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The Sounding Board 2.0

The Publication of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey

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Mission Statement

The National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, Inc. is an organization of blind and interested sighted people who plan and carry out programs; work to improve the quality of life of the blind; provide a means of collective action for parents of blind children; promote the vocational, cultural and social advancement of the blind; achieve the integration of the blind into society on a basis of equality with the sighted; and take action that will improve the overall condition and standard of living of the blind.

The National Federation of the Blind 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.

The National Federation of the Blind Pledge

I pledge to participate actively in the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind to achieve equality, opportunity and security for the blind; to support the programs and policies of the Federation; and to abide by its constitution.

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From the Editor

Annemarie Cooke

Welcome to the first edition of the 2022 Sounding Board 2.0, the official publication of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey.

Take a look around...what we hope you'll see reflected are the suggestions from the 30 Federationists who responded to our survey last year on what they liked about SB and what they wanted to see in its continuation. And we updated the name of our publication, too, to reflect its new iteration: Sounding Board 2.0.

Articles about a spectrum of age groups and experiences? Got those. News of important happenings in the NFBNJ and its programs and projects? Got those, too. A shared reflection about an experience that helped one of us move on with life, overcome a fear or a challenge? Yes, indeed. We even have a little fundraiser from a fondly remembered Northern Chapter member who has since passed away, but who had come up with the perfect "Tea for One" party found in our archives.

And, my goodness, what a team of people to thank for their part in making this issue happen. Everyone who promised to write an article or help with editing or layout followed through with flying colors. Giant thanks to:

Miss Ruth Williams, Linda Melendez, Brian Mackey, Ryan Stevens, Brianna Murray, Melissa Lomax, Carley Mullin, Mary Jo Partyka, Rick Fox and Ellen Sullivan.

So, my dear readers, did this introductory issue of Sounding Board2.0 meet or exceed your expectations? Or not? Please drop me an e-mail with your comments, suggestions and hopefully, offers of writing articles for future issues! Please send your feedback, suggestions and article ideas to me at:

aec732@gmail.com

We're shooting for early August as the issue date for the next Sounding Board 2.0, so keep those messages, story ideas and other suggestions coming...

And now.... Sounding Board 2.0!

President's Corner

By Linda Melendez, NFBNJ President

Greetings all, and welcome to the Sounding Board 2.0, the latest version of our flagship publication. This is an exciting time for me, as this is my first article as your President.

Members and leaders have been working together to accomplish the work of the Federation on all levels, and positive change is underway.

Since the goal is to resume in-person meetings as soon as possible, we will eventually be phasing out virtual meetings. Until we do, my plan is to continue offering telephone and Zoom participation as options until the end of this calendar year. Even if I do determine that it is safe to meet in-person, you will still have a choice as to how you participate in your chapter and division meetings throughout 2022.

To keep information moving to all our affiliate members, each chapter now has a liaison from the NFBNJ Board of Directors to share what's happening. This monthly update will serve to supplement my weekly emails.

Our affiliate membership Chairpersons and Chapter membership liaisons are doing great work in getting the word out about our organization to state and county agencies, other blindness organizations and fellow New Jersey residents. Soon, we will begin a social media campaign to reach blind students.

Our legislative work is progressing well following our Washington Seminar in February. See Ryan Stevens' article in this issue for more details.

As a parent living with vision loss myself, I can tell you from experience that dealing with custody issues following divorce can be emotionally fraught and difficult to navigate. That is why I am so passionate about our proposed NJ Parental Rights Bill. That bill, A5517, would prohibit courts from awarding custody of, or limiting visitation with, a child based solely on a parent's disability, provided that the parent's disability is relevant only if the court finds it detrimental to the child's best interests.

Chapter liaisons are working with our Legislative Director to identify other organizations to co-sponsor A5517 and you can help by working with them in identifying those organizations. To learn more about supporting A5517, visit: <https://legiscan.com/NJ/bill/A5517/2020>

Please share this information with people you know and consider asking them to spread the word about this cause.

Tapping into technology such as PayPal, debit, or credit cards to pay chapter and division dues is a priority this year. So far, our four divisions, as well as our Capital and Garden State Chapters, are up and running. We are currently working on the Northeast and South Jersey Shore Chapters, and the Northern and Central Jersey Chapters will follow.

Keep in mind that you can still pay your dues by check, money order, or cash when you attend your in-person meetings.

I am looking forward to attending our in-person NFB 2022 National Convention from July 5th through 10th and appreciate the protocols in place to keep us safe. It will be nice to gather once again with our fellow Federationists!

