My Federation Friends,

It’s time to let you in on my plan. I bought a house in southern Minnesota because I’m retiring from my work at the National Federation of the Blind, and moving my membership from Maryland to Minnesota. Not having done it yet, I’m not sure how living on my retirement plan is going to work out when it comes to the fun extras of life, so the 2014 July convention in Orlando may be my last national convention. Although, if the money permits, I can see me coming back like former students go to their high school reunion just to enjoy being with their old friends. My last day on the staff will be July 11, 2014. Now when did this all start, you may ask. After all, I’m a sighted guy.

Back in the summer of 1975, I had decided not to sign the contract to continue as the librarian at a 500-student high school in southern Wisconsin because I had nothing in common with anyone in that small town. So, job hunting are us! One fine summer day on a bulletin board in the multi-story library school of the University of Wisconsin Madison campus, from which I had received my masters in library science degree, I saw a 3 by 5 typed card that said, “Librarian Needed. Must have some knowledge of textbooks. Iowa Commission for the Blind, Des Moines, Iowa, (phone number).” A teacher in the library school was passing by just as I finished reading and I asked her, “Have you ever heard of this library?” She said she’d heard it was the largest library for the blind in the country. Well! After a tiny high school, that sounded interesting! And Iowa being next to Wisconsin, I could drive back to visit my family on the holidays. That it was “for the blind” never really registered with me. I figured a library was a library. Oh, my! Little did I know how my life was changing from that very minute. So I called and made an appointment to interview.

As it happened (here comes Fate dropping in again), my brother was buying a house to be close to his new job in northwest Iowa so he and his wife and I rode in the same car. He dropped me off in Des Moines, where I was to interview for a few hours. Then I rode with them up to see their new home, and would come back to Des Moines to have a second interview “if” I was invited to do so. During the first interview –with Head Library Florence Grannis, and Duane Gerstenberger, her replacement in training, it was all about my ability as a librarian. The Iowa Commission for the Blind had a large library – a point in its favor, and, when fully staffed, six librarians serving patrons statewide! I was interviewing to be in charge of obtaining textbooks from APH or our own transcribers for all (300?) of Iowa’s K-12 and college-level blind and visually impaired students and all the adults who needed materials for their work, plus the Braille collection, the large type collection, and the small professional collections of print books by blind authors or about blindness and the historical collection of early Braille, New York Point, Moon Type, and such books. Nope, I did not know Braille; did not know anything about the NFB, or about how blind persons handle things. But I did instinctively know that “Gone with the Wind” is still “Gone with the Wind” whether it is in print or in Braille; and I passed Mrs. Grannis’s several tests of my competency. So Mr. Gerstenberger gave me a stack of banquet speeches that agency director Kenneth Jernigan had made in his other job as president of a federation for blind people, and I was set up for a second interview. Hello Fate.

All the long way to northeast Iowa I read the speeches. Very interesting! And solid philosophy! Those speeches just made sense to me. Of course blind Americans should not be treated that way! And I read them some more all the way back to Des Moines. I got my second interview, this time with Kenneth Jernigan. I sat in the chair across from Dr. Jernigan at his big desk and his assistant, Mrs. Anderson (now Mrs. Jernigan), sat on a couch to my right side. As I figured out later, this was a subtle test of attitude—would I look and speak to the sighted person or the blind boss? Right. It just made sense to me to talk to the boss and, well, I got hired.

July 23, 1975, 8 a.m., I started work at the Iowa Commission for the Blind as one of their six librarians, and I continued working there for nearly 13 years. I am proud to be part of “the Iowa connection.” I joined the NFB at the July 1975 chapter meeting. As part of staff training, Dr. Jernigan had me reading several decades of back issues of “Braille Monitor,” in class with Jim Omvig as our teacher for blind civil rights history, and taking cane travel lessons under sleepshades with Field Op counselor Dick Davis as my instructor. I really liked cane travel. For my graduation exercise, I walked a four-mile route around Des Moines. No problem. I learned how to do some other things under sleepshades too. All of this got me started in understanding how a blind guy handles whatever he or she wants to do. And in September1975, President Jernigan invited me to his annual Labor Day weekend NFB Leadership Seminar at the old Randolph Hotel, where I met Diane McGeorge and my first guide dog. I am a proud alumna of the Bathroom Seminar, along with Barbara Pierce, Barbara Beech (Walker Loos), and many other current leaders of the Federation (not all of them named Barbara).

