ILLINOIS INDEPENDENT

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WHY I AM A FEDERATIONIST

by Denise Avant

Our seventy-seventh National Federation of the Blind National Convention is quickly approaching. It will be held in Orlando, Florida, at the Rosen Shingle Creek Hotel, July 3-8, 2018. If you are coming, I am glad. If you are thinking about it, I hope you will take the plunge.

As convention approaches, I am thinking about why I am a Federationist. My reasons are many. I think of our advocacy in the legislative arena to make digital materials accessible to blind college students, our efforts to seek the passage of legislation that will aid blind people in purchasing assistive technology, our efforts to have the United States Senate vote yes on a treaty that will make Braille books in various languages available to blind people across the world, and our efforts to pass legislation in various states that will secure the rights of blind parents to raise their children.

Beyond our advocacy efforts I find many more reasons to celebrate the Federation. Consider our Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Academies across the country, including two here in Illinois. BELL presents Braille to blind children who might not otherwise receive Braille instruction, and additionally shows them how to do many tasks using nonvisual techniques. I take pride in our national and state scholarship programs, which award thousands of dollars to deserving blind college students. Most of all, I am a Federationist because the National Federation of the Blind does not place limits on blind people based solely on blindness. Ours is an organization that believes in the abilities of blind people to do the things we want to do—to contribute to our homes, our organizations, our families, and to society.

Earlier this year I was appointed by my pastor to be a deaconess in my church. A deaconess is an officer of the Christian church who assists the pastor and the membership in various ways. One such way is to help with communion. When I was appointed I asked the person in charge of the deaconesses what I could do to help. She responded, "You don't have to do anything." I thought, "Why not?"

So one Sunday I remained at the church after the service to see what exactly the deaconesses did during Holy Communion. I asked one of the other deaconesses to describe all that we were supposed to do. Our duties involved setting up the wine and bread and cleaning up afterward. I knew there was certainly something I could do, even if it only meant washing and drying the serving trays or making sure the tablecloths were cleaned and ironed for the next communion.

Yet I was essentially told, "I will let you know if I need you for anything," which of course translates to, "There is nothing you can do." In fact, the person in charge told me, "There are a couple other deaconesses who aren't asked to do anything because they couldn't climb the stairs to the kitchen where we go to set up and clean up."

This was the one-size-fits-all mentality rearing its ugly head. I guess she had forgotten that I had been climbing up and down those very stairs for over twenty years during our snack break and when I went to Bible class on Wednesday nights, and for other events, too. I guess it was forgotten that I cook, wash my dishes, clean my house, do laundry, and get groceries on a regular basis. I enter and leave the church sanctuary without anyone assisting me. I travel around the city and have even gone all the way to Norway. I ski and do so many other things.

In short, people who have known me for all these many years could not find a single way for me to contribute. All they were able to see is a person who is blind.

I am not dissuaded or discouraged. I have not figured it out yet, but I fully intend to find ways to participate as a deaconess.

I recognize that blind people must live in a world that is geared for the sighted. It gets a little tiring that in this day and age we continually have to push the envelope and show what we can do. And whatever we do, we have to be perfect at it.

During national convention week I can relax and enjoy the experience. No one at convention doubts what a blind person can do. Blind people organize and participate fully in the convention. For example, I will be a greeter in our Presidential Suite, which involves making and pouring hot coffee and looking in a refrigerator that I did not organize myself to locate juice or milk or bagels or muffins. Except for the early-morning shift, I do not mind at all. No one in the Federation ever says to a blind person, "You don't have to do anything," knowing all the time that there is plenty to do.

We mean it in the NFB when we say, "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." That is why I am a Federationist!

A SECOND CHANCE

by David Meyer

In the National Federation of the Blind we are encouraged to make the most of every chance we get in life. The chance might be something big, such as the opportunity to establish a professional career. On the other hand, it might be as small as a casual social encounter. But whether the chance that comes our way is large or small, as blind people we know one thing for sure. Not only are we as individuals judged by the way we behave at any given time; that judgment almost always carries over to affect the rest of the blind population.

This point was driven home to me one day as I waited to catch a bus on my way home from work. It was a run-of-the-mill day, and nothing outstanding had happened. While I was biding my time, waiting for the bus, a gentleman came up to me and somewhat cautiously began a conversation.

"May I ask you something?" he said.

Having no idea what his question might be, I invited him to go ahead.

"I have something that I think has Braille on it," he told me. "I was wondering if I could show it to you and if you could help me understand what it is."

