



Seeing Less And More

By Greg Olgers '87

Most people can relate to the experience of having trouble putting a name with a face. Maybe it eventually comes to us, particularly if the encounter goes beyond a salutation, but maybe it doesn't and we muddle through the ensuing conversation as best we can, hoping that the other person didn't notice.

For those who have prosopagnosia or "face blindness," like Dr. Heather Sellers of the Hope English faculty, it's a much bigger challenge. Their vision functions, but no face looks familiar, not ever.

"I have failed to recognize my step kids, my best friends, even my then-husband," said Dr. Sellers, who has taught at Hope since 1995. "I can't even recognize myself in a photo or video unless I remember what I was wearing that day, although my huge hair helps."

Prosopagnosia is a neurological disorder through which the brain is unable to interpret the information that it receives from the eyes, with the effect specific to the section or process that deals with face recognition. Researchers are still seeking to understand how prosopagnosia happens. Some who have it have suffered a head trauma, but others, like Dr. Sellers, have not. About two percent of the population is believed to have the disorder, with varying severity.

Dr. Sellers has been face-blind her entire life, but went nearly four decades without being diagnosed. Throughout her life she knew that something was wrong, but even at an early age she compensated by becoming adept at interpreting other cues such as hair style, clothing, voice and setting, which enabled her to minimize any indication that there was problem—at least some of the time.

"When I was very young, the trouble wasn't that apparent because the neighborhood provided context—Paige always came out of Paige's house, Martha came out of Martha's house," she recalled. "But as I got older, I wouldn't necessarily recognize Paige or Martha at school, let alone at the pool or the grocery store."

The challenge intensified as her circle of friends and acquaintances broadened, such as during college.



Heather Sellers has found students receptive to understanding her face blindness, in keeping with the positive experience she had when she first notified her faculty and staff colleagues about her condition in 2005. As a bonus, she has found that her own openness yields benefits, helping inspire a spirit of honesty and cooperation that makes for a better overall classroom experience.

"Once at the Spaghetti Station, on a date with a guy I was crazy about, I went to the bathroom," she recalled. "When I came back, I decided, in a rash move, to sit on the same side of the booth as him. A few seconds later—I've already got a bad feeling—this guy—looks a lot like my date!—is yelling at us... I'd sat down with the wrong guy."

As the years passed, she became increasingly aware that her experience was anything but typical, but had no idea why. She even began to fear that she might be mentally ill. She did some investigating, and eventually connected with the Prosopagnosia Research Center at Harvard University, which confirmed through testing in 2005 that she was, as she puts it, "off-the-charts face blind."

Dr. Sellers was relieved by the diagnosis, but after a lifetime of hiding her inability to recognize faces was initially reluctant to let others know.

"I believed people would assume I was mentally ill when they found out I was face blind," she said. "I worried I would lose my job, or that my judgment would be called into question. I feared no one would understand."

She decided to start with a Hope faculty friend, Dr. Lorna Hernandez Jarvis. A cognitive

psychologist who had long been teaching about face blindness in her classes, she turned out to be a remarkably good choice.

"We've been running buddies for a long time, and we were on one of our runs," Dr. Jarvis said. "I said, 'That tends to be a very rare disorder. How did you figure it out?' She just stopped and held my arm and said, 'You know what it is?' To see her expression—the relief in her face..."

Dr. Sellers next set about crafting an e-mail message to share the message with the rest of her faculty and staff colleagues.

As a nationally acclaimed professional writer, Dr. Sellers is no stranger to either the hard work of putting words to paper nor how to do so well. Nevertheless, she struggled with that four-paragraph e-mail.

"I spent the whole summer writing the message and getting the courage to send it," she said. "It was one of the hardest things I'd ever done in my life, because my whole life was structured around pretending to know, and here I was admitting that I didn't know. That I had to have help."

She needn't have worried.

"There was just this massive outpouring of support," she said. "So many people wrote and said, 'How can I be helpful to you?'"

The revelation has also been helpful in her teaching. While previously she was anxious about missing a name, relying on seating charts to help her get through, now she tells students about her disorder on the first day—and finds that they are universally understanding and thoughtful. Crucially, the conversation fosters

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— Dr. Heather Sellers, Professor of English, regarding face-blindness

openness and cooperation that she feels enrich her writing classes in a broader sense. "It's just a calmer, more focused, more open, more honest place," she said.

"The past five years, having this happen here, I just feel so lucky and so grateful to everyone here at Hope and Holland for helping me through this amazingly difficult experience," she said. "I can't imagine having gone through this someplace else."

Dr. Sellers has since spoken around the country about her experience with face blindness. She has appeared on NBC's *Today* show and ABC's *Dateline*. In 2007 she gave a presentation about face blindness during the Winter Happening event coordinated by the college's office of public and community relations.

To share her experience more broadly, she has also written a memoir, *You Don't Look Like Anyone I Know: A True Story of Family, Face Blindness, and Forgiveness*, published earlier this fall by Riverhead Books. She started by focusing on her face blindness, but soon found that her experience with prosopagnosia was only part of the story she needed to tell. The book sets her quest to identify and understand the disorder in the context of a childhood that she realized was significantly shaped by her parents' struggles with mental illness and addictive behaviors—even as she loved them and they, clearly, loved her.

As she reflected, she found, unexpectedly, that face blindness provided her with a perspective that she might otherwise have missed—a way of looking at people, and life, which she hopes will help others.

"I'm isolated by this condition," Dr. Sellers said. "And at the same time, it's what connects me so deeply to other people: we all have this experience of trying to love others and that is basically a process of attempting to 'see' someone, know which person they are."

"Love is recognition," she said. "My whole life—while it was a very odd childhood—turned out to be this kind of school in vision, in knowing, in some other kind of recognition. A deeper kind of knowing."

She hopes that others who read about her journey may find help in their own.

"In some ways, we all are keeping part of ourself even from ourselves," she said. "I hope that it helps someone who is struggling to fit together parts that maybe don't all fit. That's my hope, that it's a positive story." 🐾

(NOTE: *Copies of You Don't Look Like Anyone I Know: A True Story of Family, Face Blindness, and Forgiveness* are available through the college's Hope-Geneva Bookstore, which can be visited online at www.hope.edu/bookstore/ or called at 800-946-4673.)



Decades of frustrating, embarrassing and even frightening experiences finally found explanation in 2005 when Dr. Heather Sellers of the English faculty learned that she has prosopagnosia, or face blindness, a disorder that affects about two percent of the population. She can't recognize faces, not even those of her closest relatives.

