# BRAILLE MONITOR

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*Gary Wunder, Editor*

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NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND

Mark Riccobono, President

telephone: 410-659-9314

email address: [nfb@nfb.org](mailto:nfb@nfb.org)

website address: <http://www.nfb.org>

NFBnet.org: <http://www.nfbnet.org>

NFB-NEWSLINE® information: 866-504-7300

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200 East Wells Street *at Jernigan Place*  
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## Convention Roundup #NFB24

**by Chris Danielsen**

### Introduction

The annual national convention of the National Federation of the Blind is often compared to a reunion or homecoming. This seems particularly applicable to #NFB24, as the convention was known on social media and its dedicated mobile app. Not only were veteran convention attendees reconnecting with our extended chosen Federation family, but we were also on familiar ground at the beautiful Rosen Centre Hotel in the heart of downtown Orlando, Florida. This was the site of our seventy-fifth anniversary convention in 2015, at which we broke a world record, and where the National Federation of the Blind proudly hosted the 2016 General Assembly of the World Blind Union. It seemed that many Rosen Centre staff were looking forward to the convention as much as we were. On Wednesday, July 3, the first convention morning, they greeted us with their expected courtesy, friendliness, and efficient service. Staff at the large hotel restaurant known as Café Gaugin not only served many of us our first hearty breakfast from its buffet (including your humble correspondent, who being a Southern boy at heart was delighted to find decent grits available), but also eagerly directed crowds toward the registration area just beyond the restaurant. These helpful staff members joined volunteers from other Rosen properties, where we have also held conventions and which were serving as overflow hotels, in helping the convention run smoothly and making sure everyone found the meeting or gathering they were looking for. Of course, our Convention Ambassadors, the Federation volunteers who serve as "talking signs" and assist in other ways, were also on hand.

Some Federationists had risen well before convention registration started to attend the annual daylong conference of the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children (NOPBC) or the twenty-third annual Contemporary Issues in Rehabilitation and Education for the Blind Conference sponsored by the National Blindness Professional Certification Board and the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness.

Many of the rest packed the ballroom foyer to wait patiently in the registration and preregistration lines while greeting each other and discussing their plans for the upcoming week. Registrants and preregistrants received a packet containing their convention name badge and any banquet tickets they had purchased, and many received a QR code so that they could start playing a trivia game created by the consultants working with the Federation to create the Museum of the Blind People’s Movement. On the twenty-fourth floor, the Presidential Suite was also receiving guests, who enjoyed coffee, snacks, and the opportunity to meet President Mark Riccobono and other Federation leaders and staff. The afternoon brought the annual career fair sponsored by the National Federation of the Blind Employment Committee. Some seven hundred people, most of them attending their first convention, gathered for the "Rookie Roundup" that evening, where they were welcomed by President Riccobono, First Vice President Pam Allen, and others who helped to give them a preview of the convention and tips for making the most of it.

Throughout this first day and the rest of the convention, many other meetings or breakout sessions took place. They included gatherings of Federation divisions, committees, and groups; presentations by some of our sponsors; "Youth Track" activities for children, teens, and their families sponsored by the NOPBC; and much more. Readers can obtain an overview of the hundreds of convention activities by reviewing the #NFB24 agenda, which is available at <https://nfb.org/get-involved/national-convention/2024-national-convention-agenda>. We have highlighted only a few of them in this article to give a flavor of the variety of activities available. We have asked committee, division, and group leaders to provide reports of the meetings they led or attended, so we are hopeful that this request will bring additional content in the coming months.

### Overview of the Virtual Experience

In keeping with a tradition begun in 2022, the first in-person convention after the COVID-19 pandemic, those who could not attend #NFB24 for whatever reason were invited to participate in a virtual experience. This allows those who cannot attend the convention to audit the general sessions, as well as the meetings of the Resolutions Committee and Board of Directors. They can also access exclusive content designed to give a taste of the rest of the convention. The first of the virtual experience sessions during the convention proper was an extensive welcome from the Presidential Suite beginning at 11 a.m. on Wednesday morning. For two hours, Federation First Lady Melissa Riccobono, with some help from Membership Building Coordinator Danielle McCann and your correspondent, gave listeners a sense of the conversation and activity among visitors to the Presidential Suite and previewed the other content that would be available to virtual experience participants in the coming days. Much of the exclusive virtual convention content is now posted on our 2024 convention archive page, which readers can visit at <https://nfb.org/get-involved/national-convention/past-conventions/2024-national-convention>. This page also contains many of the presentations you will read about in the following pages, in case you cannot wait to experience them in this and future issues of this magazine.

### Day Two: Exhibit Hall and Independence Market Open, Resolutions Committee Meets, and More

The next day was July 4, Independence Day. This is an important celebration for our nation, but also coincided nicely with the first opportunity for attendees to visit the Federation’s Independence Market and check out some of its over four hundred offerings, from our ever-popular white canes and Braille writing supplies to the brand new Rubik’s Sensory Cube, which uses tactile markings along with colors to allow blind people to solve the "world’s most popular puzzle" independently. The National Federation of the Blind worked directly with Spin Master, the global entertainment company that holds the rights to Rubik’s Cube, to create this product and its accessible packaging, which incorporates Braille. The rest of our convention exhibit hall was open as well, boasting everything from the latest and greatest technology products to various swag being offered by Federation affiliates in exchange for donations. The exhibitors included many of our convention sponsors, which have the thanks of our movement for helping to make this enormous annual undertaking possible. Here is a complete list of these valued partners by sponsorship level.

#### Platinum:

* Google
* Microsoft
* Non-24-Hour Sleep-Wake Disorder (Non-24)
* Oracle
* Vispero
* Waymo
* Wells Fargo

#### Gold:

* Amazon
* Target

#### Silver:

* Brown, Goldstein & Levy, LLP
* Delta Airlines
* JPMorgan Chase & Co.
* Market Development Group
* Uber

#### Bronze:

* American Printing House
* AmGen
* Centene Corporation
* Charter Communications
* Cruise
* CVS Health
* Guiding Eyes for the Blind
* HumanWare
* United Airlines
* Zoox

#### White Cane:

* ABLE United / ABLE Today
* Aira
* AllyADA
* American Foundation for the Blind
* C&P-Chris Park Technology
* Central Intelligence Agency
* Computers for the Blind
* Democracy Live
* En-Vision America
* Envision, Inc.
* GoodMaps
* IKE Smart City
* Jackson Walker LLP
* Leader Dogs for the Blind
* McGraw Hill
* National Industries for the Blind
* National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled
* OrCam
* Penny Forward
* Personal.ai
* Saavi Services for the Blind
* Selvas BLV, formerly HIMS Inc.
* Sensotec
* Tactile Engineering / Independence Science

Meanwhile, beginning at 11 a.m., virtual experience participants could listen into a sampling of audio from throughout the convention as part of their exclusive content package. This lively and fun presentation is available on the convention archive page referenced above.

One of the most important functions of the national convention is as the supreme governing authority of our movement. Not only are annual elections held, but our policy priorities for the coming year and beyond are set. That process begins with the meeting of the Resolutions Committee, which by longstanding tradition took place on the convention’s second afternoon. The Resolutions Committee receives proposed policy statements from members of the Federation, debates them, and takes an initial vote that determines whether the committee will recommend that the full convention pass each resolution during one of its general sessions. During the committee meeting, a proponent is asked to speak in favor of each resolution and answer questions from committee members. Beyond the participation of these proponents, debate takes place exclusively among the committee members at this point. Nonetheless, the meeting is often packed with other convention attendees eager to learn what policy proposals they will be asked to consider later. This year was no exception.

As noted, it was the afternoon of July 4, and fittingly the twenty-two resolutions considered by the committee often touched on the theme of facilitating the greater independence of blind people in a variety of activities, from life’s "fun stuff" such as accessing the many theme parks in Orlando and beyond to more serious matters like managing our own healthcare, receiving nondiscriminatory treatment in employment settings, and purchasing goods and services independently, whether in store or online. Resolutions Chair Donald Porterfield, with help from resolution readers Jennifer Dunnam and Pat Miller and of course the resolution proponents and members of the committee, handled the proceedings with efficiency and aplomb, with all resolutions duly debated and voted upon in just under three hours. Although not all resolutions make it out of the committee in some years, this time the committee sent all twenty-two of the proposals to the convention floor. Accordingly, the text of all resolutions remained posted to the NFB website so that members could read and consider them in advance of floor debate and prepare any comments they wished to make.

### The Board Breaks Big News

The morning of Friday, July 5, featured the meeting of the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind. While convention attendees could still visit the Exhibit Hall and Independence Market, as well as enjoy other group meetings, sponsor sessions, and more, many chose to be in the grand ballroom for this important kickoff event, considered to be the first general session of the convention. Among other things, the board meeting sets the stage for elections and often provides important news, such as the location of next year’s convention. In addition, some awards are presented, and the thirty national scholarship finalists introduce themselves to the audience. This year’s board meeting did not disappoint on any of these fronts; in fact, it broke more news than usual.

President Riccobono gaveled the meeting to order precisely at nine o’clock and called the roll. All officers and directors were present. President Riccobono then called us to remember Federationists we had lost since our last convention by reading fifty-six of their names and reminding us to lift up those whose names did not make the list but were inscribed on the hearts of all those who knew and loved them. The gathering then recited the Pledge of Allegiance and Federation Pledge. The latter was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, having been proposed by Dr. Kenneth Jernigan at the 1974 convention. President Riccobono then reminded attendees to avoid engaging in conduct that was not welcoming and respectful of others, including jam-packing the elevators, mingling in crowds if we were feeling ill, and wearing fragrances. The upcoming elections were then discussed, with the members up for re-election and those whose terms would continue read to the audience. Ron Brown, second vice president of the Federation, sought the floor and was recognized. Ron said that his philosophy of service is best summed up by a quote from the poet Maya Angelou: "When you get, give; when you know, teach." He recounted his service on the board beginning in Philadelphia in 2001 and his election as second vice president in 2008 in Dallas. He said that, having helped drive the train of our movement, he was ready to kick back with his wife Jean, his "Miss Sunshine," and ride it for a while. President Riccobono thanked Ron for being a "rock" of the board during the transition between Immediate Past President Dr. Marc Maurer and himself and averred that there may never be another board member with as many World Series of Beep Baseball championship rings.

Carla McQuillan was recognized next. She announced that she would not seek the office of president of the National Federation of the Blind of Oregon when it meets for its convention in October and has recently been elected chair of the board of BLIND Inc., our Minnesota blindness skills training center, to help reimagine and reinvigorate its program. She therefore declined to be nominated for another term on the Board of Directors. Joking that her husband, Lucas, was raising money by conducting a poll as to when she would begin to cry, Carla expressed that she did not believe that she would ever be able to give back to the Federation everything that it had given to her, but that she would continue to try. There were indeed a few tears, perhaps not only from Carla. President Riccobono fondly recalled that Carla was one of the first Federationists he met at his own first convention and thanked her for the many years of running NFB Camp, our convention childcare, as well as her board service and her anticipated contributions to BLIND Inc.

Adelmo Vigil then sought the floor to announce that he was concluding his eight years of service on the board. He added, however, that he was quite sure that he would continue to work in the movement, since every time he announced his retirement from something, true retirement seemed to slip further and further away. President Riccobono thanked Adelmo for his service and reflected that he was not the loudest board member, but when he spoke he did so with authenticity and authority that commanded respect.

Our national President then introduced Jorge Hernandez, president of the National Federation of the Blind of Florida, who welcomed us home to Orlando, invited us to visit the Florida hospitality suite, and previewed the exciting opening ceremony that the host affiliate had planned for the first general session.

Then the big news came. John Berggren, chair of convention arrangements, called our attention to various logistics, such as the shuttle transportation among hotels, guide dog relief areas, and banquet ticket exchange. In doing so, he alluded to next year’s convention, but noted that he did not seem to have legibly printed information on where it would be located. President Riccobono responded that his Braille notes were intact and announced that the 2025 convention would take place at two familiar-sounding hotels with competitive rates and ample facilities in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Norma Crosby then sought the floor and was recognized. She slyly stated that she had earlier assured some of her Federation family that the President would never keep secrets from our members, so she was sure that if he knew where conventions were taking place after 2025, he would tell us. President Riccobono wondered if Norma thought perhaps attendance would be harmed at forthcoming conventions if too much information about their locations were provided (she did not think so), and then needled her by asking if she thought there was a better location than New Orleans. Norma replied that she thought there were perhaps some cities that could at least equal New Orleans. This prompted President Riccobono to announce—after revealing dates, hotels, and room rates first to build more suspense—that the 2026 convention would be our first-ever to take place in Austin, Texas. Norma then asked, "Is that all you got?" which prompted the revelation that our 2027 convention will also take place in Austin. Marilyn Green of Illinois was recognized and mentioned that other affiliates might want a convention in their state as well, perhaps in someplace cooler than Texas in summer. "Maybe by a lake?" President Riccobono teased, previewing his revelation that the 2028 and 2029 conventions will be held in Chicago. It is probable that not since the then-pending six Orlando conventions, plus one intervening in Dallas, were revealed in 2010 have so many conventions been previewed at a single board meeting. All of the known convention dates and locations are now posted at [nfb.org/convention](https://nfb.org/convention).

A video presentation from Federationist Sachin Pavithran was then introduced. Sachin’s day job is as executive director of the Access Board, a small, independent federal agency that sets accessibility standards. He announced that in 2025, the entire Access Board, along with key staff, would attend the New Orleans convention and hold an official town hall on the morning of the Resolutions Committee meeting, as well as breakout sessions throughout the rest of the event. He also announced that the Access Board would soon be issuing a new standard regarding the self-service transaction machines that are proliferating across the government and private sector and urged all of us to read it when published and submit our comments. These announcements were greeted with great enthusiasm by the audience, and President Riccobono complimented Sachin and the Access Board for taking the bold and historic step of holding a meeting in conjunction with the largest annual gathering of people with disabilities, its direct constituents.

### Critical Committees and Supporting Our Movement

Following all of this thrilling news and throughout the rest of the board meeting, President Riccobono shared more convention logistics and invited the leaders of several important committees and fundraising efforts to make brief presentations. A few highlights of what they had to say are as follows:

Ronza Othman, chair of the Code of Conduct Feedback Committee, reminded members that they are invited and encouraged to provide critical input regarding the organization’s Code of Conduct, which governs the expected behavior of our members and outlines disciplinary procedures for violations, by sending an email to [codefeedback@nfb.org](mailto:codefeedback@nfb.org) or by calling 410-659-9314 (the Federation’s main national office number), then dialing extension 2284. This feedback is confidential; only members of the committee will be aware of the information about individuals submitting the feedback, and the overall results will be aggregated so as not to identify them.

Kenia Flores was introduced as the new cochair of the Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. She thanked outgoing cochair Colin Wong for his mentorship and service and expressed how much she looks forward to working with cochair Shawn Callaway and the rest of the committee. She also urged listeners to complete their member profiles at [www.nfb.org](http://www.nfb.org) so that the committee will have accurate information about the various intersectionalities and demographics of our membership.

Patti Chang, Director of Outreach and Development, reminded everyone of our critical fundraising initiatives, including our continued acceptance of vehicle donations, which can be made by calling 855-659-9314. She also thanked the convention sponsors mentioned earlier in this article and shared that a fundraiser planned for Blind Equality Achievement Month in October of 2024 will feature a drawing to win the new BT Speak device from Blazie Technologies. Information about all of the ways you can support our movement is at <https://nfb.org/get-involved/ways-give>, and Patti can be reached at [pchang@nfb.org](mailto:pchang@nfb.org) or extension 2422.

Tracy Soforenko, chair of our Kenneth Jernigan Fund Committee, which provides scholarships for people who need financial assistance to attend their first convention, announced that the committee received nearly two hundred applications this year and was able to award grants to 111 individuals and families, the largest class of awardees in the fund’s history.

Everette Bacon, board secretary and chair of the White Cane Fund, reminded the audience of this fund’s importance, as it is our general fund that supports much of the work of our organization. He encouraged all to participate in the "Dream Big, Give 25" campaign to support this fund before it ended at the close of general session the next day, pointing out that this would not only help our movement but give donors a chance to win exciting and valuable prizes, including a trip to next year’s convention or a Monarch dynamic tactile display.

Marilyn Green, chair of the Pre-Authorized Contribution (PAC) Committee, reminded us of the importance of that effort and encouraged the friendly but fierce competition among affiliates that is always part of the national convention.

Sandy Halverson, reporting virtually from Virginia as her husband John, a leader in his own right, recovered from a stroke, chairs the SUN Fund Committee, and reminded listeners of its critical importance in serving as the emergency fund of our organization. She urged us to find creative ways to support the fund, including passing a "SUN basket" at caucuses and events to add to the relatively small but critically important balance.

In the absence of its board chair Kathryn Webster, who had been called away from the meeting by her employer and could not present her virtual report, President Riccobono reminded the audience that our Jacobus tenBroek Memorial Fund supports and manages our property in Baltimore. He announced that the tenBroek Fund board has authorized the construction of a new, covered guide dog relief area on this property.

### Distinguished Educator and Scholarship Presentations

Carla McQuillan chairs the committee that selects the recipient of the Distinguished Educator of Blind Students Award. She took the microphone for the second time during the board meeting to announce this year’s winner. The full presentation and the winner’s acceptance remarks, along with the official press release announcing the award, appear elsewhere in this issue.

The final presentation of the morning, and probably the most eagerly anticipated portion of the board meeting except perhaps for the future convention reveals, was given by Cayte Mendez, who chairs the National Federation of the Blind Scholarship Committee. Her task was to announce the thirty finalists for the scholarships and allow them to introduce themselves briefly to the convention. The winners of scholarships were announced later at the convention banquet. Full information about the scholarship finalists and awards appears elsewhere in this issue. Following the presentation of the scholarship class, Federation First Vice President and Board Chair Pam Allen moved that the scholarship program be continued. The motion was quickly seconded and unanimously adopted.

Before closing the meeting, President Riccobono invited Pam Allen to give some brief additional remarks. Pam’s comments focused on the core values of our organization, as adopted in our strategic plan published in the July 2023 issue of this magazine. Here is what Pam had to say in closing the board meeting:

Thank you. Hello, my Federation family! I’m thrilled to be here with all of you for our 2024 convention. And whether you’re here in person or participating through our Virtual Experience, I know you feel the energy and the love. I want to commend President Jorge Hernandez and our Florida team for all of their outstanding hospitality, and I want to send a special shout-out to our first-time attendees. It was great to be together at the Rookie Roundup where our first-timers learned firsthand how to make the most out of their convention. Just like today, the excitement in the room was palpable, and our convention veterans and KJ Committee members did an extraordinary job.

This convention I encourage you to take advantage of all the opportunities. As we gather this week, let us reflect on our core values:

We believe in the potential of blind people to achieve our dreams. We lead courageously, taking bold steps toward a more inclusive society. We champion collective action, knowing that together we are stronger. We foster inclusion and celebrate our diversity, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued, and we dream big because the possibilities are limitless. When we believe in ourselves and one another, we have the power to shape our own destinies.

How fortunate we are to have been nurtured by our leaders like Dr. and Mrs. Maurer, Dr. and Mrs. Jernigan, and so many who showed us how to live our philosophy through our actions and words. I also want to acknowledge and celebrate the exceptional leadership of President Riccobono.

Your unwavering commitment to each of us and to our mission transforms lives. Your leadership has been instrumental in driving our mission forward, guided by our core values, and we are so grateful to you and to Melissa for your loving dedication, which motivates us all. I want to thank each of you for being here and for the work we’re doing this week, but also all year at our local and state levels. We could not turn our dreams into reality without you, and if you have not joined yet, we hope that you will. Whether this is your first convention or your fifty-first, I know you will leave here uplifted and renewed, ready to spread our message.

Eleanor Roosevelt said: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." Let’s embrace our dreams with determination and optimism, knowing that together, we can achieve extraordinary things. Happy convention! Let’s go build the National Federation of the Blind!

It is worth noting here that the core values Pam mentioned were the guiding theme of the convention. The registration badges contained the words "believe, lead, champion, include, dream big" and the print and Braille bracelets that many attendees received read "Believe in blind people 2024."

After Pam’s stirring remarks, the board meeting was adjourned. Those who stayed tuned in to the virtual experience heard a one-on-one discussion between Danielle McCann and Lia Stone, who cochairs the NFB Employment Committee along with Jennifer Wenzel. The employment efforts that this committee helps to direct include a career fair that takes place as part of each convention. Lia reported that this year’s career fair, which had taken place Wednesday afternoon, was an outstanding success, with some thirty employers and some 170 job seekers participating. She noted that representatives of employers who had not participated were impressed and approached her to say that they would join the event next year. She also answered questions from the virtual audience, relaying employment tips and insights from her own professional journey. This conversation is archived on the 2024 convention page mentioned above.

The balance of Friday brought the business meetings of many of the divisions and groups of the National Federation of the Blind, as well as the annual Braille Book Fair sponsored by our partner organization, the American Action Fund for Blind Children and Adults. President Riccobono had noted during the board meeting that 181 boxes of books were received for the book fair, with plenty of reading material for both children and adults.

### The First General Session Begins

The opening general session of #NFB24 was set to begin at nine o’clock on the morning of July 6, and like all Federation meetings, it started on time. Well before it commenced, though, Federationists who had found their affiliate delegations and snagged seats early were loudly and enthusiastically directing others from their affiliate to join them. The deep, sonorous voice of Dwight Sayer, immediate past president of the National Association of Blind Veterans, was also heard directing all veterans, active-duty personnel, and reservists to come to the right of the stage in preparation for the Celebration of Freedom, a beloved tradition that he helped to inaugurate. President Riccobono brought the convention to order at the appointed time, and introduced Linda Mentink, chair of the Blind Christians Group, for the opening invocation. After the first door prize, current NABV President Dr. Vernon Humphrey was introduced. He in turn summoned the color guard, which brought the American flag and the standards of the United States Armed Forces to the stage. Our national anthem was sung, and then the color guard was dismissed. Vernon thanked the local Shriners for assisting with the patriotic opening, then turned the microphone back over to President Riccobono. The President took a moment to thank the Youth Track participants for gifting him with a new hat, featuring a parrot, in honor of our Florida convention, mentioning past gifts from them as well, including his rubber chicken, Banquet. He named the parrot hat Buffet. He then introduced host affiliate President Jorge Hernandez, who once again welcomed us all and then introduced Tomasito Cruz and the Ritmo Latino Band. This high-energy combo, led by its Grammy-winning percussionist, soon had some singing along and many others dancing in the aisles as it played a spirited set of authentic Latin songs and familiar Latin-flavored pop and rock tunes. The energetic performance was all the more impressive given that, as Danielle McCann learned in conversation with their manager and relayed later to virtual listeners, they were reporting to our convention after a gig the night before that had lasted until 4 a.m.

The musicians took brief breaks to allow Kaye Baker and Camille Tate, the secretary and first vice president of the National Federation of the Blind of Florida, respectively, to introduce themselves.

### Celebration of Freedom and Roll Call of States

This electrifying opening ceremony was followed by the Celebration of Freedom. Vernon Humphrey introduced the thirty-six individuals connected to the Armed Forces who had earlier assembled on stage. These heroes briefly introduced themselves and the service branches they represented, and in some cases identified the conflicts in which they served. Each received a Freedom Ribbon to affix to their convention badge. A small choir of Federationists completed the ceremony by performing "God Bless America." Vernon then thanked the Federation family, the "hidden army" of staff and volunteers that makes the convention happen, and President Riccobono. He then presented the President a check from the division in the amount of $11,574.91. Readers are strongly urged to experience the full breadth of this powerful celebration by viewing or listening to it from our #NFB24 archive page.