I told him to show me the item. He handed me a pill box, the kind most of us have seen. It had a compartment for each day of the week. Each compartment was marked with a single letter in raised print and Braille.

I explained how the box was labeled and handed it back. The man was grateful for my explanation, and he went on to say that he thought I was a nice guy. I thanked him, thinking this would be the end of our conversation.

Then the man went on, "You're much nicer than the other blind guy I met."

I asked him about his previous experience.

"That other blind guy was very mean," he explained. "I offered to be of assistance, and instead of being grateful, the guy was ugly and rude. He screamed at me and pulled away and told me in no uncertain terms not to grab him."

That previous encounter had obviously upset my new acquaintance. As he was telling me the story, I winced inside. People grab us blind people all too often when we travel on our own, and after a while it's easy to lose one's temper.

Then I got a real jolt. The more he talked, the more vividly I could picture the incident. I could actually remember the event my companion was talking about. It had occurred more than five years earlier, and it involved me.

"I have to tell you that I have a confession to make," I said. "If you haven't already figured it out, I was that other blind guy."

As I made my confession and offered a clumsy apology, the man said nothing. Though I would have felt much better had he openly accepted my apology, it was probably best for me that he handled my admission as he did.

This casual encounter at the bus stop turned out to be anything but casual for me. If the man had recognized me from our previous encounter, I'm sure he never would have approached me this time. Had he not talked to me this time, I would not have had the opportunity to learn again that all of us who are blind are judged by how other blind people behave. Looking back, I feel lucky and grateful to have been given a second chance.

A DREAM COME TRUE

by Leslie Hamric

On a Friday night in May, 1985, excitement twirled inside me. I walked to my chair human guide with my stand partner, sat down, and got my cello into position. I was in third grade. I had started taking cello lessons in October, 1984, and this was my first orchestra concert. I had memorized all four pieces from audio recordings made by the conductor weeks ago, and I felt well prepared. This was it.

A hush fell over the audience, and I knew the lights had dimmed; then there was silence. Before I knew it, we were playing the first notes of "French Folk Song." Enthusiastic applause followed. We played our other three pieces: "Long, Long Ago," "Chorale," and "Ready, Steady, Go." It was pure heaven playing these pieces with the group. I felt that my cello and I were one.

As the last piece came to a close, my stand partner gave me the verbal cue to rise. I stood up for the applause with the biggest smile on my face. We all sat down and stood up a few more times before the clapping faded. At last I put my cello down next to me, put in the endpin, and laid the bow on top as I was taught. We in the beginner orchestra had completed our performance with flying colors.

I was filled with a sense of accomplishment. Since I was the first blind person in the school district's orchestra program, I felt that I had set a new trend. Proving to myself and my orchestra conductor that I could play in an orchestra like any other musician meant the world to me. With a little planning and teamwork, it could be done. As I sat listening to the performances of the other two orchestras, I knew that I wanted to continue with orchestral playing. In fact, performing in my first concert had gone so well that now I had a dream to pursue: that of participating in a professional symphony orchestra someday.

My orchestral studies continued from elementary school through college. I played with the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra, Illinois Music Educators Association (IMEA" District and All-State ochestras, Northern Illinois University Philharmonic, Aspen Festival Orchestra, and the New Eastman Symphony. While attending the Meadowmount School of Music in the summer of 2000, I fell in love with playing in a string quartet. In addition, I made sure to nurture my love of playing chamber music in graduate school and beyond.

After graduate school and completing coursework in music therapy in 2004, I decided it was time to start looking for a job. I started my first full-time job in 2004, but it was totally unrelated to music. Part of me was okay with having a job in a new field, because I felt that getting work experience was so important. However, another part of me felt unfulfilled, and I persuaded myself that I could both work and keep music as an important part of my life. How wrong I was! With commuting and working full-time, my days were long and busy. Practicing put me on such a high that afterward I couldn't fall asleep. I felt that music as I knew it was slipping away from me.

In March 2004 I auditioned for an orchestra, thinking that my talent would keep me afloat. Instead, I totally messed up on the audition. The conductor's comment that stood out most for me was that I was not dedicated enough to music. On that day my dream of playing professionally in an orchestra was shattered, and my life in music seemed to come to a devastating end.

When I got home from that audition, I wanted to run and hide. I was so distraught that I put my cello away for nine months and tried to block music from my life. However, I know now that I simply needed a break to reorganize. Slowly I got back into music, and it became a big part of my life again.

