

## LIVING

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## First Person

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## Caged bird takes flight with insight

Estelle Condra can't see her image in the mirror anymore, but she still sees herself clearly.

She shares this inner vision in *Caged*, her one-woman show she will perform tomorrow at Paschall Theater at Montgomery Bell Academy.

*Caged* is a tale she has written about the struggles and triumphs of a young girl becoming a woman while losing her sight.

*Caged* is Estelle Condra's personal tale.

Condra, a native of South Africa who has lived here for 17 years, was dealt a bad genetic hand. When she was 4, she and her parents were told that eventually she would be blind. "I never could see very well," she said while talking about her life in an interview last week at her home. "I faked through everything using peripheral vision."

But that, too, was fading. She spent most of her life wondering when she would pass over to the "other side" — to complete blindness. That passage, which she has made, has strengthened her.

And, oddly, it was a bird that helped.

Her husband of 23 years, David, gave her an exotic bird as a present. Its wings were clipped.

"It destroyed me," said Estelle Condra, who wanted to take back the bird who could not fly. "Then I realized that bird is me, that we all have our cages. I thought what a fantastic premise for an autobiographical piece, equating flight with sight, so I developed it from there."

Condra, the author of children's books, storyteller, child development consultant and former actress and creativity instructor, wrote the script four years ago for the Governor's School for the Arts. Since then, she has performed the piece in other cities. But not Nashville. Tomorrow's show, a benefit for VITAL Center and Prevent Blindness Tennessee, is \$50 per person. The high tea begins at 4 p.m., with the 90-minute show following at 5 p.m. Reservations are not required; people are welcome to come and pay at the door.

What the audience will not see is Condra stationed in a chair. She is able to move freely onstage, knowing her boundaries by the feel of the air from strategically placed fans and textured rugs. So while she pushes the horizontal walls of her own cage — the stage — she pushes the vertical walls of her listeners. "I take the audience from down on the floor to way up high."

*Caged* begins with one of Condra's early memories, when she and her mother would wait for the birds in the evening, when the sweet thorn trees would be white with the herons that came to roost. Throughout the show, Condra weaves the flight theme with 11 characters.

At the climax she shares what she learned from that clipped bird: "That I could fly in my own place, a full acceptance of the human condition. It's your cage, it's my cage. But the human spirit can fly free.

"It's not really about blindness but that the truth is everything. When I wrote it, I wanted to come as close to the truth as possible. For me, what it has been is I pretended to see all the time. I can no longer pretend. We have to know the reality of our lives — to accept who we are. It's hard to do that." ■

Catherine Darnell is a columnist for *The Tennessean*. She can be reached at 259-8037.