

# Blind walker asks motorists to be more aware of their surroundings

By KC Cowan  
The Southwest Portland Post

With distracted drivers checking their cell phones more than their driving, it's no wonder automobile/pedestrian accidents are up.

Even people crossing in marked crosswalks have been struck. But while most pedestrians can at least *try* to keep an eye open for drivers ignoring them in a crosswalk, it's a little more difficult for Peggy McSorley.

You see, McSorley is legally blind. She has a genetic condition called Stargardt's Disease. It causes progressive damage—or degeneration—of the macula, which is a small area in the center of the retina that is responsible for sharp, straight-ahead vision.

"I am legally blind," said McSorley. "I have peripheral vision,

is considered a *legal* crosswalk, even if there is no marking. Secondly, drivers must remain stopped for a pedestrian crossing "when the pedestrian is in your lane of travel, in the lane next to your lane of travel, and in the lane you are turning into."

If you are turning at an intersection that has a traffic signal, the pedestrian must be six feet or more from the lane you are turning into.

If there is *not* a traffic signal, you must wait until the pedestrian is out of the lane you want to turn into *plus* the next full lane.

Lest you think McSorley is just not being careful enough, she stressed that she trained with a mobility trainer with the Oregon Commission for the Blind for a year and a half after she lost her sight.

They taught her how to listen for the traffic noise to cross safely. She even uses a white cane, but shockingly, she says a majority of

people she meets don't know what it signifies.

"I can't tell you how many people ask me what I have a cane for."

The laws are very clear when dealing with the sight impaired in crosswalks. The manual specifically states that you must give the right of way to a blind or partially blind pedestrian who is carrying a white cane or using a guide dog.

You have to remain stopped "until the person has crossed the entire road, even if you have the green light."

Sadly, McSorley has found very few people know the laws. "I ask people I meet: Do you know you can't turn until I'm a certain distance away from you? And they don't," she said.

Community volunteer Cynthia Chilton gives presentations in road safety classes operated by Multnomah County Traffic Court. Chilton said part of the problem is state crosswalk laws changed in

the not too distant past but most people don't know it.

"We are driving on licenses we got 20 or 30 years ago and (the state doesn't) have a good way of educating people about new traffic laws," she said. "There might be a flyer in your auto renewal information, or when you renew your driver's license."

She recommends asking the city to set up a crosswalk sting at Southwest 45th Avenue and Vermont Street.

"Get in the face of PBOT and tell them this is a critical intersection, that has a lot of kids crossing in it," she added.

It could take some time to set that up. In the meantime, if you see people in a crosswalk, McSorley has a request for you.

"Know your driving laws and know the pedestrian walkway," she pleaded. "Be aware. I would hate to have them have the consequences of hitting someone."

Not to mention the consequences for *her* by being struck by a distracted or uneducated driver.



Peggy McSorley stands outside the Southwest Community Center where she regularly walks. (Post photo by KC Cowan)



Peggy McSorley crosses Southwest Vermont Street where drivers often illegally cut into her crosswalk. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

so I see only on the edges. I see nothing ahead of me." Two other members of her family have the disease as well.

"Usually you are born with it and it develops in your teenage years, but in our family, it developed in middle age," she said.

It forced her to retire at age 62, but McSorley still wants to get around and be active, and that includes regular trips to the Southwest Community Center at Gabriel Park.

McSorley lives in the Vermont Hills area, near Hayhurst Elementary School, so she can walk. But lately, every time she tries to cross Vermont Street, she feels like she is putting her life in danger.

"As I go north along 45th, I am walking with the light. But cars that are coming south, they don't see me," she explained.

"And when they make a left hand turn east, they come right into the white strip of the crosswalk, and they don't stop. I've actually screamed twice at cars."

Once, she said she was getting ready to step off the curb, and a woman and her child were already ahead of her in the crosswalk. "And someone actually tried to drive between us in the crosswalk," she said.

According to the official Oregon State Driver Manual, drivers must stop *before* the marked stop-line or cross walk, if there is one.

And corner-to-corner on a street