In 2005 I started singing with my church choir. I played for as many church services as I could. However, the missing part remained. After a couple of years I thought I'd audition for another community orchestra. However, as soon as I informed the principal cellist that I am blind, that was it. She was convinced that things would not work and absolutely refused to be educated about the alternative techniques I would use. In a way I was not surprised, but still, I was hurt and angry. I resigned myself to the fact that my professional orchestra dream was over.

When my son was born in 2010, I had no time for music for the next year and a half. Yet I did a lot of soul searching to figure out what my next purpose would be. Through it all I still kept teaching. Teaching gave me hope and kept me going.

In 2015 I started getting a few gigs through the Chicago Cello Society and felt the familiar excitement returning. In 2017 I even had a gig with Eclectic Choral Artists and performed the *Holocaust Cantata.* As I was playing these gigs, I began to ask myself what would happen if I auditioned for our local orchestra, the Elmhurst Symphony. I consulted with a couple of contacts there and scheduled an audition for September 12, 2017. I got some excerpts transcribed into Braille and started practicing like crazy.

I called the conductor of the Elmhurst Symphony, Steven Altop, to inquire about sight reading. I mentioned that since I am totally blind and need both hands to read Braille music, sight reading while playing my cello is not possible. However, I explained that I have had experience sight reading in ear training and music theory classes in college. I waited to hear what would come next.

To my relief Steven seemed very calm about my blindness and started asking questions. I felt that he was quite interested and wanted to know more. For once I did not feel that I had to be defensive.

Before the audition I did some role playing with a fellow Federationist, and we went through every kind of question I might be asked. My goal was to respond to each one calmly and directly. The most helpful advice I received was to let my cello playing speak for itself.

I decided to play my audition pieces at Oktoberfest, an annual fundraiser for the NFB of Illinois that draws a good-sized crowd. That was the weekend before my audition, and I figured Oktoberfest would be a good opportunity for me to get some feedback. I received positive comments from everyone who heard me play.

The day of the audition finally came, and I was nervous and excited, but I felt that I was ready. I had the most liberating feeling as my guide dog, Gerry, and I walked onto the stage and found the chair with minimal assistance. Steven and I met in person for the first time, and then my audition began. Once again I felt that I was one with my cello, and I had the sense that the audition had gone well.

After I played Steven had a bunch of questions for me. They were all good questions, and I was able to answer them calmly and directly, just as I had practiced. I knew this was a time for me to explain how I could be an asset to the orchestra. It was also a time for Steven to find out how I would learn my music and keep up with the ensemble.

Apparently my approach was successful, because Steven told me he would like to give me a chance. I was shocked and excited. Here was someone who was willing to take on a new challenge with dignity and grace. Steven acknowledged that this was new territory for him; he never had a blind person in his orchestra before. I responded that this was new territory for me, too. It was the first time I would be learning the material exclusively through the use of Braille music. We would be pioneering together.

The next day I went on some blindness listservs and asked questions about which alternative techniques I could use. Although I felt ready from a blindness standpoint, I had plenty of work cut out for me. I had to get my music transcribed, and then I had to memorize it.

Due to some health issues I couldn't attend my first rehearsal until February, and the first concert was scheduled for March. I was a little anxious about the first rehearsal, but once I was in that musical moment with the other cellists, my guide dog asleep next to my chair, all nervousness disappeared. I was one of the group. I felt that way during every rehearsal after that.

The first concert I played in was performed twice, on March 10 and 11, 2018. The piece was Verdi's *Requiem,* the longest work I had ever memorized. Both performances went well.

As soon as the March concert was over, it was time to get cracking for the May concert. The second piece I was to play, Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphosis,* scared me to death. There were so many notes, and I had trouble keeping everything straight. At one point I thought I was going to have to back out and not play in the concert at all.

However, persistence and determination prevailed. I contacted another Federationist who plays classical music. I asked him if he had ever memorized a crazy twentieth-century piece and how he went about it. He advised me to memorize no more than four measures at a time and to put the sections together as I went along. I did a lot of listening and playing along with the recording. Little by little the Hindemith started to come together. I played in the last concert of the season, which took place on May 5, 2018. I am looking forward to next season, which starts in September. Steven and I are in the process of getting next season's music so I can have it transcribed into Braille.

So far I've written about playing in an orchestra from my perspective. I want to take things a step farther by sharing the conductor's viewpoint. Here is what Steven Altop has to say.

