

Lean on Me

For Jennifer and Phil Rothschild, one spouse's disability brings surprising blessings.

By Dawn Zemke

"How do I look?" Jennifer Rothschild holds out her arms, patiently awaiting inspection. Setting aside the newspaper, her husband, Phil, carefully examines her from head to toe, smoothing a stray lock of hair and dabbing at a misplaced fleck of mascara before declaring, "Beautiful."

Of course that's what every wife wants to hear. But for Jennifer her husband's response isn't so much about making her feel good; it's about making sure she really *does* look okay—something she can't determine for herself, since she's blind. At age 15 Jennifer was diagnosed with a rare disease, retinitis pigmentosa, that caused the deterioration of her retinas. With only a limited ability to sense light from dark, Jennifer is now blind. So, Phil has become her mirror. He applies Jennifer's nail polish, picks out her clothing, and checks her hair and make-up each morning. "Thankfully he's not color blind!" Jennifer jokes. But then she admits, "He's saved me from some embarrassing situations. Like the time I nearly went out of the house with lip liner on my eyes and eye liner on my lips!"

Ignorance *is* bliss—at first

Philip and Jennifer met in the early 1980s at Palm Beach Atlantic College in Florida, where Jennifer was studying psychology and Phil, who was a year ahead of her, was studying business management. Jennifer was immediately attracted to Phil's charismatic personality—though he insists it was actually his hair. "I had a big, bushy Afro, and Jennifer had long black hair," Phil says with a grin. "We were Sonny and Cher!"

For his part, Phil recalls being impressed by Jennifer's spirit. "I'd see her walking through the cafeteria with a friend, and I knew her eyesight was terrible and getting worse by the day. She was beautiful, but also spunky, witty, and smart. I just knew we'd complement each other, and I wanted to take care of her."

They dated off and on over the next few years. Then in the spring of Jennifer's senior year, Phil proposed. Though they knew their marriage would face difficulties created by Jennifer's eventual blindness, Phil had no doubts—and so neither did Jennifer. "It was never a concern for me," he says. "Jennifer was smart and talented, and I knew she had so much to offer. Losing her eyesight was something we'd make the most of and rise above. And although it's been difficult at times, together we've been able to do that with God's grace."

"Phil's an eternal optimist," Jennifer says, smiling. "The word *problem* doesn't exist. In his dictionary, it's called *opportunity*. When he chooses to be committed, he's totally committed. And he's resourceful. I was confident he'd do whatever it took to make our marriage work." And sometimes ignorance really *is* bliss. "Of course, we didn't know in a practical, day-to-day way what it was really going to mean for me to be totally blind and raise children and be a wife," Jennifer admits. "And in some ways that was a blessing because we were committed no matter what." Shortly after Jennifer's graduation, on August 9, 1986, they were married. Despite Jennifer and Phil's optimism and certainty they were meant to be together, their marriage brought its share of adjustments. "We had all the ordinary challenges every married person experiences, because they're part of the 'becoming one' process," recalls Jennifer, "but our adjustment was multi-layered."

Their biggest hurdle was non-verbal communication. A wink of an eye, a hand gesture, or a facial expression can totally change the meaning of a comment. But Jennifer didn't have the benefit of seeing those actions. Even silence could be misconstrued. "I'd assume his silence meant something negative, whereas he could have been smiling," says Jennifer. "So we learned quickly—and through frustration—how important the nonverbals were and how those were not an option for us." As a result, Phil grew to be descriptive and clear in his communication, sometimes going so far as adding, "I say that with a wink, honey," or "I say that with all seriousness."

But communication was just one of the challenges facing the couple. For Phil, sacrifice was a daily struggle. Having a blind wife placed more demands on him than most husbands. Along with mowing the lawn and taking out the garbage, his responsibilities included acting as Jennifer's chauffeur, ironing her clothes, painting her nails, and cutting her food.

Though on the surface it might appear Phil had the greater adjustment, Jennifer faced difficult issues of her own. "Just because I struggle with blindness doesn't mean I'm virtuous in every other aspect of my life," she admits. "As a wife, I had to learn patience during the times I had to wait for Phil's help—something my blindness makes me deal with more rigorously than most people."

Inevitably, Phil's struggle to sacrifice would come up against Jennifer's lack of patience, resulting in some strong disagreements. "If the closet was messy, I'd assume that was an indictment on how Phil valued me," Jennifer explains. "It's dumb when I think about it now."

Looking back, she's now able to pinpoint the real source of their struggles at that time. "Believe it or not, they had nothing to do with my blindness," she says. "It was all selfishness and immaturity."

"When we'd have arguments, we'd stew over them," Phil agrees. "I'd go into my office and stew about it, and Jennifer would go into the bedroom and stew. And we'd let it fester."

So what was the turning point? A healthy dose of growing up, they agree—on both their parts.

