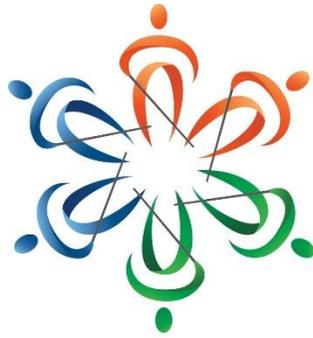


FALL / WINTER 2022



NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF THE BLIND
NEW JERSEY

Live the life you want.

The Sounding Board 2.0

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State Affiliate Office
PO Box 185
Keyport, NJ 07735
Email: president@nfbnj.org

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To subscribe via Newsline, contact Jane Degenshein at 973-736-5785 or Jdegen16@comcast.net

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.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

**From Annemarie Cooke, Editor, Sounding Board 2.0
September 10, 2022**

Greetings to you all. This issue of Sounding Board 2.0 is somewhat late, but I hope you'll find its contents worth the wait.

As you likely know, much has taken place in our Federation community since last April.

In this issue, there is a heartfelt and deeply personal tribute to Joe Ruffalo, who served us as affiliate president for 27 years and who died after a fierce battle with cancer in May.

The article, reprinted with permission from the July 2022 Braille Monitor, was written by our own David DeNotaris, a longtime friend and protegee of Joe and now a successful professional in his own right. David's recollections of his times spent with Joe are moving and so personal.

We're in a season of transition, somewhere between late summer and early autumn.

One of this issue's articles relates to the experience of travelling in a country that doesn't offer the same access and accommodations that we have come to expect in the US.

Melissa Lomax visited Ghana this summer to be part of a college friend's wedding. Her take on bridging the gap between independence and requesting and accepting assistance is, indeed, thought-provoking.

And, just in time for shopping that leads us back to school, work, or early holiday prep, in another article, Melissa offers some useful tips for navigating a shopping mall, especially on those days when you just feel like being by yourself.

Speaking of navigating, Tyion Lashley shares his joy of discovering that the decision to train with a guide dog was exactly the right decision for him.

Do you want to know more about the groups that make up our New Jersey affiliate? Janie Degenshein fills us in on the history of the Senior Division, while MaryJo Partyka tells us about the Braille Committee.

Additionally, MaryJo, who headed our BELL Academy team this year, tells us about the success of our first in-person BELL program since 2019.

And Miss Ruth Williams shares details of her volunteering and why she does it. Remember, everyone in our NFBNJ affiliate is a volunteer; no one gets paid for anything they do for the benefit of us all.

We're pleased to introduce one of our newest Sounding Board 2.0 contributors, Krystle Allen, who details the activities of Eyes Like Mine, Inc., a multi-faceted program for blind, visually impaired, and deafblind people in the Newark area. ELM also sponsors the annual Ms. Blind Diva Empowerment pageant, which is set for September 30th - October 1st.

Finally, affiliate president Linda Melendez, who also answers to the nickname "Warrior Princess," uses her Sounding Board 2.0 space to explain the hows and whys of this year's NFBNJ State Convention, which is being held from November 10th -13th. Her column is headlined "Words from the Warrior Princess."

The editorial team and I are always open to suggestions for articles; please e-mail them to me at aec732@gmail.com. In the subject line, please write "Sounding Board 2.0" so I'll know what the message is about.

I hope you enjoy this edition of Sounding Board 2.0!

WORDS FROM THE WARRIOR PRINCESS

**By Linda Melendez
President, National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey**

In less than two months, we'll be back together for our first in-person state convention since 2019! Great news, right?

Much thought, discussion, and consideration by the NFBNJ officers and board, as well as input from many of our members, led to the decision to hold our 46th Annual State Convention in-person from November 10th -13th this year.

It's important for all of you to know how this decision was made.

First, just after our 43rd Annual State Convention at the Delta by Marriott in Iselin in Woodbridge Township, the NFBNJ placed a deposit for 2020 so that the hotel would hold our dates for us. The hotel had reasonable prices and is accessible by AccessLink, as well as NJ Transit train.

We all know what happened next: in March of 2020, New Jersey and the rest of the country went on lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, our 2020 convention, as well as the 2021 convention, were held virtually over Zoom.

Now, two-thirds of the way through 2022, there are COVID-19 vaccines and restrictions have been lifted in many public places. At this point, we had to consider whether to continue with the virtual convention on Zoom or cautiously return to an in-person convention.

Many NFBNJ members let me know they were eager to get back together in person. In fact, NFB's national office has determined that all chapter meetings, except for At Large chapters, must return to in-person gatherings starting in January 2023.

And remember, the Delta by Marriott is still holding our deposit of several thousand dollars, which we would forfeit if we don't have an in-person convention in November.

Also, please note that the hotel management – and not the NFBNJ – set the new pricing for meals and rooms. Because of COVID-19, the hotel restaurant is offering very limited service, which is why we opted for the box lunches.

The Friday and Saturday dinners are costing several dollars above the \$50 attendees are paying and the affiliate is absorbing the overage. Also, we negotiated \$20 for the box lunch, \$5 less than the hotel's original asking price. Yes, everything, everywhere has increased in price since 2019!

In terms of health and safety protocols, we've decided to mandate that masks be worn by all attendees, as well as requiring that they show proof of a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of attending the convention.

These precautionary measures are based on the best advice from national and local public health authorities, as well as much-valued input from an NFBNJ board member who has been working as a COVID-19 contact tracer here in New Jersey for two years.

We've also put protocols in place for any attendee who may become ill while at the convention. Hand sanitizer will be available to all conventioners, as well.

We are also aware that some NFBNJ members have secondary health issues that compromise their immune systems, and, for that reason, they won't be attending the convention in person for their own personal health and safety.

So, no crystal ball here; your board made the convention decision based on the best information and guidance available at the time.

We are looking forward to reconnecting in person with our NFBNJ family, especially at the Family Reunion Dinner on Friday evening. And we are anticipating a safe and COVID-free convention. Fittingly, this year's theme is: "Ain't No Stopping Us Now; We're on the Move."

To learn more about the 46th Annual National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey State Convention and pre-register click on the link below.

<https://www.nfbnj.org/state-convention/>

Reprinted with kind permission from the July 2022 Braille Monitor

A TRIBUTE THAT CAN ONLY BEGIN TO CAPTURE MY FRIEND, MY BROTHER, AND THE MOST IMPORTANT MEMBER OF MY FEDERATION FAMILY

by David DeNotaris

Seldom do I feel apprehensive but trying to capture the life of Joe Ruffalo is no small undertaking. I've known Joe for most of my life, and he has not only been a larger-than-life character, but he has been at the center of so many things I have wanted to do and have eventually done.

Not only do I want to tell Joe's story as I have experienced it, but I've tried to incorporate the experiences of so many he has touched. Of course, I am not so naive as to believe I can come close to capturing all that he was and will continue to be for people, so let us not think of this as the first or the last article about Joe. What I do hope is that this one can demonstrate his generosity, humor, and enthusiasm for many generations to come.

I met Joe on a day I will forever remember; it was December 29, 1983, and the location was the Essex Racket Club and Fitness Center in West Orange, NJ. It was an event sponsored by the Association of Blind Athletes of NJ (ABANJ). We were brought together by Rich Ruffalo, Joe's younger brother. Rich was my high school biology teacher and a coach who talked me into going out for weight lifting. Like Joe and me, Rich was in the process of going blind due to retinitis pigmentosa, more normally abbreviated as "RP." I was a young teen trying to find a way to distinguish myself and find something that would get me noticed for something positive and in which I could take pride.

