*Expressions in Independence Newsletter WINTER 2013*

***New Beginnings***

Edited by: Alex Castillo

*The winter season brings us snow, cold weather, hot chocolate and, for many people, an opportunity to share good times with friends and family through holiday celebrations. For others, the holidays are a time of stress and doubt, where these celebrations are reminders of negative experiences and feelings of inadequacy.*

*This is why, at the Nebraska Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired, we don’t only focus on what can be considered the "hard" skills of blindness training, such as cane travel, home management, communications, Braille, and wood shop. We also focus on what can be called the "soft" skills of blindness training for a learning experience that can serve in all aspects of life, once the client leaves the Center.*

*This is why you will sometimes see pictures of both clients and staff flying kites on our FB page, carving pumpkins, and making holiday decorations. Sometimes after losing your vision, it’s just as meaningful to know how to carve a pumpkin with your grandchild as it is to cross busy intersections.*

*The theme of our newsletter this winter season is "New Beginnings." Just as the New Year has marked the end of a year gone by, our last four graduates of 2012 are moving forward with new skills, new life lessons, and newly formed lifelong friends. They are leaving behind those feelings of inadequacy, stress and doubt.*

*You will also find articles by our Center staff which will assist in painting a more vivid picture of life at the Center. And as a winter treat, an article on Santa Claus and how he has dealt with his vision loss.*

*We hope you enjoy this installment of our newsletter, and, like our Center graduates, may you also find your new beginning during this winter season.*

**Director’s Corner**

By: Fatos Floyd

Winter makes the mind drift to thoughts of ice and snow, especially here in Nebraska. Building snowmen and snowball fights, along with skating and sledding, are typical activities we think about.

As we look ahead to training in the new year, the image of the snowball rolling down the hill may be very fitting. We all know the story of how the snowball gets larger and larger as it rolls, gaining size and momentum as it goes, becoming unstoppable and leaving a clear track of its progress.

Center training may be seen in much the same way.

As fresh new skills are shaped and practiced, progress initially may seem small and slow. With commitment and determination, abilities and competence gain speed and strength. In the end, with sustained effort, an unstoppable avalanche happens.

Once progress has reached this point, the changes made are very obvious and can never be undone.

May the year ahead be one big avalanche for you!

**What Do You Mean, "Blind"?**

By Jeff Altman

*Jeff Altman has been a travel instructor with the Nebraska Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired for more than 15 years. Travel class, for many, is one of the more psychologically demanding classes to participate in while training at the Center. The nature of his work requires taking clients into areas and situations which often pins his students against preconceived misconceptions of blindness believed by society. And often, instructor and student alike are faced with the same questions.*

*In our first article, he asks us to consider how we feel about the use of the word "blind" and its repercussions , not only by sighted people, but by people who are blind themselves.*

There are words in our language which have the power to make people uncomfortable, that cause a wide variety of strong emotions, and inspire people to try to avoid their usage. Such a word is "blind" and in recent years this word, along with many others that describe an individual's physical characteristics, has come to be viewed as improper and even demeaning. Of course, it is not the words themselves which are the problem. Rather, it is the beliefs held by our society regarding the conditions they represent that create this sense of discomfort.

 Certainly, blindness is not a desirable outcome for anyone, and it is fair to assume that most people would initially find this experience to be frightening and frustrating. Any physical loss creates emotional trauma, and this emotional response can only be made worse when the majority of the information available regarding this condition is simply false and misleading. There are so many myths and misconceptions regarding blindness that the truth is often difficult to recognize, and it is sometimes overlooked entirely.

Many dictionaries define blindness as "the inability to see." The fact is that the majority of blind persons have some degree of vision. A more correct definition of blindness would be, "a level of visual function which is limited to the degree that the individual is reliant upon other forms of sensory information in most situations and has developed and utilizes alternative non-visual techniques to carry out the majority of ordinary daily activities."

Many of these alternative techniques are well known by the general public, such as the long white cane, guide dogs, and Braille. Unfortunately, they are not truly understood by most people. The sources of information most people have at their disposal tend to reinforce the belief that the blind are persons of limited awareness living lives of quiet desperation, forced to resort to methods which are woefully inadequate for meeting the demands of even the most basic of daily tasks, leaving us hopelessly dependent upon the assistance of others and incapable of caring for ourselves, let alone functioning as contributing members of society. It is interesting to note that another popular myth about blindness shifts us to the opposite end of the functional spectrum, endowing us with superior hearing, senses of touch and smell, and even a mystical sixth sense. For those of us that are blind, we find it truly amazing that these beliefs persist in our society when so many of us live ordinary lives; such perceptions could not possibly be any further from the truth.

