“Vision loss doesn’t define me. I’m much more than a blind girl,” Kelly says. Indeed. When unexpected obstacles came her way at age 22 -- right after she graduated from the University of Minnesota-Duluth with a degree in Public Health and Promotion -- Kelly created a path for herself... to success.

The events that led to Kelly’s vision loss started the spring of 2015, when Kelly began to experience painful headaches. This was her graduating year at UMD, and she was taking 18 credits -- a heavy load. She was also working part-time at Bellisio’s Restaurant as a host and for UMD Student Health as an intern. By May the headaches became migraines, but she thought they were just the result of her busy schedule. Her vision was perfect at that time.

On June 4, 2015 Kelly checked into an emergency room due to excruciatingly painful migraines. After five minutes into an MRI scan the doctors rushed her into emergency care with the diagnosis of stage III brain cancer. She stayed overnight for a biopsy surgery to determine the type of cancer. The following month she went to Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota where the tumor was removed.

Immediately following this surgery Kelly lost all vision. Kelly explains that the fist-size tumor behind her eyes caused fluid pressure so great that it injured the back of each of her eyes – her optic nerves. Kelly does not recall being told that vision loss was a possibility.

If she could go back in time, Kelly said she would see a doctor when she first experienced the severe headaches.

In August, 2015 Kelly returned to Mayo for treatment of an infection in her brain. Doctors predicted that Kelly would not regain any sight. However, within a few months of her surgery, about 10% of Kelly’s vision in each eye returned.

In 2017, a counselor from Minnesota State Services for the Blind (SSB) reached out to Kelly and offered services. SSB sent two instructors once a week for a year to Kelly’s home in Central
Minnesota. Kelly learned Braille, entry-level technology skills, and how to use a long white cane.

Then Kelly learned about the Lighthouse Center for Vision Loss in Duluth. She attended full-day classes at the Lighthouse from February 2018 through September 2018. During this time, Kelly resided in a Lighthouse apartment -- her first time living on her own. Upon graduating from the Lighthouse Kelly says, “I’m leaving with many new skills and greater confidence to do anything I desire.”

“I’m grateful for the opportunity to be a student at the Lighthouse, because it has been an incredible opportunity...” Kelly said. When Kelly started at the Lighthouse, she says she couldn’t cross a street alone. Kelly now crosses streets, rides the public bus, and walks to familiar places on her own.

In the computer lab, Kelly has increased her computer skills, including the screen reader application JAWS (Job Assistance With Speech) that allows her to use the computer without sight. She can surf the web, use Microsoft Word and Excel, download audio books, and more. Through Lighthouse instruction, Kelly has also improved her Braille skills, cooking skills, ability to use her iPhone, and self-advocacy skills.

Kelly has also been working hard on employment preparation while at the Lighthouse. “My employment goals are to promote and educate people on health and wellbeing... We can all reach our potential for becoming the happiest and healthiest versions of ourselves,” Kelly said.

Kelly’s tip about seeing or meeting a blind person you want to help: “Don’t touch or grab the person in any way... Ask, do you want help? Don’t assume that you need to help.”

Kelly says that even though she has experienced difficult days and tremendous loss, she’s still positive with joy and gratitude. “The blind do not see the world as the sighted do. They see through different eyes. However, it’s still a beautiful and wonderful world.” Kelly added that she sees through the feeling of the sun on her face, the scents around her, sounds that she hears, and so much more.