



Blind AND BULLIED, BUT NOT BEATEN

After losing her vision, **Molly Burke** found herself in an even darker place. Now she's giving hope to anyone who's ever felt victimized—and showing them how to fight back

BY SYDNEY LONEY

Molly Burke begins her speech with a blind joke. There is polite, hesitant laughter from the packed gymnasium at St. Joseph's College, an all-girls school in Toronto. Is it okay to laugh at a blind joke, even if the teller is blind? But Molly keeps them coming. "You're the most attractive audience I've ever seen," she quips.

Molly stands, petite and poised, under the basketball net at one end of the gym. At 19, she is barely five feet tall, with fine, expressive features, long dark hair and a wary smile. Microphone in hand, she

stares sightlessly out across her audience and, icebreakers over, tells her story without faltering, even when she gets to the tough parts. The rustling of 650 teenage girls in navy sweaters and kilts quickly subsides.

First, Molly describes what it's like not being able to tell shampoo from conditioner in the shower, or how hard it is to put together a matching outfit when you can't see your reflection in a mirror. But when she gets to the part about the bullying—and the one incident in particular >

that made her see suicide as her only way out—several girls cover their mouths with their hands. According to the latest stats, at least one in three of Molly's audience members has been bullied, too. And while the girls were uneasy about laughing at her jokes, Molly shows them how the students at a school much like their own had no such reservations when it came to bullying a blind girl.

Molly wasn't born blind. She and her brother, Brady, grew up in a pretty brick two-storey in the small, well-to-do town of Oakville, Ont. As a child, Molly climbed every structure in the playground, was an enthusiastic soccer player and rode her red two-wheeler with tasselled handlebars around the neighbourhood. But, even during those early years, there were signs that something wasn't quite right with her eyes.

As a toddler, Molly's depth perception was off; she'd reach for a cookie and miss. She also bumped into things a lot and didn't see well in the dark. "Molly always wanted books held close and under a light when we'd read to her," says her mother, Niamh (a Gaelic name, pronounced Neeve). "I found myself hanging a little closer to her—it was just an instinctive feeling that I had to be nearby." At first, the doctors weren't overly concerned. "I asked one doctor what we should do and he said, 'Well, just give her more light,'" Niamh says. "So we thought, 'Okay, that's simple, we'll give her more light.'"

When Molly was four and a half, someone at the end of an ophthalmoscope finally noticed freckles on the back of her retina. Molly was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a rare, degenerative eye disease that would eventually dim her world into darkness. "I remember having this sense of very deep sadness," says Molly's father, Peter. "One of the thoughts going through my mind at the time was whether she'd ever be able to see the faces of her own children. It just suddenly hit me, the meaning of what could happen."

Niamh and Peter tried to make Molly's childhood as normal as possible, but it wasn't easy. Things that other kids took for granted, like Halloween, were especially hard. When Molly's friends went trick-or-treating in a pack of princesses and caped crusaders, Peter had to take Molly on her own, guiding her from house to house and counting the steps up to each door. "Halloween just seemed to tear at our hearts the most," Niamh says. "No matter how happy and okay we tried to make it, it always seemed a little sad and lonely." But they took the advice of their daughter's doctor, letting Molly decide what she could—and couldn't—do, and when it was time to give up the things she loved, like soccer. "Whenever she got to that point, we always tried to find something else," Peter says. "We'd start thinking, 'What activity can she do now that she can maybe do for the rest of her life?'"

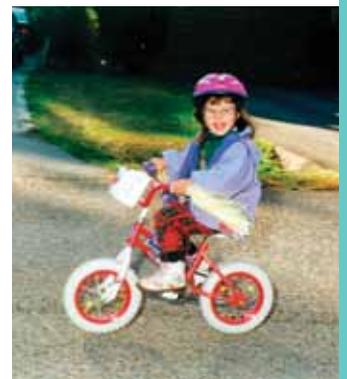
Molly learned to ride horses at a therapeutic camp and attended a ski school where she was guided to the bottom of the hill with verbal commands. She revelled in the rush of wind and the feel of snowflakes, like cold cobwebs, on her cheeks. Molly even bested her father on the slopes, skiing black diamond runs, fearless and fast. Her desire to do what everyone else was doing was paramount, despite her fading vision. Not long after her diagnosis, Molly was



TESTING THE LIMITS
From top: Doctors realize Molly is going blind; on the soccer field; Molly on her bike.



