

WREN

— ≡ 14 ≡ —

STRONG AND INDEPENDENT

SUMMER CAMP
PROVIDES INSIGHTS
FOR YOUTH
WITH VISION
IMPAIRMENTS

CO-OP SPOTLIGHT

— ≡ 26 ≡ —

**ALISON GEE
SERVES
COMMUNITY
AND STATE**



OCTOBER



ON THE COVER

14 | CENTERPIECE

STRONG AND INDEPENDENT:

Summer camp provides insights for youth with vision impairments

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ILENE OLSON

Cover photo: Krysta Hubbard, 14, smiles after arriving at the Wyoming Lions Summer School for the Blind in June.

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CENTERPIECE

Jordyn Medina, 17, applauds after hearing the menu for dinner one evening at the Wyoming Lions Summer School for the Blind.



SUMMER CAMP PROVIDES
INSIGHTS FOR YOUTH WITH
VISION IMPAIRMENTS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ILENE OLSON



Students and teachers listen to a presentation during the careers and social issues class before dinner. From left are student Hayden Roswell; Jayde Parmely, pottery and orientation and mobility teacher; and students Ally Fisk and Krysta Hubbard.



“I like everything,” says student Krysta Hubbard, 14, of Casper, who attended the Wyoming Lions Summer School for the Blind for the first time at the age of 9.

Krysta is legally blind. Legal blindness is defined as having vision no better than 20/200 when corrected, or having a visual field of 20 degrees or less.

Music class and activities are Krysta’s favorites. She also likes getting together with other kids who have visual impairments.

“Sometimes they have ideas that help,” she says.

Krysta says she likes the chance to get away.

At home and school, she likes to hang out with her friends. She likes swimming, dancing and singing.

“I’m mostly happy,” Krysta says. “I’m just like any other girl; I just have vision problems.”



Smiles abound as five youth gather on a Sunday afternoon in June at the Allen H. Stewart Lions Camp on Casper Mountain.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic they’ve waited for two years for this week, and they are excited.

This is no ordinary camp, and these are no ordinary campers. This is the Lions Summer School for the Blind, and the students have severe visual impairments or no vision at all.

After an introduction and orientation to the camp, the student-campers use white canes to find their way from building to building.

Classes, which begin Monday morning, are specifically designed for children and teens who have visual impairments.

Classes in orientation and mobility, Braille, adaptive technology, aids for daily living and careers/social issues help students develop and improve critical skills required to be successful at home, at school and in future careers.

Other classes, such as music, ceramics, lapidary (grinding and polishing rocks), photography and basket-weaving encourage creativity and enjoyment of the arts. Free time and activities are included in the schedule as well.



Wyoming Lions Summer School for the Blind Director Gary Roadifer, right, and intern Tristan Merriman-Fish prepare to raise the flag at the camp on Casper Mountain.



Jordyn Medina, 17, is a senior at Cheyenne's Central High School. He has attended the Wyoming Lions Summer School since he was a young child.

"I enjoy it all," he says. "It's like my secondary home. I love it."

"I can be with people who are like me, with visual disabilities. Here, I can be the real me. At home, I feel like I'm restrained to who I'm supposed to be."

Jordyn described "the real me" as "a little crazy, kind of energetic, very helpful, very appreciative. A positive person."

While school is "very cool," he says, "I feel like I'm alone most of the time, and I don't reach out very well. It's kind of hard to make friends. I feel like I stay in my own little bubble."

At the camp, however, "I feel a much stronger connection here, because of our disability."

Jordyn said people with vision disabilities shouldn't be underestimated, but they often are.

"We can do what sighted people can do; it just takes us longer."

Jordyn plans to go to Full Sail University after he graduates from high school.



ROLE MODELS

Charlene Blackburn, who teaches Braille at the camp, said the summer school gives youth "an opportunity to develop independence and learn independent life skills, and also to interact with other kids and adults who have vision impairments.

"This gives them a sense of independence away from Mom and Dad and away from someone wanting to help them all the time," she says.

