**The Federationist in Connecticut**

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The National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. You can live the life you want; blindness is not what holds you back.

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**The Local, State, and National Organization:**

**Three Parts of a Whole**

**by Fredric K. Schroeder**

As many of you know, I grew up in New Mexico. I lived for several years in California and later Nebraska, but in 1980 I moved back to New Mexico and began getting active in our state affiliate. At that time blind people in the state had very limited opportunities to obtain the training and encouragement they needed to live active, productive lives, yet we were Federationists and knew that things could be better. In 1986, after years of effort, we were successful in creating a separate agency for the blind, the New Mexico Commission for the Blind, and I was hired as its first director.

One day in the late 1980’s I was sitting at my desk, and I received a telephone call from a young blind woman living in Tucumcari, a woman I did not know. She used a guide dog, and she called to say that she had gone to a local restaurant which refused to admit her with her dog. She insisted on calling the police, and when the police came, she told them about the White Cane Law that guaranteed her right to take her dog into a restaurant. Unfortunately the local police were not aware of the White Cane Law either and refused to require the restaurant owner to admit her, so she was turned away. She called the Commission for the Blind asking for help, and of course we did help. We contacted the restaurant and the Tucumcari police, and we were able to resolve the issue. But I remember thinking to myself, "Here it is, the late 1980's, and a young woman in Tucumcari, New Mexico, has the legal right to take a guide dog into a restaurant. But why does she have that legal right? Whether she knew about the National Federation of the Blind or not, her right to take her guide dog into a local restaurant was a result of the efforts of the Federation, and even the intervention of the state agency, the Commission for the Blind, was also directly linked to the work of the Federation. In 1967 New Mexico was the first state in the nation to pass the Model White Cane Law in its entirety. Because Pauline Gomez and other Federationists in New Mexico had worked with the legislature twenty years earlier, this young blind woman in Tucumcari, New Mexico, had the right to go into a restaurant and take her dog.

But where did the Model White Cane Law come from? The idea did not originate with blind people in New Mexico; it had been conceived a year earlier. It started as an article that our president, Dr. tenBroek, wrote and published in the California Law Review in April 1966. The title of the article was "The Right to Live in the World: The Disabled in the Law of Torts." In that article he talked about fundamental principles of civil rights for blind people, a concept that was not generally established in law at that time. In Dr. tenBroek’s words, " Nothing could be more essential to personality, social existence, economic opportunity—in short, to individual well-being and integration into the life of the community—than...public approval, and the legal right to be abroad in the land."

At that time a smattering of state laws provided some level of legal protection for blind people around the country, but no systematic guarantee of rights existed for blind people generally. Dr. tenBroek’s article included the draft of a model White Cane Law that would grant to blind people many of the protections we take for granted today. At our 1966 national convention we voted to seek the adoption of the Model White Cane Law in all of the fifty states. As a result leaders of the National Federation of the Blind of New Mexico went home and worked to have the Model White Cane Law passed by the state legislature so that twenty years later a young blind woman in Tucumcari who knew nothing about the National Federation of the Blind would have the right to go into a restaurant of her choosing and to take her guide dog in with her.

But the Model White Cane Law did much more than guarantee blind people access to restaurants with their guide dogs. At that time—some of you are too young to know this—it was not uncommon for blind people traveling alone to be told by a bus company or an airline that they wouldn't be allowed to travel unless they were accompanied by a sighted person—and it was perfectly legal for the bus company or airline to do so. It was also not uncommon for blind people to be turned away from a hotel on the basis that they might unknowingly start a fire or have some other kind of accident that would endanger themselves or others, and the hotel had a legal right to do so. Recognizing that blind people needed the guarantee of basic civil rights, Dr. tenBroek drafted the Model White Cane Law, and brought it to the national convention. As a national movement we made its adoption in the states a priority, a unified effort of our Federation. The Model White Cane Law demonstrates how the national, state, and local bodies of our organization work together, each with its role, each with its job to do—separate and yet parts of a cohesive whole. It demonstrates our unity, and it shows something else. It shows how our philosophy binds us together. What gives us direction, what makes us strong and unified, is our shared belief in our fundamental normalcy; and, as Mrs. Jernigan pointed out to us, the truth of our equality has evolved past belief, past hope, into knowledge. We know that as blind people we can in fact live normal, productive lives and that blindness is nothing more than one of our many characteristics; it is not the overarching, all-defining characteristic of who we are. The truth of our normalcy, our equality, is the foundation of what we believe and drives our actions; it organizes us and gives us unity and focus. There is a concept in open systems theory called "negative entropy," entropy being defined in the physical sciences as the tendency for all matter and energy in the universe to evolve toward a state of inert uniformity. When applied to social systems, entropy is defined as the inevitable and steady deterioration of a system or society. In plain language entropy means death or dying. That said, what then is negative entropy? By definition it means that, in order to survive, an open system must arrest entropy—a universal law of nature—by incorporating acquisitions equal to or greater than its exports. That is, negative entropy means to be alive, but, more than alive, it means to grow or expand or develop. So in open systems theory why use the term negative entropy? Why not simply say expanding, growing, or developing? Why be so convoluted? Why not talk about death as contrasted with growth rather than entropy with negative entropy? The reason is that, according to open systems theory, social organizations drift toward death. If not resisted, if not actively combated, systems lose vitality and die. Applying this concept to our movement, if we are not expanding, if we are not growing, if we are not continuously taking on new challenges, then we will inevitably drift toward death. It is not enough to continue doing what we have done in the past. We must constantly challenge ourselves and push forward, staving off entropy through the process of negative entropy. Our success can be seen through our history, in the lives and examples of many of our members. We have a legacy of pioneers in our movement, and their spirit guides our efforts today and lays the course for the future.