I was encouraged by Joe to always set goals and work toward achieving them. One of them had to do with weightlifting. He taught me through demonstrating in his own life that the way to succeed in reaching a goal was to write it down, go after it with lots of enthusiasm, track my progress, and eventually achieve it. He said that one of the advantages to writing down and tracking a goal came at the end. "Just think how good you are going to feel when you write the words 'Goal Achieved' on your list."

On that cold December day, not only did I start learning about setting goals, but also about the value of making friends I could look up to for guidance and as role models. Joe and Rich encouraged me to become involved in the Association of Blind Athletes in New Jersey. Joe's heart came through to me when I realized that he celebrated my milestones with every bit as much enthusiasm as he did his own. He still holds a world record in the Paralympic weightlifting competition, but it isn't surprising that you heard that from someone other than Joe. As he so often said, "It's not about me, me, me. It's about we, we, we!"

This fantastic man was more than a role model and a friend. Joe was exactly the soldier you wanted by your side, and as Rick Fox remarked at Joe's memorial service, Joe was both a general and a lieutenant. As a general, he could see the big picture, could think strategically, and predict with remarkable success what was likely to happen in the future as a result of actions taken today. As a lieutenant, he was marching with his men and was in tune with the needs of each and every one of them.

Our friend came to the Federation in 1988. Joe's Federation sister, Jerilyn Higgins, has observed through much thought, study, and experience that the best way to get someone to do something you want them to do is to nag. It took her six months, but eventually she got Joe to attend his first meeting. Joe's wife, Judy, knowing him better than anyone, told him "I know you're going to go off and join another organization. Isn't it enough that you are already a part of the Lions Club, the Knights of Columbus, the Boy Scouts, and the special education board? You are going to join; I know it." This he vehemently denied and made Judy a promise that if he joined, he would take her out to dinner. When he got home, Judy took one look at him and said, "I told you so. You joined, didn't you?" Joe just smiled and asked Judy where she wanted to go out for dinner.

Joe often told the story of his first meeting and what convinced him to be a part of this organization he had previously thought to be radical, militant, and unreasonable. He shared the story that when he arrived at the meeting, Florence Bloom, then the president of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, asked if he would like a cup of coffee. He replied in the affirmative, believing that in the meeting of the blind, a coffee would be delivered. Florence informed him that the coffee was at the back of the room and that the decaf was on the left and the regular on the right. He found this both interesting and motivating. He liked the idea of blind people doing for themselves but was worried enough about his

ability to carry that he poured himself less than half a cup of coffee, reasoning he would not spill any.

As the meeting progressed, the discussion turned to fundraising, and Joe observed that the Federation could easily make dollars instead of pennies on each sale if only it upped its marketing game. Florence was not defensive; it didn't bother her that he was a new person on the block proposing significant change. She said that she could see his point and asked that he be in charge of the project. That quickly led to his being in charge of all of the affiliate's fundraising.

This was the first of many projects to which Joe lent his name, his talent, and his energy. Just how he would be called on to serve he couldn't know, but one morning he got a call, and on the other end of the phone line was President Maurer. "Good morning, Mr. President," Dr. Maurer began.

"I'm sorry sir, you've got the wrong number. This is Joe, and I'm the vice president."

"No, I don't have the wrong number. Congratulations, President Ruffalo." It seems that the previous president gave up her job, and Joe's assumption to the presidency was first communicated by a man he was so honored to serve under for decades.

So, by 1993, Joe was the president of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, and he held that position until 2020. State convention attendance was from fifteen to twenty when he joined, and now convention planners routinely count on three hundred or more to fill convention sessions. An affiliate that had two chapters when he joined had seven chapters and seven special interest divisions when he left the office some twenty-seven years later.

I attended my first national convention in 1992, and if memory serves, it was the first national convention for Joe as well. I remember seeing him at the New Jersey affiliate table, and although I don't remember what we were selling, I remember vividly how excited he was about it: lots of folks take their turn selling, but Joe did not regard it as a burdensome task. I will never forget observing him standing there, rubbing his hands together, and shouting out with enthusiasm that was infectious. As the crowd would come and make their purchases, you could hear Joe saying "Isn't this great! Isn't this great!"

One of the things I remember about Joe is that every time he approached me with a request, the way he introduced it was to say “Dave, I would like to ask you for a small favor.” A small favor seemed so little, and with Joe it was never a big favor, not even when he asked me to be the coordinator for the job opportunities for the blind program. Just having gotten a job myself, I argued how very busy I was. Joe was sympathetic. He said, “Well, how about this? Let’s say you try it for a couple months, and if it doesn’t work out, get back with me, and we’ll find someone else.” Well that two-month temporary appointment turned into most of a decade of service, but I got as well as I gave, learning from people like Lorraine Rovig and others how to organize activities, advertise them, and generate excitement about them. Here, too, Joe was a tremendous help, always reminding me that the best way to get someone enthused was to capture in a lead phrase or a sentence (a hook) exactly what you intended to do. He understood the importance of establishing momentum from the beginning and then maintaining it throughout the life of a project. His constant refrain was, “nothing ever happens without enthusiasm,” so it is not surprising that enthusiasm was something he brought in large measure to everything he did.

In talking with Carol Castellano, I learned that Joe was a master of the small ask. “He would call me and always start out by saying, ‘Two minutes, three minutes, that’s all I need.’ This might happen five or six times a day, and almost always those two or three-minute conversations went half an hour. I knew it would, but I loved being a part of whatever Joe was a part of, and I knew I was honored to be on such a team.”

Of course, Joe was about much more than selling, competition, growing, and achievement. He was about kindness, manners, being a gentleman, and living the Golden Rule. He often observed that the important thing was not the growth that took place in the affiliate but the difference we were able to make in the lives of people who interned, then decided to become a part of the organization. He deeply believed that if you did what was right for people, organizational growth would take care of itself. Joe would always say, “People don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care.”

When Joe learned about somebody who was going blind, whether it was talking to them in person or to one of their relatives, the time he was willing to spend on the phone with them knew no bounds. He knew it was all about forging relationships and through them giving the hope that would determine whether blindness was a tragedy or simply a nuisance and an inconvenience. It was not

uncommon to find Joe on the telephone late in the evening and sometimes during the very early morning. This is what all of the organizational stuff was about. Bringing hope, creating opportunity, and seeing change were all results of Joe's positive attitude and at the same time the very reason for it.

After college there were times when I wanted to participate in some particular activity of the Federation and simply didn't have the money. When Joe found out, he would pull me aside, slip me some money, or let me know that this or that would be taken care of: "Your room is covered." "We have your registration and banquet already, so don't worry about them." I listened closely during chapter and affiliate treasurer reports, but never did I hear about a fund that made me a grant. I asked Joe about this once, my theory being that perhaps the costs were rolled into convention revenue or maybe there was a scholarship covered by other attendees' registration. His response: "No, Dave, I just take care of it out of my pocket. You know, if people don't have it, they can't come, and letting them show up and hearing something positive just may change their life, and that makes all the difference."

I used to tease him and wonder why he so frequently won in the 50-50 drawing. Of course, the greater number of tickets you have, the greater chance you have of winning, but I think there was also something else involved. Joe would tell me repeatedly, "Dave, don't worry about being a go-getter; concern yourself with being a go-giver." I think that kind of attitude was reflected back to him in the form of what we called luck but may have been a bit of the Divine intervening to see that Joe could continue his good work.

