

# Check for the Checkered Eye

**S**augeen Shores resident, Libby Thaw is continually pointing out to people that blindness is a spectrum, ranging from partial vision to no vision. And she should know, she has been living on the blindness spectrum with what is known as 'low vision' for more than four decades.

Often caused by eye disease, low vision is a condition in which a person's eyesight is significantly less than average (that is, 20/20 vision) and cannot be corrected or improved back to average with regular glasses or contact lenses. As the result of what is known as Stargardt's disease, a progressive disorder that leads to degeneration of the retina, Libby herself has only 20/400 vision. That means that what she is able to see from 20 feet away, a person with average eyesight can see from 400 feet away!

"Low vision can decrease an individual's ability to carry out normal daily activities like independent travel, shopping, even recognizing people," explains Libby. "What makes it even worse is that most people you interact with often don't know you have a vision disability – and that can lead to awkward and uncomfortable situations."

And Libby found that using a white cane often led to misconceptions. People she encountered while out doing errands or going for walks treated her like she was completely blind; then when they found out she had partial sight, some even accused her of misusing the cane. "And many people with low vision I met admitted they felt uncomfortable with the white cane, saying it made them feel conspicuous and vulnerable," she says.



The checkered eye emblem.

years ago. In the fall of 2000, Libby attended a service day put on by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB). There she found herself in a discussion with other individuals suffering from low vision about the circumstances relating to their visual difficulties. "We ended up swapping stories of situations which were embarrassing or problematic not because we couldn't see

well, but because the people we were interacting with weren't aware of that fact," says Libby. "And then a CNIB volunteer who participated in the conversation pointed out that clients had been regularly asking for some sort of badge to let people know they weren't totally blind but had a visual impairment." Unfortunately, nothing like that existed.

That's when a light bulb went on in Libby's head – and she went home and designed the checkered eye symbol. "In my younger days I used to doodle an eye with bricks covering it, because that's sometimes the way I felt with low vision," she tells me. "So that's what I started sketching." The result was a simple line drawing of an eye, at the center of which is an iris covered with black and white checkers. Around the eye are the words, LOW VISION.



Libby and her impromptu Checkered Eye Project team getting ready to pull a jet plane.

The intent was to create a symbol that could be placed on a pin or button and worn by those with low vision to alert others about their impairment. "It was not intended to, nor does it, replace the white cane," Libby is quick to point out. "If your vision is impaired to the point where it puts your safety at risk, this symbol will not alert drivers or pedestrians to your situation. But people on the blindness spectrum who do not need the white cane as a travel or safety device, may choose to use a checkered eye symbol to indicate that their vision is impaired."

## Alerting Others

Because it is hands free, Libby goes on, the checkered eye symbol can also be easily used by individuals suffering from low vision who have other challenges that may make holding the cane difficult or impossible, such as the need for a walker or a wheelchair. And the symbol is discreet. "It does not attract undue attention," says Libby, "so the wearer doesn't feel conspicuous and vulnerable. But once seen, it will alert others – such as store owners, bank employees, anyone the wearer interacts with – that the wearer has low vision."

Despite these arguments in support of its usefulness, the CNIB chose not to adopt the checkered eye symbol. "I sent my design to them and explained how it could be used," says Libby, "but my suggestions were turned down." She was not detracted though. "None of the concerns they articulated convinced me that it was not a good idea, so I decided to take on the cause myself and founded the Checkered Eye Project."

And she's never looked back. Libby has created pins, buttons and patches featuring the checkered eye emblem that can be worn by those with low vision. She has produced information pamphlets and cards and handed them out, as she puts it, "everywhere and to everyone." She's also set up a website filled with information on

**Doug Archer**