**The Blind Missourian**

 **March 2019**

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PLEDGE OF THE

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND

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 policies and programs of the Federation; and to abide by its Constitution.



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LEGISLATIVE AGENDA OF BLIND MISSOURIANS

PRESENTED TO

THE FIRST SESSION of the ONE HUNDREDTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

From: The National Federation of the Blind of Missouri

Date: February 11 & 12, 2019

The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines us or our future. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. Blindness is not what holds us back.

This is the message we bring to blind Missourians and the communities we live in. We pledge to be a resource to you and your constituents when they turn to you for help.

The National Federation of the Blind is a membership organization of and for the blind. As a volunteer, grassroots organization, we are blind people working on behalf of blind people. We come together on the local, state, and national level to address issues of importance to our fellow blind citizens. We promote programs that encourage self-determination, independence, and equality of opportunity.

**Why a Research-Based Reading Media Assessment Is Needed**

The desirability of learning to read efficiently has never been a question in your education. This would not have been so if you were blind. The equivalent of print for the sighted is Braille for the blind, and this is recognized in the education laws of Missouri in RSMo 167.225. Though the law says that no blind person shall be denied instruction in Braille, it does allow school districts to conduct evaluations to determine whether print or Braille is the most appropriate method for reading and writing for a given student. Far too often print is determined to be the most appropriate reading medium because the process used in making evaluations is flawed and because the strong preference of teachers and school administrators is to teach what they know and use the resources easily available to them.

The consequences for blind students are devastating. Blind people who can see enough to read some print require that it be enlarged. In the early grades this is how it is presented, but when learning to read is replaced by reading to learn, the print gets smaller and the amount of it that one must read gets larger.

It is common practice for students with visual impairments to hold reading materials very close to their faces and/or to hunch their bodies over the materials when reading. In addition to the posture and other health concerns these reading positions raise, years of field practice and experience have demonstrated that youth who read print materials at very close distances suffer eye strain, headache, and neck and back pain. Fatigue, diminished concentration, low reading speed, and diminished comprehension result. How can any positive association be formed if this is what reading means to a blind student forced to read print she or he cannot really see? Consequently, any valid assessment should ensure that children are evaluated when sitting up straight and with materials held or placed at standardized distances.

A bill that adequately addresses this issue will be designed to modify Missouri's statutes so that Section 167.225 mandates the use of the National Reading Media Assessment (NRMA) or another research-based assessment to the definition of assessment to be of great importance. We know hundreds of adults and many children who have been denied the opportunity to learn Braille. A research-based assessment could have avoided their education being compromised. Our state must have a clear standard which is both reliable and valid to use in determining who will be taught print, who will be taught Braille, and when both print and Braille are appropriate for a student. Bringing blind people into the workforce demands this change given that 80% of employed blind people read Braille. We urge the Missouri General Assembly to embrace literacy for the blind with the same vigor that our society embraces literacy for the sighted.

**Accessible Voting In All Elections**

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) recognizes the right of the blind to vote privately and independently by requiring nonvisual access for the blind through the use of accessible voting systems in all federal elections. Electronic voting technologies, designed and properly configured with nonvisual access, provide blind voters with the ability to cast their votes privately and independently and to verify, without sighted assistance, that their ballots accurately reflect their voting choices. Electronic voting systems were certified and purchased, and Missouri received federal funds for each polling place to provide at least one accessible voting machine. All certified machines in Missouri provide a paper trail.

The Missouri Secretary of State’s Office is evaluating newer machines that mark directly onto the paper ballot. The options are there if legislation to make the paper ballot the official ballot of Missouri is passed. The work of the Secretary of State will also be invaluable when the existing machines need to be replaced.

Accessible machines are already required for the state to comply with HAVA. Some election boards may set these machines up more frequently than others. We ask that they be used consistently in all elections. The cost of setting them up should be minimal since “text to speech” options are available. Concerted efforts are made to get voters to the polls; Missouri should assure that when they arrive, they have the means to cast their ballots privately and independently.

