

Blind and determined

— By Don Long

For most of us, putting the words “blind” and “photographer” together is a dichotomy: mutually exclusive or contradictory.

Don't say that to **Robert Wright**.

This Seattle, Wash.-based photographer is legally blind.

And he's a man with a mission. He wants manufacturers to stop ignoring those with disabilities. They

are consumers, too. Just because they have some handicap not experienced by those of us who are fully “abled,” explains Wright, doesn't mean they can't enjoy the technology. By not marketing to the disabled, manufacturers and retailers are missing out, he contends, keeping the disabled in the dark [!] about what they could be buying and using.

It's difficult to label Wright. He's not a pro shooter in the classic sense or definition. He doesn't make his living from photography, yet it is one of the foundation pieces of his life and his work.

To explain, we need to back up a bit.

Wright lost his vision before he really even noticed he had it. He was in a car accident when he was a baby, just a few weeks old, and a blow to his head robbed him of his vision, damaging his optic nerve and parts of his brain. This resulted in some paralysis to his right side and the loss of some sense of touch.

His visual acuity is 20/400; with glasses it “improves” to 20/100 and 20/200. This means what you and I can see at 100 or 200 feet, Wright can only see at 20 feet. In other words, before those of us who are significantly nearsighted put on our glasses to hit roughly 20/20, we're seeing what Wright sees when he is wearing glasses. A big blur.

All this slowed him down, but didn't stop him.

Because of his poor sense of touch, he couldn't learn Braille, so couldn't go to schools for the blind. It took him a while but eventually he graduated from college with a degree in business and speech communications.

Many times he was told, “you can't do it.” He ignored those comments. Both his mother and stepfather were educators so, as Wright says, “education was in my blood.” This commitment to learning meant he had to give 200 percent to get 100

Continued on page 28



Robert Wright.



Wright's images of the Luxor Las Vegas hotel.



Wright's image of the Golden Gate Bridge.



This tower, captured by Wright, is located in Arizona's Grand Canyon.



The U.S. Navy's Blue Angels jets on the runway, captured by Wright.

knew if he was doing things properly.

While attending **Olympic College**, he took a course in journalism, and that included photography. He learned how to develop black-and-white film, and had to figure out how to use and focus the enlarger.

He was hooked.

He bought a **Canon AE-1 SLR**, a more advanced camera, although he was still pretty much restricted to infinity focus. Gradually, he began to accumulate not only knowledge but also data. What worked. What didn't.

In the late '70s, he was into biking. Once, he decided to bike around a major lake, a task that would have meant doubling the distance of his best trip to that point. Fifty miles later, he was knackered, practically collapsing at the end of the trip. His perseverance garnered him some publicity. Not only did he enjoy the recognition, people began to know who he was, and he saw a unique role for himself.

"You don't grow up thinking you're going to be a role model," he says. But he took to the task with passion.

Which brings us back to his advice to manufacturers and retailers: by not marketing to the disabled, they are "controlling the degree to which people with disabilities become handicapped."

His prime example is autofocus. Manufacturers had the technology to let the camera focus for the shooter. Had they told me, says Wright, "I wouldn't have had to wait years" to use it.

He adds that he wants manufacturers to realize that, if they market to the handicapped community, they will use the products.

Data collection was his way of gathering information to provide others with the knowledge they needed to get good pictures. He created benchmarks for exposure, for example. And so, he notes, you have

percent, to fight for what he believed in.

When he was a kid, he was given a **Kodak** 35mm camera by his stepfather, who obviously saw something in this teenager.

The first camera he bought for himself was a simple **Yashica**, which offered an up and down arrow to guide exposures. The problem was, the processor would fix the exposure when printing, so Wright never really

a blind person teaching the sighted community how to take pictures, “because the sighted community never took a leadership role.”

Society, he explains, is saying “you can’t do it. We are not being encouraged.”

It isn’t enough, he continues, “for me to say you can do it; they need to be shown how.” This is where his website, <http://www.wrightimages.com>, enters the frame – a website, he proudly notes, that he designed. It’s where Wright provides so much of the data he collects.

Not only does he provide links to various manufacturers’ websites, he also provides travel information, hotel information, and sightseeing opportunities. It’s a clearinghouse of information, he advises, for those with disabilities.

He notes the excitement one

legally blind woman expressed when she saw his website. “It was like I had opened her eyes to a totally new universe of information. When people learn of what I have done, many of them react in like manner.”

His website is also where some of his images come to roost.

Okay, so he’s not the world’s greatest photographer. He’s not laying that claim. But the very fact that he’s taking pictures – and they’re every bit as good as those taken by many of his sighted fellow shooters – tells you he’s no wallflower.

In fact, if he had half a chance, he’d love to be a travel photographer. “Because I can’t drive, travel has a premium for me.”

You may well have seen Wright at **PMA@CES**, bopping around the show floor on his scooter. He was there collecting data for his website.

Getting there, or to any other show, isn’t easy for him. He’s financially dependent on donations and support from others to supplement his government benefits.

Today, Wright is using a **Pentax K5** DSLR. He’d love to go beyond 300mm, but he’d need a lens with a maximum aperture of f/2.8 to be able to use it. “That makes photography beyond 300mm out of reach for those with handicaps.”

As for using a digital camera rather than a film camera, Wright says he loves the ability to mix ISO settings, and the ability to capture hundreds of images on the same card.

He has two areas he wants to explore. The first is getting good flash exposures, the other is lens filters.

Knowing his performance to this point, it may take him a little while, but he’ll learn. ■



Wright captured this image of the Seattle night sky.