If you are planning to attend the national convention and are up to date on your dues, please pre-register by May 31st for pre-registration reimbursement.

We are also working on our in-person state convention, which is set for Thursday, November 10th through Sunday, November 13th, at the Delta by Marriott Hotel in Woodbridge. Registration will open shortly.

Members will be able to help pick this year's convention theme. An email with a link to submit your suggestion will be open in August and the winner will receive a free banquet ticket for Saturday evening, November 12th.

Finally, we are offering an in-person BELL Academy July 18th through July 29th from 9 AM to 3 PM, at the Raritan Bay YMCA in Perth Amboy. To learn more and share enrollment information with parents of blind children ages five to twelve, please click on the following link:

[BELL \(Braille Enrichment for Literacy & Learning\) Academy – National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey \(nfbnj.org\)](https://www.nfbnj.org/bell-academy)

It's been a time of great turmoil and uncertainty in the world, but we found a way to stay connected. The pandemic forced us into new ways of thinking and necessitated novel ideas to work around obstacles. Through the dark days, we found the wherewithal — individually and collectively — to make the lives of the blind and visually impaired richer, fuller, and brighter. Thank you for the honor of allowing me to serve alongside you all. I'm so proud of the work we've done together thus far. Now, let's go build the Federation!

Membership Committee Updates

**By Melissa Lomax and Carley Mullin
NFBNJ Membership Committee**

The Membership Committee of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey would like to thank everyone who has helped to spread the word about our affiliate and the NFB. Although our committee formally consists of two co-chairs, Carley Mullin and Melissa Lomax, along with representatives of each chapter, all NFBNJ members play an important part in the progress of our movement. With your help, we're looking forward to making 2022 a momentous year!

Our team has already created a letter to share information about our affiliate with colleges, senior communities, libraries, doctors' offices, and others. The New Jersey Association of Blind Students (NJABS), the affiliate's student division, will soon begin its efforts to engage larger groups on social media with help from the Membership Committee, and the plans do not stop there! Members have started suggesting ideas for events and strategies to engage new members, which we will share in periodic updates.

In keeping with the Membership presentation at the affiliate's State Convention, the Membership Committee encourages all members to give custom invitations to those who could benefit from joining our communities, to welcome newcomers with open arms of understanding and connection, and to engage with new and current members as we all continue to live the lives we want.

The 2022 Washington Seminar: Building Support Virtually **By Ryan Stevens, NFBNJ Legislative Director**

Greetings, my New Jersey Federation friends. Another Washington Seminar has come and gone, and this is my synopsis of what took place, as well as the results of our efforts.

For the second year, COVID-19 precautions necessitated that our Capitol Hill event be held virtually on the Zoom platform. The Washington Seminar is the annual visit by NFB members to the Capitol Hill offices of their Senators and Congressional representatives to make the case for specific pieces of legislation affecting the blindness community.

Twenty New Jersey Federationists participated in visits to our federal legislators or their staff members. Moreover, 60 of us were in the virtual audience as eloquent and confident members of this year's state scholarship class outlined our legislative cases to an aide for US Senator Bob Menendez; Senate staff members for Senator Cory Booker did not respond to our requests for an appointment.

All virtual meeting calls occurred during the week of February 7th, and here are the issues we discussed.

The first was the Access Technology Affordability Act (HR431/S212). As many of you know, this would provide a \$2,000 refundable tax credit to blind people who purchase their own adaptive technology, such as a screen reader or an electronic Braille display. This legislation has been at the forefront of our priorities for quite some time, and support in Congress has been slowly but steadily growing, due to our advocacy efforts. In fact, at the end of the seminar, we were up to 138 cosponsors in the House, including eight of the twelve members of the New Jersey delegation, and 35 Senators, one of whom is Cory Booker. Our efforts also netted a promise from a ninth New Jersey Congressperson to sign onto the bill.

The next bill was the Medical Device Nonvisual Accessibility Act (HR4853). This bill would require all at-home medical devices to be accessible to the blind and visually impaired. These would include basic items, such as glucose monitors

and blood pressure readers, up through home chemotherapy devices. This is certainly an important issue now that people are handling more of their personal health care without having to go to a doctor's office or clinic. Those of us who cannot read the text on flat screen displays do not currently have this option available to us, which leaves us at a disadvantage in terms of caring for ourselves independently. At present, there are 27 House members who have cosponsored this bill, including Mikie Sherrill and Donald Payne of New Jersey.

