# THE BRAILLE SPECTATOR

# The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

# Summer 2013

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**FROM THE PRESIDENT**

# It’s Personal: Reflections on the Maryland Affiliate

By Melissa Riccobono

*Editor's Note: This speech was delivered by our president, Melissa Riccobono, at the 2012 NFBMD convention held in Annapolis. All facts were correct when this speech was delivered. However, happily there has been progress made in many areas. Please attend the 2013 convention of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, and/or watch future issues of this publication in order to find out about our progress.*

As I prepared to write my fourth report regarding the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, one question—and its answer—would not leave my head. The question was, “Why do we choose to be a part of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland?” I know there are probably many different answers to this question people can and would give if they were given the chance… so, all right, I’m going to give you a chance. Take a minute to think this over. Why are you a part of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland? Why are you here at this convention instead of somewhere else on a Saturday afternoon? Why do you attend chapter meetings, participate in fundraisers, advocate in Annapolis, and the countless other things you do for this affiliate every year? Here’s the hard part… Or, perhaps it’s not so hard. You must answer this question in only one sentence… All right, it can be a long sentence if necessary… You might even get away with having a semicolon in the middle, so perhaps you could answer the question in two sentences… But, I want you to come up with a short answer. Have you thought of your answer? Good. Please, turn to your neighbor, and each of you take a minute to share your answer.

All right, we have time to hear a couple of your answers. Would anyone like to share?

Thank you for sharing your answers. I wish we had time to hear from every one of you! But, since we don’t, let me share my answer because I truly believe it sums up simply why we are all a part of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland. My answer is only one sentence, and I don’t even need a semicolon. In fact, my sentence is only two words long… And, perhaps some or all of you have guessed by now that my answer is “It’s personal.”

As I continued to reflect on this answer, I began to realize it could, and probably does, have two meanings. The first meaning is not the one that sprang immediately to mind, but I came to realize that the phrase could be interpreted to mean that the reasons behind our involvement are “personal” that is “different” for each of us in this room. Although this is certainly a valid interpretation, and probably true, I would argue that this phrase has deeper meaning—the meaning that first struck me as I was pondering this report. In short, this interpretation is that we cannot do the work we do, with the passion and commitment we continually demonstrate, if this work was not personal to us. Our reasons as to why the work is personal will vary. Maybe the work is personal for some of you because you are blind, and you do not want the next generation to struggle like you had to. Some of you became blind later in life, and you want to help others learn blindness is not the tragedy it is so often believed to be. Some of you are parents of blind children, and you want your children to grow up with the whole world open to them. Some of you are blind parents, and you want to be allowed to raise your children without the outside world questioning your abilities simply because you are blind. Some of you just happen to be sighted… And despite that fact you have learned our philosophy and work with us because of your belief in the capabilities of all blind people.

Whatever your reasons—the parts of our work you are most passionate about—I believe it truly is personal. I am honored to be able to take this time to share details of the work we have done over the past year, and why that work was, and is, personal to the members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland and me.

Since our legislative work always begins in January, it makes sense for me to begin with our efforts in Annapolis. We had three “official” issues in Annapolis this year, and a few more issues that required our attention as the legislative session progressed. Our first two issues were familiar ones—we tried to change the law so the Internet would be considered a place of public accommodation, and would, therefore, create more of a need for businesses to build and maintain accessible websites. We also tried to change the law so people could have the right of public action in cases of discrimination based on race, religion, gender, ethnicity, or ability status. The issue of the Internet was personal to Tim Elder, who testified that he could not manage his business bank account online because of an inaccessible website. The public accommodations issue was personal to Anthony Evans, who testified that he was denied help at a store, and therefore could not get his children medication they needed in order to fight fevers. This lead his children to have to be taken to the emergency room—a trip that could easily have been avoided if Anthony could have purchased the medication he knew his children required. Both of these issues were personal to all of those who educated legislators in Annapolis, attended hearings, wrote letters, made phone calls, the additional people who testified on our behalf, and are still personal to all of us who have to struggle needlessly to use a business website, are asked to leave a store, or denied a ride in a taxi because of our guide dogs, or are told that “you can’t shop here right now. We don’t have anyone to help you!” Unfortunately, these issues weren’t personal to the legislators because, despite our best efforts, they were unwilling to pass either one of these proposed bills. We are working now to see if there is a different way to approach these issues so we can be more successful in having them passed during the upcoming legislative session.

We had a bit more success with our third issue—reminding the legislators that their new, state-of-the-art, redesigned website needs to be accessible to the blind of Maryland. Thanks largely to the efforts of Sharon Maneki, members of the NFB of Maryland were able to attend and testify at a meeting this summer where the website was being demonstrated. Ann Taylor, the director of the International Braille and Technology Center of the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute, met with some of the people responsible for the website, and provided her “personal” feedback. Each one of us, personally, should be able to access all of the vital information contained on the website for our legislators, and the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland will not rest until this is a reality.

Two more issues we worked on in Annapolis were access to e-book readers in schools, and accessibility of online courses in grades K-12. Baltimore City Schools are participating in a pilot program which will allow them to get free Nook e-book readers and provide them to middle school students in selected city schools. This was certainly personal for Sabrina Richardson, who spoke eloquently about the need for all e-book readers to be accessible. Sabrina’s daughter, Lashai, is not in middle school yet, but Sabrina certainly wants to make sure she will have access to all of the technology enjoyed by her sighted peers when she reaches middle school. While the pilot program was not stopped completely, Sabrina’s testimony certainly did get the attention of the legislators and school officials.

The issue of accessible online courses is personal for Brandon Pickrel, and his parents, Trudy and Bill. Trudy and Bill brought Brandon to Annapolis from McHenry, in the far western part of the state, so Brandon could give testimony about this issue. Brandon, who was in fourth grade at the time, was the hit of the hearing when he told the legislators that he needs access to online courses, just like his sighted classmates, so he can get married, have a job, and pay taxes in the future. Although the day of the hearing for this issue was extremely long, Trudy and Bill remained in the hearing room until Brandon could give his testimony. Again, we certainly got the attention of the legislators, and we will be watching this issue to insure web courses are truly accessible in the future.

