Given at the Colorado Convention by Carrie Gilmer, November 8, 2008

Freedom, for any group of people who have not had it, comes in stages; it never comes fully at once. Did you know that there were both free and non-free blacks living in the 13 colonies and the first to come who were free arrived in 1619—a year before the Pilgrims in 1620? Did you know that thousands of free blacks helped to win the Revolutionary War? When we prevailed in that war and won our freedom as a country, a document to outline the rights of the citizenry and to declare the independence of our new nation was crafted. The first draft of this declaration contained provisions intended to eliminate the practice of slavery. But the colonies in the south refused to join in the proposed new nation unless the clause eliminating slavery was removed. And so, Jefferson took it out. Of course, no black people had been self-represented at that meeting.

The words that Jefferson did write, "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", these words gave enough vagueness for the southern colonies to accept passage of the document and yet had enough specific-ness to, in time, apply to all people; male and female, black and white, sighted, blind, where ever you might draw a marking line... The declaration and the constitution initially were a bridge to freedom only for some, but they carried the possibility to be a bridge for all, including the blind. But people had to act in order to ensure the possibility was realized; black people had to intend progress.

It would be more than 100 years after the signing of the declaration before slavery was outlawed. All during the hundred years there was incalculable suffering by blacks but at the same time the acceptance of slavery gradually began to dissolve. It began to dissolve because

of the actions of black people themselves—in 1787 the Free African Society was founded in Philadelphia. This was perhaps the first bridge to equal status for African Americans. In his book entitled Martin Luther King on Leadership, Donald T. Phillips writes, " that event (the forming of the Free African Society) set off a chain reaction where fraternal lodges, schools, mutual aid and improvement societies and various cultural organizations were also established. Also founded were wide-ranging correspondence networks -providing for the sharing of information and deserving to link African Americans geographically for the first time...and the various independent African American churches came into existence. In the north, workers organized demonstrations against segregation and discrimination policies."

What is commonly known as the civil rights movement did not truly begin in the 1960's...it had stopped and started from the 1660's, and African Americans had formed the first structural bridges to civil rights as early as the 1790's. Freedom comes in stages.

Another 100 years and a step forward in the law; the 13th and 14th amendments, citizenship and voting rights, came. And for a few decades after the civil war blacks again joined every aspect of society and built their own networks and proved their respectability and capabilities as free citizens alongside whites, in every level of society. But it was too fast for some, and violent rebuttals and new legal constraints came— sweeping new laws were passed to keep blacks in their so-called place. And so on, and back and forth it went, through to the civil rights movement of the 1960's. From the non-violent resistance of the 1960's nearly another 50 years have passed and here we are today, having elected a black man to lead the entire country. We have turned an important corner, and hope abounds, but there remains evidence of the old deep prejudices and even the hatred and violence—but we have evidence of hope even

there because those who espouse these ideas toward the new President or any black citizen are seen by the majority in society as kooks and criminals. It is a new day; it was a long time coming. Black people were told, and they themselves believed, even until last Monday, that they would likely never get there. And they never would have if they had not constructed their own bridges. It means, other minorities who have been oppressed can get there too. It means what we all know, blacks were always first-class citizens; they just were not treated that way. Blind people too, have always been first class; society has just not recognized it yet.

There was a methodology that I think you recognize. Get as many of us as possible organized for collective action. Get laws passed or struck down. Educate the public and ourselves. Don't allow others to speak for us. Network. Protest. Form Alliances. Take the long view. Experience and meet resistance. Do it again. Stick together in unity of purpose. Sacrifice for a purpose for the greater good. Do not wait for freedom to come on its own. And above all else do not give up, keep trying, keep telling, keep acting out the truth. And build your own bridges.

Bridges enable us to get across the something that divides or separates us from where we want to be or where we need to be. I often think of the NFB, made up of all its individuals, affiliates, chapters, and divisions as a bridge. We are the bridge to somewhere for blind people. We are at the forefront of all the progress that is made for the blind. We have been the force behind that progress. We are, and have been, the bridge that gets people across from isolation and dependency, discrimination and lack of opportunity, oppression and yes occasionally violence—to integration on terms of equality. We bridge blind people across the divide, and we also are the ones who bridge society across. The divide we must get them across is the divide of myths, misunderstandings and lies.

In gaining freedom, you have to build your own bridge across the divide. You must build expansive bridges such as laws and collective action that will cause sweeping progress to bring the whole across. Also, individuals must be built up to act as bridges to bring other individuals across.

We have similarities with the American black experience, but also some unique challenges. For blind people, the road to freedom has been longer than 400 years. Oppression, marginalization, misunderstanding, myths, violence, forced or unfair labor practices and belief of inferiority have occurred for the blind in every culture. There have been small bands of organized blind people and singular instances where blind people broke through towards freedom before us and they too were met with rebuttal. Many have not hated us but have strangled us with protection, kindness, dependency, and isolation. We are a far smaller minority than blacks. We are not able to get into advertising ads and tv shows and movies and professions in the same masses, not even close.

