Torch Trust

Sight Loss 101

in conversation with June Barnett

Hello and welcome to this episode of Sight Loss 101 where I, Tim Jeffrey, have the chance to have a conversation with people who are blind or partially sighted in order to help me understand as a sighted person what's it like to live in your shoes. Today I have the joy of having June Barnett and June welcome, it's lovely to have you with us and June, I understand that your sight loss has come later in life. Maybe you can just tell us a little bit about your life story and how sight loss has featured.

I’m now 86. I’ll be 87 in two months’ time. I wasn't aware of sight loss but I was actually driving with my husband and we were in Evesham and just once or twice he said, ‘June move over, move over, you're nearly clipping the cars’. Anyway I went to the optician and they diagnosed that I had AMD. I was 73 when it started. I then had injections. It was the wet AMD and I had injections - 44 injections over many years until eventually it became dry in recent years since I’ve been here. The biggest change in my life was that I was no longer able to drive. I think that was really the thing I noticed most of all. I gave up driving immediately because I thought I might be a danger to other people as well as to myself. Apart from that I managed pretty well for quite a number of years - certainly all the years when I was having my injections I was really doing things as normally as possible. Then of course you know there's a gradual deterioration but what I found I have had a great advantage having wonderful gadgets to help me and I think the main thing is to keep positive and keep on doing what I am able to do, for as long as I’m able to do it. So with the help of gadgets I still cook for myself, I bake, I knit. My knitting is string and I just make dishcloths which I just pass out to charity or they go in the local shop and people put money in the charity box. As regards my faith, I found prayer is just so important in my life. I can no longer see to read the Bible but I’m very blessed that I have Alexa and I have the whole Bible on Alexa, so I can call up any part of the Bible I wish to listen to. During the last month I have been listening to Exodus right through. I also get on Alexa something called ‘Daily Devotion’. Do you know about all these things Tim?

Yes, some of them June. I mean it's amazing what's coming and did you know that ‘Every Day with Jesus’ is also soon to be available through smart speakers like Alexa?

Yes well I just have something called a ‘Daily Devotion’ which is the same sort of thing; there's a scripture reading and a commentary. I can listen to any hymns as long as I know the first line of the hymn and so I’m really very fortunate. I have a lot of aids which really make life a whole lot easier.

And June, how much sight have you got now? Do you have any?

I have some but it's not good. I was starting to think about this and I would think, at the most, I have about maybe 20%. Of course, I have no central vision so I’m relying on the peripheral vision all the time. So I’m looking at the screen I know there's movement on the screen but I can't see you. I get out of the corner of my eye quite a distance at the end of the room - there are people passing by my window and I’m not looking at them but I’m picking them up.

I moved here after my husband died so I’ve been here just over well ... I used to live in the Cotswolds. I lived in the Cotswolds for 37 years and this was my second husband and when he just dropped dead suddenly. It was a very tiny village and there was one bus a week and so I could get into Evesham but then they stopped the bus. Of course I couldn't drive, I had no transport, there was nothing in the village and so I was relying on taxis and this became incredibly expensive and also inconvenient. It just so happened that one time when Nigel came down he said about this little house I have here now, was up for sale and how about it. They had asked me to go and live with them but with four children I just didn't think that that was going to work at all because I was used to my own independence, so this house is just about a 100 yards from where Nigel and his family live and so it's just amazing. He's very caring and loving and supportive in so many different ways and so when I came here. Talking about dealing with the sight loss, I had been there in the council for 37 years so I was in the United Reformed Church in Broadway. When I was church secretary, I was also an elder, I was on their pastoral visiting list - very much involved. I was also secretary of the Interchurch Committee that we had. There were four denominations in Broadway; there was Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and United Reformed Church. We had monthly meetings and we did amazing things together and that worked very well. So suddenly I came here and I was 78 years old. I’d been in and out of hospital with heart problems and so suddenly I left friends and church family behind and this was a huge thing for me and so I made up my mind that I would walk around the village and I would say hello or good morning - pass the time of day with absolutely everybody and something would come out of the bag and so it did! So I have a small circle of friends and a great many acquaintances but what I did to help myself, I used to say to introduce myself, and I said my name is June. I cannot see you, so if I pass you by next time and haven't spoken you must forgive me - it's because I can't see you. What I would like you to do is to say, hello June, it's David or Joyce or whatever and then I know who I’m talking to and so I think that was a very positive thing for me to do. And this is lovely; I just stepped out the door this morning to go to the shop and somebody called out, ‘hello June, good morning June. It's Mark’. This is lovely. I don't know if that's something that other people have learned to do or not.

