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The promise of sight

Community raises \$10K to help Tina Leonard see again

By ANDY FLYNN
Editor

LAKE PLACID — Tina Leonard, 60, doesn't look like she's blind. She doesn't wear Ray-Ban sunglasses like musician Ray Charles did. She looks normal with her eyeglasses, which are just for protection. She's been legally blind for five years.

But that's about to change, the glasses that is. Her new electronic ones — made by eSight — will arrive in the mail soon. They look like a white set of virtual reality goggles. She won't look blind when she gets those, either, just like she's in another world. And she will be — the world of sight.

In the meantime, Leonard will continue working as a real estate broker and owner for her own company, Tina Leonard Real Estate, at her home office on McKinley Street in Lake Placid. This is a time to reflect on the past, maintain the present and plan for the future.

Going legally blind

Leonard, the daughter of Donald and Gayle Wilson, is a 1975 graduate of the Lake Placid High School. She's had trouble with her eyes since she was a teenager. It was glaucoma. She'd been treated over the years by a doctor in Boston, and that's where she had a candid conversation with a surgeon five years ago. She never lost sight from glaucoma, but she had a blockage behind her right eye. He offered surgery to fix her eye, but he couldn't promise it would get better.

"I could see right up until the surgery, and then after the surgery they thought it would



NEWS PHOTO — ANDY FLYNN

Real estate professional Tina Leonard speaks on the phone in her McKinley Street home office in Lake Placid Friday, May 11. She has been legally blind for five years and will soon get a \$10,000 pair of eSight "glasses" in the mail to help her see again. The glasses she is wearing are for protection only; they do not help her see. She has many tools in her office that help her do her job.

get better," she said.

The surgery was difficult, and more complications came afterward. It didn't help. In fact, it got a lot worse.

Gradually, over a year, Leonard went totally blind in her right eye. In the left eye, she sometimes sees black shadows, depending on the lighting, and sometimes she sees

colors or bodies.

"I can see enough to see around, but it fluctuates, in my left eye," she said. "The left eye now is mostly because of a thick cornea, and the surface of my eye is not good."

After first, Leonard would not accept blindness as an option. She was too independent.

"Oh my god, what am I going to do if I can't drive?" she recalled. "I can't go anywhere. I can't go shopping. I sell real estate; that's my job. I rent apartments. How can I do it without driving?"

Leonard was in denial.

"I often say to people it took me a couple of years before I agreed that I was going to be blind," she said. "I wouldn't use a blind cane. I wouldn't get help. There were people out there, the North Country (Association for the Visually Impaired, the New York State Commission for the Blind, and I wouldn't agree that I was going to be blind."

At first, Leonard thought that losing the ability to drive a car would be the hardest part about losing her sight. That's where the stubbornness came in.

"I tried to drive when my sight was bad," she said. "As long as I got to work early when it was light out, and I left when it was light out, I thought, 'Well, I can see well enough.'"

Then there were a few times she left work as it was getting dark, and reality set in.

"All of a sudden, there are lights pointing at me, and I couldn't see, and I thought, 'This

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Eat ADK added food drive this year

Giving Back

People who are paying it forward

By GRIFFIN KELLY
Staff Writer

For 10 days in the spring shoulder season, restaurants in the Tri-Lakes area offer prefixed menus at \$15, \$20 or \$30 as part of the Eat ADK Restaurant Week, which was held May 3-10. In the past, the event was received with some hesitation from businesses, but this year things were successful, according to Chairwoman Kelsey

Cassidy.

"This has been our best turnout yet for the week," she said. "A lot of the restaurants told us this is their busiest year. This was the first time I had a lot of restaurants texting me saying 'Thank you.' In the past, a few of the restaurants had asked 'Why are we doing this?' and 'how is this supposed to make us money?' I would have to reassure them that this helps bring in long-term and returning customers."

Cassidy said she thinks the week's new food drive helped make it successful for businesses and the less fortunate.

