

Through other's eyes...

What happens when your senses or mobility is impaired?

By LISA RUTLEDGE
The Herald

If you speak to those who know me well, they will tell you my favorite saying is "I can do it myself."

Even as a child I was too stubborn to ask for anyone's help. I was always the type to play the game and read the rules later, if I read them at all. But it's easy for me to get away with this impatient attitude because I've never had any real barriers to prevent me from completing any tasks I had taken on.

Last week, with help from the Office For Senior Citizens' Affairs and Halton Region's Elderly Service and Advisory Committee, I learned that everyone needs help.

The two groups organized a workshop, Through Other's Eyes, last Friday at Zellers, to provide insight into the struggles much of the elderly population face while performing simple daily tasks.

About 20 community representatives were asked to wear various equipment that would cause visual, hearing and muscular impairments comparable to the ailments many seniors suffer.

To simulate muscle deterioration and joint paralysis, we were asked to wear water wings, ankle and wrist weights. To mimic stiffening joints and a poor sense of touch, all participants had to wear two surgical gloves on each hand.

Many stroke victims lose a large percentage of peripheral vision, so many participants had to wear swimming goggles taped over, making only tunnel vision possible. Others had to wear spotted yellow tinted goggles to simulate catarax. We were also given ear plugs to simulate hearing impairments.

Not only did we look like confused Martians left behind after an Earth expedition, but we were given a shopping list and were told to return in half an hour with every item on the list.

In the beginning it was a game to me because I strongly believed my willpower would see me through the exercise in 10 minutes or better.

Fortunately, as I began my tour around the store to stop for my designated items, I couldn't see or hear well enough to notice other shoppers laughing at me.

The first item on my list was a package of Dentyne spearmint gum. Luckily, just after I picked up my shopping basket I passed, or rather bumped into, a free stan-

ding bulk gum package display. They weren't the individual packages I was supposed to get but I took it anyway. I like to chew lots of gum, or so I told myself.

The next item on my shopping list was a pair of men's medium elite style loafers. Wearing my trusty tunnel vision goggles I headed over to the back of the store where I thought I might find the shoe department.

"Many seniors need to feel independent and won't ask for help."

—Const. Leaver

I caught a glimpse of a ceiling-hung sign and discovered it did not designate the department I needed to get to. Realizing there must be a men's shoe department sign somewhere I began circling on the spot with my nose in the eyes and my eyes squinting, straining to see any sign of the word shoes.

After finally finding the shoe section of Zellers, I started looking thoroughly through all the aisles and shelves but couldn't find men's elite loafers anywhere. Against the wall I discovered men's leather loafers but I couldn't tell which ones were the elite style. I began combing the shelving stickers hoping to find the right ones. Rather than wasting my time wearing the aisle wax thin, I decided to move on to one of the next items, which was a nine-pack of Kleenex. Actually, I cheated because I heard someone say which part of the store they were in but even when I found the bin I couldn't decipher which package I was supposed to buy. So, I grabbed the first one that fell into my hand and tossed it into my hand-held shopping basket.

Another item I was supposed to locate was Mennen Speed Stick, Wild Moss scent. That's easy, I thought, because I had passed the

pharmacy section on the way in. Going slowly from item to item I finally got to the deodorant section and found the Mennen product line. However, the printing was so tiny that I couldn't tell which scent I was supposed to take. Although I thought to myself I don't care what he smells like as long as it's not B.O., I was determined to find this item. I never thought I would spend 10 minutes looking at deodorant sticks.

Quaker State 10W-30 Oil was one of the next items on my shopping list. Fortunately, I already found the auto department from previous wrong turns. But when I finally found the oil and put it in my basket, it felt so heavy I nearly put it back. But no, I had to complete this list because I was not going to let these temporary impairments slow me down.

After spending close to 10 minutes searching for red tea towels, the exercise monitors called the participants in as our half hour was up. I wasn't even close to my goal and I quickly became an angry shopper. I never had the chance to check out the public washroom or look up a name in the telephone book.

Wendy Leaver, a Metro policewoman who helped coordinate this workshop and four others in Halton, said my reactions are typical of those felt by many seniors.

Many seniors need to feel independent and won't ask for help because they feel embarrassed, Ms. Leaver said. Since hearing or

vision impairments prevent easy communication, seniors will often become extremely target oriented, not caring if what they're buying is exactly what they wanted, she said.

Large shopping stores can be confusing to some seniors because they become disoriented, rushed and irritated by the inability to shop efficiently.

Comments from other participants illustrated a lack of awareness, a crime of which most of us are guilty. Most realized how much good vision is taken for granted in a daily routine. There were few participants who even looked at the prices because finding the items was difficult enough a task.

Not only were the hand-held shopping baskets a heavy burden but participants became exasperated from the constant frustration of the search.

Finding the way to a particular department is difficult because various colored signs are hard for seniors to see, Ms. Leaver said.

Ms. Leaver mentioned a London Woolco which hired students to solely help seniors complete their shopping lists. She believes if seniors know they aren't bothering busy personnel they will not be embarrassed to ask for help.

The central message of the two elderly service groups is that public services must be more aware of the elderly if they plan to keep a growing population's business.

Close to one million or 11 per cent of the Ontario citizens are over 65 and this population is living longer and has more spending power than ever before, Ms. Leaver said. The fastest growing sector is the 74 to 85 age bracket, she said.

When I finally took the glorious apparel off, I was not older but I was certainly wiser. I never realized how strenuous trivial responsibilities can become. Society as a whole has to become more aware of these physical impairments and must alter public environments to make daily tasks easier beginning today.

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