Hadley

Hadley Presents – In the Kitchen with Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** We all have to eat. But when you're new to cooking or regaining those skills after vision loss, the kitchen can feel like a stressful and confusing place. In this episode, Debra Erickson, founder of The Blind Kitchen, joins us to share her story along with tips on keeping cooking safe and enjoyable. I'm Ricky Enger, and this is Hadley Presents.

Welcome to the show, Debra.

**Debra Erickson:** Thank you. Thank you for having me, Ricky. I really appreciate it and am a big fan of Hadley's, from a long time ago, long before The Blind Kitchen.

**Ricky Enger:** Wow. Well, it is amazing to have you here. I know that you have participated in our What's Cooking discussion group, and certainly we've had any number of Hadley members call me up and say, "Hey, have you been to this website, The Blind Kitchen? They have all these cool tools." I really have. I've had people recommend specific things that they've gotten from your website and wanted to make sure that we knew about them. So I am delighted to have the chance to talk with you and just get a little bit about your story.

Cooking is one of those things that should be a lot of fun. We hope that the kitchen is fun and fellowship and all of that, but it can feel really stressful if you're trying to figure out what's what or where does everything go or how do I stay safe? So that's just some of what we're going to talk about today.

So before we kind of jump in to talking about any kitchen tools or techniques or anything like that, I want to learn a bit about you. So can you just give us a quick intro, tell us a bit about yourself?

**Debra Erickson:** Sure. So I am blind. I have retinitis pigmentosa and I'm one of 12 children from Indiana; I have two brothers with it as well. I was the only blind student in culinary school, so I had to learn to solve a lot of problems, and that's how The Blind Kitchen came to be. When you're in culinary school, it's very busy, six hours a day, five days a week. It's a lot of time and energy. So when I had to do something like poach, so I'd have to get on the internet, try and find books or podcasts, anywhere I could find out how can I do this with vision loss? Then I'd get my answer, and so then I'd do my practical and whatever, and then I'd move on to the next lesson. And so, oh my goodness, how am I going to take the temperature of this food if I can't see the thermometer?

And so once COVID hit and I was no longer able to teach cooking at the Oregon Commission for the Blind, that's when I put together The Blind Kitchen, all those little nuggets. I'd picked up different pieces and places through my own training and through all the podcasts and things like that. And that's how The Blind Kitchen came to be. I had a lot of time to put it together.

**Ricky Enger:** No doubt. Well, just talking about culinary school and the things that you have to do kind of makes my head spin, and we'll talk a bit more about that a little later. I am curious, so you have retinitis pigmentosa, so it is a progressive vision loss. So you didn't grow up totally blind, but at some point, you did lose enough vision that it was an adjustment. You had to start thinking about doing things differently, getting some training. And you went to the Oregon Commission for the Blind to kind of get some of those things under your belt, like figuring out how to get around and figuring out cooking and cleaning.

So first I'm curious, were you always a good cook? Was it something you enjoyed? How did you feel about cooking before you had to learn sort of how to do that without vision?

**Debra Erickson:** I was not a good cook, and I really didn't particularly enjoy it. Like I said, I'm one of 12 kids growing up in Indiana, so my mom mainly distributed food. But she fed us really well, and I'll always be grateful to her. But I did not learn to cook. My part was peeling 10 pounds of potatoes, setting the table, and then cleaning up afterwards.

**Ricky Enger:** Right.

**Debra Erickson:** And so then after I moved out and lived on my own, my way of cooking was package cooking. I could follow directions on a box of Tuna Helper or open a can of Manwich or macaroni and cheese, and that's how I fed my family. Now, my youngest son is now six foot five, so obviously I fed him enough to let him get that tall.