Many members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland rely on the services from the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in countless ways. The library provides books for blind children to read, adult fiction and nonfiction, books blind parents and grandparents can read to the children in their lives, the textbook program for blind college students, technology classes, a book club, a fantastic children’s’ room, a place for blind parents to meet and network, and tours of the Walters Art Museum—along with other services too numerous to list here. Because so many of us count on these services, it is easy to see how we would take threats to our library very personally. In past reports, I have discussed threats to the library building itself, financial difficulties, and problems with the Maryland Textbook Program. In May, Jill Lewis, a true friend of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, retired from her position as director of the library. As of the writing of this report, the job for a new director has not been posted—although the job is approved to be filled. (Incidentally, we got word that the position was approved to be filled during a meeting Dr. Marc Maurer, Sharon Maneki, and I had with the new Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Lowery, regarding the library and other issues. Sharon was recently told that the posting for the director position should appear in the *Baltimore Sun* tomorrow.) Along with the vacant director position, there is currently no assistant for the Maryland Textbook Program, and Jim McCarthy, who manages the Textbook Program, has to spend much of his time at the Maryland Workforce Technology Center teaching access technology. So, there is no director to provide leadership for the library, and the Maryland Textbook Program, which we in the NFBMD worked very hard to create, is struggling… How could we not take these threats to our library personally?

As I stated, Dr. Maurer, Sharon Maneki, and I met with Dr. Lowery regarding these concerns. She certainly seemed to hear us, and she asked Sharon about the status of the director position when she attended the 20th anniversary celebration of the library building. Yet, there is still no posting for the director position, (although this is supposed to happen tomorrow), and no movement on getting an assistant for the Textbook Program, or reconfiguring Jim McCarthy’s time so he can devote more energy to this valuable program. This is unacceptable, and we will not stand for both of these positions to remain vacant. The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland will fight for our library—for the right for books and information—and we will not stop until we get the director we deserve, and until the textbook program is restructured so it can run at its full capacity. This is our library, and we need to take personal responsibility to fight to protect its welfare, so it can remain a valuable resource for years to come.

On August 25th, Federationists from around the state joined our Federation family across the United States in demonstrating in front of Goodwill stores. We organized these informational protests in order to educate the public about the immoral practice of Goodwill, which pays some of its blind and multiply disabled employees pennies an hour for their work. The CEO of Goodwill, who happens to be blind himself, earns a salary of $500,000. As a blind person, I take this inequality extremely personally, and I know this view is shared by Federationists across the country and in Maryland. Some may argue that there are only a few blind people affected by this practice. We say one person being paid subminimum wages is too many. These are our blind brothers and sisters, and we need to take personal responsibility to do everything we can to bring an end to this unjust and immoral practice. This issue is especially personal to Charles Biebl, who worked in a job where he earned subminimum wages, and I am sure there are others in this room who have had similar experiences. Our National Office is leading the way on this issue. I personally commit to do whatever it takes—protests, phone calls, tweets, education—to support this initiative. I know I can count on all of you to do the same.

For many years, the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland has had a partnership with Blind Industries and Services of Maryland. Blind Industries supports our Possibilities Fair for Seniors with a very generous contribution, which allows us to provide transportation for seniors who otherwise would not be able to attend this event. Staff and students from the Core Program also attend our state convention, and in the past two years there has been an increase in youth attendance thanks to BISM’s Youth Services Programs. There is no doubt that BISM does great things for the blind in Maryland. Unfortunately, there have been some regrettable incidents over the past year that are of concern to me, and to many of the members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland. One of the major concerns is the fact that the Core Program does not currently have a director who is solely responsible for the staff and the day to day operations of the program. I know Fred Puente, President of BISM, will be speaking immediately after my report. Fred, I don’t want to steal your thunder, so let me just say that I know you have heard my concern, and the concerns of the NFB of Maryland, and we look forward to partnering even more closely with you in the coming months to create a stronger Adjustment to Blindness Program at BISM. Good training changes lives. I have observed this personally over and over. I, and so many others are passionate about this fact—our experiences and our passion is what makes our concerns about quality adjustment to blindness training so personal. I hope to be able to share positive results of our partnership with BISM in my 2013 report.

I have always cared about the education of blind children. After all, I was a blind child who happened to have a very good education, and therefore was able to grow into a relatively well adjusted, confident, and successful adult. I always thought I understood the personal feelings of parents of blind children—and of blind parents of sighted and blind children… Then Mark and I had our oldest child, Austin, almost six years ago. Austin is sighted, but I certainly gained a much more personal understanding of what it is like to be a parent—how it feels, really, to have your abilities questioned at times, and to have society send you messages that your baby must be the one taking care of you because you are blind. I understood better, too, how parents just want what is best for their children, and how parents just don’t want their children to have to struggle in any way. Then, almost two and a half years ago, our daughter, Oriana, came on the scene. And, on June third, 2012, we welcomed another daughter, Elizabeth, into our family. Both Oriana and Elizabeth have problems with their vision. It is a bit unclear exactly what the extent of their vision loss will be; we will have to wait and see as they get older. Let me say however, that having two daughters with vision problems has made the education and advocacy of the NFB of Maryland so much more personal to me. Helping to teach Oriana to use her cane, fielding questions from others who are confused as to why she should be using a cane at all when she can obviously see, and, honestly, remembering to bring the cane with us and take the cane back home with us when we leave a place have given me a very different perspective into what other parents of blind children go through. Having our pediatrician, who I really do like and trust most of the time, tell me that Elizabeth probably wasn’t babbling very much at four months of age because of her vision—(since when do you need vision to learn to talk? I have never had vision, and I started talking when I was six months and have not stopped since), gives me a new appreciation for just how much educating still needs to be done, and the staggering amounts of misinformation parents of blind children receive every day. As I have stated, all of the work of the NFBMD is personal to me, but let me share the education and advocacy work we have taken part in this year which has been the most personal, and of which all of us should be very proud.

