

MONTREAL GAZETTE
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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.



IMAGE OF THE INFORMER BANNER

Irene Lambert:

Former Montreal West resident receives lifetime advocacy award

By SUE SLADEN

Former Montreal West resident, *Irene Lambert*, has been named recipient of the *2021 Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award*, presented by *Barrier Free Canada*, for her work for Canadians with disabilities. Irene has spent 60-plus years working towards the betterment of the lives of blind people and people with low vision.

Many Montreal West residents will remember seeing Irene and Bob Lambert around the neighbourhood with their golden retriever guide dogs. At one time there were four golden retrievers in their home - the two retired originals, Lambda and Corey , and their two replacements, Zest and Zorba. Bob and Irene lived on Percival Avenue from 1978 to 1990. Both were strong advocates for people with special needs, most specifically those with vision impairments. They accomplished many things during their time in the Town . On their own initiative they had our, then newly conceived *The Informer*, audiotaped on cassette and distributed to visually impaired residents.

Irene and Robert Lambert arrived in Montreal in 1969 in order for Bob to take up a faculty position in the Department of Psychology at Loyola College and then Concordia University. Bob initiated and directed a graduate specialization in the Psychology of Sensory Deficits, the first of its kind. Irene took the job of coordinator and scheduling and was instrumental in advocating for an office for university students with special needs.

When Irene and Bob arrived in Montreal with their three sons, they discovered that guide dogs were not accepted in taxis, at many restaurants or at Place des Arts. That was when they started actively advocating, one result being the passing of the Quebec Act, "An Act to secure handicapped persons in the exercise of their rights" in 1978. This act has been reviewed and updated in the years since. They even convinced the chairman of Bell Canada that blind people should not be charged for directory assistance.

Very involved

Irene started the Block Parents program in Montreal West which was well supported. She was involved in our first recycling program and was active with the Edinburgh School Home and School Association and the Civic Recreation Association.

In 1981 Councillor Mary Thicke invited Bob to propose a program for the Town to undertake during the Year of the Disabled. **TOUCH** (*Town Office to Upgrade Conditions for the Handicapped*) was established as a result, with the objective of ensuring, among other things, accessibility of store entrances on Westminster and sensitizing town departments of recreation, public works, etc.

When Bob unexpectedly died in 1990, Irene moved to the West Island with her young daughter where she continued to advocate for persons with special needs. There she became president of the *Low Vision Self-Help Association*, which she had helped form and where she is still active.

Irene was president of the *Montreal Association for the Blind Users' Committee* from 1993-2009, president of the *Quebec Federation of the Blind Foundation* and is still a board member there. She is founder and past-president of the Montreal Chapter of the *Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians*. These are only a few of the numerous contributions Irene has made over the years. She has belonged to several West Island committees, and has given many speeches on living with vision loss.

Gradually retiring...

At age 91 Irene is gradually retiring from the world of advocacy. She was both surprised and thrilled to receive the *Chris Stark Advocacy Award* which was established to honour the memory of Chris Stark who also worked tirelessly for the rights of all Canadians with disabilities and who Irene knew and admired.

Irene lives in Dollard des Ormeaux with her partner of ten years. And there are currently no golden retrievers in her life.



Overseas Outlook

January–June 2022
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Overseas patron Irene Lambert receives the 2021 Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award

From YOUR LIBRARIAN

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.

Irene has been an overseas patron for more than 30 years, and an NLS patron for much longer. Irene, along with her late husband Dr. Robert (Bob) Lambert, Ph.D. a graduate of the Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia, helped pass important laws regarding the rights of people with disabilities in Quebec, Canada, where they lived. When Bob unexpectedly passed away in 1990 at the age of 57, Irene continued their work, implementing new programs and educating the public to improve the lives of many with various disabilities.

Irene credits most of the couple's early successes as advocates to Bob, who was already an outspoken proponent of the rights of all people when they met. They started dating when they both were invited to help form a square dance club for blind people by two Miami Lions Clubs. Bob was an athlete, scholar, and a persuasive speaker who believed that "concepts of equality and independence were a philosophy to be put into practice."

