

Mastering her blindness

Sindy Puckett ready for new challenges

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Sindy Puckett

Profession: Seeking position as college English professor Education: GED, bachelor's degree in journalism from Lincoln University, Master of Arts in English from Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau Civic Involvement: ABLE (Adult Basic Learning Education), Leader Dogs for the Blind

In matching cap and gown, a blond Labrador walked alongside Sindy Puckett as she accepted her master's degree from Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) last month.

That was the last major event for the pair, as Eleanor, now 7, will retire this summer.

"I've worked her really hard; college life is stressful on a dog," Puckett said.

But Eleanor was a source of confidence for Puckett as she was the first legally-blind person to earn a master's degree from SEMO.

In July, Puckett will meet her new service dog through Leader Dogs for the Blind, with help from the Jefferson City Host Lions.

And then, she hopes to find a college-level teaching position in Mid-Missouri.

"Having conquered school, I'm not afraid of the work world," Puckett said.

She even is developing aspirations for a Ph.D. in the future.

"I really want to work that normal job," Puckett said.

She said she had two choices in life — to let her disability be a hindrance, let others take care of her and live a mediocre life. Or, as she chose, she could live life.

"That sounded a lot more fun," Puckett said.

Puckett was born with congenital cataracts, a clouding of the lens of the eye.

She also has overcome mild cerebral palsy on her right side, which made learning difficult when she was younger.

The best thing for her eyes is plenty of rest to keep the cell production functioning.

That was hard for a college student's lifestyle.

As a full-time master student, Puckett had nine hours per week of in-class time per semester. But in between, the demand on the English major included reading at least 17 novels each semester, plus writing the papers.

Compiling her 94-page thesis, "Comparing American and Caribbean Slave Narratives," required a lot of help to make it through in four semesters.

"Read aloud" computer software was a great aid. And she has a screen reader on her computer, which enlarges a document.

She had permission to audio record lectures and her textbooks came in audio format.

Recent technology allowed her to highlight excerpts she would like to return to later.

And she even had a Game Boy-sized viewer to help her see the blackboard and capture images to enlarge later.

"I use those a lot," Puckett said. "It's easier than finding someone to read to you on the time schedule I had."

The equipment is expensive; yet she couldn't have made it through the reading-intensive English program without it.

So, Rehabilitation Services for the Blind, which provided most of her assistance, has been a great aid.

"The program is not just to give you things," Puckett said of the state-supported program.

"The purpose is to help you become as independent as you can be.

"It evens the playing field, as if you had been sighted."

That's what Puckett wants now, to have a career that supports her so she does not need government assistance. "This is me taking responsibility for myself, like any other student does," Puckett said. What made her particularly happy was when a professor would comment

they "forgot you were blind," Puckett said. The technology is not without imperfections. "I push through the struggles because in the end I know I'll get it done," Puckett said. Her faith in God has been a foundation. "I know things will not always be easy," Puckett said. "But I'm here for a reason." Part of that reason may be to make a difference for someone who comes after her.

Being the first legally-blind student at Southeast Missouri State University to graduate with a master's degree could be a first step.

"Maybe I can help someone believe in themselves," she said.

Many times Puckett met with discouraging words from educators and peers, telling her what she could not do.

After eighth grade, she was home-schooled, earning her GED in 1999. In 2001, she headed to Lincoln University for a bachelor's degree in journalism.

"Along the way, teachers told me I'd never get a master's," Puckett said. "I was determined to prove them wrong."

"I may do some things differently; but I'm as capable and smart as anyone.

"I just have a little, yellow lab that tags along." The same positive attitude that helped her reach her educational goal will be what she needs to make it through her job search. Ideally, Puckett would like to teach English at the college level. "I want to be like the professors at SEMO, who helped me, who pushed to get the best out of you," Puckett said. "I hope I can do that for someone else."





Sindy Puckett hugs her Labrador leader dog, Eleanor, along the handicap-accessible walking path at Runge Nature Center, a path the two walk often. Kris Wilson/News Tribune



Courtesy photo
Sindy Puckett received a master's degree from Southeast Missouri University last month.