Hadley

The best thing I ever did

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**Marc:** This is Hadley’s Insights and Sound Bites, where people facing vision loss share what has helped them cope and adjust.

**Julia:** My name is Julia Spencer. I'm originally from New Jersey and just a year ago, I moved down to Myrtle Beach to be with my daughter. But I'm still a jersey girl.
I'm 91 years old, so there's no short story that I have a long story, but I'm shorten it.

My first idea of vision loss and the fact is it's a retinitis pigmentosa, which is hereditary and my sister had it. There were nine of us and my sister was the only one that had it.

And I found out I had it by accident. I was getting a pair of glasses when I was about 45, 47 something like that. You know when you need glasses just because of getting that age and you just need a pair of glasses for distance. Well, the doctor said that he saw a tiny little bit of retinitis pigmentosa. So, I went to a hospital in New York to research, Columbia. The doctors there, they said that my vision, my RP gene was so small, so little, for a woman 50 years of age, that I would never go blind. So, I believed him.

I had no problems for years, then while in 2002, I had a problem with my eyesight with cataracts. Got them removed and all of a sudden, I couldn't see a little bit and I was very upset and my husband was worried about me driving and I just kept telling him, I'm never going blind. I'm fine. I can drive. And I kept driving and then all of a sudden, I started having a little problem at night. Couldn’t see at night so I stopped driving at night, and he kept saying you're going to stop driving during the day. Please. And I said no, I'm not. I'm independent.

And one day I was sitting in a chair in the living room and I called out to him, “Ralph.” And I thought he was in the bedroom. So, I shouted. And I heard a voice say, I'm right here in front of you.

My heart stopped. My biggest fear was to kill somebody. I said to him, “if I was driving the car, I would have killed you.” And he said, “I know.”

And that minute I gave it up. I was just so frightened of killing someone. He said, “don't worry about it, Hun. We're a team. I'll you know I'm here. I can take you wherever you want to go,” and I said, “it's not the same.” And I didn't want to give up my car, but I had to. So, I did, and that was the beginning of it.

I was walking into the election with my husband and holding his arm and using a cane. And a person passes by that my husband knew and she stopped and said, “why doesn't your wife have a guide dog?”

She was a trainer for guide dogs. “Why doesn't your wife have a guide dog?” Well, right there. I didn't like the person because I hate when someone talks to my husband or anybody about me in front of me.
And I want to say to them, I'm thinking “I'm not stupid. I'm just blind. And please talk to me.” And anybody who's blind knows that's feeling. And you have to fight your own time with doctors or anybody you walk in like they talk to the other person like you're not there.

So I said to her, “uh I'm right here please. You can talk to me.” And she said, “why don't you get a guide dog?” I said, well, “I don't really want a guide dog. But I'm not completely blind, so you can't get a guide dog. I still have sight.”

She says, “No, are you legally blind?” I said, “Yes, I'm legally blind.” So, she said, “OK, you can get a guide dog and gave me a card.”

I got a guide dog that was the best thing I ever did in my life. I'll tell you why. When you're walking down the street with a cane, and you're sweeping the sidewalk to make sure you don't fall into a hole or something or curb.

People will, if they see you and they're walking towards you. They'll cross the street 'cause they don't want to just get involved with you sweeping along. And they didn't realize I could see and they cross the street.

But when you go down the street with a guide dog, people stay right there. In fact, they cross the street to meet you and they want to talk to you. They say hello. They smile because I have sight, I could see. They smile at the dog and would be so thrilled to see a guide dog. I made more friends from just walking any place with the guide dog and with my husband even, and everybody would stop and talk to us.

It was fabulous.

**Marc**: You never know who might need to hear your story. If you’d like to share with us, just leave us a message on our Insights & Sound Bites voicemail. By calling, 847-512-4867. Or, you can use your smartphone or computer and email us a recording to podcast@HadleyHelps.org.