Beyond the example and financial assistance HAVA has provided to emphasize accessible voting, there are two federal laws that require all elections to be accessible to bring Missouri into compliance. Voters with disabilities have the same right to vote privately and independently as do voters without disabilities. When accessible voting machines are not present in state, county, and municipal elections, blind, visually impaired, and other print disabled voters are denied an equal opportunity to cast their ballot privately and independently. This is a violation of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. As a recipient of federal funds, Missouri and our Election Boards are required to comply with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees equal access for individuals with disabilities to the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity. Public entities must provide individuals with disabilities an aid, benefit, or service that is as effective in affording equal opportunity to gain the same result or benefit as provided to others. Public entities shall furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to afford individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy the benefits of a service, program, or activity of a public entity. To be effective, the auxiliary aids and services must be provided in such a way as to protect the privacy and independence of the individual with a disability.

Whether the financial responsibility falls on the State of Missouri or the County Election Boards is a technicality that must not continue to preclude the full participation of blind, visually impaired, or other Missourians with disabilities who could benefit from the use of accessible voting equipment. Please assert due diligence in regard to bridging the gap that has prevented this legislation from passing in the past, and grant people with disabilities the opportunity and the right afforded us to have the same privilege in every election that you value and take for granted as your right as a citizen of Missouri and of the United States of America.

**Salary Range for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind Counselors**

The National Federation of the Blind is a strong proponent of education and training as the doorway to fulfilling the dream of living the lives we want. The Vocational Rehabilitation counselors working for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind are a valuable asset contributing to the success of blind Missourians. Unfortunately, the salary paid these valuable men and women is markedly less than the Vocational Rehabilitation counselors for those with other disabilities who work for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

For years, Rehabilitation Services for the Blind has had a problem attracting and keeping highly qualified counselors with a Master’s Degree and a level of experience that translates into quality, competent, dedicated, and effective counselors. The National Federation of the Blind of Missouri has encouraged raising the pay of RSB counselors to the same salary range as their VR counterparts. This will result in the recruitment and retention of highly motivated and empathetic professionals. Regrettably our suggestions have gone unheeded, and as a result, the recruitment and retention of qualified rehabilitation professionals continues to be a problem.

Missouri already has a template of salary ranges for equivalent positions as identified through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. It is just common sense that those doing the same kind of job should reap the same reward. We urge you to explore this issue and collaborate with your colleagues to find an equitable solution to this injustice that results in the lack of acquisition and retention of individuals who will help blind Missourians to navigate from their dreams to living the life we want.

**House Bill 61**

We actively support a piece of legislation that will remove a stumbling block in the path of those wishing to become employed. For many years Missouri employers have had the option of requiring a blind employee to sign a waiver that relinquishes all liability for injury while on the job. This means that regardless of whether or not the accident had anything to do with vision loss, the person is not covered just because of blindness. House Bill 61, sponsored by Representative Sarah Unsicker, will eliminate this unjust and unnecessary provision. Blind employees are equally competent and pose no greater risk than their light dependent counterparts. The National Federation of the Blind believes that employment is a cornerstone of living a happy, fulfilling life. No person should be denied employment or have limited workplace protections just because of blindness. We ask you to join Representative Unsicker in removing this outdated barrier to employment of the blind.

**Employment First Legislation**

The Governor made an announcement about Missouri’s participation in a grant process developing the standards and processes that enhance the employability of people with disabilities in the community. HB 517, sponsored by Representative Unsicker clearly defines a community based, integrated setting, as well as defining competitive employment. Additionally, the bill outlines the training requirements of those state workers providing job employment services for those with disabilities. Through a carefully crafted piece of legislation, HB 517 outlines a state priority to increasing access to community based, inclusive, competitive employment based on quality supports that uses the person’s wants and needs and builds an employment plan that is person focused. The National Federation of the Blind believes that people with disabilities can and do work in competitive settings as members of their workplace community. We support this legislation and ask you to do the same. Real jobs for real pay is the backbone of creating an inclusive community that fosters mutual respect for people of all abilities.