I went on many weekend protests against NAC, driving for the first time ever a huge15-passenger van to get to that hotel near the O’Hare Airport, on the crazy Chicago freeways, and this was before GPS was invented. I marched on Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis. With Tami Dodd (now Mrs. Jones), Eric Duffy, and Sharon (now Monthei)—those three blind and all of us wearing sleepshades to prove we weren’t peeking—I swung my cane and marched in our NFB White Cane Marching Team in three town parades and at one NFB national convention. I drove for tons of candy sales. Thank goodness one of the blind students that rode to Oskaloosa knew how to change the tire on the van when it went flat halfway there, surrounded by cornfields. None of us in the van will forget the time I drove the four-hour trip to the Minnesota state convention and Curtis Willoughby and Bob Ray taught us songs to sing in a bar, and I ran out of gas on that Interstate superhighway, but coasted down the miraculously appearing ramp right into a gas station and next to a pump!

After a few years, a new chunk got added to my library work, I became the boss of Iowa’s radio reading program and along with one other staff person would cut up the “Des Moines Register” to precisely fit our time slot before being one of our many readers on the air. We were proud to know our radio service was one of only two RRS in the country that operated on a public channel. Thanks to using the radio station at the Des Moines tech high school, we were heard as far as 50 miles out of the city! A truck driver told me he listened as he made deliveries to farms outside the city.

Dr. Jernigan and his extraordinary Orientation and Adjustment Center for blind adults went on all around us in that multi-story building at 4th and Keo. We’d find newly blind and scared cane travelers lost in the Talking Book stacks or get out of their way as after a few weeks they’d be striding down the city sidewalks outside on their errands. Students made wonderful smells (and some not so much) come out of the kitchens; students came to check out a first shortest book possible to practice reading Braille. They’d be gathered in our comfortable library reading room late into the night, reading and talking. We who were there every day saw in the change in the students, from their first day to their graduation. We literally could see that the NFB method of teaching worked splendidly. We saw students learn a new positive attitude along with their skills, and we saw those few students who did not learn the NFB attitude toward blindness. They would go home with their skills, more or less, but sooner or later start again to be what the sighted folks around them thought they should be since, after all, they were blind. Students that joined and got involved with their support group, the National Federation of the Blind, were the adults that thrived.

Dr. Jernigan did not just hang out in his fancy office. He taught you, whether you were student or staff, and not just about blindness. He was funny, wise, eccentric, surprising, demanding, giving, super-smart, super-educated, totally plugged in to Iowa politics, and sometimes ignorant of current cultural icons (like John Denver and his music!). He read 420 words of Braille per minute—I timed him, and he was a terrifically good cane traveller. We were walking downhill on Keo one day at his cane-swinging, lickety-split speed and me in my two-inch heels nearly sprinting to keep up, until one of my heels broke and he hammered it back on with his cane handle. That man did more work in a day and night than three other people. Of course he had two full-time jobs—simultaneously the elected President of the National Federation of the Blind, building the Federation and working on serious issues nationwide, and the Director of the statewide vocational rehabilitation center for the blind, which included the training center for blind adults, the field services department with offices around the state offering home teachers and counselors, a store for products handmade by (agency-inherited) elderly blind women, the statewide Business Enterprise Program (which went from the previous popcorn and packaged candy counters to full-service cafeterias), the statewide regional library for the blind and physically handicapped, the lending office for NLS Talking Book machines, the textbooks for the blind program, the volunteer Braillists program (including for a number of years an operation in Iowa’s biggest prison), the volunteer readers making open reel masters which became cassette books at our building, and the radio reading service. We were everything for the blind except the school for the blind at Vinton, Iowa, and the checks from Social Security.

