

# Photo exhibit engages senses beyond sight

By CATHERINE FOX  
cfox@ajc.com

You could say that Annie Maxwell became chairman of the PTA because she is blind.

Leadership, she told photographer Billy Howard, was the way "to make myself noticed as an individual."

Maxwell's point — that we often reduce people to their disabilities — is something Howard understands. The thread that links his projects through the years — including books on children with cancer, AIDS sufferers, the physically impaired — is to make us see beyond a label, to make his subjects individuals again.

Maxwell is one of the 12 people with a variety of visual disorders featured in "Blind/Sight," a powerful exhibition at the Arts for All Gallery. It's a multi-pronged effort. The longtime Atlanta artist made a sensitive black-and-white portrait of each subject, whom he found through the Center for the Visually Impaired. He interviewed them, or their parents, and wrote an accompanying text that conveys the details of subjects' lives and their personalities.



Billy Howard photographed Hembree, a former policeman, with his dog, Sampson.



This illustration by Laurie Shock approximates Cliff Hembree's field of vision and hallucinations after he sustained brain injuries.

Gallery staffer Jaehn Clare wrote and narrated audio

descriptions of each portrait so that the blind can enjoy the show along with the sighted. Most revelatory, however, are the illustrations by Laurie Shock that approximate the way the world looks through each person's eyes.

Which turns out to be just as individual as everything else about them. A victim of cataracts and detached retinas, Natelkka Frye, 53, sees a jagged swoosh of light gray over darker gray, and sometimes, in the bottom left side of her vision, bright colors and things low to the ground. The field for Cliff Hembree, a former policeman with brain injuries, is mostly black, but he hallucinates a cartoonlike image described as "a football scrum of body parts." George Guerrero Jr., an 11-year-old who lost his sight at 3, sees different-colored moving shadows of people and animals.

When you walk a mile in these people's shoes, so to speak, you really begin to appreciate the challenges they face. With understanding comes empathy. And this: a reminder that vision is more than the physical act of seeing.

It's a complex relationship between the eye and the brain, evident in the fact that blind people might hallucinate, each in his own way; that words build images in the mind's eye; and that understanding and empathy contribute to that invisible form of vision we call insight.

## REVIEW

### "Blind/Sight: Conversations With the Visually Inspired"

Through June 22. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays.  
Reception: 5-8 p.m. June 7. Arts for All Gallery,  
Healey Building, 57 Forsyth St., Atlanta. 404-  
221-1270, Ext. 202. [www.VSAartsGa.org](http://www.VSAartsGa.org).

**Verdict:** Powerful.