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## East Brunswick student gets scholarship to Columbia

### My Central Jers

BY ERICA HARBATKIN • STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 30, 2008

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**EAST BRUNSWICK** —On sunny days, Sean O'Keefe used to walk with his eyes closed.

ADVERTISEMENT The glare from the sun turned his eyesight from blurry to pure white, and he was better off walking in pitch black than intense light.

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Now the legally blind 18-year-old East Brunswick High School graduate wears dark sunglasses on bright days and carries a cane in unfamiliar places. He's working on familiarizing himself with New York City, where he'll attend Columbia University this fall to study chemical engineering.

Growing up with two brothers and a sister who are heavily involved in sports, O'Keefe carved out his own niche in academics.

He spent his high school years honing his skills in science and math and spent four years as a "mathlete."

"It's been fun," he said. The he laughed, realizing he has just called being a mathlete fun. "I'm probably the only one who thinks it's fun. But I like how it just works. There's no deep thinking and imagination required. It just works."

O'Keefe is one of four 2008 graduates to win a scholarship from the Little Rock Foundation, a nonprofit organization for blind and visually impaired young people.

The township resident was born with ocular albinism, a genetic condition in which the eyes lack melanin pigment, causing impaired visual sharpness. His eyes appear green, but the pigment is so shallow that light shines right through the iris, causing sensitivity to bright light like the sun. He can see a few inches in

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front of him, but everything beyond that is blurry or he can't see it at all.

The visual impairment presents challenges his peers don't face — he carries magnifiers for reading, and uses recorded books or a camera that allows him to zoom in on pages and then displays text on a closed-circuit television.

"I just take more time to do (homework)," he said, shrugging off the extra accommodations.

But his mother isn't so sure that's true.

"He's a real intellect. He just loves to learn, but when he does his work, he just absorbs it all," Pat O'Keefe said. "He's not one to pound the books. He can be up all night working on a paper if he has to, but he won't be up all night because he wants get the A-plus."

She thought for a moment.

"Of course he'll probably get the A+ anyway."

O'Keefe can make his own way through New York City with a cane and by listening to the traffic patterns, but he often sits next to a classmate on the bus and has no idea who he's sitting next to. He excels in chemistry but can't see the measurement lines on a beaker.

"I usually just ask others to measure for me," he said.

He'll live in a single dorm, partly because that way he won't have to worry about navigating his way through a roommate's belongings — "I trip over anything if I don't know where it is," he said — but also because after a lifetime of living in a full [house](#), he's ready to live alone.

He's not worried about leaving his lifelong home behind, he says, but he does have one concern: "I just wonder if anyone will take care of the bird," he said, referring to the family pet, Tootie.

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"I didn't name her," he added quickly.

"He's probably right that the others might forget about him," Pat O'Keefe said. "Everyone gets him for a month, and I'm sure the bird's really relieved when Sean's on 'Tootie duty.' "

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