

Walden

The list is short and to the point -

Become an Eagle Scout

Graduate from college

Many people create a list of goals at one time or another. The list represents who he wants to be, what he can accomplish and what he is made of. The list keeps him going. Achieve one goal, cross it off the list and go on to the next one. He is not ready to put everything down on the list. Some dreams are deep inside, so deep that he is not even aware they exist. And every once in a while, he adds a new one.

Get my Masters

Work in old time radio



It is five minutes to show time and Walden is ready to go. Everything necessary for the success of the show is within his reach. A long table holds the audio equipment; a five disc CD player, a tape cassette deck, a Genter phone center, an audio mixer and a microphone. Next to the table is a desk. A computer, printer and scanner rest on top of the desk and a Coke can sits inside the opened drawer. A battered brown briefcase is on top of the bed, the open lid reveals numerous cassette tapes each in its own compartment and four more cassettes lie next to the briefcase. The ceiling fan over the bed whines. An occasional car drives past the one window in his room, but Walden doesn't notice.

His hand slides towards one of the cassette cases and opens it. Finding it empty, his hand moves on to the next cassette. Satisfied that he has the right one, he removes the tape from the case and inserts it into the cassette deck. His small collection of 16 inch

transcriptions sits on the floor and behind his dresser for easy access. Because of the larger surface, each transcription can hold 15 minutes of old time radio shows. Hundreds of large yellow sheets line his headboard as well. Each one holds crucial information – dates, phone numbers, and addresses. Reel-to-reel tapes are stacked inside his dresser drawers. Although the room appears cluttered and chaotic, it is quickly apparent that Walden’s self-styled organization is very methodical.

His thumb flicks open the cover of his silver wristwatch. His fingers move over the minute hand. It is now 7:27 p.m. - three minutes and counting. He punches a long distance number into one of the phones and gets a busy signal. He tries again and then again. He picks up the other phone and dials the same number. This time it works. His call is picked up by Frank, his co-host in Los Angeles. Walden tells Frank about the technical difficulties he's experiencing and then realizes it's time to start the show. He hangs up and calls Frank back on the main phone line connecting both locations, leaving the second line open for callers.

Next he removes his hearing aid and places a Walkman headset over his ears. He takes his place between the bed and the equipment. He stands with feet apart and shoulders slightly hunched. He pushes buttons on a console and the music of *Sentimental Journey* wafts through the room. The music fades away and a voice announces: “It’s the Friday night show with Frank Bresee and Walden Hughes.” Music starts up again. “And now here are Walden and Frank.” A bell rings out with the NBC chime of long ago – Ding Dong Ding.

Walden speaks into a microphone, his voice enthusiastic and high-pitched: “Hi everybody, it’s Friday night, April 16, year 2004, and sixty nine years ago Fibber McGee and Molly came on the air. So we are going to talk about that in a little while with the

guy who wrote the book on Fibber McGee and Molly, Charles Stumpf. But anyway, Frank and I will chit chat for a few minutes and if you want to call us, call us now at (714) 545-2071 or you can call us after we get done with our little talk to Charles Stumpf.”

“I don't know about that, Walden. Based on the number of phone calls we get, no one's listening,” Frank jokes. Frank reminds Walden that Jim Jordan, the radio star who played Fibber McGee, is actually on the show tonight. Walden adds, “Kraft Music Hall, a tribute to Doris Day, and the 67th anniversary of the Hindenburg disaster round out the rest of the show.” Frank responds, “Good, it's going to be an exciting night.”

Walden and Frank continue reminiscing about old time radio shows when the phone rings – announcing the first caller of the evening. Frank continues talking as Walden moves his hand over the knobs of his console, turning down the one to his microphone so that he can talk to the caller. “Hi, who's this,” Walden asks? As soon as there's a pause, Walden interrupts Frank, “Frank, it's Richard from South Carolina.”

“Just because people don't call, it doesn't mean they're not listening to ya'll,” Richard laughs at his own joke. Frank and Walden politely join in. “One of ya'll's problems is you don't give your darn phone number out enough. You been on for 40 minutes and only given your number twice,” Richard scolds them. “You're right,” Frank agrees. “We'll make sure Walden mentions the number more.” “Listen, you got a good show going and we appreciate everything you do for Yesterday USA so God bless you all,” Richard declares and then hangs up.