At first, it may seem incredible that such clearly different points of view could be accepted as equally true within one society; however, there is a logical explanation for their co-existence. Should one accept the notion that the loss of vision renders a person hopeless, helpless, and oblivious to the world around him or her, then what possible explanation can there be when you are confronted by a blind individual who is functioning at a level well above your expectations, other than to come to the conclusion that such people must possess non-visual sensory powers well beyond those of ordinary persons. Of course, it is unthinkable to consider that the beliefs about blindness passed down to us by our parents, teachers, and popular culture are false; therefore, any blind person that does not fit into our notion of what a blind person should look or behave like must be an exception to the rule. Since blindness is a relatively rare occurrence, it is unlikely that the average person will have the chance to have experiences which discredit our society's prevailing beliefs.

 Unfortunately, the fact that the majority of blind persons have some degree of functional vision tends to further compound the confusion regarding the true levels of awareness and abilities of blind people. It is commonly believed that the more vision you have, the greater your awareness of the environment and ability to perform ordinary activities will be. Therefore, very often the success a blind individual experiences is credited to his or her ability to see, rather than his or her skill and competence as a person. Many blind persons, unaware of the truth of blindness, have come to accept these myths as reality, and they find it easy to assume that all blind persons must share their own negative experiences with blindness. They have been led to believe that the successes they have achieved either result from their reliance upon remaining vision or are based upon their own unique talents and abilities. Many somehow perceive their success in performing the ordinary activities of daily life as a great accomplishment, worthy of praise and social recognition.

Given these culturally held beliefs about blindness, is it any wonder that so many persons, both sighted and blind, seek to avoid the use of this word? For many blind individuals, there is the hope that by peeling off this label, they can emphasize the physical abilities made possible by utilizing their remaining vision, and somehow slip the bonds of the social barriers blindness creates. These individuals may even aspire to escape from the self-defeating dreadful notions of the effects of vision loss they have internalized, and if at all possible, separate themselves from any association with blindness. For the sighted individual, there is comfort in knowing that one's choice of words has allowed you to describe the person's physical characteristics without the risk of offending or having to undertake the effort required actually to change your beliefs or attitudes about blindness.

Among the guardians of political correctness, there is a certain sense of pride and gladness in knowing that our society has become more accepting and inclusive by simply changing the words we use to describe those we consider less fortunate. They are prepared to defend their position by harshly chastising anyone that might challenge their notions. They have defined what is appropriate language and attitudes regarding the characteristics of others, and they seem unwilling to consider any other opinions on the subject, including the opinions of the very people who are living with these characteristics. It is interesting to consider that in spite of the proud accomplishments touted by the guardians of political correctness, blind and disabled persons are still rarely welcomed as equals in either social or employment situations.

Our popular culture has generated a whole series of socially acceptable, supposedly non-offensive, euphemisms to replace the words we find uncomfortable, and with regular usage and more than a little social pressure, they have become commonplace in our language. Words such as blind, crippled, or handicapped are now looked upon as improper or even cruel. Terms such as "visually impaired" and "physically challenged" have gained favor as the appropriate terminology, and labels such as "non-sighted" are not unusual in this awkward age of the guilty social conscience.

 For the sake of argument, let us consider how well such euphemisms would be accepted should they be applied to characteristics other than blindness by a power-holding majority group. For example, would it be appropriate to regard a person of Asian descent as being "racially impaired" in the United States, or a person living in Eastern Europe as "culturally challenged" by Western Europeans, or for that matter a person having a darker skin tone as "non-white"? Clearly, such references would be viewed as offensive and demeaning, and the reason is easily recognizable. Each of these terms compares the individual's characteristics to a perceived higher standard, and therefore infers that the individual is somehow inferior. Can this be any less true for persons who are blind or have other characteristics which are considered to be disabilities?

