

FALL 2020

# The Sounding Board

The Publication of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey

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*Live the Life You Want*

**THE SOUNDING BOARD****Fall 2020***Katherine Gabry, Editor**Co-Editors: Annemarie Cooke, Mark Gasaway, Jerilyn Higgins & Mary Jo Partyka*

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You can help build a future of opportunity for the blind by becoming a member of our Dream Makers Circle. It is easier than you think. You can visit your bank and convert an account to a P.O.D. (payable on death) bank account which is payable after your passing to the National Federation of the Blind or one of our affiliates. Your legacy gift to the National Federation of the Blind or the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey can be made in the form of a will or a living trust, an income generating gift, or by naming us as the beneficiary of a retirement plan, IRA, pension or a life insurance policy. You can designate a specific amount, a percentage, or list the NFB as one of several beneficiaries. For additional information, please contact Patti Chang at 410-659-9314, extension 2422 or at [pchang@nfb.org](mailto:pchang@nfb.org).

### **Mission Statement**

The National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, Inc. is an organization of blind and interested sighted people who plan and carry out programs; work to improve the quality of life of the blind; provide a means of collective action for parents of blind children; promote the vocational, cultural and social advancement of the blind; achieve the integration of the blind into society on a basis of equality with the sighted; and take action that will improve the overall condition and standard of living of the blind.

***The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. You can live the life you want; blindness is not what holds you back.***

### **The National Federation of the Blind Pledge**

I pledge to participate actively in the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind to achieve equality, opportunity and security for the blind; to support the programs and policies of the Federation; and to abide by its constitution.

### ***The Sounding Board***

*The Sounding Board* is the magazine of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey. It is published twice a year. Through *The Sounding Board*, we aspire to provide a source of hope, inspiration, pride and camaraderie through the personal stories featured in our publication.

Hundreds of readers receive our publication via email and NFB Newline®. *The Sounding Board* is also available for download in its entirety from our website at [www.nfbnj.org](http://www.nfbnj.org). We encourage our readers to share *The Sounding Board* with family members, teachers, professionals, neighbors, friends and any other interested parties. We estimate our circulation to be in the thousands, as readers from across the country regularly report that *The Sounding Board* influences their lives.

Twenty-two people contributed to this issue by sharing stories, editing, interviewing and proofreading. It is truly a collaborative effort. We hope you enjoy the fruits of our labor.

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## PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE

### Dear Federationists,

My first Presidential Message for *The Sounding Board* was in February 1994. At that time, the magazine was printed on paper and recorded on cassettes and circulated to about 300 readers. My niece, Rachael Degenshein, was the editor. When Rachael went off to college, John Cucco took over as editor. The circulation of the magazine increased as our organization grew. John went off to college, and Kathy Gabry has been the editor for the last 15 years. In 2012, paper editions of the magazine became obsolete, and we discontinued the cassettes. I estimate that we produced about 7,800 cassettes and printed about 972,000 pages! Today, as I write this, my last Presidential Message, my 54<sup>th</sup> such correspondence, our circulation is electronic and reaches thousands through the networks of the NFBNJ and NFB Newline®.

I'm certain there's a correlation between the growth of the NFBNJ and the increase in our readership. Since 1994, we've built the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey from two chapters to seven and from one division to five. The number of committees has grown, too. We have made this growth together.

For all these reasons, it's been difficult to describe my feelings. Through the pages of this magazine, I have witnessed the sharing of thoughts, tears and laughter, and the growth in others and in myself. You have told your stories of how your dreams have become realities. Together, we have raised expectations that all people who are blind or visually impaired can live the life they want.

I want to personally thank all who have submitted articles to this magazine over the years. Your stories have impacted countless lives. I'm also grateful to Rachael, John and Kathy for their talents, time and effort.

Each issue, I comment that it's the greatest masterpiece and again, I thank all involved. Reading articles from members, nonmembers and those interested in the Federation family will continue throughout the upcoming years.

I invite all to attend the 44<sup>th</sup> State Convention which will be held virtually Wednesday, November 18 through Saturday, November 21. We are also planning a Rookie Roundup for all first-timers on Wednesday, November 11 at 7:00 p.m. Please visit the state website [www.nfbnj.org](http://www.nfbnj.org) for updates and other items of interest. Registration will continue throughout the month of October.

In closing, I am stepping down, but certainly not stepping out. Thanks to all for helping me to care, share, grow and to make a difference. Thanks for all you have done, are doing and will continue to do to change what it means to be blind.

With Much Respect,  
Joe Ruffalo, President  
National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey

**FROM THE EDITOR ... ONE LAST TIME****By Katherine Gabry**

My stint at *The Sounding Board* was supposed to be a temporary thing. The former editor, John Cucco, was off to college, and I heeded the call of my dear friend Joe Ruffalo to fill in for “a short time, til we find Someone Else.” Someone Else never knocked on my door. The years marched on, and 30 issues crossed my desk. This is my last.

Over the years, Joe and I have ribbed each other good naturedly about my tenure here, but truth be told, I am honored to have had the privilege and the responsibility of telling your stories. I have taken immense pride in showcasing each one – every person, issue and event – in a meaningful way. Each of you who has contributed to this magazine as an author, co-editor or someone voicing an opinion has been an inspiration to our thousands of readers across the country and to me personally.

Retirement often causes one to look back over the years and reminisce. On my watch, we’ve featured stories by 191 contributors – some have been regulars, while others were one-timers. These stories have featured myriad topics relevant to the blind community: accessibility, technology, discovery learning, braille, service dogs, role models, networking, job seeking and so much more. Through these stories, as well as the enlightened perspective of our editorial team, my goal has been to provide you with a source of inspiration, solidarity and friendship.

My reputation as a grumpy editor precedes me. It’s true that I’ve always insisted that the editorial team stick to the deadlines, check their facts, verify sources and get approvals on reprinted stories. I believe in keeping our standards high because that’s the level to which people will rise. As the years rolled on, I dare say that perhaps these standards have earned your respect and that the result has been the attraction of a full slate of articles for every publication. I have been especially honored to cull from these stories and recommend them for publication in *The Braille Monitor*.

My *From the Editor* column first appeared in the Spring 2016 issue. I have shared with all of you my story as a sighted and hearing parent raising a son born profoundly deaf and blind, a perspective I rarely find in NFB media. Writing has always allowed me to thoughtfully reflect and as a result find better understanding. Likewise, as I’ve read and edited your stories and corresponded with you, we’ve laughed, cried, celebrated and felt moved to action. Thereby, my own perspective as a parent, mentor and friend to blind and deafblind people has continued to evolve as a result of this publication.

In this, my last *From the Editor* column and my last edition as your editor, I simply want to say “thank you.” Thank you for telling your stories. Thank you for trusting me and this editorial team for the opportunity to share them honorably, fairly and with respect. Every story is inspirational. Please continue to tell your stories – whether in print or in person. By doing so you inspire others to live their own full, meaningful and satisfying life. Peace, prosperity and good vibes always.

## ACCESS LINK: WHERE WE ARE AND WHERE WE'RE HEADED

By Linda Melendez

**Editor's Note:** *Linda currently serves as a board member of the National Sports and Recreation Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, president of the NFBNJ Sports & Recreation Division and chair of the NFBNJ Transit Committee. Linda is a member of the Central Jersey and At Large chapters as well as the Senior and Technology divisions. She is an appointed member of NJ Transit's Citizens Advisory Council representing Monmouth County. In this article, Linda talks about NJ Transit's paratransit service, Access Link.*

In 1992, in response to the new Americans with Disabilities Act, NJ TRANSIT started a federally-funded paratransit system called Access Link. Ride services are provided to residents with a certified disability for rides that originate and/or end within a three-quarter mile radius of an NJ TRANSIT fixed bus route. So far this year, Access Link has served more than 58,000 New Jersey customers with more than 1.3 million rides.

There are five geographic service areas for Access Link in New Jersey, with two vehicular service providers awarded contracts approved by NJ TRANSIT. In the past, provider contracts were awarded for a specified period with an automatic renewal. Recently, the renewal process has changed and the contractor must apply for a renewal extension which can be granted or denied depending on their performance.