Much later in the broadcast, after the Jim Jordan interview, Frank signs off, leaving the rest of the show in Walden's capable hands. Right before another Fibber McGee and Molly taped episode ends Walden takes the Coke out of his desk drawer and

puts it to his lips. He has to make a slight adjustment, turning the can slightly so that the opening is now pointing towards his mouth. He sets the can down and moves his hand over his bedspread. He chooses the third tape from the briefcase and inserts it into his equipment. A rare recording of one of Bing Crosby's radio shows plays over the speaker. Kathryn, Bing Crosby's widow, will be happy. She recently asked for Walden's assistance in unearthing some of Bing's old classics and playing them on the show. This coincides nicely with the sale of her book on the radio station's website. Discriminating shoppers can purchase *My Life With Bing* for \$40.00 plus shipping personally autographed by Kathryn at last year's SPERDVAC (The Society to Preserve and Encourage Radio Drama, Variety and Comedy) Convention.

With Crosby softly crooning, Walden leaves his room and walks down the darkened hallway and towards the living room. He has a thirty-minute break before he has to switch tapes. Sandi, his mom, is sitting on the sofa, reading a novel; a bowl of popcorn by her side. Phil, his dad, is resting on the other sofa, watching the horse races on T.V. His younger brother, Philip, is leaving for his late night shift at the grocery store. The weekend has arrived and it is a typical Friday evening at the Hughes household. Walden pulls out a dining room chair and sits down at the table. Sandi sets her book face down on the couch, turns on the dining room light and joins him. Although Sandi turns on the light, it makes no difference to Walden. He still can't see her sitting across the dining room table from him. He is blind.



Sandi's doctor was on vacation June 5, 1966, the day Walden was born. He was delivered by the on-call anesthesiologist instead. As soon as Walden entered the world, the doctor noticed Walden's cleft palate and small lower jaw. Because of the posterior

placement of Walden's tongue, feeding and breathing without choking were immediate concerns. The doctor and nurses stayed in Walden's room all night watching over him. The next day the doctor stitched Walden's tongue to his bottom lip so that it wouldn't roll back up into the empty space of his mouth. The stitches broke loose a few days later, but the doctor decided against stitching Walden's tongue in place again. Soon afterwards, doctors told Phil and Sandi that Walden could have cleft palate surgery when he turned two years old.

By the time Walden was ten days old, the hospital bill had climbed to \$17,000. Phil and Sandi had no insurance, so they removed every cent from their emergency nest egg to keep the collectors at bay. Walden had to stay in the hospital for 17 days. Sandi and Phil visited him every day. They were not allowed to stay overnight. That was the way they did things then. The air in the room felt sterile, yet oppressive. Phil looked down at Walden. Walden was beating on his chest with his fists. The nurse said, "I don't think he likes being in there." He seemed so tiny. Phil was frightened. *If Walden is not going to survive, it would be better if he died right away. If they brought him home and then he... It was too unbearable to think about.*

Sandi wasn't allowed to hold Walden until he was 15 days old and she needed to learn how to feed him. She showed up at the hospital with her mother and the infant seat that the nurse had ordered her to bring. Sandi sat on the bed and her mom sat on a plastic covered chair. Sandi looked up at the clock as the minutes ticked by in slow motion. An army-type nurse marched in carrying Walden wrapped in a baby blue blanket. His face was round, with beautiful chubby cheeks and wisps of thick black hair on top of his head.

The nurse held Walden within the curve of her arm and briskly explained, "You have to hold him at a 90 degree angle because otherwise milk will come out of his nose

and he'll choke. Put him in the infant seat, hold the infant seat on your lap and then hold the bottle like this. Then cluck him under the chin to help him suck." *She could not even hold Walden while feeding him.* Desperately wanting to cuddle him, Sandi slowly put the bottle in Walden's mouth and then burst into tears. The nurse grabbed the baby out of Sandi's arms and commanded: "You get a hold of yourself, go downstairs and get a cup of coffee." Sandi walked out of the room and her mother followed. They took the elevator to the cafeteria not once discussing what had just happened. Defeated, Sandi got a hold of herself and then headed back up to try again. After a few more attempts, Sandi successfully fed Walden, feeling both relieved and exhausted.