The third item is the Twenty-First Century Website and Application Accessibility Act. This would create guidelines for manufacturers of websites and mobile apps so that they can make their products accessible from the beginning of the development process. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates accessibility; however, many website and app creators don't have a clear understanding of how to accomplish this, and this legislation would give them the information they need. There would also be mechanisms in place to verify that full accessibility is being incorporated into online and smart phone content. Since there is no bill in either the House or the Senate, we are looking for lead sponsors in both chambers.

The fourth and final bill we presented during the Seminar is the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act (HR2373/S3238). This bill would eliminate the payment of subminimum wages to workers with disabilities. It would also encourage these workers to pursue mainstream jobs that can lead to learning skills that are usable in the general workforce, rather than being relegated to sheltered workshops with no chance for decent wages or career advancement. While twelve states and several organizations that hire workers with disabilities have already eliminated subminimum wages, this needs to become national policy. HR2373 has 34 cosponsors, and we are working on building support for S3238.

For details and the full fact sheets for these four issues, visit:

<https://nfb.org/washington-seminar>

The above legislation is our priority for 2022, as it would greatly improve the lives of blind and disabled people throughout the country. Please take the time to learn more about these bills and reach out to your members of Congress and to Senators Booker and Menendez to express your support. Also, ask your friends and family to do the same. The more voices our representatives hear, the more likely these bills will become law.

To contact your member in the House of Representatives or the US Senators from New Jersey, call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121. To find your House member, contact your local public library or go to www.house.gov and enter your zip code.

Live and In-Person: BELL 2022!!!

By MaryJo Partyka, Chair of the NFBNJ Braille Committee

Hot off the virtual press! As we were finalizing the recap of the 2021 BELL Program, we received some excellent news about this year's program. It will be held in-person at a wonderful new venue with a swimming pool, an indoor theater area and plenty of space for our program, no matter the weather, and is still centrally located in Perth Amboy! Read on for details.

But first, a recap of what we hope will be our last virtual Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning event held last summer. It was the second summer the program was held virtually due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19. There were three "BELL At Home" sessions for students ages 4-12, which was especially useful where resources to practice Braille over the summer are limited or non-existent.

Karen Anderson, the NFB's National Education Program Coordinator, indicated that three two-week sessions would be held on the Zoom platform: one each in June, July, and August. She noted that the groups would be divided by age and proficiency in Braille.

Our New Jersey BELL Team consists of Linda Melendez, NFBNJ Affiliate President; Mary Jo Partyka, BELL Coordinator and President of the NFBNJ Capital Chapter; Sarah Scapardine, Teacher of Tomorrow and Assistant BELL Coordinator; Ellen Sullivan, BELL Secretary; Joanna Benthall, Coordinator of the Mentors; Carley Mullin and Jonathan Zobek, Mobility Specialists; and Andy Smith and Andrew Chin, Braille Assistants. Prior to the start of the BELL In-Home Edition, the team met several times to determine how we could best help the students and support the BELL In-home Edition, both financially and as mentors. In terms of recruitment, we sent out flyers to former BELL students and forwarded additional flyers to Carol Castellano, President of the affiliate's Parents

of Blind Children Division, and to Dr. Bernice Davis, Executive Director of the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI).

Regional blind mentors were assigned to each student with the intent to teach them about the NFB and to invite them to chapter meetings, as well as to fun outings. We held parent meetings prior to the beginning of each session to explain how the BELL In-Home Edition would work and our role as mentors. Parents were provided with the opportunity to ask questions and encouraged to share contact information with each other if they wanted to. In addition, each student received one virtual mobility lesson per week. Since the main thrust of the BELL Academy was for students to learn Braille, we arranged for our assistants to contact the students three times a week to determine if they needed any additional help. The parents were also introduced to their child's regional mentor who was urged to contact them during the program and find out how they were doing. One of the goals of both our affiliate and the NFB was to extend BELL beyond the two-week period, so the mentors (Brianna Murray; Evangelia Stone, NFBNJ Board Member; Mary Fernandez, former NFBNJ Board Member; Joanna Benthall; Michael Halm; and Rick Fox, President of the NFBNJ Northern Chapter) were encouraged to continue engaging with the students and families even after the BELL sessions ended.

The following students completed the BELL In-Home Edition: Dean, age 11; Katelyn, age 7; Addison, age 7; Ryder, age 8; Megan, age 6; and Mia, age 6.

