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Hadley Presents

Finding the Funny After Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, IT professional and standup comic Todd Blenkhorn joins us to share his story. Welcome to the show, Todd.

Todd Blenkhorn: Thanks for having me.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. It's so great to have you here. And it's interesting, I'll just say that. It's interesting how you ended up on the show with us. I feel like everybody is connected. We interviewed New York Times columnist Frank Bruni a while back. You had communicated with him as well and you ended up in his current book, which is really pretty cool. That's how we found out about you. And so, we figured why not? Let's have you on the show. Why don't we start by just having you tell us a bit about yourself and what you do for your day job, and then maybe what you do outside that?

Todd Blenkhorn: Sure. My name's Todd Blenkhorn. I live in Toronto. I'm 45 years old. I work for the CNIB, and my title is Lead Enterprise Application and Accessibility Support. Basically, I support our Salesforce system and some accessibility stuff with outside vendors and internal systems. And then on the side, I'm a standup comedian.

Ricky Enger: Nice. I can't wait to hear more about that. But before we do that, I was just thinking it's really an interesting thing that when people in the blind and low vision communities start connecting with each other, there's this icebreaker and it's like, "Hey, what's your eye condition?" And then, "Oh, I have that.” Or, “My friend has that." But I think for you, it's a rarity what you have. Can you tell us what your eye condition is and how you got diagnosed and that kind of thing?

Todd Blenkhorn: I have optic neuropathy. Sometimes called ischemic optic neuropathy. I don't really know the difference. Which is the same thing that Frank Bruni has, which is how I got in touch with him. Yeah. So, it's a bit unusual. It's usually a condition that people get hit with in their mid-fifties or sixties where they'll have one or two episodes where they lose sight in one eye and then possibly the second eye. Usually in the central vision, but mine’s different. Mine started when I was eight. I've had maybe 20 attacks. So, I still have a little bit of vision left in my left eye. They basically don't know why I have this or what causes it, but it's really weird cause it happens seasonally in the spring or fall. So, they don't know what causes it or what the underlying condition is, just that I have optic neuropathy.

Ricky Enger: And so, I guess if they don't know what causes it or what can bring on an attack and that kind of thing, they probably didn't know what your vision loss progression was going to look like either. So, when you were diagnosed as a child, did they tell you at the time, "Oh hey, this is it. And you probably won't lose any more vision" or how much did you know at that point about what was going to happen?

Todd Blenkhorn: They really didn't know because they couldn't diagnose it for years. Like I said, I was eight years old, and it was sudden vision loss. I woke up one morning and I couldn't see out of my right eye, almost all of my right eye. When we went to the doctor, they did MRIs and CAT scans and stuff, but they'd warned my parents that there was a good chance it was a brain tumor. Which is awful but it ended up being a good thing because it put things in perspective when it turned out to be just vision loss, right? So it was, yeah it was sudden like that. And it took them a long time. They diagnosed a whole bunch of different things. And so, my parents were researching something called Leber's disease. It sounded horrible. And it turned out not to be that. So, we had a few scares, but it's just one of those things that they can't really explain.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And so, you were never sure, I guess even from day to day, what was going to happen next, how much vision you were going to have, but was it then pretty gradual as it progressed? Or did you have major thing after major thing?

Todd Blenkhorn: At the beginning, it was major when I had more to lose, I guess. Like my right eye went almost all at once. And a year later I lost the rest of my right eye and the bottom half of my left eye. And then the attacks got smaller and smaller. Because there's not that much there. And they were never sure. I was part of a surgical trial at the University of Kentucky where they actually went in behind my eye and they said that everything back there was really big. So, I didn't know if that caused it, or I don't know. Been told a million things by a million doctors. And I think basically no one really knows.

Ricky Enger: Right. So, things did progress. And at some point, you actually began traveling with a cane and then after that, you transitioned to a guide dog. How did all of those transitions come about? Did somebody have to convince you, "Hey, look you're not traveling safely. You got to do this." Or was it more a decision that you made yourself based on things that happened or how did all that come about?

Todd Blenkhorn: Well, I was always really resistant to using a cane, which I don't think is uncommon. But when I had kids, so when my youngest son was born, I had another attack when he was eight months old. And at that point I knew, I couldn't travel safely. I couldn't take my kids out safely. They were a baby and three years old. And obviously, at that point, it's you got to suck it up and got to be safe for them, right. So, I started with that and then I'd been using a cane for a while. My family and everything had always encouraged me to get a dog. So, I looked into it, and it seemed like a good fit. So, I got one and the independence was just, I really like it. It took me a long time to get used to having a dog, but it still has challenges, but I like it a lot better than a cane.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. I think that's really common for a lot of people. And especially for people who maybe still have some vision, there's always that feeling of, it's hard to trust the dog because I can see just enough to get in trouble. And I think I know what I'm doing, but I really don't. Did you ever have any instances like that or were you pretty much like, "Okay, I'm all in now."

Todd Blenkhorn: No, that's kind of the hardest thing is if you can see a bit, like I can, it's almost unconscious, right? You kind of override the dog when he is trying to do something and the dog's always right. Right? If he tries to go one way and I correct him and then I trip over something, and you start to realize. "Yeah, maybe he's right." So, it's a trust thing, but it takes a while.