The one thing I treasured most about Joe was his ability to laugh not only at situations but also about himself. One story I love to share is a bunch of us at a United States Association of Blind Athletes' event went out to dinner at a busy restaurant. They directed/controlled its customer lines using poles connected together by velvet ropes often found at banks/restaurants/registration areas. We found ourselves in a long line, and Joe's brother Rich decided to play a prank. He did this by gently unfastening one of the long velvet ropes and attaching it onto Joe's backpack. Once Rich knew the rope was secured, he yelled to Joe "Come on Joe, get moving, you're holding up the line." Of course, Joe set off with real determination, and the ropes and polls that made-up the crowd-control system of the restaurant made a joyous crash, boom, bash noise as it collapsed. The only noise louder than those clanking poles was the laughter of Joe Ruffalo, the man who, no matter the circumstance, never got ruffled.

Joe used to tell me "I don't have a college degree, but I will work harder than anyone else." What a great lesson that was to me: a lesson about taking what some would consider an adversity or a detriment and turning it around to be a major source of motivation. But it was more than work; it was about attitude. "It is not about me, me, me; no, it is about we, we, we."

Joe was hardworking, determined, and driven; when he got an idea, he would run with it! Some close friends would playfully call him "Joe Rockhead" a reference to Fred Flintstone's good friend from the Water Buffalo lodge.

Joe was not only a great soldier for the National Federation of the Blind but also for the Knights of Columbus and the Lions Club, the latter giving him the highest award they could offer. There was no question that Joe was loyal through and through, the finest in what you would want in a good soldier. If there were things that bothered him or questions he couldn't answer, his standard refrain, in which he believed totally was, "They are in a better position to know than I am. I'm sure they know more than I do and have already considered this."

One of the things that most endeared me to Joe was his concern about me and about my family; his questions were not general but specific: how is Marianne, young David, MaryKate, and Emily.

I used to love it when Joe would show up at the NFBNJ Christmas Party at the Gateway Hilton Hotel in Newark, and the kids would go crazy because they observed that Santa Claus was carrying a white cane. A blind man who was happy, a blind man who was a major part of a celebration; a blind man who was always leading in holiday festivities! What an example of a role model and what better way to let young children know that blind people can be givers too.

Joe was very involved with the programs of the New Jersey Commission for the Blind. Much of his work was as a volunteer, but he did have at least two paid positions with funds from the Commission. One of them was working in the Leadership Education Advocacy and Determination Program serving children from thirteen to twenty-one. I interviewed one person who remembered one meeting that was held at Joe's house, and the activity was cooking. He helped a young man make a pie, and at the end of the session the young man pleaded with Joe to adopt him.

I played a small role in helping Joe gain a paid position working with seniors. I was asked to review a proposal to fund a program through the Commission. It was called the Senior Community Independent Living Skills Program. As I read, I could see Joe written all over the success this program could have, but, near the end of it, I came upon a stumbling block. I noted with regret that the manager must have a college degree. That was too limiting, so I inserted a part of a sentence that said "or equivalent life experience." When I turned the proposal back to the director and told him about my addition, he agreed that it was something that should have been included in the document from the beginning.

As soon as I completed that call, I called Joe Ruffalo and suggested he apply. At first, he was skeptical, noting his lack of formal qualifications. I told him about the substitution of life experience. Then he was concerned because he had no resumé, but with a three-way call between Joe, Carol Castellano, and myself, Joe was able to submit an application the very next day, and he served for more than a decade helping seniors. He loved the work, it showed, and just as he had with his transition-aged students, he and others could see that his work was making a positive difference in the lives of blind folks. What I learned that day was that even the most positive among us occasionally need encouraging. Joe had some doubts about Joe, but his friends did not. One of his often-quoted remarks came to serve Joe as well as the many men and women he helped: "People need encouragement like flowers need rain."

Although this article is about Joe's life, it would be incomplete if we did not say that Joe is being buried at Arlington Cemetery, an honor reserved for those with distinguished service. Among his medals is a bronze star, representing heroic achievement, heroic service, meritorious achievement, or meritorious service. His service came at a cost, Joe returning with occasional eruption of PTSD. One day when he threw himself and his sister Jane to the ground and she asked what he was doing, in a subdued and apologetic voice he apologized: "I thought I was saving us; for a moment we were both in Saigon."

As flattered as I am to try to chronicle the life of my friend, one of the hard things about writing this is that I have known him the majority of my life, and he is so much more than a friend: he was my advisor, my older brother, and my mentor. Interestingly, he would at times argue otherwise, many times identifying me as his mentor and then quickly letting people know that one did not need to be more advanced in age in order to mentor. One simply had to have experiences from which another could benefit, and he credited me generously with that, using as

but one example the observation that I encouraged and helped teach him to use the screen-reading program JAWS.

The only reason I can write this is that I know that no single article can capture the larger-than-life character that was Joe Ruffalo, and I trust others will fill in the blanks and tell all of the other stories that must be told. In writing remembrances, we sometimes ask ourselves what we should leave out—those things less flattering, less admirable, more revelatory of one's darker side. This has not been my issue, for there was little of this in Joe. My problem is simply that there isn't enough space in this article or creativity in me to say the kind of thank you that Joe deserves. I trust that he knows the enormity of the task we are all trying to undertake in honoring him, and he would encourage us to be kind to ourselves, give one another the time and love he can no longer give, and to understand that this really was never about him but about us.

One day I recall Joe calling me and sharing, "David, do you know what NFB stands for?"

"Yes Joe, of course, National Federation of the Blind."

"Yes, correct, but it also stands for Never Felt Better!" Joe was blessed to find the NFB, and then he found himself.

I end this with tears in my eyes, love and respect in my heart, and gratitude in my soul for having the opportunity to know, learn from, and, like so many, be encouraged by our good friend, brother, and mentor, Joe Ruffalo! Joe would so often end what he wrote with: "We care, we share, we grow." And yes, Joe, we promise to keep doing all of this and more. Thank you, Joe, — you were and still are a difference maker!

NFBNJ BELL ACADEMY RETURNS IN-PERSON FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2019!

**By MaryJo Partyka
BELL Coordinator and President, Capital Chapter**

The morning of July 18, 2022, proved to be a day of excitement, both for the five students who were attending the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey's seventh in-person "Braille Enrichment through Literacy and Learning" (BELL) Academy, as well as the members of the BELL Team who would be instructing them.

The Bell Academy, which was established by our NFB National Office, consists of a two-week program, which is open to blind children between the ages of four and 12. The Academy provides the opportunity to learn Braille and daily living skills in a focused two-week program with a certified Teacher for the Visually Impaired (TVI) and many blind adult mentors.

Our last in-person BELL Program took place in 2019; however, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NFB National Office developed a BELL In-home Edition, which the students utilized in 2020 and 2021. The classes were taught by TVIs over the Zoom platform. Because the classes consisted of children of various ages, the parents were required to assist their children with the two Zoom lessons they received each day, as our NFBNJ BELL staff mentored the students.

This year's BELL Team consisted of Linda Melendez, NFBNJ President; Mary Jo Partyka, BELL Coordinator; Ellen Sullivan, BELL Secretary; and Sarah Scapardine, Lead BELL Academy Teacher. Sarah is an NFB National Teacher of Tomorrow and a Teacher of Blind/Visually Impaired students in the Montgomery Township school district. Additionally, Ilire Goca, a college student preparing for a TVI career, served as Assistant Teacher.