Last year, due to customer complaints about extensive wait times on the phone, NJ TRANSIT implemented some new features. Access Link Online allows customers to book and cancel rides and check the status of vehicles and estimated arrival times on their computer or mobile device. Canceling rides and checking the status of vehicles and estimated arrival times can also be accomplished automatically by telephone or mobile device without the need to speak with a live representative. Another feature recently implemented is EZ-Wallet, a cashless, electronic fare payment.

This past August, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed two bills into law that affect Access Link customers. The first, S-1563 automatically enrolls individuals determined eligible for Access Link services into a reduced-fare program for all of NJ TRANSIT's bus, train and light rail services. This bill required NJ Transit to issue an identification card for this reduced fare eligibility. Access Link fares will remain the same without further fare reduction. Customers who travel with a personal care attendant (PCA) in Access Link will be able to travel with a PCA at no cost on the train, bus and light rail.

The second law, S-362, requires NJ TRANSIT to operate Access Link service in any area of the state under a state of emergency as long as it doesn't pose an undue risk to drivers or passengers. This requires Access Link to return customers home if a "State of Emergency" is declared by the Governor.

In addition to these new laws, NJ TRANSIT has completed three initiatives so far this year and is working to complete two more by the end of the year or in early 2021. The first of the completed initiatives is an annual analysis of paratransit ridership and vehicle usage. This information is necessary in determining vehicle purchasing and use across the five regions. Another completed initiative was field surveillance – a transit version of secret shopping – which is used to monitor service quality and performance. The undercover inspectors observe and report on safety, customer service and fare concerns, and scheduling efficiencies. Access Link also set up a Twitter account, which allows increased communication with customers. Additional 2020 initiatives on target for completion later this year or in early 2021 include a mobile app and upgrades to scheduling software.

In years to come, be on the lookout for additional features that are expected to enhance service for Access Link riders: customer educational/outreach programs, autonomous/electric vehicles, technology advances such as cloud-based software, and multi-modal transportation consisting of improved mobility, system integrations, same-day service, ridesharing options with transportation network companies (e.g., Lyft/Uber/VIA) and coordination with other agencies and county paratransit systems.

In the meantime, be on the lookout for information on the NFBNJ Transit Committee's Zoom Access Link Town Hall at the end of November 2020.

As a long-time Access Link customer, I suggest the following considerations for an improved paratransit experience:

- Give yourself enough time to reach your destination.
- Be ready to be picked up anytime during your 30-minute window.
- Remember that Access Link cannot control how long it takes other customers to board or exit the vehicle or how much time will be spent waiting for no shows or adjusting to road conditions and the weather.
- Also remember that Access Link is a shared ride service. This means that other riders may be picked up and dropped off along your destination route.

With so many factors, to ensure a successful experience, each of us needs to thoughtfully plan our trips, practice patience and maintain reasonable expectations.

For additional Access Link information, visit <https://accesslink.njtransit.com/>

**NOTES FROM THE ACCESSIBLE VOTING WEBINAR**  
**Notes Compiled by Ellen Sullivan, NFBNJ Secretary**

**Editor's Note:** *This webinar was presented by Mary Ciccone, Director of Policy/CAP and PAVA Coordinator at Disability Rights New Jersey. Mary's contact information is [mciccone@drnj.org](mailto:mciccone@drnj.org) or 1-800-922-7233. Feel free to contact her with your questions.*

On November 3, 2020, New Jersey residents will be voting for President of the United States, all New Jersey House members, one senator, local races and a state ballot issue on the legalization of marijuana. Due to Covid-19, this year's November elections will be run similar to the July primary elections. Every registered voter should have received a mail-in ballot. After following the voting instructions in your ballot packet, your ballot can be sent by mail, dropped off at designated locations or dropped at polling places. Accessible voting for people with disabilities is available only at polls.

You are eligible to vote in this election in New Jersey if you are: a registered voter age 18 or older, a US citizen, a resident of New Jersey and your county and living at your address by October 4, 2020, not currently incarcerated for a felony, and having a driver's license number, a state ID number or a social security number.

On Election Day each county will have at least 10 polling places. Find your polling place at [www.njelections.org](http://www.njelections.org). Accessible voting machines should be available at each of these locations. On November 3, voting is from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Voting in person in New Jersey this year is considered "provisional" since all registered voters were sent a mail-in ballot and they need to ensure there is no voting fraud. Cast only ONE vote!

You can track your mail-in ballot at [nj.gov/state/elections](http://nj.gov/state/elections) or call: 1-877-NJ-Voter (1-877-658-6837). If you have any problems, contact Disability Rights New Jersey at 1-800-922-7233.

**Please Note:** All ballots must be properly completed and signed. If the signature doesn't agree with the signature on file, there will be a "curing process" where you will be given the opportunity to validate yourself. Please seek help if you need it. Everything needs to be done properly to ensure the integrity of your vote.

Ballots must be postmarked by 8 p.m. on November 3. So, get your vote in ASAP! There will be drop-off boxes in your community, and they will be secure. Polling places will have drop-off ballot boxes also.

The Board of Elections has seven days to complete the counting of mail-in ballots.

If you have problems voting on Election Day, call: 866-493-0023 (7 a.m. to 8 p.m.) or Disability Rights New Jersey at 800-922-7233 or 609-292-9714 during normal business hours.

Mary encourages all to vote by mail and to follow the instructions meticulously. So, VOTE!!

## COUSIN RICHARD INSPIRES SELF-CONFIDENCE

By Serena Cucco

*This article is in memory of my beloved cousin whom we lost in March to coronavirus.*

From the day my cousin Donna married Dr. Richard MacKay, I loved him. He was a kind, generous and gentle man, a true altruist, and a capable, compassionate doctor. He spent his career in service to others, first treating people on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico, then tackling measles outbreaks in remote tribal areas near the Arctic Circle, then spending 10 years in Africa as a member of the Peace Corps. After treating African people with HIV and AIDS, he returned to the United States to study the disease. He created Mount Sinai Hospital's clinic for uninsured, inner-city HIV/AIDS patients. At Mount Sinai he also taught and mentored countless medical students and young doctors.

Richard retired from his career a couple of years ago and was enjoying off-the-grid travel adventures with Donna when he was diagnosed with bladder cancer. Treatment took a toll on him, but seemed effective. Then the cancer returned. With no treatment options left, doctors tried an experimental use of a new drug, explaining that it was going to be a shot in the dark as to whether it would work or not. It did work – it cured his cancer – but terribly sadly, the side effects of the drug debilitated his mind. Suddenly the level of care he required necessitated a move to an assisted living facility.

Richard's new place was in a town nearby, and I visited him almost every day. We developed quite a bond over the months. Communication often required creativity – he was sometimes able to communicate verbally on a very basic level but on most days, we had to rely on yes/no questions and gestures. As I got to know Richard more deeply in his new mental state, I learned three important things about him: though he could no longer communicate by talking with me, his intelligence was in many ways still intact, and he used this intelligence to communicate in alternative ways; he always understood everything people said to him, even though he usually couldn't verbally respond; and he remained quite observant about what was going on around him, again even though on many days he was completely nonverbal.

Richard had always believed in me and respected me as a blind person, but he seemed to become more protective of me as his own difficulties increased. Sometimes he seemed worried about me and would murmur about "keeping me safe." I wondered if my blindness was triggering a "doctor response" in him. Or maybe "keeping me safe" made him feel useful again when after a lifetime of service to others, he couldn't function on his own, never mind help others.

One thing Richard still enjoyed was going for a walk. On sunny days he and I would walk hand-in-hand along the paths on the grounds of the building, and on cold days we'd do laps around the inner corridors. Something interesting happened during these walks. Richard knew I did not know the floor plan of his new place and he would

give me directions. On some days he was able to tell me to turn right or turn left but on other days he would guide me silently.

I wondered: *Was this what his mind translated as “keeping me safe?”*

One day, Richard was verbally directing me as we looked for a place to sit down. Suddenly, an aide cried out, “Be careful!” Since I did not know the layout of the room, I had no idea what danger might lie ahead, and so I slowed down. Richard managed to find the words, “No, let her look for it.” The supposed danger the aide had seen was that we were about to reach the sofa. I suppose she thought I might fall into it. I realized that Richard’s years-long observation of my blindness skills made him know that I don’t usually have to be “kept safe” in my everyday life and that people in my family rarely have to shout at me to be careful.

