THE FEDERATIONIST IN CONNECTICUT

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**Authenticity, Diversity, and the Synergy of the Organized Blind**

An address delivered by Mark A. Riccibono, President at the Banquet of the annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind, Orlando, Florida, July 8, 2018

Any single moment in time can be an opportunity for reflection, for commitment, or for action. That we share this moment together means that we combine our unique perspectives, backgrounds, and talents into one unified experience. Publisher Malcolm Forbes noted that diversity is “the art of thinking independently together.” Artist Vincent van Gogh explained that “great things are done by a series of small things brought together.” And Aristotle is credited with observing that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This philosophical musing has now been applied in almost every aspect of life—from the Gestalt psychological theory that, “the whole is something else than the sum of its parts,” to applications in physiology, economics, and theology.

This concept is now better known as synergy, from the Latin word *synergia* meaning working together. Synergy is broadly understood to be a mutually advantageous conjunction or compatibility of distinct participants or elements. Leadership coach Stephen Covey describes it this way: “Synergy is what happens when one plus one equals ten or a hundred or even a thousand! It's the profound result when two or more respectful human beings determine to go beyond their preconceived ideas to meet a great challenge.” In this construction, synergy can be understood as the product of successful organizing. One of the best examples of synergy that I have experienced in my life is the organized blind movement. What are the distinct characteristics that have allowed us to achieve synergy, and how can we continue to grow the exponential impact of our combined effort?

Blindness has almost always been understood to be a characteristic that distinguishes one as lacking ability. Throughout the centuries the fear of darkness shaped the myths about blindness that were shared through oral storytelling and later retold in written works. On many occasions, the blind attempted to come together to move beyond the myths, but they were always marginalized or overtaken by people having the distinct trait of keen eyesight. The dominance of the vision-centered approach resulted in deeply rooted misconceptions about blindness and pushed blind people to the fringe of society—we did not belong. By the twentieth century it seemed as though the great misunderstanding of blindness was unstoppable. That was until blind women and men in the United States gained enough momentum to begin to organize and share their authentic insights.

In the fall of 1940, representatives of seven state organizations of the blind came together to form a unified national organization of blind people led by elected blind leaders—the National Federation of the Blind. Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, a blind scholar of constitutional law, was elected as our first President, and his leadership was critical to keeping the new organization together. For nearly eight decades we have distinguished our movement by continuing to build on the authentic organizational principles that brought us together. The hopes, dreams, and actions of a diverse and committed corps of individual blind people, unified in purpose, and led by elected blind representatives have resulted in synergy. When others who are not elected by the blind have attempted to knock us off course, we have held the line. When those who choose not to join together with us have tried to divide us, we have held more tightly to the bonds that connect us. When others have said the blind cannot, we have followed our dreams and made them come true. With synergy, we are the blind—the National Federation of the Blind.

Blindness is merely one of a thousand characteristics we individually bring to this movement. Yet, for our organization blindness is preeminent to our mission and our governance structure. In everything we have done, we have kept a strong and singular focus on blind people. Although we welcome those who do not possess the characteristic of blindness as members, collectively they may not constitute a majority of our membership, and they cannot run our governing boards.

Kenneth Jernigan, the second great President of the National Federation of the Blind, articulated our philosophy regarding the definition of blindness this way: “One is blind to the extent that the individual must devise alternative techniques to do efficiently those things which he would do if he had normal vision. An individual may properly be said to be “blind” or a “blind person” when he has to devise so many alternative techniques—that is, if he is to function efficiently—that his pattern of daily living is substantially altered.”

Under this functional definition of blindness, we reflect one class of people—blind people—a class that deserves equal treatment. There are those who attempt to divide us based upon how much remaining eyesight we have—carving us into categories such as low vision, visually impaired, hard of seeing, partially sighted, visually challenged, and that most feared group, the totals. We reject this hierarchical vision-centered approach which threatens our common bond and our unified interests. While some of us may use visual techniques now and then, as blind people we recognize that vision is not a requirement for success in the world. Blindness is our primary distinction, and it gives us authenticity and power, but when we choose to determine our own direction and speak for ourselves, it transforms into synergy.

An important second distinction fuels the synergy of our movement—equality. Since our founding, we have taken responsibility for setting the standard of equality for the participation of the blind in society. We have rejected society’s second-class accommodations. We have never sought greater advantages than our sighted peers, but we have insisted upon equality of opportunity and freedom from artificial barriers. Over time, we have raised the expectations for equal treatment. One example is our participation in voting for public officials. Blind people were once forced to have their paper ballot filled out by whomever the polling place assigned as a scribe—the blind did not have a choice. We fought for the right of blind people to vote independently by bringing a person of their own choosing into the voting booth. Today, we favor a new standard of equality where the blind use the same voting systems as every other voter with the expectation that the electronic machines will be fully accessible, and our ballots will look the same, allowing us to cast a vote independently and privately. We must continue to explore the limits and evaluate equality within our movement and throughout the broader society.

Equality contributes to our synergy in another important way—it strengthens our diversity. Blindness is not constrained by race, gender, economic status, or any of a thousand other characteristics. Therefore, if we are going to be a movement of blind people who synergize around equality, we must reflect a diverse range of blind people with a large variation in characteristics beyond blindness. We must continue to value and cultivate diversity as we have in the past, and we should guard against our diversity becoming a fracture that divides us as blind people.

I have been reflecting upon what we know about blind people throughout history and during the time of the National Federation of the Blind. A pattern of leadership is evident that I believe exemplifies the value we place on equality within our movement. In the stories of blind people prior to our founding, most of the prominent figures are men, not women. Consider the nineteenth century essays of James Wilson that profiled blind people in a series of volumes entitled Biography of the Blind. Wilson profiles sixty-three blind individuals, but only seven are women. While a handful of other stories of blind women have surfaced since Wilson published his sketches in the 1800s, the record is still thin.

