

# Twins overcome visual challenges

## Zuniga sisters describe life from their perspective

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From the day a baby is born, his or her eyes will assist in physical, mental, and emotional development. Observations are collected, a little bit at first and eventually many more, in order to understand the world around them.

For legally-blind twins Alyssa and Ivie Zuniga, now in eighth grade, this development has been delayed.

At three months old (June 2002), Ivie and Alyssa were diagnosed with congenital cataracts, a clouding of the lens of the eye that is present at birth. Three days after diagnosis, both girls underwent surgery to have their lenses removed. Mother Crystal Chavez recalls the learning difficulties the girls encountered.

"Because they could not see the first three months of their lives (the time when the brain develops sight), they began observational learning later than most children, including mimicry of facial expressions," Chavez said.

Chavez describes the procedures that the girls have gone through in order to strengthen their eyesight.

"Since then, Ivie and Alyssa have had multiple surgeries to correct muscle weakness," Chavez said. "Alyssa was fortunate enough to have artificial lenses implanted in November of 2007, greatly increasing her vision. Unfortunately, Ivie was not compatible with her artificial lenses, so she wears glasses instead. She also

has glaucoma."

Alyssa compares her and her sister's methods of vision correction.

"My lens implants are like contacts that I don't have to take out, and even though I still have difficulty seeing, I don't have to mess with them much," Alyssa said. "Ivie has to wear really thick glasses in order to see anything."

Besides being born with congenital cataracts, both Ivie and Alyssa have nystagmus, a visual condition in which the eyes have repetitive, uncontrolled movement, resulting in reduced vision.

"Because our eyes are constantly darting around, it's really hard to focus on anything," Alyssa said.

Chavez says that she'd find nonstop shifts in vision unbearable.

"I could not even begin to imagine my world constantly being in motion, but somehow they've persevered," Chavez said.

"When Ivie and I were little, our parents didn't want us to be in special classes because they didn't want to make us feel helpless," Alyssa said. "Other than having to use special devices, we've done everything the way everyone else has. If things were supposed to have been difficult for us, we didn't want to make us feel help-

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but she never came often enough for the information to stick. I wish she had come more often, because I think both of us would like to have learned more about that."

She also describes special assistive technology that they have used throughout their school years.

"We use CCTV's (Closed-Circuit Television) to enlarge our work using a magnifying camera, and the magnified image is then displayed on a computer screen," Ivie said. "We have iPads that make zooming-in on text easy, and we print all of our papers, even our music for band, on legal-size paper, which is double the size of normal paper."

Both twins are members of the band and learned to play clarinet prior to moving to Albany earlier this year.

"This is our first year of marching band, ever," Ivie said. "I find it really interesting and challenging at times, not to mention fun. It requires you to think quickly and keep up."

Alyssa claims she never had second thoughts when it came to entering the demanding program.

"I never really thought that I didn't want to do marching band, because I didn't like the thought of telling myself I couldn't do something," she said.

Though she agrees that disabilities should never be seen as a restriction, Ivie admits to initially thinking marching band would be too challenging for her sister and her.

"I enjoy it now, but the first week, I was afraid it'd be too complicated to have to constantly see where I'm going, and I thought it was too bothersome to have someone run out to bring us our music stands during the halftime show," Ivie said.



Alyssa Zuniga (top) makes use of a special closed-circuit computer to get classwork finished. The school administration provided the CCTV's in order to provide an easier learning environment for the sisters. Both Alyssa and Ivie (left) march side by side during the homecoming parade on Oct. 9. Despite the twin's visual disabilities, they still stay positive and stay involved in various extra-curricular activities, such as marching band.

TOP PHOTO BY GENEVIEVE STUNKARD  
BOTTOM PHOTO PROVIDED

"However, I only thought that way during the first week. After the first game, things seemed so much easier. Now, we're even memorizing our music. It just goes to show things are only as difficult as you make them out to be."

Alyssa jokes that having a visual disability could be considered an advantage when it comes to marching.

"I think one of the reasons we don't find marching band that difficult is the fact that, because we can't see the other people around us well, we aren't really affected when they

mess up and throw the whole band off course. We kind of just do what we've been instructed to do, uninfluenced by others, since we can literally only see the people right in front of us."

Regardless of whether or not having the disability has its perks as well as its drawbacks, Chavez expresses pride in her daughters' fierce perseverance.

"Low vision is such a battle, and it comes with so many struggles that people can't even imagine," Chavez said. "It takes them a considerable amount of time to decipher their

surroundings before they are able to learn their way around and utilize whatever is in that environment, and I know that must be so hard for them. They are probably the strongest, big-hearted, empowering people I know. Not to mention, even after all they've endured, they've maintained unwavering faith."

Finally, Chavez dotes on the girls' constant optimism. "They continue to inspire me every day," she said. "Their vision may be poor, but they never fail to see the good in any and every situation."