On one occasion, I walked into Richard’s room, and said “hi” to the new aide, Muri. As I was figuring out where Richard’s bed was, Richard said, “Look at you! Look at you!” He asked me how I had gotten there. I told him I took an Uber to the facility and that one of the receptionists had brought me to his room. He smiled broadly and said, “You have amazing skills!” I knew he didn’t mean “amazing” just because I’m blind and can put one foot in front of the other. He meant “amazing” because I’d gotten to the place independently and was moving with confidence through the room.

Contrary to what Richard’s phrase “keeping me safe” suggests, he never overprotected me. Since he was aware of my “amazing skills,” he gave me the opportunity to use them whenever the situation allowed. One day, Richard was sitting in his chair. I was still standing, and Richard said, “You can sit on the bed. Can you?” As soon as I heard those last two words, I realized he was encouraging me to use my “amazing skills,” so I looked with my cane and located the bed. When he saw me find it, he was able to say “Good!” In my own life experience, the average sighted person in a situation like this would either verbally direct me to the bed and call out whenever my cane would be about to touch something or, worse, grab hold of me and drag me to it. This is why our work as Federationists is so important. We educate people about the skills that blind people use to accomplish everyday tasks. Frankly, if Richard had over-directed me or even dragged me there, I would have accepted his assistance because of his condition. I wouldn’t have wanted to give poor Richard a hard time! But his previous knowledge of me and his ability to observe even in his declining capacity made him know my abilities as a blind person. I also believe his knowledge and aptitude as a retired doctor enabled him to realize that encouragement to use my skills was a more helpful strategy than guiding or dragging me around.

Another day when we were walking indoors, I realized we were near a door. I told Richard, “I don’t know where this door leads, so I’m not sure if you’re distracted right now or if you meant to walk us here.” Muri was nearby and said it was the activity room and that we could go in. At the same time, Richard put his hand on my elbow and walked me into the room. He couldn’t find the words to express that he was walking us

into the room purposefully, but when he stopped walking, I looked with my cane and felt a chair in front of me. Richard was asking silently if I wanted to sit down. Remembering my “amazing skills,” he waited as I looked for the chair with my cane. Muri, by the way, turned out to be an angel! He treated Richard with kindness and respect and, as this occurrence illustrates, never interfered with my independence.

Another time when we were walking, I suddenly felt tile instead of rug with my cane and feet, so I realized we were in the wrong place and that Richard was getting distracted. I told him I didn’t recognize where we were at all. After taking some time to find the correct word, he answered, “Okay” and we turned back. He respected my “amazing skills” enough to acknowledge he was distracted and take direction from me.

Now, for whatever reasons — was it more confidence in my own abilities or inspiration from my walking buddy? — new connections seem to have been made in my brain that now enable me to perform O&M tasks that I was unable to do before. For example, Richard taught me the value of pointing to objects to show people something. I was of course aware that sighted people do this, but as a blind person, I was always used to using only words to express myself. Because of Richard’s influence, I’m now able to point in the correct direction to show where a particular street is in relation to me. I used to have to turn my whole body to figure this out. This new ability helps me to reorient if I get distracted and move in the wrong direction. I also seem more able to understand the relationships among various streets and to create a mental map for the first time in my life. Even my posture when walking has improved dramatically. I think this is because of all the self-confidence and inspiration Richard gave me!

Every day when I go for a walk around my neighborhood, I do it in memory of Richard. I now enjoy going for a walk even more than I used to because this became a cherished tradition of ours. Although I’ll always miss my walking buddy, I know exactly what he’d remind me: “Serena, I think you’ve had enough of sighted people thinking they have to keep you safe! You can keep yourself safe. Your family knows this. More importantly, you know it! Just keep using your amazing skills!”

You’re right, Richard. I have had enough of others trying to “keep me safe.” Thanks so much for observing my skills, in spite of my needing direction when I was with you at your place. I’ll continue to build on those skills every day. Thanks so much for encouraging me! Although that medication robbed you of much of your mind, it left you with enough to give a very special gift to me. God bless you and rest in peace.

**2020 BELL ACADEMY IN-HOME EDITION**  
**By Mary Jo Partyka and Ellen Sullivan**

In early 2020, New Jersey's Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) team eagerly started preparing for this summer's program. After finding a new home at the Raritan Bay Area YMCA, the team of Joe Ruffalo, Linda Melendez, Ellen Sullivan, Mary Jo Partyka, Joanna Benthall, Monique Coleman, Jonathan Zobek and Carley Mullin was just getting started on the details of our seventh annual summer program when New Jersey was hit hard with COVID-19. By mid-March, everyone was urged to remain inside their homes and to practice social distancing. Our team wondered what would become of our BELL Academy.

The NFB has a strong commitment to providing for blind children and their families and to supporting the teaching of critical nonvisual techniques, Braille and daily living skills. Unusual circumstances notwithstanding, the NFB formulated a plan to condense all of the BELL Academies across the country into three 2-week sessions that would be held throughout the summer on the Zoom platform. Children ages 4–12 would be eligible to participate and would attend one-hour sessions in the morning or evening (in consideration of the time zones throughout the country). During these sessions, students would receive instruction in Braille reading and writing, mobility and daily living skills. A social hour would take place each day at 3 p.m. to provide an opportunity for the students to visit with each other, learn yoga, tell jokes and make up songs. All activities would be directed by teachers who were specifically selected to meet the unique challenges of teaching an online curriculum to large numbers of students with a variety of skill levels.

In preparation for the onset of the Academy, the NFB provided each student with a big box of materials to facilitate their learning including white canes, slates and styluses, tactile sketchpads, Braille, paper, tape, scissors and other Braille-related materials, as well as lesson plans and audio/visual tutorials.

The NFBNJ enrolled 12 students, each of whom was assigned an NFBNJ instructor/mentor who made daily calls to the children and parents to answer questions and provide guidance. With her winning ways of interacting with both the children and parents, assistant instructor Joanna Benthall quickly became the new "BFF" for the students she mentored. While Joanna listened to her students' frustrations about the pandemic, she pushed on with Braille training and made it a fun experience for all the children.

Carley Mullin, a mobility instructor at the NJ Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, provided virtual mobility lessons for our New Jersey students. With their NFB white canes and iPhones, children navigated their neighborhoods with Carley's careful assistance.

Our New Jersey team collaborated regularly to ensure that our BELL students were receiving the best assistance we could provide. Was this our best BELL Academy? Of course not; we all prefer the in-person Academy. However, Monique Coleman, Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) and the president of VISTAS Education Partners, concluded, "This was a very successful BELL Academy in light of the pandemic and all the issues that parents and children are facing. While some things did not work out exactly as we had planned, overall this was a remarkable effort by all and especially the National office, which was able to change the format of the Academy in a very short time period. This was no small feat." The team concurred.

Kudos to the NFB staff for their time and effort in bringing this program to fruition. Since the NFB incurred additional expenses running this program, our affiliate contributed funds to assist them in this endeavor.

In the end, we are pleased that the NFB provided valuable learning experiences to the students which will one day help them live the lives they want. Equally important, we commend the NFBNJ BELL team, led by First Vice President Linda Melendez, for their persistent efforts to make this year's BELL Academy workable and transformative for the children. Finally, thank you to all the parents for allowing the NFBNJ BELL Team to work collaboratively with you and your extraordinary child. To all: Thank you for believing that blindness is not a characteristic that defines us or our future – together we change what it means to be blind.

**ARTISTS & CRAFTERS:  
SELL YOUR WORK THROUGH THE CRAFTERS GUILD**

Pathways to Independence in Kearny offers a Crafters Guild that assists New Jersey residents who are blind or visually impaired in selling their arts and crafts. Work sold by the Crafters Guild includes crochet, leather works, woodworking, fine art paintings, prints and notecards, hand-painted notecards, caning, sewing and jewelry.

The Crafters Guild began in 1998 and is funded by the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Artists and crafters must be registered clients of CBVI. Pathways can provide craft materials, if necessary. A craft coordinator takes your completed work and makes every effort to sell it. You receive a check from Pathways for the total amount of your sales, minus any materials costs that Pathways may have provided.

