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Blind opera singer to perform at ‘Vision Beyond Sight’ gala



Opera singer Laurie Rubin will perform at the 8th Annual Vision Beyond Sight Gala. (Courtesy of Laurie Rubin)

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Southern California native Laurie Rubin was diagnosed with leber congenital amaurosis when she was 3 months old. The genetic eye condition is rare, affecting about one in 40,000 newborns and causing severe vision loss or blindness.

“The retinas never fully develop, so I can see light, I can see dark and that’s about it,” Rubin said.

Her family made sure she didn’t feel different at home while she was growing up, but in the outside world she constantly felt pressured to prove herself.

“It took a toll on my self-esteem for a long time,” she said. “I felt like a normal kid but everything that I was hearing outside was different; there were always doors I had to pry open.”

In spite of the challenges, the mezzo-soprano graduated from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Yale School of Music. She felt her vision impairment didn't define her, but it was difficult to get others to view her the way she viewed herself. Her experience inspired her to write a book titled "Do You Dream in Color?: Insights from a Girl Without Sight."

Chronicling her journey toward identity, the memoir traces her life, from being an isolated adolescent to blossoming into an international opera singer.

Rubin now makes her home in Hawaii where she runs Ohana Arts, a non-profit arts education organization in Honolulu with her wife, Jenny Taira, who is a composer, pianist and clarinetist.

"We started our performing arts organization for youth because Jenny and I both had amazing experiences in performing arts programs," said Rubin. "We wanted to bring that to Hawaii."

On Thursday, March 27, Rubin will bring her inspiring story to Orange County when she performs at Beyond Blindness' 8th annual Vision Beyond Sight Gala.

"Laurie exemplifies Beyond Blindness' core value of optimism, one of seven that guide our mission to empower children with visual impairments and other disabilities to achieve their fullest potential," said Angie Rowe, president and chief executive officer at Beyond Blindness.



Laurie Rubin is an international opera singer and her journey is a testament to resilience and determination. (Courtesy of Laurie Rubin)

Based in Santa Ana, Beyond Blindness provides services like early intervention, education, enrichment and family support to help children of all abilities build fulfilling and rewarding lives. Each year, the non-profit provides about 500 children and 1,000 family members with resources. Rubin connected with Beyond Blindness through one of its board members and was delighted to hear about the difference they were making for visually impaired youth and their families.

“Beyond Blindness really has so many of the values of organizations that I believe in and I was really excited to hear about what they were doing,” Rubin said. “It’s all about building independence and providing resources.”

Likewise, Beyond Blindness officials felt that Rubin’s story was a perfect example of what can be possible for those living with blindness when they have the right support.

“Her journey is a testament to resilience, determination and the belief that anything is possible, even in the face of significant challenges,” said Rowe. “We are honored to have her perform at our gala, inspiring our guests to join us in building bright beginnings for every child and family we serve.”

The annual Vision Beyond Sight Gala is one of three major fundraising events Beyond Blindness hosts each year, along with its annual Family Fair and the Fall Golf Classic. Taking place this year at the Mile Square Golf Course in Fountain Valley, the gala will celebrate those who live with visual impairments with testimonies from Beyond Blindness alumni, a wine pull and auction and a special “Dining in the Dark” experience.

“I will be singing a few songs, which range from covers of pop songs to classic folk songs. We will be doing some opera pieces as well,” said Rubin.

Rubin also plans to perform an original song she wrote with Taira, a personal piece called “The Girl I Am.”

“It basically tells the story of my feeling like I didn’t fit in as a blind person, but then coming at it with this perspective, knowing that things get better,” she said.

Copies of Rubin’s book will be for sale at the gala, where she will sign them. Additionally, she will be donating copies of “Do You Dream in Color?” to Beyond Blindness and hosting a book club over Zoom on March 18, from 7 to 8 p.m.

Rubin believes her story can provide hope to anyone feeling like their vision impairment creates a barrier they can't overcome. While Rubin works hard to not let her blindness define her, she knows talking about her experience can be an inspiration.

"It feels really good if I, in any small way, can help somebody who is going through some of the same stuff I went through," she said.

For tickets to the 8th annual Vision Beyond Sight Gala or to make a donation to Beyond Blindness, visit beyondblindness.org.