This work started with the continuation of the Braille Taskforce. Jill Richmond, Susan Polanski, and I had the privilege of serving on the Braille Task Force and helping to draft the English Language Arts standards of which Lisa Wright just spoke. These standards, along with standards in math, were just approved by the Maryland Board of Education on September 25th. This means that there are now clear, and high, expectations about what Braille readers need to be taught in order to succeed at each grade level. It is our hope that these standards will be a valuable tool for teachers of blind students, who will not have to guess about how much Braille to teach or not to teach, parents of blind children, who will be able to look at the standards and ask questions about whether their children know the Braille they are supposed to, and, who can also make even stronger cases to school districts as to the amount of instruction in Braille their children need. Of course, it is our greatest hope that these standards will most impact the blind children of Maryland—that they will be taught Braille in the most thorough way possible, and that they will grow into more confident and successful adults because they have the tool of Braille firmly in their toolbox.

Our work in Maryland is being noticed around the country—as Lisa Wright shared with us. Other states want to look at our standards; other states want laws on their books which say their blind students deserve Braille standards, too. And, our standards have helped spark discussions with organizations such as the American Printing House for the Blind, who create educational materials for blind students. All of this began with an idea from members of the NFB of Maryland. We personally educated legislators, testified at hearings, appeared at the bill signing, and participated on the Braille Taskforce Committee. We should be very proud of our work, and should never forget the personal impact this work will have on children, parents, and teachers for years to come.

There is one more piece of the Braille Taskforce which remains undone, however, and this piece is suggesting new requirements for teachers of blind students to acquire a new certification to teach in Maryland, or to renew an existing certification. The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland wants to make sure these certification requirements are done right—that they are as strong as possible in order to match our cutting edge Braille standards. We are hopeful that the Maryland State Department of Education will take our suggestion of a stakeholder meeting seriously, and that we will have top notch certification requirements to report on next convention. It is my hope that Oriana and Elizabeth will be taught by highly qualified teachers of blind students and held to our high Braille standards when and if they need to learn Braille in the future.

Speaking of Braille, there is no doubt members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland take providing quality Braille instruction to blind children personally. So personally, in fact, that we had over fifteen volunteers who took time from their busy lives in order to help run Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Programs in two locations this year. We were able to help 14 children and their parents learn about Braille, alternative techniques, and the advantages of being around positive blind role models. We helped two children from out of state this year—one from Florida, and the other from Michigan. How wonderful it is that a program we started has spread to other states, and has been so successful that people from other states are willing to travel to Maryland in order to take advantage of what the program has to offer. This program all started with a personal wish from two blind moms. They wanted their blind daughters to get more Braille practice in the summer… Look at where that personal wish has lead us. We very much look forward to offering two BELL programs again next year. Who knows, maybe Oriana, Elizabeth, or both will participate in a BELL program someday.

Now, for truly the most personal advocacy work I have ever done… I am working, on behalf of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, to help a blind father get his daughter returned to his custody. His daughter is a toddler, and was taken in August by the Department of Social Services because her father is blind. This is despite the fact that the NFB of Maryland worked tirelessly to get a law passed to make it illegal for disability to be considered in cases of custody… Obviously more education about this law is needed, along with more education for social workers, lawyers, and judges around the state about the capabilities of blind parents. I appeared at a hearing in this case in late October, but because of many circumstances the true hearing was postponed to later in November. Of course, the day of the October hearing was long and emotional for all involved. At one point, the blind father turned to me and said “I’m so sorry to keep you here. I’m so sorry for wasting your time.” My response was “I guess there are places I would rather be, because I would rather this had never happened to you. But, in all honesty, there is nowhere else I would rather be at this moment than helping to support you and your right to parent your child.” And all I kept thinking was "there, but for the grace of God, go I…" This could be me, or Mark, or another blind parent I know. This discrimination cannot stand. There is no reason for this father and daughter to be apart. She was well fed, clean, and happy when she was taken from her father. She was healthy, and there were no signs of abuse of any kind. The baby’s mother, who happens to be sighted, wants the father to have full custody of this little girl… Yet the powers that be on the other side say it is a question of safety. They say they just don’t see how this blind father can care for his daughter, although he cared for her for the first year of her life with no problem. And so they are apart—they have been apart since August--and they will never be able to get this precious time they have lost back.

I get very emotional whenever I think about this case. Yes, I have heard of these things happening… I just never thought a case like this would happen in my own backyard, especially because of the law we worked so hard to pass. I am also humbled that, as president of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, I have been called upon not to testify about this father’s capabilities as a parent—since I have never observed him with his child—but about the capacity of blind people, including myself, to be blind parents. This is a position I never thought I would find myself in, and it leaves me in awe of the trust all of you put in me when you elect me as your president. Although I am the one who gets to testify in this case, I know I have all blind parents and grandparents, and future blind parents and grandparents with me in spirit. I know I have the power of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, and the National Federation of the Blind behind me. I value this support and this power more than you will ever know, and I promise to do my very best to protect the rights of this blind father to raise his daughter, and the rights of future parents who happen to be blind.

I appreciate all of you allowing me to share why my involvement in the NFB of Maryland is so personal to me, and how others have shown me their personal passions for the work we do. I know sometimes this work is tiring. We feel as if we take one step forward and three steps back. We get angry about the struggles that still persist and exist, and we just can’t understand why the world can’t see things in the same way we do. This is truly the danger of our work being so personal… If we do not take the time to refresh ourselves, and sometimes even take a small break, we will burn out. For me, when I feel this way, I try to focus on the positives. My daughter is already using her cane—I wasn’t even given a cane until I was in kindergarten, and my husband wasn’t given one until high school. We have Braille standards now. We had two great BELL programs. I get the opportunity to talk to people almost every day and spread the message of hope that is the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, and the National Federation of the Blind. And, I reach for inspiration, guidance, support, and to be reenergized from all of you. You are truly my blind brothers and sisters, working for the same cause, fighting the same fights, and winning the same battles little by little. You are spreading the message of hope, and making a difference one person at a time. I urge you not to stop your work, and to think about how the work of the NFB of Maryland is personal to you. I hope this convention—this time of learning, networking, and togetherness--energizes you the way it always energizes me. I hope you will renew your commitment to this organization now, and communicate with me about how you would personally like to help with the work we do. Please, if you have not already done so, take a look at the Affiliate job list, and put your name down to help with the jobs that most appeal to you. Please let me know if you would like to be a member of our new fundraising, communications, or membership committees, or if there is a project or program you would like to see us create or take on. There is truly more than enough work to go around, and we will never be able to do all of the work we do without your help and commitment to this strong and vibrant organization. I know we will continue to do great things in the year to come if all of you, and I, can continue to answer the question of why we are a part of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland with “it’s personal.”