My Jefferson City Experience

By Stephanie McDowell

On February 11th and 12th I had the chance to join members of my Federation family in Jefferson City for the Jefferson City Seminar. During this time, we had the opportunity to reach out to our legislators about issues that are important to us as people who are blind and visually impaired. Among these issues were the Research Based Reading Media Assessment for Blind children, accessible voting, salary range for rehabilitation counselors for the blind, and employment first.

Although I have been to Jefferson City many times before to advocate for disability rights in general, it was empowering to be able to talk to our legislators about issues that impact our future directly. It also meant a lot to share the experience with others who not only believe in living the life you want, but are willing to advocate for it.

2019 State Legislative Seminar

By Rita Lynch

On Monday February 11th and Tuesday, February 12th twenty dedicated members of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri met with state legislators to educate them on several issues of great importance to citizens of our state who are blind. The seminar was carefully planned and arrangements made by the Governmental Affairs Committee under the leadership of Chairman, Roger Crome in order to make our seminar a very successful project. Our fact sheet was professionally written and folders were assembled by the capable hands of Carol Coulter and family members who helped. The folders were then delivered here to Jefferson City by the Coulters prior to our event at the State Capitol. The seminar was covered in the local paper by Reporter Bob Watson with the Jefferson City News and Tribune. State President, Shelia Wright was interviewed and Gary and Debbie Wunder were also interviewed and photographed while meeting with one of the legislators assigned to them. There was good media coverage of the event. Appointments had been made in advance which enabled us to meet in person with many of our legislators. About seventy of the 197 total senators and representatives were new this year. We found most to be interested in learning about the issues we brought to their attention. Monday-evening we met at Madison’s Café for dinner and discussed strategies and how our issues were received. We were back at work early Tuesday morning to continue meeting with legislators assigned to us. By the time we finished up, we were anxious to head for home. Following is a summary of the issues we discussed with our state legislators.

The first was the need for a research-based reading assessment; we are looking to find a sponsor for a bill that would adequately address this issue. The bill will need to be designed to modify Missouri's statutes so that Section 167.225 will mandate the use of the National Reading Media Assessment (NRMA) or another research-based assessment. We urged the Missouri General Assembly to embrace literacy for the blind with the same vigor that our society embraces literacy for the sighted.

The second issue was accessible voting for people who are blind to be able to vote independently in all elections. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) recognizes the right of the blind to vote privately and independently by requiring nonvisual access for the blind through the use of accessible voting systems in all federal elections. We informed state legislators that we are working with the Missouri Secretary of State to ensure that accessible voting machines will be available in state, and local elections, as well. We asked state legislators for their support on any legislation that may be needed to grant us the opportunity and the right afforded us to have the same privilege in every election that all other voters value as their right as a citizen of Missouri and of the United States of America.

Our third issue brought to the attention of state legislators was the salary paid to Vocational Counselors for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind. Their salary is markedly less than the Vocational Rehabilitation counselors for those with other disabilities working under the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. We pointed out that those doing the same kind of job should reap the same reward. We urged legislators to explore this issue and collaborate to find an equitable solution to this injustice. The pay of RSB counselors needs to be raised to the same salary range as their VR counterparts. This would help in the recruitment and retention of highly motivated and empathetic professionals who will help blind Missourians to navigate from their dreams to living the life we want.

The last two issues are HB 61 and HB 517 sponsored by Representative Sarah Unsicker. We actively support a piece of legislation that will remove a stumbling block in the path of those wishing to become employed. For many years Missouri employers have had the option of requiring a blind employee to sign a waiver that relinquishes all liability for injury while on the job. HB 61, if passed, would eliminate this unjust and unnecessary provision. Blind employees are equally competent and pose no greater risk than their light dependent counterparts. No person should be denied employment or have limited workplace protections just because of blindness. We ask you to help by encouraging passage of this bill.