 Certainly, we are obligated to respect the wishes of others when making reference to their individual characteristics, and therefore, should a blind individual feel more comfortable with the term "visually impaired", it is only proper that we accept his or her personal preference. However, I firmly believe that we should not feel the need to avoid the use of the word blind since it properly describes a physical characteristic without making any comparisons. If a blind individual is offended by our use of the word blind, it is not because we have done something wrong; rather, it is a matter of that individual's personal opinion. While it is appropriate to let these persons know that we understand their feelings and respect their choice of terminology, we should not feel obligated to apologize for using a perfectly appropriate word. On the other hand, should the word blind be used in conjunction with a statement which is intended to justify an action which denies opportunity based upon a belief system that holds that blindness renders an individual less aware or less capable than others, then there are many good reasons to apologize.

**New Beginnings: Commencement Articles from our Graduates**

*Laurie, Danna, Victor and Marty are our last four graduates of 2012. They began training at the Center at around the same time, and have become good mentors to each other, and a very tight-knit group. At the Center, they were a fun-loving bunch, and always made sure to keep things light, even during those very challenging lessons. And yet, they never forgot that their reasons for attending Center training were very serious, and for them, marked the start of new outlooks and opportunities in life.*

*The following are heartfelt articles which were written by our graduates to be shared during their graduation from the Center.*

**Commencement Letter**

By: Laurie J.

 It took Connie about five years of asking me to come to the Center. So when all of the stars in the universe were in the right alignment, I was ready to come. I wish to thank Connie for her perseverance and wisdom to know that I could benefit from this program.

I have had many blessings in my life, and with this experience, I can add another one to the list. I want to use the word CENTER as the acronym for all that I learned during this past year.

"C" is for the Commitment that we must have to complete this program. Thank you to the staff for their compassion, and for their commitment to teaching us. It also stands for the Camaraderie that I have shared with the other clients who have become my friends. Most of all, it has given me the Confidence to be successful in whatever I pursue.

"E" is for Education. This Education has been an edifying experience. At times it was entertaining for the other clients, when I would get lost in the hall or in Cindy's storage closet. Despite the stumbling blocks, it has been an enjoyable experience.

"N" is for Never giving up. One year ago, I did not believe that I could learn Braille. I also never thought I could cross O Street under sleep shades. Never take a peek from under your sleep shades, because Cindy will catch you. Some days I might not have felt normal, but Normal was the bus that brought us to school every day.

"T" stands for the Teachers that I want to thank for all the skills they taught me. From Cindy, I learned not to over-bake my cookies, and how to know when meat is done cooking without having to see it. Sahar taught me to trust what my fingers are feeling when I come across a word such as F J O R D. I have learned that Fatos is Fabulous, and Nancy is naughty, but I do not understand why those Feds gave Germs to that House in Iowa. Mike taught me never to hitchhike, so I have him to thank for keeping all of my fingers. Jeff gave me the tools to walk faster than a 95-year-old. Mitzy taught me not to be afraid of my computer. She gave me the skills to compose this letter, and that spell check is one of the greatest key strokes ever invented. Last but not least, "T" is for the tears that were shed. But I am glad to admit the tears of laughter and joy far outweighed the tears of frustration.

"E" is for Exit. I recently heard that for every door you exit, you are also entering into a new beginning.

"R" is for the Recognition that needs to be given to the entire staff at the Commission for their dedication to teaching us, now members of the blind community, the skills that will enrich our lives. I will take with me the knowledge that I am not defined by my blindness.

**Commencement Article**

By: Danna Y.

I am dedicating this article to my mother. Because she raised me no differently than my siblings, she gave me the ability to live my life independently and to the fullest. I also thank God for the gift of being able to tell her how I felt before she passed.

My decision to go to the Center was not an easy one, but once I made the commitment, I hoped to get some instruction in cane travel and some computer skills. I had no idea how much I would gain from this experience.

I was diagnosed with juvenile degeneration of the retina as a small child. Over the years, I adapted, and did not let my blindness hold me back. Now that I am older (60, to be exact), I wanted to take the responsibility for my mobility; I wanted to keep my independence. The Center gave me this opportunity. It provided me with the best of the best.

My travel instructor worked with me on travel skills, as well as the social and emotional aspects of using a cane. Now, rather than feeling uncomfortable about using a cane, I look at it as a tool, like a pair of glasses. This class has given me a foundation that I can continue to build on.

Although home management was nothing new to me (I am a wife of forty years, a mother and grandmother), I still learned new and different nonvisual alternatives. For me, this class was fun and confidence-building.

