

Remembering Danvers
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Seeing the tops of the trees

By Sandy Nichols Ward

"Hey, Daddy! Did you know that the tops of trees have little branches just like the bottoms?" I was an astonished sixth grader wearing glasses for the first time. We were driving through Danvers on our way home from the eye doctor's office. I'd never seen so much detailed structure at the top of tall trees, and I was delighted by this sudden discovery. The world became more interesting when I could see it in sharper focus.

I'm sure the reason my parents bought glasses for me was to help me see the blackboard at school. Probably my teacher noticed the problem and recommended that my eyes be examined. I don't recall the steps leading up to the glasses, but my memory of that first experience with glasses is vivid. Tiny little branches everywhere!

My new glasses helped in another unexpected way. I became more comfortable riding at night in a car. The headlights of oncoming cars used to scare me because they were SO large and SO close to us. I was always afraid they'd hit us. But when I looked through my new glasses, the headlights shrank to a smaller size and I could tell that they were further away. What a relief!

So I liked my glasses and adjusted quickly to wearing them on most occasions. I was, however, self-conscious about how I looked in glasses, and preferred not to wear them in social situations. I recall 7th and 8th grade "Canteens" as particularly awkward events. These Friday night dances were held in the school auditorium. Much anxiety went into the preparation for each Canteen – what clothes to wear, what shoes, whether to pester Mommy to let me wear a bit of makeup (her answer was no), and of course whether to wear my glasses. I needed the glasses to see the boys, who usually stood in groups far at the end of the room, but I didn't want them to see me in glasses. I wanted to be attractive, whatever that meant. My mother was sure that sitting up straight and smiling, regardless of whether I wore glasses, would help attract dancing partners. I didn't believe her. The most popular girls didn't sit up straight or smile much, and few wore glasses. They got asked to dance, but I didn't. I sat quietly on the sidelines or sometimes danced with one of my girlfriends. By the end of the dance I'd swear that I'd never go again; it wasn't worth the agony. Back at home, I'd cry myself to sleep. But when the next Canteen came, I'd try again.

One day my father offered a very helpful tip. He scrunched up his face in imitation of the way I looked as I squinted to see without glasses. He asked if I preferred that look or my appearance with glasses. Well! I'd had no idea that I was squinting so hard. That settled it. I wore my glasses all day every day from then on. It was better to see clearly and to look relaxed. Did this solve the Canteen problem? No. My social life didn't really improve until my first semester in college. By then I wore contact lenses and felt more confident about myself, so I'm sure I also smiled more and held my head higher. I

enjoyed the freedom from glasses, and felt almost "glamorous" in comparison to my younger self. A few years later, in graduate school in New York City, the gritty blasts of air in the subways made my eyes with contacts sting, and I decided to return to wearing glasses for a while. I've worn them ever since. And I still appreciate the beautifully detailed structures of trees, from bottom to top.