We also support HB 517,which clearly defines a community based, integrated setting, as well as defining competitive employment. The bill outlines the training requirements of those state workers providing job employment services for those with disabilities. Through a carefully crafted piece of legislation, HB 517 outlines a state priority to increasing access to community based, inclusive, competitive employment, based on quality supports that uses the person’s wants and needs and builds an employment plan that is person focused. The National Federation of the Blind believes that people with disabilities can and do work in competitive settings as members of their workplace community. We support this legislation and ask you to do the same. Real jobs for real pay is the backbone of creating an inclusive community that fosters mutual respect.

Our work is not done yet; there is still much to do. I encourage you to get involved and let your state senator and representative hear from you regarding these important issues which affect all blind Missourians. Thank you to each and every Federationist who helped to make this seminar very successful. Thanks for your time, energy, and your monetary donations you generously gave in participating in this important event. While continuing to work on these issues, we’ll look forward to seeing everyone in just a few weeks at State Convention. Meanwhile take care and all the best to all Federationists!

Washington Seminar

By: Carla Keirns

My son was five months old when we first went to a small library in Long Island, New York looking for something. I wasn’t quite sure what, but a few weeks before an eye doctor had announced that my perfect, white-haired newborn baby was blind. I was completely unprepared. On that cold December morning, we met about a dozen blind adults, men and women who were working, going to school, retired, and who assured us that our son was their son, and they would help us make sure he had the support he needed to grow into the person he wanted to be.

This January I boarded a plane on another cold winter morning, and flew to Washington DC, to meet with hundreds of blind people advocating for themselves and our community. My family lives in Kansas City, so I spent two days going from Congressional office to Congressional office with six friends from Missouri. As the only parent of a blind child in the group, I did my best to be useful in reading maps, and followed the lead of my experienced blind mentors in meeting with legislative aides, many of whom knew our NFB leaders well from years of patient advocacy.

At each office as we did introductions, I showed the staff a picture of my little boy, who is five years old with snow white hair from his albinism, round glasses, and a magnetic smile. I explained that while I could see, my little boy was born blind and that he needed their help. When we discussed the Assistive Technology tax credit, I pointed out that today even kindergarteners use tablet computers in school. While his classmates’ tablets would cost $500 each, a tablet with a braille display for my son would cost $5,500. Every staffer winced.

I have been to DC before with doctors and scientists, advocating for health care, payment reform, research, and patient’s rights. But I have never seen a group that mobilizes its members as effectively, works in as careful and targeted a fashion, or who makes as much of an impression on the Congressional staff as the NFB.

I look forward to coming back with my little boy so he can learn from our community as I have. Seeing blind adults navigating their worlds, and doing what they want is the best preparation he can have for the future.

# **LEGISLATIVE AGENDA OF BLIND AMERICANS**

**PRIORITIES FOR THE 116TH CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION**

* **The Access Technology Affordability Act (ATAA)**

The cost of critically needed access technology is out of reach for most blind Americans. By providing a refundable tax credit for qualifying purchases, Congress will stimulate individual procurement of this technology and promote affordability of these tools.

* **The Greater Accessibility and Independence through Nonvisual Access Technology (GAIN) Act**

Advanced digital interfaces create barriers that prevent blind individuals from independently operating essential devices that enhance quality of life. Congress must end the digital divide that threatens the independence of blind Americans by developing minimum accessibility requirements for such devices.

* **The Disability Employment Act (DEA)**

An outdated approach to employment fails to adequately equip workers with disabilities for the challenges of the twenty-first century. The Disability Employment Act will spur innovation that will increase and enhance modern employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Making Progress Requires Involvement

An Address Presented to the

Springfield Association of the Blind

November 5, 2018

By Gary Wunder

I am here today because I think blind people working with blind people is both fantastic and underappreciated. It is also vitally necessary. I find it amazing that a group of people who has been seen as helpless and has often seen themselves in this same way has actually gathered to do more than whine and cry and throw a pity party. Who would have blamed them; how many would have helped in this grief session, believing that this was a normal reaction from those so disadvantaged.