In following up with the mentors, it appeared that the students benefited from the BELL Academy. One student said, "I had a great time and enjoyed all the materials that were sent to me." Another student felt better, knowing that she was not the only visually impaired child and that other children had similar experiences. Dean, who attended the BELL Academy for three years, spoke at our BELL graduation and said, "I am amazed at all the Braille I learned." Christine (mother of Katelyn) said "My child went from struggling in school to excelling at her studies, based on what she learned." It is evident from these reactions that the BELL In-Home Edition was a great success and all the participants benefited from this wonderful opportunity to work with blind and vision impaired children in our community.

And now the details of this year's in-person program:

Did you know that the NFBNJ is just one of eight state affiliates sponsoring an in-person BELL program this summer? New Jersey's BELL Program for 2022 will be held at the Raritan Bay Area YMCA, 357 New Brunswick Avenue, Perth Amboy, New Jersey, 08861. The program will be held from July 18 to July 29 from 9 AM to 3 PM. Applications for BELL are now available at: <https://nfb.org/programs-services/nfb-bell-academy>

Accessible Pedestrian Signals (APS): An Effort by the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, Northern Chapter, to Address this Concern in Essex County
by Rick Fox, President, NFBNJ Northern Chapter, and Ellen Sullivan, Vice President, NFBNJ Northern Chapter

Introduction:

Have you ever had one of these days? Rick needs to walk his service dog, Flash, and Ellen is literally dashing out the door to her appointment at the dentist nearby. The weather is dreary, and we are on the go! We both live in very walkable environments – let us say a walkability score of 87% (out of 100, according to standards set by the US Environmental Protection Agency for the ease of living, shopping, and using one's local amenities without having to drive a car.) Rick lives in Bloomfield and Ellen, in Maplewood.

Oh yes, we are both blind and sometimes have difficulty crossing complex and often confusing intersections because the access button to cross the street can be non-existent or, literally, 12 feet away from the intersection. Yes, indeed, Rick and Ellen are in a hurry and listen carefully for the traffic flow and surge and say that "Hail Mary" as we each bolt across the street.

Oh no! We forgot about that invisible "delayed green" button signaling cars to turn right, and so did the driver, so Rick and I find our lives in peril for a brief moment! Hence, you can see why Rick and I and the members of the Northern Chapter are interested in Accessible Pedestrian Signals. For blind people, it may be the difference between life and death.

Definition:

Many people have asked us what “Accessible Pedestrian Signals” are. There are many definitions for these devices and the one we’re using here is:

Devices that communicate information about the WALK and DON'T WALK intervals at signalized intersections in non-visual formats to pedestrians who are blind or who have low vision. They involve both auditory and tactile information about the location, direction and timing to cross an intersection.

Information Provided to Pedestrians by APS:

- Existence of and location of the pushbutton
- Beginning of the WALK interval
- Direction of the crosswalk and location of the destination curb
- Intersection street names in Braille, raised print, or through speech messages
- Intersection signalization with a speech message
- Intersection geometry through tactile maps and diagrams, or through speech messages

Benefits of APS:

Since intersection controls are now computerized, traffic patterns can vary depending on time of day and traffic flow. Research has found that APS improved crossing performance by blind pedestrians including:

- More accurate judgments of the onset of the WALK interval
- Reduction in crossings begun during DONT WALK
- Reduced delay
- Significantly more crossings completed before the signal changed

In addition, sighted pedestrians begin crossing more quickly and safely.

Ok, that was a lot of background information. So, back in early March 2020 — just prior to the Covid lockdown — Rick Fox, President, and Ellen Sullivan, Vice President of the Northern Chapter, suggested identifying some useful locations for APS in Essex County and then doing what was necessary to have the APS

installed. This is an objective for the Northern Chapter — and worth considering as a possible project for your NFBNJ chapter, too.

Progress was quite slow at first, but we started by identifying intersections in Essex County where these signals would be most beneficial in terms of blind pedestrian safety.

In October of 2021, Rick Fox met with Lukas Franck, a Senior Consultant at The Seeing Eye who had trained guide dogs and their handlers for many years. Lukas was a wonderful source of information and guidance and, from this time on, we felt like we were finally moving ahead with our project.

Under Lukas' guidance, Rick and Ellen reached out to County Commissioner Carlos Pomares of Bloomfield and Wayne Richardson, President of the Essex County Board of Commissioners. They just happened to be Rick and Ellen's elected representatives.

Rick and Ellen received immediate feedback from Commissioner Richardson's office and were invited to meet with the Commissioner and his staff, including the Essex County Engineer, to discuss this issue. We developed a mutually agreeable agenda and scheduled a meeting at the Commissioner's Office on October 28, 2021. At the meeting, Rick and Ellen explained our roles in the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey, the primary purpose of our organization, why Accessible Pedestrian Signals (APS) are so important to us and outlining specific examples in Essex County.

