

## **A Light in the Darkness: Optometrist losing his sight guides others**

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Publication: The Gazette; Date: Sep 12, 2005; Section: Life; Page: 39

The sight in his left eye is nearly nonexistent, only a slim crescent of vision. The peripheral vision in his right eye is 90 percent gone: He sees through a narrow, blurred tunnel. And one day, Thomas Theune knows, the blackness will likely be complete. For now, though, the 44-year-old uses assistive technology that makes the most out of the bit of vision he still has. So he is able to continue doing his job — helping others cope with similar vision problems.

Theune, recently named optometrist of the year by the Colorado Optometric Association, specializes in the field of low vision: vision loss that can't be remedied by glasses, surgery or medicine.

Among his patients on a recent Monday was Juanita Bell, who has uveitis, an inflammation inside the eye. Theune (pronounced thee-nee) reviewed her medical history and evaluated her vision. "The reading's really difficult for me," Bell told him. Making out the headlines in the newspaper was a struggle. And her daughter or husband had to accompany her on shopping trips because she couldn't read the prices.

Theune showed her devices that could help her in her day-to-day activities — the same devices he relies on. He does his charting, for example, with the help of the MagniSight Explorer, a magnifying system that makes the pen he sets on Bell's chart appear to be the size of a baseball bat. Although Bell's vision is too unstable for regular glasses, she would benefit from simple, over-the-counter reading glasses,

Theune told her. He also instructed her in the use of a portable illuminated magnifier and a bulkier stand magnifier.

Before his vision problems forced him out of his regular optometry practice, Theune was what he calls “a fix-it guy” — diagnosing vision problems and equipping someone with glasses or contacts if needed. “With low vision,” he says, “you never fix the problem. It’s always there. What we do is try to help people work and live with the problem and find tools that help them maintain that independence and that quality of life.”

### **‘I think I’m done ’**

1985 was a big year for Theune. He graduated from the Indiana University School of Optometry, embarking on a career he had first envisioned with a seventh-grade social-studies report titled, “Optometry, a career with vision.” And he married Sharon, his high-school sweetheart. Eager to begin their life together with a big adventure, they moved to Colorado Springs, where Theune and a college classmate began practice in a Lens Crafters franchise. That fall, at an Air Force Academy football game, he noticed a problem with the vision in his left eye. “He was making comments like, ‘I need to get my prescription changed,’ ” his wife recalls. Theune had worn glasses for nearsightedness since sixth grade.

But Theune quickly realized it wasn’t a problem that changing his glasses could fix. As his vision worsened, he was diagnosed with cystoid macular edema, a swelling that distorts and blurs central vision. Treatment eased the inflammation, but his vision still deteriorated. It wasn’t until years later that the underlying problem was diagnosed: retinitis pigmentosa, a progressive degeneration of the retina of the

eye. In 1992, his eye doctor, a retina specialist, told Theune his vision had deteriorated to the point where he could no longer do his job properly. "I remember going home, calling my partner at the time and saying, 'You know what, I think I'm done.'" He was 31, with a wife, a young son and a newborn daughter. And his career, it seemed, was over.

### **'I'll do it on my own'**

He didn't work for a year. But with the spirit of optimism he says he inherited from his mother, and with the support of family and local eye doctors, Theune began to plan a new career. It would still be in optometry, but it would be restricted to low-vision patients referred to him by other doctors.

He started with a tiny office, part of the Penrose-St. Francis Eye Center. He was associated for years with Penrose-St. Francis, which he credits with getting him on his feet, but cut those ties four years ago. "I finally said if I'm going to do this, I'll do it on my own."

His practice, Low Vision Services of Southern Colorado, is on North Union Boulevard near the East Library and Information Center. His wife works part time at the office. He can't drive, so he depends on her and Springs Mobility, a city service for the disabled, for transportation. It's tough being the sole driver in the family, Sharon Theune says. With a son, Benjamin, 15, and daughter Lauren, 12, "It's 'Mom take me here, Mom take me there.'" She often wishes she could send her husband to the store to get something they need. But, she says, "You just kind of do what you have to do. It's just the way it is."

Her husband has been her support and vice versa, she says. She chooses to take life one day at a time, rather than looking down a road that seems to end in darkness for Thomas Theune. "When I think about it way in the future, it gets overwhelming."

The deterioration of his eyes might be slow enough that he retains some residual vision, Theune says. And there is research into areas such as stem cells and retinal implants that offer some hope. "But it's still pretty futuristic stuff," he says.

He serves as an active example to his patients that life goes on. His best friend, he says, is his lighted, hand-held magnifier. "I have it wherever I go." When hiking, trekking poles are essential. The family likes to travel and is on "a national park kick," he says. "I want to try to hit all the national parks in the country before I lose all of my vision."

If the blackness does claim him, he wants to be prepared. He plans, for example, to learn Braille. "My goal is to not let it surprise me."