

## NEW WRITING

### *Look both ways – and then take the risk*

Roger Wilson-Hinds



Roger Wilson-Hinds runs *Screenreader.net*, a not-for-profit company. Before that he worked for RNIB.

#### Summary

Roger and Margaret Wilson-Hinds are both blind. In this article Roger describes how they came to take the risk of becoming self-employed and he relates this to being allowed by his parents to take risks as a child. The article will encourage parents by giving an insight into two blind adults who are doing pretty well and helping others with their free talking software.

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Margaret and I are both blind people. I see a little and Margaret has not seen since she was five years old. We live and work from our home in Peterborough. We both went away to residential school from the age of five and did not hate it, although I found it an emotional challenge for the first two years or so.

With masses of specialist help and small classes, we both made our GCSEs and went on to university. In middle life, Margaret gave up work

to look after her elderly mother and I was made redundant by RNIB. This proved our great opportunity.

We set up our own business to sell hardware and software products to individuals with little or no sight and to Government training schemes for people in work or in training for work. I was involved in that kind of thing with RNIB so had a flying start and business was very good in the 1990s.

After a serious illness in 1998, we resolved to produce some low-cost or no-cost software for the mass of blind people in the world that could never afford the expensive commercial offerings (sometimes the assistive software would cost £1000). For several years we struggled to sell low-cost software but *cheap* was seen as *inferior* and the technology was always changing.

So, in 2006, we set up a not-for-profit social enterprise called *Screenreader.net* and since then we have been distributing talking software for free and making our money by undertaking project work. We get paid to put the software into different languages and we made a version for people with learning disabilities as well as little or no sight. And, of course, we get paid commercial training rates. Individuals and families can rarely afford to pay for training so we are working hard to put easy-to-understand, plain English, instructions and tutorials on our

website, using non-technical language. We have money in the business bank account and are really proud and happy with what we are doing. We get emails from blind people and their families from all over the world.

As a young man, I never ever thought of being self-employed. My mum and dad wanted me to have a safe job with a salary and a pension because of their 1930s difficult experiences of not getting well-paid work. The vision for blind youngsters was a sheltered workshop, making baskets, tuning pianos or doing a boring, repetitive machine job in a noisy factory.

But, if my parents were in the safe lane regarding work, they were all for risk-taking in daily life. I grew up with two other visually impaired brothers. When I was five I used to ride my little bike round the local pavements. One day, a neighbour's car backed out and knocked me off the bike, breaking it into two pieces but leaving me, quite unharmed, lying on my back under the car safely between the wheels. I can remember the smell of the hot metal engine and the oil to this day.

Now for the remarkable bit. Within a few days, I was back on another bike, me in bandage, but free and trusted and not caged up and protected. I dare say they were watching from the window, though, even if I was not aware of it.

So what's the moral here, if there is one? I think it's about a child being given his head and not being cocooned in cotton wool. Being allowed to take risks, get hurt and learn from the experience as a child permitted me to be enterprising in later adult life. 'Not so easy, today.' you may rightly say. But still just as necessary, I respond.

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Roger and Margaret run *Screenreader.net*, a not-for-profit company, from their home in Peterborough. The free talking software mentioned above is called 'Thunder'. You can download it from [www.screenreader.net](http://www.screenreader.net) and their contact details are below.

Amongst other things, *Screenreader.net* has been awarded a BBC Children In Need grant over three years to get the talking computer into families where there is a blind or visually impaired child. The talking computer is seen as the gateway to learning, education and literacy as well as being fun, provided, of course, 'That you do not spend too many hours on your backside!' says Roger.

Roger Wilson-Hinds

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