

MICHAEL BENSON OF MANASQUAN HELPS THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED EXPERIENCE THE SIGHTS THAT LAST A LIFETIME



“The other thing that was very difficult was to live in the day. I lived in some made up future that my mind would tell me.”

MICHAEL BENSON
Founder, VEF/B-Causes

MARK R. SULLIVAN THE COAST STAR

The Visual Experience Foundation is hosting a Surfing for Vision event on Aug. 18 in Long Branch.

Finding his true vision

BY ALLISON PERRINE
THE COAST STAR

Michael Benson has always dealt with vision impairment. Shortly after his birth, in 1961, he became the youngest baby in the world to have surgery for congenital glaucoma. At 16, he was told that he should start learning braille to prepare for a time when he might go blind.

“I had been taking a lot of medicine as a kid and had gone to the doctor, but at 16-years-old I needed both of my eyes operated on and that was a tough age to be told that possibly I should start learning braille,” he said.

During this same period, his parents were getting divorced and several knee surgeries prevented him from participating in wrestling.

In hindsight, he said, those situations changed the way he thought about major life choices.

“I had to make as much money as I could. I was a real workaholic,” he said. “What would I do financially if I went blind? Or, in relationships, maybe I didn’t hold out for who I was supposed to be with because if you didn’t care that I had glaucoma, then maybe I should just settle because I don’t want to be blind and alone.”

Sometimes he even found himself thinking that he would take his own life if he were to lose his sight.

“Real thoughts,” he recalled, adding, “They’re very real thoughts that people go through when they’re diagnosed with an eye disease and there’s no cure.”

He described how preoccupation with his prognosis began to cloud his whole outlook on life, recalling that it was “very difficult to live in the day.”

“I lived in some made up future that my mind would tell me,” he said.

As an example, he said, “People would tell me all the time, ‘Michael, you have great blue eyes.’ My eyes

sparkle a little bit ... and people meant that nice and I would say thank-you, but then what would happen internally is I couldn’t focus on what was happening before me.

“I remember being at a Yankee game and someone saying that to me and the next thing you know, I’m thinking, ‘Well if you only knew I’ve got an appointment coming up ... and if my pressure is up I could use another surgery. I could lose more vision and eventually, I’m gonna go blind.’”

Then the crack of a bat would bring him back to the game, he said.

“And I look up and the next thing you know, three innings would go by ... the part of the disease that no one was talking about was stealing chunks of my ‘now,’” he said.

To stay present, Mr. Benson started “burning” memories — taking a minute or two to feel all of the other senses so that he could keep these memories for a lifetime, should he ever completely lose his vision.

“I would close my eyes ... and I would bring up the smells, the sounds, which way the wind was blowing — just become really, really, present of all the other senses,” he said.

“I did this because if I ever did lose my sight, I wouldn’t lose my vision. I can close my eyes now and I can be on an elephant in Thailand, I can close my eyes and I can describe a place in the Grand Canyon that is just absolutely amazing,” Mr. Benson said.

The power of the method eventually led him to start



MARK R. SULLIVAN THE COAST STAR

Michael Benson, of Manasquan, is the founder of the Visual Experience Foundation and B-Causes.

“... If I ever did lose my sight, I wouldn’t lose my vision.”

MICHAEL BENSON Founder, VEF/B-Causes

the Visual Experience Foundation [VEF], a nonprofit which provides “memories-of sight-visits” to last a lifetime for children and adults who have been diagnosed with vision loss.

VISUAL EXPERIENCE FOUNDATION

Despite a successful sales career, he became convinced that he was meant to leave the field and follow his dreams to help other people. The realization was a spiritual experience, he said.

“It was really out of a prayer and I was like, ‘Is this really what I’m supposed to be doing with my life?’”

Repeating the question to himself gave him “pins and needles,” Mr. Benson said.

While sitting on a plane, he heard a voice telling him, “It’s time to show people what you’ve been doing.”

He decided to share his experience to help others. Before that, Mr. Benson said, he never talked to other people about his eyes.

Before that, he added, “I wanted nothing, by the way, to do with blind people. They scared me. I didn’t want to look under that rug, I stayed away from that. It was almost like not wanting

to open your mail because your bills came in.”

But after that moment, he began seeking involvement with the blind and/or visually impaired. And in 2014 he started the VEF.

One important location to the VEF is Niagara Falls. Mr. Benson made his first visit when Cathy Lampard Kincy, who is now his fiancée, encouraged him to travel there with her, saying that it was an important place for him to ‘burn’ to his memory.

The result was an impactful experience, he said, one that he decided

others needed to have as well.

First, Mr. Benson brought Jonathan Heimowitz, a 20-year-old Florida man who had diminishing vision, to Niagara Falls.

“It was almost like ‘Make a Wish’ for people going blind,” he said. “What do you want to see before you lose your vision?”

Now, Mr. Benson brings several people a year to Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon or other sites to help them see things to last a lifetime, even when their vision is gone.

The mission has its challenges, he said.

It’s not easy to attract donations or get help from other nonprofits, all of which are also competing for financial support.

And fundraising was not what was occupying his mind.

“I wasn’t thinking about all the work, staying up at night ... I was thinking about taking Jonathan on a visual experience that would last him a lifetime.”

B-CAUSES

Eventually, however, the challenge of fundraising led him to start B-Causes.

On its website, B-Causes is described as “a purpose-driven platform that has been formed to help thousands of causes raise the funds that are needed to carry out their missions of lifting lives and helping others.”

The platform is free,” Mr. Benson said, and “offers multiple strategies allowing each cause to increase their reach, raise ongoing funds,” and help others at the same time.

For more information about the VEF, visit www.visualexperiencefoundation.org.

For more information about B-Causes, visit www.b-causes.com.

Allison Perrine can be reached at aper-rine@thecoaststar.com or at 732-223-0076 ext. 23.