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Blind student teaches, bowls at UM

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Pershing M. McClean teaches in a manner most educators seldom employ, and if they do, it's only after years of experience.

McClean, in his first year as a graduate assistant at the University of Montana, does not use notes. He couldn't see them if he did, because he is blind.

It has been a long, hard grind for McClean, 50, who lost his sight four years ago. Formerly in electronics sales and management, McClean went to the Northwest Rehabilitation Center for the Blind in Seattle, Wash., and learned to read in Braille, type and achieve mobility in his new world.

Then he returned to the University and earned a bachelor's degree in business administration in only two years. He had attended UM in 1935-36 as an electronics major.

McClean's superior scholastic performance in his undergraduate years--a grade point average of 3.4 out of a 4.0 scale--earned him a graduate assistantship, mainly attained through the efforts of his adviser, Fred A. Henningsen, professor of accounting and finance at UM.

McClean said he would like to express appreciation for the aid of the Montana State Services for the Visually Handicapped during his undergraduate years.

This academic year, he began his battle with the books, as a student and instructor, teaching two classes in production management at UM and one in industrial economics at the Missoula Technical Center.

He said he tries "to say it like it is," as he compares the differences of real life business with pure theory. Thus, McClean's previous experiences in the business world come in handy because he can teach both practical and academic viewpoints.

(more)
McClean commented that he has not decided whether to teach or return to business upon receiving his master's degree. He said blindness scares employers because they cannot see how something can be done without vision. This reasoning, he said, is invalid because executives generally rely on secretaries to do their writing and paperwork.

Mrs. McClean and a work-study student, Harry Nelson of Great Falls, read for him. Some of the material is taped so that he can go back over it.

McClean takes examinations in a similar manner. Some are completely oral and others are done by tape recorder so he has an option of playing back what he has said to see if his answers were complete.

McClean has adjusted well to his handicapped world but finds it hard to establish with whom his is speaking, if he does not know the person well. He has an amazing knack for recognition but sometimes gets confused because he hears so many voices. "If people would just come up and say, 'Hi, Mac, Ray here,' it would be a lot easier to know who I'm talking to," he said.

Many people hesitate to talk to McClean, perhaps from fear they will embarrass him or hurt his feelings because of his blindness. He said he wishes more people would approach him and introduce themselves. McClean's easy manner puts new acquaintances at ease right away.

A sports-minded family, the McCleans never miss a home Grizzly game of any sort. During football season, McClean carried a transistor radio with an earphone and listened to the commentator's view of the action on the field.

McClean said he was hurt when, in the final Grizzly game versus South Dakota State, Coach Jack Swarthout failed to ask him to play.

"There's no reason why not," McClean said. "He was letting everyone else get into the act." During the final minutes of the Nov. 15 game, practically every Grizzly played.
McClean does participate in another sport--bowling. His bowling average of 114, after only five games, denotes his agility and easy adaption to sports "in the dark."

His adviser and coach, Henningsen, points him at the alley and tells him what type of ball to throw.

"In the beginning," Henningsen said, "I used to tell him which pins were up, but now I just tell him to keep throwing that strike ball. McClean's tremendous ability to concentrate his athletic abilities will make him into a fine bowler."

With teaching, studying, football and bowling, McClean is one man who is determined not to let his handicap get the best of him--and at the rate he's going, it won't.