

Ray Saunders's academic problems with physics may have stemmed from his intuitively being ahead of his time. There is now a respectable scientific theory that the universe is composed entirely of vibrations. This could mean God sang creation into existence; thus a truly successful life is one that resonates with creation's melodies and harmonies. As Jan pulls it all together, it slowly dawns that what at the time we perceived as grace notes was actually becoming principal melodies, as well as intricate harmonies and variations.

—Harry Camp

Past president and honorary life member of the Board of
Directors of Aldersgate Renewal Ministries

Born with severely afflicted eyesight, Ray Saunders has always faced life with an indomitable spirit and enormous sense of humor. When confronted with seemingly impossible obstacles, his confident reply was "Of *course* I can!" Rejected for career missionary assignment, Dr. Saunders earned seminary degrees to establish Caribbean College of the Bible International. This excitingly unusual biography (sometimes autobiography) takes him and his loveable, unconventional family into hair-raising dangers, distant lands, and exotic cultures as ambassadors for Christ.

—L. D. Kennedy

Emeritus Professor of Literature
Campbellsville University, Kentucky

This is an inspiring, compelling and riveting record of success in spite of the impossibilities of physical challenges; rejection by recognized authorities; differences of language, culture, color, and race, along with the vicissitudes of nature in hot tropical regions. Here is a servant whose mountain-moving faith became "Of *Course* I Can!" Caribbean College of the Bible International stands as witness.

—Dr. Kathleen James

CCBI President, Trinidad, West Indies

State of Tennessee
By Senator Ken Yager

Senate Joint Resolution No. 538 (excerpt)
Adopted February 2, 2012

WHEREAS, Ray Saunders began dealing with numerous health challenges as an infant and faced with dyslexia as well as albinism, Saunders was sent to Tennessee School for the Blind where his true indomitable spirit began to emerge; and

WHEREAS, an extremely talented and compassionate educator, Mr. Saunders began his illustrious teaching career in Brownsville, but both he and his wife devoted most of their careers to providing the highest quality education for Tennessee's students in the Sunbright community; and

WHEREAS, Ray Saunders was born again at the age of thirty-one, and has always sought new ways to provide hope and communicate God's love to his community and around the world ever since; and

WHEREAS, Mr. and Mrs. Saunders sought, but were denied appointment as career missionaries because of the unique issues created by his medical condition; and

WHEREAS, displaying the unrelenting spirit characteristic of a true Tennessean, Mr. Saunders turned tragedy to triumph and founded Caribbean College of the Bible, training pastors to spread the Word in the Caribbean and Africa; and

WHEREAS, Ray and Jan Saunders are wholly committed to the noble precepts of public service that have earned Tennessee recognition as the "Volunteer State", now therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED...that we hereby commend Ray and Jan Saunders for their service to the good people of Tennessee, applaud their publishing of *Of Course I Can!*, and extend them our best wishes for every future success.

Of *Course*
I Can!

Of Course I Can!

The Vision and Dreams of Ray Saunders

Janet Camp Saunders



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2nd Printing 2014.

Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022.

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ISBN 13: 978-1-63232-652-2
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2011925273

To all who are prayerfully and patiently waiting for God to fulfill your calling to missions (you know who you are) *“being confident of this very thing, that he who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

—Phil. 1:6 NKJV



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Foreword

I WAS FRANTICALLY searching for the perfect song to sing in my home church after being away at college my freshman year. Both of my parents are musicians, so there were piles of music all over their house. It was Saturday afternoon and I so wanted to pick the perfect song in hopes of showing the church the next day that I indeed had also inherited the “music gene” that my older brother was obviously blessed with, as he flawlessly played the piano.

I definitely had my dad’s genetic material in other less appreciated areas. Everyone always said I looked just like my father. I absolutely dreaded the inevitable, “You two look just alike!” or “You definitely have your father’s smile!” One woman even went so far as to say that I should have been born a boy because I look so much like my father. He was a very handsome man, but as a self-conscious teenager, I did not find it flattering to be compared to a middle-aged man and would have happily given up my father’s eyes, hair, smile, nose, and all the other things that looked like him. I did respect his musical gifts, though.

As I sifted through the dusty piles of sheet music, I came across the notebooks of handwritten large-print lyrics that Daddy had to use to enable him to read the music for the choirs he directed at church and at the high school where he was music director.