That sounds like a good top tip June to be saying that to people so that they know. That's a really good idea. How do you get around, do you have a cane or ...

No. I just have a white stick. I have to walk slowly because I have to be careful where I’m putting my feet but I do go for walks around the village. I know where I can go. Nigel no longer wants me to go wandering across the fields because he said if I tripped and fell ...!

But yes it's amazing what you can do really what you can do Tim if you really try hard. Of course there are days when you can get quite low in spirits and everything just seems to get on top of you. I mean yesterday morning I had a bit of a weepy morning. That doesn't happen very often now, but I’ve got a very old cat who's causing me a lot of problems at the moment, so there are frustrations.

I play Scrabble. At the other end of this table is a Scrabble board which I had from the RNIB. Up until lockdown, 15 months ago nearly, I used to go to a friend in her 90s twice a week, so I was there for 4 hours a week but of course that stopped. She's now 96 so it's no longer a goer and I can't really go around there like I used to and don't go around anymore, so I just been Scrabble on my own. I just pick out the 7 tiles and play and calculate and try to get as good a score as I can.

The other thing is, I rely heavily on audiobooks and on music. I listen to a lot of music.

And you do that through your Alexa smart speaker?

 Yes. It's something like £3.95 and you get a million pieces of music to choose from, so just depending on my mood I’ve got quite a more wide range of musical interests, so just depending on how I feel - if I want just quiet relaxing things or jolly things or the singing voice or I listen to ClassicFM a lot. So what else can I tell you Tim?

June that's been absolutely fascinating and so lovely to hear about the way that you've come to terms with and embraced and then found ways to carry on despite ... Okay, have there been particular ways in which your faith has helped you on that journey?

Oh very much so. Until the lockdown I had been attending the Baptist church in the village here and funnily enough during the summer last year we had services outside. There's a big bit of ground attached to the Baptist chapel and we had 15 weeks of unbroken Sundays and we were sitting outside, very much distanced but we had the organ out there and we could sing and the pulpit and that was wonderful, but of course I haven't been doing that and I’m not sure and I’ve actually been thinking that my churchgoing days I think are probably going to be fewer in the future but what I do listen to every Sunday morning at 10 past 8, I listen to the service on radio 4, which is absolutely excellent. And then at different periods of time like at Easter, there are services on BBC1 on Sunday morning and then the Songs of Praise as well, so spiritually I feel that I am very well supported. Also the Baptist pastor calls every week and he knocks on the door just to make sure everything's all right.

Really, well that's wonderful.

So I have no complaints really.

That's amazing and how have you come across Torch Trust?

How did I come across Torch Trust? I came across Torch Trust thanks to David Palmer. I heard about Torch and so I phoned up and I spoke to David Palmer and he was setting up these local groups all over the place and talking to him he thought, oh June's the person, she's the one to set up a group for MARTIN. Well of course he didn't know the difficulties at that point, but anyway he came to see me and then he found this other couple. I think you know Lesley and Michael Sergeant are our team group leaders and they've really been so supportive. They phone once a month on our day and they also call round and that's how I got in touch with the Torch Then I went on Torch holidays. I went on the Book Week which I found was absolutely wonderful and James, that's where I met James Brookman, and I always got on well with James and then, of course, there was Sarah as well and Sarah did all sorts of things like Lenten Studies and different discussion groups which were really good. They only lasted a few weeks, it wasn't ongoing all the time. I’ve been 3 times to the Book Week. I used to go down in the minibus and of course we have something in common because where James and Sarah Brookman live in Ashton-under-a-Hill was literally just across the fields from where I lived, so we have quite a connection. And David Palmer still comes. He phones me; he's been here to see me about 3 times since he finished with Torch. I’m very close to him and his wife as well.

That's lovely. June that's really special. Thank you so much for sharing all of that. It's fascinating to hear about your journey and how you've adapted life and it sounds to me like you remain incredibly positive and it’s a very beautiful thing to hear, so thank you so much for sharing with us.

Well there's just one other little bit. I have another dimension to my life. I did eventually go to university. I actually went to university to Warwick when I was 58 and I did a German degree. I have an honours German degree. And you really need to know this little bit because this is quite important. I always wanted to learn German as well as French. In our church in Broadway we appointed a minister from Germany. This was part of an ongoing reconciliation thing. Well of course, I was an elder but I was soon made church secretary to him. His name was Martin Henninger and I have been his pastoral carer and he is mine ever since those days, but his wife was a teacher of German and because we had this link with all the churches, we were always looking for things that we could do together and the suggestion was that we could all go to Oberammergau. Have you ever been to Oberammergau?

 No I’ve not I’ve not been but I'd love to.

