

Going their own way

From crowded hallways to new friendships, blind twins learn to navigate all aspects of campus life



They attend football games with other Chap fans to support the team. At lunch, they sit in the cafeteria, telling stories and laughing. They watch *Elf* every holiday season. And like many girls their age, they jam out to their favorite Taylor Swift songs in the car. But unlike their friends, they need to use white canes to guide themselves around school. Unlike most other teenagers, they won't get their driver's licenses next month when they turn 16. They don't use pencils or pens, and they read in Braille. These two girls are different, and they wouldn't change it. It's all they've ever known.

Freshmen twins Nikki and Kendal Lyssy have been blind since birth. "We were born five months early," Nikki said. "I was 1 pound and 14 ounces. We have something that affected our optic nerves called retinopathy prematurity. So, the blood vessels behind our eyes burst. We were born so early that the retina detached. We have never had sight. They tried to do surgery but it didn't work. That just shows that God made us this way for a reason."

Right before entering second grade, Nikki and Kendal moved from California and their lives changed. Texas was a new place for them to figure out. It was a big adjustment.

"My life has changed in countless ways since moving from California," Nikki said. "There, I learned how to do everything with blind people. But in Texas, I only go to a blind school for math [class]. [In California] my preschool was only for blind people. Then we moved here in second grade and there weren't any blind people [at Bridge Point]. I tell people I'm a Texan. Even though I was born in California, this is my home. This is where I belong."

The Lyssys first started touring Westlake in October 2010 to familiarize themselves with the building. They are now also learning new ways to study, get work done and maintain their grades.

"Adjusting to high school has changed my life at home because in middle school I didn't take my grades as seriously," Kendal said. "In high school I'm trying a lot harder. I have a really good memory. I just read my Braille over and over again to study."

Nikki and Kendal have classes second through eighth period at Westlake, but they go to Texas School for the Blind for math in the morning.

"Math is so hard," Nikki said. "I guess I just have an English brain, not a math brain. I don't think it's because of my blindness though, math is just hard for me. Part of it is that I learn math a completely different way than others would learn it. There's a whole code that goes with it. And I use an abacus, which is a tool with beads on it that reads numbers. And I use a talking scientific calculator."

Nikki and Kendal have to get all of their homework printed in Braille

and they take their tests differently, though they're learning the same material as their classmates. Technology is also an important tool for them in school.

"The Braille printing machine [at school] is called the embosser," Nikki said. "This thing is cool. When it's running, you can hear it from down the hall. I have a Braillist who types up my work and connects the machine wirelessly to the computer. The machine embosses all of my work which puts it into Braille. I have another machine called a BrailleNote. It's like an iPhone in a way. It goes online, I can check my email, and it does word processing. The thing I do most is read books. It has a refreshable Braille display and I can read whatever I want. It makes things really easy."

"Science tests almost always have diagrams, so I have to talk it out with the person that's helping me with my test," Kendal said. "If it's English or something like that, then I just stay in my classroom [and type my answers]. Technology has helped me so much."

They are the first blind students who will graduate from Westlake. "The blind school is a great place," Nikki said. "But Westlake is where I belong. I choose to stay here. Going to TSB was an option, but I wanted to walk across the stage in four years like everyone else and graduate with all of you. I want to tell my friends in college that I came from Westlake. I love it here."

Like most twins, Nikki and Kendal aren't just sisters, they're best friends. They've worked through a lot together and help each other with anything they do.

"Kendal is my other half," Nikki said. "We are so close. There are days where we just hang out together. I always have somebody to talk to on a bad day. Sometimes, it's like we share the same brain. We could be thinking the exact same thing at the exact same time. A few times last year, we would have free writing in English and write about the same

thing and not even realize it until after. My life would be extremely different without her and I'm so lucky that she's there for me."

Nikki and Kendal have never seen their sisters, their parents or their friends. Even learning colors was different for them.

"Colors to me are images in my mind," Nikki said.

"If you said yellow I would imagine a flower or the sun. Even though I've never seen those things, I've read enough about them to sort of know. There was this book called *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* by Mary O'Neil. It goes through every color and pairs it with a taste, a smell, a touch and a sight. That's how I

“It would be weird if Nikki could see. It would be cool though, because she could tell me what people look like or what colors things are. She could be able to stare up at the stars and tell me what they look like. I can't imagine being able to see the stars.”
—freshman Kendal Lyssy

know my colors."

"I distinguish colors by just thinking about it," Kendal said. "If someone said 'red' I would try to imagine what red is. I can sometimes tell what color hair people have, or what I think they have, just by their voice. I'm wrong sometimes, but I can get it right a lot."

Nikki and Kendal's family is extremely supportive, including their two sisters, Hill Country Middle School seventh grader Julia and Bridge Point Elementary fourth grader Sophie.

"Julia and Sophie are great about my blindness," Nikki said. "That's all they've seen of me. We can get out of a car and I can take one of their arms and they can lead me to wherever we're headed. They've showed my friends through their actions how to help me without being too much help. I'm really lucky to have great sisters like them because they know when I can do things by myself and they know when to step in if I need a little help."

Having grown up in a very unique situation, the girls developed strong views against bullying.

"I can't stand it when I hear somebody not being nice to someone," Nikki said. "It makes me angry when people are mean. In my family, we're never mean to each other. We treat everybody like it's the last time we're ever going to see them. It makes me angry when I hear someone being treated like they're not important."

"Something that makes me really angry is when I hear gossip," Kendal said. "Why waste your time on something like that? And another thing that makes me angry is when kids are ungrateful for what they have. It drives me nuts."

Along with playing piano, Nikki and Kendal began practicing guitar earlier this year. The girls, who can tell notes by ear, are enjoying their new experiences as Westlake choir members.

"I'm really excited about choir because singing has been a part of my life forever," Nikki said. "It has helped shape me into the person that I am today. Choir is something that I've done since elementary school. I've always been in a choir and high school is the next step. My dream is to be a country singer."

Nikki and Kendal want everyone to know that they are open to questions. They aren't embarrassed about being blind. They're happy about who they are and they wouldn't change a thing.

"If given the opportunity to get my sight back, I'm not sure if I would," Nikki said. "I might consider it, but for today, and right now, I would not. I think I can do something great for the world being blind. I think I'm blind for a reason. I just want to see what the plan is for my life. I don't want to try to change that."

—Caitlyn Kerbow

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