

The WI

When I moved to a new town, I obviously wanted to get to know the community here and to “fit in.” My sister suggested I join the Women’s Institute. I had an image of a group of older ladies who were only interested in jam and Jerusalem, not that there’s anything wrong with that, but it’s not my scene so I refused to go along to a meeting. My sister persisted though and found my local WI had a walking group. I love getting out for a good walk so that definitely was my scene and my sister and I went along. We joined a group of about 15 other women all about the same age as us, so in their 40s and 50s. The chairwoman is actually in her 30s! We went for a lovely walk and then to a local pub for a drink and a chat. My sister was with me on the walk to guide me and ensure I knew in advance about uneven surfaces or steps but the other women on the walk were all eager to help too and warned me of any potential hazards ahead. On subsequent walks I haven’t needed my sister to be there as the other women are happy to guide me and for me to take their arm to help orientate myself. I have learned there are lots of great walks locally and those that are easy to follow with a long white stick without a sighted guide I often do by myself now. If the walking group are doing a walk that starts and/or finishes out of town I can be certain of a lift, there and back from a fellow WI member. They are friends now after 18 months living here.

My sister and I both joined the WI and I love the fact that when I walk into the town centre or go to a local event people know me and greet me. I have also joined the local WI’s book club. Before I went blind, I used to love reading, but thought that being a member of a book club as a VI adult was just a pipe dream; but of course, a lot of books are available on audio now and I am a member of the RNIB’s reading services so I have the Easy Reader app downloaded onto my phone and through that I can access the RNIB’s library of books on audio, free to download to those of us registered VI. The WI reading group are careful to ensure the majority of books they choose to read and discuss are available on the RNIB’s reading services or on the library’s BorrowBox service. When a book was selected that wasn’t available on audio, I had other members of the Book Club offer to read it to me! I didn’t go for that though as I do like to maintain a degree of autonomy and independence; but realistically I knew the women weren’t being condescending and treating me like a child. They were just trying to help me.

Then there are the monthly WI meetings with a speaker each month. I go to these meetings easily as I am given a lift by a new friend. If it wasn’t for the WI, I probably would never have got to know her! I sit at the front of the hall and the speakers are always more than happy to tell me what they are showing on an overhead projector. Then other WI members will always rush to help make me a hot drink or cut me a slice of cake. Another favourite activity of my local WI group is our “Wine Wednesdays” where groups of us will gather at a local pub just to relax and chat once a month. It is such a fantastic way to get to know others who live locally and to share common experiences of the WI meeting. As a direct result of joining the WI I feel a recognized part of my local community.