FEATURE: 'Abundant light'

'Helping the blind see differently'

Anchor Center for Blind Children opens a window for the visually impaired

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There is a reference in the Talmud to a person without sight as a *sagi nahor*, one "of abundant light."

Among the varying interpretations of its meaning is the idea that although the eyes of the blind do not "see," the blind person sees a great deal that is invisible to the rest of us.

A visit to Denver's Anchor Center for Blind Children makes that very point — and many others — very powerfully.

One approaches the Anchor Center's pleasant, modern facility with a measure of emotional reservation. The blind and visually impaired students taught and cared for here are five years old and under. They are tiny, innocent beings, compelled to carry physical and emotional burdens that would overwhelm many people far older than they.

How many handkerchiefs will such a visit demand?

Indeed, touching moments arise almost immediately.

A slight boy with thick glasses, maybe four years old, slightly miscalculates the position of a doorframe as he waits for his mother to take him home. With an audible thud, he goes face first into the unyielding frame.

A wisp of a girl, even younger, hears the voice of a visitor, one that she does not recognize. A look at her eyes makes it clear that she cannot see very well, or perhaps not at all. She approaches the voice she hears, her tiny arm raised in the air like an antenna.

The scenes tug at the heart, soliciting pity, but one realizes very quickly that pity is misplaced at the Anchor Center.

The boy who bumps into the doorframe immediately retreats, rubs the part of his face that made contact, and manages a smile. He takes a step to the side and passes perfectly through the doorway — another lesson learned.

The girl who raised her arm toward the visitor gets her message across. The visitor makes hand contact, exactly what she was seeking through a form of tactile communication she has already developed and is still perfecting. Her smile is as radiant as the sun.

When morning classes let out, the halls are immediately filled with tots and toddlers, some of them using walker-like devices, others white canes, others guiding themselves by hand along the hallways, some making their own way tentatively.

They are like young children in any school anywhere when released from the classroom — raucous, happy, full of life.

'How many handkerchiefs will this visit demand?'

They are also, of course, unlike most other children. Not one of them, nor their instructors, would minimize the obstacles that puts before them or the challenges those disabilities pose.

But the Anchor Center is far from a pity party. It's a school, a place to learn, and a place where kids can be kids.

That means lots and lots of light.

Potential has been the mantra and underlying theme of the Anchor Center since it was founded in 1982 by Delta Gamma alumnae, located originally in the historic Clayton Campus and for the past decade in its own facility in Stapleton.

"Our tagline is 'seeing life differently,'" says Frances Owens, community relations manager.

"It's showing a kid that he or she may have a visual impairment and perhaps other disabilities, but we're going to give them the opportunities to do everything they can, like any other child."

Starting very early in life, in many cases from infancy, the 400 or so children who attend the Anchor Center are given the basic skills to prepare them for life in a world that is not necessarily geared for the visually impaired — everything from eating and pre-literacy training to mobility and language.

CONFIDENCE

Giovanni and Griffin with their canes.

Bob Weinberg

The goal is that by the time the children are of preschool or kindergarten age, they will be fully prepared to enter mainstream schools and function thereafter at age-appropriate levels.

That includes the things that all five-year-olds study

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Lessons in the basics, and courage

Imparting a sense of emotional security; learning to advocate for themselves

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at that age — the fundamentals of reading, writing and arithmetic — but also skills of unique importance to the visually impaired, such as navigating a school hallway, crossing a street or boarding a school bus.

Just as important is helping a visually impaired or blind child function in his or her home environment, since the disability "not only affects the child," Owens says, "it affects the parents and the siblings.

"When they come here we treat the whole family. We have programs and opportunities for the parents. We have sibling classes.

"When parents come in, especially really young parents or single moms in particular, they are frightened of their future. They worry: 'What am I going to do? How am I going to take care of this child for an entire life? How do I make sure my child is not bullied? How do I make sure my child is taken care of? How do I pay for medical expenses?'"

In that sense, courage might rank second to potential as the most important lesson at the Anchor Center — giving the visually impaired students the courage to enter mainstream society and their parents the courage to be able to help them meet that challenge.

