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IRENE LAMBERT DISPLAYS THE CHRIS STARK DISTINGUISHED ADVOCACY AWARD SHE RECENTLY RECEIVED FOR HER DECADES OF ADVOCACY WORK ON BEHALF OF BLIND PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH VISION LOSS. IMAGE BY JOHN MAHONEY

Dollard resident receives lifetime advocacy award

91-year-old spent decades working on behalf of people with vision loss

By CAROLYN BOLL

Dollard-des-Ormeaux resident Irene Lambert has received the 2021 Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award for her work with Canadians with disabilities.

Lambert had been diagnosed with degenerative vision as a child and she eventually became blind. Now 91 years old, her contributions to the betterment of the lives of blind people and people with low vision on the local, provincial, and national levels spans more than 60 years.

Asked why she thinks she received the award she said, "I've been told it's because you just keep going. You're always concerned with leaving the world a little better."

Brought up in Lachine, Lambert moved with her first husband to the United States, where she began working on accessibility issues related to transportation and library services, as well as rights for the disabled, and even helped start a square dance group.

In 1969, she returned to Montreal. At the time, she and her second husband, a professor at Loyola, had a wide group of friends who loved to go dancing and to the theatre, restaurants and music concerts. "My husband and I were running into a problem. Our guide dogs were not being accepted in many public places, including restaurants and Place des Arts," she explained.

"We wanted to be independent and able to do things with our friends."

Over the next few years, they persuaded the Quebec government to study the question of equal accessibility in public spaces for people with disabilities. "They set up a commission, which we participated in," said Lambert. "In 1978 a law was passed."

When Leo A. Bissonnette, vice-president and chair of the program committee of the West Island-based Low Vision Self-Help Association, decided to nominate Lambert to Barrier-Free Canada for the award, a list of accomplishments was required. "I had never summarized my lifetime activities," said Lambert, who is a charter member and past president of the association. "That was the first law in Quebec, and in Canada, to guarantee handicapped people their rights. Then it went on from there."

In the following years, among other achievements, Lambert was instrumental in setting up an office for university students with special needs. She and her husband created an office to improve the conditions of the handicapped in Montreal West where she was living at the time, and she was involved with developing legislation to allow guide dogs into Montreal taxis and helped with sensitivity training for taxi drivers, many of whom were resistant to the new laws.

"This was an era when these things were beginning to be more recognized," said Lambert. "At one point in the 1980s, we met with the chairman of Bell Canada to explain why blind people

should not be charged for directory assistance." To their surprise, he agreed to change the policy. At the Montreal Association for the Blind, Lambert established a cafe, an outdoor dog run where people can take their guide dogs, and a shopping boutique that is open to the public. "Anybody who wants to buy a magnifier or special sunglasses or large-print books can go there," Lambert said.

Over the last six decades, Lambert has contributed to improving the day-to-day lives of people who are blind or have low vision, and to shifting the organizational and legislative landscape where access and awareness are concerned.

"At 90 years old, Irene was director of programming, and decided it was time to retire," said John Ohberg, president of the *Low Vision Self-Help Association*. "Fortunately, she has chosen to remain on the board in an advisory role and to work on the history of the association."

Meanwhile, she continues her advocacy, participating in ongoing discussions with the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission concerning described video in Canada. And she still loves to dance.