"I REFUSED TO PRACTISE BRAILLE—IT MADE ME DIFFERENT, AND I JUST WANTED TO BE LIKE THE OTHER KIDS."



running with her friends in the playground when she slammed, face first, into a metal pole that everyone else had seen and run around. After that, she started having trouble sleeping. "The playground accident was a pivotal moment for Molly," Peter says. "It shook her confidence and made her realize she was vulnerable."

Before long, Molly—and the kids at school—began to notice she was different. When her classmates started learning French, Molly was taken to another room to learn Braille. "At the time, I just thought, 'This is weird, nobody else is doing this,'" she says. "I refused to practise Braille—it made me different, and I just wanted to be like the other kids." Molly did her best to carry on as normal. She became adept at navigating the world with the confidence of someone fully sighted, even memorizing the eye charts at the doctor's >

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FACING CHALLENGES

Left: Molly learning how to ski. Right: With her family, who helped her get through the toughest times.



office so that nobody realized how quickly her vision was deteriorating. But by age 13, Molly had lost her colours completely: Blue, brown, black and grey all blurred into one. Her world became increasingly shadowy and unfamiliar, and even bright, sunny mornings looked more and more like dusk.

That October, her annual eye exam began as it always did: Molly's name was called and her doctor greeted her, as she had for the last seven years, with a cheery "How's my princess today?" But then she sat down with Molly's file in her hands. "None of us expected what happened," Molly says. "She told us they didn't know how much longer I'd be able to see. I started to cry." On the way home in the car, Molly looked out at the blurred shapes of trees and telephone poles, wondering how much longer she'd see them.

When she got home and called her best friend to break the news, the response was, "Oh. That sucks." Molly could have been calling to say she had the flu. She got the same reaction from the rest of her friends at school. "They couldn't understand why I wasn't the happy, bubbly Molly I'd been before – and it was hard to expect them to, because I didn't understand either. I didn't know why I couldn't be happy, why I didn't want to go out, why all I wanted to do was sleep."

By November, the rumours had started among staff and students alike: Molly was faking it; she was an attention seeker. Although she had a cane, Molly got around fairly well and didn't exhibit any of the 'blindisms' common to those who have never been sighted. Instead of sitting with her head down, hair falling around her face, Molly has impeccable posture, and when you speak to her, she turns to 'look' at you. Her parents were told she has a rare, almost bat-like gift for mobility, using echolocation to find her way in the dark. "When we walk down the street, Molly knows when we pass a tree," Peter says. "I once asked her how, and she told me, 'Dad, everything makes a noise, you just have to listen.'" But her ability often made things more challenging, because it confused people, Niamh says. "It was almost as though she was a little too good at getting around." For Molly, school became a daily struggle to maintain her dignity. Her once tight circle of friends dwindled until there

was no one left, and that's when the bullying began.

On Molly's grade 8 school trip to Ottawa, the friends she'd planned to share a room with no longer wanted her in it. When her teachers assigned her to the room anyway, the girls made her sleep under a desk. Molly turned 14 on the trip, and her roommates promised to make her look pretty. She couldn't see that instead of applying makeup, they wrote on her face, and the "product" they put in her hair was whipped cream. "At that point, I felt so low that I didn't have the confidence to stand up for myself. I wasn't good at confrontation, and I felt cornered." Molly went to her guidance counsellor for help, only to be told she had brought the bullying on herself. "That's when I really realized I was in a bad situation: Not only was I being bullied, but nobody believed me."

Molly thought getting a guide dog might make things better. During March Break, she went to the Mira Foundation in Montreal, a guide dog school that takes students under age 16. "Getting a guide dog isn't easy," she says. "People think, 'Oh, you're blind, you get a dog!' But it doesn't work like that." Molly had to live at the school, being tested every day to show she was capable of doing everything from preparing her own meals to crossing the street. She had to prove she could care for both herself and a dog. Molly was the youngest in her class and the only one to pass.

Yet even with Gypsy, a Lab-Bernese mountain dog cross, by her side, things didn't improve at school. Shortly after returning from Montreal, Molly fell down a flight of stairs but refused to go to the doctor. "I figured this would just be another thing they'd say I was faking," she says. Molly walked on her injured foot for two weeks, until she wound up in a cast. She had to leave Gypsy at home, relying instead on her peers to guide her. Molly's teachers had to assign her reluctant classmates to the task, and one day in May, the job fell to her circle, the group of girls who had been her closest friends only eight months before. When it was time for lunch, they informed her that they weren't hungry. Instead of leading her to the cafeteria, they took Molly outside. "I was hungry, but it wasn't up to me. I figured, 'Well, at least I'm hanging out with someone.'"