If you're interested in selling your art or crafts, please contact Lisa Johnson at Pathways: 201-997-6155, ext. 17 or email [lisaj@pathwaysnj.org](mailto:lisaj@pathwaysnj.org)

## MENTORING “BAD” STUDENTS

By Melissa Lomax

Reprinted from *Future Reflections*, Volume 38, Number 2

**From *The Sounding Board* Editor:** *Melissa is a member of the At-Large Chapter and a mentor in the EDGE program. In her 10 years as a mentor, she’s worked to provide an equitable, individualized philosophy to mentoring instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. This rationale has helped her to adapt to the many changes brought on by the pandemic, most notably the isolation that leads most students to feel so far apart from each other and life as we once knew it. “Just as I help students in underserved groups find their worth, I now focus on helping students establish a sense of belonging while physically separated from the people, environments and routines they once knew,” Melissa says. “As you read this article, it is my hope that you are encouraged to reach out to others who may need an encouraging word or your guidance even if you initially felt you would have no grounds for a true connection. Our youth and young adults need to be empowered now more than ever, and you may have the right words to encourage them to one day hold the mentoring torch themselves.” The following article, reprinted from the February 2020 issue of Future Reflections, seems especially appropriate for this new and unusual school year.*

**From the *Future Reflections* Editor:** *The stereotypical blind student is compliant, even a bit passive. In reality, of course, blind students run the gamut, like students everywhere. Some quietly follow the rules, some now and then are risk takers, and some flagrantly buck the system. Drawing upon her experience as coordinator of youth programs at Blind Industries and Services of Maryland (BISM), Melissa Lomax shares some strategies for mentoring students whose behavior has earned them the label “bad.”*

In my work as a youth services manager in a program for blind teens, I sought to hire summer counselors who valued strong mentoring relationships. When I interviewed for the job, I asked each applicant, “Do you have a blind role model? If so, tell me about this person.” Each year I was disappointed with many of the responses. Stevie Wonder was the most frequent answer, while other candidates simply said no, they had no one. Luckily, however, several applicants had had experiences similar to my own. We were honored to have had blind role models who made time to learn about us and teach us.

The disparity in responses to my question led me to wonder why so many blind youth continue to miss out on life-changing mentor relationships. I noticed that many blind youth from the inner city unjustly receive the label of *bad*, and consequently they miss out on mentorship. Though it is not always spoken aloud, the label “bad” can be identified by the actions of professionals and teachers. It all starts with negative assumptions. If labels regarding a student's behavior are ever acceptable, a more fitting term than “bad” would be misunderstood. In my role in their lives, I made sure not to

operate under the belief that young people were anything close to bad. I knew such labeling would diminish the quality of the services I could provide.

During discussions with me, some students expressed themselves through foul language, raised voices and abrupt departures. Never will I claim that these actions should be overlooked and accepted. As one who values respect, I would be doing a disservice to these students by failing to address such behaviors. However, I choose not to take punitive steps to achieve my desired results. I choose to understand.

In this field I am primarily asking students to do three things: to learn and rely on new skills and techniques, to become more self-confident and to accept that their blindness is not the end of life but the beginning of a series of adaptations to reduce its impact to a mere nuisance. For many educators, mentors, counselors and other like-minded professionals, these three goals appear attainable — we have seen too much success to think otherwise. But for most students, these goals are scary. Students may express fear by crying, shutting down or making excuses. Other students deal with fear more aggressively.

Contrary to commonly held misperceptions, students who resort to disrespectful behavior fit no set categories. They are not always younger or older, male or female or black or white. As an African-American woman I am acutely aware of social perceptions regarding minority communities. I made sure to look past the superficial label of bad that several of my black adolescent students carried when they arrived. I set out to assure them that, though others may have given up seeking connections and finding common ground with them, I most definitely would not.

Initially, I believed I had this population figured out, but I was wrong. One young male student in middle school taught me lessons I would later implement for all of my students.

This student—I'll call him Tony—decided to express his fear in a disruptive way while he attended one of my summer programs. I was determined to find the source of his fear so I could encourage him to get beyond it. During his third outburst, I had my opportunity. When I heard screaming from across the building, I ran toward the sound.

It turned out that Tony had refused to help clean the kitchen after class, and as he protested he stopped using his inside voice. Hastily I removed him from the scene and helped him express himself calmly. As Tony described his class, I realized that two issues were at play. First of all, Tony did not know how to clean, and he did not know how to ask for help. Second, he liked and valued his instructors as people, but in that moment he did not feel comfortable sharing his need for help with his teacher. He could not trust people easily unless they were African American females.

I knew our program could help Tony deal with both of these issues. I assured him that his outbursts were not enough to deter us from giving him the opportunities the program could provide. I assured him that we could work together to transform his

thinking about the issues that troubled him. Once I validated his feelings and gained his trust, I explained that his negative behavior would no longer be tolerated.

When I contacted Tony's guardian, it was not to have him depart my program after his third strike. I scheduled a meeting to celebrate his breakthrough and consult with her on solidifying our new plan of action. In the end, Tony and I both won. His outbursts disappeared, and his skills and confidence increased! Moreover, I worked with him to step away from his need for a mentor just like his nurturing grandmother. I helped him see that in this program, he needed someone who could help him build confidence. When he shared that he loved to create music but did not feel equipped to broadcast his talents, I connected him with a male counselor who happened to be a musician. This connection produced results I can still see today. Tony produces instrumental music that he uploads to YouTube. The confidence he gained has spread to other areas of his life.

Experience remains my best teacher. This phrase holds great significance when I reflect on my journey to connect my students with great mentors. Tony attended our program in 2018. I know that my success in working with him grew out of a similar situation that occurred three years prior. While I was managing a summer program for high schoolers, I pulled aside a student named Rick to speak with him about his conduct. The conversation quickly escalated, and he began to raise his voice in frustration. It turned out that he had a problem with his assignment to talk to mentors I had chosen for him because he felt that none of them could fully understand his position. He felt that blindness was an injustice for him in a family and neighborhood where he was expected never to show weakness. I, too, am African American, but I realized that although I looked like him, I was not really like him. At that time in his life, he did not need a person in his dream career, from his state, with his eye condition, or even possessing his same skin complexion. He needed a blind individual who faced and triumphed through the same struggles he faced back in his hometown.

That conversation altered my approach to pairing students with mentors. When my organization had an opportunity to create a year-round program for transition-age students, I knew that in addition to workshops, the students needed mentors. I took on the task of mentoring each student myself. This approach not only fit with our limited resources at the time, but it also gave me an opportunity to pinpoint my students' specific needs. While some needed academic guidance or help dealing with social situations, others needed instruction on independence skills or advice coping with difficult experiences. I let the students choose which aspect of me they needed in that time.

In 2019 I made the choice to resign from my youth management position to pursue a career change. Before I left I spoke with the students who were interested in continuing a mentoring relationship. I asked them, "What type of person do you need to learn from at this time?" From there, I set out to establish strong matches that would elevate each student to a higher level of confidence and independence.

I encourage anyone who sees the tremendous value in connecting students with an insightful blind mentor to follow the same steps I did. First, get to know the student well enough to have an open, honest conversation about the type of guidance needed in that moment. Next, look for mentors outside of the unspoken “mentor catalogue,” as the desired demographic may not be represented well due to a lack of awareness. Then encourage students to customize their own experiences by assessing any changes in their needs and finding mentors best suited to help. With these steps it is my hope that more youth will grow to realize that they can indeed give back to future generations. We can work to eliminate the belief that students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, or those with a variety of life circumstances are not needed or valued in the mentorship arena. In fact, these students, with their unique perspectives, deep community connections and boundless gifts, can bring increased diversity, equity and inclusion to our blindness movement.

### **NORTHERN CHAPTER UPDATE**

**By Rick Fox, Northern Chapter President**

The last six months have truly been a worst-of-times, best-of-times situation. On the one hand, some of us have lost friends or family members to COVID-19, and all of us have had our lives disrupted in many disorienting ways. On the other hand, through our NFB and other beloved communities, we have seen resilience, self-sacrifice and many remarkable acts of kindness.

While most of us stayed largely in our homes, several Northern Chapter members continued their work at the VA Hospital. One of our members made masks and other items for a local hospital. Several of us volunteered to check in by phone with other members on a regular basis. Due to the limited supply of books from the Library for the Blind, one member downloaded over 50 books from the website and mailed them out to library subscribers.