Once they took Walden home from the hospital, Phil and Sandi fell into a routine. Like most babies, Walden ate every three hours, but unlike most babies, he could only swallow an ounce and a half because of his cleft. First the bottle nipple had to be boiled so that the liquid would run out when held upside down. Worn out from sucking so hard, Walden fell asleep soon after starting. They would let him rest a bit and then wake him up to start the process again. So each feeding took an hour and a half. Sandi took the day shift and Phil, who had just been laid off from his job, took the night shift. Sometimes Sandi would pad downstairs during Phil's night shift and find them both sound asleep; an almost full bottle of milk on the table next to Phil.

The doctor cautioned: "Be sure you put a board under Walden's mattress because his head needs to be up so that he can breathe easier. If he makes any noise be sure he's not choking." Phil and Sandi put Walden's crib right beside their bed. No one informed them that Walden was going to make noise anyway because of the air vibrating in and out of his cleft. At the end of each day, Sandi would go to bed, emotionally exhausted. Sometimes sleep would not come and she would just lay there. Sometimes she would

close her eyes and cry, the hot tears seeping underneath her lids and flowing down her cheeks.

When Walden was seven months old, he stopped drinking out of the bottle and started drinking out of a cup. When he was two, Walden had successful cleft palate surgery at Hoag Hospital. Later on, Phil and Sandi found out that Walden's birth defects were caused by *Pierre Robin Sequence*. PRS affects one in 2,000 to 30,000 newborns. In contrast, cleft lip and/or palate affects one in every 700 live births. The doctors told them that Walden was the first baby born with PRS to survive.

Soon after Walden's surgery, Sandi went back to work. She worked in an office during the day and Phil worked at less than desirable jobs at night in order to have medical insurance. They often joked that he sold his soul for insurance.

Sandi first noticed something was wrong with Walden's eyesight when he was two and a half years old. Often, he sat very close to the television. Phil took Walden to see an eye doctor while Sandi was at work. The doctor examined Walden, and then pulled Phil aside. Walden had dislocated lenses and was extremely nearsighted; there was a good chance that he could go blind one day.

Wanting to spare Sandi any unnecessary pain or anxiety, Phil decided not to mention the possibility of Walden's blindness to her or her mother. Next, Phil and Sandi took Walden to see Doctor Richard Button, an ophthalmologist in Newport Beach. Doctor Button spent almost half a day with Walden running tests and checking his eyes. Unaware of the previous doctor's warning, Sandi was nevertheless worried about potential eye problems. The doctor tried to reassure them, "Don't worry about the future and the unknown. There are no guarantees. You could walk out of here and get hit by a car." He continued, "We don't want to do anything right now. Nothing could happen for

years so we'll just do routine checks-ups and fit him for glasses.”

The challenges continued. By the time Walden was three he could only say the words, *mama, daddy, bye, hi and bye bye*. Suspecting another problem, they took him to an ear, nose and throat specialist. The doctor discovered that Walden was hard of hearing which had affected his language development. He fit him with hearing aids. When Walden was three and a half, and it was time for him to attend preschool, Phil and Sandi met with the school district and enrolled him in the hard-of-hearing program. Twice Walden had surgery to place drainage tubes in his ears. Although doctors, hospitals, and check-ups were a big part of Walden's life, he was a happy little boy. When he was six, Walden was transferred from the Newport Mesa School District's hard of hearing program to the Aphasia Center's language and hard of hearing program.

Once in a great while, Phil and Sandi agonized out loud to each other. And other times they agonized quietly: *Phil's distant cousin had a cleft palate... Phil caught some unknown tropical disease while in Panama during the Korean War... Sandi ate right and did not drink, but smoked during her pregnancy - at that time no one said that there was anything wrong with that... Maybe if they had married other people...*

The countless hospital visits and medical procedures were a blur, but it was the small moments or the offhand comments that remained – forever seared into memory. Like the guy from speech therapy who told them Walden's cleft palate probably caused brain damage, or the woman who told Sandi that Walden's medical problems happened because Sandi had not prayed long enough or loudly enough.