Together we developed an action plan that included:

1. NFBNJ to provide a list of high priority intersections to be evaluated for APS.
2. NFBNJ to provide an engineering guide (given to us by Lukas Franck) to the Commissioner's office that would help prioritize intersection and APS needs.
3. The Commissioner's office agreed to work with the NFBNJ to access and install APS at new and planned upgraded intersections in Essex County.
4. The Commissioner agreed to alert the NFBNJ when these devices are added and allow assessment by our blind members.

Coincidentally, on Tuesday, December 28, 2021, the New York Times published a front-page article on the subject. Here is an excerpt: "A federal judge ordered New York City to install more than 9,000 accessible pedestrian signals at city crosswalks."

In a response, Nick Paolucci, a spokesman for the city's Law Department, said that the ruling acknowledged the "operational challenges" the city has faced in its attempts to install the systems over the years.

"We are carefully evaluating the court's plan to further the city's progress in increasing accessibility to people who are blind and visually impaired," Mr. Paolucci said in a statement.

This ruling in New York City is encouraging news for its neighbors in Essex County, New Jersey, and Rick and Ellen continue to keep the lines of communication open with Essex County Commissioner Wayne Richardson. While the fluctuations in the Covid Pandemic and the icy winter weather have presented immediate challenges to our meetings at this time, we are grateful for the encouragement given to us by Commissioner Richardson and his staff. This may be a long journey, but we believe the outcome will be what blind and vision impaired people in our state need.

Note: For additional information on walkability and its importance to human health, the environment and other impacts, visit: National Walkability Index Methodology and User Guide.

https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/documents/national_walkability_index_methodology_and_user_guide_june2021.pdf

**You're Golden:
Reflections from the NFB National Senior Division's
2020 and 2021 Senior Retreats,
Plus Some Additional Musings on Aging
By Miss Ruth Williams
Member, Senior Division**

As someone fully ensconced in my “golden years,” I’d like to tell you all a little story.

First, let me set the stage. I’m a Kindly-Auntie type who goes by the name, “Miss Ruth.” My knitting is always nearby, and I’ve got a tiger-tabby cat named Squeaky. Hard candy is in my handbag (you may call it a “purse”, dearie) and I own nothing but sensible shoes. Does this sound like a person who’d sell you a bill of goods?!? Of course not! I’m not Tom Selleck, saying, “Look. This isn’t my first rodeo,” as he shills for reverse mortgages. Mind you, I love that mustached man. I’m just not so sure I trust him!

When I started out in Freelance Writing, I wrote articles for senior magazines, and one of my topics was reverse mortgages. It’s funny how much I thought I knew about getting older back then, but that reflected my relative youth. I was in my thirties, writing about things I wouldn’t need for decades, like Medicare supplements and retirement funds.

Now that I’m 56, I can say that life isn’t always easy, but with age often comes wisdom, and you learn how to shine in your own unique way.

So what’s the key to aging gracefully? In a nutshell, find things that interest you, people who “get” you, and if you’ve learned a few things along the way, share them with others.

Fellowship like that is what the NFB’s 2020 Virtual Senior Retreat, held from October 18th to 24th, 2020, was all about.

Normally held at Rocky Bottom Resort and Conference Center for the Blind in Sunset, South Carolina, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was held virtually.

Sixty attendees “zoomed” together to accelerate (small pun for you there) a sense of well-being and self-confidence for those with newly acquired vision loss, or life-long blindness.

There were 11 of us in attendance from New Jersey (the most of all of the 20 states represented) and the 15 volunteers running the show — including instructors, presenters and zoom hosts — did a phenomenal job.

Even though the topics were varied — leather-crafting, military collectibles, knitting, gardening, creative writing, auto-maintenance, jewelry-making, technology, and cane travel — they all spoke with enthusiasm and energy about their pet passions.

For example, my Krafters’ Korner pal, Jill Rossiter, taught participants how to create a craft out of a towel. Even though my origami project ended up looking more like a hammerhead-shark than a swan, I was still proud of my crafty creation, whom I named JAWS after the movie monster (and the screen reader!)

The next day, during a presentation by Shelley Alongi, President of the NFB’s Writers’ Division, I went to their website and signed up. Finding people with shared experiences is a way to keep thriving.