Luckily blind people have gotten together to do more than complain. While we love God and respect his word, we have seen as allegory the statement that when the blind lead the blind, they all fall into the ditch. Instead we have found that unless the blind lead the blind, there is often little leadership from people who know what we need, what we want, and what we aspire to become. Blind people want to be talked with, not lectured to, and although no one has full control of his life or her destiny, all of us want to have a major say in what happens to us and what we will become.

So how did blind people come together, and what in the world made us think we could be productive? Well there was this blind man with a gigantic intellect who gave us an efficient way to read and write. His name was Louis Braille, and though many educators, including those from his own country tried to suppress his code in favor of something that looked more like print, his students loved it and continued its use after his untimely death at age forty-three.

Schools for the blind were started in the 1800s. You may be surprised at the reason. The question being explored in creating these schools was whether sight was a necessary ingredient to learning; could the blind really learn. Mostly these schools were started as research projects with no clear objective other than learning for the education community. Having a school for the blind also had more to do with showing how progressive a nation or a state was than it did with lifting the blind out of poverty. Critics of educating the blind, many within the field, said that their jobs were made difficult by those blind students who returned to the school to ask for help in getting jobs, an endeavor many of the school administrators thought preposterous and certainly beyond their responsibility. Some of the students actually thought they would be well-suited to work with other blind people, and this idea too was considered ridiculous by the educators of the day. Some complained that education created unrealistic expectations in the blind population. Some of their blind students became uppity, thinking they could transcend their disability and make their own way in the world.

But schools for the blind brought blind people together, and those people began to talk. Whenever one of them would accomplish something worthwhile like learning a craft and making something people would buy, the window of possibility was opened just a little, and the fresh air and light that came through was enough to encourage people to dream and then to try to make their dreams come true.

A man named Newel Perry got his PhD in mathematics early in the last century, but nowhere could he find employment accept at the California School for the Blind. This turned out to be fortunate because his example opened doors for others, one of them becoming a professor of speech and political science named Jacobus tenBroek. It was he who started the National Federation of the blind.

When we started our organization in 1940, opportunity for the blind was a dream that depended on good luck and on the state in which you lived. Some states were progressive. California was offering blind students assistance to train in technical fields. The federal government initiated the Social Security program, an effort at rehabilitation through which some blind people might become employed, and it also started a vending program in which blind people could have vending stands on federal property. But as the federal government became more involved, some of its rules conflicted with the more progressive states, and blind people were told that we needed to make a decision between getting state aid or getting training to work. So getting public support would preclude training that might help one remove him or herself from public assistance. No state organization alone could combat this, so a national organization was formed.

One of the first things we did was work to see that people in every state got some form of income so they could venture out and experience independence. We wanted to be more than a burden to our parents, brothers, and sisters, and though for many of us having a job and a family seemed well beyond our reach, we dreamed and we heard about blind people who had achieved such things, Jacobus tenBroek being one of them. When he and other Federationists like him came to where we lived and said we could do the same things they had done, again we had hope.

After getting some guaranteed income, we worked together for jobs. Public employment seemed the right place to start, so we applied for jobs with the federal civil service. And what was their reaction to our applications? They said no. We are not agencies of charity, they said. We must do the people's work, and that work doesn't involve hiring the handicapped. But we applied to take their civil service tests anyway, and again they said no. Why give a test to a person who couldn't read it. Put the test in Braille, we said. Too expensive, they proclaimed. Let us use a reader? Impractical was their response.