We have one unique challenge and difference from the American black experience that I view as particularly important to think about. You see, black children were almost always raised by black parents and for a long time predominately educated by black educators. This meant, for the future, and the present, there was someone raising the child who KNEW the truth about what it meant to be black. There was someone there to show and tell the child—all this disrespect and all these ideas are lies and are WRONG and TOGETHER we will find a way to resist and overcome them. The importance of this can not be overstated, it is a fundamental difference we have had. Blind children are predominately not raised or educated by other blind people. Usually, there has been no one there to show or tell that the prejudices were indeed prejudices and wrong and to say we are in this together.

In just a little under 7 decades the National Federation of the Blind has made simply astonishing advances, especially when you consider the length and breadth of our divide and the smallness of our numbers. Even so it has come in stages. In the beginning of the NFB, children and parents were not the primary focus. There were more immediate concerns of daily hunger, survival and the basics of human dignity for the adult blind population. If you've read your NFB history you know of which I speak.

In the first two decades of the NFB, blind children were overall receiving a fairly decent education, most learned Braille— and they were growing up with other blind people around them- but they had to leave their families to get this. But when they graduated with their educations they had no place to go. So, security and jobs obviously needed to be an early focus. Even the right to organize at all had to take up many of our early energies. In the next two decades, while the NFB was fighting for fundamental civil rights, and meeting the rebuttal of the established agencies for the blind, we also gained opportunity in higher education and revolutionized rehabilitation training and established even more employment opportunities. But all during this time a significant thing was happening. Blind children, in masse, were leaving the residential schools and growing up in their own homes and communities. While this was a desirable thing... it created a fundamental shift and a new need. No longer were blind children surrounded and growing up with other blind children. Many in fact began to grow up without knowing any other blind person at all. Parents were now raising their child and overseeing their educations. And while some parents had normal expectations many did not know they could expect normal things...Additionally this mass exodus from the blind schools created an immediate need for many more teachers. And coinciding—as the rehab agencies were resisting or ignoring us, so did the newly forming teacher colleges. Teachers trained to fill these newly needed positions were trained with sight biased.

philosophies—and quickly the near demise of Braille, multiplication of sight saving, and an explosion of low vision focus was about to occur. This was the atmosphere as we entered the 1980's.

Then, 25 years ago, on July 2, 1983, something revolutionary, something historically significant, and unique occurred. The National Organization of Parents of Blind Children was formed. To paraphrase Barbara Cheadle (the dedicated and formative president of the NOPBC for 23 years), Never before had a national organization of parents chosen to be guided, and mentored by, and act in true collegial partnership with—an adult organization of the same disability for the same purpose: participation on terms of equality. Under Dr. Jernigan's leadership and vision-a solemn commitment to the future of the blind was made. He charged us all to think of blind children as our own spiritual children and he directed that the NFB would direct its force, power, wisdom, resources, and treasury to making the NOPBC succeed and flourish.

The primary focus for the NOPBC in the 1980's was canes and mobility. In the late 1970's Doris Willoughby and Dr. Fred Schroeder had each separately and without knowing the other had done it, started giving canes to young elementary aged children. They didn’t wait for years of federal dollars and research they did what common sense told them and they were right. In the 1980's they came to the NOPBC with their ideas and then came Joe Cutter, and we started a revolution for blind children's mobility. In less than one decade we created an explosion of young children-even toddlers-using canes all over the country. Children's canes began to be manufactured for the first time. And the rehab agencies and established professional agencies rebutted, claiming we were irresponsible and endangering the children. But a wonderful thing was happening, once the children got a cane in their hand they would not give it up. Once they had tasted freedom they would not go back.

Also, in the first decade we began to establish and distribute literature especially about raising and educating blind children, and our magazine Future Reflections was first created and assembled on the dining room table and floor of the Cheadle's home. We reached out to parents and gave educational seminars, in 1986, 22 states had local seminars for parents and in 1987 the first workshop on IEP’s was held at national convention.

By the 1990's the use of and instruction in Braille had dropped to a shockingly low 10% of the blind student population. Moreover, many teachers did not even know Braille, and if it was a requirement to get a teaching certificate it was not a serious requirement. Braille became our focus in the nineties as canes had been in the 1980's. But Braille was not as simple as canes and mobility. You can not just place Braille in a child's hand and off they go. Working in partnership the NFB and NOPBC fought to get Braille laws in many states. Then in 1995, more than 1,500 letters were sent in a letter writing campaign to Congress in support of Braille literacy. In 1997 we got it in to federal law and we got it for children not based on amount of vision but based on reading efficiency and function. The agencies and established professionals were not happy and in order to get them to agree to getting the Braille law passed we had to put in a provision that essentially says a child gets Braille UNLESS they don't need it. It is a loophole you can drive a dump truck through. Remember the broadness of the Declaration of Independence took time. Freedom comes in stages.

