



FIRST BLIND PHD GRADUATES FROM THE SEMINARY

MY

first encounter with Ray was via e-mail.

I knew he was completely blind so when an e-mail—written by Ray and sent by Ray—popped into my inbox, I was a bit surprised. He doesn't even let something like lack of sight keep him from typing a perfectly spelled and grammatically-correct e-mail, I thought to myself. But his typing skills aren't what set Ray apart from his peers. Ray is the first blind student to ever graduate with a doctorate from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, and, according to the Society of Biblical Literature and National Federation for the Blind, perhaps the first completely blind person to ever tackle a degree so heavily dependent upon Biblical languages including Hebrew, Greek and even Akkadian Cuneiform.

When I arrived at his home for our interview, I was warmly greeted at the door by Ray himself. In his hands were a few bright, intricate paper flowers. "I'd like to give you a piece of origami, made from my own designs," he said. I selected a small purple vase full of pink flowers surrounded by green leaves, and all carefully constructed from pieces of origami paper. I had barely spent five minutes in Ray's company yet it was quite clear to see—this man was remarkable in more ways than one.

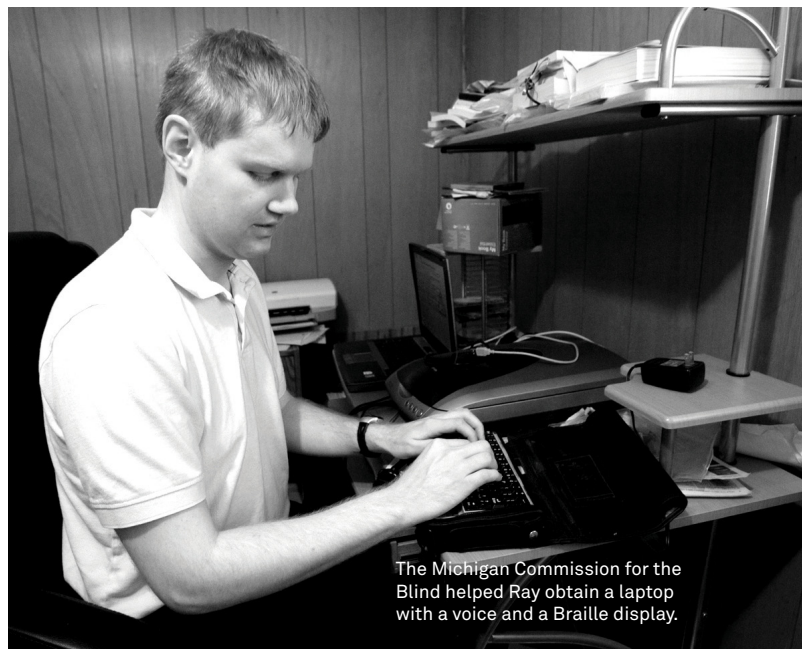
Ray McAlister was born in 1975 with a degenerative eye condition known as Peter's Anomaly. At the age of five, one eye was removed. Then, at the age of 12, his one "good" eye finally died, resulting in total blindness. That didn't prevent him from going to school, eventually graduating from a mainstream high school and earning three higher education degrees: Bachelor of Theology, Master of Divinity and PhD in Religion.

At an early age, education quickly emerged as one of Ray's passions. "When I was 3 or 4, my mother was a janitor at a school where my father was a teacher. I loved to hang out in the classroom and one teacher gave me a desk, some crayons and some paper. I liked watching the class and following the rules, so when the other kids would take their worksheets up to her desk, I would go stand in line and show the teacher the pictures I drew," he says.

Ray would go home and teach his stuffed animals everything he learned at school. During his elementary and high school years, Ray was mainstreamed: attending classes at a traditional school with the additional help of an aide. He embarked upon his pursuit of higher education at Pacific Union College where he majored in theology. Ray used a number of methods to complete his studies including hiring readers to dictate the text to him and using DOS computer software to transliterate the text, including Greek, to him. (Transliteration is a method of converting text from one writing system into another in a systematic way.)

After earning his Master of Divinity from Andrews University in 1999, Ray headed back to the West Coast to Loma Linda, Calif., feeling called to train for hospital chaplaincy. He quickly realized that this wasn't the path for him and returned to Andrews. "In the spring of the year 2000, I was impressed to begin a most exciting adventure: getting a PhD in the Hebrew Bible," says Ray. "While I would learn much useful and interesting technical information on this journey, what has been most powerful is the knowledge I've gained as my spiritual eyes were opened in so many new ways." In the fall of 2000, Ray was officially accepted into the PhD in Religion program at the Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.

"From the moment I began taking doctoral level classes, I saw God's hand of providential leading," says Ray. First, the Michigan Commission for the Blind committed to assisting and supporting his journey. He used an old DOS-based Bible software from the mid-90s, which enabled him to study the Hebrew Bible while reading English letters instead of Hebrew symbols text-to-speech



The Michigan Commission for the Blind helped Ray obtain a laptop with a voice and a Braille display.


screen readers couldn't recognize. Using scanning equipment, Ray was able to "read" English books on his computer.