Rounding out the team was high school student Vidhi Raval from the EDGE (Employment, Development, Guidance & Engagement) Program for transition-aged students who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind.

Our first challenge consisted of securing and formalizing our location, which was the Raritan Bay Area YMCA, located at 357 New Brunswick Ave. in Perth

Amboy. The location was excellent. The room we used was large enough to accommodate the needs of our staff and students. The students were able to play on the YMCA playground, as well as the gym if it was too hot or it was raining. YMCA staff allowed us to use the facility's theater for the BELL graduation.

In addition to securing our location, we met several times to determine how we would run our program, who would be there each day, and what materials would be helpful for the students. Our Board of Directors granted us permission to purchase some new equipment, including the Braille Buzz, Swing Cells for each child, the Word Playhouse and other useful Braille learning tools.

The Braille Buzz is a toy that assists young children in understanding the dot combinations used to make Braille letters. The toy is shaped like a bee and the top part of the toy contains the Braille letters of the alphabet. Students can press these letters to find out what they are, what sounds they make, and what word starts with that letter. The bottom part of the toy contains a Braille keyboard, along with a spacebar that students can use to type out the letters.

The Math Window is a tactile tool used to represent math problems. It is a board that comes with magnets that have numbers and different signs of operation on them. Students can arrange these pieces on the board to assist in working out long division problems.

Finally, the Word Playhouse Kit from American Printing House for the Blind was used by the children to practice letter sounds and compass directions. Sarah arranged the Velcro letters into rows and the children had to put their finger on the letter, and, along with the teacher, recite the letter name, the word that starts with that letter, and the sound that letter makes.

Sarah also arranged the letters in compass rows in which "N" for North was at the top of the playhouse, "W" for West was on the left, "S" for South was at the bottom of the playhouse, and "E" for East was on the right side. This activity was accompanied by daily practice of the "Cardinal Directions," which helped the children navigate around the room and find their seats.

This year's students included three former BELL attendees: R.M., age 9, from Skillman, M.S., age 6, from Brick Township, and Z.S., age 9, from Bloomfield.

Our new BELL students included I.R., age 8, from Howell, and Z.F. age 6, from Matawan.

In addition to their two daily Braille lessons, the students learned spreading techniques for making their own sandwiches at lunch time. Because the program was held in-person, the students had the opportunity to develop relationships with one another and with the staff. This is a very important part of the BELL Academy because, in most instances, a blind child is the only blind student in their school, so coming together with other children who share blindness is very empowering for them.

The students also worked together during their lessons and were encouraged to use daily living skills, both at BELL and in their homes, which would help them become more independent. During each morning meeting, the students shared with the group what they had done the day before to become more independent and they were excited to share this information and ring their bells.

Another highlight of the BELL Academy was a visit from Jane Degenshein, who is a member of our affiliate and a retired music teacher. She introduced herself and asked the students to sing the “Be My Echo” song where they said “Hi” and gave their names and ages.

Jane explained the musical laws of size and pitch and brought a tuba, piccolo, and flute to demonstrate how the laws worked. The small piccolo had the highest pitch, while the larger tuba had the lowest pitch. Jane also played rhythms and the students learned that the slower beats represented whole notes, while the faster beats represented quarter notes. The students marched to the “Pancake Robot Song.”

Jane also taught them a Braille song to the tune of “Deck the Halls,” which she composed herself. The students liked the song so much that they sang it every time they entered the elevator.

During the second week of the program, affiliate members Rick Fox and Debbie Bloomer (who had visited several BELL Academies) made another appearance. They introduced themselves and asked the students to give their names and the names of the towns where they lived.

The students prepared the following questions for Rick and Debbie: How does Rick's seeing-eye dog, Flash, help him get around? What technologies do they use to do their work? The most popular question, which everyone answered, concerned their favorite food.

Debbie and Rick made Braille Bingo Boards for each of the students. The Bingo squares were outlined with puff paint. There was one winner who received the grand prize, but the other students received a gift as well.

Rick and Debbie brought a Silly Jokes Braille book and Rick encouraged the students to guess the punch lines to some of the jokes. They also brought a book called "Sherlock Holmes Watson Riddles."

The students also used their Velcro boards to do a Word Find, based on the keys on a typewriter. Everyone enjoyed Rick, Debbie, and Flash's visit. Oh yes, henceforth our lunch period was full of laughter from the creative jokes the children shared.

The theme for this year's program was "Music, Movement, and Mathematics." The National Federation of the Blind National Office provided the students with white canes, slates and styluses, tambourines, and sleep shades, which they used when reading Braille and when they walked outside.

Regarding movement, each student received one mobility lesson from an instructor from the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired of New Jersey (CBVINJ).

In addition, the students walked to the firehouse for their first field trip. Fire Chief Ed Mullen and his staff taught the students fire emergency skills (Stop, Drop and Roll), as well as demonstrating the equipment and letting the children try some of it out (like the fire hose and siren and dressing up in fire gear!)

We brought audible soccer balls, basketballs, and footballs that the students could use in the gym and outside. In preparation for their field trip to the Keansburg boardwalk, the students learned about money, including the denominations of each coin and how to fold various paper currency so they would remember what they represented if they needed to pay for something.

On the field trip, the students walked with blind mentors, ordered their own food at lunch, and paid for it themselves. They enjoyed rides at the amusement park

and ice cream at the end of the day. Best of all, they formed friendships and planned outings with each other for after the BELL Academy. It is apparent from the reactions of the staff, students, and parents that this year's BELL Academy was successful.

The students received instructions in Braille and daily living skills each day. The instructions were tailored to the needs of each student.

On the last day of the BELL Academy, the students and their parents attended the graduation and enjoyed a pizza lunch.

President Melendez spoke and introduced the teachers and volunteers. Each of the students received certificates and each student talked about one thing they had learned in BELL and what they liked most about the BELL Academy.

After the completion of this year's BELL Academy, our lead teacher and TVI, Sarah Scapardine, sent summaries to each parent sharing the students' performances and their accomplishments with Braille, as well as suggested resources for the parents. Sarah truly shares the NFB belief that "Blindness is not a characteristic that defines us or our future—we can live the lives we want. Blindness does not hold us back."

THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND OF NEW JERSEY'S SENIOR DIVISION: TRAVELING INTO OUR GOLDEN YEARS TOGETHER

**By Janie Degenshein
President Senior & Technology Divisions**

The National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey's Senior Division, also known as the National Association of Senior Blind (NJASB), has had a marvelous journey from infancy until today.

Here are some of my fondest memories as we traveled from inception to our thriving division of 2022.

In September of 2010, Joe Ruffalo, then our President, decided we needed a membership/leadership weekend at the NFB National Center in Baltimore. Forty of the future leaders of our affiliate attended this bonding and learning session. We did everything independently, including using a power saw, cooking on the barbecue, driving in a simulated car, and all the while, with humor and camaraderie. At that time, we'd formed a Senior Committee, which I chaired.

After returning, we looked forward to our state convention, at which point our Senior Committee became a division. In our beginning years, we had about 15 to 20 members.

I started a project called S.O.S. (Spotlight on Seniors), with the goal of teaching Windows 7 and JAWS 11 to the six members who had enrolled. The students were: Mary Jo Partyka, Linda DeBerardinis, Alice Eaddy, Johanna Baccan, Angela Perone and Lester Cameron.