"Leslie Hamric auditioned for the Elmhurst Symphony Orchestra in September of 2017 and showed fine skills and training as a cellist. She had studied with acclaimed teachers at excellent schools, and her playing reflects it. Leslie provided me with the names of two conductors who had worked with her in ensembles. Both of them gave rave reviews concerning her abilities to perform in a musical group.

"The first work we performed together was Verdi's *Requiem.* Leslie had memorized the cello part of this eighty-minute work, an incredible feat. There is no doubt that she came to the first rehearsal the best prepared member of the orchestra.

"In rehearsals I found myself trying to indicate starting places not just by measure numbers but by notes and harmonies so Leslie could also know where we were. As I had been told, she does a great job of taking cues from my breathing and the breaths of her section mates, and she seems to play as well with her section as anyone.

"Leslie has invested so much in the art of music. I am so happy that she has found a fine orchestra in which she can have a challenging and rewarding experience."

I am delighted that I have found an awesome orchestra and a conductor who challenges me all the time. After thirteen years my dream of performing in a professional orchestra has finally come true. This time I feel it will stick around.

Before I close I would like to acknowledge the things for which I am grateful. First, I will always be grateful to my first orchestra conductor back in third grade, who inspired me to love music and gave me such a moving first opportunity. Second, I am grateful to those who supported me through all the years in between. Third, I am grateful to the two church choir directors who gave me the chance to participate in their groups. Finally, I am forever grateful to have found the Elmhurst Symphony Orchestra.

My advice to other aspiring blind musicians is this: as early as you can, learn and use Braille music, develop strong self advocacy skills, decide on a goal, and prepare a game plan to get there. Then, go for it! You absolutely can play or sing in a musical group of your choice. You can even take things a step further and have music be your career. All it takes is some planning, teamwork, alternative techniques, and the willingness to take on something new.

I can happily say that today I am living the life I want. I am doing what I love: enjoying the art of being a musician and taking advantage of all the musical opportunities that come my way.

MUTUAL WELFARE AND BENEFIT

by Sara Luna

[This article is based on a presentation given by Sara Luna on April 22, 2018, at the Midwest Student Seminar in Chicago.]

I've been involved in judo for eight-and-a-half years. You may be wondering, what is judo exactly? Judo consists mainly of throws, pins, and submissions such as chokes and arm locks. There are more than forty throws in judo, and there is a plethora of ways to get into pins and submissions. The sport originated in Japan one hundred and thirty-six years ago.

Here's a fun trivia fact for you. Judo is the second most played sport in the world, next to soccer—despite the fact that it is not very popular in the United States. It is hugely popular in Japan, Russia, and Brazil, and pretty much all around the world except for this country.

When I was a kid sports were not very important to me. I didn't want to play conventional sports such as basketball or soccer. I knew that as a legally blind player I would be at a disadvantage with my sighted peers. I never caught on to adaptive sports such as beep baseball; they just didn't click with me. But judo was different.

I got into judo when Chicago was trying to get the bid for the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Judo is one of the few sports that is in both the Olympics and Paralympics. I did it because my friends were doing it. The thought of learning to throw someone was pretty intriguing.

There are very few differences in the ways sighted and visually impaired players participate in the sport. We learn all the same techniques. That meant the world to twelve-year-old me! After years and years of feeling left out of conventional sports and not really catching onto blind sports, suddenly I was involved in a sport where I could participate to the same extent as my sighted peers. That was so empowering! It gave me confidence I had never had before.

I look at my journey in judo as being defined by judo's principles. For my first five-and-a-half years, my participation was defined by judo's first principle, which is maximum efficiency with minimum effort. You don't need to be the biggest or strongest person in order to succeed. You can be small and agile and win against someone who is bigger than you are. You can use momentum and leverage to win.

Judo is a high contact sport. As visually impaired players we start at the center of the mat. We begin by getting our grips, which means that we take hold of each other. If we completely break contact at any time during the match, we're taken back to the center and told to begin again. Sighted players start ten feet apart and have to fight for the contact they want.

My dojo, or club, is the Menominee Judo Club. It is really wonderful. Everyone there is like family to me. In 2012 we were named the Paralympic Judo National Training Site. That title means that, of all the judo clubs in the country, we are the best for training people who are blind or visually impaired. The only other club with a similar distinction is the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs.

