

## **BLIND AMBITION**

by Veronica Butts, The Virginian-Pilot  
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Virginia Beach - Justin Kauflin admits he may look odd sitting in a jazz spot amid a middle-aged bass player and drummer, his long, limber fingers warming the keys of a piano.

After all, the lanky teen with almond-shaped eyes and spiky, jet black hair isn't old enough to order the drinks the bartender serves at Blues Alley Bistro Cafe, where he'll play Friday.

But the young jazz pianist will never see the crowd's awkward looks. In fact, he hasn't seen anything for the last six years.

It's been that way for 17-year old Justin ever since the sixth grade, when a rare eye disease he had battled since birth robbed him of his sight.

Justin, however, has heard from his listeners.

When he's really hot, when the notes flow from his fingers like waves, his ears pick up the distinct roar of hands smacking together, bodies rising to stand and sharp whistles.

It's one of the most wonderful sounds in the world, according to Justin.

"With jazz, I don't even get nervous," he says from the bench of a mahogany Yamaha in the living room of his Virginia Beach Bellamy Plantation home. "And, I love playing. I get to take home good tips, too."

His play dates aren't anything like his daytime routine at Salem High School and the Governor's School for the Arts, where classmates and faculty are used to his telltale walking stick and careful steps around campus.

After performances, people often rush to shake his hand, thinking he can see their gestures behind his dark sunshades.

"They can't tell I'm blind when I'm playing," says Justin, who performed regularly this year at Orion's restaurant at the Virginia Beach Oceanfront. "And, it's so funny because they think I don't want to shake their hand or something and then they're like, 'Oh.'"

Suddenly aware of his blindness, his listeners gush about how amazing it is that he plays piano so beautifully.

But those who know Justin will tell you his blindness isn't what makes him a gifted musician.

He hasn't acquired super-human hearing or enhanced senses as in the movie "Daredevil," Justin explains.

His musical ability is a simple case of lost and found.

Without his sight, Justin lost sports, movies, drawing, karate, video games — all the trivial pursuits of a teenage boy. In music, he found a skill that fit into his vision-less world.

So while friends shoot hoops or catch a flick, Justin is busy figuring out how to mimic a complicated chord by ear.

His Governor's School big band teacher, Jae Sinnett, will attest to that. It was Sinnett, who leads a jazz trio and hosts a late-night jazz radio show on WHRV-FM, who tapped Justin to fill in for his pianist at Friday's Blues Alley gig.

Sinnett can recall numerous nights during his radio show when Justin would call in after midnight to ask the name of a tune or album, his piano notes resonating in the background.

"Justin just works harder than most," Sinnett says. "I mean, he's literally up into the morning hours practicing. It's his dedication that makes the difference. He'd be just as good if he wasn't blind."

Justin doesn't agree with that notion.

He views his blindness as a turning point. A motivator. An opportunity to focus.

"If I didn't lose my vision, I wouldn't be where I am. That's when I started to take music seriously. It's like I didn't have anything else, and I needed something to occupy my time. Being blind gave me an advantage."

Justin's mother remembers the tough times in dealing with Justin's disease, proliferative exudative retinopathy.

Doctors first said his sight would improve, sent him to specialists all over the country. Since kindergarten, Justin has undergone 10 surgeries, one where doctors removed and replaced an eye. Then there was the unforgettable week after he lost his sight completely.

"That was the first time I'd seen Justin depressed," said his mother, Phyllis Kauflin. "His friends stopped coming by because he couldn't do things they did anymore. He didn't want to eat in front of anyone because of how hard it was not seeing his food. He didn't even want to have his birthday party that year."

Justin once tried Braille sheet music. Now he plays from memory, listening over and over until his nimble fingers find the right keys. He can play any of the jazz classics but would rather create his own score.

"I love stuff that's different. I like to improv, put some of myself into it. That's what jazz is all about."

Soon, Justin will apply to three colleges: The Juilliard School, Virginia Commonwealth University and William Paterson University in New Jersey.

The high school senior is well aware that as a jazz pianist he's entering a small window of a dwindling music genre.

Folks who have heard him play aren't worried.

"If you just listen — not thinking he's blind or that he's 17 — you'll be amazed," Sinnett says. "In many ways, he's playing better than some of the top musicians in the state. And, it's from memory."

"The sky's the limit with Justin."