It was then time for the Roll Call of States. To keep delegates on their toes, and to ensure that delegations toward the end of the alphabet were not rushed, the roll call this year proceeded in reverse alphabetical order. This meant that Wyoming would have been first, but President Riccobono noted that no delegation from that state was present. He mentioned, however, that members of the Colorado affiliate, the national board, and the national staff had recently participated in an event to start rebuilding the affiliate, and that he hoped that a Wyoming delegation would be present in New Orleans next year. Each of the fifty-one delegates present, in turn, identified themselves and their alternate delegate, appointed their affiliate representative to the Nominating Committee, and announced the date and location of their affiliate convention if known, along with whether a national representative had been appointed by President Riccobono to attend it. Many also took a moment or three to identify Kenneth Jernigan Scholarship recipients and other first-time conventioneers, scholarship finalists, representatives from their state rehabilitation agencies, students of training programs, and other noteworthy individuals seated in their delegations. They also touted their various programs, including NFB BELL® Academies and STEM2U events. Minnesota President Corbb O’Connor announced that the affiliate was successful in getting protections for parents with disabilities and a requirement for accessible prescription drug labels passed into law. Ronza Othman, president of the Maryland affiliate, touted its recent legislative achievements as well, including a grant from the state legislature for the Museum of the Blind People’s Movement. Colorado also passed accessible prescription labeling legislation, as well as securing a grant for more assistance to the blind in rural parts of the state. Arizona announced that in October of 2023, SAAVI Services for the Blind became the latest official Structured Discovery training center. President Riccobono then appointed Pam Allen chair of the Nominating Committee that had just been appointed by the delegates. After a final door prize, the convention adjourned until 2 p.m.

### General Session II: The Presidential Report, Braille and Tactile Literacy, Adventures at Sea, and More

The afternoon session again packed the ballroom, as everyone eagerly anticipated the annual delivery of the Presidential Report. The Federation’s national President, in addition to chairing the convention, traditionally gives two addresses, and the Presidential Report is the first. In it, the President recaps the year since the prior convention, highlighting the major legal victories, legislative progress, program activities, and other achievements of our movement. This year’s report emphasized the aforementioned core values, using them to categorize the accomplishments it described. The full report follows this article. Its conclusion was greeted with a standing ovation and chants of "Ric-co-bo-no" to honor the man who delivered it and spearheaded the work that it summarized, just as he had concluded the report by honoring the membership of the Federation who made the work possible.

Back in his role as chair of the proceedings, the President welcomed the presentation of door prizes and brief reports from the White Cane and PAC Committees, then called the audience’s attention to the next scheduled presentation. This came from Casey Robertson, the lead instructor at the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness at Louisiana Tech. Casey’s topic was "Leading Courageously with High Expectations: Braille and Teacher Preparation." She described the rigorous requirements she has set for learning Braille, a component that is sadly missing from far too many other programs that are supposed to train teachers of blind students and other professionals in the blindness field, but not from the program that she leads. With humor and heart, she explained the Braille reading and writing requirements of her curriculum and how they benefit the professionals in training and, ultimately, the blind people that these professionals will help to instruct and mentor. Casey’s remarks will appear in a future issue.

The next item on the agenda was a report on the progress of the Monarch, the dynamic display for Braille and tactile graphics that is a product of a partnership among the National Federation of the Blind, HumanWare, and the American Printing House (APH). Bruce Miles, president of HumanWare, began the presentation by telling us that the Monarch is set to be available for sale on September 3, 2024. He proudly announced that since the original prototypes were created, the Monarch has gained a host of new features. Among these are the ability to instantly produce a tactile graph of an equation and announce the coordinates when the user clicks any point on the graph. Users can also play tactile chess with a friend or against the Monarch’s computer brain, access a library of thousands of tactile images, and explore maps. More features are planned, including an app that will allow teachers to draw images on a tablet and have them instantly appear on the Monarch and an email client to send and receive digital files. Bruce emphasized that none of this would be possible without the feedback received through the partnership with the National Federation of the Blind. Through this partnership and others, he told the audience, "We have released more than two hundred Monarchs into the wild, and they are being used by teachers, parents, researchers, testing companies, technology experts, libraries and more." Through these opportunities for various entities to test and learn about the Monarch, he said, the hope is to identify uses for the device beyond education in employment, transportation, and more. He then introduced Dr. Craig Meador, the president of APH, to lead a panel consisting of a teacher, parent, and student who are already using the Monarch. The panelists were Gina Fugate, a computer science teacher at the Maryland School for the Blind; Katie Carlock, a Georgia parent from the Atlanta area; and Katie’s daughter Kennedy, who is in second grade. Gina emphasized how the Monarch helps her students in robotics and computing because they can view and edit many lines of code at once. Katie said that her daughter’s young age was no barrier to her working with the Monarch and emphasized that blind students should have access to technology just as their sighted peers do. And Kennedy gave the ultimate kid endorsement when she shared her own reaction to the device and the reactions of her friends: "That’s cool!"

Dr. Meador closed the presentation by talking about the important work that our community will need to do to make the Monarch widely available. The device is expensive, but he noted that thousands of dollars are spent on technology for sighted students, so it is simply a matter of equity for funds to be spent on blind students as well. He then outlined strategies that our community can use to obtain such funding from the federal government and from state rehabilitation agencies.

The theme of partnership continued with the next item. In introducing the speaker, Robert Fenton, President Riccobono explained that they came to know each other through his role as chair of the board of directors for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. The President credited Robert with helping to bring a more blind-centered approach to the work of that agency and noted that they both are enthusiastic about ways we can cooperate as neighbors. Robert, who is also general counsel to the Calgary Police Service, spoke about his job and how he has succeeded in it as a blind attorney, but also about the difficulties he has faced and what he has learned from his career that applies to our shared advocacy to change societal perceptions of blindness. His remarks will appear in a later issue.

The final presentation of the afternoon was entitled "Inclusion by Example: Adventures of a Blind Woman Navigating the Oceans of STEM Professionals." The presenter was Amy Bower, a blind woman who is the senior physical oceanographer at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and "adventures" was truly an apt word for the stories she shared with us. These included not only tales of her work on the mysterious waters that cover most of our planet but also of how she navigated the particular challenges of a high-pressure academic institution to succeed. Her remarks appear elsewhere in this issue, and we will say no more about them at this time except to whet your appetite by noting that one of her stories involved pirates. Yes, you read that right: actual pirates! Following this truly edge-of-your seat presentation, the latest registration numbers, and a final door prize, the session was adjourned so that conventioneers could take their last opportunity to visit the Exhibit Hall, get dinner, and enjoy the many other evening meetings and activities on the agenda.

### General Session III Begins: Financials and Elections

After the gavel fell at 9 a.m. on Sunday morning, July 7, Stuart Proust, chair of the National Federation of the Blind in Judaism, gave the invocation. President Riccobono then proceeded to summarize the organization’s financial position for the delegates and members. The full financial audit report and 990 form for the year 2023 are available in accessible formats at <https://nfb.org/about-us/annual-report-and-financials>. President Riccobono was able to tell the convention that our financial position improved from last year’s report, which contained concerning deficit numbers, so that by December 31, 2023, our net assets were in the black, although just barely. He reported that the first half of 2024 was looking much brighter, with positive net assets to the tune of roughly four and a half million dollars, though he stressed that number did not yet account for convention expenses, which are always significant. He acknowledged and thanked the affiliates that had participated in the virtual Honor Roll Call of States by submitting donations to the four funds mentioned earlier.

President Riccobono then took a moment to emphasize that our legal program, while it has great impact, also costs the organization a good deal of money, typically between 2.5 and 4 million dollars a year, and needs our continued support. He said that based on his rough calculations over the past five years, we only recover in damages and attorney’s fees about a third of what we spend on litigation, and sometimes recovery in a given suit can take many years. For example, our litigation against the Los Angeles Community College District has been going on since 2017, and although we won on the merits in a jury trial, the question of specific remedies for the harm done to the blind students we fought for is still being litigated. It is therefore unclear when we will see the financial fruits of victory, although we expect them to be substantial when we do. With all of that said, President Riccobono asked if there were questions, and then requested and received a motion and second for the report to be accepted, which carried unanimously.

Elections were next on the morning agenda. Pam Allen, wearing yet another proverbial hat as chair of the Nominating Committee, gave its report, which proposed the following officers for election: Mark Riccobono of Maryland, President; Pam Allen of Louisiana, First Vice President; Everette Bacon of Utah, Second Vice President; Barbara Manuel of Alabama, Secretary; and Norma Crosby of Texas, Treasurer. This proposal moved Everette Bacon from secretary to second vice president, filling the position Ron Brown was vacating, with Barbara Manuel replacing Everette as secretary. Jamie Richey of Nebraska, Jim Marks of Montana, and Ben Dallin of Wisconsin were nominated by the committee to fill the vacant board seats. The committee’s report further recommended that Shawn Callaway of the District of Columbia, Donald Porterfield of Arizona, and Shelia Wright of Missouri retain their positions. The Nominating Committee report was duly accepted by the convention, and elections began with President Riccobono turning the chair over to Pam Allen to conduct the vote for President. After the traditional three calls for nominations from the floor, a procedure repeated for each subsequent election, President Riccobono was re-elected by thunderous acclamation. He kept his remarks brief, having just given his Presidential Report the day before, but thanked his family, his mentors Dr. and Mrs. Maurer, and his "left hand" on stage for many years, Federation Chief of Staff Beth Braun. Of the board, he said: "We have extraordinary leaders, and they are tough. They are not folks that just say yes. They ask hard questions, but they are the best group of leaders you could serve with." Concluding with "I love you all," he proceeded with the remaining elections.

Pam Allen was re-elected to the office of first vice president by acclamation. She thanked the membership and spoke of the privilege of serving with her board colleagues and with President Riccobono, whom she described as a "cherished friend.” She also thanked her husband, Roland. She concluded by saying:

Together we have already achieved so much: reshaping policies, breaking down barriers, and creating systemic change. But our work is far from over. We need you! We need all of us. Now is the time to ignite even greater commitment and purpose. We must be bold in our actions and steadfast in our resolve, ensuring our diverse voices are heard and our rights are upheld. Michelle Obama says success is not about how much you make. It’s about how much of a difference you make in the world. Let us reflect on these words, united in our pursuit for equity and justice for all blind people. I love you all. I look forward to serving and working with you as we write the next chapter of our Federation story. Thank you!

Everette Bacon was elected by acclamation to serve as second vice president. He reflected on his predecessor, Ron Brown, whose shoes he said he would strive to fill and on whose shoulders he was proud to stand. He acknowledged the close friendships he has developed while serving on the board. He concluded:

I have faced adversity as a blind person, like many of you. Henry Ford once said: ‘When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.’ Challenges are a part of growth. When I came to this organization, I didn’t believe in myself as a blind person. I doubted what I had become. And I definitely sold myself short. My wife Angela, my friends in this room, and especially the teachings of the NFB movement have taught me that I can overcome and that I have overcome the challenges of blindness, and that it is truly respectable to be blind. So with hope, love, and determination, and the strength of all of you, I am so proud and honored to be able to say that I am and will be living the life that I want! Thank you all so much.

Barbara Manuel was then elected by acclamation to serve as secretary. She thanked the convention for granting her the privilege of serving on the board for the past two years and for electing her to this new role. She thanked her family, giving a special shout-out to her son, who was celebrating a birthday.

Norma Crosby accepted her election by acclamation to serve as treasurer with these opening words: "Thank you. For our first-timers this year, I want to say welcome to the house that built me. Forty-three years ago, I was a young blind person not sure where I was going in life and not sure I could succeed. But all of you were the foundation to that house that I’m talking about that built me. Every member of this organization has shown me nothing but love and support, and I hope that I can offer the same back to you." Federationists know well that she already has, and will no doubt continue to do so.

Shawn Callaway accepted his re-election by acclamation by thanking God, his wife, and his daughter, his "princess." He also paid extensive tribute to Ron Brown, mentioning that they shared the bond of being Black men and the traumatic experience of having been blinded in their youth by gunshots. Although Ron served as second vice president for many years, Shawn praised Ron’s humility, saying: "Ron never sits above you; he always sits with you." He noted that Ron’s wife Jean proves the old adage that behind every great man, there is a great woman, and thanked them both for their leadership and love, concluding that he planned to personally make sure that Ron was not "put out to pasture" but always would have a role in the organization’s leadership. It seems likely that Ron will resist any attempt to put him out to pasture and that Shawn will not be alone in ensuring Ron’s continued participation.

Jamie Richey of Nebraska was next elected by acclamation. She is perhaps not a Federation household name yet, but is well loved in her home state and has the thanks of BLIND Inc. for serving as its interim executive director. In her remarks, she said that she was happy to fill a need at President Riccobono’s request in Minnesota but had no intention of ever leaving her beloved Nebraska. She thanked her husband Jeremy and their family at home, all four generations of them.

Longtime National Federation of the Blind of Montana leader Jim Marks was next elected by acclamation. With his characteristic wit, he told the convention that Federationists are like grizzly bears in two respects: most of us don’t see very well, but it doesn’t matter because we both go wherever we want to go anyway.

Upon his re-election to the board by acclamation, Donald Porterfield credited his wife Amy with bringing him to the Federation and former Arizona President Bob Kresmer with giving him his first leadership role as the state’s legislative director. He also shared that he first met President Riccobono in Orlando, when Donald rode in the back of the vehicle that the President drove. He spoke of his faith in the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice and in God. "I never ask, why me God, but rather, what am I supposed to learn from this challenge?" he said.

Ben Dallin of Wisconsin, accepting his election by acclamation, told his version of a story that many Federationists have shared: he grew up with a positive attitude about blindness, but without all of the wherewithal to make that belief real. When he realized that he needed more training and self-confidence, he attended the Louisiana Center for the Blind.

Shelia Wright accepted her re-election to the board by acclamation by thanking the affiliates that had been her home (South Carolina and Nebraska) before settling in Missouri, her husband Jeff, and God. President Riccobono brought the election proceedings to a close by congratulating all those elected.

### Access to Information and Indoor Navigation: General Session III Continues

Jason Broughton, director of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled of the Library of Congress (NLS), was the next speaker. This charming gentleman was unknown to the blind community when he first stepped into his role, but he quickly built trust and confidence, and President Riccobono introduced him by calling him "a true friend of the Federation" and praising him as a savvy steward of the NLS program who is dedicated to ensuring that it is the library service blind people want.

Jason kept his remarks brief, but highlighted several important items, including the forthcoming rollout of a BARD smart speaker skill, a plan to allow simultaneous book searches in up to four languages of the user’s choice, and the good news that the NLS will be moving from its rented office space to a home within the Library of Congress on Capitol Hill. We will publish his full remarks in a future issue.

The penultimate item on the morning agenda was entitled "Indoor Navigation: Access to Information and Blind-Led Innovations." This was a panel discussion led by Mike May, currently a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Nevada and long known to the blind community as an innovator in the use of GPS and other navigation technologies, with the fondly remembered Sendero GPS product line among his most notable accomplishments. The other panel participants were Charlie Meredith, Chief Technology Officer for GoodMaps, a company in which APH is a majority owner; and Tom Pey, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Waymap, who came to us all the way from London and said he was pleased to visit a place with much better weather than his home city. Mike May facilitated a discussion which allowed these two gentlemen to describe their companies’ efforts while also humbly calling for collaboration to meet the challenges inherent in creating and enhancing indoor navigation technology, which presents many more difficulties than outdoor navigation. All agreed that it would and should be blind users who ultimately identify and co-create the most effective and usable answers to these challenges. The full panel presentation will appear in a later issue.

Having sped through the rest of the morning’s business, the convention was able to use the final minutes of the Sunday morning session to consider two of the twenty-two resolutions recommended to it by the Resolutions Committee. Both passed quickly and unanimously, and the convention adjourned for the noon break.

Many attendees took their last opportunity to visit the Independence Market, while others exchanged banquet tickets or attended brainstorming sessions held by the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children or by our museum consultants, Prime Access Consulting and Origin Studios. Our NFB in the Kitchen group, led by Chef Regina Mitchell, also held a meeting.

### General Session IV: History, Programs, Progress, and Policy

When the convention was gaveled to order again at two o’clock on Sunday afternoon, President Riccobono announced that a change had been made to the agenda due to the unavailability of a panel participant. In lieu of the scheduled item, Peggy Chong, the Blind History Lady, came to the stage to share some interesting historic facts about past conventions. Her remarks will appear in a future issue.

Anil Lewis, Executive Director for Blindness Initiatives, then came to the microphone. His topic was "Putting Our Values into Action: A Report on Twenty Years of Innovative Research and Training Driven by the Blind." As the title suggested, Anil’s presentation emphasized how our core values influence the programs and projects that our Blindness Initiatives department oversees under his leadership. Anil’s remarks will also be published later in the fall or winter.

Our Advocacy and Policy team, known affectionately as the four J’s (John, Jeff, Jesse, and Justin), next took the stage. Their presentation was entitled "We Belong: A Report on Our Collective Progress toward Equality in America and Beyond." Their full presentation will appear in next month’s issue, but a few highlights are worth mentioning. John Paré, Executive Director for Advocacy and Policy, was first to speak. His office also oversees the NFB-NEWSLINE® service, which he proudly noted is accessed every 1.85 seconds, and he doubtless delighted many with the news that an Android Newsline app is coming later this year, complementing the mobile app for iOS devices that is currently available. Jeff Kaloc, whose portfolio includes our fight for equal access to all forms of voting, updated us on the progress made in that area, along with providing comments on other legislative items. He concluded with a call for us to "organize, strategize, and mobilize to ensure that our voices are heard by those in power." Justin Young proudly shared that while we continue to fight for the federal elimination of subminimum wages through the Transition to Competitive Integrated Employment Act, we have already had considerable success in curtailing this antiquated and discriminatory practice at the state and territorial level. Twenty-one states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have passed legislation that either reduces the number of people working for subminimum wages or eliminates the practice entirely within their jurisdictions. Jesse Shirek announced that the Blind Americans Return to Work Act, which will eliminate the "earnings cliff” for blind recipients of Social Security Disability Insurance, was introduced just prior to the start of convention and assigned bill number H.R. 8878. This fulfilled a promise made at the 2024 Washington Seminar Congressional Reception by Representative Pete Sessions of Texas to introduce this crucial legislation. Jesse dramatically illustrated the need for this change in the law with a heart-wrenching real-life story about how the current policy has trapped just one of far too many blind people in unemployment and financial insecurity. John Paré returned to the microphone to conclude the presentation, in part, as follows: “Our government affairs team consists of everybody in this room. It’s the big ‘we.’ It’s we who are doing the collective action, that are making the progress over the past year, and we’re going to work even harder together as a team to do even more in the next twelve months, so we have more to report at our next convention. So for all of us, this is our report. Thank you.”

The convention then turned to the consideration of the remaining twenty resolutions. Floor debate was respectful but robust on four of them. For three of those, the chair could not determine the will of the convention by voice vote, so the official delegates participated in a roll call vote, and the number of yes and no votes were announced by the President. All of the resolutions passed. They are reprinted elsewhere in this issue and available at [www.nfb.org/resolutions](http://www.nfb.org/resolutions). President Riccobono closed the deliberations with some important observations. He noted that while he personally might have preferred that certain resolutions had been less fiercely contested, he believed that this kind of vigorous debate is exactly what should take place. He further said that while our resolutions set policy, there is nothing wrong with the convention later changing its mind, citing the historical example of how several “quiet car” resolutions failed before we finally agreed on a policy that we pursued all the way to the enactment of federal law and international standards. He concluded by emphasizing that while NFB staff participate in the drafting of some resolutions, they are ultimately considered the work of their proponents among the membership rather than as having been authored by individual staff members. This final observation was shared to clear up a point raised in the debate around one of the contested resolutions. With the critical work to set our collective forward-looking agenda as a movement done, the convention adjourned for Sunday evening.

The penultimate night of the convention was of course packed with activities. To name just two of the options available to the attendees, there was an audio-described screening of *Unseen*, a dramatic and innovative documentary film that explores the efforts of a blind immigrant to pursue his dreams. As readers will discover, this film was also the subject of a presentation at the next morning’s general session. There was also the ever-popular Showcase of Talent, sponsored by our Performing Arts Division, which could be enjoyed both by in-person and virtual attendees.

### General Session V: Accessibility at the Social Security Office, Authentic Representation, AI, and More

The final day of convention is sometimes called “the longest day of the year” by members of the Federation, but this is not a complaint. It simply refers to the fact that the day begins before 9 a.m. and doesn’t end until the banquet does, usually some thirteen or fourteen hours later. This year, the longest day began with a thoughtful invocation delivered by Ronza Othman. Ronza holds many leadership roles, including serving as president of our Maryland affiliate, but she spoke this morning as a representative of the Muslim faith. President Riccobono also asked us to keep those affected by the hurricane approaching Texas in our thoughts and prayers. He then took a moment of privilege to present a video from exactly nine years before, July 8, 2015, when Federationists, then as now assembled at the Rosen Centre, set a Guinness World Record® for the world’s largest umbrella mosaic. As described in the video, the mosaic represented a figure holding a white cane and the words “Live the life you want.”

Roderick Hairston, Deputy Associate Commissioner for the Office of Electronic Services and Technology of the Social Security Administration, was then introduced for remarks. He began by expressing his pleasure at having met his cousin Ever Lee Hairston, and mentioned that the Hairstons are the largest family in America. He then expressed the hope that many of us had the opportunity to try out the new, accessible SSA visitor check-in kiosk in the exhibit hall, and proceeded to describe its features for those of us who had not. He noted that customers can also check in on our own mobile devices instead of using the new kiosks and touted the agency’s online services and accessible notices as well. His full remarks will appear in a later issue.

Anil Lewis then took the stage for the second time to chair a panel entitled “Shaping Twenty-First Century Rehabilitation Systems: Leadership, Partnership, and High Expectations.” The panelists were Cassondra Williams-Stokes, President, National Council of State Agencies for the Blind; and Stephen Wooderson, Chief Executive Officer, Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. The subject was the opportunities for partnership between agencies that serve the blind and blind people ourselves as represented through the National Federation of the Blind. The presentation will appear in a later issue of this magazine.

The next agenda item was the first of three presentations having to do with the authentic representation and inclusion of blind people in entertainment and the arts. “Leading Courageously in Art: Poetry, Sensibility, and Aesthetics of Sharing Our Unseen Stories” was presented by Set Hernandez, Filmmaker and Community Organizer, and specifically Director/Producer of the film *Unseen*. As mentioned earlier, the film is the story of Pedro, an aspiring blind social worker who must meet not only the challenges of blindness, but of his other intersecting characteristics. In introducing Set, President Riccobono noted that the filmmaker, who is sighted, had rightly asked him why Pedro himself, who was at the convention, was not a more appropriate presenter. President Riccobono told Set, and us, that while we always center blind people, it is also important to hear from “the allies who get it right.” Set’s remarks, which will appear in a future issue, showed that they are indeed such an ally. President Riccobono encouraged affiliates and chapters to host screenings of the film. If your chapter or affiliate is interested, visit [www.unseen-film.com](http://www.unseen-film.com).

The second art-themed presentation was “All the Barriers We Cannot See: A Behind-the-Scenes View on Authentic Representation of the Blind in Film.” Its presenter was Joe Strechay, Accessibility Consultant for Film and Television, Producer and Consultant for the Apple TV+ Series *See*. Joe was at convention not to discuss that science-fiction series featuring a world of blind people, but primarily his latest project, the Netflix adaptation of Anthony Doer’s novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. He was introduced by a video in which the producers and directors of the series discussed their decision to cast unknown blind actors to play Marie-Laure, the show’s blind main character, at different ages. He then told us about his work with the production team and the two blind performers, Nell Sutton (the young Marie-Laure) and Aria Mia Loberti (the teenage version and primary protagonist.) The full presentation will also appear later in the fall or winter. Keely Cat-Wells, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Making Space, was the third and final presenter in this arts and entertainment segment, delivering her remarks from London via Zoom. She discussed finding employment in all aspects of the entertainment industry, including but not limited to performing, and we will also present her comments in a later *Braille Monitor*.

The next two items focused on artificial intelligence (AI) and how it is being and can be used to enhance the lives of blind people. The first speaker was Bryan Bashin, well known to his Federation family and currently vice-chair of Be My Eyes. He told us about the outstanding success of the company’s Be My AI tool and previewed its forthcoming features. It will soon incorporate Open AI’s GPT 4.0 to chat with us in a more conversational manner, listening to our questions and responding with its own voice, and will be able to describe the live video feed from our phone cameras and answer questions about it. A demonstration of this new capability got a rapturous reception from the audience. You can hear it now, along with Bryan’s other remarks, on the convention archive page mentioned above, and we will also share the show in a later issue.

