

# WOMEN TODAY

Beyond disabilities —  
laughter plays central  
role in actress's life



Condra in the role of Annie Sullivan

By Linda Lange

News-Sentinel staff writer

**S**pirited actress Estelle Condra will slip into the role of Annie Sullivan on Friday evening with the determination and graciousness that are her hallmarks.

The Nashvillian, who is blind, will portray the remarkable teacher of Helen Keller in an original production, "Vibrations of Laughter." It will be at 6:45 p.m. June 6 at Ward Building Auditorium, Tennessee School for the Deaf. (Please see box at right.)

Condra previously played the part of Sullivan in the "The Miracle Worker" at the Academy Theater in Nashville. One thing snagged her interest immediately concerning the lives of Sullivan and Keller.

"Perhaps the most wonderful thing Annie Sullivan accomplished with Helen was to teach her to laugh," says Condra. "She tickles Helen and coaxes laughter." Condra's performance will reveal parts of Sullivan's life and personality that often are disregarded.

Laughter is seldom missing in Condra's life. The performer, playwright, teacher and writer knows laughter's importance. Any doubt disappears when one sees her stand-up comedy routine, "Blind People Shouldn't Vacuum." She enters the stage with a vacuum cleaner draped with ties, eyeglasses and bras. Her monologue relates funny incidents in the lives of people with visual disabilities.

"I am exposing (the disability of) blindness to laughter just like exposing a seed to light.

It grows and gets better," says Condra. She lost her sight, beginning at age 4, due to retinitis pigmentosa, a gradual decaying of the retina.

Condra grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa. She said she was reared by parents who nurtured her human spirit but never acknowledged her disability. "We just went on. There was no sympathy. My father would say,

"Come on. Lift up your feet, straighten your back and be somebody."

She attended a private performing arts high school and later went to London's Toynbee Theater School.

She moved to Tennessee in 1973. Her husband, David Condra, a native of Nashville, is owner of Delcon Computer Systems. Through his encouragement, she made snow skiing her sport. Last month they climbed Mount LeConte. He will be flying her to the Knoxville performance in the couple's airplane.

Their active lifestyle leaves little time to dwell on her blindness. "First thing in the morning, I bonk myself in the head. 'Oh, yes, I can't see. I have to remember to go slower,'" Condra quips. She acknowledges the ebbs and flows of her life in a dramatization titled "Caged." It was performed at the



Actress Estelle Condra

## Performance set for June 6 at TSD

Actress Estelle Condra of Nashville will portray heroine Annie Sullivan in an evening of entertainment and inspiration on Friday, June 6, at the Tennessee School for the Deaf. The performance will begin at 6:45 p.m. at Ward Building Auditorium on the TSD campus, 2725 Island Home Blvd.

It's part of the eighth annual TIPS Family Weekend, an event sponsored by the Concord-Farragut Seratoma Club and Friends of TIPS (Tennessee Infant Parent Services).

Other weekend activities will include a membership meeting and workshops on nutrition, sensory development, medical issues, teaching values, speech and hearing services. A picnic is scheduled for 12:30 p.m. Saturday, June 7. For information, call the TIPS office, 579-2456. Deadline for reservations is June 2.

Condra will reveal the courage and determination of Sullivan, best known as the teacher and longtime companion of Helen Keller. The twosome championed a better life for people with disabilities.

Interpreters will be available. A question-and-answer session will follow the performance. TIPS families from Middle and East Tennessee will participate. Individuals wishing to attend the performance are asked to call the TIPS office. There is no admission charge.

1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta.

"There are dark moments. I acknowledge the struggle — the absolute horrendous struggle — I would rather not have had this happen to me. But the blind community is a very happy people once we accept our limits and break down the bars of the cage."

From South Africa she brought the folk tales of the African culture. She performs across the United States and abroad. She operates Imagination Station, a studio for creative drama and innovative thinking for young children. She is also co-owner of the Nashville-based toy store Imagination Crossroads.

Her children's book, "See the Ocean," won the American Booksellers Pick of the List award. She collaborated with Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, to write "Miracle in a Shoe Box."