

# Living blind: How Causeway Cannibal victim and others forge on

By Mike Clary, Sun Sentinel

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In a briefing on the medical condition of Causeway Cannibal victim Ronald Poppo, doctors and therapists last week expressed confidence that the longtime homeless man blinded in a vicious assault could once again lead an independent life.

But in the year since Poppo was disfigured in the unprovoked attack, progress has been slow. "At first, he didn't even want to learn to walk," said John Clapp, a mobility specialist with the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind. "But finally he began to accept me more, to trust, and I started to teach him the cane." Still, said Clapp, "he doesn't know all the possibilities available to him."

No matter what triggers a sudden descent into darkness – a bullet to the head, a botched surgery, eye disease or a beating – the first reaction to permanent blindness is almost always the same, experts say.

"It's frightening," said Virginia Jacko, who lost her sight 12 years ago to retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative disease. "Vision is our strongest sense. Even the Bible describes it as a curse. So it's frightening."

But for most people blinded by trauma, the initial shock, disbelief and fear of the unknown are gradually replaced by hope as experts explain the therapies and technology available to help them function in a sighted world. "Blindness sounds like a death sentence to most people, and I felt pretty bad, yeah," said Harry Epstein, 54, a retired Pompano Beach engineer who lost his vision during a 2007 surgery to remove a tumor from between his optic nerves. "But with my guide dog Georganne, I lead a very independent life."

The way in which Poppo, 66, lost his sight was particularly traumatic. As he sat dozing on the MacArthur Causeway on May 26, 2012, a crazed man stripped off his clothes and began chewing on his face. Poppo's nose was destroyed, one eye was gouged out and the other eye damaged beyond repair. He will never see again, according to his doctors at the University of Miami/Jackson Memorial Medical Center.

Poppo for about 30 years lived on the streets. Although described by doctors and therapists as intelligent, a onetime student at New York City's prestigious Stuyvesant High School, he has taken a passive approach to his recovery. He has rebuffed plastic surgeons who are itching to rebuild his features. Nurses and therapists at Jackson Memorial Perdue Medical Center in Cutler Bay, where he now lives, have to coax him to get out of bed and exercise, they say.

Jacko, the president of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, and Clapp, who has met with him 22 times, said Poppo has made only halting progress in learning to use a white cane and to orient himself to his surroundings.

The first steps Poppo took were around his room at Perdue. Clapp said he taught him to orient himself from the foot of his bed, and use an imaginary clock to learn the locations of the window, the bathroom, and the door to the hallway.

In the few short walks outside of his room, Poppo also has shown the kind of understanding needed to avoid problems. "One day walking down the hall he heard a toilet flush," Clapp said. "And I asked, 'What is going to happen next?' And he knew that someone was going to come out of a door." On another occasion, Poppo displayed an encouraging sense of humor. Clapp said Poppo was about to do an exercise that required crossing a hallway. As he stood with his back to the wall and readied his cane, Poppo announced, "Watch out everybody. Here comes a blind man." Clapp said, "To me that meant he was willing to accept his blindness. It's a process. One step forward, one step back." The backward steps come when Poppo refuses to take part in an exercise, or orders Clapp to leave him alone, he said. Given signs that Poppo is more comfortable with women than men – perhaps related to his being assaulted by a man – a female therapist is to take over from Clapp, Jacko said.

Bill Robinson lost his vision 12 years ago when a hunting companion accidentally shot him in the face with a shotgun. He was a hard-driving executive in Atlanta. Today, he heads the National Accreditation Council for Blind and Low Vision Services in Chattanooga. "From day one, I wanted to move forward somehow," said Robinson, 54. "But there has to be some grieving period for the loss of a part of your body. I imagine he [Poppo] is going through that. "You can't undo it, so you have to figure out how to go forward."

Don Overton, of Palm Bay in Central Florida, lost his vision to an explosion in Iraq during the Gulf War in 1991. He said he has learned that in looking for meaning in life, the newly blind often connect through art.

The art that inspires Poppo might be music. He has recently begun relearning guitar, which he played as a teenager in New York. "My dream for Mr. Poppo is that someday he will be playing with the greatest friend of the Lighthouse, Jose Feliciano," said Jacko, referring to the blind pop star. "I really think that could happen."



'Causeway Cannibal' victim keeps positive attitude nearly a year later