

## Blind to barriers

Features

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By Karl Klooster



This 1969 Chevy Nova SS is Kenny Johnstone's pride and joy. Being blind, he can't drive the 500-horsepower hot rod on the road, but he has ridden shotgun at the Woodburn Dragstrip.

Tom Ballard/News-Register

It was Aug. 5, 1975. Kenneth P. "Kenny" Johnstone, a 19-year-old student at Walla Walla College in College Place, Wash., was driving into town when a little girl suddenly darted into the street directly in front of his car.

Johnstone swerved to avoid the child, skidded across the road, tried to correct his steering and mowed down a row of rural mailbox posts. One of the posts crashed through the windshield and struck him in the forehead.

His quick reflexes saved the girl's life but changed his own forever. As a consequence of the accident, the front of Johnstone's skull, including his nose, cheekbones and eye sockets, were shattered and partially torn away. Total exposure and trauma to the frontal lobes of his brain made doctors shake their heads in wonder that he survived. For days, a team of surgeons concentrated on stabilizing him. There was no time to consider what he would ultimately have to contend with in the event they were successful.

As it turned out, Johnstone's eyes were destroyed. He would never see again. But addressing that devastating reality still lay ahead. More than a dozen brain surgeries were necessary to ensure retention of other essential functions. Miraculously, he eventually regained a full range of motor skills and mental acuity. But he needed a total skull and facial reconstruction. Even the crushed membranes of his sinuses had to be rebuilt. A severe infection from spinal fluid leakage dictated a delicate and lengthy drainage procedure. That alone kept him at the Oregon Health & Science University for several months.

It was an arduous and prolonged journey, spanning almost four years. But things turned out as well as could possibly be expected, under the circumstances. Then it was time for Johnstone to begin addressing his blindness.

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“When I was really in bad shape, they didn’t tell me about my eyes,” he said. “When I finally did get the news, I told everyone to leave. I wanted to be alone. For about 45 minutes, I felt as sorry for myself as any human being could have,” he said. “Then, I thought, ‘I’m young. I have the rest of my life ahead of me. I vowed right then and there to keep an open mind. Whatever came along, I would grab onto it.’”

From that time forward, Johnstone tried to make the best of things. He said he has never regarded his blindness as a hardship, but rather an inconvenience. As a boy growing up in Willamina, he had always enjoyed working with his hands. He was never one to avoid hard labor. “My father was a logger,” he said. “I went out in the forest with him when I was out of school for the summer.

“But when I saw how he struggled during the winter to make a living in the snow and icy cold, I decided that wasn’t for me.” Johnson took basic courses in mechanics and auto repair at **Clackamas Community College** before transferring to the Seventh - Day Adventist College in Eastern Washington. He was progressing toward a bachelor’s degree in its automotive program when tragedy struck.

**Four years later, he went back to Clackamas and earned an A.A. degree.**

“At first, I had some difficulty navigating around the campus,” he said. “Like any student, I was always in a hurry to get from class to class, and sometimes I got lost. But someone always helped me out and I made it through to graduation. It took me a while to figure out what I could and couldn’t do,” he said. “After I got my mobility skills back, I concentrated on what I could do well.”

When you think about it, body and fender repair is the sort of thing a blind man can excel at. It’s all touch, feel, patch, sand and smooth. The same applies to the operation of precision machinery. So once having proved he could do auto body work, he moved on.

“In 1984, I was hired by A-dec in Newberg, where I ran a manually-operated machine,” he said. “I was with them for 11 years — until 1995, when they converted to computer numerical control.”

CNC machines, as they’re called, are run by software programs that command them to perform certain tasks. The operator needs to set up, adjust and monitor the machine.

Johnstone’s manager decided he would not be capable of doing this work and refused to send him to the classes co-workers were taking. When manual machine work was phased out, the company laid him off.

**Undeterred, he went back to Clackamas**, this time to learn — what else? — computer numerically controlled programming and operations.

Having mastered what he had been considered incapable of, Johnstone landed a job with the Benchmade Knife Company in Oregon City, where he worked for four years. He used CNC tools to put the precision edge on high-end blades.

Returning to his Yamhill Valley roots in 2000, Johnstone went to work for Delvin Zook, CEO of Rock of Ages Mennonite Home. He was hired to man the Valley View Retirement Community switchboard. During the four years he was there, he used his spare time to build 45 birdhouses for residents. Always a Willamina lad at heart, he went back home after leaving Rock of Ages in 2004.

Not long after, he met Mary Gandy, a retired security guard. They were introduced by friends who they said sensed these two should get to know each other. As it turned out, those friends were right. The couple married five years ago. They live on the west end of town. At the rear of their property is a large garage. Parked adjacent is a 1968 Jeep and a fishing boat on its trailer ready to go.

Inside the garage is a totally tricked out 1969 Chevy Nova SS. Kenny had wanted a car like this since he was a kid, and now he has one. It's complete with a flame-themed paint job and a modified 350 V-8 that puts out 500 horsepower. Restoration of the vintage Jeep is next on his to-do list.

Mary puts her foot into the SS whenever she gets a chance, and he serves as passenger seat critic. Somehow, they've managed to avoid speeding tickets.

Their garage is also filled with preserves the couple put up together. Their handiwork includes cherries, peaches, pears, pie filling, green beans, beets, sauerkraut, salmon, tuna, deer and elk. Kenny built the shelves on which the hundreds of jars are stored.

Attached to the garage is a woodshed chock-a-block with neatly cut cords of wood and stacks of kindling. The couple harvests the firewood from a friend's property outside of town and cut it themselves.

"Mary runs the small saw and I run the big one," Kenny said.

Fishing is another thing a sightless person can successfully pursue. Kenny and Mary go fishing regularly in their 18-foot boat, most of the time out of Depoe Bay.

He also fashions salmon and steelhead lures that customers swear by.

"I've made as many as a thousand a month," he said. Not bad productivity in anybody's book. Using his well-practiced honing skills, he also runs Ken's Sharpening Service out of their home. And he still squeezes in time to listen to audio books, help his wife do yard work and take care of their pets — a Chihuahua, Wendy, and four cats.

Over the years, Kenny says he's hitchhiked, water-skied, snow-skied and even sky-dived; all in a life's work for a man who's never been blinded, and certainly not buffaloed, by barriers.