In 1969, Bob and Irene completed their studies at the University of Pennsylvania and Bob accepted a faculty position at Loyola College in Montreal. The couple moved there with their three children and two guide dogs.

According to Irene, Bob would later establish, at Concordia University, the first graduate program in North America for the study of sensory deficits, offering vision and perceptual psychology, eye pathology, technical and assistive devices, rehabilitation services, and life experiences with a blind professor.

Having rarely experienced any issues travelling with guide dogs in the US, Irene and Bob were surprised to find that guide dog users were not welcome in restaurants, taxis, and concerts in Montreal. Place des Arts, a major performing arts center in the city, did not allow guide dogs. In an effort to resolve this issue, the Lamberts had serious discussions with the CEO of the concert hall about the right for any guide dog user to be able to choose and purchase seats of their choice. But they were merely offered free tickets to a show with a sighted guide, which they promptly refused. When Irene and Bob started investigating the rights of people with blindness, they were shocked to learn that there were no laws in the entire province of Quebec to provide equal access or rights.

Although Irene and Bob realized that most in their community of guide dog users were not yet ready to join in their fight, they were fortunate to find people who actively supported their efforts. 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.

In the following year, one of Bob's students at the university 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 assuring equal access for disabled people in education, housing, employment, public access, and other areas be passed and that "a government department be established to provide rehabilitation services and assistive devices." The Lamberts submitted recommendations that were incorporated into "An Act to ensure the Handicapped in the Exercise of their Rights," which became law in 1971.

This was a huge victory, not only for guide dog users but also for all people with disabilities. Years later, Irene would join *Quebec Accessible*, a group formed in 2015 to update the law.

In addition to this early major accomplishment, Irene contributed the following:

- Worked with *Bell (Telephone Company)* to offer free and unlimited directory assistance service to anyone with a print disability.
- Lobbied *Concordia University* administration to create an office to support students' special needs.
- Spent 18 years as president of the *Montreal Association for the Blind Rehabilitation Center* promoting the rights and well-being of all clients.
- Has served on the Board of Directors for the *Low Vision Self-Help Association* since its formation in 1988, promoting "self-sufficiency and continued participation in society."
- Organized the Montreal chapter of the *Alliance for Equality of Blind and Visually Impaired Canadians* and served as chapter president for several terms and on the National Board of Directors.

I wanted to share Irene's experiences and knowledge as a successful advocate and community leader with our readers so that we might be inspired to contribute to our community with similar work. I asked her a few questions that came to my mind as I read about her work (her answers are lightly edited for clarity and brevity):

How can ordinary people become activists?

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.

Are there specific steps you take in pursuing your goal once you've identified a problem? How do you figure out who to approach to make the changes and to enlist support?

This question deserves much organized thought and more space than we have here. Just let me say that a good place to start is to take a good workshop on advocacy. *Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians* (AEBC) held one this year that was excellent.

Advocacy is always trying to change things like laws or policies; or things like rights and equality or new concepts. One soon realizes that Lawmakers and governments at all levels cannot change overnight. Lawmakers or policy makers must be convinced that change is important or necessary, and that takes advocates' persistence, consistency, and persuasion, with much support over time, to realize success. Even then, you seldom achieve as much as you hoped for, which leaves the door open for regrouping in order to educate and fulfill the new mandate.

What important change is long overdue, in your opinion, for people with blindness in your community?

Accessibility is the buzzword today. We need better access to websites, to TV with more Descriptive Video Service (DVS), more text-to-braille translation, and universal technology in the business and employment fields.

You mentioned that activism is a long process. How do you stay motivated, and how do you help sustain those who work with you?

Being in a community where you can make a difference, doing what you love to do, or what you are good at, doing can serve the purpose.

Have you read any books on BARD that helped you with your work as an advocate and activist?

I most certainly have. The disability categories, or biography and memoirs continue to be my main source of information.

I admire your lifelong advocacy and activism. What are your plans for the future?