Suman Kanuganti, founder and former CEO of Aira and now founder of Personal AI, was next. Joined by his own personal AI, he explained the concept and demonstrated the personal AI belonging to one Mark Riccobono. We will share this presentation in these pages later, but you can experience Mark AI directly by going to Riccobono.personal.ai if you want to dive right in. In doing so, you will be helping to enhance the first truly blind-centered artificial intelligence chat tool in the world.

After these two fascinating visits to the strange and challenging but also wonderful new world of AI, and a couple of door prizes, the morning session adjourned.

### General Session VI: Bolotin Awards, the Pursuit of Justice, and More

The afternoon general session began with the presentation of the seventeenth annual Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards. Dr. Jacob Bolotin (1888-1924) was the first medical doctor who was blind from birth, and each year, with funding from the Alfred and Rosalind Perlman Trust and the Santa Barbara Foundation, the National Federation of the Blind gives awards in his honor to individuals and organizations that are advancing the lives of blind people. The awards are decided upon by a committee chaired by Everette Bacon, who took the microphone to introduce the 2024 recipients. The full presentation, including remarks from the winners, appears later in these pages.

To accommodate the schedule of its presenter, a later agenda item was moved up, so the convention next heard “Closing the Door on Discrimination: Championing the Blind in Society through Civil Rights Protections at the Department of Justice.” The speaker was Kristen Clarke, the Assistant Attorney General who leads the Civil Rights Division of that agency. She described in detail the process of promulgating the long-awaited regulations under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act requiring accessibility for state and local government websites and mobile apps, which, to her credit and that of her staff, were issued in April of 2024. She also highlighted other work of her office, including enforcement around the right to vote and the rights to equal access to education, healthcare, transportation, and more. She also properly acknowledged that there is much work left to do, including the issuing of regulations under Title III of the ADA addressing the websites and mobile apps of public accommodations. Her passion for and commitment to the work were clear, and you can experience her presentation on the convention archive page or in next month’s issue of this magazine.

Troy Otillio, Chief Executive Officer of Aira Tech Corp, was next to the podium to report on this company’s continued mission to provide equal access through “visual interpretation.” Troy had high praise for our own Everette Bacon, who joined the company last year. He also spoke about Aira’s own AI offering, Access AI, and how Aira Explorers, the blind subscribers to its service, can help improve it and receive free minutes in the bargain. You can listen to his remarks on the archive page or just open the Aira Explorer app, if you have it, to learn about and sign up for the Build AI program. You can also visit [www.Aira.io](http://www.Aira.io), and of course we will also publish what Troy had to say in a later issue.

After some more door prizes, John Berggren spoke to the convention about the important logistics surrounding preparing for the upcoming banquet. After John reminded us to clear the ballroom quickly when the session ended so that hotel staff could “flip” it for banquet service and gave other useful tips for getting to our rooms and back, the next guest speaker was introduced. This was Andy Burstein, the CEO of Accessible Pharmacy Services. This company, a 2023 Bolotin Award winner, makes the business of acquiring and taking our medicine easier for blind people by incorporating accessible prescription labeling technology, Braille and/or large print on packaging, and other accessibility features into a mail-order pharmacy service specifically tailored to each customer’s health and access needs. Andy’s remarks touched on a number of things, but one standout was support for the Medical Device Nonvisual Accessibility Act, one of our key legislative priorities. His remarks will appear in a future issue.

The last agenda item was “Telling Our Stories: A Conversation about Blindness, Justice, and Shattering Misconceptions from the Federal Bench.” This took the form of an onstage interview, conducted by Deepa Goraya, first vice president of the National Association of Blind Lawyers, with retired federal judge David Tatel, who recently left the bench of the influential United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia and is senior counsel at the DC law firm of Hogan Lovells. If you are thinking this is a presentation that only lawyers could love, you are incorrect. Although the law was discussed, Judge Tatel was able to explain it clearly and concisely. A big takeaway from his remarks is the crucial role that the National Federation of the Blind has played in influencing all branches of our government at all levels, and why our legal and legislative advocacy will likely need to be even stronger and smarter in coming years. The judge also expressed his love for NFB-NEWSLINE® and thanked Scott White and the retiring Bob Watson in particular for their work for the service. President Riccobono presented Judge Tatel with a Louis Braille commemorative coin, minted by the United States in 2009 pursuant to legislation that the Federation supported. Check out the conversation with Judge Tatel on the convention archive page, or wait for it to appear in next month’s issue. In the meantime, you can whet your appetite by reading Judge Tatel’s recently published memoir, *Vision*.

One more large door prize, in the amount of $250, was presented to close the afternoon session, and then, as John Berggren had directed, the audience quickly cleared the hall and headed off to get dressed for the convention banquet.

### The Convention Banquet: A Celebration of Dignity

Ever since the pandemic, and possibly slightly before, we have been encouraging those who cannot be at the convention in person to hold banquet parties with their local Federation family. The virtual banquet festivities kicked off at 6:30 p.m., with pre-show hosts Danielle McCann and Chris Danielsen checking in on three different banquet parties happening across the country. Sandy Halverson was hosting members of Virginia’s Potomac Chapter; Lisa Rodriguez and her crew checked in from Stockton, California; and Connie Scheu and the Erie County, Chapter of Pennsylvania put in an appearance as well. Check-ins with these celebrations continued throughout the banquet. Many other Federationists checked in via social media to let us know they were having their own gatherings, or just kicking back with their own dinner or snacks, to enjoy the evening’s festivities.

When the process of seating a couple thousand people in a reconfigured grand ballroom was mostly completed, the versatile Pam Allen assumed her role as master of ceremonies and gaveled the banquet to order. She then introduced Jean Brown, wife of our outgoing second vice president and Federation leader, for the invocation. Following Jean’s thoughtful prayer, the door prize drawings began and continued throughout the banquet, with the cash prizes generally being larger than those presented during the general sessions. A video was shown thanking those who fund our scholarships. Tracy Soforenko announced the winners of the Dream Big Give 25 drawings. He thanked all those who contributed to the campaign, which raised $38,019.58. Marilyn Green gave the final PAC report and recognized the divisions, affiliates, and individuals whose increases in contributions merited special attention.

Then came the highlight of the banquet, and one of the most anticipated moments of the entire convention: the annual address by our national President, Mark Riccobono. Unlike the Presidential Report given earlier, the banquet address is typically designed to advance our understanding of the philosophy upon which our movement is built and how we can put it into action. The Presidential Report primarily informs, while the banquet speech primarily inspires, although each contains both of these elements. President Riccobono began the address with these words: “I would like to be the first to welcome all the dignitaries of the organized blind movement here tonight. Yes, you.” The speech that followed expounded on why the word “dignitary” and the concept of dignity applied to everyone in the audience, and reflected on how, as individuals and a movement, we maintain our own dignity and that of all blind people. The remarks are prominently reprinted in this issue, and the speech is highly likely to become a classic of our movement’s thought and literature.

Our longtime friend Ray Kurzweil, the single individual most responsible for the creation and development of the print reading technology that blind people routinely use today, was present for his fiftieth convention banquet, and in keeping with tradition he offered some brief reflections and memories describing how the Federation and its leaders have touched him personally and changed our world. He mentioned that some of these reflections will appear in the autobiography he is writing. His remarks can be heard by going to the convention archive page.

Pam Allen then presented the Jacobus tenBroek Award. For the first time, this highest honor that the Federation bestows was presented to participants who could not be with us in Orlando, so careful arrangements had been made to ensure that they were present virtually for the banquet and also for them to receive the award plaque in real time as well. The presentation appears elsewhere in this issue.

Ron Brown is a previous recipient of the Jacobus tenBroek Award, but his fellow officers thought it fitting that he receive another special gift at the end of the convention at which his service as second vice president concluded. Ron is also a beep baseball player, and his team, the Indianapolis Thunder, have won the World Series of Beep Baseball many times. Accordingly, President Riccobono presented him with a Louisville Slugger baseball bat inscribed with the following words: “Thank you Ron Brown, lifelong NFB All-Star. Keep hitting home runs; proud to be on your team.”

Following the presentation of Louis Braille commemorative coins to the winners of the museum trivia game and the presentation of scholarships, covered elsewhere in this issue, the banquet drew to a close. The grand door prize, totaling $2,024 and donated by the Florida affiliate, was presented, and then Pam Allen handed the microphone over to President Riccobono. He announced that 2,590 individuals had registered for the convention in person and 655 virtually, with Florida having the most attendees at 242. He then led us in cheers of thanks for the Federation staff and all the convention volunteers, and then requested that we raise a final Federation cheer to end the event. After that glorious sound of whoops, screams, cheers, and applause, he gaveled the convention to a close, saying, “We are adjourned until New Orleans!”

### Some Concluding Thoughts

#NFB24 repeatedly stressed the core values of our organization and the concept of dignity. We believe in blind people, and the substance of that belief is that blind people have as much dignity as all other human beings and thus we have the right to pursue the lives we want, without needing to earn that right or ask for society’s acceptance, charity, or consent. Because society, often unintentionally but sometimes intentionally, places artificial barriers in our way that undermine our rights and our dignity, we have come together to lead courageously and champion collective action. We foster inclusion because the blind are a diverse cross-section of society, and the characteristics that make up each of us as blind people may also present us with intersecting challenges that we need each other’s support to overcome. Finally, we dream big, not just through our many programs and initiatives but in pursuit of the overarching goal of a society where every blind person is included, valued, and respected. #NFB24 was a reunion for many of us and a welcome for many more. It was a celebration of our accomplishments and a burst of renewed energy for the work still to be done. Most of all, it set the direction of our forward motion and strengthened our resolve.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Mark A. Riccobono]

## 2024 Presidential Report

An Address Delivered by Mark A. Riccobono, President

National Federation of the Blind

Orlando, Florida

July 6, 2024

Over the past year, we, the nation’s blind, have accelerated our march toward equality in society. Thousands of active members on the local level have joined in hundreds of chapters within our fifty-two state affiliates, unified in a coordinated nationwide movement with a momentum that is impossible to stop. As we gather to review our progress, we celebrate the infinite possibilities born from the pledge to work together to create a world where blind people can live the lives we want as valued and respected members of society. While the work ahead can feel daunting and the barriers in our way may appear immovable, we know that success will not come from the charity of others but from the momentum of our own united efforts. Our vehicle for acceleration is the National Federation of the Blind.

Despite the great strides we have made since 1940, society still does not completely believe in the full capacity of blind individuals. We are often tolerated, but not included, and are told what we can and cannot do because society expects less of us. In building our movement, we organize around five key values, which will serve as the basis of my report.

The first of these values is that we unapologetically believe in blind people. We take action to advance the aspirations of the blind, and we create a loving community where we learn to be our most powerful selves. Our faith in the capacity and dignity of blind individuals is at the heart of our mission.

One of the most important ways we carry out our belief in blind people is through our efforts to support blind children and their families. Unfortunately, the American education system continues to fail these students, but we are pushing back. The key tool for ensuring blind children receive appropriate educational services authentic to their learning is the Individualized Education Program (IEP). At the beginning of June, we held the first of our IEP Advocacy Academies. Supported by the Lavelle Fund for the Blind, the goal of this program is to increase the number of advocates available to help families through the IEP process, but equally as important is to connect them with the lifelong network that is the National Federation of the Blind. There is a great demand for this support among families. We trained sixteen individuals from fifteen of our affiliates in our first cohort, and we will be investing in additional cohorts soon. We believe that putting a successful blind adult into these meetings is one of the most effective tools we have for raising expectations.

One example of our success comes in a school district in Alabama. We got involved in the IEPs for a ten-year-old who could only write the alphabet in uncontracted Braille and a nine-year-old who could only write half of the alphabet. Neither of them could read. Neither of these young girls, both curious and eager to learn, had any access technology or access technology instruction. Neither of them was receiving substantive mobility services, thus denying them age-appropriate independence. In school, they relied exclusively on paraprofessionals to serve as readers and guides. With the intervention of the Federation, both girls’ IEPs were rewritten to include integration of blindness skills training into the general curriculum; age-appropriate Braille, mobility and technology goals; reduced reliance on paraprofessionals; and daily reinforcement of all instruction. Our Alabama affiliate now stands ready to ensure that the IEPs are followed so these girls receive the free and appropriate public education they are guaranteed by law.

There are times when our local advocacy is not enough to overcome systemic discrimination. We filed administrative complaints with the Louisiana Department of Education regarding the failure of two parishes to provide appropriate assessments and effective instruction in Braille. Due to our support, the department found violations of the law and ordered compensatory Braille instruction, training for parish staff on appropriate services for blind students, increased participation by teachers at team meetings, and new assessments for the blind students. These complaints got the attention of state and local professionals who now know that our Federation is standing by to ensure they give blind students the education they deserve in compliance with the law. We believe in blind people, and with that belief we are unstoppable in our pursuit of equality.

Another value is our commitment to lead courageously. Our members and partners count on our expertise and our resolve. We will never shy away from the effort to surmount obstacles and raise expectations in pursuit of richer, fuller lives for all blind people.

After nine years of litigation before the Department of Labor’s Administrative Review Board and in federal court, we received a historic victory in our fight against Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Earlier this year, the federal court affirmed that our clients are not disabled for the work they perform at Seneca Re-Ad in Ohio and cannot be paid subminimum wages. Shortly after the ruling, the sheltered workshop agreed to pay our three clients every cent they were owed in back wages and liquidated damages. This may be the most significant wake-up call we have ever delivered to the employers abusing the labor of disabled workers.

The momentum is clearly on our side. Sixteen states have passed legislation or promulgated regulations to phase out subminimum wages, two additional states have implemented restrictions, and we are gaining support for federal legislation. In May, another milestone was reached when a joint letter signed by the president of SourceAmerica and me, as the President of the National Federation of the Blind, was sent to the chairs and ranking members of the House and Senate Labor Committees in support of the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act. This is the first time SourceAmerica has joined the blind in urging Congress to eliminate unequal pay provisions in federal law. In addition, we continue to monitor and advise the AbilityOne Commission as it undertakes significant reform to raise expectations in employment for people with disabilities.

We continue to hold the government responsible when agencies discriminate against blind employees. Frequently this relates to the failure of agencies to meet the information technology accessibility standards of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. One example is the Department of Veterans Affairs, which rolled out Cerner’s electronic health records software knowing it was inaccessible. It is worth noting that we raised concerns about Cerner’s contract with the Department of Defense in 2015 before the implementation began. On behalf of Laurette Santos, a blind employee of the VA, we have filed suit in federal court for the agency’s failure to accommodate. This case will build on our prior legal victories and help establish the remedies for relief under Section 508. We seek equality of opportunity, not to simply be paid as charity cases for doing nothing.

Another area that takes our organizational and personal courage is our advocacy to counteract the discrimination that blind people experience from drivers in the rideshare industry. I will make this really simple: both of the leading companies, Lyft and Uber, are failing to meet their obligations to ensure that blind individuals are not discriminated against. While we continue to hold regular meetings with both companies in good faith to improve their policies and practices, there is rarely a day that goes by when we do not learn of another ride denied to a blind person.

One example is a recent call I received from Jessica Beecham, a member of the Federation’s national board, who happens to use a guide dog. She was in an Uber, but the driver refused to transport her. The Littleton police were on the scene, and they were treating Jessica like the criminal. They got increasingly forceful as Jessica kept her cool and attempted to educate them about the specifics of the Colorado statutes. While Jessica left the car with her dignity, she had no ride and had all of the stress and frustration of having her rights denied. The following day Jessica received an apologetic phone call from the officer who was in charge on the scene, but any blind person knows this was too little, too late—the damage was already done. We will take all of the courageous steps necessary to stop this second-class treatment from both the rideshare drivers and law enforcement officers. We strongly encourage all blind people to continue to share data with the Federation about these incidents and to file complaints through the [ADA.gov](http://ADA.gov) website.

Another area of our persistent advocacy relates to the unequal treatment blind people receive during airline travel. We have continued to press the US Department of Transportation regarding our objection to the service-animal-attestation forms used by airlines. In addition, we drafted new sections for the Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act, including a demonstration program for service animal users, greater training for airline personnel, and access to websites and in-flight entertainment systems. On May 16, 2024, the President of the United States signed the Reauthorization Act into law, including our accessibility priorities. The actions of Federation members make all the difference in leading courageously. A special thank you to Al Elia of New York, who has been a critical leader in our advocacy work on behalf of guide-dog users.

Leading courageously requires us to put our own ideas to the test, and we do that through innovative programs coordinated by our staff at the NFB Jernigan Institute in Baltimore. We are celebrating the twentieth anniversary of our program expansion, and the difference we’ve made is found in the blind people, employers, rehabilitation and education professionals, disability rights advocates, and technology developers who have been positively influenced. The expertise and authentic experience of Federation members is what makes our efforts uniquely effective. During the past year, in collaboration with our National Association of Blind Students, we began building a new model for regional student seminars. Our Midwest and Rocky Mountain Seminars provided an informative and fun platform for nearly one hundred students to build a community together while learning about how blind students successfully navigate college.

In the area of employment, we have been building community resources with the support of our Employment Committee. During the past year, we hosted events connecting over four hundred blind jobseekers with fifty employers offering competitive integrated jobs. We supported these efforts with our quarterly *Where the Blind Work* webinar series, which aims to shatter misconceptions about blind people in the employment arena. In the coming year we will complete and launch several training modules, grounded in Federation philosophy, designed to inform and train vocational rehabilitation counselors on how to best work with their blind consumers. This work incorporates the expertise of our National Association of Blind Rehabilitation Professionals. These resources will be made available to Federation affiliates to facilitate training within state vocational rehabilitation agencies.

Through our Center of Excellence in Nonvisual Access, we work with everyone from developers of new technologies to the largest technology companies in the world. Our staff test and track the accessibility of products and perform training along with strategic partners. Our technology staff hosts monthly ninety-minute sessions and quarterly four-hour presentations on various accessibility topics for Federation members and our allies. Through our Blind Users Innovating and Leading Design (BUILD) program, we ensure that technology partners utilize the talents of blind people in their testing efforts and that they pay users for their time. We continue to advance a culture of accessibility in higher education through our Accessibility Inclusion Fellowship program in the state of Maryland. In order to more effectively track trends and empower Federation members to engage with companies regarding accessibility issues, we recently launched a *Self-Advocacy Toolkit for Nonvisual Accessibility*.

A core aspect of our leadership is being there when individual blind people need us the most. During the past year we strengthened the technical support efforts we provide to blind people through our general information, legal, and advocacy support programs at our national office. We have increased our investment in counteracting the problems that result from the bureaucracy of the Social Security Administration. We first aim to support the self-advocacy of individual Federation members, but sometimes a stronger intervention is required. One example from the past year is Allison Depner, a leader in our California affiliate, who received a notice from the Social Security Administration in December 2022 informing her that she had been overpaid. According to the letter, her SSDI benefits would cease, and she would be responsible for repaying approximately $40,000. Allison knew the program rules, she was confident she had followed them, but the agency continued to give her conflicting information. She asked for help from team NFB, and we worked closely with her to fight the agency. After a full year, during which time she received no benefits, the Social Security Administration finally acknowledged their error. They restarted Allison’s benefits, gave her more than $21,000 in missed payments, and issued her a formal letter of apology. To quote Allison, “It pays to be a member of the National Federation of the Blind.”

One of the most obvious of our core values is that we champion collective action. The power of our membership acting through the democratic process, along with the support of our partners, enables collective action toward full participation in society by blind people. We achieve much more when we work together.

This is observed in our increasing influence in Washington, DC, with members of Congress and among leaders within the executive branch. Our Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act has more cosponsors in the House than ever before. Our Medical Device Nonvisual Accessibility Act was introduced in the United States Senate for the first time, and our companion bill in the House of Representatives has a growing list of cosponsors. Our effort to empower blind people to secure personal technology through the Access Technology Affordability Act continues to be championed by all sides within both chambers of Congress. And just days ago we celebrated the introduction of our Blind Americans Return to Work Act, H.R. 8878, which would eliminate the earnings cliff in the Social Security Disability Insurance program and create a true work incentive for blind and disabled Americans. We will continue to have our collective voice heard in the halls of power.

After more than a decade of our persistent advocacy, on August 4, 2023, the Department of Justice finally published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking related to websites for Title II of the ADA, however it included seven exceptions. We seek equality, not a second-class version of the rights of other Americans. The National Federation of the Blind responded to the NPRM with thorough comments, including our vehement objection to the proposed exceptions. When the final rule was released in April 2024, the two most egregious exceptions had been removed. In May, we were equally successful with new regulations regarding website accessibility under Section 504 of the Rehab Act issued by the Department of Health and Human Services. While we now have more tools to hold state and local governments accountable for providing us with equal access, we still demand the proposed Title III ADA website regulations that we were promised nearly fourteen years ago. All public accommodations must meet an equal standard of access in the twenty-first century, and the momentum of our collective action will make it a reality.

Our collective action is effective because it is also concentrated locally. We assist our state affiliates in advancing model legislation that strengthens our equality in local communities. In our effort to protect the rights of blind people to be parents and caregivers, we secured legislation in Minnesota, adding that state to the list of twenty other affiliates that have already secured these protections. We have advanced equal access to prescription drug labeling with a new law in Colorado—making it the ninth of our affiliates to achieve this milestone. We continue to work on pay protections, educational standards, public accessibility, and many other initiatives that are advanced on the local level but supported through our national advocacy program. One of the most important areas is expanding equal access to all forms of voting. During the past five years, we have made considerable progress in expanding the availability of accessible electronic-ballot delivery to blind people, which is now law in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia. In thirteen of those states, we have also secured the ability to privately and independently return the ballot electronically.

Using the strength of our collective action, we have also taken to the courts to enforce our equal rights in the voting process. In Alabama, we have filed suit against Tuscaloosa, Mobile, and Jefferson Counties for their failure to provide accessible electronic absentee voting to blind and print-disabled voters. We seek a permanent remedy that provides equal access. In March, we supported our California affiliate in filing suit against the California Secretary of State under the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. This suit seeks to require California to allow blind and print-disabled voters to return their ballots electronically. Our request for preliminary injunction seeks the ability to return ballots by fax, as the state already provides this option to California’s military and overseas voters. Meanwhile, we continue to provide technical assistance under the Help America Vote Act to all voting officials and advocates interested in meeting the highest standards of nonvisual access to the voting process. We will pursue equal access whenever it is systemically denied to us, and we will continue to call out any harmful opposition to our collective equality.

Our fourth value is a commitment to fostering inclusion. We recognize the diverse strengths, talents, experiences, and perspectives of our members, staff, and friends; and we cultivate an environment that is welcoming and inclusive for all. We seek that same level of integration into society on terms of equality.

Our movement is built on active participation from members across the nation, and we have continued to strengthen our tools for communicating with and connecting members of the Federation with resources. In September, we launched the Member Profile. This self-service tool allows members to update contact and demographic information at their convenience. Our Member Management Module has streamlined the process of updating and tracking membership status across our chapters, state affiliates, and national divisions. Through our regular meetings with chapter presidents, our communication channels with affiliate leaders, and our NFB Portal online, we are developing new ways to share best practices and basic tools for advancing the work of the organization at all levels.

We continue to seek best-practice recommendations from our Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to improve our program and outreach efforts. In order to create greater consistency across all of our state affiliates, our national board has required every affiliate to adopt and maintain an accessibility policy and to coordinate practices with our national office. During the past year we have piloted the Disability Inclusion & Accessibility Program tools as part of our effort to ensure our events, like this convention, meet or exceed the highest levels of accessibility and inclusion. This program was developed by the disability advocacy community, including Federation leaders, in order to provide a framework for companies to guide their efforts to be inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities. We believe that we should meet the standards we expect of others, and we are prepared to continue in our own journey of leading and learning.

Our investment in emerging leaders is central to our commitment. This was the first year for our new Kenneth Jernigan Leadership-In-Service Program. Through this intensive training, we have invested in the development of fifteen emerging leaders from across the country. These individuals have combined their unique talents and diverse perspectives into a community of leadership practice while working closely with the Federation’s President. We expect to onboard a new cohort later this summer. This leadership development is in addition to our regular leadership seminars at our national office, affiliate-building seminars, and special projects to develop blind leaders to take on the many areas of advocacy that require our attention.