**Ricky Enger:** You did something right.

**Debra Erickson:** But I was not a particularly good cook. And so I have taught adults in the past, that's what I did professionally. But I didn't want to go back to teaching what I had taught before, which was professional writing and mediation. Because I'd have to do it differently, and I felt like I'd be really frustrating. So I was in cooking class, and I was like, this is fun. I'm enjoying this. I could teach cooking. And then I realized I don't know how to cook. I could do a little bit here. How the heck am I going to teach it? So that's where the idea for culinary skill came in. There are schools that teach you how to cook, and I decided to go. I don't know what I was thinking, but I made it through. I actually loved it. It was physically demanding and a lot of memorization and things like that. But it was so worth it. And the chef instructors were absolutely fantastic.

**Ricky Enger:** I think that's incredible. Going from, I should figure out a couple things in the kitchen, and many of us would've said, I'll just get those stove safety basics and go back to Hamburger Helper. Right? But you said, nah, I'm going to take it a little further. Was there anything initially, even before you went to culinary school and you're in the kitchen, you're learning to do this after you've lost some vision, was there anything that kind of made your heart beat a little faster as you're learning to do that for the first time when you're not looking at what you're doing?

**Debra Erickson:** A moment stands out very clearly for me. So Char was my cooking instructor and she's in the Midwest. She is absolutely an icon. She's now my dear friend. But we were in the kitchen. I was under sleep shade, so I couldn't see a thing, no light, nothing. And we were making something called Dutch baby, which is terrible name for something you're going to eat just for the record.

**Ricky Enger:** Right.

**Debra Erickson:** But what you do is you put butter in a pan and then you put it in a very hot oven, like 425 until the tablespoon of butter melts, and then you pull it out, and then you're supposed to pour in the batter that you've already made, and it goes in the pan and it comes up and it forms a piece of art basically that you can then sprinkle lemon and powdered sugar on. But I was standing at the oven with her and she's like, okay, now... She had taught me how to open the oven safely, pull out the rack, grab the thing. And she's like, okay, pull it out. And I was paralyzed. The heat was so hot, and I could hear the pan sizzling.

**Ricky Enger:** Oh, yeah.

**Debra Erickson:** I just said, Char, you need to give me a minute here. I've got to think about this. And she is the best teacher. She was like, okay, okay. Because normally I can kind of fake my confidence through even when I'm not feeling that confident, but I couldn't, my body would not do what my brain was trying to get it to do. And so that was a gift to me as a teacher to recognize how paralyzing fear can be. Even though it was perfectly safe. I had the tools I need. I had the knowledge I needed. Sometimes your fear overrides your brain for a little bit. And so then when I would teach students, I'd be like, okay, just breathe. Just breathe. You don't have to move. You don't have to move. If it's a blade that's scaring you, if it's a motor that's scaring you, if it's the hot stovetop. Just breathe for a minute. Nothing's going to happen. And so that was the moment in time. And it's funny because Char later told me, I learned from you in that moment how to be a better teacher because I did not recognize that fear in you and your hesitation.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. It's so relatable too because there have definitely been moments in my kitchen even after having cooked for a while where I just have that anxiety. For me, it's a weird one. It's having the fan on over the stove, and I can't hear everything that's going on, and so I feel a little anxious, something going on that I don't know about. But it's then just tuning back into I know what's happening, I have the skills to figure it out and keep myself safe. So yeah, it's very relatable.

So when you went to culinary school... And again just that you went from, I'm going to learn to be in the kitchen safely to no, now I have to learn all of it so that I can teach other people. When you decided to go on this adventure, I imagine you have some stories and we could spend an entire episode or two talking about just that. But I'm wondering if we can just concentrate on a couple of things. Do you remember what the biggest challenge for you, maybe it was something really unexpected that you were challenged with in culinary school that you had to figure out?