During my first five years I focused on competing. I was able to compete on the national stage twice, and I represented Team USA in four international tournaments. Training for these competitions taught me a lot about myself. My teammates and coaches did so much for me. They pushed me to be better than I ever imagined I could be. They forced me to do more rounds of sparring when I was tired and just wanted to curl up in a ball somewhere. They never gave up on me when I didn't understand a new technique, and they wouldn't let me give up on myself. It meant so much to me to have a supportive team of people who had my back and wouldn't let me settle for second best.

For the past three and a half years, my focus has shifted to embrace the second principle of judo: mutual welfare and benefit, which means that we all help each other learn. I've also embraced the third principle, which states that if something is really good to you, you should give back.

I stopped competing in the summer of 2015, after my last tournament in Toronto, Canada. After that I wanted to focus on giving back. I do that by teaching classes at my club. I have helped with about 75 percent of our programs, and it has been so rewarding!

At my club we have people who participate at various levels. Some people just do judo for fun. We've had whole families get involved. We have programs for people who are visually impaired, people who are hearing impaired, people who have autism, and disabled veterans. Judo is all-inclusive—everyone can participate.

This week I helped teach four different classes. I taught a women's class, a class for the Special Olympics (people with autism and Asperger's), a class of three- to eight-year-olds (I call them my little monsters when they don't listen), and a middle-school class. It's not easy, but it's so much fun!

We don't have a lot of black belts in my club, but we have a big team of higher-ranked students who aren't black belts yet. They help out by teaching at our various programs all around the city. In a given week we may teach people who are three years old and people in their fifties and sixties. We teach people of every age and ability level.

When I was competing, I got a rush and a joy from winning a match. But the joy and sense of fulfillment I get from knowing I have helped run a good class, that the people in the class left better than when they started that day, is so fulfilling! I had many excellent teachers, and I wouldn't be where I am today without them.

I have a third-degree brown belt. That means that I am two levels away from getting my black belt. From my second-degree brown belt I need my first-degree brown belt, and then I can get my black belt. It's utterly baffling to me that I have come so far!

I remember the first time I threw someone. It was very empowering. Now I see people throw someone for the first time, and when they light up it melts my heart. I've also helped teach self-defense to Girl Scouts, and they were a great group to work with.

Thinking about the principle of mutual welfare and benefit, I realize that we don't just learn from the *senseis* (teachers). We learn from each other. If I'm struggling with something and the senseis are busy, I can ask another student who has a brown belt or higher colored belt. I can say, "Can you watch this technique and give me some input?"

I want to tell you about something that happened when I first started judo. When we bow in and bow out, we stand in two lines. A line of students faces a line of senseis and student helpers, which are called *senpais*. When I was a kid I would look at the line of senseis and senpais, and I would always wonder, What does it take to get into that line? What do I have to do to get there? Now, when I help teach classes, I'm in that line. Now I know that it takes years of hard work and dedication to get there.

I will close by saying what we say to each other when we bow out of class. When we bow we all say, "*Arigatou gozaimasu,*" which means, "Thank you very much."

AIRA OPPORTUNITIES

by Emma Meyer, Kathryn Webster, and Others

[This article is largely based upon a presentation by Emma Meyer and Kathryn Webster that was given on April 21, 2018, at the Midwest Student Seminar in Chicago. Emma is president of the Illinois Association of Blind Students (IABS) and Kathryn serves as president of the National Association of Blind Students (NABS)]

*Emma Meyer:* AIRA is a system that allows a blind person to have access to an agent between 7 AM and 1 AM Eastern Time by using an application on a smartphone. The AIRA agents are sighted individuals who have been trained to assist us in a whole variety of ways. They can look up restaurants in your area. They can take pictures of paperwork and email it or read it to you. I've even had an AIRA agent help me organize my laundry by color.

AIRA comes with a pair of glasses, which are similar to Google glasses. It also comes with a hotspot, which is a device that is about the size of a fat smartphone. The app on your phone serves as a speaker for AIRA, and it also has a camera so the agent can view what is going on around you.

The NFB has partnered with AIRA in a Back to School program. Through this program there will be a student discount starting around convention time. There are also options for students to get nine months of service for free.

[Kathryn Webster then opened up AIRA on her phone and gave a demonstration of how the system works. She contacted an AIRA agent, whose name was Ivy, and asked her to describe the meeting room.]

*Ivy:* I see from the GPS map that you're at the Holiday Inn O'Hare. The room looks to be about thirty feet to the opposite wall. There are quite a few round, black tables in the room with people sitting at them, maybe six to seven people per table. I see a guy sitting near the door with both of his hands raised up. [Laughter] There is a long table extending the entire length of the wall to the right. There is coffee at one end, and I see what look like some papers at the other end.