One example of advocacy is Lisamaria Martinez, a blind Federation leader from California, who dedicates her time to raising expectations for others. As part of developing her own life-coaching business in 2019, she needed to file a form in Alameda County—a form that was only partly accessible. When an employee at the Clerk-Recorder’s office in Oakland pointed out that she had made a mistake on the form, Lisamaria politely asked if they could assist her in making the necessary corrections—the county staff refused to help, even as they helped other visitors in the office. She attempted to explain her right to receive assistance under the ADA without success. Lisamaria returned home, hired a reader to fill out the form again, and paid for transportation back to the office simply to take care of one single paper form. Fostering inclusion often requires us to educate others, but sometimes that is not enough. When Lisamaria pursued a complaint process to protect other blind people from having this problem in the future, the county refused to enter into structured negotiations, declined the opportunity to amend its policy, and litigated the case for the next five years—all to deny assistance in completing one single paper form. Forced to fight for her rightful place in society, Lisamaria took the stand. Her testimony, offered to a jury, a judge, and a courtroom full of Federationists, was no longer about one single paper form. With eloquence and grace, she shared how the National Federation of the Blind had made a difference in her life from a young age and taught her that she belonged in this society. She explained that she deserved her rights, and she knew the importance of knocking down barriers to prevent future discrimination against other blind people. The jury agreed with Lisamaria and found that Alameda County had violated the ADA as well as state law. They awarded her $30,500 in damages for the county’s multi-year, deliberately indifferent behavior over one single paper form, and our work continues to secure permanent policy changes.

Other examples of our work to foster inclusion within society include pursuing equality in healthcare services. In Sarasota, Florida, we assisted a blind woman in reaching a settlement with Partners Imaging after it refused to assist her with its inaccessible registration system, forcing her to find a sighted person to accompany her to appointments. In Ohio, we have filed suit against ExactCare, an online pharmacy, for its failure to provide effective communication in the form of accessible documentation for medications. In Minnesota, as a result of our structured negotiations, CVS agreed to replace its existing inaccessible MinuteClinic kiosks with an accessible alternative within eighteen months. CVS will also collaborate with the Federation on the development and testing of the new accessible alternative.

We have made other progress with the Social Security Administration. In 2020, we began an effort to eliminate the agency’s practice requiring certain blind and print-disabled SSDI applicants to go through an inaccessible paper-based process when an accessible electronic process was available. While we pursue the litigation, the agency has temporarily committed to accepting electronic signatures with a back-up telephone verification process. We will continue to work to eliminate this additional barrier and make the process more effective for all applicants. Similarly, in April 2024, the SSA finished installation of new accessible visitor-intake-processing kiosks at all of its field offices nationwide as a result of a suit we previously filed. Although the timeline for completion was significantly delayed by the pandemic, we now celebrate the elimination of this barrier, and we appreciate the agency being at this convention to discuss the machines and its work to modernize communications.

Our partnerships and communications strategies are also essential to our work to foster inclusion. Examples from the past year include our collaboration with United Airlines as it became the first to commit to installing Braille indicators for individual rows and seat numbers and signage for lavatories. United expects to include this across all aircraft in its entire mainline fleet by the end of 2026. We drew attention to the harm done by Sonos in releasing a new inaccessible mobile application, and we then engaged with the company to integrate more blind testers into their quality assurance process. Our concerns were featured as part of an article in the *Washington Post* on May 17, 2024. And let us not forget our work to get blind people included more in the fun stuff like video games and puzzles. We teamed up with Spin Master, a leading global children’s entertainment company and owners of the Rubik’s Cube, to design an all-new cube to empower everyone in the blind community to learn to solve the most popular puzzle in the world. For the fiftieth anniversary of the puzzle, we worked together to create the Rubik’s Sensory Cube, reimagining the classic 3x3 puzzle with distinguishable tactile shapes on its surface to enable solving the puzzle through touch. The Federation worked with the Rubik’s Cube engineers advising on design and how to effectively incorporate Braille into the packaging. Later this year you will be able to buy this Rubik’s Cube through the Federation’s Independence Market online store, and other promotions will be planned for our 2024 Blind Equality Achievement Month. The Federation is certainly making moves to shift expectations throughout society.

The final value I want to cover today is the Federation’s commitment to empower our community to dream big and our determination to make those dreams reality. There are truly no limits to what we can accomplish together. During the past year, this has been observed in our annual NFB Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning® Academies where twenty-one of our state affiliates helped to spark the dreams of 242 young blind students in twenty-five programs in local communities. An additional seventy-two Braille learners from thirty-four of our state affiliates, as well as a military family stationed in Dubai, benefited from our at-home program in 2023. These dreams start by connecting these future blind leaders into our Federation family. The effect of our work is found in the messages of hope we receive from parents after the BELL Academies. A parent in Virginia shared that their active six-year-old boy, who previously kept his head down, straining to keep his eyes focused on the ground, was walking confidently, his cane out in front, and his head held high listening to the birds and frogs. A mom from Louisiana says her dreams for her son are now bigger by emphasizing that “he is thriving because of you!” She goes on to share, “My only regret is not finding you all sooner…” This summer, our theme is “I Can Lead,” and I am certain we will unlock some big dreams in the hearts of these young Braille-reading leaders.

Dreams come alive in our STEM2U programs with the support of General Motors and the execution of programs in more than a dozen Federation affiliates where blind students are opened to the opportunities for discovery in science and the realization that vision is not a requirement for success. The foundation for dreaming big is built in our Teachers of Tomorrow program where, over the past year, fourteen teachers from ten states have spent time each month learning from the lived experience of blind people and being supported by previous program participants who are now giving back. As one participant said, “I was inspired because the NFB has fostered a community of members who come from all walks of life who choose to join together and invest so much of their time and energy to advocate for change. Real change. Change for themselves and for future generations of blind Americans.” We are building dreams through a community of high expectations.

We also dream big by exploring partnerships with early-stage startups that have the potential to innovate solutions that will benefit all blind people. Partnership investments from the past year include Making Space, a disability-owned company driving change in employment and upskilling; XR Navigation, a blind-owned startup innovating new frontiers in tactile mapping and navigation; Purple, an entity raising expectations in inclusive financial literacy; and Be My Eyes, a previous winner of the Federation’s Bolotin Award and a company committed to blind-centered practices to leverage artificial intelligence for personal digital assistance.

Dreaming big starts within each member of our Federation—within our own stories and their connection to our collective action. We continue to develop the extensive archives housed within our Jacobus tenBroek Research Library on Blindness in Baltimore. We have added artifacts and personal papers from blind people who have made our movement what it is. We have put into place a new digital asset management system for tracking the extensive collection of photos, videos, and audio recordings that document our progress. During the past year, we have increased our pace of researching, collecting, and preserving oral histories from blind people across this nation. And we are building partnerships to preserve other key aspects of our shared stories as blind people. As one significant example, I am pleased to announce that due to the efforts of Ron Brown, a longtime leader of our movement in Indiana and at the national level, we have agreed to make our headquarters in Baltimore the official home for preserving and hosting the National Beep Baseball Hall of Fame. I am confident this will not be the last homerun Ron Brown hits for our movement.

That brings us to our biggest dream—eliminating the persistent misconceptions and low-expectations within the average person about blind people, our equality, and our capacity. We seek not merely to effect minor changes but to accelerate significant shifts in society. Thus, we have taken on a big dream—one that will not be easy, will demand resources and new talents, and that will stretch our aspirations for the future—a dream that needs to be pursued even as we do all of the other work needed in our movement. This is our dream of building the Museum of the Blind People’s Movement. This new dynamic space, physically in Baltimore but accessible everywhere through a robust digital presence, will be the only museum that is authentically and unapologetically blind-centered and designed to be inclusive, again reflecting the values of the organized blind movement. For centuries, blind people have been misunderstood and underestimated. We will invite the world to discover the authentic experiences and contributions of blind people—from the everyday to the extraordinary. This year we have continued our development work on the themes for this museum, including moving from a broad concept design process into the schematic design phase where we will develop the detailed content and experience of the museum. This spring, we were notified that our museum was approved for appropriations at both the state and federal levels totaling more than $500,000. Yet, we have a lot of work to do to make our big dream a reality. We need to find ways to accelerate understanding about us and to solidify the truth of our dignity: we belong in the world, and we make it better. This effort will take all of us, and I am again calling on you to help. You can help by gifting your personal papers and artifacts to our Federation. You can assist by researching, writing, recording, and sharing the stories of blind people into our publications and archives. You can prioritize approaching contacts within your personal circle of influence and asking them for a major pledge to our museum effort. And you can make your own pledge. While dozens of us have already made commitments, the Museum of the Blind People’s Movement will not happen without the support of thousands of blind people and our allies. When we challenge misconceptions, we create a world where we are included, respected, and valued. Our contributions make the world better. This is your museum, and together we can transform this dream into reality.

There are dozens of other accomplishments that I have not had time to cover in this report. These come from our education programs, our legal service work, our general information assistance calls, our media relations projects, our training seminars, our collaboration with community partners, our work to hold entities accountable for their programs and services affecting the blind, and our daily work to build a coordinated movement. All of these accomplishments have one single consistent and unbreakable bond—they happen through the hard work of blind people and our allies whose personal stories fuel our dedication to making the world better. You, the active members of our movement who believe in blind people, lead courageously, champion collective action, foster inclusion, and dream big. You are the heartbeat of our movement, and you accelerate our progress.

Ten years and one day ago, I was humbled to first accept your affirmative vote to serve as your President. In accepting your support, I pledged to you my commitment to build our Federation with the same love and determination shared among our previously elected leaders, and I invited you to join with me in the effort. You answered my invitation by accelerating our progress, and not one day has passed without my feeling the gravity of humility and gratitude for what you have given to our shared movement. I doubt any of us would have predicted many of the experiences we’ve shared together during the past ten years—and my thinning hair and its new grey highlights may indicate to some that the experience has been hard on me. But every time I have been confronted with difficult circumstances in the office of the President, I have found strength, hope, and wisdom in the bond of faith we share. Hundreds of times I have relied on the trust I have in all of you, and you have given me the guidance to do what was needed for our movement. In response, you have trusted me, helped to keep us on the best path forward, and have given me the courage to push harder and faster toward our equality in society.

Should you choose to invite me to continue in service of this movement tomorrow, you will have no less commitment, energy, imagination, and heart from me than you did ten years ago. And the truth is you will have all of that even if you decide something different. My trust in you and my commitment to our movement is unbroken. Thank you for the tremendous difference you have made in my life and for my family. During the past ten years, you have shown me the best of the human spirit, the strength of kindness, and the power of solidarity. I have done my best to reflect back to you all that you have given to me. If my continued service in the office of the President is your resolution, I am prepared to accelerate our progress toward equality. I remain unsatisfied with our position in society as blind people, even as I am inspired by how the momentum of this movement raises expectations every day. I will never ask from you anything that I am not prepared to do myself. I will also never compromise the bond of faith we share with each other—a faith that can move mountains and mount movements. It is the efforts of all of us combined that give us power, love, and determination to go the rest of the way to equality.

My Federation family, this is my report for 2024. This is how we accelerate progress toward a hopeful tomorrow. This is the future we build for ourselves with love, hope, and determination.

This is the blind people’s movement.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Carla McQuillan introduces Dori Senatori who sits next to her smiling.

[PHOTO CAPTION: Dori Senatori smiles while holding her award.

## Distinguished Educator of Blind Students Presentation

**Presented by Carla McQuillan**

**From the Editor: Carla McQuillan has been the chairperson of this award committee for many years because she consistently does a fine job of running it and her team excels in finding qualified educators. Here was what Carla and the 2024 winner said at the board meeting held July 5, 2024:**

**CARLA:** Thank you, Mr. President. Every year the National Federation of the Blind honors a teacher of blind students for going above and beyond everyone’s expectations to meet the needs of their students. This year’s distinguished educator comes from the great state of Texas!

This was a tough one this year. We had several very qualified candidates, but when you get letters from Norma Crosby and Emily Gibbs like I saw and the committee saw, it is absolutely the correct person we have in this seat today.

Before I move on, I would like to thank all of the members of the committee for the Distinguished Educator of the Year Award for participating, going through applications, and making decisions that will ultimately thank and reward the individual who has really shown attention to the students she serves.

This individual teaches at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). She runs the day program for students there.

I think to sum it up the best was a quotation from one of her students, Madison Flores, who said, "She told me that I was in the driver’s seat, and that has stuck with me."

So this year’s Distinguished Educator of Blind Students is—Dori Senatori! [Applause]

The Distinguished Educator of the Year gets the opportunity to speak to our National Organization of Parents of Blind Children at their annual business meeting which will take place this afternoon. She also has her expense paid for this convention and will receive a check that I have in hand for $1,000. [Applause]

In addition, we have a plaque that is in both print and Braille. The plaque reads:

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND HONORS

*Dori Senatori*

As Distinguished Educator of Blind Students

**F**or your skills in teaching Braille and other alternative techniques of blindness, for graciously devoting extra time to meet the needs of your students, and for empowering your students to perform beyond their expectations.

YOU CHAMPION OUR MOVEMENT. YOU STRENGTHEN OUR HOPES. YOU SHARE OUR DREAMS.

July 5, 2024

[Applause]

Now for a few words, Dori.

**DORI:** Thank you, Carla. I just want to start off by thanking Norma Crosby, Emily Gibbs, Mika Baugh, Kaylee Joiner, and Liz Wisecarver for nominating me, and the National Federation of the Blind for such an incredible recognition and award. I’m incredibly honored to be selected as this year’s Distinguished Educator of Blind Students. To be recognized by the NFB is extremely significant to me. I always work hard to ensure that my students have the services and supports they need, including widened perspectives, to help them shape a plan for the life they want to live.

As Carla mentioned, currently I’m the day student coordinator in Austin at the Texas School for the Blind. Yay, Austin! For the last eight years, I was in our Eighteen Plus Program, Experiences in Transition program, also known as EXIT. That’s where the goal is to customize the curriculum to students, empowering them to live independently or as independently as they can in their home community.

You know, I always tell my students they have a lifetime warranty with me, and I love it when I hear from them or see them at convention. I think I’ve counted at least seven people here today, so I’m very happy.

Recently I was able to see firsthand what happens when somebody is connected to the NFB, and that just makes my heart so happy, because when I see them at convention, I know that they are connected, and I see them thriving.

So the collaboration between the NFB Career Mentoring Program started after I completed the Teachers of Tomorrow Program [applause] in 2021. Prior to that program, I had a lot of help from Rosie Carranza—I don’t know if she is here, but she helped me, and maybe along with other NFB members in this audience, to set up numerous guest speakers for my students. I knew it was important, and I really wanted to add that into their individualized curriculum. I wanted them to hear from blind professionals all over the US, and Rosie sent me numerous people. It was fantastic.

After that, I had reached out to the Career Mentor Program, and I had the idea to collaborate and make it a part of the curriculum that I teach my students. This started, like I said, after my completion of the 2021 Teachers of Tomorrow Program. We started it shortly thereafter in the fall. Then, in the spring, we started the in-person sessions, where a mentor comes to TSBVI, and we only had seven students at the time when the program first started. This year we had a record twenty-two students in our program with our collaboration together. It was fantastic. I think that the growth of this program is that all of us, teachers and mentors alike, share the passion. I love teaching, and I think that all the mentors share this passion to teach students and work with them and give them all these different experiences that they may never have had before. I just could not have done this without the collaboration. Just to see how it’s grown over the years and to see how students, even after graduation, have chosen to participate and become a member makes me so happy.

I just have witnessed students blossom and grow in ways that I had not observed prior to partnering with the Mentor Program. I’m so grateful for this opportunity to work with the Mentor Program and other NFB members who have helped me through the years and spoken to my students. I just couldn’t have done it without the support of the NFB.

Thank you so much for this, and I’ll always keep this in my heart.

**PRESIDENT RICCOBONO:** Congratulations! Thank you. We really appreciate the opportunity to work with you. Congratulations on this great acknowledgment, and Carla, thank you to the Committee.

The National Federation of the Blind also issued a press release about the award and its recipient. The text of the release follows:

### National Federation of the Blind Names Dori Senatori 2024 Distinguished Educator of Blind Students

**Orlando, Florida (July 5, 2024):** The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) announced today that Dori Senatori has been selected as the 2024 Distinguished Educator of Blind Students. This prestigious award recognizes an educator who has made a significant impact in the lives of blind students, empowering them with the skills and confidence to live the lives they want.

Ms. Senatori currently serves as the Day Student Coordinator at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) and has been instrumental in transforming the educational experiences of her students. Her role has encompassed a range of responsibilities, from providing explicit instruction in the Expanded Core Curriculum to creating individualized learning opportunities that prepare students for all aspects of adult life.

Ms. Senatori’s colleagues and students alike speak highly of her dedication, creativity, and collaborative spirit. "Dori possesses knowledge, experience, the ability to approach problems creatively, and the ability to lead a team in a collaborative manner," said Tad Doezema, Assistant Principal at TSBVI. "Her commitment to the mission of TSBVI and to each student and family she supports is unwavering."

One of Ms. Senatori’s notable achievements has been strengthening the relationship between TSBVI and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). After participating in the NFB’s Teacher of Tomorrow program in 2021, she began working with the organization’s Texas affiliate to bring career mentoring to the TSBVI campus, providing her students with invaluable access to blind professionals and mentorship opportunities that extend beyond their school years.

Norma Crosby, President of the National Federation of the Blind of Texas, expressed her enthusiasm for Senatori’s selection: "Dori’s dedication to her students and her commitment to the values of the NFB are truly commendable. Her efforts to connect students to life-long mentorship and resources have placed them on the path towards lives of possibilities and prosperity."

The impact of Ms. Senatori’s work is perhaps best summed up by Madison Flores, a former student who attended the EXIT transition program at TSBVI: "Dori encouraged me to take control of my own life. She always reminded me that I am the driver, and that really stuck with me. I am incredibly grateful for the impact she had on my life."

“Dori Senatori has shown outstanding commitment not only to preparing her students to succeed academically and to develop blindness skills, but in helping them to build a network of mentoring and friendship that will sustain them long after they leave school,” said Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind. “Her work is living testimony to what can be achieved when teachers of blind students collaborate with blind people to help blind children and youth internalize the truth that blindness does not define them or their future. The National Federation of the Blind is proud to recognize the invaluable contributions that Dori is making to her students and to our community.”

The Distinguished Educator of Blind Students award carries with it a $1,000 cash prize and an opportunity to address hundreds of parents of blind students and network with other blind individuals and teachers of blind students at the 2024 National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind, which is taking place in Orlando through July 8.

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## We Need Your Help

*Attending my first National Convention in Orlando, Florida, I was overwhelmed by not only the resources, mentorship, and national community of students, but the love that filled every corner of the organization. The National Federation of the Blind gave me the world.* - Trisha

Blind children, students, and adults are making powerful strides in education and leadership every day across the United States, but we need to continue helping students like Trisha. For more than eighty years, the National Federation of the Blind has worked to transform the dreams of hundreds of thousands of blind people into reality. With support from individuals like you, we can continue to provide powerful programs and critical resources now and for decades to come. We hope you will plan to be a part of our enduring movement by including the National Federation of the Blind in your charitable giving and in your estate planning. It is easier than you think.

With your help, the NFB will continue to:

* Give blind children the gift of literacy through Braille.
* Mentor young people like Trisha.
* Promote independent travel by providing free, long white canes to blind people in need.
* Develop dynamic educational projects and programs to show blind youth that science and math careers are within their reach.
* Deliver hundreds of accessible newspapers and magazines to provide blind people the essential information necessary to be actively involved in their communities.
* Offer aids and appliances that help seniors losing vision maintain their independence.

Below are just a few of the many tax-deductible ways you can show your support of the National Federation of the Blind.

### LYFT Round Up

By visiting the menu, choosing donate, and selecting the National Federation of the Blind, you commit to giving to the National Federation of the Blind with each ride.

### Vehicle Donation Program

We accept donated vehicles, including cars, trucks, boats, motorcycles, or recreational vehicles. Just call 855-659-9314 toll-free, and a representative can make arrangements to pick up your donation. We can also answer any questions you have.

### General Donation

General donations help support the ongoing programs of the NFB and the work to help blind people live the lives they want. You can call 410-659-9314, extension 2430, to give by phone. Give online with a credit card or through the mail with check or money order. Visit our online contribution page at: <https://nfb.org/donate>.

### Pre-Authorized Contributions

Through the Pre-Authorized Contribution (PAC) program, supporters sustain the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind by making recurring monthly donations by direct withdrawal of funds from a checking account or a charge to a credit card. To enroll, call 877-NFB-2PAC, or fill out our PAC Donation Form <https://www.nfb.org/pac>.

### Plan to Leave a Legacy

The National Federation of the Blind legacy society, our Dream Makers Circle, honors and recognizes the generosity and imagination of members and special friends who have chosen to leave a legacy through a will or other planned giving option. You can join the Dream Makers Circle in a myriad of ways.

#### Percentage or Fixed Sum of Assets

You can specify that a percentage or a fixed sum of your assets or property goes to the National Federation of the Blind in your will, trust, pension, IRA, life insurance policy, brokerage account, or other accounts.

#### Payable on Death (POD) Account

You can name the National Federation of the Blind as the beneficiary on a Payable on Death (POD) account through your bank. You can turn any checking or savings account into a POD account. This is one of the simplest ways to leave a legacy. The account is totally in your control during your lifetime and you can change the beneficiary or percentage at any time with ease.

Will or Trust

If you do decide to create or revise your will, consider the National Federation of the Blind as a partial beneficiary.

Visit our Planned Giving webpage (<https://www.nfb.org/get-involved/ways-give/planned-giving>) or call 410-659-9314, extension 2422, for more information.

In 2023 our supporters helped the NFB:

* Send 401 Braille Santa and Winter Celebration letters to blind children, encouraging excitement for Braille literacy.
* Distribute over six thousand canes to blind people across the United States, empowering them to travel safely and independently throughout their communities.
* Deliver more than five hundred newspapers and magazines to more than 130,000 subscribers with print disabilities free of charge.
* Give over seven hundred Braille-writing slates and styluses free of charge to blind users.
* Mentor 321 blind youth during our Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning® Academy.
* Award thirty scholarships each in the amount of $8,000 to blind students.

Just imagine what we will do in 2024, and, with your help, what can be accomplished for years to come. Together with love, hope, determination, and your support, we will continue to transform dreams into reality.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: The 2024 Jacob Bolotin Award Winners with members of the Bolotin Committee]

## Presentation of the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards

**Presented by Everette Bacon**

**From the Editor: Here is what President Riccobono said in introducing the first presentation of the last afternoon session on July 8, 2024:**

This is the seventeenth Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards presentation. We have the chairman of the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards Committee. He is the president of the National Federation of the Blind of Utah. He has served as a board member and secretary of the National Federation of the Blind, and he is our incoming Second Vice President. Here’s Everette Bacon.

**EVERETTE:** It’s always exciting to be able to do the Bolotin Awards. It’s one of the highlights of the general sessions. We really look forward to it. It’s something we work hard on throughout the year, and I’m so excited to be able to be here. This is our seventeenth year giving out this award.

We usually put together a video, so I’m going to have that video queued up now and be able to play it for you. So, you get a sneak peek at the winners and a little bit about them. Then I’ll go into our committee members, and then you get to meet all of the award winners.

So Will, if you’ll start the video, please.

[Music]

AD: During the following presentation, names and logos of organizations appear on screen as they are mentioned, and pictures of individuals appear as they speak.

**NARRATOR:** Federationists and guests:

The National Federation of the Blind is proud to introduce the recipients of our seventeenth annual Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards, made possible in part by the generous support of the Alfred and Rosalind Perlman Trust and the Santa Barbara Foundation.

These individuals and organizations have broken down barriers faced by blind people in innovative ways, changed negative perceptions of blindness and blind people, and pushed past existing boundaries to motivate blind people to achieve new heights.