Fast forward to 2021, and, while we’re still holding the NFB National Senior Division meetings virtually, this one was just as jam-packed with interesting discussions and warm fellowship. It was held from September 19th to 25th, 2021.

There were so many sessions of interest, it’s hard to focus on just one, but I got a lot out of the conversation about how to respond when you find yourself in unexpected social situations.

For example, a small child points at your white cane and says loudly, “What is that stick, Mommy?” It’s always best to be tactful when this happens, and to regard it as a teachable moment. There’s no better way to mitigate the sense of stigma around blindness than to address it kindly but directly. You could say something like, “I’m using this stick to find my way around, since I can’t see. It helps me feel what’s in my way.”

All in all, it’s been my experience that the NFB Senior Retreat is a terrific resource for those of us in our golden years living with vision loss.

The way I see it, another way of saying “aging gracefully” is simply “living with grace.” Being yourself in a world that counts on conformity. Putting aside metrics like net worth and social status to set your moral compass by the Golden Rule.

So how do you find the “zhoosh” you need to keep going strong, well into your later years?

Find what lights you up from the inside. For me, it’s reading books, writing stories, and knitting on a round loom.

Find the people who “get” you. For me, it’s my friends who are like sisters-of-the-soul. It’s also the kind, kindred spirits in my network of support groups.

Find a way to share what’s important to you with others. For me, it’s positivity, spirituality, and standing up for my principles.

As you age, you realize that problems are projects in disguise, and that every time you overcome an obstacle, you build resilience muscles you can use to move the next mountain. You also learn you don’t have to climb every mountain. Some of them, dear hearts, you can go around!

If you think about who you are today, at whatever decade you’re in, it’s the most “you” you’ve ever been. You’ve survived exactly 100% of your worst days, so you must be doing something right.

It doesn’t matter that you can’t see well, if at all. So you’ve got grey hair and wrinkles? You’ve earned every one of them. Wear them with pride. You’ve got wisdom to share, time in which to do it, and a world in need of encouragement.

Before you know it, you’ll have found your calling, and once you’ve figured that out, you’re golden.

Braille Challenge: The Next Generation

by Brianna Murray

Secretary, Central Jersey Chapter

After my mom signed the Braille Challenge permission slip, I grabbed it and hurriedly stuffed it into my backpack, eager to get back to watching my episode of Gilmore Girls. Neither of us thought much about the section of the form that indicated finalists would have to go to California to compete. My Braille teacher, Ms. Ouzts, had heard about the competition and thought it might be a fun activity for us to attempt. It was 2005, I was 11 years old, and my favorite things were playing the violin, reading, and watching Gilmore Girls.

Although I was born with a visual impairment called Leber Congenital Amaurosis, I went to an audition-based arts school and was the first blind student ever to attempt it. I enjoyed my lessons with Ms. Ouzts, but I had never met any other blind students of my age, heard about blindness philosophy, or developed a sense of pride for myself as a blind student.

Several months later, when we got the list of finalists, we were shocked to learn that I was one of twelve students in my age category chosen to go to California to compete. We had just a few short weeks to get things together, try and find funding, and embark on the journey of a lifetime. Most of my family had never flown before, and we all faced the upcoming trip with fear, anxiety, and excitement. The Braille Challenge covered only part of the travel costs; I had to raise the rest largely by public speaking at Lions' clubs and similar organizations.

When the plane touched down in California, we were instantly shocked by the cool weather, overwhelmed by the public transportation and crowds of people, and ready to experience all that California had to offer. We had lots of exciting things on our agenda, like going to the beach, experiencing Disney Land, and walking along Hollywood Boulevard; however, the most important task was preparing for the competition ahead.

On the opening night, contestants gathered in a restaurant at Universal City Walk. It was exciting to meet other blind students and their families. For me, the most amazing part was that Disney star, Raven Symone, was there to speak and come around to every table. For the first time in my life, I was beginning to think

of blindness as something to be proud of, instead of something I had to hide from my school friends.

The morning of the competition, all contestants and their families took buses to the Braille Institute. We were served breakfast and then invited to explore an exhibit hall full of programs and products for the blind. One of my favorite places to explore was the Braille Institute Store, where I bought Braille playing cards and other wonderful products I'd never seen before. I was fascinated by being able to shop in a place where everything was accessible, and felt like I was speaking the same language as the people around me for the first time.

