

LEARNING TO COPE WITH SIGHT LOSS

Six Weeks at a VA Blind Rehabilitation Center

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with Sandra McGee

Introduction

On the morning of August 13, 2003, my wife, Sandra, arrived home to find me sitting at my desk, staring off into space. “Sandra,” I said, “I have some bad news. I can’t see.”

That morning I had suffered a hemorrhage in my left eye—my last good eye as I called it—that would render me legally blind. Diagnosed with Age-Related Macular Degeneration (the loss of central focus vision), from that day on I would never drive again, never recognize faces again, never apply toothpaste directly to my toothbrush again, and on and on for a laundry list of other ordinary acts that I once took for granted. So, as I was closing in on my ninth decade, did I hear the worst news of my life: “Bill, you are legally blind.”

Then, in 2008, while attending a support group for men with vision loss at the LightHouse for the Blind, I learned about the powerful work being done at the VA Regional Blind Rehabilitation Centers located throughout the United States. As a World War II veteran, I was eligible even though my disability was not service connected. I could join a band of blinded brothers and sisters for six weeks of live-in training at a Blind Rehab Center near me. Together we would learn about low vision aids and techniques for coping with our sight loss.

Consider this: According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 16.5 million Americans age 45 or older must adjust to vision loss challenges on their own. However, military veterans who have become visually impaired—whether service-connected or not—can get help with basic living skills at VA live-in programs located around the country. Having the opportunity to share experiences with other veterans is very important. Through participation in the VA program, most veterans feel their confidence, self-esteem, and attitudes toward their visual impairment improve as they regain independence, feel more in control of their lives, and more motivated to be active at home.

Sight loss can be a very stressful event in anyone’s life. I wrote this booklet—with considerable help from my beautiful wife and co-author, Sandra—to inform the thousands of legally blind or low vision veterans about the VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers. I hope my story will be helpful not only to fellow veterans, but to non-veterans alike, as well as their families and caregivers, in learning to cope with sight loss.

—William L. McGee