"Now that we're a little more established, we want

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY KELSEY CASSIDY

Lake Placid Middle School Principal Theresa Lindsay, left, and Patty Mayberry, right, collect boxes of food from the Eat ADK Restaurant Week that will go toward the school district's Backpack Program and the Jay-Wilmington Ecumenical Food Pantry.

London to Lake Placid

Susan Friedmann makes it big in a small town

Up Close

Face time with your neighbors

By GRIFFIN KELLY
Staff Writer

LAKE PLACID — Susan Friedmann sat in her living room, drinking tea and occasionally engaging with her two cats, Tiger and Chai, which translates to "life" in Hebrew.

There's quite a lot to say about Friedmann. She's a world traveler, Rotarian, singer, book publisher, author, trade show coach, abuse activist and, above all, a Lake Placid resident.

Friedmann is not originally a local; she hails from London, England.

"This is a small town for me," she said. "Very small."

When asked why she moved from the United Kingdom to the United States 20 years ago, Friedmann pointed to the other room and said, "The guy in there." She was referring to her husband, Alec Friedmann, who is the rabbi at the Lake Placid Synagogue next door.

"It's all his fault," she said.

The two met in Paris. She was working as an au pair and he was leading a student exchange program. While the students climbed the Eiffel Tower, an activity the two had already done before, Susan and Alec sat in a bus and talked.

They didn't like each



NEWS PHOTO — GRIFFIN KELLY

Susan Friedmann of Lake Placid poses with her cat Tiger.

other all that much at first, but that lasted for only 24 hours. A little time after, Susan returned to England, and the pair met up again. Two weeks later, they were engaged.

"How many years is it now, darling?" Susan said to other room.

"Forty-eight in June," Alec replied.

Before settling in Lake Placid, the couple had several moves, living in South Africa, England, New Jersey

and Cincinnati, Ohio.

For a good portion of her life, Friedmann worked as what she likes to call a trade show coach. She would teach people how to present themselves and their services in the best way possible at trade shows. She worked with a range of industries over the years, such as oil, herbal, cars, medical and librarians. These days, Friedmann doesn't do as much of that anymore. Now she focuses more on her

book publishing work.

"I had a publishing company for 25 years, so I've worked with authors all that time," she said. "We've published about 400 books from authors all over the world. I've got authors in Australia. I've got authors in New Zealand. A lot of them are in the states. Many are on the West Coast because I have a writing coach who refers his clients to us."

The books tend to be from

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APA, DEC skimp on public hearings for UMPs

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SIGHT

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is scary. I can't see anything around me," she said.

The last time Leonard drove a car was on the day of a Rotary Club meeting at Howard Johnson's restaurant. She drove to work, then home, and that was it.

"Now, driving is the least of my worries. I don't care if I drive or don't drive," she said. "The more I lived it, what bothers me about my independence is not being able to see to walk to the bathroom by myself, to ask somebody, 'Would you take me to the bathroom?' To have to wait to go to the grocery store. And when I go to the grocery store, I can't even see what's on the shelves."

One day, Leonard stopped at the grocery store with a friend and had to pick up dinner for herself because her husband Joe was out of town. So she went to the pre-made food aisle, picked up some fried chicken and macaroni and cheese, looked at them closely to make sure she got what she wanted, put them in her cart and checked out.

"And when I got home, I sat down to eat and took the cover off and it wasn't macaroni and cheese," she said. "It was corn. I couldn't see the difference."

Home office

Tina Leonard sits in her office chair like an airline pilot sits in a cockpit. She is surrounded by tools that help her do her job. The office is small, about the size of a doctor's office. There's an L-shaped desk, two rustic chairs for clients, built-in cabinet space and a small file cabinet within arm's reach. It's an old wash room at the back of the house, renovated so she doesn't have to use a corner of her kitchen anymore, and there is a door to the outside.

Surrounding her are items that help tell her story. There are plaques: one honoring her as the 2000-2001 president of the Northern Adirondack Board of Realtors, a 2002 Northern Adirondack Board of Realtors Realtor of the Year Award while at Prudential Terry Horrocks Real Estate and a 2005 thank you from the Shipman Youth Center Board of Directors for her service to that organization.