So the NFB organized a legal fund and took the Federal Government to court. We won the right to take civil service exams, but before we could celebrate, we learned that the civil service board would let us take the test but would not post our scores. Back to court we went, and again it agreed with us and said the government must post our scores. But this was another elusive victory. We will post your scores said the government, but we will tell those who hire that you are blind and that they should not consider you for a job. The federal government is not a charity with the purpose of hiring those who are so obviously incapable of doing the country's business. Again we found ourselves in court. We won, and the federal government is now a place that hires qualified blind people.

Work has always been a priority for us. Most people want a reason to get up in the morning, and when we go to bed at night, we want to do so with a tiredness that springs from accomplishment not boredom. Besides that, many of us want the money that comes from work and the respect that comes when answering the question what do you do for a living. Work is our way out of poverty, and I don't know anyone who willingly lives in the conditions that poverty imposes.

Getting a job isn't usually easy if you are blind. First you have to convince people that you are capable, that you know how to work around the problems blindness may cause in your job, and lastly that you will be a person worth paying. Then we have to deal with technology. Lots of technology enhances our lives, but some shuts us down or makes our daily walk more difficult that it needs to be.

So what is the NFB doing about accessibility? We're talking with big companies and offering to help them make their software and hardware accessible. Sometimes companies are surprised that a blind person would ever want to use their offerings. They are usually happy to have our assistance. But sometimes they say that we are such a small population that they don't care whether their services are usable for us. In some of these cases we sue these companies because it is the only way to get their attention. We don't like to sue businesses or units of government. First, it is expensive. Second, it is adversarial and unpleasant. Third, there is never any guarantee we will win. Just like winning creates good case law, losing creates bad case law. But when we see no other choice, we ask the courts for help, and what is remarkable is that, while we start off as adversaries with schools, companies, and agencies in the government, we often end up as friends because they see that we want to bring them business, competent employees, and positive press. As one university said, "We hated to see you swoop in here like you knew something about our obligation under the law and about our business. But what really surprised us was that when you left, we found ourselves saying good-bye to friends: friends with a commitment on both sides that we would continue to work together. This was a win-win for everybody."

This is the kind of organization I want to support and be a part of. It is the kind of organization I will shortly invite you to join.

The largest contributor to blindness besides aging is diabetes. We know that the information blind people have will often determine whether we remain at home or feel the need to go to a nursing facility to live. Blind people can test our blood sugar, and we can give ourselves medication, including shots. But this is only true if we make these facts known and show each other how it is done.

A couple of decades ago we created a magazine called the *Voice of the Diabetic*. We established an office and hired a staff. The office was headed by Ed Bryant. I bet some of you know that name. Well Ed is no longer with us on this earth, but his idea continues. We routinely run articles in the *Braille Monitor* from people with diabetes explaining how they remain independent with the disease. We take articles from leading diabetes magazines and make them available in Braille, and in audio so all of us know the current state of thinking in the medical field about how to remain healthy and slow the progression of the disease.

What are our challenges today? Ask most blind people, and many of us will say that transportation is our most significant obstacle. The world is now working to build cars that drive themselves. The auto industry is excited about it. The insurance companies are excited as well. We who are blind are also excited, but we have work to do. We must see that these self-driving cars are created in such a way that they are usable without vision. Imagine a car that can drive itself but has a touchscreen that you can't use. We are working to see that when self-driving cars become a reality, they will also be accessible to the blind, and we are working actively with all the big players to see that this happens, including the Congress and state legislatures.

Right now we have a really big challenge. To be independent requires that we be able to do our laundry, cook our meals, and wash our dishes. Go to any big-box store you want, and you will find a number of machines that we cannot modify or label. There is no law saying home appliances have to be accessible. There should be, but right now Congress is not receptive. They say regulation is not business friendly. President Trump has said that for every new regulation the federal government adopts, three must be repealed. While I respect the attempt to guard against excessive regulation, I'm not content to go to a nursing home because I can't buy usable home appliances. We need lots of stories from blind people who live independently and who count on their appliances being accessible. Again I'm going to ask for your help.