**REFLECTIONS: What Drew Me in and Hooked Me to the NFB**

**by Barbara Loos**

If we look carefully at what motivates us, we'll often discover a pattern in what draws us in, hooks us, and compels us to act. For me, from the time I was a small child, I have been deeply influenced by literature. I've always loved to read and have often figured out how I feel about things by writing about them. I vividly remember what hooked me on the National Federation of the Blind, even though it happened more than three dozen years ago. I invite you to join me on a brief walk down Memory Lane, close to where it intersects with Action Avenue.

As early as 1941, one year after its founding, there was an affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind in Nebraska. There was even a National Convention in Omaha in 1955. The former predates me and the latter would have found me to be a child of four, about to get my education at the school for the blind, where the Federation ranked among the unpopular. So it wasn't until 1971, when Mary Ellen Anderson (now Jernigan) and Arlene Gashel (now Hill) came to Nebraska as part of a team to reorganize the affiliate, that I had my first brief encounter with the organization. That January, although my sister, Laurie, and I, both of us blind and students at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, met with them, we neither attended the organizing meeting nor joined the movement. We did agree, though, to receive the Braille Monitor, the Federation’s monthly magazine. Our initial response to the Monitor was heavily influenced by the approach at the school for the blind, where Federationists were said to be pushy "pie in the sky" radicals with respect to expectations for the blind who would do anything to get their way. We derisively dubbed the publication the “Jernigan Journal,” because it was replete with articles and editorial comments by Kenneth Jernigan, who was, at the time, the Federation's President.

Typically, I read, ridiculed, and rejected the Monitor out of hand. I did so, that is, until the September 1974 issue. That one included the Convention banquet speech entitled Blindness: Is Literature Against Us? Upon reading that speech, I found myself quietly, almost guiltily slipping it into a shelf reserved for things to ponder. And ponder it I did. I was fascinated by his opening statement, “History, we are told, is the record of what human beings have done; literature the record of what they have thought.” But what caught and held my attention were his comments concerning the future of the blind as seen through literature:

“If we turn to the future, the answer is that the future, in literature as in life, is not predetermined but self-determined. As we shape our lives, singly and collectively, so will we shape our literature. Blindness will be a tragedy only if we see ourselves as authors see us. The contents of the page, in the last analysis, reflect the conscience of the age. The structure of literature is but a hall of mirrors, giving us back (in images slightly larger or smaller than life) exactly what we put in. The challenge for us is to help our age raise its consciousness and reform its conscience. We must rid our fiction of fantasy and imbue it with fact. Then we shall have a literature to match reality, and a popular image of blindness to match the truth, and our image of ourselves. We stand at a critical time in the history of the blind. If we falter or turn back, the tragedy of blindness will be great, indeed. But, of course, we will not falter, and we will not turn back. Instead, we will go forward with joy in our hearts and a song of gladness on our lips. The future is ours, and the novelists and the poets will record it. Come! Join me on the barricades, and we will make it come true!”

That didn't feel like "my way or the highway" to me. It felt like choice! And literature as "the song of the spirit and the language of the soul" certainly resonated with me and I sure did want to go forward with that joy in my heart and song of gladness on my lips. I even longed to be one of those creating the music. Was it really "pie in the sky"? I determined to find out.

In December of that year, I was offered an opportunity, as part of my job at the Nebraska Rehabilitation Services for the Visually Impaired (now the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired), to go to another agency for the blind to see how it operated and bring back possible suggestions for the fledgling Orientation and Adjustment Center we were in the process of creating. That was a no-brainer for me. I wanted to meet the author of that literature speech and see if the agency he directed, the Iowa Commission for the Blind, was as good as the rumor mill claimed. I came away from that experience not only believing that it was, but doing all I could to ensure that the Center we built here emulated that one.