Women have faced social, economic, and political barriers that have created inequality compared to men, and their stories have been under recorded in history. Blind women, faced with the twin low expectations of being female and having the most feared disability, blindness, have been limited in opportunities to pursue their dreams. The lack of adequate training for blind people before the organized blind movement contributed to blind women being considered inadequate for even stereotypical roles in society. The full participation of blind women has been further complicated by efforts like the eugenics movement that reached its height in the early part of the twentieth century. Proponents of eugenics believed in selective breeding, which led to a movement to pass state laws requiring forced sterilization of the poor and disabled. These forced sterilization programs largely impacted women with disabilities and contributed to misconceptions about the capacity of the blind to be effective parents—a painful history we are still trying to overcome.

In contrast, the role of blind women within the National Federation of the Blind is clear and powerful. This evening I seek to highlight a sampling of the hundreds of female leaders of our movement whose stories illuminate the characteristics that have allowed us, as diverse individuals who happen to be blind, to synergize a movement that cannot be divided.

At our organizing on November 16, 1940, there were sixteen blind people from seven states in attendance, and two of them were women who both served on the board of directors. The first was Mary McCann of Illinois, who was elected as secretary of our organization at that first meeting but only served for a short time. The other blind woman was Evelyn Burlingame of Pennsylvania, who was not elected to the board in 1940 but was elected as first vice president of the organization in 1942.

Let me pause briefly to note that Hazel tenBroek was also in attendance at the organizing, and her notes are the most substantive record we have of the proceedings. Although she was not blind, she was a significant force in the early development of the Federation. Mrs. tenBroek set the standard for what has been a proud line of deeply loved and admired sighted marchers in our movement.

Let us return to Evelyn, who was born in Pennsylvania in 1906. After graduating from the Overbrook School for the Blind, she worked as the lead stenographer in the legal department for an insurance company; later she managed a small business among other jobs. In her free time she worked to bring together many small community-based organizations of the blind into a statewide organization called the Pennsylvania Federation of the Blind (which officially came into existence in 1934). It was the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Federation that served as the backdrop for the constitutional meeting establishing the National Federation of the Blind. While early Federation leaders had to expend considerable time and energy convincing blind people that we could gain synergy by directing the future through building our own organization, Evelyn already knew the value of organizing, and she was prepared to make personal sacrifices for the movement.

Evelyn’s hard work, information sharing, and wise counsel to the Federation’s President were likely factors contributing to her election to the national board. In the National Federation of the Blind we elect leaders to speak for us, but those leaders must be able to synthesize the hopes, dreams, and innovative approaches that the members bring forward. In that regard, Evelyn may get credit for the Federation’s first major outreach and fundraising strategy. On November 9, 1941, she wrote to Dr. tenBroek to propose that we approach state and national unions to enlist their support in the Federation’s cause and to give specific examples of the circumstances in her state. This idea was developed into a significant program for making connections and gathering financial resources for the young organization. Evelyn’s early and active participation in our movement gave credibility to the notion that the blind can and should speak for themselves. For Evelyn the characteristic of blindness did not hold her back, and for the Federation the characteristic of blindness was most important to Evelyn’s leadership in our movement.

Francis Lorraine Goranson was born in 1918 to farmers near Huron, South Dakota. She was the youngest daughter of the family and, like her older sister, she was blind and received an education from the South Dakota School for the Blind. In 1936 President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the groundbreaking Randolph-Sheppard Act, giving blind individuals opportunities to operate vending facilities on federal property. By the time Lorraine graduated from the school in 1938, she was aware of the new program and prepared to build her own future.

By the early months of 1940, South Dakota had two vending locations run by blind people and, determined not to be restricted to a life of low expectations, Lorraine took the initiative to secure the resources needed to open the third. She began by convincing the officials at the Huron post office to provide her with space for a stand. She then used her previous contacts at the local Kiwanis Club to make a skillful presentation that resulted in the club building out Lorraine’s location and providing the early inventory of newspapers, magazines, candy, and cigars she needed to open the doors in April 1940. Lorraine is the first known woman to operate a facility under the Randolph-Sheppard program anywhere in the country.

Her early success did not leave her satisfied. She learned about the newly formed National Federation of the Blind through an editorial in the *All Story* magazine authored by Dr. tenBroek’s mentor, Dr. Newel Perry. On February 7, 1941, she wrote to Dr. tenBroek expressing excitement about a movement for the blind to speak for themselves. In her opening paragraph she notes, “I find that it is more difficult convincing my sighted friends of my capabilities, than the duty to be actually performed.” She later shares her ambition and commitment, “I am writing you because I am interested in what can be done for the blind, and am ready and willing to do whatever I can at any time. To be frank, as I feel I may be, I am so very anxious to get out and make a place in the world.”

Lorraine possessed another important characteristic that distinguishes members of the Federation—hope for the future. In 1942 the characteristics of blindness, a drive for equality, and a hope for the future combined with a readiness to work led her to be elected to the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind. Her self-directed efforts to build opportunities out of the Randolph-Sheppard priority laid the foundation for the leadership we have provided to that program.

Another woman from the Midwest was effective in teaching the synergy of local organizations connecting into a national movement. Ada Bates-Tiernan was born in Coon Rapids, Iowa, in 1889. She was blinded in an accident at age five, and her parents sent her to Iowa’s school for the blind, where she stayed until her graduation. In the early part of the twentieth century, Iowa had no adult rehabilitation program, and Ada recognized that bonding together with other blind people was critical in creating opportunities for herself. She started by regularly attending the annual gatherings of the school’s alumni group known as the Iowa Association of the Blind.

By 1941 Ada had moved to Des Moines where she was president of the local association. She met the tenBroeks while in Chicago, and a stream of information sharing began between them. Ada joined the Federation as an individual member since the Iowa association was interested only in the school for the blind locally. She understood that the new National Federation of the Blind was essential to bringing inspiration and innovative training practices to Iowa.