Walden was seven when he lost control of his bike and hit his head against a tree. Thinking he was alright, Walden got up from the ground, put his bike away and went inside. Later on that day, Phil and Walden went to the mall. Walking side by side,

Walden quickly grabbed Phil's hand. "What's wrong," Phil asked? "I can't see very well," Walden said. Phil raced Walden home. After calling Doctor Button, Phil took Walden over immediately. Doctor Button dilated Walden's eyes and explained: "Walden's retina has separated from the back of the eye." Without treatment, the retina could detach completely. Eventually, blindness would result. "I have performed hundred's of these surgeries, but the Jules Stein Eye Institute in Los Angeles has equipment we don't have," Dr. Button explained. "That is where he needs to go."

Sandi received Phil's call at work. Feeling like a zombie, she cleaned up her desk and went home. That Monday, they had an appointment at Jules Stein. Doctor Steven Koplow wanted to perform what was called a "belt and buckle" retinal detachment procedure. A flexible piece of silicone material would be sewn to the outside of the eye. The band, or buckle, would hold the retina in place and hopefully preserve some retinal function, but the peripheral vision where the buckle was would be lost. Because Walden's eye was too soft and needed to firm up, the procedure would have to wait. They went home.

Within a week Walden's eye was ready to be operated on. Sandi stayed in the hospital with Walden every night while Phil drove back and forth from work. To get their minds focused elsewhere, Sandi and Walden played a musical tape of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* over and over. Even the nurses would walk up and down the hallway singing,

"You're a good man, Charlie Brown. You're the kind of reminder we need. You have humility, nobility and a sense of honor that is very rare indeed. You're a prince. And a prince could be king. With a heart such as yours, you

*could open any doors. You could go out and do anything.
You could be king, Charlie Brown. You could be king!”*

Charlie Brown’s words inspired Walden:

*“Some days I wake up early to watch the sunrise,
and I think how beautiful it is, and how my life lies before
me, and I get a very positive feeling about things. Like this
morning for instance; the sky's so clear and the sun's so
bright. How can anything go wrong on a day like this?”*

Walden was released from the hospital ten days later. His vision was restored and it was pretty much life as usual after that.

A year later Walden and another little boy bumped heads during playtime. Walden woke up in the middle of the night, white half circles dominating his vision. The family rushed him to Jules Stein. His retina had detached again - this time while he slept. Another surgery and another long recovery confined to bed.

After surgery, Walden was so nauseous that he couldn’t even keep ice chips down. Naturally the nurses were not bringing any solid food, but one day a nurse brought in pizza by mistake. Walden loved pizza. Starved, he inhaled the delicious aroma and begged Sandi for a piece. *What the heck*, she figured. Walden devoured every bite. And he did not throw up. A few hours later, Sandi told the nurse what she’d done.

The surgery was successful. Instead of white circles, Walden started to see images. After ten days, they went home. The next morning Walden got up from bed. And then he saw circles - red circles and blue circles and green circles. Panicked, Phil called Dr. Koplow. After Dr. Koplow examined Walden, he gave them the bad news. Retinal detachments can usually be repaired with either one surgery or a combination of

surgeries. The success rate was usually quite high. Unfortunately, Walden was in the small minority where the surgery did not work. The doctor gave Phil and Sandi two options; either have experimental surgery in Miami or teach Walden Braille.

After talking to the doctor, and realizing the chance of success was slim to none, Phil and Sandi agonized over the situation. *What are we gonna do*, Phil asked out loud? *A small chance of success or total blindness.* Walden did not want to go through with another surgery. Feeling they had nothing to lose and needing to take the chance, Phil quickly made an appointment with the retina specialist at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami.

In the car on the way home from the doctor's office, Sandi sat in the front passenger seat and Walden sat in back. He was very quiet. Not wanting him to suffer an even bigger heartache, Sandi turned around and explained to Walden: "There is a chance that this final surgery may not be successful." Walden was still for a long time and then he asked, "Does Jesus know about this?"

The night before the flight to Miami, Phil and Sandi packed some bags and then went to bed early. Throughout the night, Walden laid in the next room sobbing and praying.