For the first time in my adult life, the communications class has made it possible for me to do my own correspondence. I know that I will continue to learn and improve my computer skills.

Shop class is so much more than learning to use tools and completing a project. It is about knowing that you can do things that you may never have done before. The students that have previously relied on their vision will have the confidence to continue without it after learning nonvisual alternatives.

At first, I thought that I could use Braille for some simple organizational purposes. Little did I know that Braille would open up a new world for me. For the first time in my life, I am able to read without a struggle. This is my wish for every child.

I want to thank all of the agency staff, the front desk staff, the field and Center staff from the bottom of my heart.

**Back to Life**

By: Victor I.

A little more than a year ago, I lost my job due to my deteriorating eyesight. I was no longer able to meet performance standards. I didn’t know what I was going to do. I couldn’t even fill out an application. Shortly after I lost my job, my father came from Indiana to help me get my affairs in order. The first appointment we had was with Connie Daly at the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. That meeting turned into the best thing that could have happened to me.

Not long after, I was getting some in-house training from Connie and Larry Roos. It very quickly became apparent that I should start training at the Center. I then went through a three-day stay and started at the Center full-time on January 30, 2012.

There is no question that this, in the beginning, was extremely taxing, both mentally and physically. After about three weeks, I started to get used to it, and sort of got into the routine. It never gets easy, but it certainly gets better.

For some, eight hours a day under sleep shades can be stressful and downright overwhelming. I actually never felt that way. I think this is because I knew that the Center is where I needed to be at this time in my life. I went from being lost to having hope.

Over the last nine months, I have learned more than I can mention in this letter. There is one thing that I feel is the most important to me. I have regained much of the confidence I had when I had more sight.

The training wasn’t all hard work; I had a lot of fun, too. I also met friends that I hope I will have forever. Thanks to all of the staff and clients for making the last nine months invaluable, and an experience that I will never forget.

**Shooting from the Heart**

By: Marty B.

I’m going to talk to you about my Center experience, and I’m going to shoot from the heart. When I first came to the Center, I wondered if I had made the right decision. As time went by, I knew that I made the right choice by coming here. I’m going to tell you about some of the good and bad times I have experienced at the Center.

One of the most memorable times at the Center for me was when Danna and I were dropped off at A Street Market. Before the drop, we were kidding Cindy that we were going to get some drinks on the drop. When we were dropped, we bounced around for a little while, but finally found the store. We left the A Street Market and waited at the bus stop for a few minutes. It was a very hot day, and I had forgotten my drink in Cindy’s car. We decided to go back and get something non-alcoholic to drink from the A Street Market. We started to go into a building when Cindy stopped us and said that she thought we were kidding about getting that drink. Danna and I realized then that we were going into the liquor store instead of the market.

When we found our bearings, we went into the grocery store. We asked the clerk if she knew what time the next bus would be coming. She told us that the bus was going by right then. We called the bus station and asked when the next bus would be arriving. They said that it would be another hour before we could catch it. Danna asked me if I wanted to wait at the bus stop, or if I wanted to walk back to the Center. I decided to walk.

On the way back to the Center, it started to rain. We were soaked to the bone, but we laughed. After all, we’re not made of sugar; we weren’t going to melt. When we got back, Cindy congratulated us for our accomplishment.

In home management class, I learned many alternative ways to cook. The first day I made mac and cheese, I did everything perfectly, until I thought that my dish needed “a little kick.” I decided to add some Cajun pepper to the mac and cheese, so I took the lid off and sprinkled a little spice into my dish--or so I thought. Instead, I poured the whole bottle into the mac and cheese. Needless to say, it had a bit more kick than I wanted. As time went on, I realized that I liked cooking more than I thought I did. I gained about 20 pounds to prove that.

In shop, I learned about the click ruler and how it worked. I used power tools with no vision, and I built a nice-looking fishing pole holder. Thank you, Mike, for your help.

As for Braille, I tried very hard to read it, but my fingers wouldn’t let me feel it. However, I can write it. Thank you, Sahar, for being patient with me.

In communications, the first thing I learned was typing, since I did not know how to type. I also learned how to surf the web and how to get my email. Thank you, Mitzy, for everything.

Finally, in travel, in the beginning, I was hugging the walls, both because of my balance problems, and because I was not confident. I remember the first time I went to Ideal on 27th Street. I hated the traffic, and went up a driveway to get away from the noise. As time went on, I realized that traffic was my friend. One day, it just clicked, and travel has been much easier for me since.

