
Blind Faith:

The story of Esther Crombag

At the age of eleven, Esther Crombag (now 37) went completely blind within less than 48 hours. Suddenly she was obliged to start a completely new quest. From her first word in Braille she progressed to graduating in law. In addition, Esther is a top sportswoman. In the spring of 2011, her book 'Blind Faith' was published. In this book, she provides a glimpse of herself and every reader can gain an insight into her personal life. Her story is about perseverance and daring to have faith. Faith in a future, in your dreams, in yourself and in people around you. Trusting others blindly.



BY ESTHER CROMBAG

At the age of 11, during a holiday in France, I went blind from one day to the next. In hospital, it became apparent that the cause was a cyst at the junction of my optic nerves. I underwent an operation, but unfortunately the world stayed dark and my sight never returned. Strangely enough, the news that I was to remain blind came as a relief. That day, a weight was taken off me. That threatening, nerve-racking feeling disappeared. I knew where I stood. I didn't need to hope any more. When my perspective, however bleak, became clear, that marked the start of a new phase of life. Clarity and knowing where you stand are then very important. From that moment on, life was turned upside down. I suddenly found myself in a new world: from a world of sight

I was now in one that was dark. At first I was afraid, sad, angry and disappointed, but I also soon realised that this was not going to help me at all. I wanted to survive, to move on and continue with my life. That I had gone blind was a fact of life. There was nothing to be done about it. It was immediately clear to me that my life could go two ways: I could sit there sadly in my armchair or grab any opportunity offered to me. I did the latter, I still do and I enjoy life to the full.

Education

I learned Braille at the Institute for the Blind in Grave. There I learned to walk with a stick and was given self-sufficiency training. In other words: I was prepared for the seeing world. I wanted to leave there after a year. These surroundings were so protective and focused on the blind that I and my parents thought that, if I stayed there any longer, I



Esther Crombag completed her secondary school education. She then graduated from the social academy before studying law at the University of Maastricht, where she graduated within four years with distinction in the field of civil and administrative law and private law. She did all of this in Braille and with a laptop with a Braille reading line. Since then she has worked at the same faculty as a university lecturer in civil and administrative law. She has also been Dutch tandem cycling champion on more than one occasion and has taken part in World Championships and European Championships. As a result she was given her own television programme on Limburg regional TV entitled "On the way to Beijing". In this, a variety of well-known sports men and women who were going to the Olympic Games in Beijing were interviewed by Esther about their sport, training schedules and ambitions. This programme was very successful. In 2009, Esther was deemed Limburg woman of the year and decided to tell her story to those interested and give lectures. She has also written down her experiences in the book: 'Blind Faith'. email: esthercrombag@hetnet.nl

would find it more difficult to maintain myself in the seeing world. That's when I returned to regular school. I carried on to complete my secondary education and attended college. It was important for me to be able to focus on a target and I wanted to study law, preferably at the University of Maastricht (UM). I succeeded and now I work as a university lecturer in constitutional and administrative law at the UM.

You first have to show faith in order to receive faith

I enjoy teaching and of course I have to trust my students, but by trusting them, I have never had any problems.

Challenges

Yet I continually look for new challenges and so I found myself in (top)sport. I was eager to cycle. But you can't cycle when you're blind, so I had to settle for tandem cycling. I trained and trained and finally became Dutch champion three times and have taken part in European and World Championships on several occasions. I just missed qualifying for the Olympic Games. At a certain point, however I felt that I really couldn't make the top level as easily as before. At first I thought: "You're getting older, Esther." I was 35 and then you start... This is what I chose to believe, but in retrospect it turned out there was another cause.

Blind Faith

'My blindness taught me that I am responsible for my own

happiness,' according to Esther. In The first place, I learned to have blind faith in my own qualities in my childhood and adolescence. But I didn't have any other choice than to place blind faith in others, fellow human beings, without whom it was impossible for me to function. Faith is the basis for progress. We can all do so much more than we think. Faith has to be earned, they often say, but according to Esther the crux is that when you show someone faith, you get it back in return. She has discovered this throughout her life. On the back of the tandem, you can only have blind faith in the person steering on the front. If you don't trust the other person, then you become cramped and you don't keep cycling. Another example was when I was shopping and didn't have enough money with me. Then I allowed the sales assistant to use my PIN to complete the transaction.