The hope and determination that came from a national movement fueled Ada’s leadership of other blind advocates in Iowa. The Federation’s National Convention was held in Des Moines in 1942, and Ada was critical in managing local details, including securing speakers. During that time the relationship between Ada and the tenBroeks developed into something more personal—what we would today describe as the Federation family. At the 1944 National Convention in Cleveland, Ada was elected to the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind. In later correspondence Ada demonstrates a deep commitment to supporting Dr. tenBroek and advises him on many matters. At the same time, she expresses her own doubts about whether she has the right talents to support the leadership where she has been asked to serve. During a series of correspondence from February 1946, Dr. tenBroek expresses a deep belief in the talents Ada brings to the organization, a personal commitment to their friendship, and a faith in her capacity to provide leadership among the board members.

Ada served on the national board until 1948, and her story helps to illuminate another important characteristic of Federationists—leadership. She wondered if she was really the right person for the job, whether she had the qualities needed to serve, and whether she was adequate to work closely with such a dynamic force for equality as Dr. tenBroek. These are doubts many of us have experienced when considering the work of this great organization compared to the individual contributions we make--doubts that are often a result of our internalizing society’s low expectations. When she did not believe in herself, the Federation believed in her. That is the bond of faith we pass from generation to generation in this movement. We believe in each other, and it is that element that brings out the potential for leadership in each of us. For Ada Tiernan her leadership was inspired by her participation in the organized blind movement, where the most important characteristics were that she was a blind person seeking equality, with hope for the future, and a willingness to lead when called.

A woman who was not born in the United states and who was not blind at the time of our founding came to be a force for sharing our message around the world. Isabelle Lyon Dean was born in 1896 in a fishing village on the northern coast of Scotland. At the age of twenty-eight, Isabelle and her husband, Dr. Alexander Grant, left Scotland to build their life together in the United States. In 1927 Isabelle began teaching in the Los Angeles County schools where, aided by her fluency in Spanish, she became a vocal advocate for the sizable population of Mexican American students. In 1940 she further enhanced her teaching credentials by earning a PhD in comparative literature.

Her career took a turn when she developed glaucoma and, by the fall of 1948, Dr. Grant was totally blind. She found no hope among the agencies for the blind she visited, and her uncertainty grew regarding how to manage her job as vice principal at Belvedere Junior High School. Hope and opportunity returned to her when a friend introduced her to a blind man who was a member of the National Federation of the Blind—an encounter that put her on the road to mastering the skills of blindness, to internalizing our shared philosophy, and to becoming an active member in our California affiliate.

Dr. Grant’s own determination, the unwavering support of her professional colleagues in the school, and the shared bond with her sisters and brothers in the Federation assisted in rejecting the school district’s attempt to force her to retire based on her disability. Yet, Dr. Grant would endure more than a decade of maneuvers by the district to sabotage her work by regularly shifting her assigned school and the students on her caseload. The discrimination she faced caused her real pain. One example is that the district assigned her a sighted teaching assistant to be with her at all times. When the sighted person left the classroom, the door was required to be locked as a safety precaution—a circumstance she described as “the blind teacher in a glass cage.”

As the first blind teacher in the California public school system, Dr. Grant worked tirelessly so that future generations of blind educators would not face similar barriers. She advocated for new state laws, organized conferences for blind educators, and innovated quality educational services for blind children based on the authentic experience of blind people. A trip to an international conference in 1957 sparked a passion for working on issues of education and self-organization of the blind outside of the United States, which would drive the final twenty years of her life.

During the 1959-60 school year, she took a sabbatical from teaching to make a remarkable journey through twenty-three countries, traveling alone, with the aim to learn from the educational and living conditions of other blind people, and to raise expectations through self-organization. She chronicled her adventures in a manuscript entitled, “Crooked Paths Made Straight,” which went unpublished until 2016. She would make many more international trips and correspond regularly with hundreds of blind people around the world. Significantly, 1960 also marked Dr. Grant’s election to the Board of the National Federation of the Blind on which she served until her death in 1977. In everything she did, no matter the continent, she was a constant promoter and information gatherer for the Federation. Blindness was what brought Dr. Grant to the Federation family, but it was only one of many dynamic characteristics that added synergy to our movement.

Isabel Grant was most certainly influenced by a blind educator from New Mexico named Pauline Gomez. Blind from birth, Pauline was educated at the New Mexico School for the Blind, where she graduated in 1940. A scholarship from the Perkins Institute for the Blind gave her an opportunity to meet blind people from around the country and set her on the path to be a teacher. In the fall of 1941, Pauline became the first blind student to enroll at the University of New Mexico, where she had to pioneer methods for gaining access to instructional materials and navigating the campus independently.

Upon successful graduation from the university, Pauline returned home to Santa Fe, where she planned to teach in the public schools. Despite her qualifications, the public-school administrators could not imagine a blind teacher working with children, but Pauline was determined to build her own opportunity to share her talents with the children of Santa Fe. On October 1, 1946, Los Niños Kindergarten School opened in the back room of Pauline’s home. There were eight children in her first class, and Pauline served as the only teacher, in addition to managing the administrative details of the school. From that modest beginning, Pauline expanded her school over the following decades, serving the children of all of the most prominent families in Santa Fe.

Pauline’s school had been open almost a decade when she assisted in organizing the New Mexico affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind in 1956. When Pauline became president of the affiliate in 1960, she began aggressively working on legislative proposals to improve opportunities for the blind. A keen educator, Pauline recognized the efficacy of Kenneth Jernigan’s Iowa training program using the Federation’s philosophy. She wanted that level of training in New Mexico. In 1963 she persuaded the state legislature to study the value of establishing an adult rehabilitation training center in the state, which threatened the monopoly that the workshops for the blind had on the employment pipeline. Workshop supervisors attended the 1963 Convention of the NFB of New Mexico where they were able to coerce their blind employees into electing four agency supporters to the affiliate’s board of directors. Pauline took swift action to guard against the hostile takeover of the organized blind movement by sending affiliate documents to the President of the Federation, securing the treasury, and reorganizing the affiliate, all of this while running her own growing school in Santa Fe.

