

WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE

Hettie Woehler – a woman who truly inspires!

When life throws a challenge at us, it is always tempting to sit around and bemoan our fate. Fortunately there are women like Hettie Woehler among us to teach us a thing or two about life. This courageous lady has had to deal with blindness and muscular dystrophy, yet she has achieved so much in her life and remains cheerful and positive.

Fifty-nine-year-old Hettie from Potgietersrus in the Northern Province is a busy lady. She bakes, she makes soap, she surfs the internet, she is a writer, she loves doing tapestries, she does fundraising for the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation in Gauteng, she recently hopped on a bus to Cape Town to visit an ill friend and ... **she is blind!**

This gutsy lady is not the type to sit back and let life pass her by, despite her disabilities. Although she is now on pension, she used to give computer courses. She also passed a Lay Counsellor's course at Unisa last year and has done 3 – 4 other counselling courses. She is an avid writer – an Afrikaans radio station used one of her children's stories during the 1980's, Rapport Magazine published an essay she wrote about the humorous side of being blind, while several other Afrikaans magazines have published her work over the years. She even published a booklet with positive ideas. It was rejected by the publishers with the comment "it has potential, but unfortunately we cannot use it". Hettie was so frustrated that she went ahead and published it herself!

How on earth does she do it all? We conducted an email interview (yes, you read correctly) with her ...

WM: Were you born with sight at all? Can you remember what the world looks like?

Hettie: I had some sight at birth. I could see trees, but not in any detail. My brother taught me the normal alphabet, and I could read the headings in magazines. I loved the sea – the white edges of the waves fascinated me. I used to be able to see the outlines of the mountains as the plane flew between them – that was when we went to visit my parents-in-law in Windhoek. My sight has gradually deteriorated, now I can't see anything at all.

What is muscular atrophy?

The specific type of muscular atrophy that I suffer from is called Charcot Marie-Tooth (CMT) named after the scientists that first discovered it. It is an illness that affects the muscles in your hands and feet. The type I have also affects the optic nerve, causing my blindness. I was always clumsy as a child, falling and spraining my ankles a lot. The muscles in the back of my legs deteriorated, which meant that it was impossible to lift my toes off the ground. It also made my toes curl into what is called "claw foot". I have endured various operations to straighten my toes, and in April this year, the tendons in my foot were. My physical balance is affected, which makes walking by myself difficult, but I can still walk with my leg supports.

Hettie, you have several hobbies, including surfing the internet and tapestry – how do you do it?

I have an ordinary computer, but I use a synthetic screen reader which reads the contents of the screen to me. When I am on a web page, the synthetic voice will say “link”. I press ‘enter’ and hey presto! Sending and receiving email is not a problem either, as the screen reader reads what I am typing as well as the message I am receiving.

As for tapestries, of course I can’t use pre-painted designs, but I design as I go along. To do this, I use Sudan Gauze with larger holes, which can be counted with a thick needle. I take a friend with me to choose the colours.

How have you learned to cope with blindness and CMT?

Life’s school is not for sissies – it is hard. I am blessed with a strong personality and the drive to do my best, whatever the circumstances. This doesn’t mean that I don’t have my down days – that is only human. I do cry whenever I realise that yet another ability is no longer there. For example, it was very hard on my self image when I had to start wearing braces on my feet. I have never been able to wear lovely shoes because of my weak ankles, and then the braces came along! I soon realised that walking around with “broken knees” and always falling was worse for my self image than wearing braces and being able to walk more normally. I used to love going for long walks, climbing rocks and being in the veld. My feet no longer allow me to do that – yet another loss. Being the optimist that I am, I know it doesn’t help sitting and sulking, so I find other things to do.

How do you get around your disabilities?

Disabilities do not go away – you have to live with them. I allow myself to feel blue on my off days, but I do not allow myself to bathe in negativity. The challenge is to find ways and means to do the things I want to do, and to go where I want to go. My computer is certainly the greatest help – it enables me to write and read literature which is not available on tape. The SA Library for the Blind in Grahamstown and Tape Aids for the Blind in Durban do a tremendous job of supplying blind people with books on all topics.

Experience has taught me that you can do one of two things. You can allow yourself to focus on the things you are unable to do, or you can find a way to experience life. For example, it frustrates me to walk into a shop and have no idea what is surrounding me. What are the new fashions? What new products are available? What is happening on television when there is no dialogue?