**Debra Erickson:** Probably the biggest challenge I had was completing my practicals in time. So it's just like the cooking shows, everybody's running around like crazy. So that was my biggest challenge. And I lost points for it because if you come into my restaurant and you order a steak and sautéed cream of spinach or something like that, and 45 minutes an hour goes by and you flag down your waiter and say, hey, where's my food? Oh, Debra's the chef, and she's blind, so she's a little slow. You don't want to hear that. So they had to hold me accountable, but they just say out loud to everybody because I never was the only one that didn't finish on time, they would say, if you can't finish on time, finish strong. And so that's what I focused on, make sure it was seasoned, well make sure it was presented well. And there are tricks to do that too, to make sure that they're getting an attractive dish, even if I can't see it.

But the one story I have was the first couple of weeks of culinary school, we learned all about eggs, poaching, scrambling, making omelets, things like that. And I had a sighted guide for about two months. So she told me that he was flipping an egg in a pan. And basically, so you've got a frying pan, you've got your egg in it, and you're going to flip the egg without a spatula, you're going to flip it halfway up in the air and it's come down and land the pan, right? Well, about half the time. So I thought we had to do it that way because that's the way my sighted guy described it to me. When I got home, my husband thought I was nuts. I put a piece of toast in the toaster. First, I was just flipping toast. Then I bought about three dozen eggs, and I had a work tray next to my stove, so I'd fry the egg on the stove. When it came time to flip it, I didn't flip it over the stove. I moved it over the work tray and then flipped it. And before the end of the week, before the practical, I was about 50/50.

So then I was in school, and I started with that one because it was the highest anxiety for me. So chef, I'm ready. And he's like, what? He had no idea what I was talking about. I thought they had to witness us doing that. Well, I was the only one. Nobody told me that everybody else was using spatulas, that we didn't have to do that. So he called the whole class over to watch. Hey, come over here. Let's see Debra do this. And I was praying to the egg gods please let this work. And I flipped it, and it came down in the pan and the yolk didn't break. I felt like I won an Olympic medal. It was a fun time. But that's one of the things where vision loss can definitely change your interpretation of things.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. So on a slightly more serious note, and we kind of touched on this earlier, just talking about fear. Fear is definitely a thing that can happen in the kitchen. And sometimes we have conversations at Hadley, in fact, we have a lot of these conversations where people will be looking for some advice because either a family member or a friend is saying, no, you shouldn't be in the kitchen. It's not safe. I don't want you doing that. Or the person themselves is feeling, I'm not safe. I don't want to do this. What if something goes wrong?

But I think there's room for a little healthy fear. You should respect that a knife is sharp. But there's also that fear that can hold us back and actually act as a barrier to getting some things accomplished. So do you have any thoughts on just how do you navigate that whole thing and make the fear work for you and then kind of work through that fear that isn't serving you well?

**Debra Erickson:** Well, I'm one, and it's always been in my nature, is to take it head on. So when I was standing in front of that hot oven and expected to perform that task I just had to stop and let my brain take over and say, you're safe. And if you aren't afraid and there's a sharp knife around you, and you don't know where it's at, or there's a hot bubbling pan of oil on the stove and you're not afraid, you're going to get taken out of the gene pool pretty quick because that's what keeps us alive without a doubt. But when it paralyzes you and you can't figure a way past it, that's when it becomes detrimental to your independence and your freedom.

The fears we've talked about of cutting yourself, the fear of burning yourself, those are real. But there's other fears too, like fears of embarrassing yourself. Am I going to look messy? Am I going to look dirty and disorganized and knocking things over? Other people can see me. So that's a real fear, and you have to have a strategy to get around it if you can't see it or tools, whichever. Some are both and some are one or the other. The other fear is, if I give you a plate of food, is it going to look attractive? You can see it, I can't. So I want to have some strategies in place so that I won't have to deal with the fear of being embarrassed. I can be confident that I'm giving you an attractive dish.

But the other fear, making people sick because you don't cook the food right, you don't kick the chicken enough or whatever, and a talking thermometer can take care of that for you. And most of us, let's face it, if we're afraid of making our family sick, we're going to overcook it. It's better to overcook than undercook. But that's not what we want to do either. We really want to produce a lovely dish that's easy to chew. This isn't beef jerky, this is a steak.

