

Only Help, but Hard to Receive

By Carol Harrison



Caption: Asking for help has never been easy for Nancy Only, but doing so enabled her to read again. She's shown using equipment provided by LightHouse of the North Coast. Photo by Carol Harrison

Nancy Only believes everything happens for a reason, but the retired minister couldn't figure out the plan behind losing her sight.

Her friend had more clarity.

"She looked at me and said, 'Maybe you need to learn to ask for help,'" Only recalled. "It hit me right between the eyes. Asking for help has always been a problem."

Part of it was the "super-mom thing" that came with raising five children while working a part-time job evening and weekends, maintaining a half-interest in an espresso bar and shaping a freelance writing career.

"I was always putting other things before my own needs, always right there to help others," she said. "I never thought I needed help. I am on the senior edge of the generation that invented the term multi-tasking. My great joy lies in the fact that I can do it all and simultaneously."

Upbringing contributed to Only's self-reliance. Her parents raised their only child to think she could do anything.

“I was constantly trying to prove them right,” she said, which has made the last 15 months particularly challenging. The former minister for Unity Church of the Redwood neared the end of 2012 unable to see the faces of the congregation sitting in the back. She relied on a magnifying glass to see her sermon notes.

She retired from Unity around the time she made her first trip to an eye doctor in 25 years. The diagnosis: macular degeneration.

“What finally got me in there was that it wasn’t getting better,” she said.

In the space of a year, macular degeneration has turned her values, and her life, upside down. Independence, once cherished, has been replaced by an appreciation for interdependence. A woman who for so long gave help and needed no thanks has finally accepted help from those who are as happy to give it as she has always been.

“I keep reminding myself: Interdependence is the nature of the beast,” she said.

She no longer scans the morning paper. In its place, she listens to the radio as volunteers of Reader Services of the Redwoods read the Times Standard, Mad River Union and other local papers.

She no longer drives, relying instead on friends after realizing she had no other choice. . Ultimately she invited a very good friend to move in with her and her husband to serve as part-time chauffeur and full-time confidante.

“When people remind me of the rides I’ve given over the years, it’s easier,” she said. “It’s a hard thing. It was, and still is, a challenge to ask for help.”

She’s chosen to view macular degeneration as “an exciting and stimulating” change now that so many of the things she used to take for granted have disappeared.

“This is a chance to reinvent myself,” she said.

Reinvention included attendance in Napa at a week-long immersion camp for those with no or low vision. LightHouse of the North Coast, the local satellite of the San Francisco-based main office, arranged the trip.

“It taught me the kinds of skills and adaptations that I could use to make things smoother,” she said, “and pointed out things I haven’t gotten to yet that are looming: like if you can’t see the dial on the washer, how do you know if it’s hot or cold, permanent press or those kinds of things?”

LightHouse of the North Coast opened other doors. It connected her to the free AT&T information phone line to replace the “impossible-to-read” telephone directory and plugged her into the state library for Braille and talking books.

“My favorite thing of all: LightHouse hooked me up with an old television monitor and attached a mouse with a camera,” she said. “I can slide the camera across a line of print and it comes up on screen in huge letters. I can read. That makes such a high difference.”

Online jigsaw puzzles that allow her to use her eyes for something creative have become a new hobby.

“The technology that’s come out the last few years is huge,” she said. “There’s so much out there now to help people get over the hurdles. There was a time we depended on the nuclear family, when kids moved to the south 40 and were nearby. We don’t live like that anymore.”

We don’t, but we haven’t done a good job of accepting our interdependence outside of the family, says Maggie Kraft, executive director of Area 1 Agency on Aging. She was a recent guest on the weekly All Faiths television show hosted by Only that airs Sundays at 7 p.m. on Channel 12.

“Most of us are not going to live independently our entire lives, but no matter what hits us, where we live or how we live, we want to feel like we have a choice or say-so in what happens next,” Kraft said.

Only had a few bouts with the blues, but she made the choice not to focus on the loss and what used to be. She opted to embrace problem-solving and enjoy the life she had.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense to me,” she said. “If you can choose to be miserable or happy, why would you not choose to be happy? It doesn’t matter what happens to you or around you. It is what happens in you that matters.”

Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article. For more information about LightHouse of the North Coast, call 707-268-5646 or stop by the third floor of the Humboldt Senior Resource Center building at 1910 California Street, Eureka.