What I do is go shopping with different people. They take stuff off the rack and place it in my hands so that I can “see” it too. We visited Table Mountain once with friends. Their “oohs” and “aahs”, descriptions and enthusiasm told me enough to form a picture of what it looked like. Standing at the top of the mountain, breathing that special mountain air, hearing the children cry out in excitement, I thanked God for all the other senses He gave me. Of course, I did ask Him to give me sight for just five minutes so that I could experience His creation, but I think He knew that I would never have given it back once the five minutes were up!

What I am saying is yes, it is difficult to live in my world. If I didn’t have my friends and family, I would be very lonely.

Thank God for friends, family, a spontaneous nature, adventurous personality, a sense of humour and the ways and means to live a full, creative and busy life.

I am a very independent person, but I usually ask for help when I need it. Now that my husband has retired, he is my “guide dog” when I want to go somewhere. I have had three guide dogs over the years, and I was able to go wherever I wanted to.

Unfortunately, as CMT affects my balance, it is no longer possible for me to walk using a white cane. I became a ‘wanderer’ of sorts, drifting all over the place whenever my balance played up. I would feel as if I was walking straight, but I actually wasn’t! On the plus side – I have a legitimate excuse for not being able to open bottles, tins and other nasty stuff!

How have your disabilities affected you on a spiritual and mental level?

Life is a challenge, and I love challenges. I learned very early on in life that I am unhappy if I am not doing something creative. Technology has opened such a new, interesting world in the last 20 years. Through my computer, I have learned so many new things. I also attended an upliftment course. With my writing, I lead a very full life.

As far as my spiritual life goes, I talk to God and friends. When I think that life is unfair, I tell God that I feel that way. I have learned that the best way to hear the Lord’s voice is by ‘emptying’ myself in front of Him. Even though I may complain, or even argue, I only become calm once I have rid myself of all the negative thoughts and feelings.

How do other people act around you?

As eye contact is the first contact when people meet, I think that makes them uncertain as to how to approach me. They often talk to the person with me, instead of to me! Most people relax once we start talking and they find out that I can actually communicate like an intelligent human being! Unfortunately, although I believe that a large part of setting people at ease lies with my ability to associate with others, there are some people who just cannot accept that I am just like anyone else with the same needs, emotions and feelings. My friend sums it up perfectly: “it is so interesting to watch people who meet you for the first time. First there is a ‘what’s this?’ expression on their faces. Then comes the ‘shame, poor thing’ look. When you start to talk, they have a look of amazement that you can actually have a sensible conversation. Finally they have a look of wonder at your knowledge and humour”.

You always seem to be cheerful, warm and positive – how do you manage that?

Life is too short to be negative. I think I can stay positive because I allow myself to feel down from time to time. I don’t allow myself to stay pessimistic – it is better to go and do something creative to get back on track. Take life one day at a time. Allow yourself to mourn over a lost ability, or whatever loss you are experiencing. Ask for help when necessary but try to be as independent as possible.

What gets you down?

I don’t like people who treat me as though I am mentally retarded too. People often underestimate my intelligence. Here is a good example: a friend of mine is the head of the School for Legal Training in Pietersburg, where graduate attorneys take a practical course for six months before they start working. One of her students was blind so she called me to ask whether I knew where his test papers could be transcribed to Braille.

As I have a machine that writes Braille, I jumped at the opportunity to earn some extra money. My neighbour told the story to some of her friends, and their reaction was “she can’t do that!”.

I decided that they are actually very unlucky to be so narrow-minded about something they have no knowledge of! Rather ask me how I am going to do something, instead of jumping to the conclusion that it will be impossible for me!

What gets you out of bed in the morning? What drives you?

The three ‘gets’: get up, get dressed, get going. Each day only has 24 hours and there is so much to be done in that time.

If you could describe yourself in one sentence, what would it be?

Hettie – with more guts than commonsense, always looking for the next challenge.

INSPIRATIONAL ADVICE INDEED ...

- Accept the challenges life sends your way and only compete against yourself.
- I believe in the saying “you cannot be everything to all people all the time, but you can make a difference in someone else’s life daily”.
- Make a list of the things you can still do and do it! Nothing is too simple not to be an achievement, when it is taking more out of you than it would a person who does not have your problems.
- Keep your mind busy – I have completed many course and attended seminars. People often ask me what I am going to do with all that information as they think I will not be able to use that knowledge. I do it because I am an inquisitive person and want to know everything! It enables me to converse with people on a wide variety of topics.
- Don’t let anybody tell you that it is easy to overcome your problems. It takes a lot of willpower and courage, but in the end you owe it to yourself to live life as well as you possibly can.
- Nobody likes being around an old grump – optimism means facing the challenges that come your way.
- Self pity, being difficult, being cross with God and the whole world, blaming them for your circumstances, will lead to the most lonesome road imaginable.