S.O.S. met weekly via Skype, and the students took notes and were assigned homework. We completed the project after about four months and the students were eager to learn more, so I continued session two with further areas of discovery. It was very successful, and we had fun doing it together.

We grew as a division, and as of 2015, which was our fifth anniversary, we had 25 members.

We started the monthly Senior Division-sponsored book clubs then and covered many genres, which we still do to this day. We have read Mitch Albom's "The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto," Rodney J. Walker's, "A New Day One: Trauma, Grace, and a Young Man's Journey from Foster Care to Yale," as well as "The Blind Doctor: The Jacob Bolotin Story," by Rosalind Perlman. I believe the latter is a must read for anyone, sighted or blind, but especially for the blind. What an incredible individual Dr. Bolotin was, growing up in the late 19th century and becoming the first doctor in his area. It is truly an inspirational read.

We continued to grow, and our monthly meetings usually had over 35 members on the Zoom calls. As of 2020, we were 45 in number and decided that we needed to continue to meet informally each week to help each other deal with COVID-19. During the summer months, we met every week for a coffee chat via conference calls to keep us all connected.

One of the goals of the Senior Division is to ensure that we all stay in touch and feel encouraged. We send cards and make caring calls to any member in need of support, healing or just a friendly voice. This has been especially important during the pandemic.

Each month, our committee chair phones active members on their birthday to wish them well. Another popular feature is the “Senior Corner” segment of our conference calls. This is a favorite among many members, as we share quotes, stories, and thought-provoking senior concerns.

When the Talking Book and Braille Center (TBBC) stopped sending out books due to COVID-19, I downloaded cartridges for seniors who had no way to download books and supplied over 50 cartridges that held more than 2,500 books. I became the satellite library for those people and some of them weren't even members of the Senior Division; just seniors who relied on reading.

So, you can see that our Senior Division is a virtual second home for seniors who want to feel welcomed, valued, and connected as a member of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey.

It is our hope to empower seniors to live well to the best of their ability. If we can help them feel more confident and connected, they are that much closer to our community's shared goal of living the life they want.

If you or someone you know may be interested in joining the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey's Senior Division, feel free to reach out to me via email at jdegen16@comcast.net or via phone at 973-736-5785.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THAT BRAILLE

**By Mary Jo Partyka
Capital Chapter President**

I became blind shortly after birth due to a condition known as retinopathy of prematurity. When I was three or four years old, the New Jersey Commission for the Blind required me to attend nursery school and sent a teacher to my house

so I could learn Braille. I learned the Braille alphabet by reading flash cards, which the teacher had created so I could practice.

By the time I started school, I'd learned to use a six-key machine called a Perkins Braille Writer. Until I learned to type on a regular typewriter in third grade, I wrote out my homework in Braille and my mother printed my answers below my homework so the teachers could read them. All my books were in Braille when I attended grammar school, so I was able to keep up with my classmates.

Many of my books in high school and college were on audiotape; however, I used Braille to do math and to take notes when I attended college, graduate school, and during my 35 years of employment with the state of New Jersey.

I joined the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey in 2000 and became the president of the Capital chapter. The NFBNJ had tried to organize a chapter in the Trenton area several times but had never succeeded.

When our former affiliate president, Joe Ruffalo, found out I lived there, he immediately told me that I should start a chapter, and, as a result, it has been in existence for 22 years.

I am the First Vice President of the NFBNJ Board of Directors, the Coordinator of the BELL (Braille Enrichment through Literacy and Learning) Academy and the Chairperson of the Braille Committee.

When I joined the NFB, we did not have a Braille Committee. The NFB national office in Baltimore had started numerous divisions, including the National Association to Promote the Use of Braille. In 2008, Joe Ruffalo suggested that we should form a Braille Division in New Jersey. As part of the Braille Division, we realized that we would need a Braille printer to make state convention agendas, Braille menus for conventions, and other materials, available to people who could not read print. I obtained a grant from the NFB Imagination Fund, which paid for the Braille printer.

In 2015, the NFB national office determined that it had done everything necessary to promote the use of Braille throughout the United States; therefore, both the national and local Braille divisions were incorporated into committees.

One of our goals as members of the Braille Committee is to help others learn Braille. To that end, we developed a Braille mentoring program in which those

who wished for lessons could contact us and we would match them with mentors who lived in their geographical area.

There are times when we receive requests from people who live in rural areas where obtaining transportation can pose a problem for the mentors. In those instances, we encourage those who want to learn Braille to contact the Hadley School for the Blind, which offers an excellent Braille correspondence course.

Our committee has come up with a list of materials that mentors can use when teaching Braille. We will pay for materials for the mentors, but the students are required to purchase their own materials. We also encourage children and adult Braille readers to enter the annual “Braille Readers are Leaders” contest where they could win prizes, based on their specific categories of reading ability.

At our 2021 state convention, our guest speaker, Deborah Kent Stein, who lives in Illinois, informed us about a program that they’d started called the LIFE (Literacy is for Everyone) program. The members get together via conference call each month and read part of a Braille book, which the group agrees upon in advance. We would like to start a similar program in New Jersey. Some of our members use the National Library Service (NLS) E-Reader to read books. Members who do not have the reader can obtain a copy of the book from the (BARD) site. We would like to use this program as a means of helping people to learn Braille.

Our committee meets on the Zoom platform at 7:00 PM on the second Wednesday of January, April, June, September, and at the state convention in November. We are always looking for new members and new ideas on how to make Braille meaningful for everyone who wants to learn it.

To join the Braille Committee, you must be a current dues-paying member of the NFBNJ and must complete a membership form, which is available on the NFBNJ website, www.nfbnj.org/committee-membership-form.

If you are interested in joining our committee or learning Braille, please contact me, Mary Jo Partyka, at choirnfb@gmail.com for more information.

THE 5 STEPS I FOLLOW TO NAVIGATE ANY MALL WITH NO VISION OR LOW VISION

By Melissa Lomax

Central Jersey Chapter Member, Co-Chair of NFBNJ Membership Committee, Youth Program Manager, Disability Advocate, and Lifelong Mentor

The fact that I enjoy navigating malls as a blind person is not amazing—it's normal. Instead of being afraid of these massive buildings, I have developed methods to navigate that help me when my vision is at its best, which is not very good, or when my vision is at its worst and practically nonexistent. I can go to any mall in any state with just my cane and smart phone and be just fine. I know that many people, including ones who are blind, love shopping with others they know—I just happen not to be one of these people.

So, here's how I do it!

Step 1: I explore the online mall directory before going shopping.

The directory will either tell me what level the store is on, or it will give the floor and the closest proximity to one of the anchor stores. First, I look for stores I'd like to visit in advance to see if any are close to each other and take note of the nearby anchor store or the floor.

Step 2: I learn the anchor stores at the mall.

Even if the stores I want are only near two anchor stores, I research all of them in the mall so I can understand where I am at any time. Anchor stores are usually in corners at the very end of corridors. So, I know that if the mall map says that a store is close to an anchor store, I can guess that it is either in the same hallway or right outside it. I can also already guess that if I get near an anchor store on the first floor, but the store I want is nearby on the second floor, I can search for a way to get upstairs, either in the hallway or inside of the anchor store so that I don't lose my bearings. When thinking about finding ways to get to different levels, I know that stairs are usually located in the middle of hallways, either as an opening around a circle or in the middle of the floor. Elevators can either be in the middle of the hallway or tucked away, so I prefer finding an anchor store if I need it because those are most often on the perimeter of the store. Escalators

are the easiest to find because they can easily be heard from far away. Fun fact: escalators are usually located near the main outside entrance of department stores or in the main circle right outside an anchor store hallway. If the mall is huge, I make sure to find out which store is closest to an escalator so I can find it again.

