

Blind

Continued from Page 1

she tells of having to read 1,000 pages a week — letter by letter. She had to use an optacon — which takes a printed letter and raises it so it can be "read" by feeling it — to read most of her textbooks.

She studied "almost literally 24 hours a day." For example, one time she had to make corrections for the committee on her dissertation which would normally take a day or less for a person with sight and hearing. She started at 3 p.m. Friday and worked steadily through until 2 a.m. Monday morning with very little sleep, and breaks only to eat so she could meet the deadline.

"That was not unusual," she says.

Becht and Schmidt commuted three days a week from Portland, often getting up and on the road by 7 a.m. and not returning home until 10:30 or 11 p.m. Driving back and forth was the only way Schmidt could maintain a practice to pay expenses. An educational fund was also set up for Becht.

Becht says she expects to start a private practice. She hopes to get approval from the State Psychiatric Board so that she can accept insurance, welfare and Medicare payments while working in her residency with another doctor.

She has had no problem with counseling people. "They like it that I can't see and hear them," she says. "Many people don't like to sit and expose themselves."

She explains that an interpreter gives her eye movements, breathing patterns and physical movements of the patient. If she does not use an interpreter she sits very close to the person.

"I can tell, for example, if the client is laughing," she says. "I can feel and smell their breath. Body odor changes when people's emotions change. The way they type (on the Teletouch machine) can also tell me their emotions. If they are angry they will hit the keys very hard and if they are sad they are probably not hardly touching the keys at all. I also see how they spell."

"One patient told me he was not using drugs, but drugs give specific smells to the breath and body odor." She pauses. "You can't fool me."

Becht also plans to do research in tinnitus, the sensation of hearing different noises in the head. Becht says she hears seven noises in her head and wants to "develop a treatment program for coping skills."

"It's an irreversible condition. You have to learn to live with it."

People take their lives — they can't live with the noise."

Tinnitus is an allusion of sound caused by the nerve deterioration of the inner ear. "For example, if you pinch yourself you feel pain in the nerve," she explains. "In the inner/middle

ear it is not pain, but sound."

Typically, sounds include screeching, steel clanking and whining noises.

Becht sees nothing unusual about her accomplishments and plans for the future. Even after becoming the first totally blind

and profoundly deaf person to earn two doctorate degrees, Becht is modest.

"I'm not an overachiever by any means."

Story by Sandy Johnstone

Photo by Juleen Myers

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