Thank you for the wonderful times I have had at the Center, and for the opportunity you have given me to better my life. I made friends whom I will cherish for the rest of my days.

**On The Back Burner**

By Cindy Zimmer

*Cindy has been with our Center for 20 years, and there is no recipe, craft, or special project which she has not come across and learned to do without use of her eyesight. As always, she lets us know all about the projects and activities which the Center has taken part in throughout the last few months.*

August-December, 2012

Wow, where do I start? We were definitely busy during these past 4 months.

Five commencement meals were hosted, along with one mini meal. Chicken parmesan, chicken-fried steak, chicken pesto, chicken cordon bleu and meatloaf. Yes, all chicken dishes and one great-tasting meatloaf. In case you were counting, a couple of clients made chicken parmesan. Marty sure has the homemade frosting perfected for his brownies!

Some of you know that I love to fish, and if there is ever an opportunity to go fishing, I am in. The Center clients and staff practiced our casting and headed off to the local lake. We had some old pros who were trying to catch the big ones, but the newbies sure had fun reeling in the smaller fish. We were at a "catch and release" lake, so no fish fry this time. Can you guess who holds the worms in their mouth so they are close at hand when needed?

This was an election year, and even though some clients were not able to vote, they did go along and learn about the voting machine and the voting practices in the United States. We also had at least two people voting for the first time! What a sense of accomplishment and independence.

On October 23rd, Victor and Danna hosted our first Appetizer Day. All staff and clients made an appetizer to share with each other. Victor and Danna each had to make two so we had plenty of great food to eat. Have you ever tried bacon-wrapped water chestnuts or bacon-wrapped asparagus? YUM!

It’s Halloween time. We carved our pumpkins and had some very creative designs. Clients continue to like the alternative of placing a hole in the center of a paper dessert plate and placing it over the stem to use as a template for cutting off the top. Did you know that if you use a cookie cutter you can scrape off the outside layer of the pumpkin, leaving the design (cookie cutter shape) behind? When a candle is placed inside the pumpkin, the design illuminates.

The pumpkins were judged, and prizes were awarded during our Halloween Soup Luncheon. This year, clients made chili, seafood chowder and vegetable-beef soup. Fatos brought in some lentil soup for everyone to try, and Mitzy shared some broccoli-cheese soup. Several clients and staff dressed up for the costume contest. Laurie’s witch costume was very scary, and the hand-painted eyes on her sleep shades were unbelievable.

It’s generally known that if I overhear a client saying they are scared to do a certain task due to their blindness, you can bet I will arrange things to help them reach that goal. Even if they are positive it is not their goal. This year, two clients carved the turkeys for our Thanksgiving lunch. It is such a joy to hear a client say thanks for pushing them into doing something they had given up or never tried. I was even told they had fun. We served over 45 people this year, and if I listed all the food that the Center clients cooked, I would have to add another page to this newsletter. Let me just say it was all very tasty!

We finished out our year putting up the Christmas tree and decorating the Center for the holidays. Several clients helped make reindeer with candy cane antlers for the doors. A former client, Stephanie, came and taught us all how to make cornhusk dolls. Thanks, Steph! There was a lot of laughing, and we had some very unique dolls.

Our holiday baking made us all look a little more like Santa Claus. Marty and Victor brought in some deer and beef jerky, and even those on diets sure enjoyed the great food. New recipes that Center clients tried this year were peppermint patties, Butterfinger candy bars, and sugar-free lemon popcorn.

Giving back is something we encourage, and this year, the Center did an activity at the mall where we did some of our Christmas shopping, but also rang bells for the Salvation Army’s Red Kettle Campaign.

The end of the year always brings graduation, and this year was no different. The last three members of the “Fab Five” (Laurie, Danna, Victor, Marty, and Dave) graduated just before our holiday break. We will miss all five of them and want to wish them all the best of luck in their next ventures.

And of course, we would all like to extend big congratulations to Tammy and Dave, who met at the Center this past year, and got married in December!

 My Experiences at Hy-Vee

By: Laurel F.