Step 3: I get to exploring!

If my eyes are not irritating me, I can easily search for any store with a logo that I can clearly read, like FYE, Forever 21, Victoria's Secret, or H&M. Most often, I use the camera on my phone to zoom in on the tops of stores to find even more names. I don't have to worry about watching my step because I am using my cane properly at the same time. For the days when my vision is not as good or I'm feeling social, I will walk very closely to store entrances until I find one that I want to enter. For me, that means a smaller store because I know it may be emptier and the people working there will easily notice me. I know how big or small a store is based on the size of its entrance and the sound I hear inside. When I get someone's attention, I start by asking the name of the store I am in. For the days when I don't feel like talking, landmarks are my best friend. If I find a food stand, Starbucks, restaurant, a sneaker store, or another location that has a very distinctive smell, I feel like I've hit the jackpot, because I'll easily remember the hallway and know that if I get confused while traveling, I can make my way back to a familiar area. It's also even better when malls have water fountains or other large attractions, like a carousel, in their main hallways, because it acts as a beacon for me to regroup.

Step 4: Then I use the knowledge of the store I found to my advantage.

I look at the mall directory to see which anchor store is closest to me. If I am in the right hallway, I'll either walk around the entire hallway until I find the store I want using all my senses, or I'll ask a store employee for directions to my destination. If I am not in the correct hallway, I may ask someone for directions to the anchor store closest to where I need to go, since they would most likely know this, when small stores' employees may not. Or I may choose to just leave that hallway and find a new one to start exploring. Either way, I'm also memorizing the stores as they relate to anchor stores, so I have a better understanding of the layout of the mall.

Step 5: Shop!

When I get into a store I like, I find the register first. It's easy to hear the beeping or the sound of hangers and bags. I ask for a shopping assistant, or a store associate to help me find items of interest. I especially love it if this person is super knowledgeable about the products in the store, because they'll show me items that my friends or family may miss. Having someone who knows the store makes shopping go by much faster. And, if I need to try on clothing, I simply Facetime my friends or send pictures, so I get the best of both worlds—my independence and my friends' support!

It's that easy, and for me that makes it more exhilarating! Each store I find is a small win that I celebrate, and each time I am confused or searching, it is a chance to create new landmarks. I know that these skills take time to develop and execute, which is why I clear an entire day every time I need to go shopping!

AT YOUR SERVICE: VOLUNTEERING AS A WAY OF LIFE

By Miss Ruth Williams

Affiliate: At-Large and Central Jersey Chapters; Seniors, Sports & Recreation, and Technology Divisions, Member

**National: Krafters, Journalists', Seniors Divisions, Member
Writers' Division, Board Member**

In the vast ballroom at the National Federation of the Blind's 2022 Convention in New Orleans, anticipation filled the air. NFB First Vice President Pam Allen took the microphone and declared to the crowd, "Laissez les bon temps rouler!", which means, "Let the good times roll!"

Just at that moment, as if by magic, a raucous Dixieland jazz band appeared, snaking its way jauntily through the crowd. The sound of saxophones, tubas and drums filled the air as the musicians marched from one end of the hall to the other.

Wouldn't it be marvelous if we could set wheels in motion so easily with an "Open Sesame" phrase of our own?

Maybe the “secret sauce” that makes everything work out in our favor in life is as simple as setting a goal and staying focused on it. At a recent meeting of the affiliate Sports & Recreation Division, a guest speaker suggested using this acronym as motivation, “FOCUS,” meaning “Follow One Course Until Success.”

I was reminded of this acronym as I thought back to the first NFBNJ meeting I ever attended, the 2019 Central Jersey Chapter holiday party held at the Kohn Center. Something gelled for me, and I realized that this group’s priorities generally aligned with my own, so I became a member of the affiliate and started focusing on projects that were meaningful to me.

So, what is it that makes some of us regard “Volunteer Advocate” as our calling in life, rather than just a nice thing to do? It may well be that the old saying, “Find a job you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life,” holds true for those of us who pitch in on a regular basis. We enjoy it, and we get as much out of it as we put into it.

Of course, not everyone has the time nor the inclination to volunteer, and that’s their prerogative. Consent is a concept that matters in every situation. No one should be “guilted” into volunteering.

But for those who are willing and able, I envision a “Honey-Do List,” with “household chores” that need to be done for the affiliate posted to the website. For example, “Call legislators re: bill” or “Check in on members who are not feeling well.” People could sign up online as time permits. No pressure.

Finding balance is important, though, so while I firmly believe in volunteering for good causes, I know I’ve got to scale back my packed schedule. In the coming year, I’m going to have to step away from some of the tasks I’ve taken on, as I’ve found myself rushing through things that really should be done mindfully.

I’ll continue most of the projects I’ve already got percolating in the NFB, and outside it – work such as reviewing ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance plans to ensure that theatres in New Jersey are accessible, and beta testing a mobile navigation app for people with vision loss as part of a group led by a college professor.

For these projects, I've found that the secret to staying fully plugged in is to find things that interest you and are a good fit for your skill set. Don't sign up for every assignment or you may end up burning out.

Look at projects that are available and consider what piques your interest. Is it advocating for legislation that benefits the blind community? Legislative liaison might be the gig for you.

Not really a policy wonk, but you love to gab on the phone? There is always a need for constituents to contact representatives. Plus, you won't have to wing it. You're provided with a script to give you a starting point, as well as the phone numbers and names you'll need to make that call.

Look at how much time you have on your schedule. You say you've only got an hour here and there to help out? That's okay. You can volunteer to do data entry for the new member list or come up with ideas for the state convention.

Whatever your level of interest and no matter how much or how little time you have, every bit helps. Pitch in when you can and help the community. To all the other Volunteer Advocates out there: I salute you! Thank you so much for all you do.

MEET EVAN, MY NEW BEST FRIEND

**By Tyion Lashley
Technology Division Member**

Getting a guide dog was one of my most life-changing experiences. At first, I didn't even think I would need one, until I discovered The Seeing Eye in Morristown. As many of you know, The Seeing Eye specializes in breeding and training dogs to guide blind and low vision individuals.

I found out about the school in November of 2019 at a program for blind and low vision high school students funded by the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired of New Jersey (CBVINJ) called EDGE (Employment, Development, Guidance and Engagement.) After the presentation, I spent weeks imagining what life would be like if I had a guide dog. Fast forward to 2020, EDGE held

another seminar about guide dogs, and I got to hear about these amazing pups once again. By that point, my mind was set; I knew I wanted a guide dog.

In my freshman year at Rowan University, I learned the lay-out of my entire campus and applied to The Seeing Eye my sophomore year. While waiting for my interview, I continued to learn routes with the help of my mobility and orientation instructor.

During my interview at The Seeing Eye, I shared everything that made me choose the guide dog life, including object avoidance, intelligent disobedience, and the increased independence it would provide. We did Juno walks, sessions where a trainer measures your walking speed and pull to determine the kind of dog you need. I'd never had an experience like this interview before, so you can imagine how surprised I was when I got a call telling me that I was accepted. At that point, all I had to do was wait for a class date, and it took quite a while to hear back.

