



“You always have to find new challenges, but within the range of your possibilities”

By Margot Krijnen

Esther Crombag is a lecturer in Public Law at Maastricht University, a top-level tandem cyclist and a popular conference speaker. Recently, she also published her biography. Crombag is blind.

Biography

Last spring, the Dutch Minister for Immigration Gerd Leers presented Crombag's biography at a festive ceremony, where he spoke about her incredible drive: "Always with infinite, blind trust in the great future that would be hers, as long as she persevered." She is just 34 years old – so why a biography at such a young age? "My friend and colleague Erik Knippenberg wanted to write my biography for years. In the summer of 2009 he suggested it again, and for the first time I thought 'why not?' I'd reached several milestones and was ready to speak about them. Also, at conferences my audiences have often suggested that I write an inspiring biography. The time was ripe for the story of my life."

Turning blind

When Esther was 11 years old, she went on holiday in France with her parents. "I was writing a letter to my

best friend on pink 'ballerina' stationery when I noticed I could no longer see the pink lines on the paper. I left the caravan, stumbled off the steps and walked into tent posts. My parents realised something was seriously wrong and we drove home. In the car on the Route du Soleil there were moments when I didn't know if it was day or night. My father got me to the hospital as quickly as he could. It turned out there was a cyst the size of an egg at the junction of the optic nerves. The cyst could be removed, but the surgery caused irreparable damage to both optic nerves. For a week I lived between hope and fear until the specialists told me I would definitely be blind. It almost felt like a relief, because it ended the insecurity and I could start the process of acceptance."

New life

It was the beginning of a new life. The girl who had expected to return to her classmates after the summer

holidays had to start all over again. Crombag: “Suddenly, the world was dark and scary and I didn’t know what to trust anymore. I had to start from scratch. Where to go to? Which institutions to contact, which school to go to? It was almost too much to deal with. I went to the Institute for the Blind in Grave, where I learnt to read braille and walk with a stick. Everything I needed to function normally. I liked it in Grave because it felt safe and comfortable, but after one year my parents brought me back home. They felt that the longer I stayed there, the more difficult it would become to find my place in the world of the seeing.” Even as a child, Esther quickly saw that she had two options: she could either play the victim or search for possibilities within her limits. She finished secondary school, went to law school and graduated with honours.

Daily practice

So how does it work in practice, studying and teaching law? “All the literature is transferred into braille. I have a braille display that scans digital texts, including emails, reports and student papers, and transfers them into braille, one line after the other. But when I teach, it’s more practical to use books, so I get them from the braille library in Amsterdam.” Is it just a matter of having the right equipment, then? “No, when you’re blind, you have to be very organised and very social. Managing to graduate from law school as a blind person is not only an intellectual achievement. It’s the result of good planning and thinking ahead. And don’t forget all the help I got from others. Teachers, fellow students, parents, friends, everyone helped. That and my enormous drive made it possible.”

Cycling

And Crombag has not only succeeded academically; she is also involved in tandem cycling at the very top level. She has been the Dutch champion more than once and has participated in several World and European Championships. “I missed out on qualifying for the Beijing Paralympics in 2008 by 0.2 seconds, but I’ll try again for 2012 in London.” There are constant challenges, but always within her limits: “You always have to seek out new challenges in your life, but make sure they are reachable, or set intermediate goals to save you from great disappointments. And when you do face obstacles, deal with them. Find the strength to pick yourself up and start over.”

Therapeutic

With her biography, Esther hopes to inspire and motivate her readers. But it was also a personal victory. “When we started writing this book, it brought back a lot of memories I’d suppressed. I thought I’d fully

accepted my blindness and learned to live with it. But now that I was consciously and chronologically talking about my life, it all came back to me bit by bit. I realised what my sudden blindness had done to my family and me. Working on the book was tiring for me. After each session I had terrible headaches. But when the last chapter was completed, I felt that for the first time I had truly given my blindness a place in my life. It sounds like a cliché, but it was a therapeutic experience.”

Blind vertrouwen (‘Blind Trust’), Esther Crombag and Erik Knippenberg, Uitgeverij Gianni, ISBN-13: 978-90-77970-13-3



Esther with her brother before she became blind