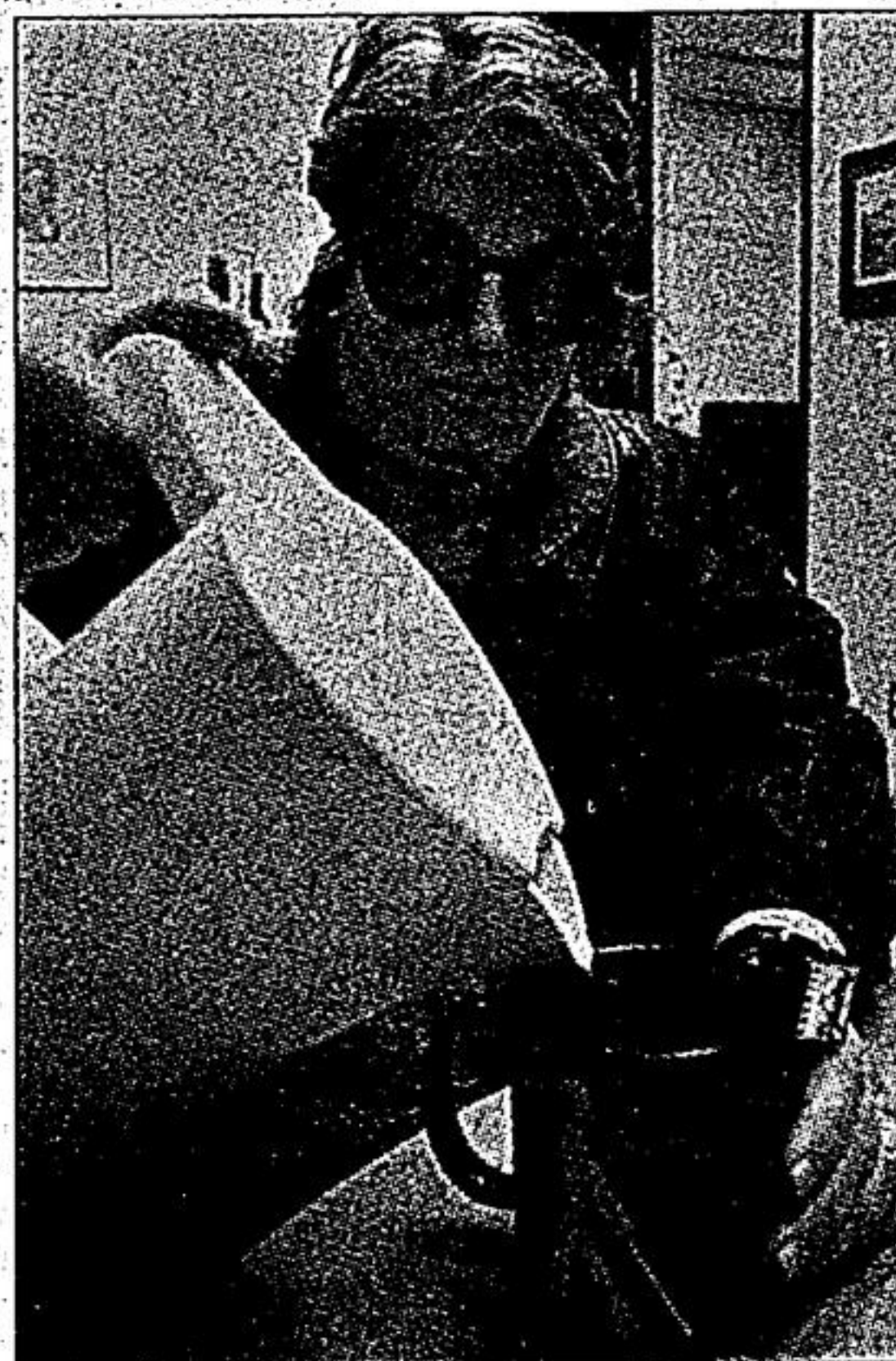


STAFF PHOTOS/ERIN RILEY

As part of White Cane Week, staff writer Lisa Queen found out what it's like to be visually impaired.



White Cane Week opens eyes to visual impairment

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

The task shouldn't have required a second thought — walk down the hall and catch an elevator up to the third floor of the office building.

But on the short route, I almost knocked goodies off a bake sale table and brushed up against a woman who had just ordered a hot drink from the coffee stand. When I finally reached my destination, I flailed around aimlessly, searching for the elevator button.

LIVING WITH GLAUCOMA

As part of White Cane Week, the York Region chapter of the Canadian Institute for the Blind in Richmond Hill provided me with vision-impairing goggles. They gave a small taste of what it's like to live with glaucoma, a condition in which loss of vision occurs because of abnormally high pressure in the eye.

The extreme tunnel vision combined with blurred eyesight made navigating simple obstacles a challenge, to say the least.

Thankfully, the conspicuous goggles and white cane gave people a fighting chance to get out of my way.

The natural thing to do when you're inflicted with impaired vision is to keep your head down to make sure you don't stumble over the smallest obstruction. Something as predictable as walking from tile to carpet can trip you up.

The trick is to let the white cane do the ground work while you keep your head up.

But that is a daunting demand, considering the end of the cane can get snagged in the cracks between interlocking stone or suddenly encounter a carpet or someone's outstretched foot.

Depth perception becomes a lost art when your eyes insist something is where it isn't.

And you become much more aware of the vagaries of speech when someone tells you an object is "right there" and you have no idea where that is.

Interestingly, going up stairs isn't as tough as expected — as long as you let the cane bounce against the front of each step and

maintain a firm hold on the banister.

Coming down, however, feels more like a trip through the fearsome section of a fun house.

Next, it was outside to test what it's like to weather winter with goggles that simulate a case of macular degeneration, which causes loss of the central vision.

While peripheral vision remains intact, huge spots prevent the person from seeing what's right in front of them.

Avoiding traffic and navigating around snow and ice are almost impossible.

Just as difficult was facing the same hurdles with the goggles that simulated cataracts, which blur vision and create sensitivity to glare.

The extreme tunnel vision combined with blurred eyesight made navigating simple obstacles a challenge, to say the least.

While getting around the community may seem like a visually impaired person's biggest hurdle, there are also challenges in the home.

Try pouring a cup of coffee from a hot kettle when you can't see.

Fortunately, there are many gadgets available to help the visually impaired, few of whom are totally blind.

A small sensor with electrical prongs that hooks on the corner of a mug lets the kettle pourer know when the hot water is reaching the top.

A hand-held, sometimes temperamental, device can have paper money fed into it and announce the bill's denomination.

York Region has committed to installing five audible traffic signals, at a cost of \$11,000 each, at intersections each year.

But, while books on tape have made life easier for the visually impaired, consider how difficult reading remains.

A novel in Braille is about the size of an encyclopedia, a textbook comes in several volumes.

VALENTINES

is a four day affair at The Corner House

This year at the Corner House, February brings four wonderful days for lovers. Bring a very close friend and enjoy the sensuous delights of our special Valentines, four-course, \$46.95 prix fixe menu from **Thursday 14th to Sunday 17th.**

Choose from: **Roast Striploin of Beef** with Bernaise Sauce, **Grilled Atlantic Salmon** or **Stuffed Breast of Chicken.** You won't be disappointed —and neither will your lover.



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