It was sunny and warm, and Molly started to sweat in her heavy polyester school uniform as she struggled to keep >

up on her crutches. First the girls led her down the hill she'd tobogganed on every winter, then across the field she and her brother used to play soccer on. When she felt roots underfoot, she knew they had entered the woods at the edge of the field. By then, she was hot and out of breath. Molly sat down under the trees with her crutches beside her—and one of the girls grabbed them. Laughing, her classmates ran deeper into the woods. She heard someone suggest rolling the crutches in dirt; another voice said to roll them in water first so the dirt would stick. Finally, she heard a loud crack—the girls had broken her crutches against a tree. Molly heard the sound of their laughter fade as they ran back to class, leaving her alone and helpless on the ground. “I panicked. I couldn't see, I couldn't stand and I didn't know what to do. I tried listening to see if I could hear anybody around, but there was no one. Then I remembered I had put my cell-phone in my jacket pocket.”

Niamh was at work when her phone rang. Her daughter was sobbing and talking fast. “I just said, ‘Molly, slow down; I'm coming to get you.’” Niamh ran to her car and drove to the school. She doesn't remember stopping for lights, or signs, or anything, really, although she knows she must have. When she got to the school, she didn't go in. She just ran: down the hill and across the soccer field and to the woods. When she found Molly, she scooped her daughter up into her arms and carried her back to the car. Together they decided that Molly would never go back.

At first, Niamh didn't tell anyone what had happened at the school—not the teachers, not even her husband. “Niamh got through it by herself,” Peter says. “I think she realized I would probably have gone ballistic.” Niamh used Molly's health, which had been poor, as an excuse to keep her home. Besides, there was only a month left of school, and they had already tried talking to her teachers so many times before. “I just couldn't do it anymore,” Niamh says. “It was enough. Everything was getting too out of control.”

So Niamh kept Molly at home—and watched her carefully. Before what happened in the woods, Molly had already begun cutting herself, wearing long sleeves and layers of bracelets to hide the marks on her arms. “It was scary, and I was ashamed, but I wanted to feel physical pain instead of emotional pain,” she says. “I felt so alone and sad. I just wanted not to exist.” Then Peter found searches for “how to kill yourself” on Molly's computer. “The doctor told my parents to take away sharp objects, pills and anything I could use to strangle myself,” Molly says. “I felt like I was in a bubble, constantly being watched. I wasn't even allowed to close my bedroom door.”

Molly's doctors told Niamh and Peter to do anything they could to bring joy back into her life. “I'd read a lot of books on positive thinking and knew I couldn't let my thoughts turn negative, because then I might crumble,” says Niamh. “I told Molly, ‘We've got to figure out what you need, what you want, what the next step is.’ And Molly knew. She said, ‘Mom, I'm never going back there; I need to find another school.’ So we immediately went out and looked at schools. Anything she came up with, I'd say, ‘Okay, we need to do something about it.’ I just kept reminding her: ‘There are ways out; you're not trapped.’”

Molly transferred to a school for the blind for grade 9. “I thought it would be a place where I could start focusing on myself and stop trying so hard to help everyone else understand.” And, at first, it was. Molly's greatest passion was music, and she started writing lyrics. “It was my healthy new way of getting emotions out that I didn't want inside me. I had felt so guilty about being depressed, but then I realized I needed to feel sad and angry, I needed to grieve the loss of the person I'd been, so I could become someone new.” Molly started singing in a band. And she started dating, something she'd been convinced would never happen. “One of the boys in my old school had told me, ‘No one would ever marry a blind girl, because it's like buying something that's already broken.’”

But before long, the bullying started again. “That's when I realized I wasn't being bullied because I'm different. There's no reason. It's not my haircut, or how I dress, it's just something in the

other person, and they've decided to target me.” At first, Molly considered leaving the school. Then she printed all the hurtful Facebook posts (she has software that lets her computer ‘talk’ to her), marched into the principal's office and asked for help. “I thought, ‘I've been through this; I've heard these things before, and the first time I ran. This time, I need to deal with it.’” The principal sat Molly down with the girl at the root of the bullying, and they talked about why what she said about Molly wasn't true, about the things they had in common. The two girls started having lunch together and still keep in touch.

