

OPINION/COMMENTARY



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25 ELM STREET, SOUTHBRIDGE MA 01550
TEL. (508) 764-4325 • FAX (508) 764-8015
www.auburnnews.net

FRANK G. CHILINSKI
STONEBRIDGE PRESS
PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER

ADAM MINOR
EDITOR
THE AUBURN NEWS AND THE WEBSTER TIMES

Maintaining your eyesight as you age

One of the discussions that emerged from the Auburn VNA Health Network's successful Diabetes and Health Symposium in June was vision — specifically, seniors have shared with me their very real fears about deteriorating eyesight.



Bring Your Health...Home
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Kimberly Harmon

And it's OK to be concerned. Today, more than 6.5 million Americans over age 65 have a severe visual impairment, often the result of diseases, such as age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, and diabetic retinopathy.

By 2030 medical experts and health officials predict that rates of vision loss and severe visual impairment in the U.S. will double as America's 78 million aging baby boomers reach retirement age and beyond.

According to a national opinion poll released by the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), Americans fear vision loss more than they fear cancer, HIV/AIDS, stroke, heart disease, diabetes and other serious health problems.

What you might think of as "just getting older" could indicate vision deterioration. Here are some of the signs this could be happening to you:

- Squinting and/or a greater sensitivity to light
- Experiencing uncontrolled eye movement
- Choosing bright over dull colored objects or clothing
- Spilling food or drinks because you misjudge where items are
- Clumsiness, like having difficulty threading a needle or buttoning a shirt
- Seeing flashes of light or rapid movement from the corners of your eyes
- Difficulties with driving at night
- Making driving mistakes, such as missing street signs or traffic signs
- Falling because of a missed step or an unseen object on the floor

Most seniors can correct normal age-related vision loss with glasses, medication, or surgery. Even with more serious conditions, using vision aids and making changes to your home and routine can help you stay safe and independent.

Even without medical attention, there's a lot you can do to protect your vision:

- If you suffer from dry eyes (gritty, itchy, or burning), a home humidifier and eye drops may help
- If your eyes water, it may be that you are more sensitive to light, wind, or temperature change. Simply shielding your eyes or wearing sunglasses may solve the problem (sunglasses should provide 99 to 100 percent UV-A and UV-B protection. Remember, UV rays can harm your eyes even on a cloudy day.)
- Turn on the lights. Seeing better can sometimes be as easy as changing a light bulb to one with a higher wattage. Bright light is especially important in stairways and narrow

hallways to help prevent falls

- Don't smoke! Smoking tobacco is a major risk factor in the early onset of age-related macular degeneration
- Be sure to point spray cans and nozzles away from you when spraying
- Eat right! A daily dose

of the vitamins and minerals found in melons, citrus fruit, carrots, spinach, and kale may help slow the progress of age-related eye diseases such as macular degeneration, glaucoma, and cataracts

• Don't drive at night if you have problems with depth perception, glare, or other vision difficulties.

If you're one of the many seniors with a low or fixed income or inadequate vision insurance, check out the Seniors EyeCare Program, formerly known as National Eye Care Project (NECP). The program is sponsored by the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology (Eyecare America), Knights Templar Foundation, and Alcon. Started in 1986, it has since helped more than a million seniors gain access to eye care.

Under the program, if you are a U.S. citizen or legal resident age 65 or older, have not seen an ophthalmologist in the last three years or more, and do not belong to an HMO or have Veterans' vision care, you can call 1-800-222-EYES (3937) for the name of a volunteer ophthalmologist in your area.

Then you make an appointment for a medical eye exam with this eye doctor. The ophthalmologist will treat any condition he or she diagnoses during your first visit. If you require ongoing care, it will be provided free through this program for one year.

The program does not cover the cost of eyeglasses, prescription drugs, hospital services or fees from other medical professionals. Volunteer ophthalmologists will accept Medicare or other insurance as full payment, with no additional payment from you. If you don't have any insurance, the eye care is free.

If you think you are a candidate for this program, or if you know a senior who is, call the toll-free helpline: 1-800-222-EYES (3937).

As always, the Auburn VNA Health Network Team is available for your health and wellness needs with a complete range of home care services. For more information or questions, please call us at 508-791-0081. Be happy, be well and be safe!

Kimberly Harmon is president and CEO of the Auburn VNA Health Network. The AVHN provides more than 19,000 home visits annually to more than 700 individuals in Auburn, Worcester and surrounding towns. Kim welcomes your questions, comments or concerns about any specific health issues. You may reach her at kharmon@auburnvna.org or 508-791-0081.

Much ado about mulching

"Who says you can't move a mountain?!" Thus spoke my wise and witty postal carrier on his way across our lawn to the neighbor's house.

"Yeah," I wittily reparteed, "one little bit at a time."