The business of the NFB has continued. Five chapter members participated in our Washington Seminar. Calls were made to legislators, and our meetings were graced with informative and knowledgeable speakers, such as Linda Melendez with an affiliate update, Ellen Sullivan on Real ID, Nicky Gacos on the Randolph Sheppard program, and Serena Cucco and Lia Stone on their experiences at the Colorado Center for the Blind.

Because our National Convention was virtual this year, we experienced a high level of Northern Chapter member participation, and we welcomed three new members, who joined the Federation over the last six months.

All of us look forward to the day when our in-person meetings can resume, and we can hug and shake hands with one another without fear. Until then, however, we will continue to build the National Federation of the Blind with love, hope and determination.

## ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE LYDIA YOUNG HAYES TRAILBLAZER AWARD WINNER

By Linda Melendez

I am proud to share the news that our fearless leader and president of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, Joseph Ruffalo, has been awarded the 2020 Lydia Young Hayes Trailblazer Award. This award is given every 10 years to an outstanding CBVI stakeholder or consumer selected by a committee after review of the nominations received. The award recognizes an individual who is blind, deafblind or visually impaired for their dedication to improving the quality of life of their peers. This includes ensuring others receive the necessary supports and services to enable independence, self-sufficiency and community access. The award was presented during CBVI's virtual 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration October 2.

Thank you to the affiliate board members who shared their personal and professional explanations for why Joe should receive this award. Special thanks to Annemarie Cooke, Chair of the NFBNJ Communications Committee, for gathering everyone's thoughts. It was my honor and privilege as your First Vice President to submit the nomination on behalf of our membership, and I am thrilled the nominating committee recognized the many contributions Joe has made to the blind community.

Congratulations, Joe! You deserve this honor, and we love you dearly. Your tireless contributions to the National Federation of the Blind, the New Jersey Affiliate and New Jersey residents for more than 30 years is much appreciated. You have made it respectable to be blind and encouraged us to be empowered to live the lives we want because **You Care, You Share, You Help Us to Grow and You Make A Difference!**

## TECH TALK TIDBITS: DID YOU KNOW?

By Jane Degenshein

There are over 260 listservs on nfbnet! Using a google search, type in nfbnet and enjoy all the interesting listservs the NFB sponsors. Here are the two that I moderate and the link to subscribe to each:

1. NFBNJ Seniors Division listserv (nfbnj-seniors)  
To subscribe: [https://www.nfbnet.org/mailman/listinfo/nfbnj-seniors\\_nfbnet.org](https://www.nfbnet.org/mailman/listinfo/nfbnj-seniors_nfbnet.org)
2. NFBNJ Technology Division listserv (NJTechDiv)  
To subscribe: [http://www.nfbnet.org/mailman/listinfo/njtechdiv\\_nfbnet.org](http://www.nfbnet.org/mailman/listinfo/njtechdiv_nfbnet.org)

### Important Tech Telephone Numbers for Reference

Amazon Accessibility Desk: 888-283-1678

Amazon Echo Support: 877-375-9365

Microsoft Accessibility Desk: 800-936 5900

Apple accessibility for VoiceOver or MFi hearing devices: 877-204-3930

## PANDEMIC COOKING CLUB LEADS TO KITCHEN CONFIDENCE

By Jonathan Zobek

**Editor's Note:** *Jonathan Zobek is president of the New Jersey Association of Blind Students, the student division of the NFBNJ. A 2020 graduate of The College of New Jersey, Jonathan plans to work toward a master's degree at Salus University with the ultimate goal of becoming a teacher of the visually impaired. Jonathan is also a graduate of the Employment, Development, Guidance and Engagement (EDGE) program. Jonathan's confidence in trying new projects prompted his adventure into one of the most ambitious endeavors in one's home kitchen: homemade croissants from scratch.*

One of my favorite things in the world is food even though my relationship with it has changed over the years. As a youngster I was a very picky eater. Like many children, I did not enjoy vegetables, and my parents report that I would eat only mac and cheese and pizza. Over the years, however, my palate expanded, and I began to explore and enjoy more foods.

When I was growing up, my parents and grandma were always cooking. Nothing compares to my grandma's Thanksgiving stuffing, fish cooked by my dad or a great meal cooked by my mom after school. I never had the urge to learn to cook myself because a great cook was always making something delicious in the kitchen. I knew that cooking was one of the most important life skills, but there was no incentive for me to learn. I finally started cooking during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the story of how I developed a crucial life skill and discovered a new hobby.

While living on my own during college, I didn't experiment much with cooking until my junior year. Until then, I lived on campus, and all on-campus students are required to purchase a meal plan. In my junior year, my roommate and I and two friends rented an apartment in Campus Town, across the street from the college and situated above a variety of restaurants. Because I was now off campus, I was not required to purchase a meal plan and cooking for myself became a necessity. I started out with simple dishes: eggs, pasta (with copious amounts of parmesan cheese), burgers, grilled cheese and every-which-way to cook chicken. My own efforts were supplemented with food from the businesses below us, typically late night Wendy's or Wawa runs and leftovers thereof. Throughout the year, I attempted more dishes, such as French toast, some vegetables (they were expensive), steaks (because we had a George Foreman grill) and salmon.

During the first semester of my senior year, I tried making my dishes more sophisticated, but still fun: Cheez-It and Doritos encrusted chicken, and French toast encrusted with cereals like Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Rice Krispies and Cocoa Krispies. I also tried new dishes like mac and cheese breadsticks, naan pizza and garlic parmesan encrusted cauliflower bites (again, with copious amounts of parmesan cheese).

It is important to note that throughout this time, my twin brother was also in college but at a different school. Like me, he lived in dorms his first two years and then an off-campus apartment. He was cooking more complicated and fancy dishes, such as risotto, crab dip, shrimp chow mein and homemade desserts. It all sounded so good, and now I was surrounded by three great cooks: my mom, dad and brother (my grandmother had passed away by this point). I felt left out. Even though nobody admitted it, I knew that expectations were lower for me than for my brother. I wanted to prove to myself and my family that I could cook, but I was never able to muster the inspiration and confidence to start. All that changed during COVID-19.

After leaving my apartment for spring break, I was informed that all classes would be online for the rest of the semester. Other activities and clubs followed suit, and soon the whole world was virtual, including the EDGE 2.0 program for college students. The EDGE instructors started organizing clubs around themes, activities and hobbies, with topics such as technology, fitness, book clubs, meditation and cooking. I joined braille, technology and cooking. While I did learn a lot from the technology and braille clubs, I gained the most from the cooking club.

Every other week, Lia Stone, who ran the club, demonstrated nonvisual techniques for cooking certain dishes, such as sour cream and onion burgers, blueberry pie bars, vegetarian white bean mushroom marinara and chocolate chip cookies. Attending these meetings and witnessing another blind/visually impaired person cooking was just the push that I needed to start cooking myself. After Lia demonstrated the chocolate chip cookies, I felt the drive to make them myself. I did, and they turned out amazingly well. They were a hit with my family and others who tried them, and the sense of accomplishment was equally as amazing. I went on to make more desserts, such as brownies, pound cake and rice pudding. I became more adventurous and made cannoli stuffed French toast. This was certainly a giant step above the cereal encrusted French toast from college, and although it was more challenging to make, it was delicious.

After making these fantastic desserts and observing many other cooking club demonstrations, I wanted to try something that nobody in my family had ever made: croissants. I had heard that they were difficult, but I was up to the challenge. I gathered all the necessary ingredients, made the dough, incorporated the two sticks of European butter into a butter layer, and after pressing, rolling and folding with a rolling pin, I finally had visibly layered dough. The hard part was over, and I just had to cut the dough, form the signature crescent shapes, let the dough sit after an egg wash, and then, after a second egg wash, bake them. They were finally done. It took about six hours from start to finish, but it was worth it. They were so buttery, flaky and delicious. They were, without a doubt, the best croissants I had ever eaten. Even my brother said they were some of the best he has ever eaten.

The EDGE cooking club gave me the confidence to start cooking and allowed me to discover a new hobby. While I only enjoyed the eating aspect of food previously (and I

still very much love eating), I now enjoy the cooking process as well. I cannot thank Lia and the cooking club enough for this confidence boost. In a crazy year and during such an unprecedented time, at least one good thing emerged.