*Quite often, our graduates call and send us letters which describe the positive changes in their lives that have occurred after Center training. Laurel is one of our graduates, and she tells us how much she has enjoyed working and having those necessary skills to feel confident and competent at her job.*

I know that many of you are probably wondering what I have been up to since I have moved back to Omaha. Well, now I am successfully employed at Hy-Vee, a grocery store part of a national chain, here in Omaha. I love my job, and I would not give it up for anything.

Some rather interesting things have happened. One of them was when Dave Webber from Channel 6 came up to me and asked me whether I was the smile in every aisle. I said of course, and not only just in every aisle, but in the entry way as well.

Another funny thing happened last night. As I was giving a customer the ad, he asked me, “Are you Mrs. Hy or Mrs. Vee?” Of course, I got a big laugh out of that one.

Also I’ve enjoyed seeing friends from years past, and teachers from elementary school years, and from Grace University. I have enjoyed every minute of interacting with them. When I saw my special ed teacher from elementary school, it was a pleasant surprise. It has been a long time since I have seen her. As for instructors from Grace that come in and shop, it is always a blessing to see them, knowing that they are always praying for me as I go through this journey of independence. Working has been such a great stress reducer, and I have been happier, and have not had nearly the anxiety issues that I have been having. I have found out that being around people has been a good thing for me, and it keeps me happy, and keeps me from going into depression. It also keeps me busy, and makes the days go by so much faster.

Also the experience that I have had navigating my way around the store has been very interesting. The staff there is completely in awe of how I get around, and I don’t take any of the credit for my ability to navigate so well. The credit goes to Jeff Altman, who taught me how to use my cane properly, and it has stuck with me. They all say that I get around like I am not blind, but how little do they know. Thank you to the staff at the Center for teaching me so well. I really appreciate it. It is why I can now say that I am Hy-Vee, and that I am a helpful smile in every aisle. I am taking part in making the lives of the customers easier, healthier and happier. And that is my goal--to make everyone’s lives’ easier, healthier and happier. So come on in to my Hy-Vee and you will be greeted by the helpful smile in the entry way!

**A Cane for Santa**

By Alex Castillo

*Alex Castillo is the Apartment Resource Counselor for the Nebraska Center for the Blind. He makes sure that clients are well oriented in independent apartment living, and that clients are getting out and about in the city of Lincoln. About a year ago, he visited Louisiana, where he received blindness training in a center much like our own. It was there that he heard the following story.*

Most people know about Santa Claus. He’s the jolly old fellow who, along with a team of flying reindeer and tireless elves, work year-round so that on one night out of every year, they can bring presents to children and adults all over the world. What many people are not aware of is that one year, Santa began noticing that his vision was not what it used to be. Of course, he did not want to admit it to himself, but driving that sleigh at night, and being up there in the sky with all of those airplanes zooming by, made him feel quite unsafe.

It was no surprise when the gossip started in the North Pole that Santa had gone blind, and that he was quitting the holidays. He became depressed, and without his work, he lost his sense of purpose in life. The man was a real sad mess.

On one of those special holiday nights, everything started going downhill, and just got worse and worse as the night progressed. The naughty and nice lists were becoming a blur, and he handed out the wrong toys to more than 1 billion people.

I know what you might be thinking at this moment. If Santa had gone blind, you would have surely heard about it. I’m not saying this is all true, but was there one year in which you received absolutely the most unlikely gift ever? Well, if the answer is yes, then this story might make a little sense.

After getting home that night, Santa could do little more than lock himself up in his office at the toy factory, and no matter how hard anyone tried to cheer him up, he could do absolutely nothing for a very long time.

This is the story I heard last year when I was visiting friends in Ruston, Louisiana. They say that one year after he had lost his vision, Santa came down there to receive training at their blindness center. “He could barely even see Rudolph’s nose,” they said. “He had lost about 75 pounds when he first arrived, and wouldn’t even touch a cookie." They would whisper, "He’d get real close to ya when he was talking. Couldn’t tell north from south even if he was holding a compass, bless his heart.”

And apparently the entire town knew about this phenomenon. So well-known was the story down there that a writer by the name of Jerry Whittle wrote a play about the whole ordeal, and everyone in town came to see the production.

When I asked how come Santa didn’t choose Nebraska to come and train (after all, we have an awesome Center right here, and it would seem the obvious choice, with all the snow, howling winds, and freezing weather we get), the answer I received was: “Well, Nebraska? With all that snow up there? He’d be recognized in a heartbeat if he stepped outside dressed in all red in his Husker gear.“ They said: “Down here, he’s just another blind guy with a beard.”