He was referring to the veritable mountain of mulch piled at the garage-end of our brand-new driveway — the driveway that can't be fully appreciated (or even seen) because it's been, for more than a week now, covered in mulch.

Who knew how big a pile 15 cubic yards of mulch would make? Certainly not I, the (over)ambitious mulch mover who finally decided — after giving other bidders several chances to tackle the task — to take on this Everest (or K-2) single-handedly, or at least single-personedly — at least to start.

There I was, with nearly 45 wheelbarrows full of mulch-moving to my credit, when the insightful postman caught me at the foot of the mountain, shoveling 10, or 15, or 18 loads into the barrow for wheeling to the ultimate site of its deposit. It wasn't an hour later that my neighbor from across the street moseyed over to catch me shoveling (spilling) and raking (smooshing) the gnarly stuff into the cracks and crevices of our front

banking.

"You've taken on quite a task for yourself," he said, and I wanted to scream, "YOU GOT THAT RIGHT!!!" but instead I mumbled something about, "Yeah, but I'm just doing it a little bit at a time."

The considered opinion of neighbors and delivery persons aside, I knew what I was taking on when ordering the mulch, which the deliverers said would take two truckloads. We've got tons of weeds on our "estate," and certain residents of our residence have made it clear that either the weeds or I needed to go!

Which is when (and why) I girded up my loins and set to the task of wheel-barrowing so much mulch along the side and front of the house, all over the front banks, and into the forest of weeds and crabgrass occasionally mistaken for a backyard.

But then it struck me — and gave me a moment to stop shoveling and catch my breath — that the postman and neighbor were both right. And I truly appreciated their comments. At first glance, the task had looked impossible. Where could anyone possibly deposit such a heaping mound of wood chips and bark? And who would ever be dumb enough to try?

Disregarding the second question for the moment, I knew that there could never be too much mulch on and around our flower and bush beds, our front banks, and our runaway backyard. Recent summers have demonstrated how even deep deposits of mulch disappear, vanish with the rains, winds, and squirrel squandering, revealing substrata of sheeted plastic that is even more unsightly than the weeds themselves.

So this year's mulching is a stab at choking out weeds and unwanted vegetation for at least five years, or until the oft-predicted Rapture — whichever comes first.

Thus I've been shoveling, hoeing, raking, and leveling — at the rate of about 15 barrows full a night (late afternoons, really), and the nice thing is that the progress is truly evident — and even measurable. As the bush beds and bankings are filled with mulch, the mountain is — literally — being moved. And despite some minor muscle aches and sweat-soaked garden garb, I have found only great joy in the project.

To date, I have moved 93 wheelbarrow loads — or about 1,600 shovelfuls — of the musky stuff, and the mountain is only half of its former self. In fact, it now looks about an inch or two shorter — (and, unfortunately, only a couple of pounds heavier) — than I am.

And since it's nice to ponder things philosophical while engaged in physical exertion, I've come to realize that life is like that mountain of mulch. Everyone has a mountain — and everyone must deal with it as best they can. To me, the mountain was at first an impossible undertaking (perhaps a bad choice of words, given certain cardiac considerations), but now it's fast becoming a story of perseverance and success.

The mountain, in fact, reminds me of some REAL challenges that so many of my friends and family members face every day — everything from brain lesions and leukemia and hip replacements to financial distress and familial dysfunctions.

Each of these concerns is so much more of a mountain than my petty pile of mulch. And each can be surmounted, overcome, transformed into an exiguous collection of dust by way of perseverance, the power of positive thinking, and — now that I think of it — earnest prayer.

Oh, and the assistance of a few stripling warriors. One neighbor, unconvinced of my ability to turn my personal K-2 into anything other than a pending hospitalization, advised me last week that he has "an in" with a quorum of young boys in need of a service project. Who am I to deprive them of the blessings associated with manual labor and meaningful service?

Greater love hath no man than to give up his (spare time) for his friend! I've got plenty of shovels, rakes, hoes, and gloves. And half-a-mountain that still needs moving.

Mark Ashton writes a weekly column for Stonebridge Press publications.



Adam Minor photo
Wayne and Effie Vinal, of Eastford, Conn., celebrated 50 years of marriage this past weekend.

A golden example of love

Anniversaries are joyous occasions. Family, friends, food, sharing memories of years gone by — celebrating a wedding anniversary is remembering a relationship still led by love, and in a world where more than half of our nation's marriages now end in divorce, it's becoming an increasingly rare opportunity to witness a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary.

On Sunday, Aug. 7, I was able to take part in such a celebration, and what I witnessed was a couple just as much in love now as I'm sure they were back in January 1962 when they were married in Denver, Colo.

I know many couples that I hold near and dear to my heart that have celebrated 50 years of marriage, but one couple in particular last weekend had the spotlight on them, so let me be the latest one to bring attention to their accomplishment.

