

Stories

David L. Cook, OD

When I entered Pacific University College of Optometry in 1974, I had little interest in being there. Optometry would just be a way to put bread on the table until I could get on with real job: telling stories.

An English major as an undergraduate, I had wanted to be a writer not a doctor. Now in professional school, I would get up each morning at 5:00 AM, drink coffee and read fiction for an hour, then write short stories. By 9:00 AM, my real day over, I would attend classes about eyes and optics, brain cells, and bio-chemicals. I was taught that seeing was a process of a light stimulus entering the eye and triggering a chain reaction of chemical responses in the brain—kind of like a billiard ball rebounding off the cushions of a pool table, again and again.

It may have been good science, but it was not much of a story. By the end of the first year I was ready to leave.

That summer I painted houses. The work, however, was too physically exhausting to leave much energy for writing. I spend long hours being spattered with paint while the dirt from the eaves stuck to the sweat on my face. When fall arrived, my lesson learned, I returned to Pacific with a new determination to graduate. To maintain that determination, I hung a poster of a schematic eye on my otherwise barren bedroom wall. At the top of the poster, in indelible red ink, I wrote the words that would see me through the second year; “Optometry: It’s Better Than Painting Houses.”

Throughout that year, I continued getting up early to write stories before dutifully dragging myself through classes. But then in the third year, I met a man who changed my life.

Professor William Ludlam that the course on treating crossed eyes. Sure, Bill spoke about eyes and optics, brain cells, and bio-chemicals just like the professors before him, but he also did something else. He told a story.

Once upon a time, it seemed, there were two eye-care professions treating children with crossed eyes. One profession saw those crossed eyes as objects which could be rearranged by surgery. The other profession saw human beings who could be inspired to change the position of their eyes. This second profession, Bill always concluded, was “on the side of the angels.

Now here was a real story, because it was not limited to the mechanics of eyes and optics. It was about life itself, about the bad guys who claimed that people could never change, and the good guys who proved them wrong by guiding people to change not only their eyes but their lives. In one of Bill’s stories, the bad guys had maintained that 9-year-old John’s surgery had fixed his eyes, even though the sad-eyed boy had continued to complain of seeing double. It was not until the good guys worked with John that his double vision vanished and he began to smile. In another story, the bad guys had told 16-year-old Sarah that because she was older than six, nothing could be done to help her legally blind lazy eye. The good guys taught her to see.

Not all of Bill's stories had happy endings. He told one about a little cross-eyed girl whose parents wanted her eye straightened by surgery, but did not want their daughter to miss any school. The surgeon had accommodated the parent's wishes by performing the surgery during spring break, but something went wrong. The child never came out of the hospital.

That story shook me up. It still does. Stories, it seems, change our lives. Bill's stories changed mine. Before the class was finished, I had put my writing aside and begun to volunteer 10 hours a week in the vision therapy clinic. Soon I had a real story of my own to tell.

Nine-year-old Joes, as I'll call him, had his left eye turned almost to his nose. He was legally blind in that eye. Even worse, his brain had learned to process the information from his turned eye as if the eye were straight, which is to say that if Joe straightened his eye, he would see the world as crossed. Most experts of the day said that such cases could not be helped. Bill said they could.

For many months, Bill guided my work with Joe until the boy's eyes looked straight and he did not see the world as crossed. His sight in his left eye vastly improved, but when I covered his good eye, the bad eye still flicked outward the tiniest bit, and the vision was not quite 20/20. By purely mechanical standards, Joe had not been "cured." When I informed his mother about this failure, she looked at me as if I were crazy and said, "What do you mean you failed. Joe can finally ride a bicycle; we can read his handwriting. He's no longer failing in school, and now in sports he isn't always left sitting on the bench. How can you call that failure?"

How could I?

The years have passed, and I'm writing again, up every morning, telling stories. But looking back, I realize that even when not writing, I had never stopped creating stories. I created a story all those years ago when I changed Joe's life. Bill Ludlam created a story when he changed mine. Every life is a story, and every story worth telling is about a life. And that, after all, is what keeps us going. We are dealing with more than eyes and optics, brains and bio-chemicals—more than just science. Our work is also art. Every time we change a child's life, we create another story. But one part of that story remains the same. As Professor William Ludlam said 20 years ago, "In optometry, we're on the side of the angels."

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr. David L. Cook, 1395 South Marietta Parkway, Building 400, #102, Marietta, GA 30064.