

Organization helps people adjust to vision loss

By Sean Nelson
Of the Emerald

Carleton Wood, a participant in the Cottage Grove chapter of Vision Northwest, is almost completely visually impaired.

But through his involvement in Vision Northwest, a non-profit organization created for the purpose of providing information and support services to the blind, he realizes he is not alone. "I've been happy just to be around other blind people," Wood said.

Wood, who is the owner of the Lucky Logger Inn in Springfield, was in Salem Hospital a year ago having his leg amputated when he began to lose his sight. "At the time I just kept thinking it (his sight) would come back," Wood said.

Wood had lost his sight once before when he was being treated in a hospital for a gangrenous foot and leg. However he regained his vision and never did find out what caused the initial vision loss.

"I've come to realize I will always be blind. I am just starting to learn to live with it," Wood said. "The amputation of a leg is one thing, but blindness is a thousand times worse."

Wood's blindness was caused by a condition called diabetic retinopathy, which is a degenerative eye disease triggered by diabetes. Diabetic retinopathy affects the nutrients going to the retina, which is the organ responsible for the perception of colors and sight. The disease causes the retina to

degenerate until the person is partially or totally blind.

Wood only can see silhouettes. "I thank God for that," he said.

Vision Northwest, and the support of his family, has provided a ray of hope for Wood.

At first Wood was frustrated just trying to put toothpaste on his toothbrush. "It sounds simple, but try it with your eyes closed sometime," Wood said. Members of the group let him in on the secret. "They put it on their finger and put it on the toothbrush."

Not knowing the time was also frustrating for Wood; however, the problem was solved with the help of a talking watch.

One of the biggest obstacles

faced by a visually impaired person is using public transportation, he said. Wood's wife helps him with this problem. "My wife drives me wherever I go. I haven't driven since about a year ago last June."

Wood can no longer participate in what was one of his hobbies: fishing. However, "I'm still looking around for some hobbies," he said. Wood is active in The Lion's Club and is the chairman of the Sight and Hearing section of the club. "We help people get glasses who don't have the means," Wood said.

"We (The Lion's Club) have one boy who lost his eye in an accident with a BB gun," Wood said. "We will take care of all his bills until he is 18," he added.

Audrey Wood said she helps her husband, "by doing things for him that he wasn't able to do himself and being understanding of the various emotional adjustments that he was going through."

It took a long time for Wood to get over his initial grief, and he withdrew for a time. However becoming more active in the Lion's Club helped Wood to overcome his grief, Audrey Wood said.

The Vision Northwest meetings are held "for the purpose of giving each other emotional and peer support," said Darian Hartman, program coordinator of Vision Northwest. A great need is filled when a visually impaired person learns that he or she is not alone and that there is hope in learning to deal with their predicament from others, he said.

From the moment a person becomes blind, he or she must make an emotional and a physical adjustment. Each day that person will have to deal with the frustrations of being blind. The simplest tasks, such as getting a drink of water, can seem insurmountable at first, Hartman said.

In order to lead a happy and productive life, a person must adjust to his or her blindness. With the help of Vision Northwest a person is able to make this adjustment by learning from others who have already made the adjustment, according to a press packet released by the organization.

Vision Northwest was founded in 1985 by Dr. Robin DeVour, who became blind

shortly before obtaining his master of arts degree in clinical psychology. "Luckily I was in something I could continue," he said. There are now chapters of the organization in most major cities in Oregon.

Through his own efforts to cope with blindness, DeVour learned how to teach others to cope with total or partial vision loss. He founded the organization while running a private practice in Tualatin, Ore., Hartman said.

A visually impaired person must volunteer to form a group. A typical group begins with between two and eight people who have recently lost their vision, Hartman said.

"Groups address topics such as where to get help learning how to cook, how to mark items such as temperatures on ovens or settings on appliances with raised notches or dots to identify them and how to buy clothing," Hartman said. If the group cannot teach someone, then that person is referred professionals who can, Hartman said.

Information such as where a person can go to learn how to walk with a cane or a guide dog, or where to go to buy cooking utensils or a talking watch can also be obtained by calling Vision Northwest, Hartman said.

Sylvia Turner, who attends a support group in Portland, completely has lost her vision in her right eye and can only see silhouettes with her left eye. "If I put my hand close to my left eye I can see that I have five fingers," Turner said. She has been visually impaired since last July.


"One day I was driving my car and my vision blurred," Turner said. The fact that her jaw also hurt was the clue that led doctors to have her hospitalized, and three days after she was hospitalized she was completely blind, she said.

Turner had a condition known as temporal arthritis, which is an inflammation of the small artery leading to the eyes. The inflammation caused a lack of blood flow to the eyes causing the visual impairment, Turner said.

After doctors treated the impairment by giving Turner large amounts of steroids, the vision in her left eye started to come back. "We had some hope," Turner said. However, she did

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