Whether it was in the president’s chair or another position within the Federation, Pauline had a hand in more victories than we can do justice to this evening. From leading New Mexico to be the first state in the nation to pass the Federation’s model White Cane Law in 1967, to developing the teachers division of the National Federation of the Blind in 1970, for Pauline the Federation was personal. Her community contributions outside of the Federation were extraordinary and widely celebrated. Her school was admired for its quality and innovative practices. It would have been easy for her to decide that the organized blind movement did not matter. Except for her it did matter. She was a blind person, she felt the pain of discrimination, and she understood the synergy of equality. The National Federation of the Blind fueled Pauline’s hope for the future, and we helped her to know she could do something to shape that future. She brought perspective, diversity, knowledge, and determination to us, and we gave to her the place where her blindness was a most important factor in her leadership, but the least important factor in her success.

There may be no better example of the role blind women have played in the National Federation of the Blind, than the pioneering, tough, persistent, dedicated, and generous women who founded the three training programs that proudly call themselves Federation training centers. While these women, Joanne Wilson (Louisiana), Diane McGeorge (Colorado), and Joyce Scanlan (Minnesota) built upon the philosophy and methodology tested by Kenneth Jernigan, they made significant personal sacrifices and took risks that few would even dream to pursue. While each of these women has an extraordinary personal story, they share a common bond. They are all blind people who, until they came to know the heartbeat of our movement, had internalized some of the misconceptions about blindness that threaten to hold each of us back. It was their coming to be part of our movement which allowed the rest of us to benefit from their leadership. Did the Federation believe in them more, or did they believe in the Federation more? The answer most certainly is yes. Each of these women have brought their talent and energy to our cause, and their lives have been enriched by being part of us. From the perspective of history—now having thirty years or more of graduates from these centers—we can be certain that all of us are stronger because these women invested in equality for the blind. In case anyone doubts the impact these three women have had on our movement, how about a cheer from anyone who has been impacted by the programs and graduates of our NFB training centers?

There are thousands of other examples of contributions small and great from blind people who happen to be women. From managing our scholarship program over the past fifty years, editing our publications, leading pickets and writing protest songs, directing our research and training institute, answering general information calls, testifying in Congress, building affiliates while raising families, commanding local legislatures, pioneering new teaching techniques, managing the operations of our Washington Seminar, directing fundraisers, to leading or serving wherever this movement has needed them, blind women have added synergy to our organization. That they were women was not nearly as important as the fact that they were blind people who believed in equality, had a hope for the future, and were willing to participate actively in the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind. From Arlene Hill practicing the techniques that blind people use to teach blind people to travel, to Ever Lee Hairston delivering a powerful address to the next generation of blind leaders from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, we have overcome because of the everyday and extraordinary blind people that have given synergy to our movement.

Tonight I call on us to celebrate these individuals and the thousands of others I have not named by committing ourselves to carrying the march forward. Tonight we celebrate the diversity of our organized blind movement, a movement that brings together blind people for a common purpose. We are blind people who come with varying characteristics—different races, sexual orientations, religions, political points of view, gender identities, disabilities, economic circumstances, languages, talents, interests, and priorities. Yet, in everything that matters we are one as blind people. We cannot be divided. We share a quest for equality and hope for the future. It is our diversity that gives us depth. It is our long-standing commitment to work together that gives us strength. It is our synergy that makes us unstoppable.

Tomorrow we must again pick up the tools of progress. There are those that seek to divide us and slow us down. There are those who say we do not represent those blind people who have some usable vision. There are those who claim that for us equality means only for blind people who do not have other disabilities. There are those who tell the story that in order to be one of us you must fit a certain type. To those who share these false claims about us we say, we, the blind, speak for ourselves. Our movement is for blind people, all blind people, and we will not let others who are not committed to equality and hope for the future stand in our way. We will set the direction and the pace, and we invite all blind people to contribute to our synergy.

We will not go back to a time when we must fight the agencies for the blind for recognition. We reject, as we have before, accreditation without authenticity in an effort to validate mediocracy. We leave behind the days when technologies were built and later made usable by the blind. We move past, but do not forget, the employment shackles of the sheltered workshops that pay pennies per hour. In doing so we recognize that there are those who wish to return to the good old days when the blind received what little charity was offered, and the experts in the field were qualified by the amount of eyesight not insight. To the extent that the past belongs to others, we declare once again this evening that the future is ours. Our future is filled with love, hope, and determination. Our future is distinguished by leadership, collaboration, and authenticity. And our future, as has been our pattern since 1940, is unified in the common bond of faith that we hold with each other as blind people.

My sisters and my brothers, blindness does not define us or our future. It does serve the most important role of bringing us together in this movement, a movement that is built on equality, a movement that feeds our hope for the future, a movement that empowers us to lead in all aspects of life, a movement where we come seeking a place to belong and where we stay because of those we befriend. Let us recommit to our march toward equality. Let us welcome new members into the diverse family that we share. Let us direct our own future and reach for unimagined possibilities. With synergy, let us go build the National Federation of the Blind.

**BRUCE WOODWARD’S FAMOUS BUTTERNUT SQUASH ROLLS**

Makes 36-42 rolls

From Bruce Woodward

 Those of you who like to make bread will find this to be a piece of ‘cake’. While out on Cape Cod I tasted these rolls in a restaurant and asked the chef how to make them and he obliged.

1 C baked butternut squash

½ C sugar

1 tsp salt

1 C scalded milk

1 ½ packet yeast dissolved in ½ c. warm water

½ C butter (1 stick)

5 C flour

 Cut the squash in half lengthwise, scoop out seeds, place cut side down on cookie sheet and bake at 350 degrees for 50-55 minutes. Check at 40 minutes to see if squash is tender. When tender, scoop squash out of skin and mash.

 Mix up squash sugar, salt, scalded milk and butter. Add yeast water mixture but be mindful that the mixture not be too hot before adding the yeast. Too hot kills the yeast. Start adding flour mixing it all up as you go. When the dough seems stiff and ready to knead, do just that. Knead awhile but not too much because that tends to make rolls tough. Let rise in a Crisco wiped bowl in a warm, cozy place. Knead again briefly after dough has doubled, then begin shaping the rolls. Put on an ungreased cookie sheet and let rise again. Then bake at 325 degrees for about 15-18 minutes until golden brown. Enjoy; it’s worth the effort.

