Challenges of Aging

by Annie Schlesinger

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From the Editor: For far too many seniors, blindness becomes the ultimate assault on their independence and the ultimate insult as life takes away things that once made it meaningful. Annie Schlesinger doesn’t intend to let it do that. She knows what problems aging may send her way, but she knows how to think, knows how to plan, and knows how to ask those who can help her with strategies and inspiration. Although I interviewed Annie with an eye toward writing this headnote, I think that I can do no better than Bob Kresmer in what he says about her. “Annie Schlesinger is a long-time member of the NFB of Arizona and has served on the board of the Tucson chapter. She is very active in the chapter and is a leader of a vision loss support group in her retirement residence, where she has lived for five years. She is also involved in community activities and keeps her mind and body in tiptop shape. She is a well-kempt woman who dresses in a very nice hat for every occasion. She is a real friend!” Here is the candid and inspirational article she has asked the Braille Monitor to consider publishing, and we are honored that she wrote and submitted it:

Two years after Arthur died I, at age seventy-five, moved into a large senior retirement complex. I love it! We have transportation to stores and to medical care, fifteen meals included per month, activities, and more.

Now at age eighty, retinitis pigmentosa leaves me with a small circle of hazy but still useful vision. I am preparing for when it is gone. As a member of the NFB I pride myself on being independent, but, as total blindness approaches, I am anticipating difficulties coping with blindness and consequences of the aging process I see going on around me.

Being in a senior development is both inspiring and scary. Many residents are active and independent; some volunteer here and at outside facilities. We shop, go to appointments, and enjoy playing cards and entertainments. But I observe changes in my fellow residents and me. Forgetfulness has a huge impact: forgetting to take medications, forgetting appointments, even forgetting to drink enough water affects health. We become hard of hearing and must manage hearing aids including changing batteries. Hearing aids require dexterity in inserting them. No one told me constipation (or colonic inertia, as my brother correctly called it) could be an ongoing problem that must be managed. I may be faced with urinary incontinence; the Depends are ready!

I am a competent cane traveler. When I moved here, I admired the ubiquitous rollators and walkers that are used for balance. As I watched them I wondered how I could use a walker with my long white cane if my balance gets bad. An O&M instructor told me some end up in a wheelchair when balance becomes unsafe. No no no! But I know that some use a support cane along with the long white cane. Now I have had training in using the canes together. It takes practice and slows my walk, but I hope it will enable me to keep on the go.

The thought came to me that it might be possible to use my four-wheel cart to help my balance, the one I pull behind me to carry groceries to my apartment. Bob Kresmer, past president of the Arizona affiliate, told me that there is a technique developed to use a walker and the long cane, which I will investigate.

Our complexity of life seems to increase. I use the iPhone, but will I be able to adapt as the system changes? Older brains are less efficient in areas of learning, memory, and problem solving. From learning psychology I remember, "You can teach an old dog new tricks; it just takes longer."

Motivation is key to learning; many of my neighbors are content in their niche. Some who used a computer have given it up. I am motivated to adapt now, but will this continue?

I am pursuing two paths to keep track of appointments and maintain lists. Along with using the iPhone, I am looking at low-tech methods such as Braille tape on a magnetic board. I have used a digital recorder for notes. I journey on, and look forward to tomorrow's challenges!