In January 1975, about a month after my trip to Iowa, I joined the Lincoln Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska. The following month, I was elected its president. Before the year was out, I had attended both my first State and National Conventions, a leadership seminar in Des Moines, and a demonstration against the National Accreditation Council for Agencies Serving the Blind and Visually Handicapped (NAC) in Little Rock. Since then, I have held numerous positions, both elected and appointed, within the movement.

Many of the opportunities which have blown my way have involved literature. One of the first was a request from Mr. Regler, Superintendent of the school for the blind, who asked my sister (who had also joined the NFB) and me to write a song for the school's centennial celebration. He told us that the theme was a quote from its blind founder, Samuel Bacon, "Not just a living, but a life". Pleased to so soon have a chance to be part of writing a song which had, in fact, asked to be sung, I fleshed out that quote for the chorus and wrote a couple verses, then handed it off to Laurie to write the literal music. It was truly awesome to hear blind youth proclaiming that message of equal expectation and to have it adopted as the school song, knowing that the National Federation of the Blind, the organization that had been maligned there, had had a hand in it through my sister and me. Our mom, who had discussed our change of perspective with Mr. Regler at some point, mentioned that his response to her had been that if we raise children to think independently, we shouldn't be surprised when they do.

Whether serving as state president, treasurer, board member, committee appointee, or, my personal favorite, rank and file member of this organization, literature of some kind is always influencing my approach. As I was writing this article, for instance, I received an observation in an e-mail message by Bob Perks which I think sums up well how the Federation can turn around your life, whatever your initial hook may be. He wasn't talking about blindness, but I think it applies. He said, "I used to say, 'I'll believe it when I see it.' Now it's, 'I'll see it when I believe it!'" The first part of that statement is, of course, a slight rewrite of that old, untrustworthy stereotype "seeing is believing". The second part could be restated in a phrase I have often heard my husband say which I liked so well I used it for the title of another of my writings about mentoring, "Attitude is everything." The former sets a trap, while the latter sets you free. And that, really, is what the National Federation of the Blind has done for me. It has set me free and it can do the same for you.

**We Leave at Dawn! Or, Ten-ish Anyway**

**by Bertie Wooster**

You are standing in a dank, confining space. Spread your arms and you’ll touch concrete walls to either side. Walk just a few steps further in and you might smack into a concrete slab. You can turn 180 degrees on your heels and head straight back out into the fresh autumn air, or you can climb the iron ladder set flush to the wall to your immediate left.

You choose to climb. A breezy downdraft carries the sounds of bodies and feet shuffling somewhere above. A startled echoing exclamation decries the stinkbugs colonizing the space above your head. But you climb steadily, your hands grabbing rung after cold rung, your toes bumping the wall because the ladder really is that shallow. Your hands find the top rung even as you realize you’ll have to stretch one leg across open space to shift to a small climbing platform. You do this ten times, scaling iron ladders, crossing open space, zigzagging your way up a tight vertical shaft even as the drop grows increasingly perilous, even as the draft strengthens all around, tugging your hair and your clothes until you finally emerge, exhilarated and triumphant, through a hole in the center of the deck of an observation tower you are sure must be rocking in this massive wind!

Now imagine you’ve done this in darkness. Utterly impenetrable complete darkness.

Imagine you’ve climbed a 66-foot observation tower for the thrill of the climb – but can’t see the view from the top. Park Naturalist Dianna Sprucebank said Barrows is the first blind person to climb the Observation Tower at Clarence Schock Memorial Park. “When I learned of his climb it started me thinking. I spend a lot of time trying to get visitors to look up from their phones and into the woods. They’re blind in a different fashion. It’s an awareness thing. It’s a big issue. I realized now I need to try to focus on getting them to experience what’s in front of them through all their senses, not just by seeing but feeling , touching.” Dianna Sprucebank.

Except not being able to see isn’t the same as not perceiving. Or sharing, as Brad Barrows did when he and this reporter stood on the deck of the Governor Dick observation tower at Clarence Schock Memorial Park in Lebanon, Pennsylvania October 19, 2014.

“Wow!” Barrows beamed as he gained the deck. “I can feel the sun on my skin. The strength of the wind. Wow!”

“Wow” is more of a motto than an exclamation when Barrows uses it. And he uses it a lot: cheerfully, generously, sometimes in puzzlement, yet ever optimistically.

Though he faced a brilliantly crisp, clear-skies panorama encompassing five surrounding counties of quintessential Amish Country – he could see none of it.