But some material, like commentaries with Hebrew letters, wouldn't scan properly. "God had a way around that problem, too. In my Ezekiel and Malachi class, one of the other students and I were allowed to choose similar enough research topics so we could share sources. He would read his commentaries which he needed onto a cassette tape, and I would take notes from that for my paper," says Ray.

"God knew, though, that I would need assistance on a more constant and intense level," says Ray. "This is where Sally enters the story." They had met through their classes while studying for the Master of Divinity, but over the years, their friendship grew. In the spring of 2000, Ray became increasingly aware of his desire to have a lifelong companion.

"Without any knowledge that it would be Sally, I was impressed to make a silent faith claim before God that by Christmas of that year, I would be in a close, serious relationship with the one I would marry," recalls Ray. Two weeks before Christmas, Sally confessed her love for Ray. Having already known each other for a few years, their three-

by Keri Suarez



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month courtship and six-month engagement culminated in their marriage on Sept. 13, 2001.

Sally’s academic background proved to be a great source of support for Ray’s studies. He took a course in theological French, a class Sally had taken the previous year, so she could help him complete the required reading. Sally was given permission to sit in with Ray in Aramaic class, where she read him the quizzes and exams. During his studies of cuneiform, Sally took notecards, turned them over and created the impressions needed to represent parts of the cuneiform language. “She also gave invaluable emotional support and encouragement through these and many other stages of my path,” says Ray.

Now, as a newly-married graduate student, Ray’s mind turned to matters of earning income. In the summer of 2002, Ray was given the opportunity to teach Old Testament Survey, a four-week intensive. It was the first time he had ever taught.

Whether he was a student in the classroom, or an instructor in front of the classroom, Ray continued to find creative ways to effectively teach and lead discussions despite being blind. “Since I cannot see raised hands, I led discussions as I learned to do as an amateur radio operator. When someone wishes to speak, the person simply calls out his/

her name, and I answer that person when appropriate,” says Ray.

When the time came for Ray to learn the art of chanting the Hebrew Bible, God once again provided. With no software to display the Hebrew markings, Sally dictated the verses to Ray along with the instructions on how to sing them. This method worked, but it wasn’t ideal. Ray took to the Internet, searching for a better solution. In just a few hours, he found an Internet resource that, for a small fee, could provide him the entire Hebrew Bible in a text file that would work with his voice synthesized laptop. When the Michigan Commission for the Blind learned of Ray’s Hebrew Bible text files, and that his current laptop was getting out-of-date, they helped him obtain a laptop with a voice and a Braille display.

“Since I am blind, such a sound-based method made the Bible come alive for me in a new way, even helping me with certain subtle aspects of interpreting the text,” says Ray.

When the time came for Ray to focus heavily upon his dissertation, God’s leading and guidance continued to be there every step of the way. He selected a topic close to his heart: Blindness in Hebrew Scriptures. Ray scanned thousands upon thousands of pages into his computer, searching for and analyzing the different mentions of blindness in the Bible.

Then Ray began to enter a phase he calls “spiritual darkness in my path.” “Little seemed available for employment except the one or two classes I would teach each semester, and, eventually, those would end as times change. I began to wonder why God would call me as if onto a journey out into a wilderness where hardly anything would grow.”

It was during one of those moments when Ray was reminded of Psalm 119:105: “God’s Word is a lamp unto the feet and a light unto the path.” He was impressed to focus more heavily upon memorizing Scripture, particularly the Psalms. “Learning to sing every one of the Psalms in Hebrew was healing and enjoyable, and definitely an excellent way to strengthen my Hebrew. I found I could explore feelings expressed in the Psalms that many don’t feel comfortable

Ray has a large collection of origami creations, including many original designs. He sometimes uses the models as sermon illustrations or props for children’s stories.

sharing. I would review portions of what I’d learned every day along with other memorized passages, and would maintain some sense of spiritual order in my life.”

In April 2010, Ray defended his dissertation. “I remember counting down the days, hours, minutes, even seconds, until the moment when I could defend. Unfortunately, I had to add a few extra minutes onto the countdown because my external examiner got a flat tire driving to the campus.” Just a few short months later, Ray donned his academic regalia and, led by Sally, he marched in the processional along with the rest of the Andrews University graduating class of August 2010.

Ray may be at the end of this journey, but he is anxiously and faithfully looking ahead to what God has in store for him next. “God will provide the means to do whatever He calls you to do. Don’t be afraid to reach out for assistance, though, as sometimes God does His work through the hands, feet and eyes of those around us.” ■

Ray McAllister is pursuing an employment opportunity as the Southwest Michigan Representative for Christian Record Services, a publisher of materials for the visually impaired. He looks forward to pursuing other opportunities more directly related to ministry.

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