Molly decided to switch back to a sighted school for grade 11. Rachel Stinson, a vision itinerant (a teacher trained to help the visually impaired), helped her transition back. Rachel could relate to Molly—her own parents had pulled her out of school because of bullying. “I remember being so broken down by it,” she says. “I thought by becoming a teacher I could prevent it from happening to other kids.” >

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Rachel visited Molly's new school and talked to her teachers about how they could best support her. But at the start of each class, it was Molly who stood up and said, "Hey, I'm Molly. I like shopping. I like boys. I like parties. I can't see, and I'm in your class, so please leave this seat empty for me." She knew it would be less effective coming from Rachel. "I wanted them to see that I was just an average kid, like them." In an attempt to create empathy among Molly's peers, Rachel blindfolded the students in her gym class, then sent them out to experience Molly's world. Once in the halls, they instantly became targets. Other students stuck their feet out to trip them, then stole some of the kids' hats. "I think we made a difference that day, but there's so much ignorance out there that it can feel like you're spinning your wheels in mud," Rachel says. Although Molly made lots of friends at her new school, the bullying never stopped completely. One day she was walking down the hall with her mother when a group of kids pushed a container of ketchup and fries into her path, calling out, "Hey, blind girl, watch where you're going," when she stepped in it. "I was used to it, but my mom was really upset. I just said, 'It's fine, Mom. This is what I deal with. But it's okay. I have friends. I have confidence. I believe in myself and I know I'm going somewhere in life.'"

Molly finished high school and contemplated college, but she still felt she had something to prove. Her brother, Brady, long a source of inspiration, had travelled to Africa to work in an orphanage. Molly wanted to do the same but couldn't find an organization that would take her. Then she discovered Me to We, created by the co-founders of Free the Children. Molly was invited to join one of their youth trips to Kenya to help build a school. While there, she spoke at a local girls' school—and discovered what she wanted to do next.

Last September, Molly joined Me to We's speakers' bureau and shared her story about blindness and bullying with 20,000 people at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto. Before she stepped onstage, one of her fellow speakers (Martin Sheen) pulled her aside and asked whether she was nervous. She was. He opened her hand and placed a rosary in it. "It's from Egypt and is made of olive pits and sterling silver," she says. "I've brought it with me to every We Day event since." During Molly's speech, the crowd rewarded her with two standing ovations. Her family were on their feet, too, clapping until their palms stung. "Seeing her speak was just... I was in awe," Peter says. "Molly has a real ability to inspire people and to help others who are going through something, whether it's a disability, or bullying, or a different set of challenges."

Molly was overwhelmed by the response from her audience. "Four years ago, no one even wanted to sit near me, and people thought I wasn't worth anything. Now there were 20,000 people on their feet supporting me. It was a really cool feeling." Whether she's speaking to thousands at a We Day event or telling her story in a school gymnasium, the response is the same.

Back in the gym at St. Joseph's College, Molly's audience is captivated. When she talks about her music, they chant her name until she gives in and sings the first verse of one of her songs, "Let It Go." Her voice is clear and lovely, and when she is done, the gym explodes. When she gets to the



BEST FRIENDS
Molly with her
guide dog, Gypsy.

Q & A part of her talk, the girls eagerly queue up at the mic. Molly gets the same questions every time: How do you put on makeup? (She uses a sticker code—a foam bump and a hard bump on an eyeshadow palette mean it's Satin Taupe—and a counting system for application: three swipes across her blush compact, then three across her cheek to ensure everything's even.) What does she see when she dreams? (Molly dreams in sounds, smells and emotions. Visual memories usually last only seven years, but Molly has already lost hers—she no longer remembers what she or her parents look like.) They also want to know what she is proud of, and that's a tough one.

Sitting with Gypsy's head on her lap in her bright, cheery apartment in Toronto, Molly considers the question. She is proud of overcoming her depression, of coming to terms with her blindness, of getting her own place. The apartment is proof of her independence. It smells subtly of lavender ("I burn incense because although I love candles, no one felt comfortable with me having them"), and everything has texture: The pillows on her sofa are covered in stones, shells and embroidery; even her mugs are decorated with raised bumps and swirls. There are also plenty of knick-knacks scattered about. "Because I don't get any visual stimulation, I like to pick things up, so I can appreciate the feel of them."

But most of all, Molly is proud of how she has taken all the hard things that have happened to her and used them to help other people. She has become an inspiration to the bullied and the bullies alike. "I've had kids come up to me afterwards and say, 'Thank you for helping me realize that it does get better, and that I might feel happy again one day.'" She's also been approached by bullies who tell her they didn't realize what they were doing, and that she's inspired them to change. Molly believes the only way to alter attitudes and prevent bullying is to create understanding and empathy by sharing stories like hers. After a recent speech, she was approached by a group of girls from her old school; one had a sister who'd been in Molly's class in grade 8. "The girl said, 'My sister told me to tell you she didn't know what you were going through. She said to tell you she's sorry.' It was an incredible moment for me, because if she's thinking that, maybe others are thinking it too." 🗣️