



COOKING SAFELY presents numerous challenges for the visually impaired. The Independent Living program teaches students helpful hints like how to use timers and label stove controls to assure proper times and temperatures. Here Amelia Stewart dishes out a perfect batch of rice as Marie Mathis serves a hearty stew.



A MIDDAY MEAL highlights each gathering of the Independent Living participants and mini-center directors. Shown (clockwise from left) are Essie Irene Cumbee, Phyllis Smith, Mary Allred, Frank Bennett, Amelia Stewart and Ilene Probst.

VIPs Find Friends, Freedom Through 'Independent Living'

BY ERIC CARLSON

Marie Mathis of Leland used to think she was the only visually impaired person living in Brunswick County. Miles away, in Holden Beach, Margaret Lambert thought the same thing about herself.

So did Frank Bennett of Shallotte. That's why he was so surprised when Ann Smith called from the N.C. Department of Human Resources Services for the Blind. She told him about a new program called "Independent Living Rehabilitation Services," which provides special training for people who have lost most or all of their vision.

"When she told me about the program coming here I thought, 'Boy, I'll be the only one in THAT class,'" said Frank. "It sure was nice to find out I was wrong. Not that I'm glad to hear someone else has the same problems."

"It's just nice to have people you can relate to," said Marie, completing Frank's thought.

You'll find a lot of that among members of the VIP Club, a group of ten visually impaired people who were brought together when the Independent Living program held a three-week series of classes at Calvary Baptist Church in Shallotte recently.

Only two of the VIPs knew each other when they arrived the first day. But now they seem like the oldest of friends, laughing and joking and trading stories about the tragedy and the comedy of losing their sight.

"I remember when I was staying in Raleigh, at a place I wasn't familiar with. I was getting ready to go out and I picked up a spray can to do my hair," said Marie. "Turns out it was spray starch and I had starched my hair to death. It was so stiff, it took me two days to get it out."

Sitting around a table in the church fellowship room, the others laughed knowingly.

"I'm just glad it wasn't bug spray!" she said, eliciting more hearty chuckles.

Scenes like that seem funny in remembrance, but they can be increasingly frustrating for someone who's view of the world is slowly slipping away. That's why the Independent Living program was started.

Marie and the others have learned several new ways to identify things they used to recognize by sight. One or more rubber bands can slipped around a container so a sightless person can tell which one is which. Safety pins can do the same for different colored clothing.

"I've had enough bad times to know when the good times have begun... Because even a blind man can tell when he's walking in the sun."

—Stevie Wonder

Or a set of child's magnetic letters can identify the canned goods in your cupboard, explains Amelia Stewart of Shallotte. Stick a "B" on a can top to indicate "beans." Put a "T" and an "S" on another to identify "tomato sauce."

Asked how she used to tell them apart, Amelia grabbed a can and held it so close to her face that the label touched her nose.

"Like this!" she said as the others joined her in laughter. They couldn't see Amelia, but everyone knew what she meant.

They all said the best part of the Independent Living program was "the fellowship," the finding of new friends. But the classes also gave them back some of the freedom that had slowly slipped away with their sight. Each one had learned new techniques and discovered new gadgets that would make it easier to cope with their loss of vision.

Phyllis Smith of Supply was particularly excited about "puff paint." Class members learned to use this fluorescent, glue-like stuff for marking stoves and other appliances to identify time and heat settings. The paint leaves a bright mark for those who still have some vision and a little raised bump that can be easily felt by those who don't.

Ann Smith and the other program directors visited each participant's home to help design individual identification systems custom-fit for each one's needs.

"The first day I went to Phyllis's house, she said, 'I'm SO glad to see you!'" Ann said. "She had a pound cake all made up and ready to bake. She was just waiting for me to set up the markings."

"I used to have to crawl on top of the stove with a magnifying glass to see the settings," Phyllis said. "They also told me about these long oven mits that will help keep me from getting burned."

Essie Irene Cumbee of Supply used to enjoy making quilts, but had to give it up as her vision failed. She was overjoyed to learn about a special gadget that would allow her to thread a needle without seeing it. Now she hopes to sew again with the help of a large magnifier that can be mounted around her neck.

Ruth Simmons of Supply loves her new talking clock. It wakes her up in the morning with a loud rooster's crow. And every time she presses the button, it tells her the time with an electronically produced human voice.

"You can't imagine how nice it is when you don't have to keep asking people what time it is," said Ruth.

Like the others, Murphy Hewett of Supply looked forward to hearing some of the magazines and books on tape now available for the visually impaired through the state library system. He demonstrated the use of a special tape player with large, easily-identifiable controls.

Another favorite device was the liquid level indicator, which the VIPs jokingly refer to as the "say when." It's a little battery-powered gadget you put on the side of a glass before pouring liquid into it. When the level nears the top, the indicator "says when" by emitting a loud beep.

"There's only thing wrong with it. Now our tea won't be sweet," said Nell Long of Ash. "Because we won't be hanging our fingers into the glass!"

Again the group members join in a round of laughter. Their vision may be impaired, but their sense of humor certainly isn't. All agreed that the three-week course had more than fulfilled its promise of helping them live more independently. It had also given them a new circle of friends.

As they finished preparing their last class meal, group members sat down to eat with Ann and the "mini-center" directors Mary Allred, Alex Propst and Ilene Propst. After a prayer of thanks, the VIPs talked about holding regular meetings throughout the year.

"I just wish it could go on and on and on," said Ruth.

The Independent Living mini-centers move from county to county across the state. Smith hopes to hold another series of classes here next year and encourages visually impaired persons to learn more about such programs through the Brunswick County Department of Social Services or by calling N.C. Services for the Blind in Wilmington at 1 919-251-5743.



IDENTIFYING denominations of paper money can be a real problem for the visually impaired. Essie Irene Cumbee demonstrates how each bill is folded before storing in a wallet.



THE "SAY WHEN" is the nickname for the liquid level indicator demonstrated by Margaret Lambert. The battery-powered device emits a loud beep when the glass is nearly full.



TAKING TURNS cooking, serving and cleaning up the daily meal allows each student in the Independent Living program a chance to do it all. Here Ruth Simmons brings a dish of mixed vegetables to the table.



LINE GUIDES help the visually impaired keep their sentences straight. As Nell Long looks on, Phyllis Smith demonstrates a check-writing guide that allows her to feel where the date, amount and signature belong.