Born without retinas, Barrows, 54, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has been blind all his life. That didn’t stop him from wanting to share a view he couldn’t possibly “see” – to actively share it – by participating in its partaking. And this gentle, affable man; someone who’s never known the depth of an azure sky or the blush of an apple, or the sun-edged wings of the red-tailed hawk soaring, right now, above our heads…is asking me to describe the colors of everything in sight.

How? How to translate this pristine, color-saturated patchwork of villages and farmlands; a veritable cornucopia of Americana cradled by rolling hills of gold, orange and green? This scene surrounded by yet more distant mountains that fade into a bluish haze…“Hmmm. If you could run your hands over the autumn hills they might feel like a bumpy quilt. Different nubs and ridges could convey different flavors? Some patches taste like orange? Some…? What does bumpy green taste like? Broccoli?”

Barrows laughed a polite, “Mm, yes.”

Okay, this is where simplistic analogies break down but he appreciated the effort as a starting point of a shared experience.

He leaned into the wind and made his way forward, reaching until his hand found the metal cage that encloses the observation deck. Being familiar with the local geography, using the round deck as a compass, he told me the names of the villages to the north and west by measuring my descriptions of steeples, silos and sub-divisions against the feel of the sun on his face. These reference points grounded him even at the top of a tower.

Barrows knew exactly where he stood within the space of the moment: his immediate environment and the world all around. Something that, if you close your eyes and think about it, could be difficult to achieve in the dark…with chattering voices swirling around and a brisk wind buffeting you and oh yeah there’s that hole somewhere behind you and …I open my eyes, not wanting to contemplate it. “Brad?”

He’s chatting with other sightseers, setting them straight on which direction they’re facing. They’re mostly startled and politely amazed to realize they’re sharing the deck with a blind person who’s just climbed the same tower they did.

It’s this intersection of encounter and realization that determines whether a connection is forged or a conversation abandoned. Will the sighted conquer reflexive assumptions or will their inner Boy or Girl Scout presume to take the blind person in (literal or allegorical) hand and guide them to ‘safety’? Will the blind stand their ground and conduct themselves with an assurance that broadcasts self-reliance or let themselves (whether they wish it or not) be shepherded through life?

Barrow’s moment on deck was defined by a casual confidence that encouraged the typical banter and pleasantries that mark a communal experience. Did his sighted deck-mates return to earth with an experience that might shape their reaction to the next blind person they encounter? It’s a subject worth pursuing.

With the shaft’s pattern of gaps and ladders committed to spatial and tactile memory, Barrows made short and capable work of the descent, besting this white-knuckled reporter’s return to terra firma by several fluttering heartbeats! Making our way back along the leafy trail to the park’s visitor center, he used the tip of his white cane to feel for sneaky toe-catcher rocks, fallen branches; all the typical woodland trip-hazards. On our mile hike to the tower he’d held one end of the cane while I gripped the other, me walking in front, he deducing which way the trail was bending by the movements telegraphed along the cane’s length. Now familiar with the trail’s character, he tapped his cane a few steps ahead of him an unassisted, high-stepping gait.

He was duly smiling at his achievement. I was still trying to process what he’d just accomplished. Part of me inwardly grieved for what he wasn’t seeing. A piano tuner and musician by trade, Barrows was reveling in the forest’s acoustic subtleties, the raucous crows and affronted jays, the swish of leaves under foot, the rustling canopy above.

**Cats and Dogs**

**by Al Daniels**

Yes, it was cats and dogs, but with absolutely no sign of rain. On July 26, 2014, the Central Connecticut Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of CT sponsored a trip to the New Britain Rock Cats game, when they faced the Portland Sea Dogs in minor league baseball. We put together a group from the Shoreline chapter; and it was most certainly an excellent night for it.

It was a pleasant Saturday night. The stadium was packed, and the Rock Cats were hot. The Sea Dogs, however, were a powerful opponent, as they were in first place with a record well over 500. Tyler Duffy was pitching for the Rock Cats while Derrick Gibson, the lead-off man for the Sea Dogs hit. I cannot recall if they ever even got to third base the whole night.

Those of us who were blind were concerned if we would know what is going on out on the field. There was no problem on that score, as the radio station 1410 AM broadcasted updates the entire game. Jeff Dooley, the announcer, kept us informed on every pitch, count, and action. It seemed as if every inning, the Rock Cats hit a double and then knocked the runner into home plate. Unfortunately, it was just not the Sea Dogs’ night. They were shut out with no runs.

The series of four games was split. The night before was a Rock Cats loss: 1-0. The following day, the same thing happened with the Rock Cats losing in extra innings. The time was right for a Rock Cats win, and we just happened to be there to enjoy the great American pastime. The final score ended up being Rock Cats 7, Sea Dogs 0.

