

'Dining in the Dark' event promotes awareness of the challenges of blindness

DENISE O'TOOLE KELLY ON THE SIDE

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The four courses to be served at a fundraising dinner in Daytona Beach next week are a closely guarded secret. In fact, patrons will remain in **the** dark about what's on their plates even as they're starting to eat it.

“Our guests won't know what's on **the** menu. You might bite into something and say is that chicken or is that steak? That's part of **the** fun of it,” said Ronee Silverman, executive director of **the Center for the Visually Impaired**, which is putting on its second annual “Dining in **the** Dark” event Oct. 2 at **the** Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort.

The title is meant to be taken quite literally. Though there'll be plenty of daylight left at 5:30 when **the** evening's festivities start, **the** windows and doorways to **the** dining area will be covered to knock it out. Guests will enter through a light-lock room, as if they were going into an old photographic darkroom. They'll be escorted to their tables by Volusia County sheriff's deputies wearing night-vision goggles.

“It's pitch black. There's no light whatsoever,” said Silverman, whose first experience with **the** concept was last year at **the** center's inaugural dark-dining event. She remembers misjudging where her dessert might have been placed on **the** table and ending up with a hand full of chocolate cake.

“I'm not used to eating in **the** dark. When I was eating, several times I was talking to people around **the** table, put my fork down and totally forgot where I put it,” she recalled.

So, what's **the** point of putting people through all this when they've been nice enough to buy tickets to your event? (**For** information on how to do that, go to cvcentralfloida.org or call 386-253-8879.) Obviously, in part, it's to promote awareness of **the** challenges of living without eyesight. “A blind person has to be hyper alert to pay attention to these things **the** sighted world doesn't even think about — **for** example, where did you put your fork?” Silverman explained. Such events have been popular in Europe since 1993 and in **the** U.S. since around 2005.

Silverman, however, had mixed feelings about trying it here.

“We want to project an image in a positive way about blindness. We don't want people to feel sorry **for** blind people,” she said.

Last year's event dispelled her concerns. She said she could hear in **the** room that people were interacting with one another with empathy and humor — and willingness to ask **for** and accept help. **The** many blind guests — supporters, clients, staff members of **the** agency — were mentors **for the** people temporarily thrust into their world. Though **the** darkness was an obstacle, it could be overcome.

“That message did come across,” Silverman said.

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