**COME MEET US IN OCEAN CITY!**

Please come meet the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland in Ocean City, November 8-10, 2013, for our annual state convention. Why, you ask? Here are just some of the highlights you won’t want to miss!

**Seminars** for blind students and seniors.

**Hands-on demonstrations** of the latest and greatest in technology in our Exhibit Hall.

**Workshops** for parents of blind children.

**Networking opportunities** for blind parents.

**Dynamic speakers** discussing resources, employment and the history of the NFB of Maryland.

**Door prizes**.

**Baked goods auction**.

Speaking of dynamic speakers, Scott LaBarre will give a national report and banquet address. He will be visiting us as our national representative from the lovely state of Colorado. Scott is a civil rights lawyer, and he has been working tirelessly on a treaty to allow worldwide access to copyrighted materials for the blind, along with other legal cases involving protecting the rights of blind Americans. Scott and his wife have two children; he is very involved with his family and in his community. A top notch speaker, you will not want to miss his national report and banquet address.

Please join us in Ocean City for our state convention this year. For all of the information you need regarding location, costs, transportation, etc., please see the form in the center of this newsletter. You can also visit <http://www.nfbmd.org> to find this information, or register for the convention online. See you in November!

# RESOLUTIONS

# *Editor’s Note: These resolutions were passed at our 2012 convention. They are policy statements of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland.*

## Resolution 2012-01

## Regarding certification and recertification requirements for vision teachers

WHEREAS, if blind and visually impaired students are to receive a quality education, they must be instructed by highly qualified vision teachers; and

WHEREAS, in 2010, The Maryland General Assembly and Governor O’Malley enacted legislation requiring the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to create Braille standards for mathematics and English/Language Arts for students in grades K-12; and

WHEREAS, on September 25, 2012, The Maryland State Board of Education approved the implementation of the Maryland Common Core State Curriculum Frameworks for Braille: Mathematics and the Maryland Common Core State Curriculum Frameworks for Braille: English/Language Arts, standards that will potentially dramatically improve the quality of education for blind and visually impaired students in Maryland for many years; and

WHEREAS, this legislation also calls for an examination of teacher certification and re-certification requirements to ensure that vision teachers are able to instruct their students to meet these new standards; and

WHEREAS, MSDE is currently proposing certification and recertification recommendations to the Professional Standards and Teacher Education Board, the entity responsible for setting such criteria; and

WHEREAS, these recommendations, as currently drafted, do not adequately address a vision teacher’s competency in reading and writing Braille, because while they would require taking courses in reading and writing Braille, they do not require passing a competency test for certification; and

WHEREAS, The National Literary Braille Competency Test (NLBCT) has undergone a long development and is now available to be used as a validated professional standard for teachers of the visually impaired and other instructors of the Braille code; and

WHEREAS, the inclusion of the Braille Praxis Exam as an option for recertification, now under consideration in the MSDE recommendations, is simply inappropriate because it is too elementary; and

WHEREAS, even the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which authors the Praxis Exams describes them as “designed to assess subject matter knowledge and other competencies for individuals planning a career in teaching,”; and

WHEREAS, the process to create the Braille standards was very successful because MSDE sought input from advocates, teachers and parents, but thus far has failed to seek input from the same cross section of stakeholders regarding certification and recertification requirements; Now therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, by the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, in Convention assembled this tenth day of November, 2012, in the city of Annapolis, Maryland that this organization strongly urge MSDE to immediately convene a group of stakeholders including the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland and representatives from a University vision program to examine the current proposals and develop a stronger set of recommendations to be presented to the Professional Standards and Teacher Education Board; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that this organization insist that the Professional Standards and Teacher Education Board adopt certification and recertification requirements for vision teachers that include testing of competency in Braille reading and writing comparable to that which is provided by the NLBCT.

## Resolution 2012-02

## Regarding DORS Support of Textbook Purchases

WHEREAS the purchase of textbooks and related study materials is a necessary and increasingly costly expense incurred by students who attend post-secondary institutions; and

WHEREAS, the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) assists some blind Marylanders by covering the cost of textbook purchases; and

WHEREAS, this financial support may not exceed $500 per semester for full-time students and $250 per semester for part-time students, an amount that has not changed in many years, though textbook costs have not remained stagnant; and

WHEREAS, through the internet, there are several sources available to students that permit students to buy textbooks for lower prices than at their college bookstores; and

WHEREAS, DORS procurement rules place nearly insurmountable barriers in the way of students receiving reimbursement for textbook purchases at these lower prices, despite the fact that permitting reimbursement could save state or federal dollars; and

WHEREAS, though it is theoretically possible for post-secondary students to receive financial support for textbook purchases that exceed the stated amounts by classifying such excess textbook costs as "other services," this procedure is so fraught with bureaucratic intricacy as to assure it virtually never occurs; Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, by the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland in convention assembled this eleventh day of November, in the city of Annapolis, Maryland that we call upon DORS to amend its regulations and procedures to create an annual indexing process to account for inflation in the price of textbooks and related study materials needed by blind students to succeed in their post-secondary studies; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that this organization urges DORS to develop procurement processes that encourage students to shop for lower price textbooks and related study materials by assuring that they will be reimbursed when their careful shopping saves money for DORS.