## AND WE'RE ROLLING!

By C. P. McKenna

**Editor's Note:** *Pat McKenna, Esq., is the Director of Employment Services for the Family Resource Network. As such, he is responsible for the Employment, Development, Guidance and Engagement (EDGE) program, which supports transition-age youth.*

One of the big unforeseen challenges I've experienced as a guide dog user was teaching our son to ride a bike. It was easy at first; working with a balance bike in the driveway posed few challenges. As he improved, we moved on from the driveway, going farther and going faster. This was a little trickier. I monitored him by keeping one hand on the back of the bike and instructing my guide dog to follow. This task wasn't exactly covered in guide dog training class, but Finn figured it out.

Next was the real bike with real pedals and real brakes. The pedals were used liberally, the brakes quite conservatively. Steering seemed to be more of an optional component, which meant there was a lot of hands-on monitoring and safeguarding at much higher speeds, all while being guided by a Seeing Eye dog who was following at the same pace. And it worked, mostly worked. There were a few crack-ups, but not many. The most awkward moment was when he narrowly missed a group of three elderly men on their way to religious services one weekend morning. He avoided them by the expediency of steering into a hedge proclaiming, "Wow, dad, that was close. I almost hit those three wizards."

The elderly service-goers were very understanding. One even joked, "Yes, we are the wizards."

Next was the hands-off monitoring. This involved having my dog hurriedly follow the bike while I listened to what was transpiring. This stage was even faster, but fortunately Finn is fast and somehow managed.

Now my son bikes to the end of the street and back without being followed. I'm thrilled with his progress and thankful for my Seeing Eye dog whose effort, and skill, and flexibility made this possible.

But Finn's not off the hook, for the little brother just started on the balance bike this week.

Get ready Finn, it begins again.

## OCTOBER IS MEET THE BLIND MONTH: GET YOUR FREE CANE HERE!

The white cane gives blind people the ability to achieve a full and independent life, allowing us to travel freely and safely. The National Federation of the Blind started a free white cane program in 2008 because we believe that no blind person should be without a white cane, regardless of his or her ability to pay for it. Since that time, the NFB has distributed more than 64,000 free white canes.



### Request a Free White Cane

Any blind person in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico can request a white cane for their personal use. Requests can be made as often as every six months. To request a free white cane, complete the online application at <https://freecane.nfb.org//> or download, complete and mail the pdf application at [https://www.nfb.org/images/nfb/documents/pdf/free\\_white\\_cane\\_application.pdf](https://www.nfb.org/images/nfb/documents/pdf/free_white_cane_application.pdf) to: Free White Cane Program, National Federation of the Blind, 200 East Wells Street at Jernigan Place, Baltimore, Maryland 21230



### How to Choose Your Cane Size

The canes distributed through the free white cane program are straight (not folding or telescoping) fiberglass canes. All canes are white with a loop on top of the handle and have a cane tip. The NFB recommendations for cane length measurement are as follows:

*For first-time users:* Measure from your armpit to the floor.

*For seasoned travelers:* Measure from your chin or higher to the floor.

### Cane Travel Training

The NFB is committed to ensuring that every blind person can acquire the training he or she needs to use the white cane and is proudly affiliated with top-notch model training centers to achieve this goal. The innovative training programs pioneered at these centers are increasingly being replicated by other rehabilitation agencies and providers.

For more information on cane travel and techniques, please read *Care and Feeding of the Long White Cane: Instructions in Cane Travel for Blind People* (<https://www.nfb.org/images/nfb/publications/books/cfcane/canetc.htm>)

### More Information

For more information, please contact [freecane@nfb.org](mailto:freecane@nfb.org) or 410-659-9314.

**BOOKS OF THE MONTH: *THE GREATEST SALESMAN IN THE WORLD* – BOOKS I & II****By Janie Degenshein**

I've been hosting book clubs for various groups since 2010. I'm the facilitator for the ECHO (Eyes Closed Hearts Open) active blind support group. In the last 10 years, the ECHO book club has read close to 100 books. The next two groups are through the NFBNJ: The Senior Division has held quarterly book clubs since 2014, and the Sports and Recreation Division has held quarterly book clubs since 2018.

My most recent book club meeting combined all three of these clubs because the books chosen – *The Greatest Salesman in the World*, Books I and II – have impactful messages for all in living a full and enlightened life. *The Greatest Salesman in the World* illuminates the story of Hafid, a lowly camel boy of 2,000 years ago. He used the ancient scrolls of wisdom to become the greatest salesman in the world. Below are Hafid's secrets revealed in Book I and his Vows of Success from Book II.

Book I: *The Secret of Salesmanship and Successful Living*.

1. **I will form good habits and become their slave.** Success is a state of mind. Failure is man's inability to reach his goals in life whatever they may be.
2. **I will greet each day with love in my heart.** Always will I dig for reasons to applaud. Never will I scratch for excuses to gossip.
3. **I will persist until I succeed.** The prizes of life are at the end of the journey, not at the beginning.
4. **I am nature's greatest miracle.** I am not on this earth for a chance. I am here for a purpose. The purpose is to grow into a mountain, not to shrink into a grain of sand.
5. **I will live this day as if it is my last.** Each hour of the day, I will cherish for it can never return.
6. **Today, I will be master of my emotions.** Weak is he that permits his thoughts to control his actions. Strong is he who forces his actions to control his thoughts.
7. **I will laugh at the world.** I will laugh at my failures and they will vanish into clouds of new dreams. I will laugh at my successes and they will shrink to their true value.
8. **Today I will multiply my value a hundredfold.** I will set goals for the day, the week, the month, the year and my life. I will turn my goals into reality.
9. **I will act now.** My dreams are worthless, my plans are dust, my goals are impossible. All are of no value unless they are followed by action. Action is the food and drink which will nourish my success.
10. **I will pray for guidance.** I will pray but my cries for help will be only cries for guidance. The guidance I seek may come or the guidance I seek may not come. But are not both of these an answer?

Book II: *The Vows of Success*. Hafid, now widowed, at age 60 embarks on another speaking tour to promote positive thinking. This presents his Ten Vows of Success.

1. **I was born to succeed, not to fail.** Never again will I pity or belittle myself.
2. **Never again will I greet the dawn without a map.** The victory of success is half won when I gain the habit of setting goals and achieving them.
3. **Always will I bathe my days in the golden glow of enthusiasm.** Enthusiasm is my fate in action. With fate, I cannot fail.
4. **Never again, will I be disagreeable to a living soul.** A smile remains the most inexpensive gift I can bestow on anyone.
5. **Always will I seek the seed of triumph in every adversity.** Adversity is the first path to truth.
6. **Never again will I perform any task at less than my best.** Whatever my job may be, let me perform it with love and I will not fail.
7. **Always I will throw my whole self into the task at hand.** The great difference to those that succeed and those that fail does not consist in the amount of work done by each, but the amount of intelligent work.
8. **Never again will I wait and hope for opportunity to embrace me.** Opportunity like love is never attracted by gloom and despair.
9. **Always I will examine each night my deeds of the fading day.** Today's lessons can be tomorrow's foundation for a better life providing I have the will to learn from them, and I do.
10. **Always will I maintain contact through prayer with my creator.** The fewer words, the better prayer.

Both of these books can be downloaded from the BARD site, as below:

**The Greatest Salesman in the World DB18023**

Mandino, Og. Reading time: 2 hours, 12 minutes.

Read by Andy Chappell. National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress.

Psychology and Self-Help

**The Greatest Salesman in the World, Part II: The End of the Story, Featuring The Ten Vows of success DB27742**

Mandino, Og. Reading time: 3 hours, 1 minute.

Read by Andy Chappell. A production of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress.

Psychology and Self-Help

To join future book club discussions, please email me at [jdegen16@comcast.net](mailto:jdegen16@comcast.net).

## WHAT TRAINING DID FOR ME

By Carley Mullin

Reprinted with permission from EDGE Newsletter, April 2020

**Editor's Note:** *Carley is a native New Jerseyan who recently earned a master's degree in cane travel instruction at Louisiana Tech University. As a future instructor, Carley is excited to give back to the blindness community that supports the growth of independence. Carley enjoys reading, playing the bass and drums, and being in nature.*

From May 2018 until November 2019, I lived in small-town Ruston, Louisiana, and got my master's degree in orientation and mobility (or as I like to call it, cane travel). As part of my degree, I was immersed in the training program of the Louisiana Center for the Blind. To be sure, it is not the only training center in the country staffed with hard-working and highly skilled blind and sighted staff, and it is true that I did not go through the official 9-month training as a center student. However, I would like to tell you a bit about the absolutely life-changing experience that I had there.