*Kathryn:* How do we get out of this room from where I'm standing?

*Ivy:* In the direction you're facing there are two sets of doors. You can take about five steps to your left and walk down about twenty feet to a door that is propped open. There's another set of doors if you walk about ten steps to your right and then go straight.

*Kathryn:* Is there a banner behind me?

*Ivy:* I see a banner that says, "National Federation of the Blind Illinois. Live The Life You Want!" On the left I see a logo. It's kind of like a flower with six petals. Two of the petals are red, two are blue, and two are green.

*Kathryn:* Thank you very much for doing this demo for us! We really appreciate it!

[Following the demo, several members of the audience added their comments.]

*Denise Avant:* I use AIRA a lot to help me sort through mail. I find it's a lot faster than putting things on a scanner. But as good as AIRA is, there's still no substitute for good blindness skills. AIRA is one more tool we can use. AIRA is an additional tool and a great enhancement.

*Kathryn:* That's an excellent point. AIRA can't tell you everything you need to do. Literally, they just describe. They can tell you about your surroundings, but you still have to have the tools to get you from Point A to Point B. AIRA is a great product, and it's being developed with the input of the NFB.

[NFB of Illinois Treasurer Patti Chang later described how AIRA is helping the affiliate.]

*Patti Chang:* A lot of the buzz about AIRA is around travel, but the service is also helping us keep up with our affiliate business. Our president and I both subscribe to AIRA, which gives us two hundred minutes of sighted assistance per month. When we're doing paperwork for the affiliate, our main reader for handwritten documents and other documents that are hard to scan and convert has generally been Francisco Chang. Due to work commitments, Francisco is less available than he has been in the past. Our latest solution is to call an AIRA agent, email the difficult document, and have the agent read it aloud. Denise or I record the document if it needs to be shared, posting the recording to our Drop Box folder. Wow! Instant access!

We have used AIRA for our 990 government forms and for hotel documents such as contracts, banquet event orders (BEOs), and invoices.

Another useful service that connects us with sighted assistants via the smartphone is called Be My Eyes. Be My Eyes is great for reading short documents that don't need to be confidential. Technology as one of the tools in our arsenal is awesome!

NATIONWIDE BRAILLE READERS ARE LEADERS 2018

by Deborah Kent Stein

[This article originally appeared in *Future Reflections,* Volume 37, Number 2, Special Issue on Early Childhood]

"I am soooo happy that I did it!" said first-grader Cameron Gooden of Carterville, Illinois, when his mother asked him what he thought of the Nationwide Braille Readers Are Leaders Contest. "It was so much fun!" Cameron was the first-place winner in the K-1 grade category, and his parents and teachers were thrilled by his achievement. "We were very surprised to learn that he took first place," his mother wrote. "His school is also very proud. The principal included a statement about Cameron winning the competition in the daily announcements, and they are honoring him at the next school board meeting. Since the competition his Braille reading has become more fluent."

For twenty-nine years the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children (NOPBC) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) hosted Braille Readers Are Leaders (BRAL), a national competition for K-12 students who read Braille. After the BRAL contest was discontinued, the NFB of Illinois decided to sponsor a statewide contest in 2013. Response to the Braille Readers Are Leaders of Illinois contest was so positive that Illinois teamed with Minnesota in 2015-2016 to offer BRAL LOL-2 (for Land o' Lincoln and Land o' Lakes). The 2016-2017 competition included all of the Great Lakes states: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.

In the fall of 2017 the NFB of Illinois, in conjunction with the National Association to Promote the Use of Braille (NAPUB), extended the opportunity to NFB affiliates throughout the United States. Each affiliate that chose to participate in the Nationwide Braille Readers Are Leaders contest contributed one hundred dollars to cover prizes, postage, and other expenses. Sixteen states chose to take part, and eighty-one students from twelve of the participating states actually submitted reading logs at the close of the contest period.

In order to take part in the contest, students counted the number of Braille pages they read between December 15, 2017, and February 1, 2018. Students competed within five grade categories: K-1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12. The top three students in each grade category won cash prizes. In some cases an honorable mention was also awarded. The first-place winner in each category received $25. The second-place prize was $15, and the third-place and honorable mention recipients won $10.

