



The White Cane

The White Cane is the international symbol of independence, mobility and safety for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Throughout history, visually impaired people have carried canes, staffs and walking sticks to help move 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 in continental Europe started through a one-woman campaign. Guilly d'Herbement watched 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*, similar to those carried by traffic police. A few months later, she arranged for the French president to ceremoniously present one white cane to a blind war veteran and to a blind civilian. She then purchased 5,000 more white canes for the city's blind residents.

Meanwhile, Peoria Lions Club President George A. Bonham rallied the help of Lions when he introduced the white cane to North America. Lions had eagerly embraced Helen Keller's call to aid the blind at the Lions Club International Convention five years earlier. Now, they were primed to act on a fellow Lion's compelling new idea for service.

Bonham was moved one day in 1930 in downtown Peoria when he 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.

One of the tools Leader Dog uses in their Orientation and Mobility Training is the White Cane. During a week of intense one on one training Clients begin to master the skills needed to travel independently in their home environments. Each Client is unique and is taught techniques that are developed for their circumstances. Over the years, the White Cane has evolved, now with removable tips and with flexible shafts and even GPS enabled software. These White Canes provide Clients with a way to be unstoppable and Leader Dog is there to help them on their journey to independence.

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.