On my first day, I was thrown right into the mix. I went over basic cane technique in travel class, the slate and stylus in braille, how to measure using a tactile click ruler in industrial arts, JAWS key strokes in computers, and I began picking through every inch of the kitchen to learn where things were in home management class. In the beginning, everything seemed tedious. My fingers were slow on the uptake with this new cane grip they were teaching me, the slate and stylus seemed slow and inefficient compared to my skills with the Perkins braille, and I always miscounted the grooves on the accursed click ruler, causing my project to be off by mere sixteenths of an inch.

Yet, many of these things became easier. I went from clutching at my cane to cruising down the block faster than I had ever travelled with a cane in my life; I went from rummaging through cupboards to cutting up deliciously tender pork that I braised with pickled vegetables; and I went from shaking off the rust on my JAWS commands to putting together a multi-media PowerPoint presentation without any visual assistance.

These things happened at different speeds: I was walking up and down blocks within the first week, and I did not get to the point where I could successfully prepare that braised pork dish until just a month before I graduated. But with the encouragement of other students, the staff who mentored me and my own determination, I had the opportunity to do these and many other frankly awesome things.

Let's take travel as an example. Although this was an area that I considered myself pretty skilled in when I started, I quickly realized that there was an even higher level of nonvisual travel out there that I was determined to learn. It started with realizing that I could move very fast (at a decent jog) when I used a lighter cane and my fingers instead of my wrist to move it side-to-side, but I ended up doing so much more. I learned how to find stores in malls that I had never been to before. I learned how to find businesses

in an unfamiliar city with nothing but an address and some directions from passersby. And I learned how to cross streets busier and wider than I had ever crossed before.

Along the way, I realized that I had unknowingly designated many of these things in my mind before training as things I could simply not do by myself, even though I had always considered myself a very independent blind person. But with this newfound training and support that I received from the staff at LCB, my independence continued to grow, and I had fun doing it.

Towards the end of my training, I went on what is called an “out-of-town” trip. This is where a student plans a solo trip to a city they have never been to before. For my trip I chose San Francisco, and I chose some activities that I really enjoy – food, music and parks – and peppered in some tourist attractions. By the morning of my flight, I was admittedly nervous. I had travelled through unfamiliar airports and cities before, but something about leaving everyone I knew behind and going off on what was essentially a solo weekend getaway was one of those things that I never thought I would be able to do. As I nonchalantly strolled out of my hotel into this alien city, walked along the Golden Gate Bridge, savored a lamb burger and the music at one of the best jazz concerts I have ever been to, and chatted with a Boujee couple over bratwursts at a beer garden in the Mission District, I had a sense that this experience was larger than life, like it was someone else enjoying it who had never struggled with their confidence as a traveler.

It was in this weekend outing that I realized just how far I had come, despite whatever skills I had when I arrived in Louisiana. I had conquered things that, quite simply, I thought that blind people rarely or never did. I had overcome many a frustrating and fearsome lesson to become a better cook, a better cane traveler, a happier blind person. Because I achieved these milestones, I would recommend a training experience like this to anyone with the time and resources to undertake it.

### **LEGO LAUNCHES BRICKS WITH BRAILLE**

The first toy to promote braille was the game Uno, by Mattel. There’s also braille Scrabble, Bingo and Monopoly, and now Lego has braille on its bricks! The Danish company that makes Lego announced the addition of braille to the iconic building blocks in August. Read the full article at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/lego-launches-bricks-with-braille-875705.html>

From the Archives: *The Braille Monitor*, July 1997

## THE POWER OF BEING PLUGGED IN

By Gerald Moreno

**From the Editor:** *Those of us who have been members of the NFB for many years sometimes take for granted all the benefits we receive from the organization every day. It's fairly easy for those who read Federation material but remain aloof from contact with members to dismiss as propaganda the enthusiastic stories of those who have recently discovered what a difference the National Federation of the Blind has made in their lives. Gerald Moreno presented the following speech during the Job Opportunities for the Blind Seminar at the 1997 convention of the NFB of New Jersey on April 18. It is a salutary reminder to us all of how important it is that we share the gift of the Federation with every blind person willing to listen. This is what Gerald Moreno said:*

I wanted to use the hair dryer last week. My daughter likes to keep it in her room, and I always have to look for it. She claims that I do not have enough hair to use a dryer. Annoyed by the search, I grabbed the plug and plugged it in. It didn't work. I had a perfectly good hair dryer, and it didn't work. Then I realized that I had plugged in the wrong cord. When I plugged in the right one, it worked.

It wasn't that the hair dryer wouldn't or couldn't work; it should have worked, but it didn't because I had grabbed the wrong cord. The same can be said for the about 70 percent of blind people in this nation who are unemployed. There are perfectly employable blind people out there who, for whatever reason, are not plugged in and not working. Others are working below their potential.

I would like to share my experiences with you about the power of being plugged in – how, why, where. I entered Rutgers in 1968. In late 1969 I had to stop driving because my eyesight had deteriorated. At that point I went through what many blind people go through. Many weeks and many tests later I was declared legally blind. Until this time I was not aware that there was a National Federation of the Blind.

I registered with the library in Trenton, RFB in Princeton and the New Jersey Commission for the Blind. At that time the Commission paid for my tuition and books and gave me spending money. Still I didn't hear about the NFB.

I graduated in 1972 with a B.A. in economics. Thus I began my job search. No one was interested. I felt alone in a world full of people. It was sort of like being a plug that couldn't find the receptacle where the power was.

In November 1973, I was shopping in the W.T. Grants department store and had stopped to ask questions of one of the employees. I related my story to him: no job and my wife four months pregnant. Little did I know that he was the store manager. He told me to file an application for a job, and I was hired on the spot. He gave me a chance.

Although I was working, this job did not pay enough. I continued to search and finally found a job as a social worker for the Essex County Division of Welfare. It was early 1974, and I still hadn't heard of the NFB.

In late 1974 there was a change in managers at my office. A gentleman by the name of William Waldman became the assistant field office supervisor. Mr. Waldman asked me to take oversight of the Work Registration Project. The fact that I was legally blind didn't enter into the equation.

Over the next five years I had contact with the New Jersey Commission for the Blind as I developed various needs. I also had contact with other agencies and groups, but I didn't learn about the NFB yet. One thing that I should have done was remain active with the Talking Book Library in Trenton. During my interview I inquired about receiving Talking Books again. After I reapplied, I was put on their mailing list.

The library's spring newsletter arrived in March of 1994. After being introduced to the technology available and seeing how it would increase my job performance, I was anxious to call a telephone number listed in the newsletter for more information about computers and adaptive technology.

The telephone number belonged to David Denotaris. I called David, and the rest is history. Not only did he talk to me about his computer, he introduced me to an organization that could benefit me. He introduced me to the National Federation of the Blind. Finally I heard! Because I had contact with fellow blind users of adaptive technology, I was better informed. When my employer was about to purchase my adaptive equipment, I found out that they had made some changes, and the substitutions were not compatible. I believe they were acting in good faith, but they didn't have the expertise to assemble a suitable package for me.

By that time I had been in contact with a member of the NFB by the name of Bob Kanish. He explained his system to me, and I wanted a similar one. Just before the altered package was purchased, I was able to intercept the order and have it modified. This technological catastrophe was averted because I was plugged in. A potential problem was converted into an advantage because I had contact with those who knew.

Due to a rather lengthy process (both the Commission's and my employer's) of testing, evaluations, questionnaires and more, the adaptive equipment arrived in January of 1995. Should it have taken so long? No, but I did get the equipment. We should probably work on shortening the period between the first evaluation and the arrival of any assistance such as training or adaptive equipment.

Think about what would have happened if I hadn't been networking. That is why it is important to be plugged in. You can find out that someone before you has already invented the wheel so that you don't have to reinvent it.

When I met David in April, he asked me to go on a bus ride to the National Center in Baltimore the next month. That is where I attended my first NFB chapter meeting. I also

purchased my first cane that day. I often wonder when I would have gotten around to buying one if I had not taken that trip.