In addition to the prizes based on the number of pages read, several participants received Kelly Doty Awards of $25. The awards were given in memory of Kelly Doty, a longtime member of the NFB of Illinois who was a dedicated promoter of Braille. The Kelly Doty Awards were given to students who faced special challenges in order to become proficient Braille readers. Such challenges included, but were not limited to, having disabilities in addition to blindness and being an English-language learner.

When the reading logs began to come in, we received many wonderful letters from parents, teachers, and students themselves. "As a parent [I believe] reading for the simple joy of it is power," wrote Alison Tarver, whose son, Nicholas Tarver, was the second-place winner in the grades 6-8 category. "Having opportunities to promote reading with rewarding contests is a wonderful way to motivate children to connect and fall in love with reading!" She went on to explain, "Before this contest Nicholas would read mysteries and comedies. When he started reading for this contest I challenged him to read other types of books, and he discovered that he really enjoyed reading nonfiction. What a remarkable discovery! I think he read at least twelve nonfiction books for this contest." Rachel Bodek told us, "Even though my son didn't win a prize, the contest really motivated him to do more Braille reading. We'll try again next year."

Through our email exchanges with parents and teachers, we learned the stories of many of the contest participants. Thirteen-year-old Holly Connor of St. Louis is intensely involved in community theater. When she has down time backstage, she keeps busy by reading novels on her electronic Braille device. Soon after his family emigrated from Ecuador, Alan Bunay unexpectedly lost most of his sight. Undaunted, he set about to learn English and Braille.

Jonah and Isaiah Rao also face the challenge of learning both Braille and the English language. The boys were adopted from China in August 2017. "Both boys have embraced this huge change in their lives and really are doing super!" wrote their mother, Monica Rao. "We are blessed to have them as our sons!"

The top reader in the entire contest was Maria-Luisa Monteiro-Oliveira, a ninth grader who read a whopping 10,297 Braille pages! We learned that Maria-Luisa's mother began reading to her when she was a baby, and Maria-Luisa developed a consuming love of reading. When she entered school her teacher of the visually impaired transcribed an average of four books a week into Braille to keep up with her reading needs. "Luisa enjoys getting lost in the worlds she explores in the books she reads," wrote her TVI, Jackie Mushington-Anderson. "As she got older, it became necessary to teach her how to download her own books. We just could not keep up with her demands. She currently uses her Braille Sense U-2 to access Bookshare. However, she still prefers hardcopy Braille."

Among the titles that Maria-Luisa read for the Nationwide BRAL contest were *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo. When she received her check for first prize she wrote, "Thank you very much. I really did not do anything differently. It is great to get money for something I do anyways."

Not every student could win a monetary prize, but each student who submitted a reading log received a package of small gifts related to Braille. These included Braille slates and styluses, Braille calendars, Braille playing cards or tactile Tic-Tac-Toe sets, and adhesive dots for labeling items at school and around the house. We extend our warmest thanks to National Braille Press and Seedlings Braille Books for Children. Both organizations donated gift certificates that the students could use toward the purchase of their own Braille books.

Packing and mailing eighty-one padded envelopes filled with gifts was an impressive task, but Illinois Federationists Bob Gardner, Nancy Gardner, Lois Montgomery, and Pat Olson rose to the occasion. Their dedication to this project embodied the love, hope, and determination that are hallmarks of our NFB philosophy.

Nationwide BRAL brought out a spirit of competition in most of the students who took part. For some it also fostered a sense of solidarity with other Braille readers across the country. Nicholas Tarver expressed this idea when he wrote, "It is so cool that kids from all those states were reading along with me. I wonder what they were reading and how many pages they read."

Below is a list of all of the 2018 Nationwide Braille Readers Are Leaders winners. Congratulations to every one of them!

**2018 Nationwide BRAL Winners**

*Grades K-1*

First place: Cameron Gooden, Carterville, IL

Second place: Ander Mielke, Havre, MT

Third place: Kenji Torihara, Chicago, IL

Honorable mention: Anastasia Marinos, Burr Ridge, IL

*Grades 2-3*

First place: Aisha Safi, Chevy Chase, MD

Second place: Preston Rose, Eagan, MN

Third place: Anna Sayles, Peoria, IL

Honorable mention: Ely Giraldo, Staunton, VA

*Grades 4-5*

First place: Jonah Rao, Columbia, MD

Second place: Isaiah Rao, Columbia, MD

Third place: Karli Copes, Oak Grove, LA

*Grades 6-8*

First place: Holly Connor, St. Louis, MO

Second place: Nicholas Tarver, Many, LA

Third place: Anthony Spears, Mattoon, IL

*Grades 9-12*

First place: Maria-Luisa Monteiro-Oliveira, Marietta, GA

Second place: Marie Presume, Staunton, VA

Third place: Kaelyn Kinlaw, Staunton, VA

*Kelly Doty Awards*

Alan Bunay, Spring Valley, NY

Miracle Douglas, Peoria, IL

Isaiah Rao, Columbia, MD

Jonah Rao, Columbia, MD

Aisha Safi, Chevy Chase, MD

Nicholas Tarver, Many, LA

IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT LESSNE

(1936-2018)

