Addressing the Needs of Seniors

by Barbara Pierce

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 From the Editor: No name is likely to be more familiar to Monitor readers than Barbara Pierce, she having served longer than any editor in the history of this magazine. She now edits the Buckeye Bulletin, a publication of the National Federation of the Blind of Ohio. It is always a pleasure for me to read what she writes, and I think what she has to say about addressing the needs of senior citizens is both timely and important. Here is what she says in an article entitled “Editor’s Musing,” which appeared in the fall issue of the newsletter:

 On September 1 Bob and I celebrated our first year of living at Kendal at Oberlin, a residential community for seniors. We have a lovely, air-conditioned cottage and one delicious meal a day in an upscale dining room. The tradeoff is that we spend most of our time with senior citizens, thinking about issues of interest to them. One of these is vision loss.

 Recent statistics suggest that 6.8 percent of people over sixty-five are losing vision. That is from the NFB website. The AFB says that 12.2 percent of people between sixty-five and seventy-five report vision loss while 15.4 percent of those over seventy-five are losing sight.

 Not surprisingly a number of people here are struggling with macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma. Also not surprisingly people watch me very carefully. They are always worrying that I may trip someone with my white cane. They also want to know how I do things, and they worry about how I am going to get where I am going.

 I am also president of the NFB of Ohio Seniors Division. I am sorry to say that I have not done much with this job this year, but I have been thinking about the NFB’s general responsibility to reach out to seniors losing vision. This is or should be a concern for every chapter across the state. All of us have competent people in our communities who are losing vision and who could be helpful members of our chapters. Retirement centers are a good place to search for these folks and recruit them to join us.

 In August I spoke to the Vision Support Group at Kendal. This is a group of people who meet monthly, mostly to learn about cutting-edge research in their particular type of blindness. Once a year they have Magnification and More come out to show them technology, and they are linked with an international group addressing senior low-vision issues. I have not attended a single meeting of this group this year because none of what they were doing was of any interest to me. But the guy who runs the group asked me to come in August and talk to them, and it seems to have been a great success. They had twice the number of people attend the meeting as the previous record, and they were quite interested in what I had to say. My title was “Exploring the World of the Other Four Senses.” I began by suggesting that focusing intensely on what they could see had disadvantages. Their vision was failing, so they necessarily got less and less satisfactory visual information. I also told them that they were always getting information from their other senses but that their brains could concentrate only on a certain amount of data at once. If they were busy concentrating on vision, they did not have brain power left over to assess the other, more useful information coming in.

 I went through what they could learn from touch, hearing, smelling, and the kinesthetic sense of where their bodies were in the world. I covered what one can learn through feet on the ground, what temperature changes or sunshine or the breeze on a cheek can tell you, how to use the balance and weight of what is on the fork to help you eat efficiently, and how the weight and balance of papers can help you find things that are buried in a pile of junk. We talked about marking things with rubber bands or safety pins. I told them about listening for walls, doorways, bushes, and wide open spaces. I answered lots of questions and talked them through how I find my luggage on a carousel at the airport. I also put in a word for accessible voting machines. They asked good questions and begged me to come back again next summer, when I suspect they will have forgotten everything I talked about, so I can easily do it all again.

 I have bothered to describe all of this because I hope to inspire some of you to go and do likewise at retirement facilities near you. One could have done a lot more of course. This is a great opportunity for mentioning the NFB’s vehicle donation program. One could urge them to come to chapter meetings or events or join even if they don’t want to come to meetings.

 I also want to urge members who are seniors to join the Seniors Division by coming to our meeting at convention Saturday at lunch. Susan Day will be talking with us about how to stay safe in our homes. We will also be planning activities for the coming year. It would be great to hear that some new folks have made arrangements to talk with seniors in their communities. Seniors too can live the lives they want; blindness is not what holds them back.

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