The two individual winners are Deborah Kendrick and Donna Posont. Deborah is a blind writer whose body of work has informed and represented the blind and people with disabilities, including a syndicated newspaper column.

**DEBORAH:** The purpose of it as the purpose of probably all of the writing that I’ve done in one way or another is to connect people to people and let people understand in a visceral way that those of us who are blind or have other disabilities are more the same than we are different from others. The only real condition that matters is the human condition.

**NARRATOR:** Donna Posont, who leads the innovative Blind Birding and Beyond program at the Environmental Interpretive Center of the University of Michigan, Dearborn.

**DONNA:** When I started out, I wanted to learn nature as a blind person, and then I wanted to learn it in a way so that I could understand how to share it with other blind people. Through this, I see how much it helps improve skills of blindness. When children or adults learn how to identify a bird by hearing their sound, they get excited, and they gain confidence. When we go through the woods and we walk the trails and we show them that they don’t have to use sighted guide but can follow the edge of the trail, that makes a difference. They can hear the sound of the wind; they can hear where the birds are; they gain a lot of confidence from that because they often don’t have that opportunity to walk trails and walk in the woods, and it makes it better when they are walking out on the sidewalks in the cities because they gain that level of confidence for using their canes.

**NARRATOR:** The first of our two organizational winners is Handid Braille Services for providing quality Braille transcription in multiple languages. Here’s founder, Don Winiecki.

**DON:** The company as a nonprofit has grown quite a bit, and without really planning for it, I’ve become a provider of non-English Braille as well as Unified English Braille. I specialize in Braille for languages that don’t use the Latin symbol system in their print alphabet—Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Farsi, and on and on. I do a bunch of that stuff now, as well as the more common non-English languages like Spanish and French and German.

We hear over and over again "nothing about us without us." I’m very sensitive to that idea. I don’t want to claim that I’m doing things for other people in a sense that I’m trying to take care of them! No, I’m doing things for people so that they can achieve more, and being a background part of that is such a rewarding thought. The acknowledgment that the NFB provides is just further ratification of that.

**NARRATOR:** *Living Blindfully*, a global podcast about living your best life with blindness and low vision. Here’s producer and host, Jonathan Mosen.

**JONATHAN:** I interview a lot of movers and shakers for the podcast, and I take a long time before each interview to do my research. I ask the questions that I think listeners want me to ask. So I aim to be fair but also fearless. Another element of the show is that we have listeners who contribute from all over the world, and I’m proud that in an era where people do a lot of yelling at each other online, we’ve maintained a climate of respectful but robust debate.

To convey just how much receiving a Bolotin Award means to me, I have to be a bit vulnerable. Growing up as a blind teenager in New Zealand back in the eighties, I had so many big dreams, and I was confident that they were realistic dreams. But I quickly discovered that my biggest problem wasn’t my blindness. It was other people’s limiting perceptions of it.

I actually became very depressed about this when I was seventeen. So that was in 1986. I got a 1200 baud modem, and I started logging on to bulletin boards using technology called Fido Net. Ultimately I got onto an online service called the CompuServe Information Service, and it was from being online that I learned about the Federation, and it changed my life. Actually, if I’m being absolutely honest, I think knowing that there were other people out there who felt about blindness the way I feel about blindness saved my life. So to be recognized by the Federation with one of its most prestigious awards means more to me than I have the words to express, and it’s an honor I never expected.

These winners each will receive a trophy and a monetary prize to advance their work to help blind people live the lives we want.

Now the National Federation of the Blind proudly presents them with their Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards. [The end of the video is greeted with applause]

**EVERETTE:** All right, are you excited? Yeah, these are some outstanding winners, and we are excited to give them their award.

First and foremost, I want to thank the members of the committee who served this year. Mrs. Mary Ellen Jernigan, who has been serving on the committee since it started and has been guiding all of us. Thank you, Mrs. Jernigan. Thank you to Donald Porterfield of Arizona. Thank you to Steve Jacobson of Minnesota. Thank you to Dr. Natalie Shaheen of Illinois, and last but not least, Jessica Beecham of Colorado. Thanks to all of you for serving on the committee.

I also want to thank members of the National Federation of the Blind staff who have been so supportive. Yvette Castillo, Chris Danielsen, Beth Braun, and Suzanne Shaffer Schildwachter. They’re all wonderful supporters in making sure these awards are given out. Thank you to President Riccobono for having the faith in me to chair this committee.

Let’s get to the really great information about our award winners. You haven’t heard their monetary prize. I know you want to know that, right?

We have two individual awards. The first individual award is Deborah Kendrick. Deborah Kendrick was nominated by Judy Dickson. When personal computers were a new American phenomenon in the 1980s, she created a Braille only magazine called *Tactic*. This would enjoy worldwide readership and garnered numerous awards from the Society of Technical Communication and others. That publication was acquired by the American Foundation for the Blind, and you may know it now as *Access World*. Deborah serves as senior editor and continues to contribute articles to this day. I am excited to give the award of $5,000 to Deborah Kendrick. We’re going to have Deborah Kendrick say a few words. [Applause]

**DEBORAH:** When I was sixteen, I met my first blind grownup. He was a vocational rehabilitation counselor, and he held the key—in other words, the money—to my college education. He said a blind girl couldn’t be a writer. Years later, with a pile of awards from both journalism and advocacy organizations as evidence that I was not only a writer but a writer who got it right, I learned about Kenneth Jernigan, who was also discouraged from pursuing his chosen career. In my jobs, books, and elsewhere, I have told stories of people who are blind or have other disabilities about the work they do. Many, too many, have told me that they were first told that a blind boy or a blind girl could not do what they wanted to do, and they did it anyway. [Applause] Then in 2007 I read the book *The Blind Doctor*. I learned about Dr. Jacob Bolotin, who not only did it anyway—became a doctor against the odds of his environment and swarms of naysayers—but became a truly gifted healer and dedicated physician. To be deemed worthy to be among those honored as following his example is both humbling and exhilarating.

One day several months ago, when a child asked me how many words I had written, I started playing with numbers in my head.

Now, I have no idea how many words I have written, but I added up articles and books and columns, and I figure that I have published about two million. [Applause] So that’s a lot of stories—true stories, and there are many more stories to tell, yours and mine. Thank you so much for this honor and for the encouragement it gives me to keep writing.

**EVERETTE:** Thank you, Deborah; what a wonderful award winner and wonderful story.

Donna Posont—Michigan is excited, Donna—.

These are some words from Donna herself in her application.

Through the years, I have had the pleasure of witnessing some people who always wanted to walk with a sighted guide turn into scientists taking off down paths using their canes. There have been times when someone afraid to touch new things would eventually shape bird beaks and feet using homemade play dough after being involved in its cooking. Those afraid to speak in front of others could eventually write Braille notes and increase confidence to share information.

If you don’t know anything about Donna, she has created a nature society in Michigan. She works with a university there and is doing such wonderful things to learn about birds and nature and so many things about our wilderness that we didn’t get a chance to use or become a part of as blind people. So I am excited, and it is my honor to give Donna Posont an award of $5,000. [Cheers and applause]

[Sound of bird chirping]

**DONNA:** Hey, for those who don’t know, that’s the beautiful state bird of my beloved Michigan. Many of you have heard me say "It’s not about the birds." I will explain a little about how I came to that through my journey. Fifty years ago this summer, I graduated from high school.

I took off to college to get a degree in biology. About a week into that, I realized I had no skills and no way to learn biology. I had no skills of blindness, and I couldn’t do it. So I was redirected into social work—nothing against social work. I graduated in ‘77 and moved to Philadelphia and worked at the Upsale School for the Blind. It was there that I met the National Federation of the Blind, or more likely they got ahold of me.

Through the years, I worked in the vending program in three different states, and I served as vice president of the Blind Merchants Division until I married the president of the Merchants Division, and I moved to Michigan where I have lived ever since. There we raised five children, and that indeed was the greatest joy of my life. And you know what is so amazing about them that really makes them stand out? They gave me twelve grandchildren, which is really an honor.

In 2008, I decided to once again pursue my dream, and I went to the University of Michigan Dearborn. I didn’t know what you would call it, but I wanted to learn about nature so I could share it with others who were blind. It wasn’t about me so much anymore. I wanted to learn it, but I wanted to make it accessible to other blind people. Because through working at camps and so forth, I realized blind students often had been denied the opportunity to learn about the birds and the trees and the insects and the frogs, and I wanted to change that.

So, during that time, I started a program called Birding by Ear and Beyond, where we learned to identify birds by their sounds, and then we learned all about the birds. Then, in 2015, I graduated from the University of Michigan Dearborn with a degree in environmental studies, and just to show I could do it, I got a minor in biology.

At that time the director, Dr. David Susko, asked if I wanted to come on the staff and do what I had been loving to do—for money—and get paid to do the Birding by Ear and Beyond Program. So that’s what I have been doing ever since. COVID gave us a little slowdown, but we’re back in business now. It’s not about the birds; it’s about sharing with blind people and helping them gain the confidence they need to travel the trails of life. [Applause]

**EVERETTE:** I’m really excited about our next awards; they are our organizational awards. We had two individual awards; now we have two organizational awards.

Handid Braille Services. Don Winiecki. Don Winiecki was nominated or recommended by Tasnim Alshuli. As a gift for the blind Muslims of Ramadan, 2024, Don volunteered to produce a screen-reader accessible version of a new translation of the Quran in both English and Arabic. This is pretty exciting.

We are honored to give Handid Braille Services an award of $15,000. [Applause]

**DON:** Give me a minute here. [Cheers and applause]

Hello, Federation family. I’ve been a member of the Federation since 2016 when I joined the Treasure Valley Chapter in Idaho. Transformational is a word that comes out a lot when people talk about how the Federation has affected them. That word works for me too.

Transcribing text into Braille allows me to contribute to a world that I would want to live in, a world I want all of us to live in. I never imagined I would come to specialize in producing Braille for languages other than English, much less languages that don’t use the alphabet we’re familiar with in English. It was a chance meeting with a director of the NLS at this convention in this venue a number of years ago that pointed out the terrific gap there was in producing Braille for multiple languages. I and my nonprofit company now have clients on six of the seven continents. [Applause] I regularly produce Braille in Arabic and Chinese, in simplified and traditional Hindi, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, French, German, Vietnamese, Navajo, and others—lots of Unified English Braille, too. And sometimes even English Braille American Edition (EBAE).

As we know, Braille is a code and not a language. However, languages and their unique orthography are codes too—codes that allow one to package intricate concepts into deceptively simple marks and tactile patterns. There are few things more amazing and beautiful than that. I allowed that beauty and quality to pull me in to learn how to learn Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and more so that I could put that in Braille.

I type Arabic at a rate faster, I’m told, than most native speakers.

Learning to read these languages has changed my life. The knowledge that I am producing materials enabling independence is transformational.

And there’s more. To help spread this independence, I’m starting work on developing Braille instruction for adults in the same languages I transcribe today. [Applause] But I’ve got to tell you, it is immeasurably more meaningful to me that the National Federation of the Blind recognizes this and ratifies what I do with the Bolotin Award. There is no collection of individuals more able to assess the value of what I do than you, my Federation family. Thank you. [Applause]

**EVERETTE:** We have one last award to give—last but certainly not least. I am excited to give our last or second organizational award to *Living Blindfully*, Jonathan Mosen. [Applause]

An example of the podcast remaining true to its values is that *Living Blindfully* boasts a commitment that everyone working on the podcast will be blind. The podcast now employs a transcriber and an audio editor, both of whom are blind themselves. *Living Blindfully* is clear about its audience. It is not seeking to explain blindness to sighted people or to hold back on the important issues. *Living Blindfully* is unashamedly our place, our issues. I’m excited to give an award of $15,000 to my friend, Jonathan Mosen, *Living Blindfully*. [Applause]

**JONATHAN:** So at this point I’m waiting to wake up and realize I’ve been dreaming this. This is incredibly special. So thank you so much to the Bolotin Committee and the National Federation of the Blind in general for this award.

You know, media usually ignores us, and when it doesn’t, we often wish it did, because it frequently underestimates us, it misrepresents us, and far too often it would have people believe that you mustn’t say that dreaded B word—blind.

I was observing yesterday that living visually impairedly just doesn’t have the same ring to it, you know, does it? [Laughter] So *Living Blindfully* seeks to give you an oasis from all that.

Now, in humbly accepting this award on behalf of the members of our *Living Blindfully* team, I want to mention them by name.

It includes Hannah Mae Aldeza who produces our transcripts so that, in particular, deafblind people aren’t excluded from the conversation, because so often deafblind people are excluded from the conversation, and it’s not right.

Accessibility has benefits because it means that we also in that process build an extensive searchable repository of information and opinion on the issues of the day.

And also Derek Lane, our gifted and [Cheers]—got some Derek fans out there? Our gifted and brilliant audio engineer who speeds up the production of the show by editing some of the interviews. And, of course, my wife Bonnie, who is here with us today to see *Living Blindfully* get this award. I love you so much.

And finally, I accept this on behalf of our listeners in over 113 countries now, and some of whom—good to know some are out there—and some of you share your thoughts on the issues that we cover and the things that matter to us.

Thank you so much again for recognizing *Living Blindfully*, and I’ll conclude my acceptance with the way I conclude every episode.

Remember that when you are out there with your guide dog, you’ve harnessed success, and with your cane, you’re able. [Applause]

**EVERETTE:** Congratulations to all of these winners. As President Riccobono pointed out, when I said my friend, he’s everybody’s friend, that’s for sure. Jonathan Mosen is everyone’s friend. I’m just lucky to be one of them.

Let’s do one big round of applause for all of these winners. Let’s do it.

Every year we give these awards out. This is the seventeenth year of doing this, so that is pretty exciting. That means we’re going to have year eighteen in Louisiana next year. For year eighteen, if you want to know what we’re looking for, we’re looking for these types of dream makers who do innovative things in the field of blindness. This is your chance to apply. If you did apply and didn’t win this year, we keep all your applications. We review old applications each year, but if you want to apply again, we definitely encourage that. Please go to [nfb.org/bolotin](https://NFB.org/Bolotin). You can also find it under awards and presentations. You can apply. We will open up the application process again on January 1, 2025, and we will have that open until April 15, 2025. These are awesome awards. We definitely want to hear what is going on out there in the field of blindness. Thank you, Mr. President. This is my report.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: President Riccobono smiles as he gives the convention banquet speech.]

## Dignity, Respect, and Determination: The Momentum of the Blind People’s Movement

**An Address Delivered by Mark A. Riccobono, President  
At the Banquet of the Annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind  
Orlando, Florida   
July 8, 2024**

I would like to be the first to welcome all the dignitaries of the organized blind movement here tonight. Yes, you; are you a dignitary? Those humble members among us are thinking, “No, not me.” The most driven advocates among us may be claiming this status without even considering what it means. Others may be saying, “I am not a blind person, so I am no dignitary in this crowd.” Still others among us may be feeling unworthy of the title as they are here for only the first time.

As we gather tonight in this space we first created eighty-four years ago to consider the extent of our collective progress, I want to return to a basic aspect of our movement that may be taken for granted. This is the concept of dignity, and whether it is different for the blind than for the nonblind. Tonight, I declare that each of us, engaged in our shared reflections, are dignitaries of the organized blind movement. As dignitaries, we have a responsibility to examine our position, consider our progress, challenge our own assumptions, and recommit to being the “dignity we want in the world.”

The civil rights, Latino, and farm labor leader, Cesar Chavez, said, “From the depth of need and despair, people can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems and fill their own needs with dignity and strength.” And Bernice King, lawyer and daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., noted, “You will encounter misguided people from time to time. That’s part of life. The challenge is to educate them when you can, but always to keep your dignity and self-respect and persevere in your personal growth and development.” While the philosopher, courageous line-breaker, and celebrated baseball star, Jackie Robinson observed, “The most luxurious possession, the richest treasure anybody has, is his personal dignity.”

The concept of dignity has a complicated history intersecting with philosophy, politics, and religion. The root of the word we use today comes from the Latin term *dignitas,* which was a central aspect of the ancient Roman society. *Dignitas* has several overlapping meanings, including the intrinsic worth or value of a person, the social standing or rank of a person within a hierarchy, earned reputation or prestige, and the authority and influence that come from high social standing. The concept of dignity as a universal term, meaning the unearned status or worth of all persons, is sometimes credited as stabilizing due to its appearance in the opening sentence of the preamble of the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms the “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” as the “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Today, this concept is often described as human dignity. I intend to simply use the word dignity to refer to humans as I have no interest in sparking debate about the dignity of blind people compared to the dignity of their guide dogs.

If we accept that dignity, the inherent worth of all persons, applies to blind people, then it is reasonable to accept that it cannot be taken from us. However, our experience also suggests two other truths. The first is that not all of us accept that dignity for the blind has the same value as dignity for the nonblind—at least the words and actions of individuals often communicate an inequality. The second is that often we, as blind people, struggle to resist the misunderstanding and second-class treatment in society, which, in turn, leads to our own doubt about our dignity.

In our movement, we know that blindness is not the characteristic that exclusively defines our future. We also know that the persistent misunderstandings we encounter, the undignified actions of others, and the artificial barriers throughout society threaten our dignity on a daily basis. Dignity may be inherent, but there is an inequality between how it is perceived and experienced in our lives. If we fail to resist second-class treatment, if we value the charity offered to us over fulfilling the responsibilities inherent in equal rights, and if we internalize the external low expectations, we risk devaluing our dignity, we move further from equality, and we sacrifice the progress we have made together. It is not enough for us to understand the dignity of being blind; we must teach the rest of society what we know. For just because we have our dignity does not mean we have realized full equality within society. While the mission may feel overwhelming, we continue to have the power and determination that comes from linking our hearts and minds in a movement that has made all the difference since 1940. Under no circumstances will our dignity again be taken from us, and under no circumstances will we permit our dignity to be undervalued. We know who we are, and our dignity is equal to others. In wearing our dignity with pride, we honor the dignity of others. We continue to recognize that we do not journey alone. We do not face the challenges by ourselves, and we do not have to be perfect in order to preserve our dignity. Our dignity comes from within, and it is valued, strengthened, and honored through the collective actions of individuals focused into a movement we share. We are the National Federation of the Blind.

Dignity is a fundamental concept within the philosophy of the Federation, but having our dignity affirmed in society has taken decades of hard work and sacrifice. It began by recognizing that dignity comes from taking control of our own lives, speaking and acting for ourselves, and using that self-determination to build a network of support. Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, the founding President of the National Federation of the Blind, framed our early understanding of the dignity of blind people. Those ideas were radical in 1940 and continue to meet resistance even today. Dr. tenBroek was a widely celebrated scholar of the United States Constitution. It is no surprise that his concept of dignity was tightly bound to the ideals of equality, liberty, and the ability to direct one’s own actions.

As the second generation of dignitaries in our movement began to add to our shared wisdom, our concept of dignity was significantly challenged by the vision industrial complex. During this period of struggle, we demonstrated the dignity of blind people through training programs developed by the blind themselves. Kenneth Jernigan, the dynamic leader who was first elected as our President in 1968, led us through a period of aggressive external resistance to our self-determination. He also provided us with the historical understanding that the popular narrative about us does not reflect the true lived experience of blind people. By synthesizing the stories of blind people into logical patterns of thought and action, Dr. Jernigan articulated the nature of independence for the blind and its relationship to our dignity.

In his speech, “The Nature of Independence,” Dr. Jernigan shares that independence—which is central to dignity—starts with our own internal attitudes about blindness, involves the development of a range of skills and resources needed to tackle the complexities of life, and requires the maturity to put all of these things together in the real world in a way that does not diminish our dignity or the dignity of others. While it is somewhat easy to summarize, it is much harder to put into practice in a society that largely undervalues the capabilities, contributions, and the continuum of human experience among blind people.

With the third generation of our movement, we gathered significant momentum in defending our dignity in society. Furthermore, our high standards for equality increasingly created opportunities for us to partner with others and raised expectations for the disability community more broadly. A prime example is our leadership in steadily eliminating the legal practice of paying people with disabilities a lesser wage based only on a false assumption that these individuals give less to society than others. Yes, we must recognize that federal law does not yet fully acknowledge our dignity by guaranteeing us equal-pay protections. However, by eliminating the practice in a significant portion of this nation, we have defended the dignity of blind and other disabled individuals time and time again. Despite the historical record, even the most entrenched employers, who previously defended this discriminatory practice as part of the dignity of work, now celebrate joining us on the better side of history. Many more examples can be found in our legal victories, in our legislative accomplishments, in our community building work, and in our innovative programs—all undertaken with an unapologetic commitment to being blind-centered and blind-led.

With that as background, let us examine some of the components of dignity that require our daily attention as blind people. A fundamental building block of self-determination is autonomy. This requires establishing the pattern of thought and behavior that expects the individual to be in charge of their own decisions, including having real choices in those decisions. One of those components is the opportunity to fail, which can provide invaluable learning. However, when blind people exercise their autonomy, it frequently creates conflict with others. A fundamental misunderstanding is that the dignity of blind people requires the charity of others. More specifically, it requires the charity of any individual who possesses eyesight. When this pattern is learned by blind children from a very young age, it has the potential to limit much if not all of their life. When blindness comes to a person after decades of internalizing the historical misconceptions, it can significantly impede their progress toward living successfully in the world as a blind person. It takes real energy and emotional intelligence to overcome the perception that you have no autonomy or that you are somehow diminished or less deserving.

One example is that blind adults have the experience of being treated like they are still children. Most frequently this happens as an instinctual reaction in customer service situations. The individual encountering the blind person wants to know, “Who is your assigned companion?” This might be the person expected to be traveling with you, the person who should be helping you make a decision, or the person who should be available to manage your affairs. Sometimes these incidents are minor annoyances for blind people and opportunities for education. However, very often they are much more than that and become extremely stressful for us. When this treatment comes from our own family, it is always deeply painful. When these events are more than a minor annoyance or when they occur in a series of incidents together, they challenge the blind person’s resolve to be self-determined (and to hold back on the four-letter words).

This is where preserving our dignity takes a measure of maturity and determination. The American healthcare system seems to be one prime example of an environment where our dignity is consistently devalued. During my recent annual physical, the medical attendant who did the intake with me concluded by instructing me on what I needed to do to get ready for the exam—this involved putting on the standard-issue paper gown. They then asked me if I needed their assistance getting undressed. Is this a question they ask all patients? Was there something about my clean dress shirt, tie, and slacks that raised concern? My quick analysis of the situation told me that this was a new employee who had little experience with blind people and that the question was not routine. As tempting as it was to respond with something snarky, I knew I would likely encounter this person again, and my snark would only serve to diminish the dignity of this person who seemed genuinely not to know better. With a forced smile I replied that I had been dressing myself for more than forty years and felt I had it under control. The attendant stopped and, to their credit, they admitted that it was a silly question to raise with me, but it is not always that easy.

In May I took my daughter to the urgent care near our home. Her last visit there had been handled by my wife, Melissa, who also happens to be blind. Unbeknownst to me, during the check-in process they defaulted to sending the electronic check-in packet to Melissa’s mobile number. I have appreciated the mobile check-in process as it allows me to manage sensitive information from my smartphone without having to provide personal information verbally in the middle of the lobby. When I did not receive the expected text message, I shared with the receptionist that the packet went to my wife and, before I could ask to have the packet sent to my number, the receptionist asked if my wife would be more capable of completing the forms for me. I was already on edge because of my worry about my daughter, and I did not have the emotional energy to correct their misunderstanding and further delay my daughter getting the attention she needed. I took a deep breath and made a conscious choice in that instance not to be an ambassador of the blind, not to try to change the understanding in that moment, but to simply let my actions speak for themselves. I received the packet on my phone and jumped all of the hurdles needed to get my daughter examined by a physician as quickly as possible. Afterwords I reflected on the choices we have to make in order to maintain our dignity as blind people. One of the very difficult choices is when to simply make a difference by living our lives and when to consciously work to change the understanding of others. From my experience in the National Federation of the Blind, I knew in my heart that I did not have to overtly change someone else’s mind in order to maintain my own dignity.