## Resolution 2012-03

## Regarding staffing problems at the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

WHEREAS, the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (LBPH), located in the Division of Library Development and Services, Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), is the major provider of reading materials for blind children, adults and senior citizens throughout the state; and

WHEREAS, LBPH serves over ten thousand patrons, and requires the services of a competent director to manage its many complex operations; and

WHEREAS, from May 1, 2012, LBPH has been forced to operate without a full time director, and MSDE has only belatedly begun its search for qualified candidates to fill this position; and

WHEREAS, from 2010 to the present, MSDE has found it expedient to implement a makeshift arrangement whereby the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) provides some funding for LBPH, and in return LBPH staff must provide direct services to DORS clients; and

WHEREAS, since the beginning of this arrangement, DORS has increased its demands on LBPH staff, and if unchecked, these demands will continue to increase; and

WHEREAS, this arrangement, while advantageous to DORS, has a detrimental effect on LBPH services, because it currently prevents at least four LBPH staff members from performing their regularly assigned duties, such as staffing the reference desk, duplicating digital books and mailing them to patrons; and

WHEREAS, the textbook program at LBPH, intended to assist college students to procure textbooks in alternative formats, has also been seriously damaged by this arrangement because the director of this program is now required to spend three work days of each week at DORS; and

WHEREAS, since the textbook program is operated only by a director and an assistant, MSDE has further failed in its responsibilities by not replacing that assistant who vacated this position in August 2012; and

WHEREAS, for many years, LBPH has also been grossly understaffed according to guidelines recommended by the American Library Association; Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, by the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, in Convention assembled this eleventh day of November, 2012, in the city of Annapolis, Maryland, that this organization insists that MSDE immediately take steps to hire a full time director for LBPH, and also take prompt action to fill other vacancies at LBPH; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that this organization strongly urges MSDE to examine how it funds LBPH in order to eliminate the regressive and damaging partnership between DORS and LBPH so that LBPH may carry out its mission to serve the reading needs of blind Marylanders.

## Resolution 2012–04

## Regarding an accessible website for adding value to rechargeable fare cards for MTA and Metro

WHEREAS, public transportation is a service often provided in some form by municipal governments, especially those of highly urbanized areas such as the Washington D.C. and Baltimore metropolitan areas, and these transportation services require payment of fares by their users; and

WHEREAS, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), the transit agency for the Washington area, including the Maryland and Virginia suburbs, first began using the SmarTrip cards in 1999, which allowed users to place an amount of value on the card that could be read by transit vehicles and entry and exit gates, and to replenish this amount as necessary; and

WHEREAS, determining the amount of value on and replenishing the amount on one’s SmarTrip card are a fully accessible process when performed at a Metro station and are activities that can be performed online by citizens who are not blind; and

WHEREAS, the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA), the transportation agency that serves the Baltimore region, introduced a similar card called the CharmCard in 2010, and a reciprocity agreement allows patrons to use either payment card to travel on any participating systems throughout the Baltimore-Washington Metropolitan Area, which is a valuable integration between the 2 systems that benefits citizens including those who are blind; and

Whereas, those who want to recharge their CharmCards or SmarTrip cards online are directed to the website <https://smartrip.wmata.com/Account/AccountLogin.aspx>, which has not consistently provided an accessible way for blind patrons to recharge either type of card online; Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland in convention assembled this 11th day of November, 2012, in the city of Annapolis, Maryland, that we call upon WMATA and its contractors to make necessary repairs to the website that will make it accessible to blind users and continue to maintain the accessibility of this site.

# ACCESS FOR ALL

# A REPORT ON THE 2013 GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION

By Sharon Maneki, Legislative Chairman

One of the greatest challenges facing blind persons in the 21st century is access to information. Access to information is a source of great frustration because it could be easily available to blind persons if web developers and others took the time to think about properly designing their products. Nonvisual access is technically achievable. What is frequently missing is the will to make it happen. During the 2013 session of the Maryland General Assembly, we, the organized blind, worked with legislators to increase the willpower of various segments of society to provide nonvisual access to a variety of information.

As usual, we got an early start in promoting our goals to the Maryland General Assembly. On January 17, fifty Federationists came to Annapolis to tell legislators that the state of Maryland was doing a poor job in providing access to government information. We presented each legislator with an excerpt of “A Longitudinal Study of State Government Home Page Accessibility in Maryland and the Role of Web Page Templates for Improving Accessibility” by Jonathan Lazar, Brian Wentz, and students from Towson University. This study cited specific examples of state web sites that were inaccessible to the blind. The study examined twenty-five web sites. Of the twenty-five, twenty-three had access violations. We urged the General Assembly to encourage executive departments of state government to redeem themselves not only by correcting problems, but also by ensuring that new websites contain nonvisual access features.

The state of Maryland should demonstrate its commitment to nonvisual access by making sure that blind persons have access to information on the new MarylandHealthConnection.gov website. The Maryland Health Benefits exchange created the MarylandHealthConnection.gov website to help citizens gather information and enroll in health insurance programs. Enrollment will begin in October 2013. According to Federal law, all citizens must have health insurance coverage in 2014. Since blind citizens must have health insurance, along with the rest of the public, the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland requested that the Maryland General Assembly amend HB 228/SB 274, The Healthcare Progress Act, to ensure that the website and healthcare information will be accessible to the blind. The access amendment reads as follows:

“(c) (1)… The exchange shall comply with section 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and any regulations adopted under section 508 of the Act.

(2) The obligation for the Exchange to comply with section 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 does not affect any other requirements relating to accessibility for persons with disabilities to which the exchange may be subject under the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.”

Our second access issue dealt with access to online learning. Like many other states, Maryland is promoting online learning for students in grades K-12. Our position has always been that if online learning is available to sighted students it should also be accessible to blind students. State law clearly mandates that online learning must be accessible. However, in the past, there was no mechanism to ensure that nonvisual access became a reality. The enactment of SB 461/HB 1176 corrects this problem. Thanks to the leadership of Senator Joan Carter Conway, Chairman of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, and Delegate Sheila Hixson, Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, these bills passed the Maryland General Assembly and Governor O’Malley signed them into law on May 16, 2013. These bills permit the Maryland State Department of Education to charge a fee to course vendors for assessing the accessibility of individual courses.