A Rubik's Cube sits on a shelf next to a poster that says "See the Adirondacks" in the shape of an eye chart — with an Adirondack chair icon at the top and other icons filling out the eye chart pyramid, such as a deer, tent, skiers, snowmobile and an outhouse.

A sign on the cabinet says "Mom, a son's first love, daughter's first friend."

Leonard was blind when she left Adirondack Premier Properties two years ago. That's when she decided to go solo.

"When I lost my sight, I had a whole new outlook on life, and I just decided I'm going to do what I want to do and be happy," she said. "I'm not working at home because I'm blind. I'm working at home because it worked."

And it does work. She handles long-term rentals with Tina Leonard Real Estate, and she has an associate broker license for sales with Guide Boat Realty in Saranac Lake.

Since Leonard can see colors sometimes, everything she does is color coated, including folders.

"Sales are in blue folders, personal stuff is in red folders, rental stuff is in yellow folders and extracurricular activities like my Rotary are in green folders," she said.

Her tape dispenser is green, and her stapler is red. The homemade paper clip holder — a pottery piece made by her son Joseph when he was young — is light brown.

"The other thing is don't move my stuff because if you move my stuff I won't know where it is," she said.

Aside from color coating her office, another low-tech tool is a product called Bump Dots. She puts these raised rubber dots on key places in her office, so she can feel rather than see important objects. For example, she has a couple Bump Dots on the keyboard for her computer, on specific keys.

"I know these two buttons make my computer go bigger and smaller," she said.

Leonard also counts on a variety of electronic gadgets to help her find things and read important documents

On her computer, she has software called ZoomText, which reads email messages to her in a man's voice.

Another tool is called a Pen Friend. It's black and looks like a thin remote control. It's an audio labeler, reading tags on file folders in her own voice.

"I can talk for half an hour and label something," she said.

She can also take notes on the Pen Friend, which reads magnetic discs.

Another tool is a portable Smartlux Digital video magnifier made by Eschenbach. It's about the size and thickness of an Apple iPhone 8 Plus and magnifies whatever she puts underneath it.

Like most of Leonard's techno tools, her Google Home Mini smart speaker talks to her. It's a round speaker about the diameter of a pancake, powered by the Google Assistant, so she can ask it questions and tell it to do things.

"Hey, Google, what's the temperature out?"

"In Lake Placid, it's currently 42," the Google Home Mini said a woman's voice.

One final tool is a

GoVision high-definition video magnifier with its own monitor and a scanner to read documents using optical character recognition (OCR) software. She uses the camera and monitor to write checks, and she uses the scanner with OCR software to have the machine read deeds to her.

Although all these electronic gadgets help Leonard sell real estate and rentals, there's one more that she can't wait to get: her eSight reading glasses.

Glasses in the mail

Tina Leonard has known about the eSight electronic glasses since she's been legally blind. Her daughter Daci researched them years ago, but there was always one sticking point: the price. They are \$9,995.

Yet things changed in April when her son Joseph saw the latest TV news report about a blind man whose life was changed after acquiring the eSight glasses, which use HD cameras and tiny monitors to help people see. The next day, Joseph began filling out an eSight form for his mother.

"He called me up and he

said, 'OK. You've got to answer these questions. I'm filling this out like I'm you, and I'm emailing it,'" Leonard said. "It says, What do you miss the most? Driving, right, Mom?' And I go, 'No, Joseph, it's not driving. What I miss the most is being able to see people's faces.' ... When I look in the mirror, I can't see my own face. When I fix my hair, I have no idea what I look like."

On Tuesday, May 1, Tina Leonard and her husband Joe

traveled to Ottawa to try on a pair of the eSight glasses. Not only was she able to read an eye chart with no problem, she was able to read newsprint.

With Leonard's permission, her daughter created a giving page on the eSight website. Within three days, they raised \$10,447 from 87 donors. The site went live on May 2 and they had enough money by May 4. Donations ranged between \$25 and \$1,000.