My father was born with albinism and due to the lack of pigment in his eyes, had visual deficits significant enough that he was sent to our state school for the blind. He had a teacher there who took a special interest in him, facilitating his musical talents. He has always had a vibrant and charismatic personality, so it was no surprise to anyone when he was voted “Mr. Tennessee School for the Blind” his senior year. As he matured his eyes gradually improved, and although he had to take college notes with a Braille writer, he diligently completed a Bachelor and a Master of Music Education to become a high school band and choir director.

My parents dedicated their lives to God soon after they were married and my father became compassionate and caring to the point of embarrassment. I was always a bit nervous about bringing friends to our home, because anyone who passed through our little town, especially if they looked like they needed a bath or a hot meal, was invited to our house. We never knew who might be there for food or to sleep in the basement bedroom. Daddy eventually turned an abandoned church building into a homeless shelter and held regular church services there for the residents. When he was teaching school, his office was always filled with students who just needed someone to listen. Later Daddy felt called to become a missionary, and continued to pursue that dream long after he was turned down by his denominational mission board due to his disability. He eventually started a correspondence school and has tirelessly taught the Bible to countless native pastors in Africa and the Caribbean.

My father has never let his eyes keep him from doing what his heart tells him to do; however, he has had his share of accidents as a result. He is the only person I know who has actually fallen into a manhole, just like they do in the cartoons. Another time after preaching a late-night service in Guyana, he walked across a narrow bridge and toppled right into the open sewage ditch. He recently survived driving his riding lawn mower over a twenty-foot embankment. He always cleans himself up, has a good laugh, and relives the “excitement” as he joyfully retells the stories of his adventures to anyone who will listen.

Foreword

As I dug through the music that day, I finally came to a contemporary songbook. I flipped through the pages and came to a song that was in my vocal range, had lyrics simple enough to learn in a day, and sounded tolerable with my mother accompanying me on the piano. Yes, if my mother played loud enough, they might think I inherited the “music gene” after all!

I was very nervous, turning every shade of red, as I stepped to the podium to sing the hastily learned song with which I had hoped to impress the congregation. As I began to sing in a shaky voice, an amazing thing happened. My eyes were opened to a new understanding and appreciation for both my earthly father and my heavenly Father. I was filled with peace as I realized that the “music gene” was insignificant. My father’s eyes, not his musical talent, were what I needed to be blessed with.

His eyes?! I could never have dreamed of actually praying to be *blessed* with my father’s eyes! God gave me the awesome awareness that even though he will never see perfectly, my father has vision with much greater acuity: to reach out to everyone he meets and touch them with His love. The song by Gary Chapman that God so miraculously led me to sing that day, made popular by Amy Grant, was “Father’s Eyes.” ...*Eyes that see the good in things when good is not around...*

—Melanie Saunders Scott



Acknowledgments

APPRECIATION TO BECKY Haynie for typing; and many thanks to Mary Black, Harry and Jane Camp, L.D.Kennedy, Martin Saunders, Bev Schwind, and Kathleen James for editing, comments, and encouragement.

We are forever indebted to CCBI Board of Directors, Faculty and Staff, Students, National Directors, and our beloved friends in Belize, Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad/Tobago, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, St. Thomas, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Part 1

Chapter 1

Something's Wrong!

A COUPLE OF weeks after Ray's mother had delivered her healthy, boisterous eleven-and-a-half-pound son in December 1931, his happy father was shattered by Lucy's scream from their baby's crib side. "George! Something's wrong with this baby's eyes! Come and look—his eyes are glowing at me!" The medical diagnosis proved to be albinism, a rare genetic disorder characterized by a lack of pigmentation in the eyes, hair, and skin.

George Saunders, a successful young Cookeville optometrist and his lovely wife, Lucy, had been told they could have no more children after their first-born, Frank, so they adopted infant Carol. However, when she was three years old, after several miscarriages they were thrilled to welcome their third child, Ray.

Since there was no known cause, no cure, and no treatment for albinism, after the initial shock wore off George and Lucy settled into a normal family life with their three children. They seldom gave attention to or discussed baby Ray's challenges. In his earliest memory he vividly recalls crying furiously in his crib while the ceiling light glared through his translucent eyelids, but until he was an adult he never knew that his defective eyes, easily sunburned skin, and white hair had a medical name or diagnosis.

Home was the farm on Nashville Highway 70 near Cookeville, where George and Frank raised chickens, pigs, goats, cows, a little mule, a vegetable garden, and later a greenhouse. Ray and his playmate, Benny, loved munching raw beans, turnips, potatoes, tomatoes, and even okra snatched from the family garden. Frank was a hard-working farm boy who learned to trim the mule's mane so well that he became a great part-time barber years later in the Army.



