

KEVIN CULLEN

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No time for tears

By Kevin Cullen, Globe Columnist | November 5, 2007

When he was born, James Elleyby's eyes were so messed up he could barely see anything.

Then, when he was 6, the lights went out. It was pitch dark, and he was blind as could be.

It was a jail sentence for a little boy.

"The worst part wasn't being blind, it was being forced to stay inside all the time," Elleyby, 24, was saying, sitting in the Oak Bar at the Copley Plaza.

His mother, Shirley, did the best she could. They would sit on the couch in their Brooklyn apartment, watching cartoons, and Shirley would hold two fingers behind his head and have him feel her fingers so he could imagine what Bugs Bunny looked like.

But mostly he was alone, listening to the shrieks of other kids playing outside, rocking in the darkness.

He went to a special school for blind children. He was 15 and Ivory was 14 when they met. She towered over him. It didn't matter. Five years later, they married.

"The only good thing about being blind is that I met my life partner at that school," James said.

Ivory was blind from eye cancer, and they knew there was a good chance their children would be blind.

"Some people said, 'Why have kids?' We're still people. We still want a family," James said.

Tammy is 3, Joanne less than a year. Both are blind.

James had the most severe form of corneal disease. While there is no hope for his wife and daughters to gain their sight, he never gave up trying to regain his.

James underwent a half-dozen corneal transplants, but they failed.

Two years ago, he and Roger Harris, a friend who can see, were fooling around on a computer, using a search engine to look for anything they could call hope.

"I was always good on the computer," James said. "I just couldn't see the screen."

They found the name of Dr. Claes Dohlman, a doctor at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary who had developed a technique in which he places artificial corneas in the eyes of those for whom transplants don't work.

James reached out and Dohlman reached back.

Last January, after surgery, Dohlman ripped the patch off and James instinctively covered his face with his hands. Then he blinked and pulled his hands away and realized he could see his fingers. He looked around the room and saw colors, the names of which he hadn't a clue.

He took the bus back to New York and found that Ivory and his little girls were more beautiful than he had imagined. He sat on a couch, snapped his fingers, and watched Joanne crawl toward the sound, toward her daddy.

He got a job - telemarketing, working with computers. He wants to go to law school. He wants to do everything. He believes he can do anything.

A while ago, he got an invitation to come back to Boston, because Dohlman's friends had organized a dinner. Of course, he would come. But what would he bring?

"I don't have any money," James said. "What do you give a man who gave you your sight?"

A few weeks ago, James stepped outside his home in the Bronx. He looked up into the sky and saw something twinkling. He didn't know what it was and asked a neighbor. The neighbor thought James was kidding.

"It's a star, James," the man said. "It's a star."

As he gazed upon a star for the first time, James decided that the best way to show his gratitude was to rent a car and drive 200 miles to Boston, because he could.

And so he did. Dohlman had no idea he was coming. On Friday night, when Claes Dohlman spied James Elleyby sitting at a table in the Copley Plaza, the two men, doctor and patient, embraced.

There was no time for tears because they were so glad to see each other.

Kevin Cullen is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at cullen@globe.com. ■

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