**THE GOOD EARTH**

By Al Daniels

203-488-7348

We walk this earth for some seventy plus or minus years, but do we ever really feel the earth? The farmer knows the feel of the earth, the rich soil that brings forth our good food, beautiful flowers and plants. The individual on his diesel tractor, and the small gardener who uses a gasoline powered tiller to turn the ground into soft, usable soil, know the true beauty of the earth. I turn the soil over with my shovel and spading fork. I pause, breathe deeply, and pick out a large rock or trailing root. If the soil is extremely dry, I will have to make it moist in order to grow plants. I have time to plow the lower forty acres before the rain, but I’ll have to wait to plow the upper forty acres until the weather is warmer and it is safe to put out the tender plants. For now, I set aside a section of my garden. It is marked by long flat boards around the edge. I mark off each five by ten square as needed. The boards prevent a blind gardener from stepping where he shouldn’t, and distribute the weight so the soil is not packed hard between the rows.

After each clump of soil is turned over and broken up with a shovel, it is combed with a garden rake to further smooth out the dirt and disentangle roots. I feel the soil and wonder at its capacity and potential to bring forth plant-life. It has a beauty that can’t be explained, but must only be experienced. I may have to wait a day or two until I have the time, appropriate weather, and inclination to plant. Before I plant, I usually mark each row by placing a stake at both ends of the row and a string between the two steaks. The string tells me where to feel for the tiny plants as they spring up. It also tells me where specifically to water. If the string is high enough, I will not have to reach all the way down to the ground to feel where the plants are in early stages of watering. As the plants grow larger, I can hear when the water hits the plants, as opposed to the surrounding ground. When planting, I usually mark the spot with a vertical stick in the ground so that I am aware of its location, and so that it may receive support as it grows.

It is not necessary to turn over or plant the whole garden area at one time. If you are tempted to do so, you may find that weeds have a head start in some areas where you are not planting right away. It is important to remember that different crops respond better in different seasons, depending on the climate they require to thrive. Fertilizers should be applied as directed. The sun will serve its purpose by aiding in photosynthesis, or providing plants with necessary nutrients, as long as you avoid shady locations. That being said, water is also essential; if you cannot supply water daily, you may not be a successful gardener. Small amounts of water daily are preferable to infrequent soakings. Some geographic areas are more convenient than others for gardening because rain is a natural part of the daily seasonal climate. Each spring holds promise for gardens and those who maintain them. You are bound to find something remarkable, whether that is exercise, time in the sun, nourishment, or amazement in the beauty that surrounds us all.

**A DISABILITY DOES NOT MAKE YOU FRAGILE**

By Melissa Carney

For some reason, it seems as though disabilities are often equated to fragility. People with disabilities are treated like breakable china, while our able-bodied counterparts are free to fall, splinter, and reshape themselves as they please. We are sheltered from adventurous dreams and newfound opportunities, while everyone else around us exercises the freedoms of risk-taking and movement. I do not think it is fair that many of us are forced to remain stagnant. I do not think it is fair that we are often discouraged from jumping off the shelves like all the other beautiful masterpieces in the world. I am sick of the words, “You can’t.” You cannot tell someone that an objective is out of reach if you have never taken the time to witness them in action. Is it too dangerous to take chances because I don’t have a pair of fully functioning eyes? Is it too dangerous to travel because I navigate in a different way? No, it is not. There is always a chance that I will lose my way, or stumble and fall, but is my risk really that much higher than an able-bodied individual? I do not think so. The most prominent examples of self-growth and maturity stem from our mistakes. Disabilities are not excuses to habitually monitor and control a person’s life. Disabilities do not actively diminish a person’s level of self-sufficiency; limitations set by others distort our full potential. We possess keen self-awareness, a knack for trouble-shooting access barriers, and above all, the ability to make calculated and healthy decisions for ourselves. If you would not take away someone else’s autonomy, then do not take away that of a disabled individual’s. Each person has their own story, condition, and medical diagnosis. Those medical diagnoses may make us more bendable than the average person, but just because we bend does not mean that we will break with every encounter of an obstacle. Various illnesses, diseases, and conditions may make our daily lives a bit more hectic, but we are frequent fighters both inside and out due to the adversity we face. Everything that is meant to destroy us strengthens our resolve. We may have fragile bodies, but beneath the surface are infinite possibilities for future success. We are vesicles of determination and heart. It is reasonable to protect us, question the logic behind our choices, and so on, but never to the point that it infringes upon our well-being. Build upon our resistance; do not place more barriers in our paths. We are only as fragile as you make us. We hold the same academic and career aspirations as non-disabled peers. We want to discard the false and degrading stereotypes of weakness and delicacy. Reinforcing them is just as harmful as constructing them yourselves. We want to defy low expectations by displaying independence, problem-solving skills, and the rest of the characteristics of driven human beings. I do not speak for all of us, but I speak for a large amount of people that feel oppressed or frustrated by the lack of awareness surrounding negative treatment. You may not realize that you are babying a disabled individual. You may be a good-hearted person that simply looks out for someone’s best interests, but your best interests may not align with ours. By maintaining the belief that we are fragile, that we require special caretakers and safeguards, you are imposing on our endeavors. We do not want to be silenced or restricted. We want to maximize our happiness, prosperity, and overall achievement in life. Please do not judge us for our disabilities, the ways in which our minds and bodies work differently than yours. Give us an equal chance to thrive, a chance to rebel against the parts of us that are fragile by default. Those fragile parts may be the most visible, but they are not indicators of our worth.