About three years after I was hired, Dr. Jernigan resigned his state job and moved the headquarters of the National Federation of the Blind to Baltimore, Maryland. A series of blind directors followed him; none making innovations worth commenting on and the NFB no longer recommended to students, nor, in some years, even mentioned in a favorable way. I continued to be a steady member of the NFB, attending local meetings, the state conventions, and the national conventions. One day in July 1987, I got a phone call from Baltimore. It was Dr. Jernigan. He said, (read this in a deep, deep voice), “Miss Rovig, How would you like to be director of Job Opportunities for the Blind?” I said, “But Dr. Jernigan, I’m not blind.” And he said, “Miss Rovig, How would you like to be the director of Job Opportunities for the Blind?” Not being dumb twice, I said, “Yes sir, I would.” I was the director of JOB for 10 years.

At various times during that decade, Dr. Jernigan also put me in charge of the single staff person cleaning all the bedrooms in our bedroom wing (I personally cleaned every toilet we owned many times), cassette production (which, if I remember right, was more than 60,000 copies per year); and for a very brief period back in 1975, I was the reader and first engineer of the brand new NFB studio. Larry McKeever, “the voice of the *Braille Monitor*,” designed it to be, as he told me, equal to a big-time studio in Nashville. He taught me how to run the giant board and all the equipment over a couple days. As time went on and the monthly “Presidential Release” was recorded, Dr. Jernigan and I discovered I was an okay reader but a poor engineer. Yes, I lost that piece of the job. (Whew!)

JOB was a big part of my job. The NFB’s innovative program, Job Opportunities for the Blind, was funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. Mary Ellen Reihing (now Mrs. Gabias) and I used the NFB studio to produce six cassette newsletters per year. Half of it was articles about blind workers (I usually did the interviews and wrote them up) plus job hunting advice, and half of it was reading real job listings for all kinds of jobs all over the country—as long as they were not specifically to hire a driver of a vehicle or a life guard at a swimming pool. My all-time favorite came from the “Baltimore Sun” and said, “Seamstress needed. Steady work. Baltimore Casket Company.”

I got calls from all over the US—blind job seekers asking advice and, occasionally, an employer worried about the new ADA. What helped folks the most was our rock solid belief in their goal, and introducing a blind job hunter to someone who was blind and already at work in that same field or one with similar requirements. Networking built that essential positive attitude and provided the practical advice that one who is in a field knows. Once a year I wrote a four-page “Employer’s Bulletin” like the one in 1995 called, “Employer Nightmares about Hiring Blind Employees.” It started like this,“This bulletin is for employers who have hidden worries about hiring a blind person.”Some bulletins are still posted on the NFB website, but they surely need updating.

Then we had the three-hours long JOB Seminars at national conventions for a live audience of two to three hundred NFB members. I was the MC for our lineup of blind speakers. I’ll never forget the presentations by John Fritz on doctoring his Wisconsin dairy herd; Doug Lane of Nebraska, a professional baker for a large hotel; Joe Urbanek, owner of a B&B for newlyweds; Lloyd Watts, house parent in a group home for adult men with low IQs; Carla McQuillan on childcare in the home (before she started her Montessori school); Allen Schaefer of Illinois, a public high school music director and teacher (whose students went all the way to state several times), so many others. But, golly, my number one favorite was Robert Munz of Long Island, New York, telling us about his interview and his job working the Price Club fast food counter. He got the job of defrosting the pizzas and warming the big dough pretzels when he told the sighted HR lady that he cooked a meal for 40 as part of his training at the Louisiana Center for the Blind, and she said, “I couldn’t do that!” and Bob said, “You could if you tried.”

I am proud to say I started the JOB convention breakfast meetings targeted to different professions. Out of that networking, people found each other and they grew our NFB divisions for science and engineering, for voc rehab workers, and for medical fields, among others.

One day, Dr. Jernigan asked me, “Miss Rovig, would you like to go to the United Nations?” The NFB was invited to run an information table in the lobby of the UN in New York City alongside other self-help groups because it was The Year of the Disabled.

And one very memorable day, Dr. Jernigan asked me, “Miss Rovig, how would you like to go to Japan?” Of course, I said, “Yes sir, I would.” The Japanese government office that ran training centers to train blind persons for employment asked for a keynote speaker to come to their convention to explain how the NFB worked on employment issues. Their chief push was to teach the use of the Opticon. Unfortunately that was the last year the machine was manufactured. Anyway, what a wonderful trip and what an honor to be chosen. I heard later from our contact, Chuji san, that my speech had been translated and published in the main Tokyo daily newspaper with my photo.

