mowgli from



BEATING THE ODDS

Since suffering a cruel acid attack in 2008, Katie Piper, 28, has become an ambassador for burn victims. She set up the Katie Piper Foundation to help raise awareness.



Presenter and actress Carrie Burnell, 31, was born with no right hand. She refuses to wear a prosthetic arm but still appeared in *EastEnders*, *Holby City* and *The Bill* before landing a job as a children's TV presenter.



Comedian and actress Francesca Martinez was born with cerebral palsy – she likes to call herself 'wobbly.' But it didn't stop Francesca, 32, starring in *Grange Hill* and she's now carving out a successful comedy career.

The Jungle Book. That got me thinking and so I took a sabbatical from work and organised a trip where I would spend four and a half months riding an elephant across India, raising money for the charity Sightsavers. By the time I got off that elephant six months later, having raised £100,000, I'd found my mission in life.

I was fascinated by the way people view disability. I'm not Caroline the blind girl, I'm Caroline who is Irish and impatient, and loves chocolate and elephants and a thousand other things. Yet society tends to put people in boxes and label them.

I couldn't rest until I'd done something about it. So I resigned from my job and set

up a business called Kanchi, named after the elephant I'd ridden across India. I wanted to change people's understanding of disability so I targeted businesses because if they could change their approach, it would affect society's view too.

Extraordinary people

I've been doing this successfully for 10 years now. I set up the Ability Awards, now a permanent fixture in the business calendar, in which companies are recognised for their forward-thinking approach to disability in the workplace. Attitudes have changed and are still changing. You see more disabled people out and about than ever before. Public buildings have to be designed with access for everybody, and there's been huge hype surrounding the London 2012 Paralympics.

I used to think that being different was terrible but now I think it's brilliant. My eyesight has turned out to be an asset and given me opportunities I never dreamt of. I still walk into doors and get frustrated that I can't drive, but I've had so much fun since I've let myself be me.

In 2007, I became a trustee of Sightsavers International. I run my own business, I get to speak around the world, meet extraordinary people, and make a difference. I've even got to drive a car – racing round the Malaysian Grand Prix track for a charity event. If I was still that duck paddling away in the job I was devastated to leave, I would never have done any of that. ☺

* Caroline is a trustee of Sightsavers International (sightsavers.org) and founder of Kanchi (kanchi.org). She is promoting Trustees' Week (trusteesweek.org.uk), 31 October – 6 November.

NEED MORE INFO?

* Albinism is a rare, genetically inherited condition, which affects one in 17,000 people in the UK.
 * There are two types of albinism: oculocutaneous albinism which affects the skin, hair and eyes; and ocular albinism which affects only the eyes.
 * In most cases, both parents must carry albinism genes. With ocular albinism, however, just one parent can be a carrier.
 For more information visit albinism.org.uk