For more than twenty years, the Braille Institute in California has hosted the Braille Challenge. Its purpose is to promote Braille literacy through a series of competitions. In the preliminary round, students take tests in their home state, but in the final round students take a series of more challenging and time-consuming tests in California. The tests include speed and accuracy, reading comprehension, proofreading, charts and graphs, and spelling for younger students. As an 11-year-old, facing the day of testing was one of the hardest things I had ever done. I had to focus through all of the anxiety and distractions around me to perform well on all of the intense test questions. At the end of all four tests, I was relieved at the chance to go back to the hotel, swim in the large pool, and relax before the awards ceremony that evening.

As we took the elevator up to the roof-top banquet, I jokingly said to my family that I hoped we would see more celebrities that evening. I was particularly hoping someone from Gilmore Girls would be there but had little faith something like that would actually happen. The banquet meal was fancy and delicious, but thoughts of eating went completely out of my head as someone began to speak. I couldn't stop shaking as anxiety filled my stomach, and the announcer introduced the guest celebrities who would be giving out the awards. To my complete shock and delight, Alexis Bledel, Rory from Gilmore Girls, along with America Ferrera, would be giving out the prizes for the 2005 National Braille Challenge. At that moment, I was so stunned and excited, I don't think it even mattered what happened next. When my name was called up for third place, I got to walk on stage with both celebrities, and I couldn't have asked for a better "moment in the spotlight." My mom even chased down Alexis Bledel at the end of the ceremony so I could get a picture with her to keep forever.

As a middle-schooler, the fun parts of that June were flying, getting to meet celebrities, and experiencing the vacation of a lifetime. However, looking back on the experience as an adult, I realize that the Braille Challenge brought so much more to my life than just those superficial rewards. I returned to California for the Braille Challenge finals in 2008, 2009, and 2010. While none of those experiences was quite as magical as my first time, I continued to make connections with blind peers, improved my blindness skills and literacy, and began the career path I am on today.

Currently, I work with blind high school and college students as a part of the NFB of Virginia's Project RISE. We work on employment skills, blindness skills, and providing interactions and social opportunities for our students that I never had at that age until the Braille Challenge. The Braille Challenge showed me the importance of connecting to blind peers and professionals, keeping up with Braille and literacy, and developing a sense of pride in myself and my blind identity. Through that experience, I became a confident blind adult, as well as realizing the importance of programs like the one where I am currently employed.

When I finished high school, I was sad that being older meant that I could no longer compete in the challenge, but I am now using my experiences and passion to help the current group of students, who are eager to compete. On March 5th, New Jersey held their fourth annual Braille Challenge, where seven students pounded away on their Braille machines, forming the next generation of Braille Challenge contestants. I now serve as a planning committee member, a proctor, and a scorer for this incredible group of students. When I first took part in the competition, I took the preliminary round during the school day with my teacher as my proctor. Now, in many states, students have the chance to come together, network, and be part of this influential event.

I will never forget the sound of twelve manually operated Braille machines clacking together at top speed as all of us rushed to type that last word before the time was up. I won't forget the pride I felt after being a part of something so amazing each year. I'd like to forget though, how old I felt when this year's student competitors laughed at me after I recalled using a tape player and foot pedal switch during my years in the competition. Some things have changed since 2005. Participants now use digital devices like Book Ports and Victor Streams instead of tape players during their speed and accuracy exam. Students even completed the competition virtually because of the Coronavirus last year. While

some small, logistical points have shifted over the years, most aspects have stayed the same.

This annual competition remains an excellent way for students to have fun while learning crucial skills in literacy. It is a chance to meet blind friends, be proud of yourself as a blind student, and gain irreplaceable skills for the future. My experiences as a student in the Braille challenge have shaped me into the independent adult that I am today, and I cannot wait to facilitate that experience for many more generations to come. Almost twenty years later, technology has shifted the Braille landscape. Today's students are more likely to use Braille screen input on their phones, or to read from a Braille display, than to carry a Perkins Braille between classes in school; however, the need for opportunities like the National Braille Challenge will always remain. It is a beautiful experience to watch today's students become prepared, confident, well-networked adults through the years of such an influential competition. As the Braille Challenge Motto says: Keep calm and Braille on!

Note: As of publication time, results of our NJ Regional Braille Challenge were not available. Stay tuned to the next issue to learn whether another Brianna is in the making!

Meet Our Members: President Linda Melendez

The Sounding Board 2.0 will highlight an affiliate member in each issue.

This blog post from [Voice of the Nation's Blind](#) is reprinted here with the permission of the NFB and presented with minor revisions.