For two years, I have also worked as a speaker and I regularly hold lectures about 'Blind Faith'; I also give workshops and business training. The lectures and workshops I give also provide me with much satisfaction. I think I can be a source of inspiration for others, also for people without limitations.

The journey is at least as important as the destination; you have to enjoy both!

That's why I like to give lectures about perseverance, (blind) faith in your own abilities and a positive attitude to life. Despite the setback of becoming blind at the age of eleven, I have still managed to make something of my life. It is just a

question of setting targets and believing in them. And if you fall flat on your face occasionally... just stand up and pick up where you left off. The journey is just as important as the destination. Enjoy the trip and trust you will get there in the end. This encouraged me to write a book with the title: 'Blind Faith'.

Sarcoidosis

Professor Marjolein Drent asked me to give a lecture for chronically ill patients, primarily suffering from sarcoidosis, at a national symposium on 15 June 2011 in Maastricht on the theme: 'Living with a chronic disease'. Among the 350+ participants were many patients with sarcoidosis and their partners. I spent all day with them and occasionally heard stories that made me think: 'I'm glad I don't have that.' People said they were so tired, exhausted, and unable to do anything. That touched me and did not cheer me up. During one of the encounters with Marjolein Drent I told her that my brother was looking for a good lung specialist, because he had problems with breathlessness. I asked her whether he could see her. Of course that was possible and later I indicated that I also occasionally have problems with breathlessness and clearly perform less well on the tandem. Then I attended the lung clinic with my brother.

There's no such thing as coincidence

All the tests revealed that we both have sarcoidosis! I couldn't believe my ears. Nor could Marjolein Drent. She didn't want to tell me over the phone. I still couldn't believe it. Further tests were done and tissue taken and other doctors looked too. While Professor Marjolein Drent is often consulted by colleagues for a second opinion and advice, she now indicated she felt she needed a second opinion! But the diagnosis remained sarcoidosis. There was no avoiding it, so really... many pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Those polyps in my nose always irritating, which I had removed surgically, returned rapidly... My breathlessness and occasional extreme exhaustion. Is this coincidence? Or is it inevitable... Who shall say? One thing is certain: I am very glad I met Marjolein Drent and asked her to look at my complaints. Otherwise this was probably never discovered and I would

still walk around with all those vague complaints and would blame my age for the deterioration in my fitness.

Focus and set intermediate targets

If you really want something, then you'll succeed and failure is not an option... Those were the mottos with which I graduated with distinction in law. And that in a faculty where no blind students had ever studied. The aims you set yourself of course have to be achievable. It is better to work with intermediate targets and hence achieve your aims slowly but surely.

'...If you can dream it, you can do it...' Walt Disney

What makes someone happy in the end? The feeling, that you receive recognition and appreciation in life. You always need a focus, a target. Focus primarily on what you can do and not on what you can't do (any more). You can only get anywhere and realise your targets with a positive attitude to life. Of course everyone has an occasional dip, but you shouldn't allow them to last too long, so continue to focus on the light at the end of the tunnel, despite setbacks. Taking on the role of a victim is pointless and if it's raining today, the sun will shine again tomorrow. So my advice remains: continue to focus on things within your own reach.

I hope one day to realise my dream of becoming a judge. I also hope that, somehow, I will be able to inspire more people with my positive attitude to life and my story. At present I am busy on the lecture circuit and would like to combine this with tandem clinics, all of this in the framework of team-building, faith and cooperation. And who knows, one day a second book?

According to Erik Knippenberg, co-author of the book, Esther is someone who is really alive, enjoys life for the full 100% and always lives in the present. Esther attributes this to her blindness, which has given her an opportunity to develop as the woman she is. The determination and drive she has developed led her to grasp the opportunities she was given and to make the most of them.