"We want them to live their lives to their best ability," Anchor Center executive director Heather Cameron says of her students, "and even more important, for their parents to feel confident raising a child who is blind or visually impaired. We want parents and children to leave with confidence."

Virtually everything at the Anchor Center is geared toward easing a child's transition into the mainstream world.

Tiled rails along the hallways are notched in diminishing sizes, which helps students find classrooms. Floor lights and the careful use of contrasting colors provide beacons for children with limited vision. Differing floor surfaces help students know which part of the school they're in. Individual "cubbies," or storage spaces, have tactile objects — pieces of fabric or plastic — that help children find their own spot.

A beautiful garden behind the school also uses different paving materials —- concrete, stone and brick — to familiarize students, by touch and sound, with the various surfaces they will encounter in the real world.

Some paving stones are embossed with Braille letters, giving them an early lesson in that form of communication.

A curved "cane lane" trains them how to use their canes to find curbs and crossings on streets.

Erin Lovely, Anchor's horticulture expert, explains how the children help grow, care for and eventually harvest a vegetable and flower garden in an outdoors environment, giving them valuable lessons on temperature, the elements, seasons and countless other clues about an environment they can hear, smell and touch but not see or see only in a limited way.

"Our idea," says speech and language pathologist Zoe Morgese, "is to have the materials and opportunities for kids to use the visual abilities they do have to the best degree that they can.

'What am I going to do? How am I going to take care of this child for an entire life?

A more sophisticated opportunity would be crossing the street at the light

"They might understand that light in a certain area might mean a doorway or a window, for example."

Instruction is highly focused on the practical and is holistic in application, Morgese explains.

"The teachers who have orientation and mobility certification talk about moving safely through the environment. A more sophisticated opportunity would be crossing the street at the light. We go shopping and take the kids, but we're always with them. We'll teach them about getting on a bus. Of course, later they'll do that independently.

"We get them canes very early. The canes are introduced as soon as they're walking safely on level surfaces."

Among the many things sighted people take for granted is using stairs, something the visually impaired have to work hard to master.

"There are so many kinds of stairs," Morgese says. "There are stairs with landings, without landings, curved ones, wide ones, narrow ones."

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Photographer shares students' vantage point

Bob Weinberg

The photographs for this feature were taken by Bob Weinberg, the award-winning photographer for the **IJN** from the late 1980s into the early years of this century. Weinberg, who has spent much of his life as a professional photographer, was compelled to retire from the profession because of a progressive visual impairment. He works today at Buckley Air Force Base for Envision Xpress, a military equipment supplier.

Using a digital camera with "point and shoot" capabilities and largely relying on his photographic instincts, Weinberg considers this assignment something of a "reunion tour" with the **IJN**. His interest in the Anchor Center for Blind Children and its work is self-evident.

World mourns passing of Peres

Former prime minister, president and just about everything else

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ing three more close elections with Likud. The two parties formed a unity government following the 1984 elections and Peres served as prime minister from 1984 to 1986, then foreign minister under Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir from 1986 to 1988.

As foreign minister in 1987, Peres conducted secret negotiations with King Hussein of Jordan for Israel to withdraw from the West Bank as part of an Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty. But Shamir rejected the proposed agreement, and the following year Jordan unilaterally relinquished its claim to the West Bank.

After the Alignment lost the 1988 elections, Peres again joined a Likud-led government as finance minister, but tried to overthrow the government two years later. In what became known as the Dirty Trick, Peres assembled an Alignment-led coalition with leftist and *haredi* Orthodox parties, only to see it fall apart after he received a mandate to form a governing coalition.

He lost his party's chairmanship to Rabin in 1992, and again became foreign minister when the party, now renamed Labor, won elections that year.

'Israel's role in the Middle East should be to contribute to a great sustained regional revival'

Under Rabin, Peres was the architect of the Oslo Accords, which gave the Palestinians autonomy in parts of the West Bank and Gaza. He shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat.