**THE PROBLEM WITH FAKE SERVICE DOGS**

By Melissa Carney

Many people in today’s society still neglect to treat legitimate service dogs and their handlers with the respect they deserve. Every time I hear about yet another attack or confrontation, my blood begins to boil. Every time I hear the bark or growl of a pet in a store or restaurant, both of which are only open to service dogs, I cringe, prepare to protect my guide dog at all costs, and fight the urge to tell their owner off. The average person sees a cute dog that is a little feisty. A service dog handler sees an unwarranted challenge to their safety and well-being as part of a working team. In order to understand this ongoing issue, you need to look at it as a multifaceted problem. The problem of fake service dogs is a culmination of ignorance, lack of education surrounding the disabled community, and selfishness. In this article, I will break down exactly why irresponsible and careless pet owners pose such a threat to people with disabilities and their service dogs.

Service dogs undergo months of rigorous training from the time they are born to the time they are placed with their handlers. The breeds are strategically selected, the temperaments are closely monitored, and their ability to perform specific tasks is repeatedly tested. They are taught impeccable obedience skills, unique commands, life-saving maneuvers, and so much more. They are constantly socialized so as to make sure that they are friendly and approachable by other dogs and people when need-be. Service dogs are driven to work, dedicated to watching out for their handlers. They are each trained for a specific type of disability. Some service dogs alert their handlers of oncoming seizures, help those with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder through anxiety attacks, provide assistance to those with auditory or learning disabilities, support individuals with balance or mobility issues, and/or serve as a guide for blind and visually impaired handlers. This is only a small, compiled list of the tasks that service dogs can perform. While each service dog may be trained to assist someone with a particular disability, the overarching theme is that every service dog is extremely well-trained, whether that be through a large organization or owner-training methods by a disabled individual.

From a legal standpoint, under the Americans with Disabilities Act, legitimate service animals are those who are individually trained to perform tasks for disabled individuals. Service animals are the only animals that have unlimited access to stores, restaurants, hotels, and other such facilities that do not typically allow pets. Emotional Support Animals and all other pets do not have these rights because they do not have any of the stringent training that is required for public appearances, nor are they certified to assist those with disabilities. It is also important to note that Service Dogs in Training are also not allowed access to facilities until they are fully trained.

Pets may have basic obedience training and social skills, but the variability of pet owners’ methods and lifestyles guarantees that their behavior is unpredictable. Untrained and aggressive pets can disrupt, or even unravel, the precise training of service dogs in a matter of several seconds. When service dogs are on duty, their sole job is to keep their handlers safe. As soon as a pet disrupts that routine, either by attempting to play with the service dog or attacking it, the handler is left vulnerable to the worst side-effects of their disability. An irresponsible pet owner can mean the difference between life and death. Even if the pet owner is unaffected, the service dog itself can be traumatized by this experience. They may become anxious by the presence of an unfamiliar dog, and associate them with the fear of another attack. These stress-induced reactions usually require even more training to reverse. This training could entail a lot of patience, effort, time, and money. In extreme cases, service dogs will no longer be able to perform their jobs, and be forced to retire early, thus leaving the dogs and their handlers in the midst of a very unstable and emotionally taxing situation.

While the pets cause the literal damage, the owners are the ones who truly inflict harm. They selfishly bring their pets into stores because they do not want to leave them home. They place them in rolling strollers or keep them on long leashes as they shop. They purchase service dog vests off of Amazon. You cannot simply trust a vest for confirmation that a dog is a service animal. Pet owners are even beginning to place service dog vests on their Emotional Support animals, which only serve to blur the line of legitimacy even more. A lot of pet owners have no regard for how their dog’s behavior may impact those around them. They refuse to respect, or at least acknowledge, the existence of service dogs and the laws that attempt to protect individuals with disabilities. There are many people who believe that the disabled community is making a big fuss over nothing.

I, for one, believe that it should be a crime for pet owners to disguise their dogs. I am tired of always being on constant alert. I am disgusted with the pet owner who brought their tiny dog into Walmart on a retractable leash and proceeded to allow it to run between my guide dog’s legs. I am furious about the pet owner who allowed his German Shepard to jump on my guide dog’s back, while he just stood by and did nothing. I am horrified by the pet owners in Ben and Jerry’s, who held the leashes of two dogs in fake service dog vests as they growled and barked at people that passed by. I am fed up with the women who carry their dogs into restaurants in large purses. I am extremely annoyed with the misuse of service dog language in regards to Emotional Support Animals. These pet owners and animals prevent legitimate service dog teams from achieving a sense of security and respect in their surroundings.

Not only do fake service dogs threaten the safety of legitimate service dog teams, but they also ruin their reputation. The public suddenly believes that all service dogs are misbehaved. This is evident by the amount of compliments that actual service dog teams receive on a daily basis. The public often believes that there are no fundamental differences between service dogs and pets, and this is where the confusion originates. All of a sudden, it is perfectly acceptable to dress your dog in a vest to give it special privileges. It is an exciting trend. It becomes more and more difficult to distinguish real service dogs from all of the pretenders. It is sad that we have to live in a society in which we question whether or not a service animal is legitimate.

Ableism and ignorance continue to plague the minds of countless individuals. If you want to combat this problem, there are only a few things that you need to remember at the end of the day. Pets and Emotional support Animals are not service dogs. If you know of someone who frequently brings their pets into stores or restaurants, educate them. If you are unfamiliar with the Americans with Disabilities Act, educate yourself. If you see a pet in a store that is causing trouble, report it to the store manager. The disabled community should not be the only group of individuals fighting for our rights to safety and security.

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE**By Rich McGiffin

I was once a president of the Southern CT chapter of the NFB of CT, however in 2012 I became very sick, and due to health issues and personal family matters, I’ve had to step down and away from our states’ affiliate and local chapter. I do hope to eventually return some day.

In the summer of 2017, my Dad’s life came to an end. He died at the age of 96 years with dementia, so it was a blessing for him. However, for some reason, I felt the pull-back to the Congregational Church where I grew up. It was the 2nd or 3rd Sunday when I noticed they were short ushers so I volunteered, thinking it would be a one week and done deal. I’ve been ushering in the same corner where my Dad had been an usher for over 30 years. It’s actually kind of funny but the first couple months, a few of the older members’ actually called me Bill instead of Rich, and other remarked how wonderful it was that I honored my Dad by taking his corner and ushering for the church. I must confess being a man who likes to talk; it’s a perfect job for me to greet church members as they enter the building.