So much of what we do is to help blind children because these young people are our future reflections. We want those who come after us to have it at least as good as we have had it, and we want them to have better if we can. Creating opportunity starts with education. Part of what we miss in education is learning about pictures and icons and graphs. So many of our jobs today in the sciences require knowing about these things, and our hope is that by introducing young children to these, they will become as natural as Braille and other things that involve the development of the sense of touch. This means working on technology to make pictures touchable and making them easy and cheap enough to create that people do so in abundance. We also want blind kids to create pictures they can feel, and again we are putting money into exciting technology to do this.

All of you know that literacy is important. Our blind children are too often going through school without it. Audio books are wonderful, but who learns to spell by listening to audio? Who observes punctuation through audio? People who believe audio is sufficient just haven't thought this through. Do I use audio? Yes. Do I love audio? Of course I do. But it isn't what taught me to write or to read aloud. It isn't what helped me follow outlines or write computer code.

But our blind children face another obstacle. People want those of us who can see a bit to learn print. They want this so much that they force us to learn to read print even when it hurts our eyes, gives us headaches, ruins our posture, and keeps us from coming to love reading as a path to personal note taking, pleasure, education, and employment. We have won the right to put our children in schools where they live, but we haven't yet ensured they will be getting an education. Both are important, and keeping blind people in their home schools and giving them a great education takes lots of work. It is work that needs all of us to do, and the upcoming generation is counting on us.

When I was a blind kid, I didn't know successful blind adults. This scared me because I knew I was blind, and I knew my family would only respect me if I found employment. I wanted to have a family. I wanted to influence people in the same way my dad and my uncles influenced them. I didn't yearn to be the president of the United States or a man of wealth, but I wanted to matter to somebody and not be the burden that some unlucky person in my family had to support. Getting to know successful blind people helped me find the path, and working with those people helped me to follow it. When I ran into obstacles, they helped me find answers. When I found answers, they appreciated my sharing them. When I have felt down and overwhelmed, they have given me strength, and when I felt on top and some of them didn't, I gave back what they so freely gave me.

I am asking that you get involved, not just in appreciating what we do for blind people but to be a real part of what helps the blind. What we do takes volunteers. What we do takes creative thinkers and doers. What we do takes numbers of people willing to speak out with us. What we do takes money, and that means we need people who are willing to help us raise funds. Fundraising isn't glamorous, but without funds, blind people simply won't have the tools to do what I've outlined today. Just this trip will cost $300 for transportation alone, never mind the food and the other expenses that go along with travel.

The National Federation of the Blind is not a big luxury liner or a cruise ship. No, we are a canoe, relying on everyone to take up an oar and move blind people where we want to go. If we want quality lives, we have the primary responsibility to work for them. If we want change, we must be that change. We must give with our minds, our hearts, and our energy. Dreams are only dreams—until we dare to act on them; I invite you to help me make those dreams become real. It's risky because we don't always win. It's hard because sometimes people say no when we ask them to say yes.

It's hard because some people think there is virtue in not being involved. They say to me, "What you do is okay, but I am not a causist." Well I am not a causist. I have other things to do in my life as well, but change doesn't happen without involvement and commitment, and I care enough about blind people that I'm willing to put time into changing a small part of the world for us.

Think about this: there is a special blessing in giving. Too often we blind people are seen only as takers, people so disadvantaged that we have nothing to give. But the truth is that we have much to give and good reason to take control, not only of our lives but to change for the better the lives of blind people today and tomorrow. Almost fifty years ago a president observed in his inaugural address that "Until he has found a cause larger than himself, no man is truly whole." Our religious beliefs embrace the same sentiment through the golden rule and the declaration that what we do for our fellow man we do for God. It doesn't get much better.

Please consider becoming a part of us, moving from the bleachers to the playing field. Your involvement will make a difference to you and to other blind people who need your help and encouragement. With your help, blind people will climb the stairs of opportunity, get jobs, have families, and be contributors. Without it, we will struggle along as best we can, failing to reach and help so many who yearn to live the lives they want.