Finding My Way to Equality: Coming 'Home' to the Federation

By Linda Melendez

For as long as I can remember, I've never quite fit in with the intersecting communities in my life. Although I'm of Puerto Rican descent and my full name is very much Latin, I'm white-passing so the Latinx community didn't accept me. Meanwhile, my fair skin, freckles, and red hair didn't get me very far within the white community; they kept me at arm's length because of my name and accent. Needless to say, I had to fight for equality within these spaces.

When my son, Logan, was six years old, I attended my first National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey convention on my own. The following year, Logan came with me and, although I enjoyed myself at both conventions, it wasn't until my son was nineteen that I really became an active member; his encouragement and belief that I needed the Federation in my life convinced me to join. By this time in my life, I had experienced discrimination and exclusion because of my race, being a single mother, and my blindness. I came into the NFBNJ hoping that I would find a place where I fit in, and that is exactly what I found.

I have never felt as though I had to fight for equality within the Federation family. Since I was a newer member of the organization, Joe Ruffalo took me under his wing and, through his mentorship, I felt empowered to push for equality for all blind people. We fought tirelessly as an organization for equality in areas from education to legislation, employment to health care, and so much more.

During 2020, my first year in the position of President, I advocated for the rights of blind parents before the state judicial committee, and the bill is expected to be

signed into law before our next National Convention. I'm also proud to say that, to date, two-thirds of our representatives have signed onto the Access Technology Affordability Act (ATAA), another piece of legislation that gives blind people equal footing in society.

When I attended my first National Convention, President Riccobono said something that really sealed the deal for me. During the Rookie Roundup, he said to new members, "Welcome home." Those two simple words changed my life; for the first time, I felt that I truly belonged. I felt accepted and equal to everyone else within the movement. All the things that had kept me from full participation within my community are now strengths that I use in the Federation. I like to think of myself as "Abuela [Grandma] Presidente". I am teaching my two-year-old grandson, Lucas Matthew, to see people as equals, no matter their background. I proudly pay membership dues for Lucas every year and will do so until he's eighteen years old. My hope is that, as he becomes an adult, he will be inspired to lead his generation to the place where equality for all is the rule, not the exception.

From the NFBNJ Archives...

The Pandemic lockdown, when most of us were alone at home most of the time, save for virtual meetings on Zoom, this poem would have been perfect – a solo tea party!

As we prepared to launch this issue of the Sounding Board, many of us are venturing out into the wider world again, often with a face mask, sometimes without one. This poem is still worth sharing because of its backstory and the collaboration among New Jersey Federationists that brings this poem to you here.

Some months ago, Capital Chapter Secretary, David Mostello, came across the poem while reorganizing some of his paperwork. He passed it on to President Linda Melendez and Secretary Ellen Sullivan who agreed it had potential for reprinting in the Sounding Board.

**“Stay At Home Tea Party”
A fund-raising poem by the late Edna Baker**

The author was listed as Edna Baker, member of the Northern Chapter. But who is Edna Baker? Joe Ruffalo, Rick Fox and Debbie Bloomer, all chapter members, had the answer:

Edna Baker was a loving, long-time member of the Northern Chapter of the NFBNJ. She lived in East Orange and was employed with the Division of Youth and Family Services of New Jersey. Outside of work, she was an active member of the NFBNJ and was involved in numerous activities, including reading Braille books, social and recreational activities. Every year, she attended the NFBNJ State Convention and shared wonderful times with her many friends. She always had a kind word for everybody. She died at the age of 81 on September 21, 2007.

The poem, presumably by Edna Baker, was part of a fund-raising initiative and was distributed with a teabag and instructions for the recipient to send a small donation of five dollars when using the tea bag to make and drink the cup of tea.

"STAY AT HOME TEA PARTY"

Dear Friend, you are cordially invited

to attend a stay-at-home tea

party.

You don't have to dress up, or fuss with your hair,

or get out your cane and go anywhere

Just sit back in your easy chair, but first fill your favorite water pot

Get that water steeping hot, and think of those friends who have helped

blind people a lot

Put this teabag in your cup, add water, sweetener and then stir it up

But just before you take a sip,

let it cool so you

don't scorch your lip!

Enjoy your cup of tea and remember the NFB continues to help you and ME

Please send a tip to the NFB of NJ to assist us with our advocacy,

outreach, and educational programs. Please do not forget to plan your trip to

the NFB national and state conventions. You'll get inspiration and an

education.

Thank you, Edna Baker. Reflecting upon this as I write, the poem a teabag (in a sealed foil packet,) might continue to be a fund-raiser today if the poem was printed in ink print and Braille.

CHECK US OUT ON THE WEB

www.nfbnj.org