Baby Ray, Frank, and Carol

Carol's primary occupation was to look after Ray-boy. She taught him to climb trees with her (though he never ventured as high as she loved to go), she doubled him on her bike down the busy highway to the big community swimming pool, and she led him to be bold in adventure. They were such good buddies (oh, yes!) that when Carol and Billy married, teen-age Ray and Billy's brother, Lloyd, hitch-hiked to spend the week with them at their honeymoon campsite on Dale Hollow Lake!

Ray always had a cat draped over his arm or a dog of any size in his lap, even now. He was fascinated to watch his cat have a litter of kittens. Billy and Nanny Goat were fun; also a dog named Whitey, but his favorite was Little Runt, whom he saved from the bacon farm for a while. Little Runt went where Ray went, sometimes lugged and sometimes grunting and trotting behind. When Frank returned from a teen-age job in Detroit he brought his young brother a male

pigeon, but Walter Pidgeon (famous movie star) soon surprised them with a clutch of eggs.

Their mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis when Ray was two. Lucy was sent to Texas for treatment and rest for over a year, while George faithfully wrote her the family news. "Ray is always an avid eater," he reported. "If he thinks eating time is nearly over, he crumbles bread up in his plate so we have to put more stew, gravy or syrup on it, thus prolonging the meal."

The family appreciated George's sister, Alberta, whom he declared to be a great and good help with the children during this time. Often she and George would patch up their little overalls and take them on many jaunts and picnics, including trips to Lucy's mother (Zuzu) in Knoxville. Sarah Grider was given room, board, and a little spending money to keep house, cook, help in the garden and greenhouse, and whatever else was needed for several Depression years. Ray later marveled, "Sarah never used a hot pad when she baked; she would pull a hot iron skillet of cornbread right out of the oven bare-handed."

The entire family loved Ray-boy as a pleasant, cheerful, gullible, and carefree child with a powerful streak of determination. After waking from a very realistic dream in which he was flying, he reckoned that with a fast running start he could surely fly over that boulder in the field. "So I got back and ran as fast as I could, got to the rock and made a flying leap just like my dream—*splaat!* Obviously I had not backed up far enough, so I went way on farther back and ran even faster, with the same painful results. That's the only time I ever remember giving up."

Somehow neither Sarah nor his mother appreciated his habit of saving dead mice in the bib of his overalls, or collecting and presenting the household an occasional bouquet of poison ivy. They were always screaming about the mice, but not sister Carol; she was tough.

George and Lucy were pleased with their three children. "They did everything they could think of," Ray remembers, "to help with my vision. They got my first glasses at age three, all sorts of magnifiers, tutors, a special study desk, large print books that I could see all right but never learned to read; later even some innovative telebinocular lenses for my glasses." They were faithful to take

their kids to First Baptist Church in Cookeville where George, a deacon, sang tenor in the choir for some fifty years. Lucy taught Carol's Sunday school class every year from nursery through high school and was always an active leader in Women's Missionary Union. With satisfaction and gratitude, George entered in family records the dates of each child's profession of faith and baptism.

It was Carol's job to sit near the front pew with Ray-boy while their parents were helping in the services. As a pre-adolescent, Ray often found himself guilty during the altar call, to which he usually responded by scooting past Carol to go forward. "Why do you do that?" she would demand, embarrassed by her little brother. "I wasn't a good boy this week," would be his sincere reply. But one fateful day Ray overheard his exasperated sister loudly declare, "If he goes up front one more time I'm going to *scream!*" At that moment he resolved in his heart never to do it again, and thus began many years of pretending to be a Christian, with no conviction of sin or spiritual concern.

Music was an enjoyable part of George's entire life, and he was glad to share that interest with his younger son. Long nights during the years of The Great Depression were often spent with the two of them listening to magnificent operas or classical symphonies on the 78 rpm record player. Ray happily absorbed his dad's explanation of Wagnerian mythology and instruments of the orchestra.

George's own dad, a scalawag pseudo-optometrist, had paid the pawn shop five dollars for a cornet, which George played in many programs with Hume-Fogg High School Band and numerous school and community groups, including Tennessee Tech, after settling in Cookeville. Ray listened, learned, and enjoyed, but never participated in music in those early years. The same was true for his literacy skills. He listened, learned, enjoyed, and even memorized the exciting stories he was read, and the family assumed he was reading.