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10 OCT, 2026

'Making the most' of life with visual impairment

Weekend Press, Christchurch

‘Making the most’ of life with visual impairment

OPTOMETRY

Mariné Lourens

Claire Williams has never known a life without visual impairment.

Born in Rangiora, she was barely a year old when she started developing painful corneal ulcers, leading to severe and worsening vision loss.

At 77, she still remembers her mum taking her to hospital to have radium treatment - a practice no longer used today – in the hope it would be an answer to the recurring ulcers.

“I can still remember going under this machine and having to keep my eyes open for about 15 seconds under the threat I’d lose my eyelashes.”

Throughout her life, Williams travelled up and down the country to see doctors in the hope of winning back the vision she has lost. She has had 19 corneal transplants and numerous surgeries to repair a detached retina.

She remembers being wheeled into the operating room as a child, being strapped down and then watching the doctors scrub up as they readied for surgery. “It was quite frightening,” she said.

“The doctors would deem the surgery okay, but then I always had to have more.”

At times her vision temporarily improved, but there was never a cure. Today, Williams is completely blind in one eye with very limited vision in the other.

Despite the constant struggle with low vision, Williams never allowed it to hold her back in life. She qualified and worked as a teacher, married a “wonderful” man from Britain, became a mother, lived in the UK for a few years, travelled to different countries, and is now basking in the joy of being a grandmother.

Living in a Christchurch retirement village, Williams has helped establish a women’s social group, serves on the residents’ committee, and has taken on the challenge of learning to navigate independently with a white cane. “It is not as easy as you think.”

She has also taken it upon herself to educate others on how small changes can make someone with blindness or low vision feel included and connected. Like introducing yourself when you walk into a room, telling the person when you are leaving a conversation, or speaking to them directly instead of through their companion.

After seven years working with Blind Low Vision NZ, she will also host a fundraiser tea in a couple of weeks to support the charity during Blind Low Vision Month. When telling her story, Williams repeatedly says how “lucky” she was. Lucky to have had a mother who refused to let her daughter believe there were any limits to what she could achieve. Lucky to have been married to a man who said there was no such thing as ‘can’t’. Lucky to have two wonderful children who are just as determined as she is. Lucky to have travelled and seen beautiful places.

But there is a whole lot of tenacity behind that luck.

“Well, I can’t change it, can I?”

Many people her age are struggling with much bigger health problems, she said.

“Life is what you make of it and I want to make the most of it. So I just have to keep doing what I’m doing.”

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Claire Williams, 77, knits at her home in a retirement village in Christchurch. She has helped establish a women's social group and serves on the residents' committee in the village



Williams has recently take up the challenge of learning to walk with a cane, which she says is "not as easy" as one might think. PHOTOS: KAI SCHWOERER/THE PRESS

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