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Visually Impaired Woman Volunteers For Organization That Saved Her Life

The dedication of volunteers from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind empowered Pat Gates to reclaim her life, and inspired her to devote her time to others struggling to adjust to their vision loss.

“CNIB saved my life,” Gates said. “I’ve got my positive attitude back; I’m a lot more independent. I don’t need people to do things for me anymore. I’ve learned to do things for myself, just in a different way than I used to do.”

Gates, 57, of Halifax was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of eight. Nearly 30 years ago, she developed diabetic retinopathy and lost the vision in her left eye. Things got worse when Gates was diagnosed with glaucoma in her right eye, another complication from her diabetes. It left her legally blind.

She had to go on long-term disability leave from her job at Dalhousie University. She could no longer do the things she loved. Gates no longer left the house by herself because she was afraid of falling. An avid reader, she was only able to read for short periods of time.

“Following the diagnosis, my life took a complete turnaround. I lost practically everything I knew,” Gates said. “For 10 years, I lived in isolation. My whole life changed. I lost my social contacts. I became a very negative person.”

Two years ago, Gates was determined to reclaim her life. “I decided something needed to change. I wasn’t living my life – I didn’t have a life. I had lost what I considered to be myself.”

With that realization, Gates phoned CNIB.

Reclaiming her life

She went through an eight-week vision loss adjustment program, which helps people cope with their vision loss. With the assistance of CNIB volunteers, Gates learned to adapt to her vision loss, shed her negativity, and regained her independence.

Gates was so grateful for the help she received from CNIB volunteers that she decided to become a volunteer herself. She speaks with people about their experiences and listens to their frustrations. Gates also volunteers at a CNIB booth at an eye centre. There, she talks to people about the services offered by CNIB. On top of that, she does public outreach and speaking engagements.

"Pat's story is a perfect example of the impact of volunteers," said Anne Perigo, Volunteer Canada board member and Director of Volunteerism and the Non-Profit Sector for the Department of Labour and Advanced Education of Nova Scotia. "The contribution of volunteers can go unnoticed, but the fact is they're creating positive change and strengthening our communities. That's why we celebrate National Volunteer Week, to thank volunteers for their great contributions and caring."

For Gates, it's a small contribution to give to the organization that helped her rebuild her life.

"Volunteering keeps me active mentally and emotionally. I don't think there's any reason for people to lose as long a period of their lives as I did, because I had no support. I'm giving back and helping people, and it gives me a purpose in my life. I'm doing a little bit for the organization that gave me my life back."

About National Volunteer Week

National Volunteer Week (www.volunter.ca/nvw) pays tribute to the millions of Canadian volunteers who graciously donate their time and energy. This year's 68th annual NVW takes place the week of April 10 to 16. It is Canada's largest celebration of volunteers, volunteerism, and civic participation. The theme of this year's National Volunteer Week is "**Volunteers: Passion. Action. Impact.**"

National Volunteer Week was first proclaimed in 1943 as an initiative to draw the public's attention to the vital contribution of women to the war effort on the home front. In the late 1960s, the focus was revived and broadened to include all community volunteers.

Investors Group has supported NVW for 12 years. Investors Group is a founding member of Volunteer Canada's Corporate Council on Volunteering. The company has been sponsoring National Volunteer Week for 12 years as part of its commitment to corporate citizenship.