Wayne and Effie Vinal, of Eastford, Conn., celebrated their "Golden Anniversary" on Sunday, Aug. 7, with a host of friends and family in my hometown. I write this column not to embarrass them or splash my friends' picture across our company's newspapers for no reason — I write it because I pen this column about things that matter; things that affect me, things that inspire me, amuse me, or even challenge me. On Sunday, as I witnessed the Vinals commemorating half a century as a wedded couple, I thought about my own marriage, which in comparison, is still in its infancy (celebrating four years in September), and thought about the times still to come — children (one of which is also due in September), raising said kid(s), graduation(s), (gulp!) grandchildren, the list goes on. There are, no doubt, challenges still to come to accompany the good times, but to see a couple that has seen it all, the good times and the difficult, just as strong now as ever, was utterly and completely inspiring.

During the ceremony, songs were sung, tributes were given, dances were danced — some more awkward than others — but the marriage of Wayne and Effie was honored, as it should be. When it's all said and done, members of the Vinal family may live far apart, but their love for one another, led by the example of Wayne and Effie, is easy for anyone to see, and it's that love for each other, and more importantly, for the God they serve, that makes them a "golden" example for other married couples to imitate.

I may still be relatively new to this "marriage thing," and I may have lots to learn yet, but one thing I do know — love is the glue that holds it all together, and for Wayne and Effie, that glue has stood the test of time.

To Wayne and Effie Vinal, 50 years and counting, may the love you have for each other continue to grow, and may God continue to bless you and your family. Thank you for being such a great example!

Adam Minor may be reached at 508-909-4130, or by e-mail at aminor@stonebridgepress.com.

A lifetime of loans? Priceless

Back in December, British students took to the streets to protest the latest set of tuition hikes.

One student held a sign that read: "There's some things money can't buy... For education, there's Mastercard," making fun of the popular advertising slogan, which usually ends: "For everything else, there's Mastercard."

Now, in the US, the Mastercard of choice — subsidized federal loans — are in jeopardy. Actually, for graduate students, they won't exist come next summer.

When you consider the average price of graduate school at a private university, or for an out-of-state student at a state university, that could cause major problems.

British students' protests were all over the news in Europe when I was studying there this past year. Students in Slovenia, where I lived, couldn't believe how much tuition in the U.K. had been raised: it had been tripled, bringing the yearly cost of per-year education to somewhere around \$14,000.

To me and to my Slovenian friends, that number — and the protests around it — seemed absurd.

To me, and to many other Americans, that number seemed absurd because it is so low compared to the price of a private school education and is roughly equal to that of an in-state public school education, when both tuition and fees are considered (never mind room and board, plus books and incidental expenses).

In the rest of Europe, that number seems absurd because it is so much higher than the cost of a year of college. Indeed, in many countries, like Slovenia, students don't pay for their college education at all — or pay only fees, which would consist of the cost of books for the year at an American college.

That number no longer seems so low when one of the major sources of funding to help pay it is being moved off the table.

Just how can Americans who aren't rich afford to pay for a college education? I was asked, time and time again, when I lived abroad.

For the past several decades, the answer has been roughly what the British student with the protest sign proposed: Mastercard, or some derivative thereof. In other words, Americans have been paying with loans.

But what happens when that loan money becomes harder to come by?

While the top concern when talking about raising the debt ceiling was not student



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KRIS REARDON

loans, future American students will have a harder time getting subsidized federal loans. At first, the bill was to eliminate all subsidized federal loans — for all students, undergraduates included. Thankfully, the bill did not eliminate these loans for undergraduates. But by July 2012, subsidized federal loans won't be available for graduate students.

That means our future doctors, surgeons, dentists, and law and business professionals won't have access to subsidized federal loans to help them bear the burden of tuition, one year of which amounts to more than any middle class family can even hope to help pay for. And most of these professional schools are far more than one year.

Sure, there are other options for graduate students.

They could opt to attend less expensive universities, but not all students can go to state schools; there simply aren't enough seats there to absorb the number of students heading to graduate school each year. Some might not be admitted, and some might not have the cash on hand — or the other loan sources — to bear the burden of an in-state education, either.

They could look for grants, scholarships, assistantships, and fellowships. But not all students are eligible for these, or receive them. And not all sources of aid cover a significant enough amount of tuition to make a difference.

What are the rest of our graduate students to do? In an era where we need professionals more than ever — specifically in the medical field — it seems absurd to cut a needed source of financial aid to individuals who are seeking higher education and will most likely positively impact people's lives and our country's future.

Maybe American students' protest signs should simply read: "There are some things money can't buy."

Kristina Reardon, of Uxbridge, writes a weekly column for the Stonebridge Press. You can reach her at kristina.reardon@gmail.com.