

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Memoir describes life of St. Louis man, shot while traveling, who lost his sight

By Dale Singer Special to the Post-Dispatch May 8, 2021

Imagine not being able to tell the value of the currency in your wallet, to distinguish the ones from the fives from the 10s from the 20s.

St. Louisan Bill Johnson didn't have to imagine such a dilemma, after being blinded in a random shooting on a business trip to Atlanta in July 1991 that killed two of his colleagues. At age 41, he had to start relearning many such skills, often adapting or adopting new ways of performing the tasks that most adults take for granted.

He learned the money lesson the hard way. Flying between St. Louis and Arkansas, where he was doing intensive rehabilitation, he wanted to tip a helpful airport skycap and asked whether the money he was handing over were singles. "Yes, sir," the man responded, and Johnson gave him four bills, only to discover later that they had been 20s.

So, he learned to keep the denominations straight like this: Fold \$5 bills in half, \$10 bills in half lengthwise and \$20 bills both ways. Leave the singles unfolded and put all the cash in your wallet to be able to identify later. Whenever you get change, ask the cashier to identify each bill, then fold it in the proper way.

Johnson's memoir, "[Snow Blind](#)," is filled with such learning experiences, as he moves surely and swiftly from his hospital bed to

his St. Louis County home to rehab in Arkansas and back to his job as a management consultant at KPMG in downtown St. Louis. Living alone, away from his ex-wife and their children, his goal is always self-reliance. He approaches each challenge with confidence.

“I didn’t deny that I couldn’t see,” he writes of his early days on the path to living on his own, “but I held an innate belief that my life was on track and would continue to progress forward. ... I couldn’t picture my life as a blind person, good or bad, and I didn’t have a step-by-step plan for getting from where I was to where I would be. I simply had a core belief that I was OK, and I wanted to take the next step forward.”



Johnson learned early on that the faint amount of light he could detect was likely to be as good as his sight would ever get. But his positive outlook and peace of mind propelled him as he learned basic life hacks needed to get along on his own: using a cane, taking a helper’s guiding elbow, even how to bend over without smacking his head into something. He didn’t want to be reduced to what he calls walking like Frankenstein, arms out in front to find and avoid anything in his path.

William Johnson Courtesy of the author

“Snow Blind” tells his story in clear, straightforward prose as he gains more abilities and more assurance that he can go even further. Along the way, he and his former hospital nurse begin a romance, and his life

If skiing is your thing, you'll probably enjoy his stories of conquering one run after another, with a bold message proclaiming "BLIND SKIER" on his orange bib; if not, the descriptions in that part of the book may be a little too detailed. But either way, "Snow Blind" is an inspiring story of a man whose confidence and upbeat attitude help him to survive harrowing circumstances and teach lessons that can benefit anyone.

"Had I not been shot; would life have been easier?" Johnson asks.
"Probably. Would I have been happier? That's questionable. One thing is certain: being shot and everything that happened as a result — all the trials and tribulations — have made me a far stronger and better person."