On February 28, 2013, here is how Brandon Pickrel explained the need for SB 461/HB 1176 to the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee:

“Good afternoon, Senators. My name is Brandon Pickrel. I am in the 5th grade at Accident Elementary School in Garrett County.

I am the only blind student in my class. I do all the same work that the other students do. The only difference is that I do my work by using Braille. I use a laptop to do my work in the classroom. I am learning how to do email and search the internet.

Last year, I testified before this committee, to let you know that students like me need to have the same chance to use online courses as the sighted students. I am glad that you fixed the bill and said that all of the courses should be accessible.

This year I am asking you to finish the job by creating a way to make sure that blind students can really read and learn the material in these online courses.

I hope that you will pass this bill and help all of the blind students in Maryland. I will be in middle school next year and may not be able to come back due to my heavy work load to ask for your help again. Please vote in favor of SB 461, so I don’t have to come back here in 10 years to run for your job. Thank you for your time.”

Our third access issue, which was the most difficult, was attempting to enact legislation to encourage the business community to make their websites accessible to the blind. Senator Jamie Raskin sponsored SB 365, and Delegate Sandy Rosenberg sponsored HB 550, bills to provide a tax credit to a business for the cost of making a website accessible to the blind. Legislators supported the concept of these bills but felt they needed more information on how such a tax credit could be administered. The Senate Budget and Tax Committee and the House Appropriations Committee instructed the Maryland Department of Disabilities to conduct a study in consultation with the Maryland Department of Information Technology on the cost and implementation of such a tax credit. This study is due to the committees by October 15, 2013. I am sure we will be working on this issue again next year.

The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland frequently supports other bills that we did not directly suggest. One example was SB 279/HB 224, Improving Access to Voting. This legislation expands early voting, makes it easier to register to vote, and allows individuals to request an absentee ballot via the internet. These bills were of special interest to us because we wanted to make sure that blind persons can independently fill out the absentee ballot form. The legislation requires the State Board of Elections to implement both an accessible online ballot application and an accessible “Ballot Marking Tool.” After completing the absentee ballot, the voter will be required to print it and send it to the Board of Elections through the postal service. This legislation is an important step in maintaining accessible voting for blind citizens in Maryland.

The NFB of Maryland was also pleased to support SB 832/HB 932. This legislation creates a dispute resolution workgroup in the Maryland State Department of Education. “The workgroup shall make recommendations to the State Superintendent regarding rules and regulations to establish a uniform and timely dispute resolution process to resolve claims of discrimination by a child care provider based on a child’s disability that addresses the needs of children and their families to obtain and keep child care.”

On February 13, 2013, Bernadette Jacobs offered the following moving testimony to the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee:

“I am here to support SB 832, a bill that will create a workgroup to establish procedures to resolve discrimination complaints involving child care centers.

I have two disabled children, Virginia and David. I have faced discrimination by childcare centers and have found it extremely difficult to obtain childcare help for my son David. In addition to being blind, David has autism and other disabilities.

Recently I went to a daycare center on the recommendation of a friend. My friend gave me the price of daycare and explained that the center had a quality program. My son and I came for an interview and the provider wanted to charge me an additional $100 over the weekly price because of my son’s disabilities.

I had no remedy to combat this discrimination. The Maryland Civil Rights Commission would take too long to investigate this incident. Since the Maryland State Board of Education is responsible for licensing and inspecting daycare centers, this department should be able to help resolve discrimination complaints.

Please vote in favor of SB832 so that parents who need childcare for severely disabled children can obtain it.”

Many thanks to everyone who testified, visited legislators, and helped make the 2013 session of the Maryland General Assembly very productive for the blind of Maryland. We made significant progress in our quest toward equality. We look forward to continuing to promote accessibility to information in the 2014 session. We appreciate the support of our many friends in the Maryland General Assembly and look forward to working together to promote equal rights and equal opportunities for the blind.

# BELL PROGRAM: ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR!

By Judy Rasmussen

As stated in previous issues of the *Spectator*, Maryland was the first state to hold a Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Program. Parents of blind children conceived the idea to hold a two-week program in the summer to supplement, or in many cases, begin Braille instruction for children ages 4-12 who were not receiving adequate instruction in Braille in the public schools. In addition to Braille, students would meet blind adults, learn non-visual techniques for cooking simple things, practice cane skills in unfamiliar environments, and most important, have fun! We are proud to say that because of the leadership provided in Maryland, BELL programs were held in 19 states this summer, with several states holding programs in more than one location.

The BELL program has been operating in Baltimore since 2008. In 2012, our affiliate expanded the program to include a second site in Prince George's County. This summer, 15 students participated in BELL, ranging in age from 5 to 11. Eight of them were first-timers, with most of them having very little knowledge of Braille. One student, who was visiting her family in Baltimore, came all the way from the Congo! Many of our first-timers have deteriorating eye conditions, so the sooner they begin learning Braille and other blindness skills, the easier it will be for them to keep up with their peers in a regular classroom. Over 20 volunteers assisted with the programs at our two sites.

Special thanks go to Carlton Walker, a certified teacher of blind children and the parent of a blind child, who ran our Baltimore program, and Nancy Lentz, also a teacher of blind children, who ran our Prince George's County program.

As the two weeks unfolded, volunteers and teachers heard quotes like this: "This is the best camp ever." "I can now pump myself in the swing." "I liked reading skits about blind people." "I was scared to walk up and down the stairs with my cane, but when other students said they weren't scared, I tried it too." "I got to feel all four wheels of the bus before going on a field trip." "I liked making play dough." "I learned most of the Braille letters in two weeks."

It isn't enough to have a two-week program in the summer. Members of our affiliate will be meeting with our BELL students throughout the year to help them practice their newly learned skills, and to encourage them to continue reading to increase their speed. We will also be inviting BELL participants and their parents to join us at our annual convention in Ocean City. We want these students and parents to know the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland is here to support them, answer their questions, and help them advocate for all of the things needed for success.