Much of the medical system does not give blind people a choice in the management of the care we seek for ourselves and our loved ones. Many healthcare providers require the completion of inaccessible paper forms, prescribe inaccessible home medical equipment, and offer discharge instructions with the assumption that someone else will be there to care for us. In many medical facilities, blind patients who are admitted for care will have a sign placed in their room, without their consent, that notes they are blind. Often that sign will indicate they are at greater risk for falling or require other special treatment. Eliminating all of these barriers rooted in historical misconceptions about us is part of the work we have yet to accomplish together, but they need not devalue our dignity unless we accept the narrative of the past. We have the autonomy to make our own decisions and direct our own actions. We have the freedom to push back when we need to or to simply live our lives without interference from others.

Another aspect of dignity is choice, and I am confident all blind people can relate to having their choices limited. Some common areas where our choices are limited include career opportunities, access to adventurous activities like zip-lining and water skiing, the freedom to independently navigate everyday obstacles such as metal detectors, full engagement in group projects where our contributions are valuable and where we can lend a hand, various modes of transportation, and the option to decline unnecessary or unwanted accommodations. Lack of choices can devalue our dignity in the minds of others and can make us feel like our dignity is being taken away.

Limited choice is found in the persistent access-to-information problem we face. In general, when traveling in the environment, the most efficient way for blind people to get information is to ask a person nearby. This tends to be a stranger who happens not to be blind. Frequently our questions are not answered but met with another question. In airports I will often ask, “What gate number is this?” To which I get a common reply, “Where are you trying to go?” or the more aggressive, “Can I help you get somewhere?” I generally choose not to reveal my destination in order to preserve my choices.

Another example is access to menu information at unfamiliar restaurants. Without independent access to the menu, we must negotiate with wait staff who frequently limit our choices to, “What kind of food do you like?” How often do blind people simply choose something they know rather than exploring their choices because it is easier than demanding equal access to information? It is easy to say that no one can take our dignity, but it is harder to deal with the persistent absence of choice.

Maintaining control over our own body is another area where our dignity is regularly threatened. Blind people are frequently handled without ever being given a choice in the interaction. If I were about to walk into something very dangerous, I hope someone would help me avoid it. However, so far I have never been viciously attacked by a shrub when my cane touched an outdoor planter. I have never had a glass door shatter when I tapped the bottom of the door and I reached for the handle. And I was never in danger of falling through the floor when standing in one place. Yet, in all of these instances, I have been grabbed, moved, or pulled without consent because someone else decided I needed help. In an instance where I may want some assistance, it would be considered inappropriate for me just to walk up to someone, grab their arm, and command them to take me somewhere. But the same standard for personal body space is not applied to those of us who are blind. This is where the choice to seek, select, direct, and reject help on our own terms is critical. This is why many blind people report feeling dignity the most when they go through a set of interactions without ever being grabbed by a stranger.

One concept that often gets paired with dignity is respect. Where dignity is inherent, respect is earned or lost. Respect is influenced by our perception of a person’s worth or value. As blind people, if we believe in our inherent dignity, we must first respect ourselves enough not to compromise when people disrespect us. Then we must be prepared to give respect as a means of helping others recognize our dignity. With equal treatment comes equal responsibility. This, too, is much easier said than done.

One area where respect can be challenging is within our own community of blind people. Many of us are working through the journey of blindness. Thus, our actions are still strongly influenced by the misconceptions we have internalized about blind people. When a blind person who is still new on that journey takes an action or says something that feels like it takes away from our dignity, many of us react strongly. We need to challenge ourselves to take a step back and respect the fact that newly blind people are especially prone to defaulting to the conditioned vision-centered responses.

Consider these examples. Have you ever been in a room full of blind people when someone says, “Is there a sighted person here?” or, the one I like better, “Can I borrow a pair of eyes?” I often jump in to note that I have eyes, though they do not work, and I am happy to help. My experience is that far more often than not, vision is not a true requirement for dealing with the concern of the moment. Considering the increasing availability of image recognition, I expect that small gap to narrow even further. Recently, one of my blind colleagues shared with me that, during a Braille technology training seminar in our building, a participant asked for a sighted person who could read the serial number of the device they were registering. My blind colleague walked over, read the Braille serial number off the bottom of the device, and went on their way.

Do not get me wrong, it can be really difficult to deal with conditioned vision-centered responses, especially when they come from other blind people. For the record, dignity for the blind is inherent regardless of the details of an individual’s blindness. However, if we are going to uphold our inherent dignity, we need to offer respect and grace to those who are still on the journey of understanding. We must not forget that many of us came from that same place of misunderstanding and, thankfully, we were respected and provided with the grace to discover the value of our own dignity. The respect with which we handle these situations can significantly contribute to the shared value of our dignity.

When nonblind allies demonstrate their understanding through their advocacy with us, we are shown respect, and our dignity is strengthened. For example, I feel respected when one of my nonblind colleagues reminds a presenter that purely visual cues are not meaningful and that explaining key aspects of a visual image may also benefit everyone. If we desire that level of respect from others, we must also be prepared to give it. My experience is that when we share a high level of respect, everyone benefits.

Our individual efforts to respectfully educate others about our dignity is all too often not enough. We must continue to have the courage to take the more forceful steps required to achieve our equality in society. This happens when our state affiliates object to the harmful actions of agencies within the vision industrial complex. It happens when we show up to defend the rights of blind parents and blind business owners. And it happens when we negotiate with public officials regarding needed protections in the law. Sometimes the forceful demand for our dignity requires personal sacrifice. A common example within our community is the forceful stand against the discrimination of rideshare drivers that many blind people have had to take. For some of us, the result has been being treated like criminals by law enforcement who defend the discriminatory actions of the drivers. Others of us have had to walk away from those situations because the risk of taking a stand was too great. This is where the strength of our community helps to uphold our dignity. Each of us can make a difference by pushing back on the harmful barriers and misconceptions we face. However, all of us are not in a position to push back all of the time. By combining our efforts into a movement, we have the best chance of reaching equality of dignity within society.

Wearing our equality of dignity with pride requires us to honor the dignity of others. This was most powerfully articulated by our longest-serving President, Marc Maurer. As he led our movement into the twenty-first century, he demonstrated that central to dignity is heart and giving back. In one of his last banquet speeches as our President, he articulated the current and unshakeable status of our own dignity and the necessity to welcome the dignity of others. At our 2013 banquet he said:

One element of the misunderstanding about blindness is that we live in a sighted society. Although many sighted people live in our society, it is more accurate to say that the society in which we live belongs to all of us, and we belong to it. Because we belong in this society, we expect to be welcomed within it. Because others belong to this society, we expect to welcome them. We do not accept exclusion from any element of our culture. We belong within the political, economic, legal, educational, and scientific arenas. We belong in all elements of our society of every kind and description. We have helped to make it what it is, and it belongs to us. We cannot be (and we will not be) extracted from it. We give this society richness, depth, and a level of experience and understanding that cannot be had without us. Some may try to shoulder us aside into low-grade, shabby lives, but this is not enough. We own our freedom; we have power; and we know what to do with it. Our society belongs to us; we will not be shut out; we belong!

If dignity is inherent in us, we must recognize the dignity inherent in others. We must honor dignity even when ours is threatened, we must welcome the dignity of others even when we do not fully understand their experience, and we must earn respect for our dignity by sharing in the courtesy of giving. Dignity is inherent, but upholding it is a choice—a choice of self-determination and a choice of mutual respect. Upholding our dignity supports both the diversity and authenticity of our shared community—a dignified community of blind people who represent the full range of diverse characteristics including race, creed, color, religion, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, national origin, citizenship, marital status, age, genetic information, disability, and any other characteristics or intersectionality of characteristics.

The day-to-day struggle of overcoming misconceptions, low expectations, and artificial barriers can feel overwhelming. However, eighty-four years ago we took back our dignity, and we are still determined to achieve full equality. What gives us boundless hope for the future is the solidarity of dignity we have found in the National Federation of the Blind. We preserve our dignity by speaking and acting for ourselves. We enhance our dignity when we define the solutions to the problems we face, rather than waiting for the charity of others to do it for us. We strengthen our dignity through the support we give to the dignity of others. We share our dignity through the rich diversity within our community and by ensuring that all blind people can bring their full selves to our movement. Equality will come when we can link arms with our nonblind colleagues in recognition of the interlocking aspects of our shared human dignity.

So is dignity for the blind different from dignity for the nonblind? “No,” is the firm answer from us, the dignitaries of our movement. Yet, our daily experience demonstrates that the understanding of others, no matter how well intentioned, provides an alternate answer. Our challenge is to hold tight to our shared understanding of dignity for the blind while we do the work of inviting the rest of society to find their place as dignitaries in the organized blind movement. We must guard against becoming angry and feeling powerless when misunderstanding threatens our dignity. By striving every day to live out the dignity that is rightfully ours as blind people and by holding firm to the bond of faith we share, each of us has the power to make a difference in changing the understanding of others. When you encounter moments when your dignity is respected, pause to acknowledge the progress. When you are confronted with low expectations, remember that the choices are yours, and your dignity cannot be taken. When you push back on those misconceptions and create understanding, feel proud of defending our dignity. And when you feel like you cannot push any more, when you are too tired of defending your rightful dignity, remember that you are not alone; all of the other dignitaries have your back.

My Federation family, let us be proud of the dignity we share. Centuries of misunderstanding created the narrative that we were not worthy of equality, but we organized and took back our dignity. Under no circumstances will our dignity again be taken from us, and under no circumstances will we permit our dignity to be undervalued. Every day we struggle against persistent low expectations, but we do so with hope and our authentic understanding that it is respectable to be blind. We know who we are, and our dignity is equal to others. In wearing our dignity with pride, we honor the dignity of others. We continue to recognize that we do not journey alone. We do not face the challenges by ourselves, and we do not have to be perfect in order to preserve our dignity. Our dignity comes from within, and it is valued, strengthened, and honored through the collective actions of individuals focused into a movement we share. But equality in society is not yet ours. We deserve a world where every heart and mind know our understanding of dignity for the blind. The only way we can get to that future is together through the courage, determination, and creativity of a shared movement. This is the commitment to defend our dignity. This is the commitment we make to each other. This is the love, hope, and determination felt in our movement. This is the bond of faith that fuels our hope for our tomorrows. Let us go together to find those blind people who have not yet discovered the power of their dignity. Let us show that we belong in the world and that we make it better. Let us never again allow our dignity to be devalued. Let us go build the National Federation of the Blind.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Amy Bower]

## Inclusion by Example: Adventures of a Blind Woman Navigating the Oceans of STEM Professionals

**by Amy Bower**

**From the Editor: As the last presentation of Sunday, July 7, this was one the audience found well worth the wait. It includes drama, accomplishment, and breaking barriers all in one well-constructed address. It also speaks to ongoing battles many of us have in school, in the workplace, and in reconciling what we need with the concepts of independence, interdependence, societal obligations, and economics. There is no question that for most of us the battle of accessibility has been far more challenging than the work we are paid to do.**

**Dr. Bower is a physical oceanography senior scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution located in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Here is what she said to our convention:**

Thank you, President Riccobono. Are you ready for a sea story? Well, thanks for sticking around. I hope you won’t be disappointed.

These are words you never want to hear if you are on a ship at sea: "Attention, all personnel! Return to your staterooms immediately, and lock all your staterooms and passageways. A hostile vessel is circling our ship."

No textbook and no classroom and no advanced degree can prepare you for a pirate attack on the high seas. But this is exactly what I experienced in 2001 as an oceanographer on an unarmed research ship in the Indian Ocean.

Before I tell you how this turned out—I’m going to keep you waiting a few minutes—Let me rewind a few decades. Growing up in a small coastal community north of Boston, Massachusetts, I fell in love with the oceans. Yay, Mass! An insatiable curiosity had me turning over every rock at low tide to see what was hiding underneath and wondering what else laid below the waves. I was also curious in the classroom. I took nearly all the science and math classes offered at my small high school and found physics, oddly enough, to be the most interesting. So that is what I chose for my college major. But I quickly realized that most physicists focus on the invisible particles that are inside atoms, whereas I was more interested in the physical environment that we all experience every day: wind and weather, ocean waves and tides, and how it all fits together to shape our planet.

But exactly how I would turn my interest in these topics to a career was uncertain until I signed up for an off-campus college program called Sea Semester. It appealed to my sense of adventurous spirit, sailing for six weeks offshore on a tall ship and learning everything about the oceans: its science, its history, its literature and its policy.

There I discovered there is a field called physical oceanography. I bet you never heard of it. This is the study of the physical forces that drive motion in the ocean. Now I knew how I could combine my training in math and physics with my passion for understanding how our planet works. Because, after all, to be good stewards of our one and only home, we need to understand what natural forces make our life on this celestial planet possible.

To be a physical oceanographer, I went off to graduate school. Starting in my very first year, I was involved in research expeditions to the Gulf Stream, where I learned to use sophisticated instruments to study the three-dimensional anatomy of this massive and important current. I loved it: the adventure, the sense of exploration, camaraderie that develops during remote fieldwork like this. I was completely hooked.

The frequent storms that I rode out with my shipmates at sea in those early graduate school years did not prepare me for what happened next. In my third year of grad school at a routine eye exam, an abnormal blind spot was discovered, and shortly after that I was diagnosed with macular degeneration and retinitis pigmentosa, a twofer.

Accompanying this totally unexpected diagnosis—no one in my family had a similar eye condition—was the demoralizing advice from an ophthalmologist to change careers and consider a career in science administration instead of research. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with administration, but it’s not what I wanted to do.

At that time I had not heard of any scientist anywhere in any field who was blind or had low vision. In fact, I didn’t know a single person who was blind or had low vision—not personally.

I wanted to be an oceanographer and go to sea and do research on ships. Could I still do that? I was no longer sure.

The uncertainty in the prognosis was as unsettling as the diagnosis itself. I was informed that I would likely become fully or totally blind over some unknown number of years. It could be several years or several decades.

But since I’m standing here before you now as a physical oceanographer who is blind with thirty-five years research experience behind me, you know I did not take that doctor’s advice. [Cheers and applause] Instead, I signed up to see a low-vision specialist who had a totally different attitude. He had that positive can-do attitude. I think it helped that he was a sailor and understood the excitement of living and working on the ocean. He introduced me to various assistive technologies, and I started believing that maybe I could continue my graduate studies in my chosen career.

Indeed, I finished my PhD and then started my professional career as a physical oceanographer at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute or WHOI [pronounced Hooey] as we call it for short. It’s on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. Yay, Mass!

So what do oceanographers do? Many think that we only study what are sometimes called charismatic megafauna. Anybody have a guess about what that is? Yes, whales, sharks, and dolphins. Yeah, the kinds of things we typically hear about and see in movies or read in books like *Moby Dick* or *JAWS* or whatever. But oceanography is actually a vast field of study focused on a highly complex physical, biological, chemical, geological environment that covers 70 percent of earth’s surface. It is intricately connected to our climate and therefore to all life on earth. It’s in constant motion from waves at the surface to slow moving but powerful currents in the abyss. These currents creep along more slowly than walking speed—maybe three or four miles an hour or less—but they transport huge volumes of salty water, heat, tiny marine organisms, as well as greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide.

But where do all these currents go? Are they changing as the planet warms? It’s not easy to figure this out, and this is why. Below the sunlight surface, the ocean is a very inhospitable environment for both humans and the most sophisticated research tools. There is the crushing weight of the water overhead. You know if you pick up a gallon of water, it’s pretty heavy, right? Think of millions of gallons of water.

There is the cold—about three degrees Celsius through most of the deep ocean. There is corrosion. If not well protected, oceanographic instruments will just stop working with exposure to saltwater. And it’s pitch dark. No one, sighted or not, can physically see what is going on with the currents at these depths.

So how do we measure ocean currents then? With my research team, I release hundreds of freely drifting buoys in currents more than a mile below the sea surface, and we track them under water using sound as they trace out the pathways of ocean currents across entire ocean basins from months to years. Using these and other tools, we have discovered how one current can change the path of another current deeper in the ocean. We’ve learned how warm currents in the Gulf of Mexico fuel hurricanes, which are going to be bigger in the news this year, and how rotating features the size of Rhode Island trap salt, heat, and marine organisms in their swirling currents, like a slow-moving tornado, and transport them thousands of kilometers across the ocean; think Dorothy in her house in the *Wizard of Oz*, but in slow motion.

The most thrilling aspect of being a physical oceanographer for me is going out on research ships. Just for the record, these are not the Love Boat. These are not cruise ships. They have large working decks, science labs, dorm-like state rooms (no luxury living), and cafeterias. And maybe if you are lucky, you get an exercise room with a few weight machines.

I’ve sailed extensively around the Atlantic and Indian Ocean on these ships, staying at sea for up to six weeks at a time. You don’t go into port every night. If you’re out there, you’re out there.

After I lost most of my useful vision, I had to give up working with the equipment on the open deck, but I can still lead the expedition as the primary decision-maker or chief scientist, as we call it. I depend on some sighted assistance, though, because most of the data being collected by the ship is still not accessible in real time for blind or low-vision scientists.

On one such expedition in 2001, I was chief scientist on a research ship in the Indian Ocean. This should start to sound familiar. The currents in this remote region were a complete mystery, and we were mapping them for the first time. While on station off the coast of Somalia, we noticed a small boat approaching with six men on board who appeared to be wearing some kind of uniform, maybe like a local Coast Guard. But they didn’t contact our ship by radio, which would have been normal operating procedure. Instead, they circled around our ship, shouting words we couldn’t hear. Then, suddenly, one of them stood up and brandished a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Immediately recognizing the danger, our captain quickly got our ship underway at top speed. We had to get away. But the top speed of this ship is about fifteen miles an hour. That’s about as fast as a bicyclist on a good clip. The other boat, which was faster, started chasing close behind. Everyone on our ship was ordered to their state rooms and told to lock the doors. Why? In case, what we now realized were modern-day pirates, got on board our ship. For about an hour, they trailed close behind us, firing rifles and grenades at our ship, trying to get us to stop so they could get on board.

But our captain knew much better. He knew we had to keep moving, because it’s almost impossible if you’re in a small boat and trying to jump up and climb up the side of a bigger ship if that ship is moving, it’s pretty hard to do. So the captain knew: keep it moving.

Eventually the sea conditions forced the pirates to give up and turn back to shore. Whew!

As it probably would be for you as well, this was one of the most frightening experiences of my life—right up there with trying to cross any street in downtown Boston. [Chuckles] My PhD studies did not prepare me for this test of leadership. Even though no one on the ship was harmed physically, everyone was traumatized to some extent. It was my responsibility, along with the captain, to maintain a sense of calm and carry on with our research, even though I myself was as rattled as everyone else and remember I couldn’t really even see everything going on during this incident. It was all being described to me. I was getting it in second or third person or something.

If you are interested in learning more about modern-day piracy, oceanography, and my career, I welcome you to check out the book *Seven-Tenths: Love, Piracy, and Science at Sea* by David Fisichella, which is available on Amazon and on BARD (Braille and Audio Reading Download).

As a scientist with first low and then almost no vision, I’ve had to navigate a sea of obstacles to be the oceanographer I wanted to be—the single most daunting one probably being my own self-doubt. In the early days, not only was I a super minority in my professional community as an oceanographer with low vision; I was also a woman in a very male dominated field, with just a handful of female peers.

I sometimes felt like I did not belong in physical oceanography. I was afraid I wasn’t good enough, that I couldn’t be successful with low vision, and that any day now my colleagues would figure it all out and kick me out. Some call this the "imposter syndrome." Yes, thank you! But others have argued recently that the imposter syndrome is not really a syndrome at all, but it’s these feelings, which are experienced by many, that are more a sign of an unwelcoming or unaccommodating community, and not an indication of some failing or inadequacy on my part.

Anyway, from my female colleagues I have learned that having a network of peers and mentors with similar lived experience was just as important to a successful career as being able to write a good grant proposal. Luckily, this was just when the World Wide Web was taking off. I know I don’t look that old, but I am. I could search beyond my immediate circle of colleagues for other blind scientists. Indeed, I was able to find and contact a few, all in other fields: none in my own field, but at least it was a start. Around the same time, I searched for support groups for blind professionals closer to home on Cape Cod. I finally found one in Boston, two hours away by bus, but it was the closest one I could get to by public transportation. This was my first significant connection with peers facing some of the same challenges. I made more connections attending the international Ski for Light cross-country skiing events. [Applause] Yay, Ski for Light, where I met many other blind and low-vision outdoor enthusiasts, and many of them also had professional careers.

I started to have more hope that maybe I could not only survive but thrive in my chosen career. Others seemed to be doing it, so why not me? My network and my confidence continued to grow, as my vision declined continuously.

I still had to contend with something important here, which is the tenure clock. Academics usually only have a limited number of years to build an independent research program and demonstrate that they have made a significant impact on their discipline. At the end of that time, it’s up or out. So even with many video magnifiers and screen readers, many research tasks took me a bit longer than my sighted peers. Plus I had to constantly research new assistive technologies and learn to use them, as my vision continued to decline. With all this extra energy and time spent adapting to ever-changing vision, I wasn’t sure I could make tenure.

At that time, academic institutions were beginning to implement "slow the clock" policies, mainly as an accommodation for expectant mothers who were pursuing academic careers. It occurred to me that such an accommodation would be appropriate for someone in my situation as well. I too was experiencing a life event that was going to impact how quickly I could get my research program up and running.

But I had to request this accommodation, and I was hesitant. As far as I knew, no one at WHOI had requested a "slow the clock" accommodation for reasons of disability. With the encouragement of my institution ombudsperson, I did make this request, and to my relief it was granted without hesitation. [Applause] Thank you.

I earned tenure in 1999, and a few years later I was promoted to the highest rank for scientists at WHOI, senior scientist. I was the first woman to achieve that rank in my department.

Over the next twenty years, I continued to grow my research program. Then, in 2018, I was selected by my colleagues to be the next department chair. I wasn’t expecting that. I was, there too, the first woman to serve in that position in my department and also the first blind person to hold any high leadership at WHOI at all. [Applause] This meant I would be responsible for the professional well-being of over one hundred researchers, students, and administrative staff in the physical oceanography department. I would also join the other department chairs, vice presidents, and the president of WHOI to lead our world-renowned research institution of over one thousand employees.

Before I became chair, I was constantly running to keep up with my workload. After I became chair, I had to sprint to keep up with the huge increase in the volume of emails, reports, memos, spreadsheets, budgets, personnel concerns and, oh, by the way, the response to a global pandemic.

Many documents I had to read and digest as a department chair were not accessible, and decisions based on those had to sometimes be made very quickly and often at the same time that the PowerPoint or spreadsheet was being shared with me and the rest of the leadership team for the first time.

Screen reader accessibility was not familiar to this team at all. So it was a big challenge for them to make their documents accessible. They were as busy and pressed for time as I was, making it challenging for them to find the time to make their documents accessible. I had to start pushing publicly and repeatedly for accessible documents to be provided with time to review them, which, by the way, I pointed out would be good for the whole team if we had more time to review them—universal design, right?

This constant reminding, though, was not comfortable for me, but I just kept asking. After all, my department had chosen me to be their representative at the highest administrative level, and I did not want to disappoint them. In spite of my persistence, I didn’t always get these documents in an accessible format at the same time. Life is messy; it doesn’t always work out. I just had to ask a lot of questions and do the best I could.

It was not always an ideal situation by any stretch, but nonetheless I successfully completed my four-year term as a department chair two years ago. This experience made me realize, a little late maybe, that what I really needed to be on a level playing field with my peers in this kind of fast- paced career was an access assistant, a concept I recently learned about from Mona Minkara, a blind assistant professor at Northeastern University. Previously a few staff members in my department were assigned on an ad hoc basis to help make data, graphics, and documents accessible for me, but they had other responsibilities competing for their time and attention. As a result, I often hesitated to request access assistance when I needed it. Finally, last year, I requested that my institution support the salary for a dedicated access assistant, whose only job would be to help make inaccessible information accessible to me. I was so excited when the request was granted. Yay!

As far as I know, this is the first such approval at my institution. Until the STEM fields have embraced independent accessibility, it is my opinion that access assistance is required for one to reach their full potential. This dedicated access assistance has been the game changer I imagined. No longer do I hesitate to ask for help with making information more accessible. I suddenly feel free to be a scientist again, without the extra burden of scrambling for access just to get to the starting line with my colleagues. I wish I could wind back the clock and repeat the last twenty years or so of my career with an access assistant.