It is very important to remain plugged in. Think of a rechargeable battery. As long as it remains connected to the power source, it is energized. The power in the battery would enable you to listen to a radio or tape this talk. If the batteries were run down, you would be powerless to do what you wanted to do.

Just as a battery needs to be charged, so do you. The blind job seeker needs to know how or where to look for a job. Not only the job seeker, but every blind person should take advantage of what is available. As I said earlier, the right equipment was purchased for me because I was plugged in. You remain plugged in by attending local NFB chapter meetings and conventions and by getting on mailing lists such as Job Opportunities for the Blind, the Braille Monitor, and other worthwhile publications. Developing new relationships and networking with those who have walked the path you are about to walk can help guarantee that you will not succumb to the same pitfalls that others have.

My life has decisively changed since my introduction to the NFB. New friends, experiences, opportunities and challenges have come my way. The question some might ask is, "How different would things be if you weren't plugged in?" The truth is that I am plugged in, so I don't have to wonder. What I do ponder is, what is next for me?

Recently I read an article by Carol Castellano in the *Braille Monitor* entitled "Possibilities." (By the way, this appears in the newest Kernel Book, entitled *Beginnings and Blueprints*.) In the article Carol recounts conversations that she had with her daughter Serena concerning her future. The article reminded me of some conversations that I had with my daughter concerning future possibilities. I said that I was considering going on to further my education. The other possibility was to change careers in a few years. My choices are limited only by my imagination.

The possibilities are countless. However, if you aren't plugged in, you will never be aware of the multitude of choices before you. Why limit yourself? Life has enough restrictions of its own. Don't add to them. Become plugged in and informed of the menu of choices in front of you. Place your order and enjoy. You are a peculiar type of hair dryer. You can decide to plug yourself in or not. Plug yourself in and get hot – on fire for success. The choice is yours.

I chose to be plugged in over three years ago. Being plugged in has revealed to me things that I wouldn't have known otherwise. This is my third state convention, and I am looking forward to my third national. If you have never attended a National Convention, by all means make an effort and meet us in New Orleans. You will assuredly feel the power of being plugged in.

## 20 WAYS TO OBTAIN SUCCESS

Author Unknown

**Editor's Note:** *These characteristics have been adapted from an email received by NFBNJ President Joe Ruffalo. It's okay if you don't see yourself in all 20 of them. Be happy to see yourself in just a few. Keep striving and in time the rest will come.*

1. **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Few people succeed in isolation. Asking for help doesn't mean you're weak. Actually, it's a sign of strength to know when you need assistance and who to seek out for that assistance.
2. **Say "Yes!" to new opportunities.** They don't come around every day, but when they do, jump on them. You may have no idea what you're getting into, but go for it. One good opportunity can lead to bigger and better ones.
3. **Keep your standards high.** Don't tolerate bad behavior and hold people accountable for their actions. Say good-bye to Debbie Downer, Angry Andy, Nasty Nellie and F'd Up Freddy. Successful people have no tolerance for them.
4. **Let go of things that aren't in your best interest.** Self-love and self-respect are key to your success. Love yourself enough to say "no" to anything that doesn't work for you, serve your purpose or drags you down.
5. **Don't seek praise.** If you're waiting for others to tell you how great you are, you may be waiting a long time. Be satisfied to do your part to the best of your ability. Actions speak louder than words, and in time, your deeds will be recognized.
6. **Recognize that failure is part of personal growth.** In fact, failure can be the point needed to succeed. Many people need to hit the bottom before they can reach the top. Crawling back from failure is a sure sign of success.
7. **Know who will do anything for you and recognize those who won't.** This can be a painful realization, but once you learn to see the signs of betrayal and smell the BS, you can build your life with only the people who deserve to be there.
8. **Don't complain.** Unless you're going through a debilitating diagnosis, unimaginable loss or a terrible trauma, most of what everyone goes through on a day-to-day basis is just "the small stuff." Don't sweat the small stuff. Live in a space of gratitude.
9. **Truly feel good about and celebrate others' successes.** Just because other people succeed, that doesn't make you a failure. Applaud the people who rise to the top. The more positive energy you give to other people's victories, the more positive energy you create for yourself. Jealousy has no place in success.

10. **Stay driven, especially when times are tough.** Rev that engine! Roll up your sleeves, get down and get dirty. Stay focused and get through the tough and difficult times.
11. **Have things to look forward to.** Everyone needs some fun in their lives. Make sure your calendar has some cool things, goals and plans that you're eagerly anticipating. This excitement fuels your spirit and keeps the pep in your step.
12. **Be there for others.** Provide others with guidance and compassion and be a pillar of support when others need you. Giving is actually a gift that you give yourself.
13. **Understand the value of mutual respect.** Your experiences, including your stresses and difficulties, shape who you are. Practice that understanding and realize that influence for your colleagues and friends.
14. **Love deeply and allow yourself to be loved.** Everyone wants love, but it's risky and scary because it's tied to something we fear: rejection. Try to open your heart without fear, you may find deep, true love and passion and compassion.
15. **Don't be a victim.** You're the co-creator of your life experiences and outcomes. Don't be kept down by life's bad days or play the "victim." Rise up and carry on.
16. **Don't let it matter what others think of you.** Know that the standards with which society judges people can be unrealistic, and face it: You can't please everyone. Just stay true to yourself and love the person you are.
17. **Learn from the negatives.** Life can be full of regrets and dismay, but don't hang onto them in a negative way. Convert what happened (or didn't) into a learning opportunity. No negative experience is ever wasted as long as you learn from it.
18. **Be assertive.** Clearly stated explanations help others understand your position. In turn, your respect, understanding and consideration of others' positions will be appreciated, as well.
19. **Practice patience.** Patience is a virtue that must be practiced on a daily basis. Without patience, it can be hard to ever make the type of impact or influence you want to have in the world. It takes patience to learn new skills, understand others' ideas and develop perspective as you travel your professional or personal path.
20. **Be happy.** This is the ultimate success. Who cares what the balance is in your bank account, how big your house is or how many luxurious vacations you take? If you're happy, then you're succeeding in life. And life is too short not to be happy.

## RECIPES

## BITTERSWEET CHOCOLATE PUDDING with SCENTED CREAM

Submitted by Jonathan Zobek

This recipe is one of Jonathan's favorites. It's from the cookbook *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat: Mastering the Elements of Good Cooking* by Samin Nosrat. The recipe can be found online at <https://www.eatyourbooks.com/library/recipes/1814572/bittersweet-chocolate-pudding>

**Ingredients:**

4 oz bittersweet chocolate, chopped	3 cups half and half 3 TBS cornstarch	3 TBS cocoa ½ tsp kosher salt
3 eggs	½ cup + 2 TBS sugar	

**Method:**

1. Place chocolate in heatproof bowl with mesh strainer on top, set aside.
2. In a separate bowl, whisk eggs. Set aside.
3. In a medium saucepan over low heat, add half and half. Heat until steam is visible and remove from heat before it boils.
4. In a medium size bowl, combine remaining ingredients: cornstarch, sugar, cocoa and salt. Whisk in the warm cream. Pour the mixture back into the saucepan.
5. Stir over medium low heat until the mixture becomes thicker. (Dip your spoon into the mixture; Nosrat says that if you can draw a line in the pudding on the back of the spoon, then it is thick enough.)
6. Add 2 cups of the cream mixture to the eggs. Whisk and return to the saucepan.
7. Lower the heat to low and whisk constantly until the mixture becomes thick or reaches 208 F on a candy thermometer.
8. Pour the mixture through the strainer, letting it melt the chopped chocolate below. Stir all together and blend with an emersion blender until smooth.
9. Taste, and add more salt, if desired.
10. Pour into 6 ramekins, tapping the bottom of each cup to burst air bubbles. Let cool. Serve at room temperature with **Scented Cream**.

**Ingredients:**

1 cup heavy cream	1 tsp vanilla extract
1 ½ tsp sugar	

**Method:**

1. Put metal mixing bowl and metal beaters or whisk in freezer for 20 mins. Add all ingredients to chilled bowl.
2. Whisk by hand or use electric mixer on low (Nosrat recommends switching from electric mixer to hand-held whisk once the first peaks appear in the cream). Continue whisking until mixture forms soft, fluffy cream. Chill until serving. Chill until serving.

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