On Earth day of 2018, I went up to join several members of the church who raked planted & cleaned up the grounds in front of the church. Like most colonial churches we have a cemetery with our church so I chose to rake that out instead of cleaning around the church where everyone else was gathered.

Since our green is now owned by the town of West Haven, I’m not too sure, but I believe there’s a bit of confusion on whether or not it’s the city’s responsibility to clean the cemetery which I believe is how our cemetery got in such a sad state.

The next day was Sunday of course, and when I greeted a long time member, a mentor of mine so to speak. He was my seventh grade Sunday school teacher, and he’s a longtime friend. He complimented me on raking out our church’s cemetery. He then explained to me how the vines were taking over & destroying the fence line, and the fire escape. So it took me a couple weeks but I did go up and, after a couple of trips. I cleared the vines, and the weeds. I then noticed other sections of the cemetery that were covered in vines. Well friends, this is an on-going job, let me tell you. In fact just last week while I was canvassing the cemetery picking up trash I noticed the vines I removed were back. They’re gone again of course.

I have since branched out in cleaning other sections of our church’s property, and removing overgrown vines, weeds, sweeping around the church, and picking up the trash that lies around our building and the green which surrounds our church. It’s sad to think that no matter how much I pick up; I’m never at a loss for more work when or if I have the time. Unfortunately, having type 2 diabetes, I haven’t had the energy to work more then 2-3 hours a day if I’m lucky. Most days, if the weather and my health agree, I just walk up and pick up trash. But when I can, I will pull weeds and cut down baby trees, or vines that try to take over our church’s property. Not being an expert on plants, I don’t cut down any bushes without speaking to one of my friends (other church members) who may know what’s valuable or not. But I do know that it will take more than one summer to finally get this project done.

I am proud to be a member of the First Congregational Church, and I’m also proud of the fact that they have enough faith and trust to allow me to do this volunteer work for them. I’m not thought of as a blind man, but a man who happens to be blind. My offer of help is welcome and appreciated. I’m not quite sure what the tie is between my Dad’s passing and my returning to the church, but it’s one I am enjoying. Both my parents have been very active in our church, and perhaps that’s why I’m here now. All I know is it’s nice to know I’m making a difference.

It’s been quite some time since my day’s marching protesting for equality for the blind. I’m proud of the fact that in the First Congregational Church I am a member of their community, not a blind man, but a man who happens to be blind and helping out.

May God be with you all when you too find your place in life to make your own difference in society.

**TAKING LIFE BY THE REINS**

By Melissa Carney

Reprinted from the blog of the National Association of Blind Students, March 2018

*From the Editor: Melissa Carney is completing a double major in English and psychology at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. She won an NFB scholarship in 2017.*

When most of us think of sports, we think of soccer, football, basketball, or baseball. We might love to participate in these sports, but as blind students we often dwell on the accompanying accessibility issues. It can be difficult at times to conceptualize, let alone overcome, the barriers in the path. However, certain sports automatically place us on the same playing field as our sighted peers. Horseback riding is often portrayed as a leisurely activity, but it requires just as much skill and athleticism as any other sport. Unlike team sports that involve throwing and catching balls, however, horseback riding is naturally accessible.

I began horseback riding when I was four years old. I still remember the joy that consumed me every time I sat on a horse's back. At first I didn't know exactly what that joy meant, but it didn't take me long to dissect its meaning. That joy was the epiphany of freedom, the gratification of equality.

As I grew older, I was told *no* or *you can't* more times than I can count. Horseback riding was one area of my life where I felt that I could excel without the fear of being yanked backward. When I was in the saddle, no one equated my visual impairment with fragility or an inability to thrive. For once no limitations were imposed upon me. My blindness even may have given me an advantage; my sense of touch provided me with excellent balance and a keen awareness of the horse's movements. I was free to take reasonable risks, free to fail and try again until I succeeded. I was given the same opportunities as my sighted peers.

For the first few years, an assistant helped me guide my horse around the arena while I learned to balance my weight, settle into the proper position, execute turns, and ask the horse for different gaits. Soon enough, upon my instructor's request, the assistant stepped back. The reins, and ultimately the control of the horse, were firmly placed in my hands. In turn, the instructor placed her complete faith in my abilities. She had the utmost confidence that I could be an independent rider, and she continued to challenge me. She encouraged me to create and pursue my greatest aspirations.

When I was eight years old, I began to utilize echolocation in order to navigate indoor arenas. I no longer had to depend on the verbal cues of others; I could use unique parts of my own skill set. As I traveled around the perimeter of the arena I was able to sense each wall and opening. Directions became a secondary focus. Now that I could manage the navigational aspects of horseback riding, my instructor was able to teach me more intensive balance exercises and maneuvers. Blindness enhanced my mobility, rather than inhibiting it.

When I was ten years old, I ventured out on my first cross-country ride. At first I rode through the woods alongside my instructor. She gave me verbal cues to take the proper turns and change the horse's gait. The footing and terrain were much more diverse than I was used to, so my skills were thoroughly tested. Before long I began to ride with a group of other students. My instructor focused equal amounts of attention on each of us; I was never treated as the weak link. My friends often forgot that I was blind, and didn't shout warnings about low-hanging branches until the very last minute. I wasn't offended by their forgetfulness; I was flattered. I was not treated as a liability or lesser human being. I was treated as their equal in equestrianship.

My instructor taught me to jump at the same time she taught the other students. Everyone worked as a team to show me the correct jumping position. My fellow students worked together to problem-solve tricky situations. They cheered me on over every fence, much as they had supported me over every metaphorical hurdle. My instructor counted down for the jumps while my friends gave me verbal directions for steering purposes. There were times when I made mistakes, times when I almost fell off the horse, but I was not phased. Every false start or jolting landing was a learning experience, a reminder of what I could improve upon in the future.

