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Blind CEO a Lighthouse first

By Nancy Bartley
Seattle Times staff reporter

As the talking alarm clock tells him it's 5:30 and time to get up, Kirk Adams' day unfolds in sound, scent and touch.

The aroma of coffee drifts through the house. He hears his wife's soft voice in the kitchen of their small, white Leschi home as he reads the morning news with his fingertips. The sound of his children clomping on the floor lets him know they're getting up.

The day for Adams — the first blind chief executive officer and president of the Seattle Lighthouse for the Blind — has begun.

In the organization's 90-year history, only executives with vision have been at the helm of the organization, which offers training and employment for the blind. Proponents for the blind say his appointment illustrates how technological advances, like talking computers and laptops with Braille keyboards and screens, now open opportunities for talented people to do most of the jobs a sighted person can do. They say Adams' appointment is not just a promotion but a statement that disabilities don't have to be limiting.

A Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Whitman College and a recipient of a master's degree from Seattle University, Adams, 46, was employed by the agency for eight years before the board selected him to take over for President George Jacobson, who retired Friday after 40 years — 29 of them leading the organization.

The time has come for a blind president, said Jacobson, who mentored Adams. "He's a good choice to fill my sandals."

Paula Hoffman, a board member who hired Adams, said he was promoted because he's skilled, has a background in nonprofit management, and "he's brilliant." That he happens to be blind "is a bonus," she said.

"It gives him so much credibility with blind people and other blind agencies ... and he's just a regular Northwest guy," Hoffman said. He's got a favorite table at the Virginia Inn, never misses opening day of fishing season and loves the Mariners.



Kirk Adams, the first blind director of Lighthouse for the Blind, uses a standard cellphone — he's memorized the keys — to make a call before leaving for work.



Kirk Adams walks through the Seattle Lighthouse for the Blind factory with Pat O'Hara, general manager for operations. Products include aerospace parts.

Help with the details

On a recent morning, as Adams' family stretches and yawns and sinks into chairs at the breakfast table, his wife, Roslyn Adams, stirs eggs on the stove. Does he want anything to eat? When does his flight leave? And what about the TV appearance in Spokane? Does he want the blue shirt or white?

As soon as she drives him to the office in time for his 8 a.m. teleconference, she'll go home and pack for him. As he gets out of the car, he raps his knuckles against the window in a gesture of affection, then — seemingly effortlessly — navigates his way up the stairs, into the building and to his office.

His computer gives him a message. He calls a shop foreman on a standard cellphone, having memorized the keys. With his white cane held before him, he makes his way downstairs and into a workshop. There he asks a foreman, who can see, for an elbow, and takes hold of it as he walks along the aisles, the cane swishing from side to side.

There's the hiss of compressors and hum of machinery — nearly all run by people who are visually impaired. The machines have been modified for the blind and vision-impaired. Sometimes the modification was simply getting a larger computer screen to make the type bigger, and other times it was adding a computer program that talked, giving instructions to a router operator.

"Where we see the disconnect is with the kids" coming into the Lighthouse, Adams said. Most have not gone to special schools for the blind, so they are not proficient in Braille or other technology to make them employable. And while sighted kids get jobs "flipping burgers," blind kids miss the opportunity for entry-level jobs.

"I want Lighthouse to be a beacon of [Braille] competency," he said.

The blind can do most jobs, except those involving driving. But because most employers don't realize that or aren't will to pay the extra cost to make a workplace accessible to the blind, there are limited employment opportunities, Adams said.

As many as 70 percent of all adult blind people are unemployed, according to one survey.

That makes organizations like the Lighthouse, which employs 200 blind people, 40 of them who are also deaf, vital as both employers and places for learning "blindness skills," like reading Braille and becoming familiar with technology that compensates for being unable to see, he said.

Those skills Adams learned early in the Oregon School for the Blind in Silverton, which he attended as a day student. In the fifth grade, he entered public school. Later, when the family moved to Snohomish, where his father, Jim Adams, became a coach at Snohomish High School, Kirk ran track, skied and wrestled.

The oldest of three children, Adams was born with crossed eyes. He had surgery to repair them and apparently had an adverse reaction to the anesthetic, causing hemorrhaging that eventually detached the retinas.

He was only 5 at the time, and although his vision was fading, he never seemed to be any different from a typical boy, his father said. His parents vowed to never overprotect him.



MIKE SIEGEL

An avid reader, Adams scans a story from The Washington Post in Braille. He learned "blindness skills" as a child.

Lighthouse for the Blind

The nonprofit has a community-outreach program to educate the public about blindness issues and to spread the word about employment opportunities, programs and employee achievements at the Lighthouse for the Blind. Speakers and supporters are needed to represent the Lighthouse at nonprofit fairs, service-club meetings, school assemblies and local events. For more information: 206-322-4200 or www.seattlelighthouse.org.

Learning to ski, through the Ski for Light program for the blind, came easily. The person who skied behind him was his eyes and told him to turn left or right. He went to championship meets across the nation.

When he went away to Whitman College, his father was looking for Seattle students with whom Adams might be able to ride to and from campus. A college newsletter had photos of freshman students from Seattle. Jim Adams saw a photo of Roslyn Jackson and told his son, "Hey, she's beautiful. You should call her."

Once he was on campus, he did. Eventually they married and now have a son, Tyler, 21, a college freshman, and daughter Rachel, 17, a student at Garfield High School.

On the move

Adams was in Spokane early last week announcing the opening of a Lighthouse for the Blind there and made an appearance on a local television station, in addition to meeting with architects and planners. Then he was off to Florida on another business trip.

Through technology, or sometimes requests as basic as asking for "an elbow" or an explanation, Adams navigates strange airports, subways, machine shops, high-traffic streets, shopping, cooking and the daily routine of running a corporation. He credits his ease to having learned blindness skills early in life and to a world that is slowly, steadily opening, giving blind people access to some of the opportunities the sighted take for granted.

On Adams' desk are tactile objects — shells, a prickly sea star, a jagged-edged amethyst, a smooth rock. He's a nature lover who in 1980 climbed Mount Rainier with famed climber Jim Whittaker.

On the wall of the office is a quote from a Sherman Alexie novel about a man who stood in the dark, the only light the distant stars, small miracles that "happened at the edges of his peripheral vision, tiny wonders exploding while his back was turned."

Although Adams cannot read the type — it's not in Braille — he knows the words like he knows his world: through his senses and his heart.

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