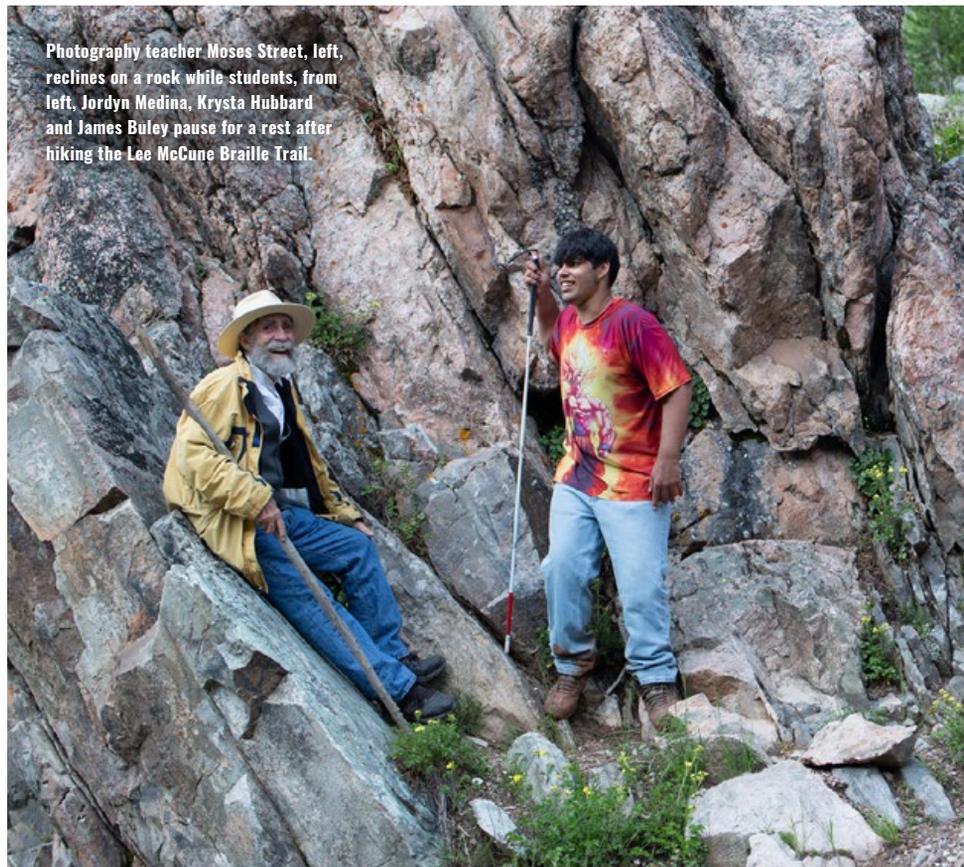
Blackburn is sighted and works as a teacher of the visually impaired in Pavillion. But she notes that most teachers at this year's summer school also have vision impairments or are totally blind.



Student Elly Krow, 11, dances during the Friday evening talent show.

"I feel a much stronger connection here."

Photography teacher Moses Street, left, reclines on a rock while students, from left, Jordyn Medina, Krysta Hubbard and James Buley pause for a rest after hiking the Lee McCune Braille Trail.



Music teacher Pam Glasser plays "Amazing Grace" on her Swiss Alps horn during a hike of the Lee McCune Braille Trail on Casper Mountain. Ropes on the trail help guide blind and visually impaired hikers and lead them to Braille plaques describing the flora, fauna and geology of the area.



Orientation and mobility teacher Ellie Carlson, right, uses a white cane to help student Hayden Roswell know which direction to face during a dance at the talent show.



"They're role models who can show [the students] that you don't have to be on disability all your life. You can go to college."

Parents often don't realize that college, careers and family life are viable options for their blind or visually impaired children, Blackburn says.

Kristin Olaveson of Cheyenne is one of those role models.

She teaches the aids for daily living class at the summer school. Her lessons at the camp focus on adaptive skills and techniques that blind and visually impaired people can use to be more independent in their daily lives.

"I don't want them to get eight or nine hours away from Mom and Dad and not know how to make a meal or wash their clothes," she says.

Cleaning and cooking simple recipes are among the skills her students practice. One of the "Aha!" moments she observed while teaching this year was when one of her students figured out how to peel an apple after trying unsuccessfully several times.

"When she finally got it, she was so excited!" Olaveson says.

That's a feeling Olaveson knows from personal experience.

A native of Wheatland, Olaveson is legally blind. She attended the Wyoming Lions

Summer School as a youth, beginning at age 8. The things she liked best were the chance to be with other kids who had visual disabilities, and opportunities to take classes that she normally didn't get to take in school—"like the art and that kind of stuff," she recalls.

"I wasn't thinking social skills and independence. I was thinking fun and friends, and not really seeing the value. But I got the value. I was learning stuff without even knowing it."

Olaveson remembers discovering ways to do things independently at the camp, then bringing that knowledge home.

"I was so excited when I got home from [aids for daily living] and said, 'Mom, I can do it, this way!' Then my mom put [those techniques] into play at home, and she just kept building on that."

One of the first things her mother did was to attach toothpicks to the knobs on the stove and the washer so Olaveson could feel the position of the knobs and operate both appliances independently.

That was the beginning of her road to independent living.

Olaveson later graduated from Wheatland High School, then went on to attend Laramie County Community College and the University of Wyoming.

She and her husband, Roy, have a 6-year-old son, Conner. Olaveson also owns a budding children's clothing business.

