

## Living With Macular Degeneration Local residents share their experiences

By Hanneirole Volpe

Imagine having a big dark spot in the centre of your vision so that you can no longer see the faces of your family or friends.

Reading, driving or working become a challenge.

Around one million Canadians live with this eye condition called age-related macular degeneration (AMD). That number is expected to double in the next 25 years because of our aging population.

Stouffville resident Angela Graham lives with AMD. A feisty, enthusiastic woman, she has come a long way since her diagnosis.

In the summer of 2011, she noticed something wasn't quite right with her vision. It got worse very quickly. By the end of 2012, she had to leave work and could no longer drive. She moved in with her son for a time. Her vision was reduced to 20/200 by both wet and dry macular degeneration and she is considered legally blind. Her poor vision has caused her to tumble down stairs and have some close calls when crossing the street.

"I went through a period of not feeling very happy," she said.

But she's not one to stay down for long. She joined the 55 Plus Club and started by playing cards with help from her friends. She takes shifts at reception and recently became the club's vice-president. She has also moved into her own apartment.

She urges anyone with AMD to not be afraid to accept help. She is putting together a presentation on AMD, which she hopes will be ready for Healthy Vision Month in May. She hopes to have an ophthalmologist, a CNIB rep and someone living with AMD among the guest speakers.

You have to "put yourself out there," she said. "I am a very independent person. There is still a lot more to do and learn."

Ninety-three-year-old Bill Stedman has also struggled with AMD, but it hasn't affected his sense of humour. He relates how he was known as 'Blind Bill' in the army, 70 years ago, because of his thick glasses.

Six or seven years ago he began noticing changes in his vision. He started receiving treatments at Sunnybrook Hospital, but a year or two ago, his eyesight went from "acceptable" to not being able to see a car a hundred yards away. Now when he looks around his apartment he can see the furniture, but not the details. "Wherever I look there is a cloud in the centre of my vision."

He proudly notes that he used to be the "only 90-year-old paper boy that everyone in his building knew." He recently gave up this job because his eyesight makes it difficult to read the delivery lists. On his route through the building, he would look

at people in disbelief when they asked why he was doing this. "Because I can't!" was his answer.

Now he's a regular at the 55 Plus Club, where he plays cards. "I have to have help from everyone at the table for me to participate," he said.

Mr. Stedman is not afraid to ask for assistance when he goes shopping. He gets talking books by mail from the CNIB and at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Public Library. Both the CNIB and Veterans Affairs (which has funded various vision aids for him) have been a tremendous help. He's thrilled with a special magnifying screen from the CNIB.

"I can read my mail. This is just a Godsend," he said. He also has special glasses which enable him to watch TV. He, too, credits his children for helping him.

When Laurette Johnson was first diagnosed with AMD about 10 years ago, she thought, "My life is over. I am going blind."

When she was no longer able to drive, it felt worse than not being able to read. Her specialist at Sunnybrook Hospital had come up with a pioneering treatment, however, which stopped the progression of her AMD. Her vision has remained stable for the past four years.

"I am one of the luckiest ones," she said. Because her peripheral vision has remained very good, she can do many tasks successfully and can watch TV.

This vivacious woman has done what it takes to live successfully with this condition. She uses audio books from the CNIB library, has help from her family, and has joined the 55 Plus Club where she meets with friends to play cards. Her good friend, Judy Galbraith, takes her shopping every week, and to appointments or for lunch. Lemonville United Church has made a big difference in her life. This small congregation with a big heart has been "wonderful for me," she said.

Ms Johnson uses York Region Transit's Mobility Plus service to travel outside Stouffville. She is a member of GHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors) which drives clients to a monthly lunch at restaurants in town and takes them shopping once a week to area malls.

All three rely on the CNIB to make daily life easier. CNIB specialists visit the homes or workplaces of people with low vision, offering strategies for doing household tasks. They offer useful tips on organizing your home to make it easier to get around as well as many innovative products including magnifiers, talking clocks, talking scales and object locators.

The CNIB Helpline at 1-800-563-2642 can connect you with services in your community and put you in touch with others living with vision loss.



Laurette Johnson, who was diagnosed with AMD about 10 years ago, has benefitted from a pioneering treatment which has stabilized her condition.



Bill Stedman, seen here with his lady friend Florence Peacock, leads a full and busy life, despite having to cope with AMD.

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