

Plastic button ends prof's blindness

Ron Milliman regains sight after operation



PROF. SEES NEW LIFE — Ron Milliman, assistant professor of business, only recently saw his wife. He has been blind since he was 17 but regained his sight when doctors inserted a plastic "button" in his eye.

by christy wicker

Ron Milliman is seeing things in a new light this semester. Last semester he couldn't see at all.

Declared totally blind at the age of 17, the assistant professor of business was able to see again after an operation on his right eye replacing the iris, pupil, cornea and lens with a kind of plastic "button."

Milliman was not able to open his eye for six months after the December operation. During that time he became a little apprehensive about the use of a plastic device.

"Sometimes you can't tell the men from the women — until you see the moustache," he said. "Hair and dress are really different. There is a tremendous variety in hair and dress styles that we didn't have. Sometimes I go to a shopping center just to observe people.

"I knew I'd open my eye in April," he said, "and the first thing I'd see would be letters that read 'Made in Japan'."

The appearance of men is the biggest change that has occurred in the twelve years since he was blinded, Milliman said.

"Perhaps people have fewer hang-ups," Milliman said. "It used to be you didn't wear blue and green together or talk about sex. I can see what I only felt before — a much greater sense of freedom. I like it."

Being blind has its advantages as well as its disadvantages, according to Milliman.

Although some things have changed, some things are always the same.

"Television is still an insult to the intelligence," he said.

"I didn't like being blind," he said, "but I'm not so sure it was a terrible thing.

"I had a greater determination. It's difficult to say if I would have even gone to college if I hadn't been blind. I got some financial assistance that I wouldn't have gotten, and besides that, I felt that it was a challenge to do as good as everyone else," said Milliman.

He graduated from Eastern Michigan University with a 3.8 grade average on a 4.0 system and has completed much of his graduate work at Arizona State with only one 'B'.

"I knew that if I was only as good as the next guy, employers wouldn't want me. I had to be better."

His biggest disadvantage in teaching was an inability to use the black board.

"I had to have my notes duplicated before class," he said, "and sometimes that was a nuisance. However it made me strive to be more articulate and organized.

"Sometimes I was able to use my blindness as a way to break the ice. If I could tell a story or joke about being blind it sort of put everyone at ease."

Students who didn't realize they had signed up for a class taught by a blind teacher were surprised to find a hundred-pound German Shepherd lying quietly in front of the classroom.

"All the questions on my test will be multiple choice," joked Milliman. "I haven't taught the dog to grade essay questions yet."

The tendency to judge a person

by his appearance is one of the temptations that comes with being able to see, he said.

"I have always stressed the importance of judging people for what they really are. Now sometimes I have to remind myself to practice what I preach," said Milliman.

"It's really hard not to react to appearance. I became friends with some hippies in Arizona that I might not have had anything to do with if I could have seen them."

Being blind also puts a different slant on race relations, according to Milliman.

"I was friends with a black fellow in graduate school for over six months before I found out he was black," he said. "The only way to tell when you are blind is through speech patterns. His vocabulary and sentence structure were better than most people's and I just couldn't tell. He was really a super guy but many people never gave him a chance."

Even blindness doesn't keep a man from noticing a pretty girl, he said.

"I didn't actually form images but I could get a pretty definite impression of a girl from her voice. If she sounded pretty, I thought of her

as pretty," he said. "It's rather interesting that I didn't get that sort of impression with men."

Some people are a little more friendly to him now that he can see, Milliman said.

"I don't know exactly why but a couple of the faculty members never spoke to me before. Now they do. I guess it's hard for some people to accept someone who is different. They think if you are different, you must be weird."

Although he wasn't eager for the publicity that came after his operation, Milliman says it has encouraged blind people who had given up hope of ever seeing again.

"Doctors had told me that I would never see again," he said. "But Dr. Louis J. Girard in Houston, who is something of a maverick, felt that a plastic transplant could help me. A lot of prominent Dallas ophthalmologists disapprove of him; but when you don't have any hope, what the heck.

"I know of two or three people who didn't think anything could be done for them and now they have a very good chance of seeing again."