The more I thought about the story, about this blind and depressed Santa Claus, the more sense it made. Often when people start to lose their eyesight, they feel ashamed, and even worthless. People find themselves transforming from a productive and contributing member of their family or community to just sitting passively, watching life and everyone else pass them by. We often confuse the inability to do with the inability to see. And all it would take for us to get back into our routine, or even find a more exciting and challenging new one, is to understand that with some blindness training, many doors can open with the promise of opportunity.

Training centers do not create Santa Clauses. But they can help Santa figure out how he can do his job non-visually, as a respectable blind person.

As I recall, the play ended with Santa making the decision to keep the toy factories open and to stay in the job as Santa Claus. He arrived at the North Pole to continue his yearly duties, with some new blindness skills and alternatives. It was a truly happy ending.

But the people in Ruston tell a different story. They say that he didn’t go back to the North Pole right away. “Oh, he had some trouble with the training,” they said. "At first, he was always lifting those sleep shades." They said he would use the excuse of being overheated to lift them and peek during every class.

He didn’t like travel very much, they said. Oh, Santa--Santa, you would see him just hiding when it was time for travel class.

But what surprised me the most was when they told me: “The first time Santa stepped into the wood shop and heard those live blades running, he almost fainted.” One would think that someone who has been working with factory machinery their whole lives would be able to handle a radial arm saw.

As time went by, he settled into the center and became an excellent student.

But after training, he didn’t go back to the North Pole right away. He wanted to try out a new career. He went to work at this Cajun restaurant as a cook in the next town. During training, Santa had discovered that he had let Mrs. Claus do all the cooking during their entire marriage, but he actually enjoyed working in the kitchen. “Could ya’all imagine that?” they said. “Santa as a cook in a Cajun restaurant?”

I suppose he just felt like he wanted some independence. Like many people after they finish blindness training, he must have felt a bit rebellious and must have wanted to prove to anyone that he could go far beyond the common expectations for a blind person. It wasn’t until the Mrs. threatened to come and get him that he decided to go back up north.

Sometimes the path to independence isn’t obvious. Sometimes, like Santa, we need to figure ourselves out for a little while. Sometimes, blindness gives us an opportunity to learn and make decisions which vary greatly from those in our past, and that we would never have thought possible if we had not lost our eyesight. And sometimes, we just get a stronger sense of who we are.

The first step toward independence, and starting your life (or getting it back) is recognizing when it’s time to receive training, and then going through that training in a program that will allow you to fully realize yourself as a respectable blind person.

After all, this is our life, and we live through our choices.

As for the story about Santa, you can believe it or not, but the children and grownups are still receiving presents on time and without any strange mix-ups. Polls show that he’s been doing a better job year after year. And just the other day, I read a review about some new restaurant opening up on the North Pole which specializes in Cajun cuisine.

Note: This story was adapted from the play written by Jerry Whittle.

We hope you’ve enjoyed reading this issue of our newsletter, and may you have a wonderful year ahead of you.

Don’t forget to check out our FB page at: www*.****facebook****.com/****NebraskaCenterForTheBlind***[Cached](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:vGqzU3jHaz8J:www.facebook.com/NebraskaCenterForTheBlind+nebraska+center+for+the+blind+facebook&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us)

You +1'd this publicly. [Undo](http://www.google.com/search?q=nebraska+center+for+the+blind+facebook&rls=com.microsoft:en-us:IE-Address&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&sourceid=ie7&rlz=1I7ADRA_enUS477)

and our Twitter feed at: *https://****twitter****.com/necenter4blind*[Cached](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Q5MkRraglMMJ:https://twitter.com/necenter4blind+nebraskacenter+twitter&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us)

You +1'd this publicly. [Undo](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&tbo=d&rls=com.microsoft%3Aen-us%3AIE-Address&rlz=1I7ADRA_enUS477&q=nebraskacenter+twitter+&oq=nebraskacenter+twitter+&gs_l=serp.3..0i8i13i30.44414.55151.0.55408.28.18.5.5.5.0.164.1456.17j1.18.0.les%3B..0.0...1c.1.FeY4xFHIAgg)

We also have a monthly blog which can be found at:

http://nebraskacenterfortheblind.blogspot.com/

Sincerely,

The Center Team