**Building Braille Reading Speed**

**by Jerry Whittle**

Over the past seven years I have had the opportunity to teach over two hundred blind persons to read Braille. During that period I have timed twelve students at rates of greater than three hundred words per minute. Of course, all of these rapid readers had been reading Braille since early childhood, and none of them needed to improve speed; however, there were some interesting similarities among many of them that are worthy of noting. First of all, eleven of the twelve read with two hands, starting the line with the left hand and finishing it with the right. Meanwhile, the left dropped down to the next line to find the beginning and start reading as soon as the right hand had finished. Only one of the twelve read more than three hundred words per minute using only the right hand. In fact, he read over five hundred words per minute. One of these twelve read one hundred sixty-nine words a minute when he entered the center. At the beginning of his training he read with his left hand only, but he moved both hands across the entire line and brought both all the way back to the beginning of the next line, losing approximately one second per line because of the inefficiency of this method. We encouraged him to read the first half of each line with his left hand, then track down to the beginning of the next line while finishing the line with his right. Once he started practicing this more efficient method, he no longer lost that second on each line since he could pick up the next one with his left hand as soon as his right had finished the last. As a consequence he increased his reading speed from one hundred sixty-nine to three hundred two words a minute before graduating.

After years of teaching, it is absolutely clear to me that the two-handed technique is by far the superior method. I remember another student who read only sixty words per minute when she entered the center. She read with only her right hand. She also took the advice to begin using both hands, and she increased her reading speed from sixty to one hundred twenty words per minute in six months; however, I should point out that she also read over three thousand Braille pages while she was a student at the Louisiana Center for the Blind.

The number of pages read is an extremely important factor in building speed. A large proportion of Braille readers read at a rate of fifty to seventy words per minute. In order to increase speed, once someone is reading at sixty words a minute or more, he or she should read a minimum of ten thousand Braille pages a year, two hundred fifty pages a week, thirty-five pages a day-- give or take a few pages.

Setting goals is another important factor in attaining good or excellent reading speeds. I would suggest that one set page goals per day. For example, I currently have a student who has just finished Grade II Braille, and she is working diligently to build speed. When she first completed the code, she began to read a short novel, setting a goal of ten pages per day. She set aside a certain time in the evening to accomplish this rather ambitious task. During her first time test she read twenty-four words per minute. During the next month she faithfully maintained her page goal and even increased it to about fifteen pages per day. In her last timing she read forty-five words per minute. Of course, some of this speed resulted from her being able to pick up words more rapidly from context, and this ability accelerated her reading rate. Some of the improvement also resulted from her growing ability to pick up the signs more easily through constant practice and in general from her consistent hard work.

I have noticed that most of the students who really work hard attain a level of about sixty words per minute rather quickly after completing the code, usually in two to three months. Then the rate of speed levels off. This observation is not based on a controlled study but merely on my observation. What usually happens is that students are able to increase speed rapidly because the faster they read, the more it makes sense to them, and the more they pick up by context. For example, "Jack and Jill went up the ...": it does not take a mental giant to guess that the final word of this sentence will be "hill." However, once the student has reached a speed that takes account of contextual prediction, the rate levels off, and it then takes reading a tremendous number of pages to continue to increase steadily--at least ten thousand pages per year.

The best readers at the Louisiana Center for the Blind who knew no Braille before entering the Center have learned to read at a rate of fifty to seventy-five words per minute in six to nine months. The student in this category who attained the greatest speed before graduation read at a rate of seventy-five words per minute. That person read over eight thousand pages during that six-month period. She actually stayed in her apartment on many weekends and read Braille diligently. In other words she approached her Braille reading as if it were a job.

I would also suggest that those working to increase their reading speed work on their Braille before becoming too fatigued. If you are an early morning person, read early in the day. I know a former student who arises at five o'clock in the morning to read Braille before he begins to prepare for school at seven. Others are able to read late at night and set aside the time to do so. I also think it is important to read aloud during part of this reading time so that one does not develop sloppy reading habits. For example, when one reads aloud, it is hard to mumble through words; one must be exact. Also, by reading aloud periodically, one can begin to develop good reading techniques for delivering speeches or for reading in public places, such as church or before civic organizations.

Additionally, reading aloud enables one to hear how fast he or she is picking up a line or to identify where any problems lie. I once had a student who was timed at three hundred fifteen words per minute. When she read aloud in public, she tried to read at that speed. She sounded like she was on fast forward. While she attended the center, she worked on improving her speech-making techniques. She tried to slow down to a reading rate of about one hundred twenty words per minute, and her speaking style improved tremendously. Incidentally, President Clinton's Inaugural Address was read at a rate of one hundred twenty words per minute, about the proper rate for communication of ideas without losing one's audience.

