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GAINING BLINDNESS:
HOW TO LIVE TWO LIVES IN ONE LIFETIME
(AND RECEIVE TWO STATEWIDE AWARDS IN ONE NIGHT)

Author and actress to receive both Tennessee's highest award in the arts and Tennessee's top award for empowering artists with disabilities on April 12

NASHVILLE, Tenn., April 12, 2011 - Most of us hope to live a long life. That's not enough for author and actress Estelle Condra, who says she has lived two lives in one lifetime.

So it's only appropriate that she receive two statewide awards for her body of work on one night.

Tuesday, April 12, Condra will begin her evening at the executive residence of Gov. Bill Haslam, where the governor will bestow on her the Distinguished Artist Award. The award is one of three awards given every two years by the Governor's Arts Awards and Tennessee's highest honor in the arts.

She will then leave the governor's mansion for Schermerhorn Symphony Center, where she will receive the Decade Award from VSA Tennessee, the state organization dedicated to helping people with disabilities participate in and express themselves through the arts.

Condra spent her first life seeing the world. She is spending her second life more deeply experiencing the world with all of her other senses. And it's during the sightless years of her life that she has done her award-winning work.

"The second half of my life has been more about gaining blindness than losing my sight," Condra said. "I have lived such an interesting life after I was no longer distracted by what I am seeing. A whole new world opened up to me."

Since she lost her sight 15 years ago, Condra has:

- Published a book that was named to the American Booksellers Association "Pick of the Lists" and is now in its sixth edition.

- Written several one woman plays that she has performed in major venues including the Kennedy Center and the 1996 Para-Olympics at the Atlanta Olympic Games.
- Founded and chaired an organization to recognize teachers who best incorporate arts in the classroom.
- Organized an international art exchange between school children in South Africa, her native country and Tennessee.
- Produced a hour-long radio show that was broadcast twice-weekly.
- Creatively engaged school children throughout Tennessee with her unique perspective on reading and writing.
- Helped to found VSA Tennessee, which celebrates its 10th anniversary with a full day of activities and performances at Schermerhorn Symphony Center – capped off by awarding the organization’s founders, including Condra.

And that’s just scratching the surface. A complete list of her accomplishments as an artist, author and actress would cover several single-spaced pages. And that wouldn’t count her many other adventures, such as learning how to sail and to ski on snow and water. Or riding ponies in Mongolia, Lipizzaner stallions in Croatia and camels in Jordan and Morocco.

“Losing my sight made me less afraid. For instance, when I learned to ski, I was not afraid of the heights, because I couldn’t see them. Instead, I was free to concentrate on the wind in my hair, the sound of the skis crunching on snow, the crisp smell of winter in the mountains. It was wonderful,” Condra said. “It also meant that I had to trust others, because if my guide had not been telling me when to turn, I surely would have skied off a cliff.”

How does someone lose her sight and go on to accomplish more than several sighted people could working together?

First, it helps to be a talented person who has always been fully engaged in life. But we are all aware of gifted people who were felled by a disability, instead of lifted up by it.

The difference is attitude. It’s deciding to understand your situation as “gaining blindness instead of losing sight.” This philosophy is elucidated in **her irreverent one woman comedy “Blind People Shouldn’t Vacuum” where she makes fun of sight loss.**

Estelle has been described as a “pack of creative dynamite ready to explode.” This is never more evident than in her one woman play “Caged” where she uses textured surfaces, blowing fans, and sound emitters to guide her on stage as she dances, runs, climbs and jumps. In “Caged,” a metaphor about a caged bird with clipped wings, Estelle as the bird eventually comes to accept the cage’s limitations and turns them into an advantage, learning to fly in a new way.

Estelle’s creative work with children is evident in the way she dramatizes her book, “See the Ocean.” In the book, a little girl is able to “see” the ocean through a thick fog when her

sighted brothers can't, and the ocean she sees in her mind is a much fuller and deeper concept than what her brothers see when the fog lifts.

Her special message also comes through in her favorite one-woman show, "Vibrations of Laughter," where she uses the story of Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher, to help children see someone overcoming disabilities.

"Learning to trust others makes you more aware of them, more connected to them. And consequently, you become more aware of who you are and how you are connected to the world," Condra said. "It's a whole new way of living, and it is living very directly, very deeply. You really learn to experience the world when you are no longer distracted by seeing it."

Condra credits her husband, well-known Nashville IT entrepreneur David Condra, with helping her to make the most of her situation.

"David is always challenging me to try new things like learning how to ski or learning how to ride a horse. And he never settles for doing things half-way. So I didn't just learn to ride a horse, I went on a week-long, 25-mile horseback trip over a 10,000 foot pass in the Tetons.

"Because of David's connection to technology, I also have every tool you can imagine to help me deal with the challenges of blindness, like a computer program that reads emails to me and a talking watch and even a machine that tells the colors of the clothes and jewelry I'm putting on. But everything is not hi tech. I've placed around my garden wind chimes that ring at different tones, so I know where I am by the sound of the chime," she added. "Sometimes the simplest solutions are the best, which is another lesson I've learned since gaining blindness."

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