

Nashville Banner

Nashville Banner, Wednesday, January 8,

Blindness restrictive? Estelle Condra doesn't see it that way

When I visited her home recently, Estelle Condra greeted me with gracious enthusiasm. She smiled sweetly, extended her hand and ushered me inside.

Then she led me down the hallway to her living room, directed me to a place on the sofa, sat across from me, and looked right at me while letting me know how excited she was that I wanted to write about her. Her actions and demeanor were so natural and normal that had I not known better, I might have believed that she could see me.

This charming transplanted South African wasn't born blind, but the illness that took her sight manifested at a very early age. When she was 4 years old, one of her parents asked her to look at the family dog while her picture was being taken. Estelle couldn't see the little animal. This was the first inkling she ever had that something might be wrong.

Estelle's recollections of her youthful years are centered on the love of her parents and their desperate search for a cure for

RICHARD
SPEIGHT



her "sick eyes," which was actually one South African doctor's ignorant diagnosis.

They were willing to try anything — soothsayers, faith healers, witches — and, of course, every doctor who offered any hope at all. Estelle remembers taking weekly shots, drinking Epsom salts and bicarbonate, and even placing potato halves over her eyes right before a new moon, because someone had told them this would help. But nothing worked. Her sight continued to deteriorate.

Estelle's problem, as it turned out, was retinitis pigmentosa, a gradual decaying of the retina, for which there is no cure.

During her teen years, and as a young adult, Estelle's activities

became more and more restricted. But thanks to the tough love and unwavering support of her mother, her determination grew stronger and stronger.

Estelle's two passions were athletics and drama. Athletics proved impossible, but drama became her salvation. She polished her skills and vented her emotions on the stage, succeeding to the point that she was invited to study at the prestigious Toynbee Theater School in London, which also gave her access to a whole new world of specialists.

In spite of their best efforts and the efforts of the doctors who cared for her when she moved to America several years ago, the deterioration of her sight continued unabated. Today, she can't see at all.

Before you begin to feel sorry for Estelle, you need to hear the rest of the story. You need to know about her success as a teacher and performer. You need to know about her marriage and her move to this country. You need to know

about the pivotal events in her life that finally brought her freedom from the restrictions of her disease and of her own attitude toward it.

Her story is a thrilling account of tragedy and triumph which can't be confined to this small space. It is a tribute to the beauty and strength of the human spirit, one which can best be told by this talented woman herself.

And tell it she will, this weekend, at the Darkhorse Theater at 4610 Charlotte Ave. here in Nashville, where her one-woman dramatization, titled *Caged*, will be presented on Friday and Saturday evenings, and again on Sunday afternoon.

Estelle's performance of this stunningly beautiful original work will benefit the Tennessee Society to Prevent Blindness. Call the Society at 352-0450, or the Darkhorse Theater at 297-7113, for times and prices, and to make your reservations.

Richard Speight is a local writer. His column appears on alternate Wednesdays.