*"Mom
I can do it,
this way!"*





I WANT PEOPLE TO BE AWARE

Hayden Roswell, 13, was the student who was so excited to find a way to peel an apple. Legally blind since birth, she woke up one morning some months ago and realized she couldn't see anything at all. Since then, she's been working to adapt to the loss of what little vision she had.

"It definitely took a long time, and it was very hard," she said. "I wasn't used to using my [white] cane 24/7. Now, I'm constantly using my cane" to navigate a world gone dark.

It didn't help that she was experiencing bullying at the school she was attending in western Colorado at the time, or that her music teacher limited her participation in concert band, apparently believing that Hayden's blindness made her incapable of participating. Hayden and her parents had to push to get the school administration to support her in both situations.

At the end of the year, things had improved.

"My music teacher complimented me on how well I was doing," Hayden says. "I think that was an eye-opener for her."



"I am very independent, and I am capable of doing anything that I want to."



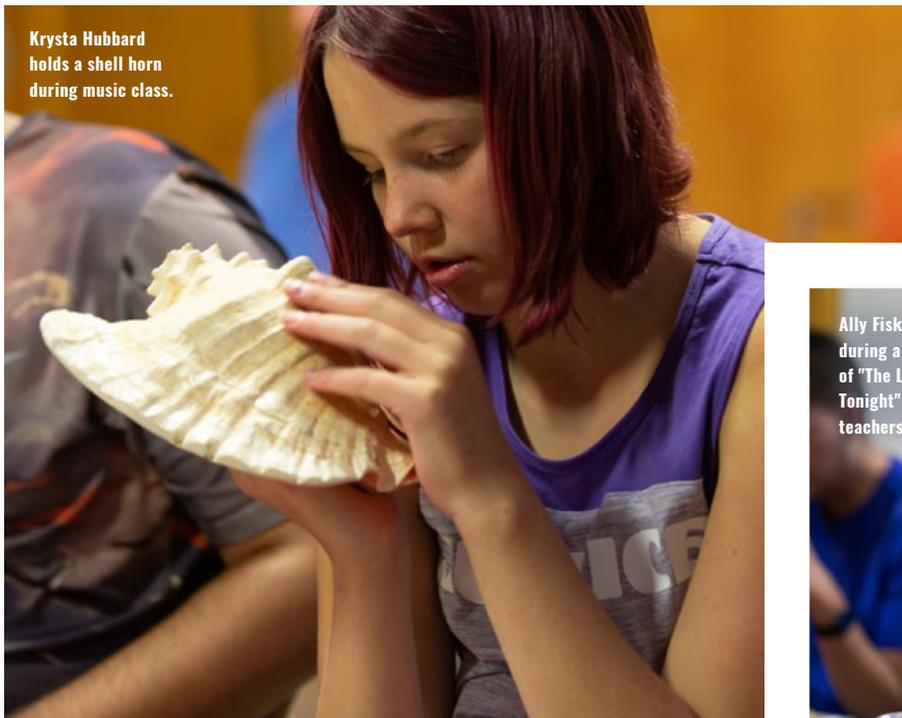
Penn Street shares her experience with her dog guide, Beethoven.

Hayden hopes she paved the way for future students with visual disabilities to succeed at that school.

"I really want people to be aware of who us blind individuals can really be," she says. "I am very independent, and I am capable of doing anything that I want to. Maybe it has to be changed a little so I can do it, but I can do it. I want people to not think of me as disabled and handicapped, but as someone who is strong and independent."

People sometimes assume she's standoffish, Hayden says. But that's usually just because she can't see when someone is near her. She just needs people to say "Hello," so she knows who's there.

"Just because I can't see doesn't mean that I won't talk to you. I'm totally social once you get to know me," she says.



Krysta Hubbard holds a shell horn during music class.



Ally Fisk plays a recorder during a group rehearsal of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" by students, teachers and staff.

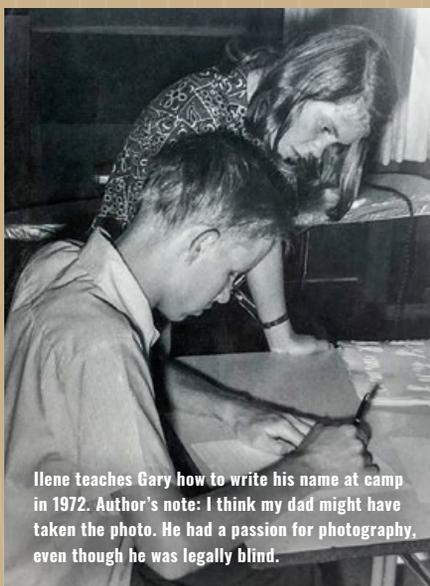


This year's Summer School for the Blind on Casper Mountain served as history coming full circle for my husband, Gary, and me.