Ricky Enger: So, given that you have experienced a gradual shift in vision loss, I guess. And you've had some periods where, "Oh, it's gradual and then some where you lose a lot." But you had, I guess the baseline, which is you appeared to be fully sighted. And then you had a period where you've lost some vision, but maybe you're not traveling with any mobility device. And then you are traveling with one, but you still have some vision and that gradually decreases. And I think going through that, you've had a lot of chance to observe just how people behave towards you. So, what kinds of things did you notice from say, I guess your baseline, everybody thinks you're sighted to then what started to change as your vision did?

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah. It's funny. Both situations are difficult, right? Like when I was walking around without a cane and didn't seem to be visually impaired, I had very little peripheral vision. So, I'd walk into people or trip over stuff or just do kind of dumb things or I was young, didn't think anything was wrong with me. If I bump into somebody, then I've had people get mad at me or whatever, or I've knocked stuff off over and just kind of dumb, one time when I was a teenager back when you could smoke everywhere. I was at the movies, and we were on the balcony on a mezzanine, and I tripped over an ashtray, and I knocked it.

Ricky Enger: Oh no.

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah. I went over the railing onto that construction stand below. So, I mean, stuff like that, I don't look like I'm blind and I just do something like that. So that's hard, but it's different when you start using a cane, everyone can see you’re blind and it's, that's hard too, right. Because then you do get treated differently. People talk to you differently. Or people talk to my wife instead of me, or I don't know. I've had people try and give me directions when I’m in the middle of Young Street in Toronto, which is a six-lane, super busy street. And someone will talk to me in the middle of the road. I don't know, people mean well, but-

Ricky Enger: And you wonder how do they know where you, how do you know where I'm going? I don't think-

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah. And I'm in the middle of traffic. Just let me go, it's fine.

Ricky Enger: And I think you do have to laugh at things like that because otherwise it can really start to feel overwhelming. So, humor really is important for all of us. It's good that we can laugh at ourselves. It's good that we can laugh with people and so on. And so, I guess we all do that to some degree, but you actually took it a step further and you decided, "Hey, you know what, I'm pretty funny. And I'm going to do standup." How did that come about? First of all, how did you have, I think that takes a lot of courage to do that. And then how did you decide, "Okay, this is the kind of material I'm going to focus on."

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah. I've always loved standup from when I was a little kid, when I grew up, we didn't have air conditioning in the house. So, in the summer, my brother and I would sleep in our basement on the floor, and we'd watch An Evening at the Improv back then. So, I remember the very first time I saw Norm McDonald, he was my comedy hero. Sometimes my brother and I would sneak out, sneak up and watch SNL. So, I've always liked it. And I've always thought I wanted to try it, but I never kind of had the, I never had the guts to do it. But then when I got to the point where I lost all my sight. We're in a different city from where I grew up and I thought, "Well, what the hell?" I'm in my forties now I might as well just give it a shot. If I don't do it now, I'll always regret it. So, I took a class, and it went really well. So, I stuck with it.

Ricky Enger: Wow, okay. So, there was a class that you were able to take that talks about, what kinds of things did you learn in that? Like how to compose a joke that wouldn't be too long or too short or whatever, or maybe how do you behave on stage? What did they cover?

Todd Blenkhorn: The biggest thing is editing. So, I took a course at Second City in Toronto and got to do a performance at the John Candy theater, which is pretty amazing. But yeah, that's basically, it's just classes with just people who haven't done this before and a professional comedian. And the biggest thing is they can't teach you how to be funny, obviously, but editing, everyone tries to write these really long storytelling jokes when they start, everyone does it. Every single person I've met, and you can't do it for years, it takes a long time to get to that point. Oh, that's basically the biggest thing they do is teach you how to take an idea and get the funny part out of it and make it short and kind of punchy.

[Clip from Todd’s stand-up]

Todd Blenkhorn: So, I do call myself blind or Todd sometimes. Depends on the circumstances. If I'm in a meeting, going into a conference call at work, I don't say "I'm blind.” I say, “It's Todd." Obviously, I am super charismatic, so everybody knows the word right. To be honest, I'm not sure if I can call myself blind. They change these terminologies all the time. So, calling myself blind, I might be oppressing myself, right. To start a hashtag or some sort of walk.

What? We are in Canada, we're lucky to get great healthcare. The eye doctors are great here. He says, "I've seen this a lot. We know exactly what to do. Here's this metal pole. Tap it in front of yourself. And we'll see you in a year." [laughter fades out]

Ricky Enger: I guess you have a lot of material to pull from your daily life. I feel we can all, anybody with vision loss has at least one story where something happened that was just completely ridiculous. And goes into your archives of things that you're like, "You wouldn't believe what this person said or did" or whatever. Do you have one that really stands out for you? Just a story that is super funny or that you had to laugh at because it was so ridiculous.