Another suggestion is to set a timer for five minutes and read aloud during this interval. If you can finish a Braille page in five minutes, you are reading at a rate of forty words per minute. If you read two pages, your rate is eighty words per minute. If you complete three, you are reading at a rate of one hundred twenty words per minute. By setting a timer periodically, one can see how much progress is being made, and the timer acts as a very good motivator to read faster.

In conclusion I would say that building reading speed requires hard work and consistency. It does little good to read thirty pages in one day and wait a week to read another thirty pages. The reading must be done on a consistent, day-by-day basis until a certain level of efficiency has been established. One must approach the challenge of increasing reading speed in the same way one approaches a job. Many students carry Dr. Jernigan's and President Maurer's banquet speeches around with them on trips in order to get in some reading in airplanes or in doctor's offices. These Braille speeches are lightweight and quite portable. It is amazing how much time one spends waiting, and this time can be used to increase reading speed. Most important, it is essential that one set high page goals, not necessarily time goals. Ten pages per day is a better goal than one hour. The two-handed technique is by far the best for optimum reading speed. Find something that holds your interest. If you are just beginning to read for speed, choose a book or magazine article that is not too complicated and work your way into more sophisticated reading material. Finally, read! read! read! Always read with both hands, and set ambitious page goals for yourself.

**It’s Time to Ring the BELL!**

**by Kathryn Webster**

On Monday, August 10, 2015, the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut will begin a journey to expand Braille literacy in the Nutmeg State. As State Coordinator, I am asking for your help. As loyal members, leaders, or believers in blind people, please spread the word about our national Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Program. From 8:30-3:30 p.m., blind mentors and experts will share in the love for Braille as we expound upon the importance of literacy for children.

It is now up to us to raise awareness, bring children together, and enlighten families. Please direct any and all questions or concerns to Kathryn Webster, [kathrynwebster.nfb@gmail.com](mailto:kathrynwebster.nfb@gmail.com) or by phone at 203-273-8463. It’s time to ring the bell!

**Jumping the Fire**

**by Patti Chang**

In April of 2013 I traveled to Baltimore to chair our scholarship committee meeting. Everything was ordinary on my trip out: I used my cane to navigate from my home to the airport and checked flight status with VoiceOver on my iPhone. All went according to plan, and then the real work began. Lorraine Rovig, other National Center staff, and I prepared for the committee’s arrival by organizing and reviewing files. I used my handy slate and stylus to take notes to train our print readers.

But then everything morphed. My husband called to let me know that his ailing father had died and that the funeral would be on Sunday in Belize City, Belize, in Central America. Since our scholarship meeting ends on Saturday evening, I proceeded to book airline travel for my husband Francisco, our children Johnathon and Julia, and me from three different US cities to Belize.

My spouse and our daughter traveled to Belize on Wednesday. On Friday, as our scholarship committee work got into full swing, this email waited in my inbox:

On Apr 26, 2013, at 12:04 a.m., Francisco Chang wrote:

On Sunday Fabian, being the oldest son, and Robert, being the oldest of the grandchildren, will go with the funeral director and pick up Papi's body from the morgue at 8:00 a.m. They will bring the body to Fabian's house. Throughout the whole trip Fabian or Robert will need to talk to Papi's body in Chinese, telling him where he is going, especially if it is over a bridge as water is bad.

Up to 10:30 a.m., visitors can come to view the body. Family members can place something personal and special inside Papi's coffin. After 10:30 or 11:00 all the family members will gather together around the coffin in a horseshoe-shaped formation, gather hands, and Juan will lead a prayer. This prayer is not traditional Chinese, but Juan wants to have one. The reason for the horseshoe is because traditionally no one can stand at the feet of the body. Then we all sit together and have a meal with Papi.

All the male family members will have a black band around the left arm placed halfway. All the daughters-in-law and Mami will wear a small white circular cloth in shape of a flower in their hair that Sunday and for the next forty-nine days. You can sleep without it. The granddaughters will wear a blue one for the next twenty-one days. At the end of those periods the cloth is discarded.

Before climbing up the stairs to Fabian’s house, there will be a small shallow bowl with fire going that everybody will need to jump over. This is meant to get rid of any bad spirits from the cemetery, and we don't want to bring them home. All the male members then remove their arm bands, cut a small piece, and throw away the rest into the garbage. The small cut piece is kept by the sons for forty-nine days and twenty-one days by the grandsons. At the end of these periods the piece of cloth is discarded.

