Vital Visionaries: Sue Barry - Vision Therapy Helped Me Overcome a Lifetime of Vision Problems Transcript

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Early Life With Crossed Eyes

My name is Sue Barry, I live in Arlington, Massachusetts. I had 48 years before working with vision therapy because I have been cross-eyed since the very first months of life.

So I've had three surgeries when I was two, three and seven years old. and they made my eyes look more or less straight, but they didn't really change the way that I saw.

I still looked with one eye and turned the other, only the turn was more subtle now, so most people didn' t notice it. But because my two eyes were looking at different regions of space, the information couldn't be combined between them, and so I didn t have stereo vision.

So what does that mean? Well, you can imagine, for example, looking across the room, let's say, and seeing a chair in front of a table in the wall. I could see all that.

If I can see the chair, I would tell it was in from the table, which was the front wall, but I couldn't see this space, the volumes of space between the chairs and the tables and walls.

So my view of the world was very cluttered. Space was compressed. And this led to a lot of problems when I was a kid and a lotta frustration and humiliation.

I had a hard time learning to bicycle. Rollerblading was just frightening, and learning drive was the nightmare. But the worst of all was school.

Struggles With Depth Perception and School

Because my two eyes did not point to the same place on the page, I found reading very difficult. And at the end of second grade, we all had to take a standardized test.

And I must have done very poorly on it because the principal told my mother, and I'm quoting her, he told mother you must face facts. Your daughter is a dim bulb.

I was put in a class where every single kid had a problem. Some of the kids had behavior problems. That was pretty obvious. They couldn't sit still and so on.

My best friend in the class had polio. I don't know if he had any academic problems, but it didn't matter. He wasn't normal, he walked with a bad limp, and so that relegated him to that class.

Well, it was my mom who taught me how to read when the schools gave up on me. She basically read to me and with me constantly. And by the end of elementary school, I was a good reader.

And like many people who have compromised vision, I had an excellent memory. And so between my sloba comprehensive reading and my really good memory, i started to do well in school and I started pursue my interests which were all in the natural world and i became a college biology professor.

and things went along pretty well. I was able to design my life all around minimizing the necessity to drive. And things were going pretty well. But when I hit my 40s, I noticed that when i looked in the distance, everything would jitter.

And I was teaching a class at that time to about 100 students in a fairly large classroom. My co-teacher said to me, how come you never call on the kids in back of the class?

Discovering Vision Therapy

And i said, to her, what kids? That made me realize that I could see those students if I looked far enough away, but I just didn't look in the distance because it was difficult and things jitter.

And so I had unconsciously stopped looking in distance except to drive and I avoided driving as much as possible. But at this point I have kids and had to driving around town and thought I need to find some solution to this vision problem.

After much searching I found a developmental optometrist And she changed my life. The changes with vision therapy were just breathtaking. Basically, what the vision-therapy procedures taught me how to do was to point my two eyes at the same place in space at same time.

So now my eyes were bringing correlated, not conflicting information into my brain. And to my astonishment, I began to see in 3D. I was 48 years old and I beginning to the stereo vision.

So now I could see, for example, if I looked across the room and saw a table and a chair and wall, and the chair was in front of the table, the space, almost palpable space between the chairs and table.

It was as if space inflated, the world inflate it. Trees took on a whole new view. I could see how the outer branches enclosed and captured whole volumes of space through which the inner branches grew.

Seeing in 3D and Everyday Improvements

And it wasn't just that I had a new few of the worlds, I have a feeling about the way I felt in the Stereo vision gave me a new feeling and it was a sense of immersion in the world.

So the vision therapy gave not only a way of seeing but a a feeling myself in a world What I can do now that I couldn't do before vision is read for longer periods of time.

with comfort without any fatigue, without the letters moving, appearing to move on the page. Driving is a lot easier, and not just because I can see things in 3D.

Sure, that helps with parking, but I also have a more expansive view of the world. I see more of what's around me, both in front and to the sides, close and in the distance.

And so that really helps driving. And not only that, but now I actually look people in the eye. Before, I never really looked people the in eye, maybe because I knew my eyes were kind of wonky, and also it was kind difficult to train my eye on another person.

And being able to look at people with the eyes makes the world a lot friendlier place. Something I wish I knew that I only learned through vision therapy is that, I was not a victim of a visual fate that had been sealed in early childhood.

I may have been cross-eyed since the first months of life, but that didn't mean that i didn''t have any control over my vision. With the help of my optometrist and with the vision I learned how to see in a new way.

Challenging the Critical Period Dogma

And this was particularly surprising because there had been, and still is to some extent, a long-standing scientific dogma that stereo vision, this ability to seeing 3D, has to develop within the first months or years of life.

If it doesn't develop by, let's say, six months or six years or eight years, but if it doesn't develop by early childhood, it can never develop. And I was 48 years old before I began to see E3D.

So I learned that the critical period, this concept of the Critical Period, wasn't quite as critical as people believed, and that I actually had control of my own vision and my visual faith.

What does it mean to me to be a vital visionary? Well, it means to, me that I can take my story, my personal story and use it to help other people. So let me explain how that has happened.

When my vision first began to change, I didn't tell very many people about it because I knew the scientific dogma that said that the change in my And the very first person I told about my vision outside of close friends and family was the author and neurologist Oliver Sacks.

I wrote him out of the blue this long nine page letter about visual history and my new vision. He wrote back quite intrigued and after lots of research and visits he wrote a story about me called Stereo Sue that appeared in the New Yorker magazine in 2006. And then in his book, The Mind's Eye, was captured in this book The mind's eye.

Sharing the Story Through Books and Media

Also at about the same time as the New Yorker article, I was interviewed on national public radio on morning edition. And my goodness, the emails just started to flood in.

That's what I mean about how your story can be an inspiration to other people. These emails were all coming from people with binocular vision problems.

people who had trouble coordinating their two eyes and using their eyes together. So they might've been cross-eyed like me, they may have been wall-eye, They might have had a condition called amblyopia or lazy eye, or some other binocular vision problem.

And they all wanted to know what they could do to help with their vision. That inspired me then to write my own book, Fixing My Gaze, which was first published in 2009 and is still out there.

in which I could go into a lot more detail about what binocular vision is, how vision therapy helps, and in, which could also use other people's stories, people who had written to me to describe how one can change one's vision.

And in fact, even after that, when I realized the power of these stories I wrote a second book called Coming to Our Senses that came out in 2021. And that book was also a sensory rehabilitation book.

Only it was a book about two young people, one who was born practically blind and learned to see at the age of 15, and another who is born profoundly deaf and learn to hear at age 12. And so all these experiences, starting with the vision therapy, moving on through Oliver Sacks and the book writing have taught me about the power of a story to inspire and to teach.