When they got to Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, Doctor Robert Machamer wanted to show Walden to several other doctors. Phil agreed as long as the doctors did not ask any questions in front of Walden because Walden was too sharp. Phil was afraid of what the doctors might say.

The experimental surgery was called "Vitrectomy." This procedure involved removing the vitreous gel and injecting a gas bubble. The bubble pressed the retina against its underlying tissue and kept it attached. Gradually the body should absorb the

gas. Unfortunately, after examining Walden, Doctor Machamer realized that the scar tissue on Walden's eyes was too great. The procedure could not be performed after all. Almost like a consolation prize, the doctor suggested removing one of Walden's dislocated lenses, which by now had become cloudy. Maybe Walden would be able to see some kind of light or shadow when finished. Phil and Sandi decided together to go ahead.

Unfortunately, the surgery gave Walden neither light, nor shadow. After several days they returned home. Walden told his mother that he did not want to go through any more experimental procedures: "I don't want to be a guinea pig. I'm fine the way I am," he announced. That was the end of the surgeries. Walden was permanently blind. He was nine and a half years old.



Walden's love for old time radio shows started after they got home from Miami. One night soon after the last unsuccessful attempt in Miami, his parents and his brother were in bed, sleeping. Besides his dad's snores, the house was quiet. Feeling lonely, Walden reached up and felt for the knob on his radio. He turned it on, fiddling with the station dial. He stopped turning when the sound of a talk show came on. Frank Bresee, one of the guests, was an expert of old time radio and he had brought excerpts of old radio shows. A voice [Excited] announced, *Jack Armstrong – The All American Boy*. After several voices sang a catchy tune, the announcer said, *Wheaties, the Breakfast of Champions, bring you the thrilling adventures of* [Loud and Excited] *Jack Armstrong – The All American Boy – Jack and Billy are caught in a snow avalanche and they're starting to fly down the mountain. Stay tuned to next Monday morning kids to see if Jack and Billy slide into the cave of the glacier.*

The sound effects, the music and the dramatic acting added to the excitement Walden felt. While listening to the mysteries, comedies and music of an earlier era, sound was everything and sight was not necessary. The world came alive for him once again, his memories of objects and colors were strong, and the stories played out as he imagined. More like dreams. A picture was painted vividly inside his head.

At one in the morning, Bret Morrison, one of the actors who played THE SHADOW, came on the radio. Bret explained how a filtered microphone was used to get the sound of THE SHADOW'S menacing voice. *Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. THE SHADOW knows.* Throughout the night, Walden turned off the radio, worried that he'd be too tired to get up in the morning even though it was Saturday. Besides, his parents might wonder why he'd slept in so late. They wouldn't understand old time radio. And then Walden couldn't stand the suspense. After a few moments he'd turn the radio back on.

The next morning Walden got up and told his Dad about what he had discovered. They went together to the local record store and bought two 8-track tapes – the first two episodes of Superman and The Shadow, one from 1930 and one from 1948. These two tapes were the beginning of what eventually grew to be his collection of old time radio - over 6,000 shows.

Phil and Sandi knew early on that they weren't going to raise Walden in a glass bubble. They would raise him like a normal boy. On weekends, Sandi would take Walden and his brother, Phillip to the Braille Institute, a non-profit organization. Walden learned how to ski, swim, participate in the Braille Olympics and play Beep Baseball. Before his involvement with Beep Baseball, Walden would stand by himself while the sighted neighborhood kids played baseball nearby. Holding on to his mitt, Walden was

not able to play. A volunteer group called Telephone Pioneers inserted phone speakers into hollowed out baseballs and bases. The balls and bases would beep so that blind children would know where to hit and where to run.

One day the Telephone Pioneers filmed Walden hitting the baseball and running around the bases. They also interviewed Sandi: “When Walden lost his sight it was a very lonely world. Radio was the first thing he grabbed on to. By listening to radio he also got interested in sports and baseball.”

The camera zoomed in on Walden. Wearing a red baseball cap and team shirt, he gripped the bat firmly in both hands. He then placed the nose end of the bat down into the grass. A volunteer held Walden’s hands and placed them on the ball sitting on top of a tee. The loud intermittent BEEP, BEEP, BEEP could be heard by everyone. Walden swung the bat. He made contact, but it veered off into foul territory. The umpire yelled “STRIKE ONE.” BEEP, BEEP, BEEP – Again, Walden hit a foul ball and again the umpire yelled, “STRIKE TWO.” Walden bent at the waist and squeezed the ball between his palms. He put his face so close to the ball that his nose touched the dirt-smudged surface. Walden stepped back, his face scrunched with determination. BEEP, BEEP, BEEP - he gripped the bat once again and swung.

