Learning to Use a White Cane as a Senior

by Jonathan Ice

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From the Editor: Jonathan Ice is a cane travel instructor with the Iowa Department for the Blind. He is a longtime Federationist and delivered the following remarks at the 2011 convention seminar of the NFB Seniors Division. They were reprinted in the 2012 spring/summer issue of the Division’s newsletter. He began by pointing out that this was the first time he had given a presentation using Braille notes. He said he had been a high partial and was just now learning Braille. This is what he said:

I am not going to make the assumption that all of you are experienced cane users. I want to talk about the value of the cane and how it is best used. I did not use a cane until I was in mid life, although my vision has not changed. Let me explain why I started using the white cane. Most of the time I could get around all right; my central vision is missing, but I can see around the periphery of my eyes. So what if I cannot see things directly in front of me.

It wasn't until I finally went to an NFB training center and used a cane under sleepshades that I realized that I had been fooling myself. I couldn't read signs, which caused me a lot of problems. I was trying to get around as a sighted person, but I had to ask questions, which confused sighted people. They thought I was really odd for asking about signs and things that were right in front of my face.

The first answer to the question of why use a white cane is for safety. If a person cannot always see stairs or curbs, the cane is a necessity. I know that I have saved myself from some nasty falls. Also, no matter how blind a person is, when you ask for help, the sighted person will usually give detailed directions instead of saying that something is over there, which has no meaning to a blind person.

Basically, the cane acts as an antenna. It alerts the blind person of a change in the space ahead, on, or near the ground. With practice the blind person learns to move into the safe space. One doesn’t want to swing the cane in too wide an arc because this provides unnecessary information and does not provide the data in front of the cane. When the cane does find something in the path, a turn or stop is essential. Besides depending on the cane, the traveler can use hearing to assist. But those who have poor hearing can touch things in the environment with the cane or even the hand to aid them. It is important to keep the cane on the ground during each step. If it is in the air, you can miss a curb or step-down.

I have been asked if I use the same methods when teaching seniors. Since I'm older myself, I realize that I have to use more repetition with older folks. I also stay closer to the senior. If I'm working with a person who is eighty and he or she falls, it might mean a broken hip. A younger person would probably get up and go on.  
 I teach my students that, if we make a right turn at the corner, a left turn will be required when we turn around to retrace our steps. Sometimes I notice that older people think they know something when they really don't. I just let the senior make the mistake and then figure out that it was not a good choice. When I get a new student, I realize that he or she usually has a lot of fear of being injured or simply being watched as a blind person for the first time. However, after a while these problems usually abate.

People have inquired about using sleepshades with older students. I have found that, if I don’t use them, the older person does not learn because he or she is using limited vision even though it did not work well in the past. At one point I was teaching a group of seniors. The star of the group was eighty-nine. She was safely crossing streets after only four days. She was highly motivated, but she always kept safety in mind. She told the others that, if she could do it, they could too.

I had one older person who had serious problems, and I thought she would have a hard time learning, but she proved me wrong. The part of her brain which had been injured was not involved in travel. Another of my older students was having trouble finding her way around her kitchen, and I was about to give up on her, but one day she got the hang of the layout. Then we progressed out to the porch, then down the steps and finally around the neighborhood. Visiting neighbors was her goal.

If any of you at this meeting have not used a cane before, now you have heard all these stories and might want to give it a try. Everyone I know agrees that the NFB cane with its metal tip is the best. For most seniors, using a backpack or bag with long handles is best for carrying things because they leave the hands free.