"Phil's heart has softened, and I think part of that comes from maturing," Jennifer says. "We've matured emotionally and spiritually. As much as I hate to admit it, I really gave the man a run for his money back then. I didn't make it easy for him to be gentle with me because I often acted selfishly toward him. But as we made conscious choices to love God more and walk with him, it positively affected our marriage."

"We learned to back off each other and not have such high expectations," Phil says. "To deal with the big issues, and with everything else give grace. If my side of the closet isn't clean, in light of eternity, it's no big deal."

Tandem bikes and marked cards

Despite the difficulties Jennifer's blindness has brought to their relationship, both Jennifer and Phil agree that over the years it has also strengthened their marriage, teaching them on a practical level the value of interdependence. Whether dealing with the daily tasks of running a household or parenting their two sons (Clayton, 18, and Connor, 9), the couple have been forced to rely on each other and think beyond their own needs.

"We had some pragmatic challenges," says Jennifer. "Phil changed his share of diapers at first, but I could still do those things—I just had my own systems for doing them." Jennifer recalls pinning jingle bells on the boys' backs when they became mobile so she'd know where they were. "It worked perfectly! Our house was full of jingle bells all day long."

Though there's much Jennifer can't do, she's tenacious in finding ways around her limitations, such as riding a tandem bike, taking nature walks with Phil and the kids, and playing Uno with a "marked deck" she's rigged with stickers.

"Working around my blindness has added a strong dynamic to our family," Jennifer explains. "The whole family has learned a new degree of sacrifice because we all have to wait at times to get our needs met. I see my blindness as something God mercifully allowed to help us walk with him in ways we wouldn't have otherwise."

For Phil, Jennifer's strength in dealing with her blindness has been inspirational. "Jennifer's tenaciousness has taught me that if I trust God with my life and with my marriage, both will thrive. She's an encouragement to me."

That interdependence has made their marriage a true partnership in every sense of the word. "Because Phil does things for me that husbands with a sighted wife would never think of doing, it's caused us to connect on a deeper level," Jennifer says. "I absolutely trust him in every area of my life."

And Phil depends on Jennifer as much as she does on him. "I'm not the most organized person," he admits. "I forget and misplace things. She keeps me organized."

Jennifer explains that because of her sightlessness, she relies heavily on her memory. That includes knowing exactly where everything is. "When it comes to finding things, I'm Phil's eyes," she says. "He's constantly asking me, 'Where's my ... ?' or 'Have you seen my ... ?'"

Preparing for "the next thing"

That partnership extends beyond their marriage to Jennifer's writing and speaking ministry, in which Phil, a professor of entertainment management at Missouri State University, plays a crucial role. Back in college, Jennifer led worship and sang in local churches. When she and Phil married, he encouraged her to make a professional recording. That first cassette tape created more opportunities to sing in new venues and earned Jennifer radio play across their home state of Florida. Soon she was invited to lead worship with well-known Christian speakers such as Beth Moore—which opened the door for Jennifer to share her story. Suddenly she was receiving requests to speak as well as sing.

Jennifer admits she initially felt unqualified for such a task. But Phil's belief in her was solid. "When my first speaking invitation came, Phil took the call and said, 'Sure she'll speak.' He has always had more confidence in me than I've had in myself. To me, that shows what kind of man he is, and affirms that he's the one God chose for me."

Phil's business expertise and his belief in Jennifer's gifts make him the perfect person to be her business manager. "My role is to believe in Jennifer and her message and to find opportunities not just to share that message but to grow and develop." In a sense, that's also how he considers his role as husband.

God has continued to use their shared gifts to expand their ministry. Jennifer has authored several books—her most recent is *Self Talk, Soul Talk*—and this year the couple launched a women's conference ministry called Fresh Grounded Faith (www.FreshGroundedFaith.com).

"It's cool how God orchestrates things," Phil muses. "You learn, you grow, and that opens greater doors. You take a risk, step into a situation, stretch, and when you're faithful in small things, God prepares opportunities for even larger things."

"And if you treat every small thing as if it's the only thing," Jennifer adds, "if you give it 100 percent stewardship and 100 percent obedience, you're prepared for when God gives you the next thing."

Fueled by faith

After 21 years of tackling "the next thing" together, Jennifer and Phil are still going strong. They credit their shared faith and commitment for their ability not only to persevere as a couple, but to grow together.

"Our faith is a reservoir of hope and tenacity for our marriage," Jennifer says. "Without it, I don't know how people stay married. Having faith in common gives us the fuel we need to walk together and with God."

That fuel has served them well as they've navigated more than the average share of obstacles in their marriage. "Many of our college friends' marriages have crashed and burned," Phil says. "People give up. They think it's greener on the other side, and it's not. You've got to stick with it."

Jennifer agrees. "When you feel as if you can't do it, you still can. You may not be able to do it in your own strength, but you can do it through Christ who strengthens you. That applies to my blindness and to having a thriving marriage. In either case, true, vibrant life is in Christ."