

A White Cane Stands for Independence

By Dennis Steiner

Sunday, Oct. 15, is National White Cane Day, a day that began as White Cane Safety Day. It was signed by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 to recognize the movement of blind people from dependency to active participation in society.

Today, it is celebrated as National White Cane Awareness Day and used to promote and recognize the independence and equality of people who are blind or have low vision.

The white cane is a symbol of freedom, independence, and confidence. I use a white cane to travel safely and independently throughout my community.

White canes help create opportunities for personal and economic independence for people who are blind.

You may see people near you or in urban areas using white canes to walk and cross streets. You could see individuals anywhere – airports, train stations, subways, and at sporting events – using the white cane to help guide them in their travels.

Here's how some of our employees use the white cane: one person traveled alone to an airport to fly to Florida for vacation and go deep-sea fishing; another individual used her white cane while she traveled through Europe, and another employee uses his white cane to walk back and forth to work from his home.

I used my white cane when I travel for business and have meetings with individuals in offices that are new to me. I used it recently to the National Industries for the Blind Focus Forward conference in Washington, D.C.

Here are some tips to better interact with individuals using a white cane:

- If you are driving – or bicycling – the law requires that you stop and give the right of way to the person using the white cane.

- Don't shout warnings or try to physically steer us away from things our white canes may bump. We are trained to use our white cane to explore what is around us – including cracks in the sidewalks or curbs.
- It's easier to cross streets using a white cane. White cane users listen to traffic patterns and cross the street keeping a straight line when moving forward.
- White canes are independent travel guides. If you think the white cane user needs help, please ask him or her.
- People who use white canes might have some sight – blindness is a spectrum -- and may choose to use a tool like a white cane.

VisionCorps offers free orientation and mobility training using a white cane, for those who have vision loss in Chester County. Our orientation and mobility services are provided by a highly-skilled staff trained in the use of the white cane.

We also offer an educational and peer support group specifically on the topic of Orientation and Mobility for our clients.

If you would like to find out more about using a white cane or other services such as including occupational therapy for daily living skills, educational and peer support groups, and technology instruction, please call 610-738-3008.

Dennis Steiner is the president and CEO of VisionCorps, a non-profit that offers rehabilitation services in Chester County for individuals who are blind or have impaired vision. He is legally blind and often uses a white cane for assistance in navigating new or unfamiliar places.