Francisco Chang

Sent from my iPad

Admittedly a couple of things in this email caused me concern. First, how was I, an attorney, going to be taken seriously with a flower in my hair for the next forty-nine days? And how was I supposed to “jump a fire"? My orientation and mobility training had left that one out.

I left our National Center by van at 4:00 a.m. for the trek to Philip S. W. Goldson International Airport by way of Miami International Airport. Anxious about my tight time schedule, I was relieved when we departed on time. My change of planes left me twenty minutes between flights, so, for the first time ever, I requested airport assistance in Florida. Of course, the first time I requested assistance, the help failed to materialize at the gate. Thankful for my confidence that I could find the gate myself as an independent traveler, I proceeded, heart pounding, to the concourse. It would not be good for me, the only American daughter-in-law, to miss the funeral. It would be disrespectful in the extreme! I asked a passerby if he was going my way. When I heard he was young, I explained my situation and begged him to “pleeease run with me.” He did: all the way from E16 to E1. The gate agents held the door when they saw me running, and I never even caught the full name of my Good Samaritan. I waved and jogged my way onto the plane.

When I arrived in Belize, an employee of our family business, Maria Chang & Sons Co., met me after I cleared immigration and customs. My mother-in-law, who is not generally demonstrative, hugged me as I arrived at the shop where the coffin rested before the funeral. Self-conscious about my borrowed black dress and my tendency to stand out in the crowd, my nerves were on edge. I was the only Caucasian at many events, not to mention the only blind person.

Belize is not what you might call a disability-friendly country. There are no wheelchair ramps, and I have seen Braille on only imported elevator panels, so one must use the cane carefully to locate oft-present holes and barriers. But, since most people are unfamiliar with blindness, they tend to leave one to manage and are not overly solicitous.

Finally we returned to Fabian’s house after taking the ribbon down at the shop. But, remember I had to jump that fire. And, I was now wearing a long-past-my-knees black dress, which did not belong to me. I discouraged one relative or another from grabbing my arm. I managed to linger long enough that almost everyone in this large extended family preceded me. I stretched out my cane to figure out where this fire was, and I guessed based on the size of it as to how high it might be. I hiked up my dress, and I cleared it with room to spare. Juan or Willie made some wisecrack about my showing a lot of leg, but I was content—no burns on me or the dress. I could now recover from my three hours of sleep in the past forty or so hours.

Jumping the fire stands for me as a challenge no one could have prepared me for, but my independence and ability to believe that where there is a will there is a way can help in any situation. Those attitudes are attributable to my upbringing and the National Federation of the Blind. I know that blindness is not the characteristic that defines me or my future. I can live the life I want. Blindness will not hold me back.

**Affiliate/Chapter Updates**

**NFBCT Legislative Update 2015 05 15**

Members and leaders of our affiliate have been hard at work in recent months to strive for success in our policy agenda. We always need more support and will increase our probabilities of success with each additional member who joins in the work.

At the federal level, we are working on our wish list, the Legislative Agenda of Blind Americans. We are fighting for the passage of H.R. 188, the Transition to Integrated and Meaningful Employment (TIME) Act, which will phase out the provision within the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) that currently allows employers to pay workers with disabilities wages less than the minimum wage. We have actually found a worker being paid $0.00 per hour, where the employer has been writing it up as employment. With the help of our sponsor, Congressman Gregg Harper of Mississippi, we are working to end the exploitation. At the national level, we are seeking Republican cosponsors first, but it is still important to inform Connecticut’s Democrats about the bill so that we can bring them on more easily once we have enough Republicans. The Technology, Education, and Accessibility in College and Higher Education (TEACH) Act is on our agenda again, but the bill has yet to be dropped in the legislature. Since the higher education lobby, the American Council on Education, came out against us near the end of the last session, our national legislative leaders have been meeting with them to negotiate new language that we will both support. The third item is the ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty, which will enable blind Americans to obtain accessible materials that have already been produced in other countries. As Hamit Campos pointed out, if it’s a foreign publication, the quality of the media production will be best in its home country.

At the state level, we are working to prevent the damage that can be done by bad legislation. Senate Bill 234, if passed, will require health insurance companies to purchase assistance dogs and guide dogs for people whose healthcare providers declare them a medical necessity. The guide dogs will have to come from accredited, non-profit organizations. For many reasons, we are requesting that guide dogs be removed from this bill. The bill’s author understands what we want, but there is general concern that it would be discrimination against the blind community to remove us. Once we properly educate them about the function of a guide dog, which is not medical, they should do the right thing.

Senate Bill 854 will replace references to “crippled” or “defective eyesight” in the general statutes with “visually impaired.” It is important for us to educate our legislators about how, as we have decided ourselves, the politically correct term for us is “blind people,” since what they are doing is in the name of political correctness.