Over the past twenty years, I have spent some of my time sharing my experiences with the next generation of low-vision and blind students interested in science to help them realize that they too can succeed in STEM careers. With Perkins School science teacher Kate Frazier, I started an outreach program called Ocean InSight. With other members of my lab group, I visit Perkins classrooms and other classrooms with stories about my career and all my assistive technology and how I have managed to carve out this career with data sonification—which I’m getting into more—and touchable oceanographic equipment for them to explore. We also host an accessible field trip to WHOI every year through the Perkins Outreach Program where students can learn more about all the exciting research going on at WHOI.

At the beginning of my career, the odds seemed stacked against my dream to be an oceanographer. A doctor’s advice to give up on a career as a researcher left me awash with self-doubt. There was no network of low-vision or blind scientists in my field.

Since I began to lose my vision as a young adult, I did not get any official blindness training as a youth. I was racing all the time to adapt to ever changing vision, and all that time the tenure clock was ticking. In my favor has been the supporting encouragement of my family, a somewhat accommodating employer—mostly accommodating I would say—and the energizing curiosity and passion to understand the inner workings of Planet Earth, or more aptly described by Arthur C. Clarke, Planet Ocean. As my network of blind scientists and other professionals grew, so did my self-confidence, my comfort level requesting accommodations, and the realization that, yes, I can do this and, yes, I do belong, and so do all of you. Thank you!

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Cayte Mendez]

[PHOTO CAPTION: The 2024 Scholarship Class: (left to right) Back row: Thor Kargatis, Joshua Olukanni, Benjamin Grelk, Henry Young, Enrique Mejia, Miranda Lacy, Miles Little, Hannah Clemenson, Natalie Rankin, and Tom Geraci. Middle row: Jonesti Steele, Madison Flores, Cole Carper, Muntaha Ruthba, Rachel Grider, Sam Morgan, Abey Finklea, Tamara Lundy, and Lindsay Adair. Front row: Josè Montano, Julia LaGrand, Krystle Allen, Colin Wong, Casey Reyes, Thelma González Santana, Lynn Wu, Maranda Ulvestad, Amanda Juetten, and Dishon Spears]

## Remarks of the Scholarship Class of 2024

**From the Editor: One of the highlights of each convention is listening to the remarks of our scholarship finalists as they share our convention and add their enthusiasm and ambitious plans to our gathering. Here is what they said to the Board of Directors and the thousands attending the meeting. President Riccobono introduced this presentation as follows:**

Now, I want to move to a very special part of the agenda. We’ve had a packed agenda, but I know most of you have been waiting for—especially now that we told you where the convention is—our scholarship program!

Without further ado, I would like to introduce from the great state of New York, our chair, Cayte Mendez.

**CAYTE:** Good morning, Mr. President and members of the Board. This is the seventh year that it has been my privilege to introduce the National Federation of the Blind scholarship class to all of you. Every year it is as much of a privilege as it was the first time.

This year we have thirty wonderful students. They were selected because of their academic excellence, their leadership potential, their community involvement, the quality of their applications, and I am delighted to be able to present all of them to you and to the folks watching.

We’ll be passing the mic down. They will have about thirty seconds to introduce themselves to you. They are going to tell you a little bit about who they are, where they’re from, what made them excellent candidates for the scholarship program, and a little about their vocational goals. This year we have two tenBroek Fellows with us. Jacobus tenBroek was the first president of our organization, and we reserve the title of tenBroek Fellow for those receiving their second National Federation of the Blind Scholarship. Scholarship finalists, are we ready?

Wonderful! They have been ready for the last two hours. They’re ready to go and get this done. I will be introducing them—first name, last name, home state, school state, and vocational goal. For the purposes of making sure the agenda moves along as it should, I’m going to ask that you hold your applause until the end. I know that can be extremely challenging, but please help us all out with that.

Without further ado...

Lindsay Adair, Louisiana, Louisiana, psychology, social work:

**LINDSAY:** Hello, my name is Lindsay. My career goals are to be either working in psychology or social work, and I am a person who loves to help other people. I want to give back, and something I would like to do is to reach out to other blind people who may not have heard of us. I encourage you all to remember those who have no hope and who have not heard of NFB. Please reach out to those people. I do not know where I would be without this organization today. Thank you. [There was some applause despite the request of the Chair.]

**CAYTE:** Thank you for the 95 percent of people in the audience who remembered to hold their applause. For those 5 percent, there you go.

Krystle Allen, New Jersey, New Jersey, social work:

**KRYSTLE:** Good morning everyone, and thank you to the Scholarship Committee for selecting me as one of the finalists. I am excited because I am a nontraditional student, and I am pursuing the goal to become a full-time employee. I currently work at the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired as their state community outreach specialist part-time. So with my education credentials that I’m acquiring for social work, I’m in the helping field, and I want to go full time so I can help more visually impaired and blind consumers to pursue their dreams. I’m excited that during my education experience I’m celebrating a milestone year with a nonprofit I founded ten years ago called “Eyes Like Mine, Inc..” I’m wearing a crown for you guys today, because I am Miss New Jersey 2024! [Applause]

**CAYTE:** Cole Carper, Arkansas, Alabama, aerospace engineering:

**COLE:** Good morning, everyone. I just graduated high school in May. I’m super excited to be here. It’s a great honor; thank you to the National Federation for doing the convention. My career goal is eventually to work at NASA, Boeing, SpaceX. I don’t have a specific company I want to work for yet; I just know I want to work in that industry.

**CAYTE:** David Carrillo, Utah, Utah, counselor:

**DAVID:** Thank you to NFB for the honor of being chosen as one of the finalists this year. Right now I’m currently working on my Master of Social Work with the goal of becoming a licensed social worker so that I can be able to counsel in specializing in grief, trauma, and bereavement. Having lost my three-year-old son in 2020 and my sister in 2022 to suicide, I feel particularly versed in order to understand that grief and what comes with it. I want to be able to be there for those newly experiencing that and help them through that journey knowing that there is a light at the end of the darkness.

**CAYTE:** Hannah Clemenson, Montana, California, journalism and broadcasting:

**HANNAH:** Good morning, Board members, Scholarship Committee, and Federation family. I grew up in a really small town in Montana, and at the time National Public Radio was about the only sound on my dial. Despite my isolation in rural Montana, I was able to build a vivid and nuanced image of the world around me through listening to public radio. I want to use my scholarship to jump into that world and continue to be a storyteller for the people.

**CAYTE:** Before I introduce the next finalist, I just have to tell you this: If you haven’t applied—first of all, how many people in the room have received a National Federation of the Blind Scholarship? [Cheering]

Okay. So from where I am sitting, the whole left side—right side, you have to get on that, okay?

If you want to know what month you should have a birthday in to win a scholarship... those that sit through this presentation each year, you know that I love birthday trivia. August, you guys are my people, Leos and Libras. You almost made it this year, but with only five, we lost to May which has six. This was the year to have a May birthday. And next:

Abey Finklea, Wisconsin, Washington, elementary education:

**ABEY:** Hello, everyone. I am very passionate about working with children, and I have had many wonderful experiences working with elementary schools and equine therapy programs for children. My goal is to use my degree to improve the education system and empower underserved students to reach their full potential. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Madison Flores, Texas, Texas, law:

**MADISON:** Good morning, everyone. It feels really great to be here. Thank you all for selecting me as a finalist. As for my career goals, I’m currently studying government at Austin Community College with plans to transfer to the University of Texas at Austin where I will complete my bachelor’s in government before going to law school. Thank you so much.

**CAYTE:** Tom Geraci, Massachusetts, Massachusetts, marketing and public relations:

**TOM:** I am Tom Geraci, a senior at Merrimack College, and I have been very involved in the local blind community in the Greater Boston area for most of my youth. I currently work at the school for the blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, in the marketing department, and I am pretty involved locally. But this is my first convention, and I have really enjoyed it so far. Thank you to Cayte Mendez, the rest of the Scholarship Committee, Ryan, Cassandra, and my mentors for guiding me through the whirlwind. Thank you to my fellow finalists, because it’s not easy being the only vision impaired student at your college, and you guys get it. Most importantly, thank you to the donors for giving these scholarships away and allowing me and other students to really live out the college experience we want and deserve. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Our scholarship class this year is representative of twenty-two states, but twenty-four affiliates. One of the affiliates that is not a state is the one from which our next finalist hails. Her name is Thelma González Santana. She is representing the affiliate of Puerto Rico, so Puerto Rico home state, Puerto Rico school state, and she is looking at going into a career in international development. She will be speaking through an interpreter, so we’re going to give time to let the process work out.

**THELMA:** Greetings. Good morning, Federation family. I am very honored to share with all of you. This is my first convention. I am studying strategic communications and international studies. My purpose is to project our philosophy to the entire population in general, so I am carrying out several projects. Among these is to create a database at the Puerto Rico level on how many blind people currently have a job. In addition, I’m trying to create empowerment in all our community with a mobile fashion application and also creating an educational committee for emergency management. The essential idea is to empower our community and let them know that we can all achieve what we want and fulfill our dreams and goals. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Ben Grelk, Nebraska, Nebraska, software engineer:

**BEN:** Hello, everyone. I was a military brat, so I popped around seven different addresses before settling in Nebraska. I am a software developer, and I love using my skills to contribute to open source, especially in the web accessibility space.

**CAYTE:** Our next finalist is a tenBroek winner: Rachel Grider, California, Louisiana, orientation and mobility:

**RACHEL:** Hi, guys. I am so excited to be here today. First, thank you so much to the Scholarship Committee and the National Federation of the Blind for selecting me as a finalist. Up until less than a year ago, I was teaching music at a music academy. During the course of several years teaching there, I started becoming more and more involved in the National Federation of the Blind of California. As I was doing that, I started to see that more and more there is such a strong need for orientation and mobility instructors and all kinds of instructors of the blind who help empower blind people, and I started to feel a calling and passion to come and give back. I am back in school, and I am pursuing a degree in Structured Discovery cane travel, orientation and mobility, and my goal is to teach Structured Discovery in a place where there is not a lot of SDCT around. One of my dearest ambitions is to start a Structured Discovery center in California.

**CAYTE:** Amanda Juetten, Tennessee, Tennessee, blindness training:

**AMANDA:** Good morning, Federation family! How are you? I’m Amanda Juetten from Tennessee, currently getting my bachelor’s degree in organizational leadership and will go from there to work on a graduate certificate in blindness rehabilitation teaching. I am opening a training center in the wonderful state of Tennessee, and we have established our nonprofit and working on the process of funding and development and getting that thing up and off the ground. I enjoy serving on many boards and positions within the Federation, but I mostly enjoy serving and doing whatever it takes to see the Federation reach the blind community. I believe in the philosophies of the Federation, and I believe that we need more quality teaching in the area of alternative skills of blindness. That is my aim, and that is my goal. Thank you so much; thank you for this opportunity.

**CAYTE:** The next one I mispronounced twice. I’ll see if I get it right this time. This is Thor Kargatis. I mentioned earlier there were two affiliates, not states, represented in this class. Thor hails from the District of Columbia, going to school in New Jersey and pursuing a career in urban planning.

**THOR:** Cayte actually got it right on the third time today. Nicely done! Good morning, everyone. I’m Thor Kargatis, the guy who has been doing neurodivergent things in the front right corner of the room for the past two hours. I’m interested in studying urban planning. I’ve come to realize there is often an overlooked aspect of accessibility, which is that accessibility means frequent bosses and accessible Braille services and fair systems that work and whatnot. I’m very new to the NFB. I didn’t find out about its existence until I applied for the scholarship. I’m here to meet people. This is my first convention. I implore you to come up and say hello and talk to me about anything, whether you want to talk to me about me living in DC or urban planning or anything really. I’m eager to make some friends here.

**CAYTE:** Miranda Lacy, West Virginia, West Virginia, social work:

**MIRANDA:** Hello, everyone. Good morning. I’m humbled and thankful that I have been chosen as a finalist from West Virginia. I’m studying social work at West Virginia University. My undergraduate degree is psychology from West Virginia State University. I spent thirteen years out of the workforce thinking that I would never be able to work while raising my children as a single mother. I have two boys, ages twelve and eighteen, but blindness is not the characteristic that defines me. I am excited to start my internship at the Appalachian Center for Independent Living. It’s the first time I’ve worked in eighteen years. It’s been exciting and overwhelming. I found the National Federation of the Blind when I was seeking assistance with discrimination from my university. So I am thankful to have an advocate in the West Virginia chapter, Ms. Sheri Koch. I’m excited to be here and learn about the NFB philosophy. I am a new member.

I can’t wait to get to know you all. Thank you so much.

**CAYTE:** Julia LaGrand, Michigan, Massachusetts, violinist and educator:

**JULIA:** Good morning, Federationists. Thank you to everyone for giving me this incredible opportunity. I am about to start a joint degree program at the New England Conservatory at Harvard pursuing violin performance and a liberal arts education. I want to continue my work becoming the best classical violinist I can be, but also be a more broadly educated person and continue my passion for disability advocacy. I have had a number of professional opportunities to engage in this kind of work, and I have also learned so much about the organized blind movement and how that interacts with music through my role as a board member of the National Federation of the Blind Performing Arts Division. I am so grateful for the Federation. In this year of music intensive training, I have heard so many times in different ways about how classical music doesn’t work with blindness, and I have been so grateful to my Federation family who I have called often to hear reassurances and grow, and it has changed me so much. I look forward to continuing growing with the Federation, and thank you for making that all possible.

**CAYTE:** Miles Little, District of Columbia, District of Columbia, finance:

**MILES:** Good morning, everybody. First off, I would like to say that I’m very thankful and grateful for being here, and I have plans to become a financial adviser. Also, one thing I’m excited about is that I want to show everybody that we can do it and that it is possible. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Tamara Lundy, Louisiana, New York, healthcare finance:

**TAMARA:** Good morning, everyone. I am honored to be standing before you this morning. My career goal is to become a financial analyst or health insurance specialist. I served in a nonprofit clinic for fifteen years, and my passion is to serve patients. I’m honored to be able to do that once again. I’m looking forward to pursuing my CDC as a certified medical professional coder once I get my master’s degree. I also look forward to serving you all once again in New Orleans. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Enrique Mejia, Iowa, Iowa, special education teacher:

**ENRIQUE:** Good morning, Federation family. My name is Enrique Mejia, and I’m currently pursuing my master of science in teaching with an endorsement in special education at Drake University. For the last ten years, I have worked at the Iowa Department for the Blind as a technology specialist where Dr. Jernigan developed the philosophy that we now refer to as Structured Discovery. During the summer I have worked with students to become empowered and pursue their goals. Throughout the years they have inspired me to no longer be a bystander and pursue my own goal to work with children who are receiving special education services. I am deeply thankful to the National Board and the Scholarship Committee, as well as the generations of Federationists who have come before me—Federationists like Shawn Mayo, Emily Wharton, and of course my wife, Helena Mejia, who is in the audience. Thank you, and let’s go build the National Federation of the Blind.

**CAYTE:** Josè Andre Montano, District of Columbia, New York, jazz pianist:

**JOSÈ:** Hello, everybody. I’m Josè Andre Montano. It’s an honor and a pleasure to be selected as a finalist. Thank you so much. My goal in the future is to become a piano teacher and mentor for other young musicians like me. Despite the challenges I have had, I’m still here today, transmitting joy and happiness with my music. Remember that life is a trip to be enjoyed, and we can all love our differences and who we are. Thank you so much.

**CAYTE:** Sam Morgan, Colorado, Massachusetts, meteorology:

**SAM:** Good morning, Federation. I want to say that I’m deeply grateful to be here, and it’s an honor to be among such great people. For my degree, I am pursuing a master’s degree in meteorology at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, with a minor in math and a minor in sustainability. Thanks to the Federation scholarship, this fall I’m going to be doing research in Iceland on how climate change is impacting precipitation trends in the Arctic. Further in my career I hope to be able to help with the presence of those with blindness and low vision in the fields of STEM and atmospheric science. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Joshua Olukanni, Georgia, Minnesota, organizational development:

**JOSHUA:** Hello, everyone. Good morning. I just want to start off by saying I’m very appreciative to have the opportunity to be a scholarship finalist. I am currently majoring in human resource development at the University of Minnesota. I want to leverage this degree to become an organizational development consultant where I can come up with strategies to better implement DEI and how to best develop and organize an organization to make it run most efficiently. Currently I am learning a lot from the current internship I have at Unilever, and I hope I can continue to build on the foundation I have. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** So there are thirty-two years between our most seasoned scholarship finalist and our youngest. This next finalist is toward the younger end. Although I would like to shout out the most senior member of the scholarship class, I won’t say who that is. That person’s birthday is Valentine’s Day, which is really fun.

Our next finalist is not "the youngest;" that one is coming later, but, Natalie Rankin, Texas, Texas, cybersecurity:

**NATALIE:** Hi, everyone. I want to express how deeply grateful I am for this incredible opportunity that the Federation has offered me. I am deeply passionate about protecting privacy in this digital age that we live in, and I fully intend to use this scholarship to help in promoting a safer cyberspace that is accessible for all. Again, thank you so much.

**CAYTE:** Casey Reyes, Utah, Utah, public relations:

**CASEY:** Hello all. My name is Casey Reyes. I’m very grateful for having been selected as a 2024 scholarship finalist from the National Federation of the Blind. I’m currently studying strategic communication at the University of Utah and hope to pursue a degree to go on to pursue a career in crisis management. Mentorship is something that I deeply value, and since becoming more involved in the National Federation of the Blind, I have been blown away by the abundance of mentorship available to me. I look forward to taking advantage of this mentorship and growing. I cannot wait for where the Federation can take me and where I can take the Federation to live the life I want. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Muntaha Ruthba, Texas, Texas, international blindness program:

**MUNTAHA:** Hi everyone. I am Muntaha Ruthba, and I go by Ruth. I’m a Bengali American woman from Austin, Texas. I’m majoring in psychology and minoring in disability studies at UT Austin. My goal is to remove mental and physical barriers for blind children and families so that they have the tools and training to be independent and successful. I’m so grateful for everyone who has made this scholarship possible. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Dishon Spears, Colorado, Colorado, nonprofit tech:

**DISHON:** Hello, everyone. My name is Dishon Spears, and I want to thank the Board and NFB for giving me the opportunity to get this scholarship. I’m studying business right now with my focus being on nonprofit organizations. I hope to start my nonprofit and being able to give back to blind people in the technology area. Thanks again to the NFB and to all of you who helped raise money to make this possible.

**CAYTE:** The youngest finalist is in the last group, and this person turned eighteen which means they qualified for the scholarship, on July 2—just squeaked under.

So, since we shared a fun fact about our most seasoned birthday, I thought it would be a fun fact about our least. As we commence the last group of scholarship finalists this year, we have Jonesti Steele, Mississippi, Alabama, rehab counselor:

**JONESTI:** Good morning. For those of you who don’t know me, I went blind three years ago due to a physical assault. Initially I looked at my predicament so negatively until I realized I was blind but blessed. As a rehabilitation counselor, I aspire to continue working alongside my Federation family within our movement to make a difference. My plan is to encourage individuals to see capabilities before our disabilities. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Maranda Ulvestad, Arizona, Arizona, elementary teacher:

**MARANDA:** Hello, Federation family. Thank you so much for the opportunity to be a finalist. For me, I have seen my confidence grow from being a member of the NFB through the opportunities that I have received from this organization, some of which include advocating for the blind community at the Washington Seminar, as well as working as a mentor for the BELL® Program this year. I am looking forward to becoming an elementary schoolteacher sometime in the future and working to build the NFB in the rural parts of my home state of Arizona.

**CAYTE:** Our next finalist is a tenBroek winner. Colin Wong, Washington, Washington, professor:

**COLIN:** Thank you, everyone. My name is Colin Wong, and I’m honored to be here today. The Federation has shaped me to be who I am as a student of both CCB and LCB, and even my first job was offered to me outside general session at Shingle Creek. So I’m incredibly thankful for the Federation and the Scholarship Committee for supporting me again in advancing my career and pursuing a PhD in educational leadership to become a university professor and researcher to study adult education and blindness education. There needs to be more research in blindness with the high expectations expected from the National Federation of the Blind. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** Lynn Wu, California, California, nonprofit tech:

**LYNN:** Good morning, everyone. My name is Lynn Wu, and I am the youngest of the scholarship class this year. I just want to begin by saying how grateful I am to the NFB and the Scholarship Committee for selecting me as a scholarship finalist. I just graduated high school a month ago, and I’m going to pursue a major in computer science at Stanford University with the hope of improving digital accessibility, especially making STEM more digitally accessible to encourage and let more blind people explore the topics in STEM more easily to really help in the age where technology is rapidly advancing. Thank you.

**CAYTE:** And last of all, this year in our fantastic group of scholarship winners, we have Henry Young, New Jersey, Montana, park ranger:

**HENRY:** Hello, everyone. My name is Henry Young. Again, I would like to thank the Scholarship Committee for the great honor that you’ve given all of us; it is truly appreciated. I attend the University of Montana, studying history and mountain studies in beautiful Missoula, Montana. This summer, as well as after I graduate, I will be pursuing my dream of living in and working in the national parks, and that is for one simple reason: I love national parks. I want to spend as much time in them as possible, telling their stories in a way that is unafraid of conflict and controversy, yet one that showcases a common American narrative. At the same time, I want to help issue a special welcome to those Americans who do not yet feel a sense of ownership of their national parks, their common inheritance, America’s best idea—to show that these sacred spaces belong to all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity, or disability.

**CAYTE:** With that, Mr. President and members of the Board, I am pleased to conclude the presentation of the 2024 National Federation of the Blind Scholarship class.

At the Annual Banquet of the National Federation of the Blind, Cayte Mendez presented the 2024 National Scholarship Awards to this year’s winners. Each received a plaque in print and Braille contributed by the Ray Kurzweil Foundation and an award of eight thousand dollars from the National Federation of the Blind.

