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IT BE A
TOOTH?**



Virginia A. Jacko



WHAT LOSING MY SIGHT TAUGHT ME ABOUT VISION

BY VIRGINIA A. JACKO

When I was an executive at Purdue University, my world was defined by budgets, spreadsheets, strategic planning, and the high-pressure, public-facing nature of university leadership. I was a leader who navigated complex systems with ease. But when I lost my sight toward the end of my 22 year career, those systems collapsed.

Suddenly, the woman who could manage departmental and college budgets couldn't safely cross busy intersections or pour a cup of coffee without the fear of spilling the coffee or even scalding her hands.

I found myself in a terrifying paradox. I had a lifetime of professional wisdom, but I was needing to learn the most basic building blocks of daily living from scratch.

My journey toward independence didn't begin with a medical miracle. It began when I became a student again. I sought out vocational rehabilitation at Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and it was there that I learned the most important lesson of my life: Independence isn't about "seeing," it's about skills.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE "INVISIBLE" WORLD

The hardest part of losing my sight wasn't people and things becoming invisible. It was the loss of incidental learning. Sighted people absorb the world effortlessly. They see a sign and know a store is open. They see a curb and know they should step down.

When I lost that, I realized how much of my confidence was tied to visual cues. Young children with a visual impairment don't have the memory of those cues to fall back on. This is why I am so passionate about early intervention. If I struggled to adapt as an adult with a fully formed brain, imagine the mountain a child must climb to understand a world they cannot see.

LESSONS FOR THE PATH AHEAD

Through my own rehabilitation and my eventual transition to becoming the first fully blind President and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, I have identified three pillars that I believe every family must embrace to help their child thrive:

Be the Narrator: When I first lost my sight, silence was my enemy. I encourage parents to "talk, talk, and talk some more." When you're driving, say "We are turning left now. We are passing Grandma's house. Remember, it's right next to the bakery where we get your favorite treats and close to your doctor's office." You are helping

your child build a mental map, turning a void into a structured environment.

Bridge the Gap with Touch: A sighted child learns what a grocery store is by looking at the shelves. A visually impaired child needs intentional learning. They need to touch the cold glass of the freezer aisle and feel the skin of an orange. We must bridge the gap between the child's hands and the world.

The Power of Specialized Tools: I had to learn Braille and assistive technology, and it was like learning a foreign language late in life. If we introduce Braille, orientation and mobility training, and social-emotional skills to children early, these tools can become as natural to them as breathing.

A LIFELONG GIFT

My transition from a Purdue executive to a blind CEO wasn't a move backward. It was a move toward a different kind of vision. I encountered moments of deep frustration, but knew each "failure" was just a data point in my rehabilitation.

To the parents navigating this today: your child's potential is not limited by vision, but it is vastly expanded by skills. We often think of rehabilitation as something you do after a crisis, but for a child, it is the foundational gift.

By starting early and focusing on intentional learning, we ensure that children with visual impairment don't have to spend their adulthood catching up. They can spend it leading. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Virginia A. Jacko is the President and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, where she provides equitable access to education, blindness prevention programs, and vision rehabilitation training to nearly 30,000 program participants annually, from blind babies to low vision seniors and their families. She attributes her highly active mobility to her highly trained guide dogs provided by Guiding Eyes for the Blind, and recently received the 2026 Children's Week Florida Impact Advocate Award for her dedication to children and families across Florida.

STEADY GUIDANCE:

The author and her seeing eye dog; "By starting early and focusing on intentional learning, we ensure that children with visual impairment don't have to spend their adulthood catching up."