"Israel's role in the Middle East should be to contribute to a great, sustained regional revival," Peres said upon accepting the prize. "A Middle East without wars, without enemies, without ballistic missiles, without nuclear warheads."

After Rabin was assassinated in 1995, Peres became acting prime minister, but lost the post again in a close race with Likud's Netanyahu. Following his defeat in '96, he founded the Peres Center for Peace, which runs programs aimed at regional reconciliation.

Peres remained in the Labor Party through 2005, twice regaining the chairmanship and serving another stint as foreign minister under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. In 2006, following the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, Peres joined Sharon's new centrist Kadima party.

The next year he won a race for Israel's largely ceremonial presidency. As president, Peres stayed largely above the political fray, though he conducted secret negotiations with PA President Mahmoud Abbas in 2011, culminating in a peace deal that Netanyahu's government rejected. After leaving the presidency, Peres remained largely silent on politics.

Peres frequently traveled internationally as president, focusing his speeches and activism on encouraging Middle East peace and touting Israel's technological achievements.

In 2012, President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the America's highest civilian honor. Peres' annual Presidential Conference brought together leaders in politics, science and culture. He finished his presidential term in 2014.

He is survived by three children, Tsvia Walden, Yoni Peres and Chemi Peres, eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

LAST OF ISRAEL'S FOUNDERS

Shimon Peres, left, walking with David Ben-Gurion, center, in Kibbutz Sde Boker, Israel, Jan. 3, 1969. Government Press Office

Anchor Center involves the whole family

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The Anchor Center's approach to intellectual development is similar to that of many preschools, although "maybe we do things a little more often," Morgese says.

"A school might have a unit that changes every two or three weeks; we'll go five or six weeks, and have opportunities to do things more than once.

"One of my jobs is to help families learn to use their language a little differently. Saying 'go get that thing over there' is not very helpful with these kids."

Another crucial task at the school: Imparting to the children a sense of emotional security.

"All kids need that," Morgese says, "and I love that this program starts at infancy. They always talk about eye contact between child and parent, where the child gazes back at you and you just melt into a big puddle. Here, either they're not able to make eye contact or they look different.

"We try really hard with infants and toddlers to show families that their kids are communicating, no matter what. Some of the kids are a little hesitant to touch things, so sometimes you'll see them reaching out with their feet to find their moms and dads."

Touch — like the little girl mentioned above — can be a primary communication technique for visually impaired children and it's important to help them develop that.

"It's also important to teach parents how to read their kids' cues," Morgese says. "It's amazing what kids communicate from the get-go."

It's just as important to teach the parents the unique communication skills that they'll need. A touch on a child's diaper can come to mean it's time to change. Placing a spoon into a child's hand can mean it's time to eat.

"This is language," Morgese says. "This is saying, 'I understand that something is going to happen because my mom gave me that spoon.' Keys are a big thing. That means we're going to go somewhere.

"Some of the kids communicate with tactile systems, some are verbal, some use body cues."

For the visually impaired, Anchor's teachers say, navigating the world means a lot more than crossing streets and finding one's way through a building.

One of the telltale signs of "an Anchor child," Morgese says, is a concept the school calls "efficacy."

"We really hope that the children and their families, as much as they're able, learn to advocate for themselves."

The Anchor Center itself shoulders some of that responsibility. It routinely sends its experts to the public or private schools their graduates eventually attend to help prepare teachers for their new visually impaired students.

Eventually, the Anchor children and their parents will take charge of that important task themselves.

"It could be something as small as saying, 'This is way too bright for me, could you please pull down the blinds?' in a classroom. Or, 'Can I sit closer to you,' or for parents to say, 'Make sure our child's back is to the bright light,'" Morgese says.

"When that happens the parents are realizing that they have to help educate everybody that their child is going to come in contact with."

It costs the Anchor Center about $30,000 per year for each student it teaches. Almost entirely privately funded, the school sets tuition on a sliding scale with scholarships available for families unable to pay the full rate. Information: 303-377-9732.

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Students Austin, Owen and Giovanni have fun with music therapist Mollie in Anchor's motor room.