For the next several years, I competed in horse shows, learned dressage, and jumped cross-country. I helped a nonprofit, therapeutic horseback riding center for students with disabilities with its fundraising efforts by giving demonstrations and speeches about my experiences as a blind horseback rider. I did everything in my power to show the disabled community that exercise, teamwork, and self-satisfaction are possible. I do not agree that people with disabilities should be sheltered or discouraged from pursuing sports. Everyone deserves a chance to take meaningful risks, explore different passions, and discover the beauty of true equality.

People have told me that I am brave because I horseback ride. I don't view my passion as an instance of bravery. My visual impairment is simply an occasional obstacle that pushes me to work harder. I ride for the whistle of wind in my hair, laughter with genuine friends, and the exhilaration of completing complex tasks. I ride for the companionship between horse and rider. I cannot drive a car or chase a silent soccer ball, but I can participate in an accessible sport that happens to be one of the most rigorous forms of exercise.

My life has never been easy or predictable, between a cancer diagnosis at two years old, discrimination in the classroom, and countless other obstacles that have appeared in my path. That is why I capture every opportunity to take the reins into my own hands whenever possible. Horseback riding enables me to find a greater sense of freedom and peace. It takes away so many of the societal barriers that work against me. In this space, there are no fights for equal access, no condescending tones, and no low expectations. There is only me, a horse, and a group of people who look at me as a horseback rider, not as a blind person. There is nothing more empowering than being seen for your ability rather than your disability. The only barriers I encounter here are literal jumps.

**BRUCE WOODWARD**

**1934 - 2018**

By Lucia Lee

Betty always said that Bruce was the kindest and gentlest man she ever knew. Plus, he always vacuumed the house! I can add a few more adjectives: charming, funny and welcoming. There were many other wonderful qualities about Bruce, all adding up to a fine gentleman that many looked up to.

I didn’t meet Bruce in person until quite a while after I felt I knew him very well. He was working at Travelers and Betty worked in the office calling businesses for donations. When we ate lunch together, Betty would talk about him a lot. Bruce and I conducted office assistant/treasurer business over the phone but it was quite some time before I met him in person. In fact, it very well may have been at a Hartford Chapter Picnic that was held at their house every June. The Chapter would invite all CT Federationists, and members from all over the state would come. Bruce & Betty were so happy to welcome everyone to their home. Fun times!

Bruce was a pretty independent person, hating to ask anyone for help with anything. I can remember Betty telling me about them taking a screen door to the hardware store for repairs on the bus! Both ways! He thought it was too much to ask anyone to drive them to the hardware store with it.

Each year, Bruce baked Chocolate Chip Cookies to be sold at a bake sale that was near and dear to his heart. The recipe said that it would make 48 cookies, and Bruce made sure he made 48 cookies. Now, that’s precision for you! Each year, Diane and I would try to persuade him to send some in to the office with Betty. One year, he did send one for each of us, but it took some cajoling. Bruce also loved to make Butternut Squash Rolls for special occasions. The recipe is in this issue of *The Federationist in CT.*

 Bruce loved to go to Moosehead Lake in Maine. He and Betty had a camp there that was close to many of Bruce’s long-time friends. They had a lot of great times there: good company, swimming, canoeing, boating, and such. Every year, they would go up on Memorial Day weekend to open the camp and get things going for the summer. They would go up at least once during the summer months for a few weeks at a time. They would often tussle whether to go there or to National Conventions, Moosehead Lake winning out several times. Columbus Day weekend meant one last trip up to close things down for the winter.

 Bruce’s dog, Morgan was named for Bruce’s favorite make of cars. He was always interested in cars. Over the years, whenever my husband or I bought a new car, he’d want to know all about it. He would have loved the car show that Rob Palaski organized at our state convention last year. It was too bad that he wasn’t able to attend.

 As many people know, Bruce served as Treasurer of the National Federation of the Blind of CT for many years. I cannot find anything in our history files that tells when he was first elected to the position, but I do know he completed our 1983 financial paperwork as treasurer in 1984. He would insist that the checkbook be balanced each month to the penny. Everything had to be to the penny. He’d call and ask me to check over paperwork that he was sending into the office with Betty. He was off by a penny or a nickel and couldn’t find it. I’d think, Bruce, it’s only a penny. But, the one time I said anything to him, he said, Lucia, it’s got to balance to the penny! For years, he watched over our investments and worked closely with our broker. Our financials were of such interest to him that he didn’t understand that they weren’t fascinating to most of us. His Treasurer’s Reports were pages long and when he read them at Board Meetings, you could tell he loved being Treasurer.

Bruce loved the NFB of CT scholarship program. He so enjoyed reading all the scholarship applications every year. He thought everyone was so deserving of a scholarship. Many a time, he’d comment that he wished the NFB of CT could give a scholarship to each and every applicant. He enjoyed meeting in person and chatting with each and every one of the winners at the state conventions.

 Have you ever heard that Bruce liked to do handstands? I’d heard it but didn’t really believe it. After all, when I first met Bruce, he was in his fifties. But, sure enough, at a state convention, he said that if we reached a certain level of participation in the PAC program, he’d do a hand stand. We did….and he did! And, he didn’t need a wall behind him to help balance!

 At one NFB of CT State Convention in East Hartford, Carol Lemieux organized a panel of Federationists who taught how to make their favorite foods. Beth Rival made taco salad and handed out samples. Bruce taught us all how to make a martini … with 5 olives. Bruce loves his martinis, especially with multiple olives!

 Everyone who spent time with him has a Bruce story. Beth & Charlie had a standing joke with him about riding on the roof of their car. Rob Palaski remembers the first time Bruce tried to check out our website. Let’s just say he didn’t have the web address quite correct! Diane Hooker remembers the time he tried to give a homeless man a fruitcake. And, there are many more….

 Bruce loved the Federation. He loved our philosophy and advocacy efforts, but he loved our comradery the best. He loved being one of the bunch of blind people who were improving lives for other blind people. Bruce’s 40 plus years as a Federationist might be over, but his legacy, his good will, his firm belief in the abilities of all blind people will stay with us always.