Well, after I’d done this job for ten years, DOL decided we’d been funded way longer than they normally would fund any program (normally only two or three years!) and ended our funding, so Dr. Jernigan switched me to being the writing-driving-reading assistant to our staff in the IBTC, the International Braille and Technology Center for the Blind. Working this job for two years, I learned a lot about modern equipment for blind persons. I loved the time Robert Jaquiss and I drove to several high tech companies and saw the amazing, new, 3D printing machines.

After a while my several layers of bosses and I discovered I was an editor and proofreader. My job changed to working in our Advocacy and Protection Department, mostly proofreading print documents that leave our building—letters, emails, petitions, invoices, language in new legislative bills, posters, website pages, fact sheets, and official reports. I helped proof the opus, “Walking Alone and Marching Together”—all thousand-plus pages of it. I wrote the wording for the Bolotin Award online under Jim Gashel’s direction. I began to proofread the “Braille Monitor” and “Future Reflections.” This is what I’ve done for the last decade.

Dr. Jernigan had a dream of a national headquarters for the National Federation of the Blind, one that would work on all the different issues, with room for things like a library to educate the researchers and a research institute run our way, an educational center figuring out best practices, and lots of room for offices and meeting rooms to cover all the different jobs the NFB is doing and will want to do in the unknown future. This is not a school, but a think-tank at work to innovate ideas and train the trainers. We had 18 million dollars to raise so I helped build it. I had NFB accounting take a small portion of my paycheck every month to give $5,000 to the building of our National Center for the Blind, 200 East Wells Street at Jernigan Place, Baltimore, Maryland 21230. Yup, my name is on the wall in the Wells Street lobby.

Five years ago, President Maurer changed my job again by appointing me to assist Anil Lewis, NFB state president in Georgia, with all the paperwork for our national scholarship program. Under Anil’s direction, I wrote the information on our scholarship website; answered half a zillion phone calls and emails, printed and filed the 500 to 700 or so scholarship applications we get each year, and handled lots of other time-consuming details. After a couple years, Anil accepted a staff position here in NFB’s home office and Patti Chang, Esquire, a full-time lawyer in Chicago and president of the NFB of Illinois, became my boss for this part of my job. It is so very strange to think this is my last year working on this fun, important, expensive program. I so enjoy meeting our thirty winners at convention and helping them find out that what the National Federation of the Blind offers to them goes way beyond a one-time check and a week in a big hotel.

I have been to every NFB national convention since 1976. This convention will be number 39. It’s the most fun you can have in a week and still be legal. I’ve been to every NFB state convention in the state in which I lived (Iowa or Maryland) plus some extra state conventions just for fun: Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Virginia, and Washington, DC. All were so different and yet all were totally NFB.

There’s never been a national convention that I didn’t have several jobs. I met and got to know hundreds and hundreds of our members when I had the job for many years of training and supervising volunteers for the NFB Store. Remember the time we had no customers at all, so joking around we got Ellen Ringlein to do an advertisement and demonstration for her table of Braille tools in German and got Fatos Floyd to advertise her Braille equipment in Turkish? Many of our volunteers had a first Braille lesson, many learned how to use the click rule and the abacus, and many strangers became friends as they sat beside each other.

So many good times!

Looks like I’m writing a book here, and not a goodbye! It somehow doesn’t seem proper to say only, “So long, and thanks for all the fish.” Fellow members and friends, if you read between the lines, you know I will always treasure these things—getting to know the most extraordinary man I’ve ever met—Dr. Jernigan; having the chance to work, protest, and laugh with the many wonderful, hard-working members I’ve met since 1975; and, yes, I very much treasure the fact that, using such gifts as I have, I have helped the movement of all blind Americans toward full equality. The conclusion I reached in a car crossing the hot summer landscape of Iowa in 1975 hasn’t changed—equality for the blind just makes sense. So see you in Orlando! If you come to Minnesota’s NFB events, look for me there, or find me on NFB listservs.

With appreciation for the past and anticipation of the future,

Lorraine (also known as, Miss Rovig)