by Steve Hastalis

In the Presidential Release that I heard at the meeting of the Chicago Chapter on Saturday, Febroary 10, NFB President Mark Riccobono mentioned several people who recently passed away. The last name on the list particularly caught my attention: Dr. Bob Lessne. I had not heard about him in decades, and I'm sorry to hear about his passing now.

Bob Lessne served as the head mobility instructor at the Illinois Visually Handicapped Institute (IVHI), now the Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education (ICRE). I was a student at IVHI during the summer of 1964, when I was twelve years old. At that time the agency was in its last year of operation at that location. I would like to share with you some of Dr. Lessne's instruction and methodology.

One morning Dr. Lessne showed me a cane with a mercury switch mounted on it. Wires led to a bicycle horn and battery. If the user raised the cane too high off the ground or tapped it too hard, the switch would close the circuit and the horn would sound. If the user kept the cane close to the ground and tapped it lightly, the circuit would not close and the horn would remain silent.

Another morning Dr. Lessne worked with me to develop a response to someone who grabs my arm. To demonstrate, he grabbed me as I might be grabbed by a "helpful" stranger on the street. He explained that a person's natural response when this happens is to tense up. "If you're tense," he warned, "the person can push you. Don't let the person take control of your body. Let your arm hang loose. That way you can buy some time."

He repeated this exercise several times, but whenever he seized my arm I had difficulty responding as he instructed. Moreover, I did not fully understand his point. I did not say so, but I thought, "What's he doing? He's crazy!" but I did not say what I was thinking.

Ten years later I fully understood his concern. Twice within a year I had two ill-fated travel experiences that illustrated Dr. Lessne's point. On two occasions as I stepped down from Chicago area commuter trains, people panicked and grabbed me by the arm. In the first instance someone took hold of me from behind. As a result my feet could not reach the platform from the bottom step of the train car. I fell face first onto the platform with my feet under the train. In the second instance someone stepped in front of me and grabbed my hand that held my cane, lifting it so high that I could not reach the steps with my cane tip. I knew there was broken concrete on this particular platform, but without the help of my cane I could not tell where it was. I jumped down from the bottom step of the train car and landed with my right foot precisely on the broken concrete. I sprained my ankle badly and fell over backward next to the train. In both instances, I got off these commuter trains miles from their terminals. I knew, therefore, that I had only seconds to get myself clear of the train before it would proceed.

During my summer at IVHI the agency invited an instructor from the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) to bring a city bus to the facility. We had two mobility lessons, one in the morning and another in the afternoon. We students boarded, paid a fare, received a transfer, sat down, and exited through the rear door. Dr. Lessne reminded us to "sweep the seat" before sitting. If we did not, he partially blew up a balloon and placed it on the seat. If we sat on it, it deflated. That was a slightly embarrassing but humorous and instructive reminder to "sweep the seat."

Every afternoon we did calisthenics in the yard of the facility. The yard was right next to an elevated train line of the Chicago Transit Authority, now the Pink Line. One day Dr. Lessne asked, "How many cars went by on that train?"

I excitedly answered, "Nine."

He corrected me, "No, four."

I thought back to the wheel arrangements of the model trains I played with at home. I realized that I should be able to identify the number of cars on a train by listening, according to the number of wheels (and therefore axles) that passed a given rail joint. Clearly Dr. Lessne wanted us to have a strong awareness of our surroundings, even if we did not immediately need the information. I later found that I could determine my location relative to the rest of the train—front, middle, or rear—by listening to these sounds.

Dr. Lessne died in Orlando, Florida, where he had lived for many years. According to his obituary in the *Miami Herald,* his family requested that donations in his memory be made to the National Federation of the Blind.

A few days after I learned of Dr. Lessne's passing, I rode the elevated train line past the former location of IVHI to remember him. I appreciate the opportunity to share some of my recollections with you.