

# GUEST EDITORIAL

## "On Being Visually Deprived"

Leonard J. Press, O.D.

"I was blind as a bat as a young boy. My eyes were horribly crossed from birth and this reduced my vision to a blur. My depth perception was awful. Until I was 10, I lived in a world of shapes and shadows and noises. Had it not been for the love of my parents, family and neighbors, I might have retreated into a shell. Oddly enough, for all the problems my poor eyesight created, I remember being happy and always active. I didn't know how bad my eyesight was. I thought everybody saw things as I did and got used to it."<sup>1</sup>

This tale opens the chapter on the childhood of current Senate Banking Committee Chairman, Senator Alfonse D'Amato. In his candid autobiography, *Senator Al*, as he is affectionately known to some New Yorkers, shares the emotional pain of being visually neglected as a child. At 6 years old he was already labeled a hopeless case. The hurt that D'Amato suffered was profound, and he remembers it to this day. His mother finally accepted the risks of surgery and, at age 10, he was operated on at Brooklyn Ear and Eye Hospital.

After recovering from strabismus surgery, young Al excitedly told his mother that he could really see for the first time. He cites this episode as the beginning of a new life.

"After my eyes were uncrossed, it took more than two years for my mind to catch up with my new sensations. It would be more than two years before I could really read."<sup>1</sup>

Alfonse D'Amato ultimately succeeded at Syracuse Law School and carved a niche in politics that included heading the Whitewater Investigation. Unfortunately, there are many children

with strabismus who do not have the perseverance or resourcefulness that pulled Alfonse through. This prompted me to pen the letter to Senator D'Amato that follows:

July 26, 1995

Senator Alfonse D'Amato  
520 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator D'Amato:

I am an Assistant Professor at the State University of New York, State College of Optometry, and have published a textbook on children's vision. I was skimming your book in Barnes & Noble when the chapter on "Childhood" jumped out at me, and I bought it to devour at home. As fascinating as the entire book is, I was particularly intrigued by the account of your childhood visual difficulties. At your convenience, I would like to speak with you (or correspond further) to learn more of your experience.

From the description of your eyes being "horribly crossed from birth," I presume that you had a condition known as strabismus. You go on to state that even with your glasses you were "half-blind" and couldn't see the blackboard from the front of the room.

It is fortunate that you had surgery as a 10-year-old that made such a profound difference in your sight. It is sad, however, that it took two years of self-exploration to discover how to use your vision after surgery when this effort should have been guided and accelerated by a vision specialist. We are constantly striving to educate the public and

other professionals about the interrelationship of vision and learning.

To this day, the majority of eye surgeons and educators ignore or discount the impact of visual disorders on learning to read. Although surgical technique has improved in the last 50 years, the attitude toward facilitating children's visual development remains archaic.

Sincerely,

Leonard J. Press, O.D., FCOVD, FAAO

### References

1. D'Amato A. *Power, pasta and politics: the world according to Senator Al D'Amato*. New York: Hyperion, 1995.

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