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They cope with blindness

Elderly teach kids to read

United Press International
 WASHINGTON — For three weeks, Lillian Miller has visited a local elementary school a month to tutor slow students in reading.

Miller, 83, is blind. At first, I asked, 'How in the world can I help a child to read if I can't even read myself?' she said. But they explained how I should listen to them read out loud and help them when they say a word they don't understand."

Her visits to the Takoma Park school are part of a unique program called "Internal Light," which helps elderly blind people learn to cope with the loss of their sight.

Not only do children benefit from her visits, but Miller has learned she has not lost her usefulness.

"It's as good for me as it is for the children," she said. "It's a fun and friendly atmosphere."

Four programs now operate in Maryland, and another satellite program was started in September in the District of Columbia by Evelyn Saile, the real

force behind Internal Light. "I want the senior citizens to realize that they can give to the community, not just take," she said. "Many have had to depend on social services."

In 1972, Saile, who is not a senior citizen herself but whose husband is blind, became director of a small program at the Jewish Community Center in Rockville, Md.

When she first approached the Maryland Board of Education with the idea for the tutoring program, they weren't enthusiastic. Later, she had to battle reluctant teachers, skeptical principals and financial difficulties.

At the Stevens School, a District of Columbia program, Internal Light volunteers tutor students one-to-one in a bright yellow room.

"The senior citizens have to have a lot of courage to come here," said Juan Febles, coordinator of the school's program. "I guess the students instinctively know this and respect them."

According to Feyishara Adelekan, 9, it doesn't matter to her that her tutors are blind since they still "have had lots of experience in reading."

Besides, added Gohar Babazaden, 12, "It's fun reading to someone not just to yourself."

"The children learn a great deal more from the program than reading," said Leslie Chepenick, director of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, which works in conjunction with Internal Light in Maryland. "It lets the children learn that handicaps aren't something to be afraid of or ashamed of. It definitely changes the lives of the senior citizens, too."

Most of the senior citizens lost their sight gradually and late in life.

"As well as blindness, they are coping with aging problems, like a change of residence, or death of a spouse," Saile says. "There are horrendous things happening at this time and then to lose your vision, too."

The majority of blind Americans are over 60 — most of them having lost their sight from incurable diseases, Saile said.

To help the elderly confront their anger at being blind and their fear of living alone, Saile invites professional counselors to lead discussions.

Saile teaches them they can do

anything a sighted person can, except drive a car, and they can lead independent lives.

"Blindness is not a handicap," said Saile, whose husband is a labor economist. "It is an inconvenience."

Beneath the surface of Internal Light runs the river of her philosophies.

"Ten years ago, when I took over the existing program," Saile said, "they took me to a closet and showed me beads and baskets. I said, if that's what you want me to do, I'm the wrong person."

In a few years, word of her success spread, and the University of Maryland's Center of Aging suggested she apply for a state grant to fund satellite programs. She wrote the grant proposal and won a year's funding for 1979.

The following year, the Maryland Board of Education renewed her grant — the only renewal in 26 applications. Currently, although private donations help, the financial wolves still howl at her door.

"I always live from grant to grant," she said. "I'm always worried and I'm always writing grants."



Filled with news

staff photo by Eric Evan Lee

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owner was out of town. The automobile, belongs to Robert Lundberg, a sophomore biology major.

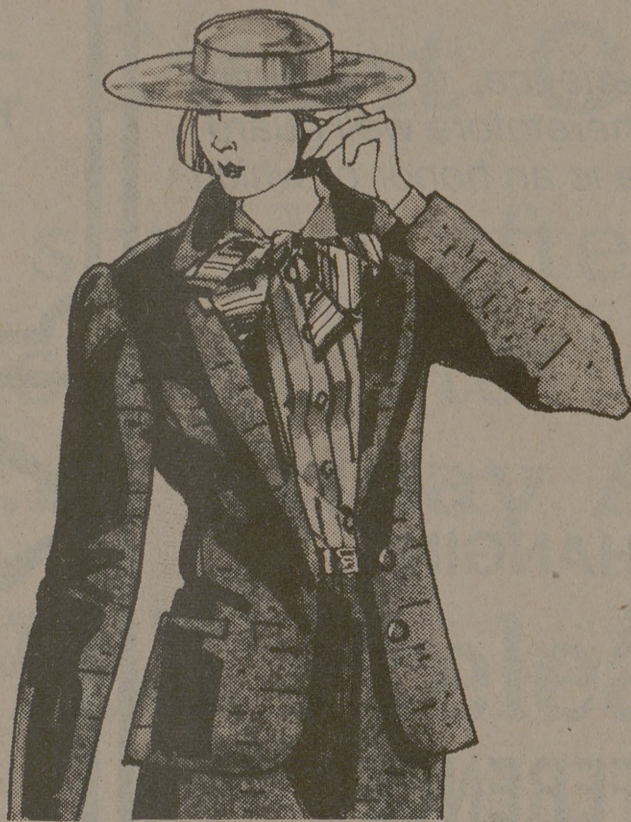
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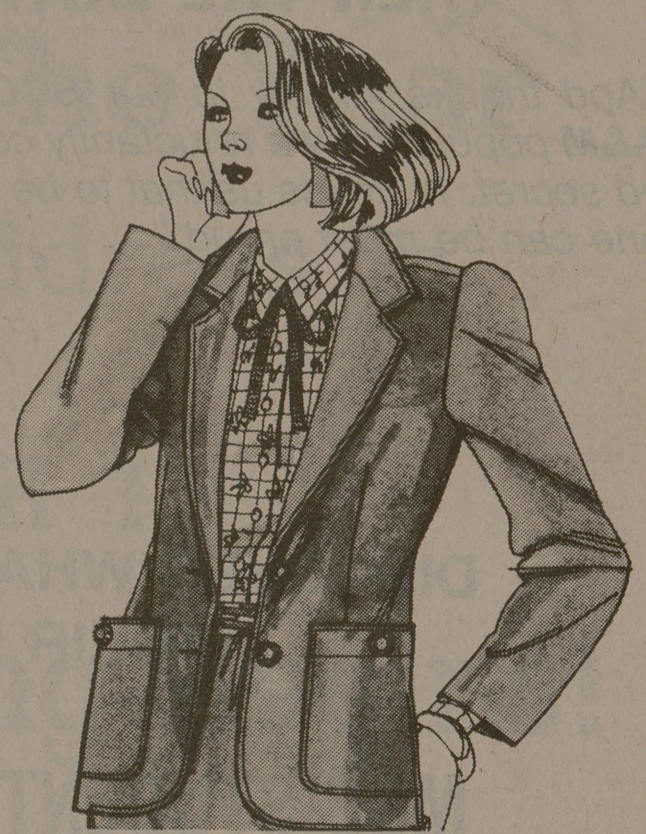
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