Seniors in Charge Provides Training to People with Vision Loss

By Stacey Johnson

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Last September 13 to 15 blind seniors in the greater Denver area received intensive training in blindness skills at the Colorado Center for the Blind. Stacey Johnson of the CCB staff wrote up the story and submitted it to a publication called 50 Plus Marketplace News, and it was printed in the November 2011 issue. Here is the story:

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A trip to the grocery store? An email communication? Not a big deal, right? Not the case for seniors with vision loss. Keeping up with changes in technology is a challenge. Add blindness, vision loss, or a variety of other sight-related diseases to the equation, and the outcome is typically frustration and discouragement.

But not for the seniors who participated in Seniors in Charge, a three-day program offered by the Colorado Center for the Blind at no cost. Seniors with varying degrees of vision loss took part in mobility, home management, and technology training. "The goal of the program is to keep visually impaired seniors living independently for as long as possible. If blindness is the only factor impacting the person, there is no reason he or she can’t live independently," says Duncan Larsen, senior services coordinator for the Center. Participants received an introduction to Braille, adaptive technologies such as electronic readers and screen readers, then traveled with the assistance of a white cane, a tool used by the blind to navigate their surroundings safely.

Often seniors feel disconnected to friends and family. With technology taking over routine, daily communication, they often feel left out. Colorado Center for the Blind steps in and provides basic training in these skills. "I didn't think I could even use a computer, and now I can use one without a screen," said one participant.

"This is often the case with the participants. They come with all sorts of misconceptions of what they can and can't do. They leave the program with a new understanding of what possibilities exist," explains Larsen. In addition to technology class, several outings were planned throughout the three days. A trip on the Light Rail from the Littleton station to Downtown Denver. For some, the trip was filled with firsts--the Light Rail, the 16th Street Mall Shuttle, an escalator, and the first time in a crowded buffet line navigating a tray of food--all without sight.

Inclusion of family members is a key component of the program. On the final day the participants prepared a meal for their family and friends. Seeing what their loved ones accomplished in such a short time provided hope and a glimpse at what can be achieved with practice, the proper tools, and training.

The program's success was summarized best by Brent Batron, youth services coordinator: "Our seniors in this week's program have raised the bar for all of us here at the Center." Telling a group of twenty and thirty-somethings they had been outdone by a group old enough to be their parents or grandparents provided ample motivation for them to work harder. More Seniors in Charge training sessions are planned. For information call (303) 778-1130 or visit <www.cocenter.org>.