Senate Bill 1061, an act concerning fiscal sustainability of state parks, originally was going to remove the opportunities for blind vendors under the Randolph-Sheppard vending program at all facilities run by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. We fought, and we were able to get them to reduce the bill’s language to involve an investigation this year so that they can gather evidence to cut the blind vendors’ jobs next year. This bill is moving, has been passed in the Senate and is ready for a vote in the House. In the coming year, it is absolutely vital that we organize the blind vendors in Connecticut, creating a Connecticut Association of Blind Merchants, a division of NFBCT, like many other affiliates have done. It will enable us to focus on vendors’ affairs as a cause affecting our members and to have voices from the vendors’ community coming from within our affiliate. With a strong and new merchant’s division, we ought to be in a great position next year to defeat the bill, evidence or not.

**Central CT Chapter Update**

On the last Saturday of March the Central Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind participated in a fundraiser called the Charity Cycling Challenge. Teams of eight or less ride spin bikes for an hour or more for the charity of their choice. Each rider raises donations. This was our second year participating and there were 75 bikes with riders from 8 AM until 4 PM. Water, breakfast, lunch, snacks, a T-shirt and a goodie bag are provided with the registration fee. The atmosphere is lively with music and videos along with an instructor to make the time go quickly.

Deb Reed, President

National Federation of the Blind Central CT Chapter

**Work evaluation success or failure you decide?**

**By Rich McGaffin**

I have been asked to write about my recent employment evaluation experience, in our local CVS drug store. This was a 40 hour work evaluation, where I have stocked shelves, checked expiration dates on food items, some dusting of shelves and products, and most recently put over stock away in the store room.

It’s unfortunate that there will be no job for me at the end of this work evaluation. I can only assume that this was purely a test to see if I’d be capable of actually working in a retail establishment.

On a positive note, I enjoyed stocking shelves; it was an interesting experience, putting stock away was also interesting, dusting the shelves was time consuming, but not so productive, but if indeed it was part of the job, then whether I liked it or not, I would do the best job I could. I believe the most difficult assignment out of the things I was asked to do was to check the expiration dates on the products. I say this because, my magnifier didn’t always pick up the expiration dates, due to the color of the font and the color on the packaging. But not being a quitter I did the best I could to succeed in this as well.

Unfortunately because in the retail world everyone and I do mean everyone is expected to run a cash register. Although the physical aspect of running a cash register is most definitely something I could learn to do. I am not interested in being a cashier. I say this because I’ve heard too many horror stories that have to deal with people trying to take advantage of the cashiers. I can only imagine the field day that these indviduals would have trying to rip off a blind person. I know this sounds a bit negative but as a teenager in high school I did have such experiences working in the school store. Several students tried to claim I didn’t give them the proper change. It left such a bad taste in my mouth I swore I’d never work as a cashier again.

All in all, I’d say it was a pleasant, productive, and positive adventure, and a wonderful learning experience.

The woman I worked with was very pleasant to work with, and she was very encouraging. There were a couple days where my vision would blur out, and I could barely make out the different products, she was very patient. Not rushing me, nor at no time did she try to degrade me by telling me to pack it in, she allowed me to work through the problem and eventually my vision would clear slightly.

If there were any changes or suggestions I could make for those training folks and services, it would be to ask if there’s an employment opportunity before having a client start the evaluation process so that there wouldn’t be any hurt feelings, or discouragement on the client’s behalf. Although I do understand the circumstances and I am walking away from this positively, I can’t help but feel a bit saddened by the fact there’s no job. I’m not a major fan of working retail again. I did like the fact that I could walk back and forth. I didn’t have to depend on a ride or public transportation, which, given the problems I’ve had with the transportation for the blind, I’d rather walk.

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APPLICATION/REGISTRATION FORM

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Home Phone ( )\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Work Phone ( )\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail Address \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I am registered with a state or private rehabilitation agency for the blind. \_\_Yes \_\_No. If yes, please specify\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I am enrolled in a public school special education program for the blind or state residential school for the blind.

\_\_Yes \_\_ No. If yes, please specify\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I am registered with a cooperating regional library under the program of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress.

\_\_Yes \_\_ No. If yes, please specify\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If you answered no to all the above questions, you must include with this application a letter from one of the following which certifies that you are blind, visually impaired or unable to read newsprint due to a disability.

\_\_Your doctor; \_\_Social Security Award Letter;

\_\_President of a local chapter or state affiliate of the NFB

\_\_Teacher of the visually impaired/O&M Instructor

I would like to receive information in \_\_ large print, \_\_ Braille, or \_\_ by e-mail.

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