By the year 2000, 26 states had a parent division. We had also long established resources for parents of blind children with additional disabilities. The advent of technology allowed parents to network day and night without geographic limitations; they began to network with each other and with blind adults and teachers on our list serv. In 2002, 449 students read 637,993 pages in the Braille Readers Are Leaders contest, NFB members and NAPUB worked with us, acting as judges verifying all those pages and getting out awards. In 2003 the Braille Flea market was established, and NFB leader Peggy Chong has taken the initiative to partner with us and coordinate this wonderful place where blind children can browse the shelves for books to their heart's delight. I would like every member to think about donating a brand-new Braille book to the flea market this year. Well, I don't want you to just think about it, I want you to do it. I don’t know if you have ever dared to go into our flea market, but the enthusiasm is awesome, it is like the rush at the front door of Walmart or BestBuy the morning after Thanksgiving...every man for himself. We established our Parent Leadership program, and we have more parent leaders than ever before who also have gotten to know each other well and are able to easily network and support each other through our new POBC presidents list. We are truly becoming a cohesive acting national force. In addition, parents of grown children have now expressed a desire to form an Alumni Group, led by Marty Greiser.

These days my in-box and phones are filled daily with several stories that make you want to scream and cry and rip your hair out. Yes, every day, several NEW stories. Teachers from the old school are still there, we don't have enough teachers, children are isolated from blind peers and role models, parents don't know anything about blindness. Parents must become practical lawyers to get their child a free and appropriate education. School budgets are stretched, and technologies are expensive. With the internet, many new parents are desperately searching looking for hope and answers. We just got an Imagination Fund grant to build a revolutionary new web site that we intend will revolutionize our ability to reach new families and empower them with all the resources we have. We want to double the number of Braille readers and expand our Braille programs-so we have to double at least the number of teachers and we want them to be without bias. Joanne Wilson got excited with me and we are

now creating a vast new teacher recruitment program which Dr. Maurer has enthusiastically approved—look to be asked to become a part of this soon. We are planning an Educational Symposium to build Alliances and to bring all the players to our table sometime next year. We are creating a new Assessment tool in partnership with a variety of professional friends and family that will put an impassible barrier up to the old school's loophole in the Braille law. Another Youth Slam will occur. I want to have a blind Continental Congress for youth—or a blind youth Model United Nations Assembly—I keep bugging Mark Riccobono- I encourage you to email him at Mriccobono@nfb.org and tell him you like the idea, and you are willing to help find the money for it. We are partnering with the new teacher division to develop a new IEP and Special Ed. Law video. We have just started a new blog site for teens, thanks in great part to Rosy Carranza. And of course, the NFB Braille Initiative and the promotion of the coin has begun.

When they graduate our kids need a place to go, and many will need more training in blindness skills, so our interests also lie in higher education, employment, and rehabilitation. We are reaching out to new partners who are believers outside the NFB. Within we are finding new ways to partner with the teacher, rehab, and student divisions. Eventually, we intend to build strong partner and mentorships with every division. If you are a division leader—oh of say for example the merchants division, or the lawyers division, or ah...the computer science division—let's think about what we can do for blind kids together. We are YOUR future, and you are ours—it is that simple and profound. Parents and children have a vested interest in ensuring the strength and success of the NFB, and you have a vested interest in ensuring their strength and success. There are tens of thousands of students and adults seeking assistance to reach their full potential every day. The vast majority are met with a limiting containment wall rather than a bridge to success. They are in need of a bridge, or they will not get to where they are capable of being.

We are at a crucial time I believe, the fight of our lives to cement our movement, I believe is happening right now. NAC is Back? Blind people can not be parents? The movie Blindness? People saw it as no big deal? Freedom comes in painful stages.

Have you ever been across the vast expansion bridge in San Francisco? It is a wonder of engineering achievement, it works, it withstands, and it is a beautiful thing. I think we are like that. Together the NFB and the NOPBC are like this huge expansion bridge from the island of isolation to the mainland of freedom. We are a wonder of engineering achievement, we work, we withstand, and we are a beautiful thing: but we need to continue to expand. Individually we all need to act as bridges. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "People are often led to great causes and often become committed to great ideas through persons who personify those ideas. They have to find the embodiment of the idea in flesh and blood in order to commit themselves to it." Build a bridge. Mentor a child or young adult or a parent or someone newly blind. Be a bridge. We will get to the other side. Yes, we can.