



Touchstone Story #7 The White Cane

Photo Caption: The white cane is the international symbol of independence, mobility and safety for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Great ideas often take ages to form **before taking hold all at once**. The white cane, the now universal and indispensable aid for the blind, follows that path. It came into wide use beginning in 1930 as two caring problem solvers stood on busy street corners thousands of miles apart—one in Paris, France, and the other in Peoria, Illinois.

Throughout history, visually impaired people have carried canes, staffs and walking sticks to help get around obstacles. But, they faced terrifying new challenges in the 20th century as cars replaced carriages on city streets—streets that were frequently without stoplights and crosswalks. The plain, walking stick still worked as a way-making tool, but it was useless as a warning sign to motorists. A blind Englishman named James Biggs claimed to have found an answer in 1921 when he painted his walking stick white. A decade later, this simple invention began to gain ground.

The white cane crossed first to continental Europe through a one-woman campaign. From her home on the bustling Boulevard de Courcelles, a wealthy Parisienne named Mme. Guilly d'Herbement would watch nervously as sightless students commuted to a nearby school for the blind. In November 1930, she wrote a letter to a leading Paris newspaper urging the use of attention-getting *batons blancs*, similar to those carried by traffic police. A few months later, Mme. d'Herbement arranged for the French president to ceremoniously present one white cane each to a blind war veteran and a blind civilian. She then made personal gifts of 5,000 more white canes to the city's blind residents.

Meanwhile, Peoria Lions Club President George A. Bonham rallied the help of thousands of partners when he introduced the white cane to North America. Lions had eagerly embraced Helen Keller's call to aid the blind at the Lions Clubs International



Convention five years earlier. Now, they were primed to act on a fellow Lion's compelling new idea for service.

Like his Parisian counterpart, Bonham was moved one day in 1930 in downtown Peoria when Bonham saw a blind man tapping his cane helplessly as traffic swirled around him. No one seemed to notice the man's dilemma, which set Bonham thinking. The answer again was the white cane, this time with a red band for even greater visibility. Bonham shared his idea with club members who immediately voted their endorsement. Members took up the cause, painting white canes for the blind and writing letters to city officials. In December 1930, the Peoria City Council passed the nation's first "white cane safety law," giving blind citizens the right-of-way and other protections when carrying a white cane.

At the 1931 international convention in Toronto, Lions heard a detailed presentation on the white cane program and received copies of the Peoria ordinance to bring home. By 1956, with the help of a full-scale awareness and advocacy campaign, every state in the United States had enacted white-cane safety laws.

The white cane has become a symbol of the independence, confidence and skills of those who rely on it to guide their walk through life. Every Oct. 15 on International White Cane Safety Day, many Lions wear a white cane lapel pin, reminding us how far we have walked together.



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