We are most appreciative of a BELL grant from the Friends of the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, and a contribution from the Steptoe and Johnson law firm, thanks to Denise Rush, one of our Sligo Creek Chapter members. The National Harbor, Central Maryland and Greater Baltimore chapters also contributed funds to the BELL program. Reid Temple Christian Academy, the site of our Prince George's County program, was most generous in providing us with free space, transportation to our field trips, use of their playground facility, and lunch at a reduced cost. Even with all of this generosity however, our costs exceed the amount we receive in contributions. Purchase of liability insurance, paying teachers' salaries, and transportation for students are all costs we have to pay. The NFBMD is committed to running this program, so we will find a way to raise the necessary funds to keep it going. Any contributions to our affiliate for this program would be most appreciated.

**LET YOUR VEHICLE GO FARTHER**

Please consider donating old or unwanted vehicles to the National Federation of the Blind. Your vehicle will be picked up from a location of your choice, at no cost. You will receive a tax deduction for your donation, as well as the knowledge that your vehicle is being used to truly help blind people achieve independence.

To donate a vehicle, or for more information about this program, please call 1-855-659-9314, or visit http://www.carshelpingtheblind.org. This is a national program, so please share this information with family and friends around the country. We appreciate your support!

# SPECTATOR SPECS

## Ray Jackson dies

On January 4, our colleague and friend, Ray Jackson, died after a long illness. Ray was a member of the Board of Directors of the NFBMD for several terms and was the President of the Delmarva Chapter for more than 10 years. Here is what Muffin Copper, who was the Vice President of the Delmarva Chapter said at Ray’s eulogy. She expresses the sentiments of all of us.

“A link has been broken in our chain of leadership at the Delmarva Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind. It is one that can never be replaced. We’ve lost a good soldier who put up a good fight. He was a skilled leader who had a passion for his people and what he believed in. The NFB was his baby. He fought a good fight for his people because he believed that all things are possible through Christ. He left a legacy of understanding, leadership, and knowledge which no one can match. He taught his people to never let anyone define who we are. Even though his body was wracked with pain, he never showed us that he was giving up on us. We’ll miss his laughter and endless jokes. God gave him the gift of leadership. Most of all, we’ll miss his personality. Ray, we saw you slipping slowly away from us so we let you go because God wanted you to be with Him.”

## Other deaths

On February 5 Millicent Morris died after a long illness. Millicent was a long-time member of the Greater Baltimore Chapter and served on the BISM Board of Trustees for many years. She was a source of encouragement to newly blind seniors and an enthusiastic supporter of NFBMD fundraisers such as the crab feast. We will miss her humor and spirit.

We recently learned that long time Federationist, Ron Metenyi passed away in April. Ron was a member of the Greater Baltimore Chapter and an employee at BISM for more than 40 years. One of Ron’s favorite NFB activities was going to Annapolis to testify at various hearings. We will miss his jokes and puns and his caring personality.

We are sorry to report the death of Jude Lincicome on May 2. Since the 1980s, Jude was a tireless advocate for children with multiple disabilities. She was an active member of the Parents’ Division while her son Jeremy was in the school system. Jude was always willing to help parents make it possible for their children to reach their full potential.

On May 24, Tyraine Taylor, a member of the Greater Baltimore Chapter, lost his battle with cancer. Tyraine was a talented musician. He loved to play the piano at gatherings such as the Christmas Repast and Chapter breakfasts. Tyraine was active in the music ministry of his church and inspired many members of the congregation.

On June 21, Leon Rose passed away. Despite his poor health he remained active in community life. During the 1990s, Leon was president of the Central Maryland Chapter. He was an excellent role model for seniors because he did not just attend the low vision groups, he was active in many Senior Center activities--from playing the drums to serving on the advocacy committee. Leon was an avid supporter of NFB Newsline. When he moved to Nevada, he helped the Nevada affiliate obtain Newsline services. While in Nevada, Leon was a stand-up comedian and a community reporter for a local television station. We will miss his humor, energy and zest for life.

We were shocked to hear of the death of Sharon Reed on Monday, August 5.She attended our National Convention in Orlando just a month earlier. Her health deteriorated when she returned home. Sharon was a member of both the National Harbor Chapter and the Sligo Creek Chapter. Although she was sighted, she believed in the capabilities of blind persons and was an enthusiastic worker and supporter of all activities.

## New babies

Nathaniel Green, a relatively new Federationist, became the proud father of Judaea, on August 26, 2012. Like most little girls, Judaea already has Dad wrapped around her finger. Nathan graduated from the BISM Core program and also works at the company.

On April 5, 2013, William Creighton Otwell (Will) arrived. Jackie Otwell and her husband are excited about their first-born child. Jackie has been a mainstay in both the Maryland BELL program and in many national BELL programs. Jackie is an excellent vision teacher who won the Maryland Distinguished Educator of Blind Children award a few years ago. Jackie’s students are awaiting her return to the classroom.

Rosy and Marco Carranza became the proud parents of Sophia on April 19. Rosy worked at the National Center for several years and is currently a teacher in the Vision Program in the Washington, DC public schools. Marco, who was formerly a travel instructor at BISM, is now a rehabilitation counselor in Washington, DC. Congratulations to the Carranzas on their new jobs and their new family.

On June 3, 2013, Nick Lambright, who works at the National Center in the accounting department became a dad for the first time. Nick and his wife welcomed their son, Theodore. The new family is settling in nicely.

## First Grandchild

Congratulations to longtime Federationists Barbara and John Cheadle on the birth of their first grandson, Francis. Their son Charles and daughter-in-law Emily became proud parents on June 7. Congratulations to all the Cheadles.

## Weddings

In December 2012 Dianne Grant married her longtime sweetheart Anthony Morgan. Dianne has been a member of the Central Maryland chapter for many years and also worked at BISM.