If you never went to any theatre again in your life that would be sufficient. So we were going to go in 1990. His wife's name was called Ryan - she was a teacher of German and she said it's all in German so we need a German class, so the people gathered ages from 18-80. Do you know German at all?

Not much.

Anyway we were starting off with 'ich heisse". People were struggling and this went on for about 3 weeks and I said to Ryan, ‘Ryan please excuse me but I won't be coming anymore. But of course she knew me and she said what's wrong and I said nothing. She said,' oh but there is! We're not going fast enough for you are we?' So she said I've got a book here and you come to the manse every 10 days and we will have an evening session. So this was in the autumn of 1989. I went and we got to Christmas and Ryan said, 'June you've got to do the O-level.' I said, 'it's a very long time since I left school.' She said, 'yes but you've got to do this.' So I said, 'where do I do it?' So she phoned in January and said if you've got to check for £24 (because I could drive then) get yourself to Strafrod-on-Avon College of FE; it's the last day, the closing day for the exam entry. So I went there and saw this wonderful lady, the examination officer, and I said do you have a syllabus or something? So she gave me a syllabus and Tim, if I tell you I knew nothing, I knew nothing! And so it was a case of head down and I had 5 months and then I had to go there for the exam. I always have to say this because please do not think me arrogant, it's just I have inherited a gift for languages from my father, and when I came out I thought it was so easy and I couldn't understand why children took 5 years to do this and I went to the cloakroom and she followed me in there and she said Mrs Barnett I know I’m not supposed to say but you've handed in a perfect paper. I said but I can't believe how easy it was and so of course the next thing was A-level. Well of course there's people in the church, again this is church, all this comes from the church, I have to stress this and the people said, oh June you will do the A-level. I said, goodness can I have a rest. No, you've got to do the A-level.So it was arranged I had to go all the way to Bromsgrove over 60 mile round trip so I did the A-level at Brosmsgrove College of FE. I went just twice a week and then I did the A-level. And then my son started, this is Nigel who's a wonderful person and he says, Mum you know this degree has been in you screaming to get out all your life. You've got to go for it. I said I can't at this age and he said, yes you can. He said you could go to Birmingham. I said I’m not going to Birmingham every day because there's a long way. So I went to an open day at Warwick and I sat there with all the parents and children and they all got up and went and this professor said to me, are you here on behalf of your child? I said no, I’m going on behalf of me! And he said were you sure? I said well I got my Scottish Higher Leaving certificate in 1950. I was only 15 years old - all the others in my class were 17. I was 15, so I was very young. I got I had Higher French and it's a very different system in Scotland. It's like A-levels and they're joined together and I said, it's a long time ago and he said if you get your A-level German we will accept a "C" and you come and join us. And to my horror and again, forgive me, I said I’m so sorry but if I got a "C" I wouldn't dream of coming!

So what did you get?

 Well in fact I got As across the board except B for the audio because this was a discipline I wasn't used to. That was difficult for me. Anyway I went and they said just give it a go for a year but then anyway I came out with the 2-1 honours and then in my year out, you know you have a year out if you're doing a language, you have to go to the country. Well by this time of course I’m 60/61. I wasn't wanting to do it, so through Martin Henninger he got me a placement with a woman who was the dean in the Palatinate church and Warwick agreed they would accept 3 months but I must know that this would affect my final degree. So I did 7 weeks in the autumn. Left my husband; I could not have done this without a wonderful husband; I did 7 weeks in the autumn and 7 weeks in the following spring but during that time I was a speaker at the Women's World Day of prayer which was 400 women there. I was all reported in the Sunday paper and everything. I was speaking German and church-speak Tim, church-speak like in any language you've got normal conversation but then you have specialist language and so I had to swat up on this like mad and I set up pastoral care things there. I had to take services even. It was the most wonderful it was all God led, absolutely and I just kept on praying and saying, 'God you have brought me here, I picked up the ball I’m running with it and I’m having the time of my life' and it was absolutely wonderful Tim.

Thank you so much.

I’m still in touch, so when I finished, the West Midlands Diocese appointed me European Links Coordinator, setting up partnerships in churches in Germany, in what was formerly East Germany because they were just emerging and so my work was in the former East Germany but nobody spoke English because it had to learn Russian only and nobody here of the groups I took knew any German, so I did that till I was 67 and so that's my spiritual journey Tim. And you needed to know that because you were asking a lot about faith and so I’ve had an amazing journey.

You have June. Bless you and thank you for sharing it with me. It's been a delight to hear you and get to know you a little and thank you on behalf of myself and anybody who listens to this for sharing with us. Bless you.

Thank you for joining us on Sight Loss 101

for more information on Torch call 01 858 438 260.