But the other fear that I've come to start to add to this is other people's fear of us being in the kitchen. And it comes from a good place. I don't want to get burnt. I don't want to get them cut. And the kitchen is full of stuff that can hurt them. So families also have to get past their own fears and help that person to build that confidence and that success by making sure they have the right tools or the right strategies. So fear is a real thing.

**Ricky Enger:** And it sounds like every fear that you've mentioned really all comes down to one thing, they all reference it in different ways, but it's all about fear of the unknown. So if you don't have a strategy or you don't know about certain ways to keep yourself safe in the kitchen, then certainly you're going to be afraid. But once you have some knowledge or a strategy, as you say, then you have a way to move forward. It's no longer about the emotion. You have some tools in place or a strategy in place, and then it's about, okay, whatever else I'm still feeling I can confront that knowing that it's a feeling, it's not necessarily reality.

**Debra Erickson:** That's a good observation. And I feel like in this chosen career path of cooking, all of us have fears around relationships, around weather, around bills. I mean, the fears are part of what keep us alive. But rarely in life do we have a chance to face a fear and then realize we overcome it, like flipping that egg. In real time I can note my fear and then I can overcome it, and I can be proud of myself for it. I can say, look, I went from here to here. I could see progress. But there's so many other things in life that we have fear where the reward is not that close.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, that's a really good point. And what's better than overcoming that fear and seeing in real time than, hey, I get to eat my own success?

**Debra Erickson:** That's a good point.

**Ricky Enger:** So there is a lot to think about in the kitchen. You got to figure out what each ingredient is. You have to figure out how to measure those ingredients. You got to think about cleanup. So all these different things, and I think there are tools and techniques for a lot of these different things. And so again, we could spend a whole episode just talking about tools and techniques in the kitchen, but since we don't have quite that much time, we'll focus on just a couple of different things.

I'm wondering, first, those tools that keep you safe in the kitchen. Do you have some thoughts on tools that everyone should have in their kitchen for safety?

**Debra Erickson:** A cut glove would be one. That's a relatively thin glove that you wear on the hand holding the food, and you can literally run a knife back and forth on the palm of that. You'll feel the pressure and you'll feel the movement, but it won't cut through. Heat gloves. So most of us use grew up using bulky quilted rectangles or circles or whatever, the heat gloves that are found in the blank kitchen and other places as well. Some people might know them as UGG gloves, but those are much more expensive. But they have four fingers and a thumb. So you've got the flexibility of your fingertips. And they're thick, but not as thick as the quilted ones, but they have designs on them made of silicone. The silicone makes it non-skid as well. Not only are you getting heat protection, but you’re also going to be able to trust that you have a more secure grip on it. Those are two tools for cutting and for heat.

The work trays, they're just cafeteria trays. I would encourage anyone to get those because if you accidentally do spill something... I do not work without a work tray. So if I do accidentally knock something over, it's going to contain the spill within the confines of that tray for most of them. And you may even be able to salvage the spillage by using a funnel to get it back in the box or the bottle because it's trapped in a predictable place. We have a cutting and chopping collection where nobody needs everything in The Blind Kitchen, but that contains 15 tools that all have to do with cutting and chopping and to keep your hands from getting cut.

**Ricky Enger:** And I think that's so important, protecting yourself from something sharp or something hot, the first couple of things people think about.

**Debra Erickson:** Sure.

**Ricky Enger:** The work tray is one of my favorite tips. I tend to be a messy cook, and nothing has saved me more time than learning to measure over a work tray. It's all contained. I don't end up with flour on the ceiling or whatever.

**Debra Erickson:** It's true.

**Ricky Enger:** If we can talk about one other kind of tool. So now that we're safe in the kitchen, presentation is such a big thing. If you're giving food to someone else, you want to feel proud about not only how it tastes, but how it looks. And did I just give you three times as much as is on my plate or what have you? Do you have tools or techniques for plating for portioning?

