



By: Luke Shipley
Shipley & Swain PLLC

BEING SEEN: HOW DAREDEVIL AND OTIS STEPHENS CHANGED MY LIFE

You might be wondering what a straight, white, Baptist man is doing writing about diversity in our profession. Well, you wouldn't know it just by looking, but I'm legally blind. Oddly enough, being a blind lawyer has taught me just how important it is to be seen.

I grew up in the late '80's in very rural, northeast Tennessee. There weren't many role models for a little blind kid. In my community, being "successful" as a blind person meant that you'd find a menial job that would give you enough money so you wouldn't be a burden on your family that you still lived with, if you didn't go into assisted living. I didn't want any part of that.

All my life, I've wanted to be a lawyer. I don't know where I got the idea. There are no lawyers in my family and I never knew any personally while I was growing up. That didn't matter, though. I told anyone who would listen that I was going to be a lawyer.

Some folks (like my family) told me I could do it, but the vast majority thought it was just "precious" that the little blind kid thought he could move away one day to be a lawyer. It didn't take long before I stopped talking about what I wanted to do, because I couldn't stand another person telling me that I needed to have realistic goals and shoot for something I could actually do.

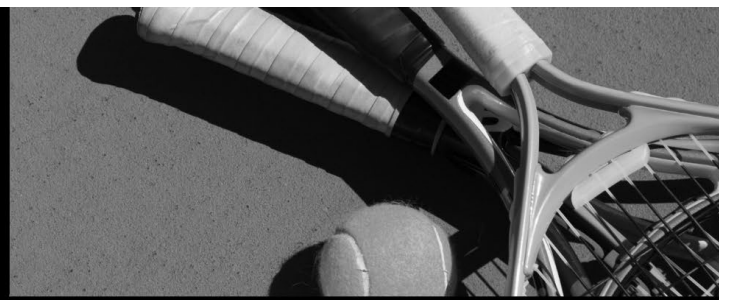
I stopped talking about it, but I didn't stop thinking it. One day, I found a Daredevil comic, the story of a crime-fighting superhero who is a blind lawyer by day. I was hooked. I squirreled away money from odd jobs and had quite the stash of Daredevil comics. It was fiction, but it also showed me that someone out there didn't think a blind lawyer was so crazy.

In high school, a guidance counselor got me to 'fess up that I wanted be a lawyer. She told me about "this professor in Knoxville who's blind and does something at the law school." Of course, she was talking about Professor Otis Stephens. I started digging for information, and I called him up and talked to him for a long time. He thought all the naysayers were ridiculous—not my aspirations.

For the first time, I found a living, breathing embodiment of what I wanted to be. My dream wasn't just a pipe dream anymore.

Today, I own my own firm with my wife. We employ people. I go to court. I write briefs. My notes are in 48-point type. I carry my white cane with me wherever I go. I want to be seen. Because, for this little blind kid, it didn't take any special program to ensure blind people are represented in the legal field to get me here. All I needed was someone to see me, and I hope one day another little blind kid sees me and keeps dreaming, too.

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REGISTRATION DEADLINE: JULY 9

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