CRACK - the ball and bat connected and the ball sailed perfectly down the center. Walden ran toward the beeping base and finally lunged forward. He rolled over and then crawled on all fours, flinging out his right hand. He touched the base. “SAFE,” the umpire called. Walden removed his baseball cap and waved it back and forth towards the crowd, a big grin covered his face.

“The backyard fence is full of holes where the ball has gone through,” Sandi smiled at the interviewer. “When a ball sails over the fence and it is beeping the

neighbors know who it belongs to.” Besides a good education, Sandi and Phil wanted their boys to have the same experiences that other boys had.

Walden had always wanted to be a Boy Scout. When he was five or six he used to cut out pictures of Boy Scout badges and pin them to his shirt. Before he lost his sight completely, Walden joined the neighborhood Cub Scout troop. Once he lost his sight, Sandi worried that Walden’s blindness would be an additional burden to the troop. She was not sure that the troop would welcome him back. She called the troop leader, who said, “We’ve been waiting for Walden to come back.” So Walden continued with the Scouts and at the age of seventeen he achieved one of his lifelong goals.

Become an Eagle Scout

Before starting college, Sandi wanted Walden to go to Living Skills, a government sponsored program in Northern California. Living Skills was supposed to teach one how to live independently, but Walden’s friend went there and only learned how to balance his checkbook and heat up frozen food in the microwave. Meanwhile, one of his friend’s roommates broke a glass jar in the kitchen and got glass in his foot. The counselors were supposed to look out for stuff like that, but Walden’s friend told him there was extreme drug usage among most of the counselors and so they weren’t much use in the supervising category.

Walden passed on the Living Skills idea and went straight to college. He was accepted at UCLA, USC, UC Berkeley and UCI. He chose UCI because it was close to home and the first to accept him. A week before each new quarter started, he and his parents traipsed across UCI, orienting him to his classes’ locations, the building layouts and - most importantly - where the bathrooms were.

His mobility instructor worried that Walden would have difficulty getting around

because of his combined sight and hearing loss, but somehow with the help of his white cane, orientation skills and mobility training, Walden managed just fine. College brought new challenges. Walden soon discovered that UCI was always under construction, so he had to be cautious.

He could have gotten a Seeing Eye dog, but that took a lot of dedication and constant training and he did not have time. Besides, his best friend, Jeff, had his own set of challenges with guide dogs. In fact, Jeff had already gone through three of them for various reasons. One dog led him right into a construction hole. Another one did a big number in the middle of a shopping mall. Walden's favorite story, though, was when Jeff got onto the bus with his guide dog: "There was another blind person sitting right across from Jeff with a guide dog. The guide dogs didn't like each other and they started to snap and fight with each other. So here you had a moving bus, two guide dogs lunging at each other and two blind guys trying to hold them off." Walden laughed every time he told the story. "I would rather have a dog that just sat around the house," Walden smiled.

Recently, while singing in a choir performance, Jeff and Walden had to stand on risers. Because Jeff was partially sighted, he was responsible for Walden. When the performance finished, Jeff led Walden down the risers. Unfortunately, Jeff got confused. He led Walden in the wrong direction and Walden felt himself falling. With arms flailing, they both fell off the risers. Fortunately, only their pride was injured.

Another time Walden's UCI professor announced that they needed to move classrooms. Walden could hear the sounds of everyone standing up and leaving and then silence. They had forgotten him. This experience led Walden to share his frustrations with his mother about how long it usually took for classmates to approach him and start talking to him. Sandi said, "A lot of times, people are not used to being around someone

with disabilities and they do not know what to say or how to act. It probably makes them nervous or self-conscious.” Sandi encouraged him to make the first move and approach other people first.

