

Looking to new horizons

A degenerative eye disease "popped out of nowhere" during his early teen years in Mississippi, and Robert Darby was sent to a school for the blind to deal with the problem.

"When I came back, my mother said 'Oh, my poor baby,'" remembers Darby, now a 34 year-old first year law student. "I said secretly, to myself, 'to hell with that shit.' Empathy yes, pity no."

With the help of a Seeing Eye dog, Darby travels around campus with more purpose of movement than most sighted people.

"I appear to have a very serious expression about me," says Darby. "I'm big, I'm tall. When I correct a dog, it tends to stand out in a person's mind. I carry myself in such a way that says 'hey, I'm confident about where I'm going.'"

Throughout the past decade Darby and his dog have become a common sight around campus. He completed a master's degree in English Literature at the University, and had substantial work completed towards his doctorate before financial problems forced him to drop out.

'I carry myself in a way that says 'I'm confident.'

Darby relies heavily on readers and pre-recorded material to do his studying. Braille is generally too bulky and expensive to have a practical application.

Beyond the obvious barriers of being sightless, Darby has met with little opposition in his decision to enter law school.

"The kind of support I've had from the faculty, staff and students has just been incredible," he says. "They have been acutely aware of my need to be prepared. They have essentially said 'you've got the ball. If you run with it, we'll block for you, but you have to run.'"

Darby hasn't let his handicap stop him from living a full life.



"After some counseling and some self-evaluation, I came to realize that a cane no longer afforded me the security I needed," says Darby.

His Seeing Eye dog is the third he has had since January of 1975. The first one died of kidney failure after being with Darby five years, the second one became too easily distracted and would run over pedestrians and lead Darby into obstructions.

'I said to myself, 'the sky's the limit from now on.'

"All the sudden I'd walk right into a cement post," says Darby. "Eventually I just lost confidence in him. A dog does about 95 percent of the work in that situation, and if you can't trust him, you're gone."

His current dog is known as "Eagen" around the law school. But it doesn't answer to that name because an unthinking friend might call out a greeting to the dog in traffic.

Such a distraction can have disastrous results, and eventually ruin what is a \$20,000 to \$25,000 investment.

Tentatively, maritime law is among Darby's career goals. He decided to enter law school because "one of the things I've always wanted to know is how to answer questions legally," he says.

But his schooling might not be over when he gets his degree. He says he might then pursue an interest in computer science.

"From day one, I've always been motivated to do these kinds of things," says Darby. "Really, the only problem with being blind is not being able to see."

**Story by Sean Meyers
Photos by Bob Baker**

The father of three children, two of whom share his West Eugene apartment, Darby has worked in professions ranging from janitor to artist's model.

A strong advocate of handicapped and minority rights, he has been involved with such organizations as the Oregon Council for the Blind, Oregon Architectural Barriers Council, Campus Planning Committee, Eugene Human Rights Council, Lane County Affirmative Action Council to the Commissioners,

VISTA Volunteer Review Board and as a director of ALERT.

Dealing with sudden blindness didn't come easily for Darby.

"In March of 1965, my eyesight really hit the cellar," says Darby. "At the time, I had the lead part in a three-act play. I couldn't read it, and I finally became so frustrated I went up to the director and said 'I can't learn this.' She asked me why I couldn't, and I said 'because I can't read it.' She said 'yes, but

why can't you learn it?'"

"I did learn it, and the play was a great success," says Darby. "I said to myself, 'the sky's the limit from now on.'"

That philosophy and a cane got Darby around well enough until 1974, when he was struck by a car.



This is the first year of law school for Robert Darby and his Seeing Eye dog "Eagen," seated in front of the University law school in the top photo. Above, the pair search for texts in the law school library, then Darby chats with a friend while "Eagen" manages a brief nap.