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah, for sure. And you're right. I feel having vision laughs. I feel it's almost a superpower when it comes to this because we do all have those stories. The one I always think of that I think is funny is... I used to work at a hospital. I did the data and reporting and stuff in the surgical department. So, I worked with all these heads of service, all these surgeons. And one time after a meeting, I was walking out of the hospital with the chief of neurosurgery, a brain surgeon. And I had my cane, and we were walking out the door and it was raining out and he said, "Oh, it's really raining, Todd. I hope you're not parked too far."

Ricky Enger: [laughing] And what did you say?

Todd Blenkhorn: [laughing] I'm not driving, it's a brain surgeon. I don't know. Stuff like that. It's just people don't, people aren't used to being around blind people. Right. So, I don't know, that's probably perfect, but it's funny.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And people just don't know what to say. And sometimes they will be really afraid to say anything and afraid to say the wrong thing. Or sometimes they just think, "Well, I will just open my mouth and let's see what comes out." So yeah, we get lots of funny stuff. But it's not always about the laughs, I guess. I mean, as cool as it is to be able to laugh at ourselves and take things a little less seriously. There are some things about vision loss that are hard to talk about and they are serious. I feel when we make jokes, they are a way to talk about the important things in a safe way. But sometimes you do have to go a little deeper and talk about the serious stuff. Do you think there are things about vision loss that really don't get a lot of attention and should?

Todd Blenkhorn: Oh, for sure. And you're right. I think that one of the reasons I started this was because there is, when there's something that's painful and you can have fun with that sometimes. I think the thing we don't talk about enough and it might not be everybody, but with my vision loss being so gradual, we never really talked about anxiety and mental health challenges around that. It's not part of primary care and it probably should be. I know with myself, I started having panic attacks when I had kids. My son, the first one I had, we were at a playground and my wife had my younger son at a different part. He was just a baby. And my three-year-old son at the time fell and knocked the wind out of himself. So, he was hurt, and he was scared, and he was 10 feet in front of me and I didn't know he was there. So, I mean, stuff like that, you wouldn't even think of a situation like that. But it caused a panic attack and I've had panic attacks ever since then. So, I think the mental health aspect of it maybe isn't talked about enough and it's kind of easy to think, "Well, I'm doing fine with this." You're probably not.

Ricky Enger: And are there things that have helped you? Knowing that you have panic attacks now, are there things that have helped you, in addition to just being able to laugh at things? Are there things that you do for either relaxation or things that, connecting with other people that have helped anything like that?

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah, I would say. I'm lucky that my wife is incredibly supportive. My kids are just normal, so that’s really good. I've done counseling about it, which is another issue I think that isn't recognized, is even getting counseling or mental health support. I've been to a few counselors who've not known how to help me because they don't know how to deal with someone who has a disability that's progressing. But you think that would be an important thing for some, for counselors to know, but.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And how much of a challenge is that when you are reaching out for help and yet you're having to educate that mental health professional about how to deal with someone with a disability, even though you are overwhelmed yourself.

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah. It makes it really difficult. So, I don't know if there is, if there's something that should be maybe dealt with, but.

Ricky Enger: So, when, when is your next standup? Are you doing tours? How are you approaching that?

Todd Blenkhorn: I've been really lucky actually. I've been getting a good reception. So, there's a bunch of people who put on shows in Toronto that have been inviting me on. I'm doing actually a whole bunch, probably seven or eight in the next few weeks. I'm doing a Star Wars theme one next week. That'll be interesting on May the fourth. So, we'll see how that goes.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. Well, May the fourth be with you?

Todd Blenkhorn: That's right.

Ricky Enger: That's fantastic. If people want to either know more about what's going on in your world or eventually catch maybe some comedy clips, is there a place that they can go to check that out?

Todd Blenkhorn: Yeah, sure. Just my name, Todd Blenkhorn, B-L-E-N-K-H-O-R-N on YouTube or Facebook or Instagram.

Ricky Enger: Fantastic. Well, this has been super fun and certainly illuminating and I admire you for what you're doing in terms of actually getting out there and saying, "Hey, I've always wanted to do standup, so what's the harm in it?" And I think that's amazing. Anything else you want to leave us with before we wrap up?

Todd Blenkhorn: Nice. I appreciate you having me on here, it's been a lot of fun.

[Clip from Todd’s stand-up]

Todd Blenkhorn: So, I actually ended up getting a guide dog. And people are crazy with dogs, but they are out of their minds when it comes to guide dogs, I don’t get it.

I was honestly, this isn’t a joke, I was sitting in a coffee shop with my guide dog and a person came over and said, “Can I give your dog a cheese danish?” And I didn’t even know how to answer that. He’s already had a cheese Danish. So, he’s doing Keto, he can’t have carbs. That’s the stupidest question in the world.

Everyone knows the rules around guide dogs, you just don’t acknowledge them, act like they don’t exist. Every day someone will pet my dog, and they always say the same thing, “I know I’m not supposed to, I can’t help it.” So, what I like to do is when they bend down to pet my dog, I punch them as hard as I can. Which I know I’m not supposed to do, but I just can’t help it.

[laughter fades out]

Ricky Enger: It's been great. Thank you so much, Todd.

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