The Magic of Student Seminars in the National Federation of the Blind

By Justin Salisbury

From the editor:

Justin Salisbury currently serves as a board member of the National Association of Blind Students. He lives in Hawaii, where he pursues advocacy in all shapes and forms. He finds huge amounts of energy and satisfaction from bringing students together around the country. Below, he writes of his experience with regional student seminars, and the positive impact they can have on blind students everywhere.

In mid-August, I had the honor of attending the 2019 NABS Pacific Regional Student Seminar. We partnered with the Enchanted Hills Camp, owned and operated by the Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco. I was tasked with leading the committee of students who planned the seminar, and we brought students from all over the west coast and some landlocked western states. We were joined by NFB of California President Tim Elder, Lighthouse CEO Bryan Bashin, Martin Becerra-Miranda and Jen Spears from the Colorado Center for the Blind, and many other great mentors and role models. We planned it months in advance, advertised, found financial support, and built many connections for a long time to come. We had dozens of students in attendance, and it was appropriately powerful for the name of the Enchanted Hills Camp. We had speakers, role-playing, and spatially interactive activities. We went hiking, had bonfires, an did a ropes course. It was a wonderful time, and I heard great reviews from students who attended. This is something that we should be proud of as a movement, but it didn’t start there. It was grown over the years, and I am blessed to have been able to grow with it.

My first student seminar with the National Federation of the Blind was in 2010 in North Carolina. I participated because it was expected of me as an officer in the North Carolina Association of Blind Students, but I did not know what to expect at a seminar. The leaders ahead of me did most of the work in planning the seminar, and I was asked to co-lead three discussion groups: one on orientation and mobility on high school and college campuses, one on testing and academic accommodations and access, and one on getting involved on a high school or college campus. Working with my fellow student division leaders, I had the opportunity to facilitate discussions about blindness, to empower people to tell their stories, and to learn through the experiences and solutions of others. It was the first time I remember doing that, and I now do it almost every day.

The following year, I approached the same seminar as the President of the North Carolina Association of Blind Students. One of the goals I brought to that seminar was to expand our home-cooked technology fair, which had been operated by generous volunteers from the NFB of North Carolina, to a full-blown exhibit hall. We had about 30 vendors as I remember it, and we hosted close to 100 students. We had the understanding of the importance of building something big, but we were still learning about what it was that we were building. We brought blind students together, and, like the year before, we had unwavering support from our affiliate president, Gary Ray. These two ingredients are critical. We had teams for advertising, fundraising, and other tasks related to the seminar.

We built a full directory of all disability-related contacts at every institution of higher education in our state, which we continued to use afterward.

The state vocational rehabilitation agency rented vans before dawn and literally brought students to our seminar.

When it came to lunch time, our vice president and his team had a beautiful spread of wraps, cookies, etc. I felt like it would be most appropriate for me to wait for everyone else and then go to the back of the line, so I did. Someone else came up behind me. It was George Wurtzel, who was attending the seminar as a representative of BLIND, Inc., a training center run by the National Federation of the Blind in Minneapolis. He noted to me that, if I ever came to visit, I should come when one of the students was serving a meal for 40 people. That stopped me dead in my tracks. He explained that students at BLIND, Inc., as a type of capstone project for the home management class, would cook and serve a multi-course meal for 40 people. Until that point, my experiences at training centers were about being fed by others, not preparing food for others. It was a completely different way of thinking about training, as well as thinking about blindness. I could not have articulated this at the time, but what I was realizing was that we were not only the passive recipients of the generosity of others; we could be the producers and contributors who could influence the world around us in everyday ways like serving food to a large group. Jim Omvig famously called this “giving back.” It is a necessary part of being a first-class member of society.

As the years have passed since that seminar, I cannot remember how many seminars I have attended. Some have been single-state, and others have been multi-state.

It has been an honor to bear witness to the transformative experiences in many blind students’ lives across the country. When we bring blind people together, the magic is automatic. We need to have a strong connection to our national movement to help students feel that connection at the individual level.

Sometimes, the primary role of a seminar in a student’s life is the opportunity to be around other blind students. If I did not have that already, it could be that for me. There have been times, even within the past month, where I have been down about something and needed to talk to a friend who would understand.

A half hour spent talking to a fellow NABS board member did not necessarily create a solution, but it did help me truly understand that I was not alone.

Sometimes, that makes all the difference in the world. Other times, this can be helpful because then it allows us to explore other parts of our identities because we are no longer finding our identities consumed with the blindness part of it. When we are around other blind people, then I can be the American Indian and Ashkenazi Jew. Then, I can be the guy who ran scored points in a conference championship track meet in high school. Then, I can be the guy who pledged a fraternity. I want the opportunity to celebrate those other parts of who I am, and being around other blind people helps me do that.

The skills that are useful in planning a state convention are similar to planning a student seminar. We still need a venue, food, attendees, advertising, sponsorships and other forms of revenue, an agenda, and the list continues. Years later, when I had the privilege of planning a state convention with my state president there to mentor me, I was already familiar with every part of what I needed to do.

When I head into a student seminar, I don’t know what every student will gain from it. I try to make sure it is as multi-dimensional as possible so that students can gain from it in every possible way. The list is literally infinite. Some students need to learn about resources, some need to make friends, some need to learn a skill, and some need to learn about what is possible for blind people.

Every time we do student seminars, we get better at them. We know more about how to help empower blind people. I no longer think about our velocity as a movement; I think about our acceleration. It is not our job to maintain velocity; it is our job to maintain acceleration. In the future, someone will likely say that we must maintain the next derivative, which mathematicians call the “jerk.”

A student seminar is a microcosm of the magic that is the National Federation of the Blind. Every seminar is an opportunity for students to learn and grow, whatever their current level. Every task that must be executed is training for us to put together other programs within the Federation. Every situation is a learning opportunity. I encourage all students to make every effort to attend student seminars and discover what magic will happen for you.