

# NLS Overseas patron receives Canada's Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award

By DONNA KOH, NLS Overseas Librarian

NLS overseas patron Irene Lambert received the 2021 *Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award* from *Barrier Free Canada* for her lifelong work as a disability rights advocate and community leader. Lambert has been an overseas patron for more than 30 years.

Lambert, 92, and her late husband, Robert, helped win passage of important laws protecting the rights of people with disabilities in Quebec, Canada, where they lived. After Robert's death in 1990, Irene Lambert continued their work, implementing new programs and educating the public to improve the lives of many with various disabilities.

*Barrier Free Canada* established the *Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award* in 2020 to honor "individuals in our community who have demonstrated superior and outstanding advocacy over a period of ten years or more as a leader."

In announcing the 2021 award, *Barrier Free Canada* said Lambert "has and continues to advocate tirelessly for Canadians with disabilities [and] has fought countless battles in order to ensure that the rights of Canadians with disabilities are recognized and protected."

Lambert was diagnosed with degenerative vision as a child and gradually became blind. She was born in Canada, but became an American citizen-and as such, eligible for NLS services-after moving to the United States. When she and Robert completed their studies at the University of Pennsylvania in 1969, he accepted a faculty position at Loyola College in Montreal and she returned to Canada with him.

Having rarely experienced any issues travelling with guide dogs in the US, the Lamberts were surprised to find that guide dog users were not welcome in restaurants, taxis and concerts in Montreal-including the Place des Arts, a major performing arts center. In an effort to resolve this issue, they met with the CEO of the concert hall to argue for the right of any guide dog user to purchase seats of their choice. But they were merely offered free tickets to a show with a sighted guide, which they promptly refused.

When they looked into it further, they were shocked to learn that there were no laws in the entire province of Quebec to provide equal access or rights for blind people.

At the Lamberts' behest, a friend in New York City compiled notarized testimonies from blind concertgoers asserting that they regularly visited major US concert halls using their guide dogs without incidents. The Lamberts also had representatives from guide dog organizations affirm that the dogs don't cause problems for other patrons.

The following year, one of Robert's students connected the Lamberts to the office of the Ministry of Health and Social Services, which at the time had no existing programs or services for blind and visually impaired residents of Quebec.

Subsequently, a commission was established to study the issue, and it recommended that a law be passed assuring equal access for disabled people in education, housing, employment, public access and other areas.

An Act to Ensure the Handicapped in the Exercise of Their Rights became law in Quebec in 1978—a victory not only for guide dog users but also for all people with disabilities.

Among her many other achievements, Irene Lambert successfully lobbied Bell Canada to offer free and unlimited directory assistance service to people with print disabilities; served for 18 years as president of the *Montreal Association for the Blind User's Committee*; helped organize the Montreal chapter of the *Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians*; and is a longtime board member of the *Low Vision Self-Help Association*.

*Donna Koh is NLS's Overseas Librarian. Learn more about NLS's Overseas services at [www.loc.gov/nls/about/services/overseas-services](http://www.loc.gov/nls/about/services/overseas-services).*

**Pull quote:**

Be curious, find a group whose mission is of particular interest, participate, and learn the resources. Activism, to me, is finding a place in a community whereby your voice, your talents or your presence contributes some good to the group dynamics."

-Irene Lambert, on becoming an advocate