In order to keep up, Walden used a tape recorder or an occasional note taker supplied by the school. At times, the note taker would give the notes to Walden late or not show up at all. Sometimes Walden would not have much time to study, but he was a night owl and would stay up late. It was no big deal for his dad to help him do six hours of homework every day for school. Many times they would stay up all hours trying to solve a tough calculus problem. Oftentimes they would go to bed with the problem unsolved. Then Walden would wake up Phil a few hours later, “I got it dad. I’ve solved the problem.” During sleep, his brain percolated.

Graduate from college

After Walden graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and Economics, he wanted to earn his Masters degree. Unfortunately, he had to have work experience so he looked for a job instead. Most jobs offered through the Department of Rehabilitation were vending machine or coffee stand operators in the federal building. So Walden struck out on his own. He picked up the phone and started calling some of the financial companies. A division of American Express, IDS, said they were looking for financial planners and he decided to take one of their seminars. Afterwards, he took their test to see if he qualified for a financial planner position. He blew them out of the water and got the job.

Walden soon realized that the job was not for him. Walden was not comfortable pushing their disability insurance. After several months he decided to quit. Although the job didn’t work out, Walden made some great friends and was now eligible to enter the

MBA program. In 1995, Walden earned his Masters in Finance from UCI. Next he found a job through a friend selling stocks part-time out of his home. He was also a frequent caller of local old time radio shows. One radio show guest, in particular, changed his life. Kitty Kallen, a popular big band singer from the forties and fifties, was the evening's guest. Walden called in and talked to Kitty for several minutes. His old time radio expertise was obvious. Kitty took his phone number down and called him back after the show. A long and close friendship developed. And because of this friendship as well as his old time radio knowledge, Walden eventually got his job in radio.

Get my Masters

Work in old time radio

Sandi and Walden are very religious. Walden credits his beliefs with getting him through the rough spots. Knowing he was the first baby to survive with Pierre Robin Sequence, Walden realizes God has a plan. He believes the Holy Spirit and grace work together in molding his life. Sandi and Walden worry about Phil though, because Phil is not yet a believer. Sandi hopes that one day Walden will be the person who turns him into one. They also believe every day is an adventure.

Two years ago, Sandi and Walden went to see the play, *Porgy and Bess*. Sandi liked the play's song "*Summertime*" and thought the play would be good. Sandi and Walden had third row seats, but when they got there the person at will call informed them that their seats had been moved to the first row. At first, Sandi was apprehensive. The orchestra pit was directly in front of them surrounded by a high screen of black fabric. Despite the screen, the stage was high enough so that Sandi could see everything. Sandi and Walden took their seats. Walden collapsed his folding cane and placed it under his

seat.

Three quarters of the way through the first act, Sandi heard a large clatter. Walden's cane had slid out from between his legs and flown directly into the small opening underneath the fabric blockade that separated the orchestra from an audience of trousers and nylons. The unexpectedness of such a thing caused Sandi to giggle, but this was soon replaced by a horrific sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. What if Walden's cane had hit one of the musicians, put an eye out or landed on a Stradivarius violin? As soon as the curtain came down, Sandi stood up, and peered over the barrier. She saw the cane resting between a row of orchestra members apparently innocent of harming anyone or anything. Sandi piped up: "Could you please hand me that white cane?" They soon left the performance.

One day Phil and Walden went to the grocery store. Phil grabbed the end of a shopping cart and Walden put his hands on the handle of the cart. Like a well-oiled machine, they strolled up and down the aisles, the routine familiar. Finally, the cart was full and they went to the check out line. Item by item, Phil and Walden unloaded their cart. The box boy put their groceries in plastic bags and then grabbed another cart, filling it up. After Phil paid the bill, he reached over and started pushing the cart. As he reached the parking lot, he heard a guy shouting: "Sir, excuse me, sir." Phil stopped, turned around and realized Walden was still standing in line in front of the cashier.

More than once Phil would grasp his younger son, Phillip, by the hand and Phillip would remind him that he had his sight: "Dad, I'm thirty five years old and you don't need to hold my hand."

One night at dinner, Phil expressed his disgust with the Costa Mesa City Council. The council had voted that the Lion's Club could no longer run the fireworks stand as a

fundraiser event. Phil, a long-time Lion's Club member, thought this controversy could be an opportunity for Walden to get into politics. How great – Rabble Rouser Blind Guy running for Congress. Walden's motto could be "The blind leading the blind," Phil laughed.