Going on 92, I am planning to resign sometime soon from the two boards where I am still active. I plan to participate in short-term projects and in any research projects that come along. With the hope that COVID is almost over, I want to spend more time with my family and catch up with my reading. In 2020, we all had big plans to celebrate my 90th birthday, which ended up being a very special Zoom call. For the last two years, Zoom calls have almost taken over my life. In retrospect, I have virtually met many more people and learned more than I would have ever imagined.



WE ARE HABILITAS

With a legacy dating back to 1869, the former MAB-Mackay, Constance-Lethbridge, Camp Massawippi and Action Centre foundations are now stronger together as Habilitas.

Our dream is to build a society where no one is left behind.

Habilitas Foundation Impact Report
Fall 2022

From HABILITAS FOUNDATION

Boutique Founded by Blind Visionary Still Changing Lives



IMAGE SHOWS SHELVES OF SPECIALTY PRODUCTS FOR BLIND PATRONS AT THE TECHNICAL AIDS BOUTIQUE FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED, AND FOUNDER IRENE LAMBERT

Loss of sight can be devastating. The simplest tasks - making coffee, calling family, even navigating your own home - are fraught with struggle, risk and frustration. But thanks to Irene Lambert - and you - that world is more navigable.

Irene is the remarkable founder of the *Technical Aids Boutique for the Visually Impaired*, operating at the *MAB Mackay Rehabilitation Centre* since 1998. The Boutique stocks more than 300 specialty items that improve lives for the visually impaired - from adapted kitchen items

and Braille or talking watches to magnifiers, games, specialized sunglasses, lamps and phones.

After a lifetime of advocacy and leadership (she is now 92!), Irene knows full well the challenges blind and visually impaired people face. And how important their independence is in their day-to-day.

Much more than a boutique

Since its founding, the Boutique has grown into a gateway for those needing services and support. Folks typically drop by for one item, discover and test out other devices that help them maintain their autonomy and safety. They also have the chance to learn about the programs available to them at the MAB-Mackay.

To ensure the devices are affordable to everyone, they are not sold at a profit. As such, the Boutique relies on donor support to operate. Last year, more than 1,300 items were sold, with traffic expected to surge as baby boomers continue to age.

A model for philanthropy

Irene Lambert received the *Barrier Free Canada's 2021 Distinguished Advocacy Award* - but that's just a footnote to a stellar career. She is a model for giving and community service. Or, as she says, "you're always concerned with leaving the world a little better."

Together with other pioneers, she's changed government and corporate policy affecting the visually impaired, and served as a board member at *MAB-Mackay*, as well as many other organizations. In the process, Irene has changed countless lives.

Thanks to Irene, and you, the *Technical Aids Boutique for the Visually Impaired* carries on her astounding legacy.



IMAGE OF THESUBURBAN.COM BANNER WITH THE LINK [HTTPS://WWW.THESUBURBAN.COM/NEWS/WEST_ISLAND_NEWS/DDO-RESIDENT-92-CAPS-CAREER-AS-ADVOCATE-FOR-VISUALLY-IMPAIRED/ARTICLE_7B99D04B-948E-5ED5-A17A-B0E3087BA2C8.HTML](https://www.thesuburban.com/news/west_island_news/ddo-resident-92-caps-career-as-advocate-for-visually-impaired/article_7B99D04B-948E-5ED5-A17A-B0E3087BA2C8.HTML)

West Island News | thesuburban.com
Featured:DDO resident, 92, caps career as advocate

May 31, 2023



LAMBERT HOLDING HER LETTER FROM LAC-SAINT-LOUIS MP FRANCIS SCARPALEGGIA.

DDO resident, 92, caps career as advocate for visually impaired

By DAN LAXER

Dollard-des-Ormeaux resident Irene Lambert is an award-winning advocate for those living with visual impairment. After 35 years on the Board of Directors of Pointe-Claire's *Low Vision Self-Help Association*, and at the age of 92, Lambert is stepping down.