While I was waiting in suspense for months, I spent my time preparing and hoping for a positive outcome. I downloaded The Seeing Eye's class schedule to review the potential class dates. I asked people on Facebook and other social media platforms what classes were like and what it was like owning a guide dog.

Finally, one April morning, as I headed down to the residence dining hall, I got a phone call. At first, I thought it was a scam caller and declined the call. When I got a voicemail from The Seeing Eye, I dropped what I was doing and called back. They invited me to attend the May 23rd class and asked, "Are you interested?" It took all my might to keep from screaming happily, "YES!"

The night before that first class, I didn't sleep very well, as I was too excited. On the morning of May 23rd, I couldn't believe it was actually happening and had butterflies in my stomach. In The Seeing Eye van, I looked out the window and started remembering my past life as a cane user. I knew that when I came back to East Orange, I'd be a totally different person.

When I arrived at The Seeing Eye, I was a bit nervous. After meeting my trainer, Oscar, and all the other trainers, I was given a tour of the entire building. In the afternoon, I met the other students, who had come from different states. I was the only student from New Jersey. There was even a student from Canada and another from Puerto Rico.

Two days later, it was “dog day,” and everyone went up to the lounge for a quick lecture and back to their rooms to wait for their new four-legged friends.

At 9:00 AM, my trainer came into my room with a beautiful Yellow Labrador Retriever/Golden Retriever mix named Evan. Although I wouldn't use the cliché, “it was love at first sight,” to describe this moment, I would say it was like meeting my new best friend who would take care of me, and I of him for the rest of his life. He was fluffy, adorable, extremely intelligent, caring and provided many sloppy, wet kisses.

When I put the harness on Evan for the first time and gave the “Forward” command, I felt like I could do anything. There would be no one to stop me, except Oscar if I did something wrong during training, of course. To be honest, even though I knew I wanted a guide dog and watched a lot of videos and did a lot of research, the thought of a four-legged ball of fur guiding me was a bit unnerving at first.

Well, the nervousness went away when Evan started guiding me around trash cans and other obstacles, stopping at curves and at platform edges, finding the inside and outside of buildings, and overall, making sure I was safe. The whole thing felt electrifying, but in a good way. Throughout training, I got to learn about Evan and how to work with him and he got to know who I was. In fact, we got so close that when I hit my head while feeding him, he ran over and started licking me.

As I'm writing this, it's now June 27th. It's been a week since I came home with Evan, and I can't imagine life without him. He's adapted to my lifestyle very well and is a fast learner. He does so much and all he asks in return is love in the form of chin, head, and belly rubs.

The experience of getting a guide dog for the first time was one of the best of my life. I don't think there will ever be anything that will be able to top that. At The Seeing Eye, I was surrounded by people who cared about me and wanted me to succeed. It's been a while since I've had people who felt that way towards me. As I grew up, I didn't really have many people who believed in me. My trainer, the training manager, and all the other people I met at The Seeing Eye made me feel like I could do anything, no matter the situation. I can't wait to see what other adventures life has in store for me and my faithful, furry friend. With Evan by my side, I know I can take on the world.

MY EXPERIENCE IN THE MOTHERLAND

By Melissa Lomax

Central Jersey Chapter Member, Co-Chairperson of NFBNJ Membership Committee, Youth Program Manager, Disability Advocate, and Lifelong Mentor

As I turned my back to the wide door behind me and faced the sun, I could hear waves crashing onto the shore below, loud music to my left, and the distant sound of people ascending stairs to my far right.

I was standing on the property of Cape Coast Castle at the “Door of No Return” where slaves were once shuttled through to signify their forever departure from Africa. I stood where my ancestor once stood; the heaviness of that moment was not lost on me. But as I smiled for a picture, the tour guide announced that in 2019, this same entrance was renamed the “Door of Return” to welcome in descendants of slaves who were forced to leave their homes to travel to faraway lands—and that included me.

Up until that point, I had to introduce myself to everyone new as “just American” whenever they asked where I was from. As the only non-African in our entire group, this often felt lonely. But standing on the rocks in front of this large door changed all of that for me, because this was the warmest welcome I could have received to the beautiful country of Ghana.

I was in Ghana to participate in both the traditional and white weddings for my best friend of over a decade. After a 10.5-hour flight, I landed in Accra, Ghana, ready to embrace the culture. Within minutes, this excitement was slightly shattered when they stated that my visa had expired the week before. I was immediately whisked to a small, crowded office contained in a skinny hallway where I learned that I could either pay \$150 or return to the US. When I reached in my wallet to get the money out, the agent stopped me and only required \$50 because of my blindness. This was the first taste of the treatment I could expect while in Ghana.

As a blind person, I realized quickly that the independence I embraced so often in the states would not help me overseas. The streets even in the more affluent area where our guest quarters in a friend’s mansion were not paved. They were filled with rocks, hills, and large puddles of water. The gutters were often

exposed and easy to fall into. At every house I visited, both the very small and exceptionally large structures, there were random steps up or down, sometimes in the middle of rooms, which prevented me from traveling indoors without a cane.

Because drivers do as they please, I often had to be aware of my surroundings, even on sidewalks, since people would do anything, they could to avoid the traffic that made any sense of deadlines or urgency impossible. For this reason, I had to be guided everywhere I went. I hated this feeling initially, because that meant that everyone, I met would not see me for the independent person I usually am in my element. I felt as if I was not doing justice for the blind community while there. I knew I would probably be the only blind person many of the people I encountered saw getting around, and it hurt to know that they did not see me setting the bar higher.

By the end of the week, this guilt had transformed into gratitude.

I realized that I had a lot of pride, and within the 10 days of my being there, it had to decrease for me to fully appreciate my total experience. And as soon as I stepped out of my pity party, I learned just how highly people still thought of me, even though I needed help. It was a reminder that we often are too hard on ourselves and need to step aside to understand how others view us.

On both the traditional and white wedding days, I was viewed as an equal amongst the other three bridesmaids. The traditional wedding was a time where the elders of both families sit across from each other to agree on the union. The husband's family brings elegantly wrapped dowry presents, to include fancy plates, clothing, jewelry, or whatever else the bride's family requests in advance. The bride dances out with her bridesmaids and greets all elders. Then, she reviews the dowry and chooses to approve or decline it. A tailor had designed matching one-shoulder, white dresses with lace, and added fabric to signify a large diagonal bow for the bridesmaids. The wedding couple were the only ones wearing colors—royal blue and gold.

Two days later, we celebrated the white wedding in a church. The bride wore the traditional white dress, and her bridesmaids wore royal blue, one-shoulder dresses with a mermaid tail and small train. In addition to walking in with groomsmen, the bridesmaids later had to dance in for special entrances at the

reception. For both occasions, we wore makeup and gold or silver jewelry and had our hair pulled back into a slick, long ponytail.

The day after the white wedding, we attended the thanksgiving church service where we wore dresses tailor-made for each of us from the thick and luxurious kente cloth with gold, brown, and purple pattern. I can say that the feeling of having my dresses made for me is great and one that I cannot wait to duplicate. I sent my measurements in and was unable to try on the dresses in person until less than a week before the wedding. All of them were too small, but in two days, a little extra tailoring made them perfect!

On both wedding days, I debated whether I would bring a cane with me or leave it. My best friend was very encouraging and assured me that whatever choice I made; it would not hinder her special day. In the end, I chose not to use a cane because, after all, it would not have helped on any of the terrains we had to traverse. That choice was much more liberating than I thought it would be.