"It was so nice to see the

support," Leonard said. "All I kept thinking was, this is kind of like when you die, and at your funeral your family would say, 'Where were all these people when she needed them?' And it's like I got to see it before I died. These people were there, and they were there before I died to help me."

So now Leonard is waiting for the package that will change her life forever. She's nervous, yet excited.

"I want to see faces," she said.

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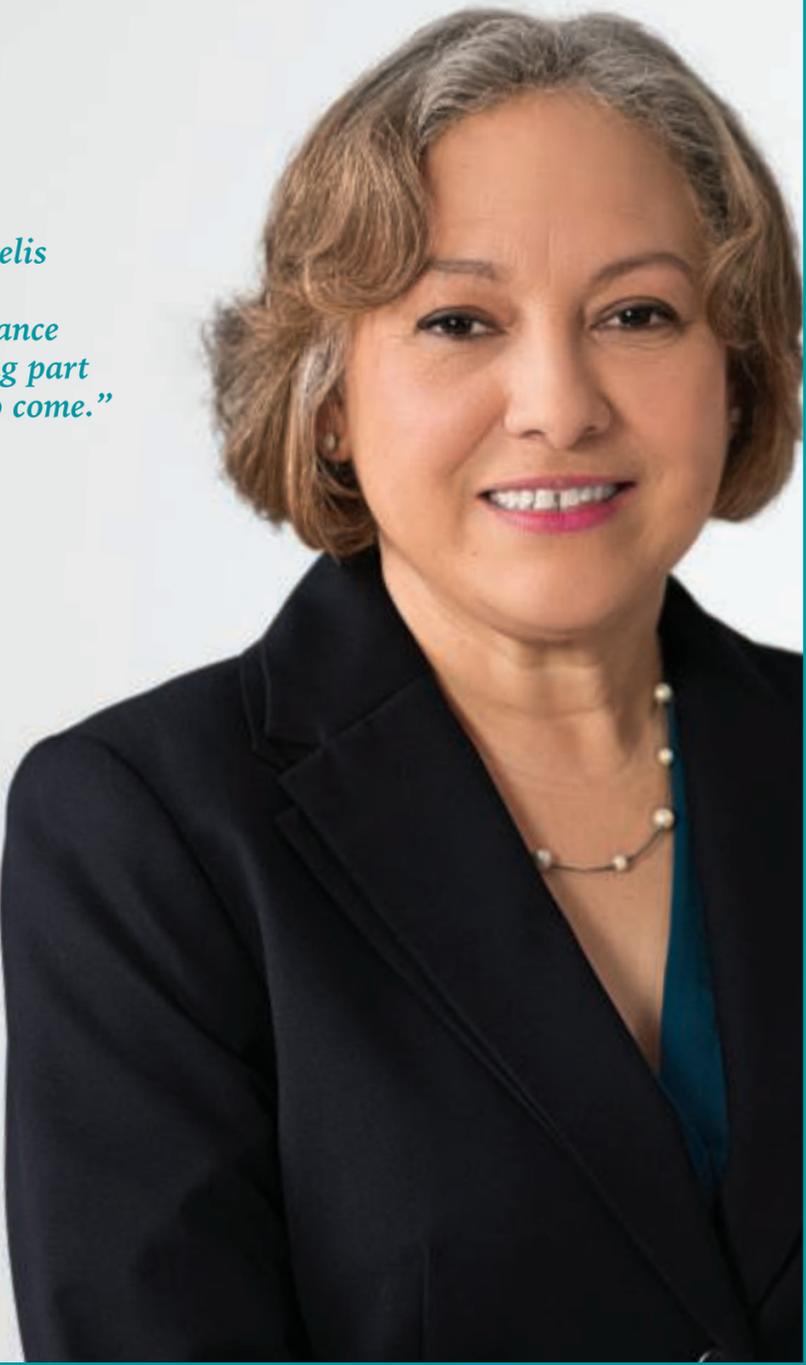
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