Lambert was raised in Lachine. Since the age of 10, she has been living with Retinitis Pigmentosa, or RP, in which the cells of the retina break down over time, causing

vision loss. She turned her disability into her passion, working to make the lives of those living with visual impairment better. She worked alongside her late husband, Bob, who was the first blind professor at what was once Loyola College. They spent some time in the U.S., but made their way back to Montreal in 1969, when the PQ was in its infancy, the October Crisis was brewing, and the merger of Loyola College and Sir George Williams University was just a few years away.

At the time, there was no real support for people living with visual impairment. Guide dogs were not welcome anywhere. But eventually the Quebec government set up a commission that Lambert and her then-husband were part of, and in 1978 an accessibility law was passed to improve the lives of the disabled.

Later, she joined Ruth Williams, founder of the Low Vision Self-Help Association, becoming her right hand, eventually taking over as president, a position she held twice. She is amused by all the publicity she's been getting over the past couple of years. "I never wanted recognition," she told *The Suburban*. "That's not why I do what I do."

Still, two years ago she was awarded the Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award. And after 35 years with the association, they are as reluctant to let her go as she is to leave. "I'm still a member," she says. "It's still my passion."

As for what she'll do now that she's stepping away from official duties, she plans to write the history of the association. "I'm one of those ridiculous people," she says, "who always has more to do than I have time to do it." But she remains, at nearly 93, an indefatigable advocate. "Advocacy," she says, "was really the greatest consumer of my time."

Lambert is now very happily married to her third husband, Peter, with whom she's made a life in DDO. She is indeed proud of the work she has done, and of the accolades she had earned, including a tribute paid to her in the House of Commons by Lac-Saint-Louis MP Francis Scarpaleggia.

But she says there is still work to be done to further improve the lives of the visually impaired. "Even today," she says, "perceptions of blind people are pathetic. We're still fighting for acceptability and accessibility."

She would like to see the association, and the work they continue to do, get the publicity they deserve. "You're writing a story about Low Vision," she says, referring to the association. "Not about me."

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.

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



IMAGE OF THESUBURBAN.COM BANNER

City News | thesuburban.com
Beaconsfield's Irene Lambert wins Advocacy Award

January 17, 2022



IMAGE OF IRENE LAMBERT

Beaconsfield's Irene Lambert wins 2021 Chris Stark Advocacy Award

By CHELSEY STt-PIERRE

Having recently celebrated her 91st birthday, West Islander, Irene Lambert, has been named the winner of the 2021 *Chris Stark Distinguished Advocacy Award* presented by *Barrier Free Canada*, a national organization that works to remove and prevent barriers to accessibility for Canadians with disabilities.

Lambert is a chartered member of the *Low Vision Self-Help Association*, a group of people with varying degrees of visual impairment who meet monthly at Briarwood Presbyterian church in Beaconsfield in a bid to promote self-sufficiency and continued participation in society.

“I was surprised to be selected but very proud to be the recipient of this award. He was an icon in the blindness field,” Lambert said. Stark was a long-time advocate for the needs of the visually-impaired community in Canada until his death in 2019. Lambert and Stark were friends and often worked together in their efforts to improve services for the visually-impaired community.

She participated in a provincial commission that led to the National Assembly passing legislation in 1978 — *An Act to assure the Handicapped in the Exercise of their Rights*.

Along with her late husband Dr. Bob Lambert, PHD, they were successful in convincing Bell to offer free and unlimited directory assistance service for anyone with a print disability, as well as assistance in dialing long distance phone numbers. In 2010, she was the recipient of the *Alliance for Equity of Blind Canadians’ CCD Award*.

From 1995 to 2006, she served as a member of the *Montreal for the Blind* Board of Directors, and worked on establishing points of service in the Chomedey and West Island area. Moreover, from 1993 to 2009, she served as President of the User’s Committee for the *MAB-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre*. These are but some of the many contributions Irene has made over the years.

Lambert was born in Lachine, currently living in Montreal and continues to be an integral part of the *Low Vision Self-Help Association* since 1988. Meetings are held monthly and are currently being held online.