

Blind attorney has big vision Man overcomes disability, works to promote justice

KELLY CUCULIANSKY - STAFF WRITER

March 31, 2008; Page 01C

DAYTONA BEACH -- DAYTONA BEACH - In **the** courtroom, Lady Justice is blind. So is Attorney Craig Spencer.

Entering court on **the** arm of his legal assistant, Spencer, 31, is led to his seat before **the** judge. Sitting beside him is his client, an older woman who is seeking a restraining order against her 38-year-old son.

At **the** end of **the** hearing his client admits she was "taken aback" when she learned Spencer would plead her case. "In my mind, I was thinking, 'How does a blind man be an attorney?' " "And that's just ignorance on my part," said **the** woman, who wished to remain anonymous. Spencer, a native of Antigua, landed his first job as a lawyer last year with Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida, where he specializes in domestic violence cases. He has been blind since he was 12 years old.

At **the** recent morning hearing, Spencer faces Circuit Judge Shawn Briese from his seat in **the** Volusia County Courthouse, his eyes hidden behind silver-framed sunglasses.

"Your honor, today we believe **the** evidence would show there's been an incident to cause **the** petitioner to be fearful of **the** respondent," Spencer said in his opening statement.

He calls his client to **the** stand, allowing her to elaborate by questioning her recollection of events. She is scared her son will hurt her after having a series of heated arguments with him, which included one episode where he threw papers at her.

About an hour and a half later, Briese grants **the** injunction of protection **for the** woman. Outside **the** courtroom, Spencer receives a hearty handshake from her before she says goodbye.

"Mr. Spencer, thank you so much," she said, with his hand in hers. "I was very impressed."

NO LIMITS

When he lost his vision due to a medical condition, Spencer refused to let it stop him from doing whatever he wanted to do.

"Why shouldn't I do anything other people are doing?" said Spencer, a musician who plays **the** keyboard, piano, bass and rhythm guitar. "I wanted to have **the** same experience everyone else would."

He received a bachelor's degree in communications and a minor in music before enrolling at Florida State University **for** law school in 2001. He always liked writing and research, and a class in media law during his undergraduate studies piqued his interest in **the** profession.

"I really wanted to do something where I could feel good at **the** end of **the** day," said Spencer, a man of medium stature who speaks with a hint of a Caribbean accent.

Along with a little adaptation, Spencer does everything any other attorney does to be effective at his job.

He pores over just as many documents by using computer software that reads **the** text. He takes notes and uses Volusia County Power Transit to get to and from work. To attend hearings in court, a legal assistant gives him a ride in her vehicle.

TECHNOLOGY HELPS

According to **the** National Federation of **the** Blind, there are 1.3 million legally blind residents in **the** United States. About 70 percent of them are not employed, said John Pare, executive director of **the** organization's strategic initiatives.

There are many misconceptions that lead some employers to believe a blind person can't perform as well as their sighted peers. But with **the** proper technology, education and opportunity, Pare said a blind person can perform at **the** same level as anyone with sight.

To be successful, Spencer has taken advantage of such tools.

During his college days, he ordered books on tape from Recordings **For the** Blind and Dyslexic. While he does know Braille, he does not use it regularly. To take notes, he used a laptop and an audio recorder.

At **the** office, Spencer scans documents into his computer and uses screen-reading software called Job Access With Speech, or JAWS. **The** program reads **the** text, such as e-mails and legal briefs, aloud at varying speeds and after years of use, Spencer listens to it so fast that some people in his office can't make out **the** words.

The software also reads what is displayed on **the** computer screen, such as menus and toolbars. To navigate **the** computer, he has memorized **the** keyboard and uses shortcut keys, **for** example, to open **the** Start menu on Windows.

And when he's away from his desk, he takes notes using a portable keyboard that has **the** capability of reading **the** notes aloud.

"To me, it's no different than anybody else who goes through life where change is required," he said. "Everyone has to adapt and deal with changes. Sometimes you need assistance."

REWARDING EXPERIENCES

When Spencer began working at Community Legal Services, he received help from **the Center for the Visually Impaired**, which provided someone to assist him in learning **the** best routes in an unfamiliar building.

Legal assistant Miriam Evans also received training on how to work with and guide him.

"Sometimes I go off walking without him," she said. "I'll just forget that he needs guidance because to me, he's such an able person."

She sits in on client appointments with him, occasionally needing to remind clients to say "yes" instead of nodding.

Standing outside **the** courtroom with Evans as they wait **for the** injunction to be typed up **for** his client, Spencer said **the** 15 months on **the** job have been rewarding because he is helping people in need.

But in **the** realm of domestic violence cases, there will always be some mixed feelings about a day in court where unfortunate family situations play out.

"A lot of times, it's not about winning or losing," he said. "It's whether you get **the** result **for** your client."

Did You Know?

Pac Mate, first released in 2002, is a laptop computer used by vision-impaired people that was developed by Freedom Scientific, a company based in St. Petersburg.

*Weighing slightly less than 2 pounds, Pac Mate comes with either a Braille keyboard or a standard QWERTY (typewriter-style) keyboard and can be used to search **the** Internet, take notes, send and answer e-mails and act as a personal digital assistant.

*One of **the** more recent additions to Pac Mate is a global positioning system. Although it won't take **the** place of a guide dog or white cane, **the** system's street-mapping software will automatically record a person's position ever 10 seconds and plan a route back home.

SOURCES: Compiled by News Researcher Peggy Ellis from News-Journal research

Cutline: Photo 1: Attorney Craig Spencer, 31, right, and legal assistant Miriam Evans leave **the** Courthouse Annex in Daytona Beach after a recent hearing. Spencer lost his eyesight when he was 12 years old. After getting his law degree a few years ago, he got a job with Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida and began specializing in domestic violence cases.

Photo 2: Craig Spencer, right, and Miriam Evans listen to proceedings at **the** Courthouse Annex recently.

Photo 3: Attorney Craig Spencer, 31, right, and legal assistant Miriam Evans, left, leave **the** Courthouse Annex in Daytona Beach after proceedings recently.

News-Journal photos/ JI-EUN LEE