On the day I had to board the plane to leave Ghana, I was sad. I'd learned how to truly relax while there and embrace the uncertainty of others' schedules. I had amazing food that far exceeded anything I've had in the US. Because I stayed with locals and those native to the country, I had a well-rounded experience, usually far from tourist attractions, which gave me a deeper appreciation of their culture.

But the aspect of Ghana that I enjoyed the most was the people. Several times throughout the trip, I encountered residents who often explained that tourists think they come for the attractions but really stay for the community. I now know this to be valid. The community—strangers' willingness to help or to extend a hand, the cultural expectations that govern great hospitality, the joy and peace exuding from the people I spent time with, and so much more—this will be the reason I return as often as I can. Except next time, I will bring a folding cane known to help with hiking, so I can give another go at international independence.

MAKING BLINDNESS INTO A RENEWED VISION

By Krystle Allen
member, At Large Chapter, NFBNJ
Founder, ELM, Inc., and Ms. Blind Diva Empowerment Pageant

When I was a student at Essex County College, some people used to know me as “that blind chick” or “the blind woman.” I decided I wanted to up that narrative and give it some personality and sass, so I reinvented myself as “the Blind Diva.” And that became the basis for the Ms. Blind Diva Empowerment Pageant and its sponsoring organization, Eyes Like Mine, Inc.

It started in March 2014, when Eyes Like Mine, Inc., was incorporated as a nonprofit 501C3 organization based in my hometown of Newark, New Jersey.

With the help of Maquila Wright and Ihsan R. Muhammad, Esq., I wanted to introduce a unique pattern of advocacy for individuals who are vision impaired or blind.

The mission of Eyes Like Mine, Inc., is to share awareness about the abilities and potential of individuals with vision loss through community service initiatives, comprehensive empowerment workshops, and innovative social change awareness events. I’ll detail some of those later in this article.

During the 2020 pandemic, ELM, Inc., pivoted most of its work to a virtual platform, just as many other organizations did. This was implemented as a method to stay connected to communities in New Jersey. Our virtual programming expanded to include people from beyond New Jersey, including Russia and Jamaica.

We also learned that our audience wanted more than resource information; they really wanted engagement with other people. To date, the peer support group that we established has included more than 150 guest speakers who are considered influencers in the blindness and disability communities.

The peer support group has returned to in-person gatherings and has a new name: P.A.C.K. (Perseverance, Acceptance, Community, Knowledge.) In addition to providing useful information and support to participants, we make the meetings fun and engaging.

Of course, we had to hold our Ms. Blind Diva Empowerment Pageant virtually as well in 2020 and 2021. We're delighted that the pageant will also resume, live and in-person, on September 30th and October 1st at the Newark Airport Embassy Suites Hotel in Elizabeth, New Jersey. During the pageant, contestants will be escorted down the runway by members of the Irvington Fire Department.

The pageant was established to empower women with vision loss by providing tools to encourage them and focus on independent women changemakers who happen to be blind, visually impaired, or deafblind. We also welcome trans women.

At the event, there will be door prizes, dinner, and a chance to meet our 2021 titleholders: Miss Independent, Tonika Williams, from Kingston, Jamaica, who is our first international titleholder, and Miss Blind Diva, Naomi Panarella.

There has been a total of 36 applicants, 25 contestants, eight titleholders, and hundreds of supporters over the past five years. The titleholders include women from within and outside of New Jersey, including two international participants, and three deafblind participants.

To spread the word about our pageant, we embarked on a publicity tour that included several states, including the National Federation of the Blind's 2022 National Convention in New Orleans, where we had a booth in the Exhibit Hall and offered a lunchtime informational session.

This year, ELM Inc., began in April 2022 at the Not My Eyes Fashion Showcase coordinated by Annaliese Smith, a visually impaired model from New York. This fashion show included 16 visually impaired or blind models from all over the country and Canada.

We didn't stop there, as we traveled to the Foundation Fighting Blindness' 50th Anniversary Visions Conference in Orlando, Florida.

We organized our very own New Jersey tour stop in Newark, a first-ever Community Baby Shower for mothers with and without disabilities, which was our first in-person event since the pandemic. This was called the "Marvelous Moms Community Baby Shower."

At this event, over 80 mothers were recipients of items for their newborn and young children, food packages from the Food Bank of New Jersey, and on-site

makeovers provided by Mary Kay Director, Elisa Smith-Patterson. It featured blind mothers from New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey as the event speakers.

After the success of the Community Baby Shower, we headed over to the Tory Burch Embrace Ambition Summit at Lincoln Center in New York City.

It's important to note that our pageant does not focus on physical beauty and does not include a swimsuit competition; it's about the character and accomplishments of the contestants.

Along with this tour, we collaborated on a short film documentary, entitled "*Blind Divas*," produced by award-winning filmmaker, Lisa Durden. Lisa has been a host of the pageant since 2017 and her experience led her to submit the concept of highlighting the lifestyles of people in the blindness community to a competition with Lightboat and the African American Women in Cinema and Media in 2021. Her submission won an opportunity to be the main feature of a short film documentary, which led to media interviews on syndicated radio shows, such as WBGO Jazz Radio and ABC's *Here and Now* with Sandra Bookman.

The theme for this year's pageant is "Bombshells Blooming Through the Dark: Moving and Shaking it up Around the World." We invite all women aged 18 or older to be a part of the pageant this year, especially because every participant will be a part of the short film documentary. For more information, visit our website: eyeslikemine.org.

More ELM, Inc., activities to look forward to include an in-person film-screening event at Montclair State University through the Reel Abilities Film Festival, with an audio-described documentary on blind love by Patricia Zuccarello on September 23rd, 2022. Transportation will be provided for the first 28 registrants from a selected location to the screening site in Montclair, New Jersey. For more information and to secure your spot, email events@eyeslikemine.org.

Right before that film screening, we will be hosting some virtual events leading up to National Disability Voter Registration Week (September 12th-16th, 2022) in partnership with the American Association of People with Disabilities and their REV Up network.

Join the return of the 8th Annual Resource Fair outdoors and in-person on Saturday, October 15th, which is White Cane Safety Day. This event is in partnership with United Parks as One and will be held at Nat Turner Park on 18th Avenue in Newark, New Jersey. Both the film screening and resource fair are free events; however, registration is required. Anyone who is interested can check the website to register once the registration link is available.

With all the work ELM, Inc., has been doing in 2022 alone, we are especially excited that during the pandemic, our work in the community has given New Jersey and out-of-state students an opportunity to intern. We've provided access to professional development and work experience, with students from Hudson Community College, Rutgers, the Family Resource Network Edge Student Program, and the NFB RISE Program of Virginia.

In all, eight visually impaired or blind students contributed to the Eyes Like Mine, Inc., mission with their work on our newsletter, social media campaigns, community outreach, event planning, public service announcements, and multimedia program jingles.

In addition, I am a co-author of an anthology written by all visually impaired or blind female authors entitled, *The Write 2 Heal*.

Last month, I graduated from the Centennial Leadership fellows program sponsored by the American Foundation for the Blind. Some of my cohorts and I will be featured in a Helen Keller documentary produced by the American Foundation for the Blind (Keller worked for the AFB for many years prior to her death). The film is set for release this October.

For any detail about the listed events, virtual or in-person, pop me an email at events@eyeslikemine.org. Additionally, I invite you to follow us on social media at @EyesLikeMineInc. Our website is eyeslikemine.org.