I want to leave you with some thoughts that are crucial in my participation and may be helpful in kindling yours. I am filled with hope, energy, and love by participating in the National Federation of the Blind because my expectations are raised, my contributions make a difference to me and to others, and I can celebrate the realization of my dreams with my Federation family. 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. Thank you, and may God bless you and those you love.

The Weekend the Teachers Came to Learn

By Debbie Wunder

On February 7 to 10, 2019, Jenny Carmack and I traveled together to be with more than fifteen states gathered at our National Center for the Blind to share success stories and the difficulties we have encountered while running a two-week BELL Academy. The purpose of our stories was to share how we have made learning Braille so much fun that the BELL ringers come to think of our instruction as participating in a game and not the traditional school grind some of them look forward to escaping during their summer vacation. The purpose of sharing our challenges is to use the collective knowledge and enthusiasm of our fellow coordinators and teachers to produce an even better experience for students.

One of the ways we learn is by taking on the role of the student. It is amazing how competitive adults can be while playing children’s games. A simple game of do you love your neighbor (similar to musical chairs) felt more like a game of football than a learning experience to fill the minds of young children. Our students thrive because we are just as competitive in our desire to teach as we were in our game.

Although the primary focus of BELL is Braille, our students benefit immensely from other activities they are sheltered from or simply have not observed. Many of our students come to us not knowing how to run, skip, or engage in the simplest form of play.

As volunteers, many of us come with a willing heart but have no idea how much work goes into planning and running a two-week program and how much energy it takes to supervise and to engage children of different ages and skill levels.

None of our good work could be done without funding, so we discussed ways to get our communities involved and to ask for their help in raising funds. The help of our affiliates and chapters is invaluable, but they should not carry all the load, and our communities will also benefit from participating in bringing literacy to some very important young citizens in their area. The cost of a typical two-week academy is somewhere between $5,000 to $6,000, and this is running a barebones program. Fortunately, in Missouri we have a number of dedicated volunteers who ask nothing but that they be allowed to make better the lives of young blind children who will come after them. There is such a wonderful feeling of helping to make tomorrow a better world for our blind kids.

This year Missouri will again have two BELL Academy programs running concurrently from July 22 to August 2, 2019. One will be in Saint Louis and the other in Kansas City. This will be our sixth year for the BELL Academy and our second year running two programs. More information is soon to follow. Please think about how you can help and the fun we will have together.

Before Fitbit and After Fitbit:

By Jeremiah Wells

When I was diagnosed with diabetes I was working and told exercise was good for diabetics, so I told myself that the physical exercise I did during my work would be enough for the day. After working five to six days a week I told myself that I did not have time to go to a fitness center. Despite the exercise I got at work, my A1C ranged from 7.0 to 7.3. I continued to look for ways to lower my A1C.

When I retired, I joined a fitness center and went three days a week which did help to drop my A1C level below 7.0. Although I saw improvement in the A1C, I would come up with excuses as to why I could not go; raining, or other commitments.

When I joined the United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA) Fitbit challenge for the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri (NFB), my A1C was 6.7. I received my Fitbit in March of 2017, at which time the challenge was on. After learning how the Fitbit works, I began to realize the amount of information it provided to me. The most important thing is to wear it every day. I learned that the exercise you get by doing activities at home can be beneficial to your health in terms of lowering A1C, heart, and other physical benefits. The encouragement of being a part of the challenge with the NFB of Missouri motivated me to exercise every day. The benefits of performing exercise at home eliminate finding excuses when you don’t go to the gym. During the past year my A1C was as low as 5.7, however, this happened only once. As of September 2018, my A1C was 6.1. I can say that being a part of the 2018-19 Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield/USABA National Fitness Challenge with the NFB of Missouri is helpful to me. This is my second year as a participant in this program.

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