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Teen girl's eyes damaged after looking at eclipse

WINNIPEG (CP) — Beverly Nicholson was a mischievous teen-ager when she saw her first eclipse of the sun.

And although she didn't realize it at the time, it was a split second of impulsiveness that changed the rest of her life.

In an interview in her parents' Winnipeg home, the 34-year-old Vancouver kindergarten teacher told of her experience in the hope that it would warn others that a similar tragedy could occur to them by viewing the total eclipse of the sun Feb. 26.

Mrs. Nicholson said she remembers the hot summer day in July, 1963. She was living in Winnipeg at the time, and she and a girl-friend went outside to view the eclipse.

"We were supposed to look at it through a negative and a box with a little hole in it," she said. "But I said 'Ah heck, I don't have to do that,' so I looked at it very quickly."

She never thought any more about it. But as the months passed, her eyesight began to deteriorate and she had to get glasses.

It wasn't until about seven years ago, when she was fired from a job in Vancouver because of her eyesight, that Mrs. Nicholson went to see an eye

specialist and discovered the retinas of her eyes had been permanently scarred from the eclipse.

By that time her vision was so bad she couldn't see the letter E on the top of an eye chart, and couldn't see clearly beyond a distance of about five feet.

In the years following, her eyesight has remained relatively unchanged, and Mrs. Nicholson has learned to cope with the restrictions it has made on her life.

"I get frustrated more than anything else, because I have to do everything so close," she said.

Her eyes are so sensitive to light that she has to wear heavily-tinted glasses.

Despite the hardships, such as not being able to drive, Mrs. Nicholson said she is thankful the condition is not getting any worse, and specialists have told her it will never make her permanently blind.

The Canadian Ophthalmological Society and the Manitoba Medical Association have recommended the Feb. 26 eclipse be viewed only on television. However, other specialists have said the spectacle may viewed safely through No. 14 welders' goggles, or through aluminum-coated mylar visors being sold through the Winnipeg Planetarium.