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Seeing Things Through

Beth Finke

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I was twenty-five years old and on my honeymoon when the spots first showed up.

“Retinopathy,” the eye specialist told us when we arrived home.

During my months in the hospital for eye surgeries, a social worker suggested I keep a journal. Good idea. Only one problem: my eyes were patched shut. My husband Mike came to the rescue. He bought me a cassette recorder. I recorded dozens of tapes, full of daily thoughts and impressions. If nothing else, keeping an audio journal helped fill my days.

Eye surgeries didn’t work. The spots grew. A year later, I was blind.

I was the assistant director of a university’s study-abroad program, but I lost my job when I lost

my sight. The Americans with Disabilities Act wouldn’t be passed until four years later, in 1990.

Mike arranged a low-interest loan from a friend and bought me a very expensive Christmas present that year: a talking computer. Revolutionary technology combined special screen navigation software with a speech synthesizer to parrot the letters I typed. I could hear—and fix—typos as I went along, and when I was finished, I could check grammar and spelling errors by manipulating the keys to make the synthesizer read a page of type by character, word, line, or paragraph.

Transcribing my hospital cassettes onto my new computer turned out to be an ideal way to learn word processing. Writing new entries provided me with cheap therapy, and, boy, did I need it! I had already

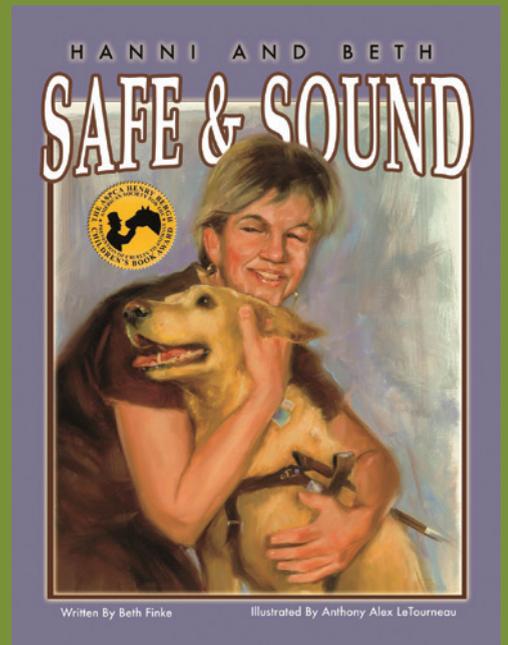
tried finding inspiration from audio books by blind authors, but most of them wrote about finding God or performing amazing feats, like sailing across the Atlantic alone or climbing Mt. Everest. Until then I wasn’t thinking in terms of writing a memoir. But maybe the world was ready for a book by an unathletic pagan who’d gone blind. Only one way to find out: start writing it.

It took me three years to write my memoir, ten years to find someone to publish it. *Long Time, No See* was published by University of Illinois Press in 2003. My first essay—about how I choose my wardrobe and why it’s important to me—aired on NPR that year, too.

Mike helped me set up bethfinke.com—a website easily accessible by sighted and nonsighted readers. After *Long Time, No See* was published,



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coordinators of conferences, book fairs, schools, libraries, and writing workshops began inviting me to do presentations. No matter where I spoke, or what the occasion, when it came to the Q&A part of my book presentations, nearly every question was about one thing: my Seeing Eye dog Hanni.

I may have been born at night, but it wasn't last night. I knew my next book should be about dogs. Not a memoir, though—and not just any dog—a picture book for young children about a Seeing Eye dog who doesn't always like his job.

Other dogs get to play Frisbee in the park, but day after day, this dog has

to follow commands and lead a blind woman around. She doesn't always go where he wants to go, either. And speaking of *going*...other dogs get to lift their legs on any tree they want, but this dog has to wait until his human companion takes his harness off and gives him permission.

The book would be a sequel of sorts: *Long Time, No Pee*.

The rejections came quickly. Most arrived via postcard, which meant poor Mike had to read them aloud to me. Months passed. As more magazines and newspapers began accepting stories online, I was able to pitch my ideas using my talking computer. I wrote articles for the *Chicago Tribune* and *Dog Fancy* magazine and got a gig teaching weekly memoir-writing classes for senior citizens. I couldn't read essays if they were printed out, so writers who wanted edits and suggestions had to learn to e-mail their essays to me. "If I could learn to use e-mail," I'd tell them, "so can you!"

I'd almost forgotten about *Long Time, No Pee* when a note from Blue Marlin Publications popped up in my inbox. Francine Rich, the publisher there, liked my writing. "But the story needs to be about *you* and *your* Seeing Eye dog," her message insisted. "The kids will be meeting you and Hanni during school visits, so the book has to be about *you*."

I agreed to rewrite the manuscript, but not in the first person. "How about I write it from Hanni's point of view?" Francine loved the idea, and after months of sending rough drafts back and forth, we came up with a manuscript—and a new title—we both liked: *Hanni and Beth: Safe & Sound*.

Now to find an illustrator. "Usually I involve authors in the decision about illustrators," Francine told me. "But you can't see. Is there a way we can involve you?" By then, Mike had been describing things to me for twenty years, and we felt confident he could describe sample drawings to me.

After the artists' bids came in, Mike, Francine and I all agreed Anthony Alex LeTourneau should do the illustrations. We live in Chicago, and Tony lives on a hobby farm hundreds of miles away in Minnesota, and to make the illustrations as authentic as possible, he needed to meet Hanni and me. I arranged for a roundtrip bus ticket from Chicago, and Hanni and I took a ten-hour bus ride to Minneapolis. Tony met with us at a coffee shop halfway between the Twin Cities and his farmhouse. After spending the day drawing us, photographing us, and observing us walking around outside, he exclaimed, "People here think we're from Hollywood!"

In some ways, they were right. In its first year of publication, *Hanni and Beth: Safe & Sound* received the prestigious ASPCA Henry Bergh Children's Book Award. When the ASPCA flew Hanni and me to California to receive our award at the ALA Annual Conference that year, we felt like stars.

Beth Finke is the author of the award-winning memoir *Long Time, No See* (University of Illinois Press 2003) and *Hanni and Beth: Safe & Sound* (Blue Marlin Publications 2007), a winner of the ASPCA's Henry Bergh award for children's literature. Her story "One Smart Dog" was included in an anthology published by National Geographic School Publishing last year. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, Beth teaches weekly memoir-writing classes for senior citizens and works part-time at Easter Seals headquarters, moderating their blog. She is married to Mike Knezovich. They have one son, Gus, and live in Chicago with Beth's new Seeing Eye dog, Whitney. Hanni is thirteen years old now, happily retired, and living with friends.