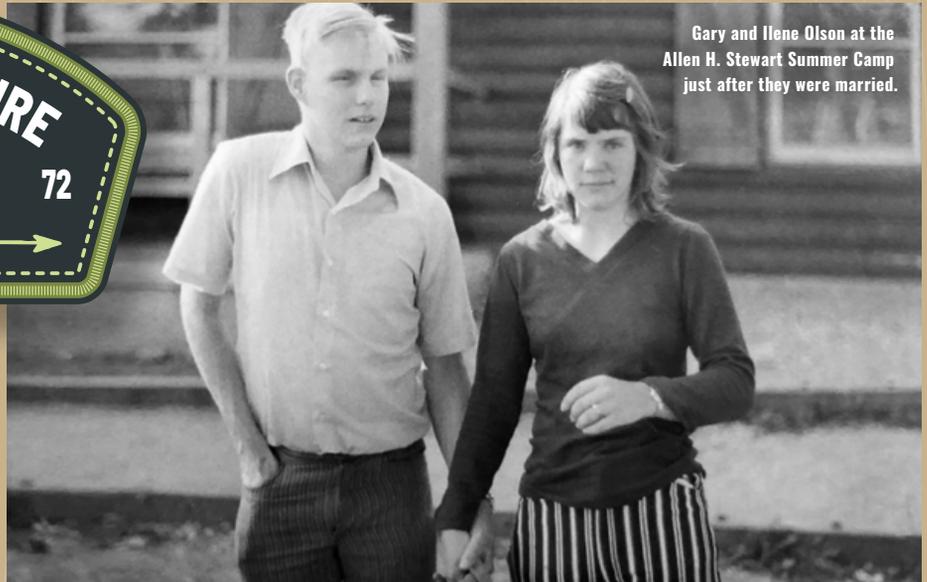
For us, that history started in late July 1972, when he attended the camp as a student, and I as a helper, or intern. The Allen H. Stewart Summer Camp witnessed a turning point in my life; I turned 16 there.

Gary and I both lived in Cheyenne at the time, and we had met a year earlier. But our acquaintance was limited to greeting each other in the halls as we were on our way to classes in the old Central High School. He'd been a senior the previous school year, and I was a sophomore. We'd had no classes together, and no chance to do more than say a passing hello a few times each week.

That all changed during summer school that year. Gary and I finally found ourselves in the same class—aids for daily living. His mother had told Gary, who is totally blind, that it was time for him to learn how to sign his name to



Ilene teaches Gary how to write his name at camp in 1972. Author's note: I think my dad might have taken the photo. He had a passion for photography, even though he was legally blind.



Gary and Ilene Olson at the Allen H. Stewart Summer Camp just after they were married.

increase his ability to be independent. The ADL class was where he would learn that skill.

The teacher was a wonderful lady named Billie Taylor, who taught during the school year at the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind in Colorado Springs. Billie handed me some large books with pages that were embossed with tactile shapes of capital and lowercase letters written in cursive handwriting, and said, "Here you go, Ilene. You teach Gary how to sign his name."

Billie knew that I liked Gary. She also knew my father, Kent Jensen, who was legally blind, and was currently serving as assistant director of the summer school. She was confident that I would have the insights and skills to help Gary feel the shapes of the handwritten letters, then to make the movements with a pen to reproduce them in his signature. She monitored our progress and made suggestions if she saw something that would help either of us with our efforts.

By the end of summer school, Gary knew how to sign his name, and we knew each other much better. We'd become good friends.

Nearly two years later, after I graduated from Central High School and Gary had completed his sophomore year at the University of Wyoming, our friendship blossomed into a romance, which then led to our marriage a year after that.

My father, who was a consultant for the visually impaired for the Wyoming Department of Education, later became the director of the Wyoming Lions Summer School for the Blind. And much later, Gary followed a similar career path, also working as a consultant for the visually impaired, and eventually going on to direct the summer school as well. During that career, he signed his name to correspondence and government forms countless times. His mother's foresight was prophetic.

Gary taught lapidary (his hobby, grinding and polishing stones for jewelry) at the Wyoming Lions Summer School for the Blind for several years, and later spent 10 years in leadership positions there.

I, however, returned only as an occasional visitor. Gary and I had five children, and they were my full-time job at home. When they were all in school, I returned to school as well to study journalism, then moved onto my full-time journalism career.

This June was the first time that Gary and I had a chance to be at the camp together again. He taught lapidary again, and I supervised the interns and served as camp photographer. For me, it was a really neat experience. For him, it was pretty much déjà vu with a new twist, since I was with him this time.

The summer school was a lot of work for both of us, but it also was a wonderful trip down memory lane.