**Debra Erickson:** Yeah, so this is something I also learned in culinary school because if you're running a restaurant if you're giving somebody three times as much as one person... Let's just take rice. So I'm giving you three times as much rice as I'm giving your buddy, your buddy's going to be mad and probably not come back to the restaurant. They're portion scoops, so they're just like ice cream scoops and they come in like 42 different sizes. So if I have rice, I can use a six ounce portion scoop, or if I want to give you a cup of rice, an eight ounce portion scoop, and then level it out so I know exactly how much it is, and then invert that over a plate. I can put it in the center. I can put it to the side, you're going to have this beautiful dome of rice, and so will your friend, because it just got portion scooped out. And then I can sprinkle fresh herbs on it or toasted nuts and just know that it's going to be very attractively presented because I had the tool to help make that happen. Guessing doesn't work, as a rule. Some people are better at guessing, I guess, than I am. But I have to have a strategy.

**Ricky Enger:** Definitely. And it's a simple thing, but very effective just to have something that you are measuring with. So whether it's an ice cream scoop or I know The Blind Kitchen has some of these portion scoops as well, so such a great tip for not having to do the guesswork. You don't have to eyeball it anymore, right?

**Debra Erickson:** Right.

**Ricky Enger:** If you've got this scoop full, then everyone is going to have a plate that looks the same.

**Debra Erickson:** And if I don't want a dome of rice, if I don't want a little rice mountain, I still have the amount on the plate, and I can smash it down a little bit with the back of the scoop. And I've done that before, and I put a poached egg on the top of the mound of rice.

**Ricky Enger:** And you, as we've said, have a couple of these on your website. We'll have the link to Debra's site in the show notes. There is a lot of great stuff there. Not just tools, but also tips, techniques, recipes. It's a great place to go and look around. Also got to give a shout out to Hadley's What's Cooking discussion group.

**Debra Erickson:** Yes.

**Ricky Enger:** If you're thinking about getting back into cooking or maybe you're really good at it and you want to come share some recipes with us, we'd love to have you for that too.

So this has been amazing. Debra. As we wrap up, any final thoughts that you would leave people with? Maybe someone is still at that paralyzing fear stage and not sure how to step back in the kitchen. Or maybe someone has done that and they're just finding it a little bit tedious now. I'm still having trouble measuring things, or it's just not as enjoyable as it once was or whatever. Do you have any tips for these budding new cooks or someone who's returning to it and finding it maybe not so enjoyable?

**Debra Erickson:** I'd encourage people to look at why it's not enjoyable for them. Some people just don't like to cook, but if you really have that motivation that you would really like to cook and like the outcomes then there's different sources besides me about how do blind people cook, there's a lot of different things on there. To seek out the information, notice where your problem is, just don't let it freeze you on the threshold to walking into your kitchen say, no, I'm afraid I'm going to spill stuff, I don't know how to measure well. It's a skill. You have to do it over and over and over again before you can build your confidence that you're going to get it right.

So I would encourage people to, instead of just having this general fear door in front of them, not allowing them access to something they want to do, to isolate what is it I'm afraid of, and then focus on that. Because if you break it into manageable pieces, cooking is too big. Knives, stoves, all of that in one thought, it's too big. Pick a piece of it and then pat yourself on the back when you get it right and then pick another piece.

**Ricky Enger:** I love that. Really good advice for anything really. Just breaking it down into smaller chunks that you can tackle, and then you get to feel that reward of having accomplished that one little thing and you can move on to the next.

**Debra Erickson:** Exactly.

**Ricky Enger:** Well, Debra, thank you so much for stopping by, giving us your story, some tips and tricks and tools and all kinds of things. And certainly check out Debra's website, that's TheBlindKitchen, all one word, TheBlindKitchen.com. Thanks for joining us, Debra. It's been wonderful having you.

**Debra Erickson:** Thank you for having me. It's been an honor.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@Hadleyhelps.org, that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T at Hadleyhelps.org, or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.