It is time for Walden to put in the next tape. He thinks he'll play an old episode from Superman. Walden pushes his chair back and stands up. As usual during his Friday night broadcast, his Mom asks: "Walden, how'd it go?" As usual he answers, "Great."

His folks had listened to his very first show, but not so much anymore. The show is just a part of their everyday lives. Like a comfortable piece of furniture or a dog-eared, but well-loved book. They hear bits and pieces when walking past Walden's bedroom or when playing a tape of his show while driving in the car.

Sometimes, Walden places a speaker on the living room sofa, its long cord winding its way from his bedroom, down the hall and into the living room. If requested, Walden plays one of Phil or Sandi's favorite shows, shows they grew up listening to - for Phil it's *I Love a Mystery* - for Sandi it's *Lux Radio Theatre*. And the childhood memories come flooding back -

Phil's father in his armchair and the kids cross-legged on the floor, staring intently at the radio or into space while Phil's mother cooked dinner. Look in the window of Sandi's house and the scene is the same.

Who would ever guess that years later Walden would be working at Yesterday USA Radio Station, playing his beloved old time radio programs, interviewing icons of the past and co-hosting with Frank Bresee, who played Little Beaver on the Red Ryder show and is considered "the Living Legend of Old Time Radio." Walden himself is

known as “the Walking Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio.”

Walden walks down the hall and towards his room, feeling the wall with his hand to orient himself. Phil is sprawled out on the couch fast asleep, the horses at the track race across the television screen.

Sandi watches Walden as he heads to his room. Recently, she pulled Walden’s baby book out of storage and typed his medical history into the computer so that Walden can access it. While organizing, Sandi discovered a letter that she had written to Walden when he was seven years old. As she scanned the letter, long forgotten memories were dusted off, no longer a painful reminder of difficult times, but rather a memoir of their journey together. When the time is right, she will share it with him.

July 1973

Dear Walden,

You are a dear, remarkable little boy – such a joy to all of us. I can’t tell you how brave you have been through all your stays in the hospital and especially this last one for your detached retinas. You must have a great deal of faith to be so cheerful and cooperative. The doctors and nurses thought you were such a good boy. We hated having to go the second time – just dreading to tell you and then as usual you surprised us with your cooperativeness. Your teacher, Mrs. Rigler, says that you are unique and a very adaptable person and I quite agree.

I love the way you express yourself now – such a sense of humor. How can I ever record some of the things you have said in the last couple of years? It would take a book to do it. But I would

like to tell you a few.

One night you seemed concerned as to what you would do when you grew up and you asked me what I would be. I told you I was already grown up. You thought for a while and then said, “I think I will be a teacher-man and help other people.”

You always make other people happy. On our trip last summer to Nebraska, every house that you entered you said, “What a beautiful house,” and at every meal, “This is my favorite!” My, how other people beamed. See what I mean?

You have many friends at school – both in and out of your classroom. Your principal told me that “If anyone could charm a lion, you could!” I understand that when he and his wife visited your room that you introduced both of them to your classmates.

I like the way you never give up. We were making paper-mache rabbits and I was having a terrible time getting the whiskers on and I finally said, “I just can’t do it!” Whereupon you replied, “We try and we can!” Well, I just had to get them on after a statement like that.

I like the way you share and your enthusiasm for life. You have so many good qualities – I wish I could be more like you. Just wanted you to know how much we love you and how very much you mean to us.



Now that his show is finished for the evening, Walden sits down at his desk and turns on his computer. He checks his email, his computer's automated voice reads each one out loud: "Dear Walden, Arthur is working on a current project and can't be interviewed right now." The email is from Arthur Miller's secretary. Last week Walden had sent the famous playwright a letter, requesting an interview. What a feather in his cap if he could talk to the *Death of a Salesman* author and ex-husband of Marilyn Monroe! Walden forwards the email to Sandi knowing that she'll get a big kick out of it when she reads it tomorrow.

Later, while the rest of the family is in peaceful slumber, Walden will be up most of the night, planning tomorrow night's show and brainstorming about the future.

Own a radio station

Get married – maybe

The list continues...