Melissa Burch and James Treaster were married on May 24, 2013. Melissa was the immediate past president of the Tri-County chapter, a position that she gave up to move to Rosedale to be with James.

Congratulations and best wishes to both couples!

## Graduations

Carlos Mora obtained a Master’s degree in Clinical Counseling from Johns Hopkins University. Carlos will continue working at Johns Hopkins Hospital as an interpreter while he seeks other opportunities for employment in counseling.

Rachel Grider, a 2012 national scholarship winner, earned a Masters degree in Voice and Music theory from the Peabody Institute. We look forward to hearing more of Rachel’s singing concerts.

Carolyn Myles, a member of the Central Maryland chapter, earned a Bachelor’s degree in Human Resources from Strayer University. She is hoping to find work soon now that she has some new skills.

Leah Palmer graduated from Crosslands High School. She plans to attend an adjustment to blindness program and then get a job.

The following students graduated from the Maryland School for the Blind: Regina Melvin, Ashley Stewart and Jessica Woods. We have known these students for many years. They frequently came to our Braille Readers are Leaders parties. Congratulations and best wishes to all of the graduates.

## Achievements

Maryland had two winners in the National Braille Readers are Leaders 2012-2013 contest for adults. Patrick Gormley won first place in the expert category by reading 11,919 pages in Braille. Danielle Shives won third place in the expert category by reading 4,303 pages in Braille and won the expert drawing prize of $500 as well. Congratulations to both Patrick and Danielle.

After 41 years of service in the Health Department of Prince George’s County, Pauline Johnson retired on July 1, 2013. Pauline is the vice president of the Sligo Creek chapter and has held numerous offices on the state and local level. Pauleen was also the 2011 recipient of the Jernigan Award from the NFB of Maryland. We wish Pauline much happiness in her new career.

## New Citizen

On April 23, Geobert Amtoung, an energetic member of the National Harbor chapter, became a U.S. Citizen. Geobert came from Cameroon as a young student and is proud that he was able to master the knowledge about how the U.S. government works. Congratulations!

## Significant Milestones

Shirley Morris celebrated her 75th birthday in June.

President Marc Maurer and First Lady Patricia Maurer celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary on Aug. 17, 2013. Congratulations and best wishes to all.

**CALENDAR**

**October 5, 6:30 PM**

Scholarship Fund Dinner and Auction

Knights of Columbus Hall, 9450 Cherry Hill Road, College Park, MD

**October 15**

White Cane Safety Day

**October 1-31**

Meet the Blind Month

**November 8-10**

NFB of Maryland State Convention

Carousel Hotel, Ocean City, MD

**November 29 – December 3**

NFB Online Auction

***The Braille Spectator***

**Summer 2013**

**Judy Rasmussen, Editor**

The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, an affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind, is a non-profit organization of blind people whose purpose is to promote equal opportunities for the blind. We provide advocacy services for the blind, special training programs for parents of blind children, job referrals and placements for the blind, public education programs, scholarships to blind students, and help the newly blind to acquire special techniques for maintaining productive lives.

The *Braille Spectator* is published in print for members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland and others who share an interest in the work of this organization. It is also available in Microsoft Word and MP3 formats at <http://www.nfbmd.org>.

Send all inquiries, donations, news items, articles, letters to the editor, address changes and additions to the circulation list to the NFB of Maryland, 1026 East 36th Street, Baltimore, MD 21218. Phone: 410-645-0632. Email: president@nfbmd.org

**Officers of the NFB of Maryland**

Melissa Riccobono, President

Debbie Brown, First Vice President

Barry Hond, Second Vice President

Judy Rasmussen, Secretary

Shawn Jacobson, Treasurer

**Members of the Board of Directors**

Darlene Barrett

Ray Jackson

Pauline Johnson

Sharon Maneki

Trudy Pickrel

Renee West

**NFBMD CHAPTERS AND DIVISIONS**

**At-Large Chapter**

Mike Bullis, coordinator (443) 286-9001

email: bullis.michael@gmail.com

Monthly meetings second Thursday via phone:

(424) 203-8075, code 720125

**Baltimore County Chapter**

Ruth Sager, President (410) 602‑9030

email: rsager@bism.org

Monthly meetings fourth Thursday

**Central Maryland Chapter**

Darlene Barrett, President (410) 997-9664

email: chicagirl3@verizon.net

Monthly meetings first Tuesday

**Delmarva Chapter**

Danielle Earl, President (443) 359-5882

email: [dearl@bisum.org](mailto:dearl@bisum.org)

Monthly meetings second Saturday

**Greater Baltimore Chapter**

Chris Danielsen, President (410) 659-9314

email: cdanielsen@nfb.org

Monthly meetings third Saturday

**Greater Cumberland Chapter**

Jason Adkins, President (301) 759-3232

email: [silver1003@verizon.net](mailto:silver1003@verizon.net)

Monthly meetings last Thursday of the month

**National Harbor Chapter**

Michelle Clark, President (301) 583-8585

email: [mcikeyc@aol.com](mailto:mcikeyc@aol.com)

Monthly meetings fourth Saturday

**Sligo Creek Chapter**

Debbie Brown, President (301) 881-1892

email: 63characters@comcast.net

Monthly meetings second Saturday

**Tricounty Chapter**

Nikki Tippett, President (443) 262-5020

email: nikki8221@yahoo.com

Monthly meetings third Saturday

**Maryland Parents of Blind Children**

Trudy Pickrel, President (301) 387-4182

email: [tlpickrel@hotmail.com](mailto:tlpickrel@hotmail.com)

**Maryland Association of Blind Students**

Melissa Lomax, President (410) 608-6118

email: mlomax1@umbc.edu

**Maryland Senior's Issues Division**

Ruth Sager, President (410) 602-9030

email: rsager@bism.org

The print edition of the Braille Spectator contains a form to register for the 2013 National Federation of the Blind of Maryland annual state convention in Ocean City, Maryland, November 8-10. To obtain a registration form, or to register for convention online, please visit <http://www.nfbmd.org>

You can also contact Sharon Maneki at 410-715-9596 for registration assistance.