

Support groups help visually impaired

Independence, understanding cited as goals for members

by Candace Wilson

"You're going blind. You won't be able to read or drive. But don't worry: you'll be able to clean yourself and feed your husband." That's how Bonnie Truax, San Antonio, Texas, learned she had macular degeneration at a routine eye exam in 1980. "I went home and cried for two days," she said, adding that she didn't go to an eye doctor for another 15 years. By then she was legally blind and knew she needed a support group. Finding none, she organized the San Antonio Low Vision Club, which now has 800 members.

For most people, the first reaction to learning about vision loss is one of shock and denial. This is often followed by grief and depression. At the same time, the newly visually impaired are challenged to learn new ways of doing necessary tasks: shopping, sorting their socks, cooking. Many are not aware of available resources, such as training and technology designed to help the visually impaired live full and independent lives. "When vision loss is new, people don't know where to turn and how to reinvent themselves. Being with others with the same challenges and same situation can really help," commented Truax.

Art Motz of Boise, Idaho, first attended a low vision support group when his wife, Linda, insisted, "You have to get up off the couch." Motz is now a full time resource for

inclusive low vision support groups administered by the Gem States Region of American Blind Veterans Association. His experience with denial and depression following his diagnosis of macular degeneration has made him a persuasive advocate for support groups. "I try to show people what I've learned through the groups. Life can be more than talking books."

Carin Mack, a social worker who facilitates support groups in Seattle, Washington, is concerned about isolation and loss of self-esteem that usually accompany vision loss. "Our culture is very sight-oriented, and we isolate those who are different." Mack added that many never come out of depression.

Support groups offer role models, practical help, and a sense of community. Colleen Dooley of Mt. Vernon, Washington, commented, "It's hard to be with people when you can't see their faces or read their body language. In the group, we are all in the same situation."

During his career as a social worker, Frank Johnson of Seattle, Washington, facilitated client support groups and knew firsthand how they helped people. Even so, it took him a year or two before he sought out a group. "I thought I was doing a good job adapting. I knew on an intellectual level how to deal with stuff." But Johnson had

Losing
your **vision**
doesn't mean
losing your
independence.

We're **Community Services for the Blind and Partially Sighted** and for over 40 years have helped those with vision loss maintain their independence.



Community Services
for the Blind and
Partially Sighted

C · S · B · P · S

Call to find out how we can help.
(800) 458-4888

WWW.CSBPS.COM

continued from page 28

GROUPS

difficulty describing his condition to family and friends. "They said, 'You keep telling us you have peripheral vision, but then you say you can't see; you can't read.' Then I began to wonder if I was malingering." An avid reader, Johnson had always feared losing his sight. He now knows it isn't the end of the world. "I needed to learn by being with others with common experience."

Mack, Truax, Motz, and Johnson all agree that the educational component of their groups is vital. Guest speakers provide information on treatment options, new research, skills, guide dogs, and additional resources. Articles and information are regularly distributed. "People don't want a pity party; they want to know how to be independent," said Mack. She also advised, "All support groups are different. If the first one doesn't fit, try another."

Truax can laugh now about her doctor's idea of her limited future. At 80 she leads a full life involved in club activities. Starting a support group has been life changing.

How to Find a Support Group in Your Area

- Contact a local agency for the blind
- Ask your ophthalmologist
- Call Community Services for the Blind & Visually Impaired at 800-458-4888 for referral to an agency near you.
- Contact a senior center

How to Start a Support Group in Your Area

- Contact a local agency for help
Agencies such as Community Services for the Blind & Visually Impaired in Seattle, Washington, offer a 10-12 week informational program on visual impairment to local groups.
- Contact a senior center
Senior center sponsorship can provide space to meet and advertising.
- Contact Lighthouse for the Blind @ <http://www.lighthouse.org> or call (800) 829-0500
- Contact a facilitator of any support group for tips
- Call Art Motz at 208-362-2854 to order pamphlet "How to Set up a Support Group"



- Customized Web Site For The Customer
- Live Product Video Demonstration
- FREE Download Of A Reading Chart
- Secured Web Site

**Macular Degeneration?
We Can Help!
(727) 526-2020**

Visit Our Web Site
www.magnifyingaids.com