*National Federation of the Blind Scholarships:* Lindsay Adair, Krystle Allen, Cole Carper, David Carrillo, Abey Finklea, Tom Geraci, Benjamin Grelk, Thor Kargatis, Miles Little, Tamara Lundy, Natalie Rankin, Muntaha Ruthba, Maranda Ulvestad

*Charles and Betty Allen Scholarship:* Henry Young

*EU and Jean Parker Scholarship*s: Jonesti Steele

*Charles and Melba T. Owen Memorial Scholarships:* Amanda Juetten, Julia LeGrand and Joshua Olukanni

*Edith R. and Alvin J. Domroe Scholarships:* Enrique Mejia and Casey Reyes

*Jesse and Hertha Adams Trust Scholarship:* Josè Andre Montano

*Jacqueline Billey Memorial Scholarship:* Hannah Clemenson

*Mimi and Marvin Sandler Award:* Miranda Lacy

*JAWS for Windows Award:* Dishon Spears

*NFB STEM Scholarship:* Lynn Wu

*Oracle Scholarship for Excellence in STEM Field:* Sam Morgan

*Adrienne Asch Memorial Scholarship*: Colin Wong

*Scott C. LaBarre Memorial Scholarship*: Madison Flores

*American Action Fund Scholarship:* Rachel Grider

*Kenneth Jernigan Memorial Scholarship*: Thelma González Santana

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## Resolutions Passed by the 2024 National Convention

### RESOLUTION 2024-01

### Regarding the Accessibility of Theme Parks

WHEREAS, The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requires that theme parks be accessible to individuals with disabilities; and

WHEREAS, the United States Department of Justice is responsible for enforcing the ADA; and

WHEREAS, large theme parks such as Walt Disney World, Disneyland, and Universal Studios claim to provide accessible theme park experiences, but these experiences are insufficient and often ineffective to provide blind and low-vision guests with equal access to the parks’ attractions, experiences, and information; and

WHEREAS, Walt Disney World and Disneyland both post tactile maps of their theme parks, but these maps are large and stationary, meaning blind and low-vision guests do not have accessible map information while moving about the park; and

WHEREAS, both Walt Disney World and Disneyland offer to blind guests a reasonable accommodation of a physical book containing park information concerning rides, attractions, shows, and food venues in large print or Braille, but this book is heavy, cumbersome, and potentially inconvenient to carry around the park and store while riding attractions; and

WHEREAS, neither Walt Disney World nor Disneyland offers an electronic version of this information, meaning those who use a reading media other than Braille or large print have no meaningful access to the information contained in this book; and

WHEREAS, Walt Disney World and Disneyland both offer an audio description service using a Disney-provided handheld device available for rent, which includes information such as general area descriptions, queue and pre-attraction descriptions, real-time attraction audio description, nearby restrooms and restaurants, and service animal relief areas; and

WHEREAS, the handheld device uses beacons Disney has installed to trigger the description service, which is supposed to update as a guest navigates the park; and

WHEREAS, users report that some of the issues they’ve experienced with Disney’s handheld devices include outdated hardware, short battery life requiring guests to return to guest services to replace their devices, frequently failing to connect to location beacons, attraction descriptions that are not properly synchronized with the attraction experience, descriptions for attractions that have been discontinued for many years, and general unreliability; and

WHEREAS, Walt Disney World and Disneyland both offer mobile applications that enable guests to perform tasks such as scheduling visits, scheduling rides using the Disability Access Service (DAS) and GeniePlus, joining attraction virtual queues, checking wait times for attractions, pre-ordering food, getting walking directions to attractions and activities, and more; and

WHEREAS, most of these features and tasks are not accessible to those using the mobile applications with assistive technology; and

WHEREAS, Disney’s DAS program, with certain limitations, offers guests with disabilities and their traveling parties the ability to schedule ride times without having to wait in the stand-by queue; and

WHEREAS, Disney recently changed its DAS program to grant access only to those with developmental disabilities; and

WHEREAS, many blind Disney guests also have other disabilities which would make standing in a queue difficult or impossible, such as heart conditions, cancer, being immunocompromised, anxiety, and mobility disabilities; and

WHEREAS, Disney has denied the DAS applications for guests with intersectional disabilities including blindness, telling them they can use scooters, wheelchairs, and companions they bring as alternative accommodations; and

WHEREAS, these guests have communicated that such alternative accommodations are ineffective because many blind guests cannot drive scooters, cannot push themselves in a wheelchair, or cannot provide a companion to push them, but Disney still denied their reasonable accommodation requests; and

WHEREAS, Disney’s new DAS approach ignores those with intersectional disabilities related to mental health and immunity; and

WHEREAS, Disney’s one-size-fits-all approach to disability accommodations fails to ensure that blind guests with intersectional disabilities have equal access as do non-disabled guests to their theme parks; and

WHEREAS, the Universal Studios mobile application also has significant accessibility challenges for those accessing the app with assistive technology; and

WHEREAS, Universal Studios does not offer an audio description service at all, and instead only offers access to attraction scripts in large print and Braille but not electronic formats; and

WHEREAS, these scripts are only accessible at Guest Services, meaning guests cannot remove the scripts from that location or read the scripts while experiencing the attraction; and

WHEREAS, though Universal Studios’ attraction scheduling service application process for individuals with disabilities, including those who are blind with intersectional disabilities, is individualized and consistent with ADA disability definitions, the Universal Studios disability scheduling service uses a paper ride scheduling pass that is not accessible to the blind or others with print disabilities; and

WHEREAS, blind guests, including those with intersectional disabilities, have a desire and a right to experience theme parks and their attractions and to be effectively accommodated when visiting: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that we call upon Walt Disney World, Disneyland, and Universal Studios to establish tactile maps that blind guests can take with them as they move about the parks; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we strongly urge Walt Disney World and Disneyland to make available their park information books in an accessible, electronic format and permit guests with disabilities including blindness to access them on their personal devices; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we strongly urge Universal Studios to make available to its guests with disabilities including blindness Universal Studios’ attraction scripts in an accessible, electronic format and permit guests to access these scripts on their own devices; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we strongly urge Walt Disney World and Disneyland to update, modernize, and maintain their audio description services program and devices and strongly urge Universal Studios to implement an audio description service for its parks; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we strongly urge Walt Disney World, Disneyland, and Universal Studios to make their mobile applications fully accessible to guests with disabilities and that they consult with the National Federation of the Blind to ensure these apps are accessible and usable by the blind; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we condemn and deplore the decision of the Disney Corporation to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to reasonable accommodations for its guests, including those who are blind with intersectional disabilities; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we demand that the Disney Corporation revise this discriminatory policy to make its DAS program comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, affording an individualized assessment for guests with disabilities; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we strongly urge the Department of Justice and any applicable state entities with jurisdiction to immediately enforce the ADA with regard to theme park accessibility at Walt Disney World, Disneyland, and Universal Studios.

### RESOLUTION 2024-02

### Regarding Legislation to Create a National Framework for Fully Autonomous Vehicle Deployment

WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind advocates for equality, security, and opportunity for blind Americans in order for us to live the lives we want; and

WHEREAS, the right to freely move and travel is a cornerstone of our society, enriching life and fostering economic opportunity; and

WHEREAS, the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) outlines six levels of driving automation starting with Level 0, which is limited to warnings and momentary assistance such as a lane departure warning or automatic emergency braking system, and ending with Level 5, which is fully autonomous driving under all conditions with no geographical limitations; and

WHEREAS, the advent of Level 4 autonomous vehicles, which are fully autonomous but restricted to operation only within specific geographical boundaries, presents a unique opportunity to revolutionize automotive travel, increasing transportation opportunities for the blind to the extent that blind people can now travel alone, in a fully autonomous automobile throughout several cities across the United States including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Phoenix; and

WHEREAS, twenty-four states have passed legislation expressly permitting autonomous vehicles to operate within their borders; and

WHEREAS, many bills that would limit the deployment of fully autonomous vehicles, and even specifically require a licensed driver in every fully autonomous vehicle have been introduced in state legislatures across the country, essentially stripping away a dream that is now a reality: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that we call upon members of Congress to work with the National Federation of the Blind to pass legislation that would create a national framework for autonomous vehicles that ensures equal access to transportation for blind and low-vision people, addresses potential access barriers to the use of autonomous vehicles by blind and disabled people, and promotes the inclusion of blind people in the testing and continued development phases of autonomous vehicle technology.

### RESOLUTION 2024-03

### Regarding Raising the Supplemental Security Income Resource Limit and Eliminating the Marriage Penalty

WHEREAS, the Social Security Administration (SSA) provides monthly benefit payments to individuals and couples who qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) due to blindness, disability, or old age; and

WHEREAS, in order to be eligible for benefits, a beneficiary who is single must possess resources valued at less than $2,000, or less than $3,000 if the beneficiary is part of a married couple; and

WHEREAS, the resource limit, established in 1972, has only been adjusted once, in 1989, and is not indexed to changes in the cost of living; and

WHEREAS, when the monthly SSI benefit was first established it comprised approximately one tenth of the resource limit, but since the resource limit has increased so little in fifty years, the current monthly benefit is nearly half of the resource limit; and

WHEREAS, this year, the monthly SSI benefit amount for a single individual is $943 and the monthly benefit amount for married couples is $1,415; and

WHEREAS, two individual SSI benefit recipients living as unmarried partners currently receive over $450 more in monthly combined benefits than if those same two individuals were to get married, resulting in a marriage penalty; and

WHEREAS, this same marriage penalty also exists in the SSI resource limits for two individual SSI benefit recipients living as unmarried partners versus a married couple: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that we call upon Congress to enact legislation that abolishes the marriage penalty associated with SSI monthly benefits and SSI resource limits; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon Congress to increase the SSI resource limits to $10,000 for single individuals and $20,000 for married couples; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon Congress to tie the resource limits to the consumer price index to ensure that resource limits maintain proportional value with inflation.

### RESOLUTION 2024-04

### Regarding Amazon Employment Practices

WHEREAS, Amazon promotes itself as building an inclusive culture for employees with disabilities, in part, through the establishment of its Global Accessibility Awareness Month and Amazon People with Disabilities affinity group; and

WHEREAS, Amazon still does not have company-wide standard operating procedures in place on a national and global level with regard to accommodations, accessibility, and assistive technology; and

WHEREAS, company-wide training for leadership, management, human resources, technical support associates, and employees is minimal or not present; and

WHEREAS, while employment with Amazon is highly desirable, in that Amazon offers industry-leading benefits, including comprehensive healthcare, retirement savings plans, tuition reimbursement, and more; and

WHEREAS, Amazon still maintains a practice of refusing to accommodate blind employees in entry level positions; and

WHEREAS, Amazon has established a continuous pattern of shifting these blind employees to leave-without-pay status or terminating them, rather than providing necessary accommodations or placing them in a temporary position that is currently accessible while accommodations are put in place for other jobs originally applied for or providing an option for temporary or permanent placement in an accessible position, such as Virtual Customer Service Associate; and

WHEREAS, Amazon could provide these accommodations, modifications, and safety features without significant difficulty or expense given Amazon’s financial and technological resources; and

WHEREAS, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits employers from denying employment opportunities to qualified individuals with disabilities when that denial is based on the need to provide reasonable accommodations and requires employers to engage in an interactive process when reviewing accommodation requests; and

WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind has advocated strongly on behalf of blind employees by filing suit and supporting administrative complaints against Amazon for its continued disparate treatment of blind workers and job applicants: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization condemn and deplore Amazon’s constant pattern of discrimination against blind employees and job seekers in violation of federal and state law; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization demand Amazon promptly implement and keep company-wide processes for reviewing and approving reasonable accommodations and modifications for blind employees, including the use of third-party screen access software at workstations, approval of reasonable assignment modifications, and implementation of nonvisual safety precautions in warehouse settings; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization demand Amazon immediately cease placing blind employees on leave without pay while Amazon engages in a reasonable accommodation review process; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that Amazon and the National Federation of the Blind regularly participate in joint discussions to improve accessibility, accommodations, training, timely acquisition of assistive technology, and company-wide policies regarding the previously mentioned issues.

### RESOLUTION 2024-05

### Regarding Walmart Refusing Shopping Assistance to Blind Customers

WHEREAS, each week, an estimated 255 million people visit Walmart stores worldwide, resulting in more than 648 billion dollars in total revenue in its most recent fiscal year; and

WHEREAS, as a result, Walmart is the largest retail establishment both in the United States and abroad; and

WHEREAS, in 2024, the average Walmart location employs approximately two hundred people and comprises more than 160 thousand square feet; and

WHEREAS, according to the 2022 American Community Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau there are approximately 8.2 million Americans who are blind or low-vision; and

WHEREAS, Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires places of public accommodation to make their goods and services accessible to disabled Americans unless doing so would constitute either an undue burden or a fundamental alteration; and

WHEREAS, for decades, blind Americans have accessed the goods and services at brick-and-mortar locations by requesting a guide from the staff; and

WHEREAS, a growing number of Walmart stores have begun refusing assistance to blind Americans, in some cases going so far as to tell blind people not to return to their stores unless they bring a sighted shopping assistant of their own; and

WHEREAS, this is a clear violation of our civil rights and is harming blind Americans’ right to live with equity, autonomy, and independence: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization demand the Walmart corporation, and all similarly situated corporations, immediately cease refusing shopping assistance to blind Americans in accordance with our rights under Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization demand the Walmart corporation, and all similarly situated corporations, adequately train their staff as to their obligations under the law.

### RESOLUTION 2024-06

### Regarding Silent Electric Vehicles Weighing Over 10,000 Pounds

WHEREAS, in the early years of the twenty-first century, blind Americans noticed a new danger posed by silent hybrid and electric vehicles that were nearly undetectable to the ear on the roads; and

WHEREAS, because of this emerging threat, the National Federation of the Blind worked with the automakers and the United States Congress to develop a solution to which all stakeholders could agree; and

WHEREAS, that solution came in the form of the Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act, which was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama in 2011, and required hybrid and electric vehicles on American roads to emit a safe level of sound; and

WHEREAS, the United States Department of Transportation limited the scope of the final rule, published in 2016, to vehicles that weigh ten thousand pounds or less because it did not “have enough information at this time to apply the minimum acoustic requirements of this final rule to these vehicles”; and

WHEREAS, in 2023, there were more than 1,200 electric school buses and more than 6,000 electric public transportation buses on US roads; and

WHEREAS, these electric buses all weigh more than 10,000 pounds, meaning the regulation does not require them to emit an alert sound; and

WHEREAS, these motorized behemoths are silently roaming our streets, putting blind Americans in just as much danger as the quiet cars that were the impetus for the original Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act more than a decade ago: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization urge the United States Department of Transportation to update its rules so that all electric vehicles, regardless of weight, are required to emit a safe level of sound.

### RESOLUTION 2024-07

### Regarding Accessible Labels for Medication Dispensed Through the Department of Veterans Affairs CHAMPVA Program

WHEREAS, the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) provides healthcare benefits to spouses, children, widows, and widowers of a veteran who is rated permanently and totally disabled due to a service-connected disability, was rated as permanently and totally disabled due to a service-connected disability at the time of death, died of a service-related disability, or died on active duty and the dependents are not otherwise eligible for Department of Defense TRICARE benefits; and

WHEREAS, as a part of the healthcare services provided through CHAMPVA, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers the Meds by Mail program; and

WHEREAS, through this program, the VA’s Consolidated Mail and Outpatient Pharmacies fill and mail prescriptions to beneficiaries at no cost to them; and

WHEREAS, however, this option is not available to blind beneficiaries who must rely on audible prescription reading devices, such as ScripTalk, to manage their medications safely and independently; and

WHEREAS, audible prescription labels are not merely a convenience for blind patients, they are used to identify medications, provide dosage information, and include warnings and other important information; and

WHEREAS, these accessibility features ensure that the blind patient can take the right medication at the right time and lessen the possibility of errors that might cause injury or death; and

WHEREAS, according to the VA, the Consolidated Mail and Outpatient Pharmacies cannot currently support the use of audible prescription reading devices through the Meds by Mail program due to the complexity of audio label technology and the requirement that specific Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) labels be applied to each prescription bottle; and

WHEREAS, the alternative offered by CHAMPVA involves acquiring the blind user’s prescriptions from a retail pharmacy, which forces them to incur a 25 percent copay until they meet a $3,000 deductible, a cost not incurred by sighted beneficiaries who can receive their prescriptions through the Meds by Mail program; and

WHEREAS, Paragraph (a)(1) of 38 C.F.R. 17.274 addresses cost-sharing exceptions within the CHAMPVA program but does not include an exception for blind beneficiaries who must get their prescriptions filled at a retail pharmacy because they need to use an audible prescription reading device; and

WHEREAS, since there is currently no way for a blind beneficiary to use the free Meds by Mail option if they need to access information about their medication using an audible label, amending the regulations would be a reasonable accommodation for those beneficiaries; and

WHEREAS, amending the regulation is only part of the solution since using a retail pharmacy can also present a transportation barrier that the Meds by Mail program eliminates for blind program participants, making a permanent solution to inclusion in the Meds by Mail program a critical necessity to accessibility for the blind: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization call upon the Department of Veterans Affairs to develop a means by which blind CHAMPVA beneficiaries who must use an audible prescription reading device can receive their medications using the Meds by Mail program; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we urge the Department of Veterans Affairs to amend 38 C.F.R. 17.274 (a)(1) to include an exception to cost sharing for blind beneficiaries who choose to use the option of obtaining medications from a retail pharmacy in order to have access to the important information provided by an audible prescription reading device.

### RESOLUTION 2024-08

### Regarding Potential Regulation of the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Visual Interpretation

WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind is committed to advancing the lives of all blind people by ensuring that we have access to the same opportunities, information, and technology as our sighted peers; and

WHEREAS, because most people can see and the world is full of information that is presented visually, equal access for the blind necessarily involves equal access to visual information in printed documents, scanned and photographic images, and our physical surroundings, and;

WHEREAS, artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, particularly large language models such as ChatGPT, are increasingly being used by blind people and by visual interpretation services, such as Be My AI from Be My Eyes and Access AI from Aira, in order to generate detailed descriptions of images and scenes captured with smartphone cameras or imported from other sources, providing blind people with almost instantaneous access to a wealth of visual information; and

WHEREAS, these AI implementations have proven to be enormously helpful to blind people in any number of situations, including but not limited to exploring unfamiliar locations, identifying items on store shelves, analyzing printed documents, describing vacation photos, and much more; and

WHEREAS, overly restrictive practices and regulations on AI used in this manner, particularly limitations on the description of human faces and other important visual details involving people and places, could significantly hamper the effectiveness of these technologies and diminish their value to the blind community: for example, one iteration of Be My AI would not describe an image at all if it contained any identifiable characteristic of any human being, including the person taking the image, making it useless until the problem was fixed; and

WHEREAS, while such severe limitations can be problematic, it is also essential to balance the benefits of AI technologies with the need to protect the privacy of individuals captured in images, ensuring that identifiable information about them is properly protected from harmful storage, dissemination, and use; and

WHEREAS, other details captured in images may also present challenges, such as images of artwork that is the intellectual property of its creator or images of copyrighted text; and

WHEREAS, the rapid advances in AI technology in just the past couple of years have both excited and alarmed the public, and consequently legislative bodies and regulatory agencies are already considering laws and regulations around the deployment and use of these technologies; and

WHEREAS, the development of AI regulations must consider both the accessibility needs of blind individuals and other rights such as privacy and intellectual property rights; and

WHEREAS, without the voices of blind people providing our expertise and lived experience, the wrong regulatory balance may be struck in addressing the role of AI technology as applied to our needs: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization urge Congress and relevant federal agencies to work closely with blind Americans to develop AI legislation and regulations that:

1. Allow AI technologies to continue to be used to provide detailed and meaningful descriptions of scenes, documents, and images to blind and low-vision individuals without undue restrictions, ensuring these technologies remain effective and beneficial to the blind; and
2. Implement sensible protections that prevent images taken, imported, or otherwise collected for the purpose of providing visual descriptions to the blind from being stored, disseminated, or otherwise misused in ways that violate the rights of others.

### RESOLUTION 2024-09

### Regarding Inaccessible Insulin Pumps

WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind is dedicated to advancing the lives of all blind people by ensuring equal and dignified treatment in all aspects of life, including healthcare; and

WHEREAS, access to healthcare technology is crucial for the health and well-being of individuals with diabetes, including those who are blind or have low vision; and

WHEREAS, nearly all insulin pumps and related devices currently on the market lack accessible nonvisual features, rendering them difficult or impossible for blind individuals to independently use and manage their diabetes effectively; and

WHEREAS, inaccessible insulin pumps not only pose significant barriers to daily diabetes management tasks but also contribute to increased health risks, diminished quality of life, and decreased independence for blind individuals; and

WHEREAS, accessible technology is essential for ensuring that blind individuals have equal opportunities to monitor and manage their health independently, including diabetes management; and

WHEREAS, a 2023 study published by the National Institutes of Health shows that diabetic retinopathy is the leading cause of blindness among working-aged adults in the United States; and

WHEREAS, despite the growing prevalence of diabetes among the blind population, insulin pump manufacturers have yet to fully address the accessibility needs of blind users in their product designs and development efforts: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization demand insulin pump manufacturers and developers, including Medtronic, Tandem Diabetes Care, Insulet Corporation, Beta Bionics, and other industry leaders prioritize accessibility in the design and development of all insulin pumps and related devices; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon insulin pump manufacturers and developers actively to engage with the accessibility experts of the National Federation of the Blind throughout the design, development, and testing phases to ensure that insulin pumps are fully accessible to blind and low-vision users.

### RESOLUTION 2024-10

### Regarding the Accessibility of Destination-Oriented and Touch-Screen Panel Controlled Elevators

WHEREAS, destination-oriented elevators, also known as “smart elevators” or “dispatch elevators” are elevators that typically do not contain destination or floor number buttons inside the elevator car; and

WHEREAS, passengers indicate their destination floors using a common keypad that controls all elevators in the area; and

WHEREAS, the technology running such elevator programs assigns the specific elevator that the passenger should take to reach the passenger’s desired floor or destination; and

WHEREAS, the elevator car that is assigned to transport the passenger is programmed for the specific destination in advance of the passenger boarding the elevator car, the goal of which is to move passengers more efficiently to their destinations by reducing the number of times an elevator stops per trip; and

WHEREAS, while some smart elevator control panels operate based on floor numbers, others operate based on a directory containing specific offices or individuals rather than floors, meaning an individual seeking to visit a doctor for example would have to navigate the elevator directory to find the doctor’s name or practice rather than selecting the floor of the doctor; and

WHEREAS, many of the directory-based destination-oriented elevators are not accessible to the blind at all, with many of those claiming to be accessible requiring significantly more time and effort for a blind user to choose a destination or floor than a sighted user, rendering such elevators functionally inaccessible; and

WHEREAS, destination-oriented elevators are a fairly new form of technology, gaining popularity in the last decade, particularly in hotels and recreation facilities, high-rise commercial and residential buildings, cruise ships, and government and office buildings; and

WHEREAS, the number of destination-oriented elevators is expected to significantly rise, with a current market value of approximately $22.4 billion, which is predicted to reach $50.3 billion by 2032, the majority of which is in the United States; and

WHEREAS, the accessibility features of destination-oriented elevators are often inadequate to be functionally usable for the blind, including such issues as audio announcements that are garbled, tinny, or otherwise hard to hear, audio announcements and non-visual chimes that cannot be heard during peak or busy periods, Braille and tactile markings that are missing or not accurate, and/or keypad controls that are not tactilely discernible; and

WHEREAS, there has also been an increase in the installation of traditional on-demand destination elevators that contain touch-screen destination and floor buttons that are not tactilely discernible; and

WHEREAS, though many of these elevators have an accessibility button, which when activated, enables the passenger to listen to a menu of options, usually hierarchical with multiple levels in the hierarchy, and press the accessibility button once the preferred selection is spoken; and

WHEREAS, the passenger must wait for the entire menu of options to be spoken up to the desired floor before the passenger can make a floor selection, for example having to listen to the audio announcement list floors one through thirty individually as well as the five to thirty seconds of silence in between each floor number, before being able to select floor thirty; and

WHEREAS, this results in the blind passenger spending considerable time, often at least several minutes, waiting for the elevator to cycle through the audio prompts, while a sighted passenger can make their selection in moments; and

WHEREAS, the single accessibility button method for on-demand destination elevators with touch screen controls may be technically accessible, but it is functionally inaccessible, inefficient, and demoralizing for blind passengers; and

WHEREAS, The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requires that elevators be accessible to passengers with disabilities; and

WHEREAS, the United States Department of Justice is responsible for enforcing the ADA, including violations to elevator accessibility requirements; and

WHEREAS, the United States Access Board is charged with providing accessibility guidelines and standards for certain physical spaces and the built environment including elevators; and

WHEREAS, blind people have the right to move about our communities, hotels, and recreation facilities, and the commercial environment using elevators that are both technically and functionally accessible: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that we demand elevator manufacturers design destination-oriented and traditional destination on-demand elevators that are both technically and functionally accessible; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we urge elevator manufacturers to work with the National Federation of the Blind to ensure that design and development of both destination-oriented and on-demand destination elevators is functionally accessible and efficient for blind and low-vision users; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we strongly urge the Department of Justice to immediately enforce the ADA with regard to technical and functional accessibility of destination-oriented and on-demand destination touchscreen-controlled elevators, including correction and remediation of functionally inaccessible elevators; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call on the United States Access Board to swiftly promulgate standards for technical and functional accessibility of both destination-oriented elevators and on-demand destination elevators including those with touch screen controls.

### RESOLUTION 2024-11

### Regarding the Adoption of Inclusive Digital Maps by Title IV Higher Education Institutions and Federal Agencies

WHEREAS, over thirty million digital maps are currently available on publicly facing websites worldwide for professional and personal use; and

WHEREAS, blind, deafblind, and low-vision individuals have extremely limited access to the vital geographic information presented in digital maps; and

WHEREAS, alternatives such as text descriptions, turn-by-turn directions, tables, and nearby address searches fail to convey the same geographic information inherent to maps; and

WHEREAS, digital maps often have poor contrast, lack full keyboard accessibility, lack a visible focus, lack interface elements that can be programmatically determined or set, contain keyboard focus traps, have buttons and other interactive elements that are too small, and fail to handle zoom up to 200 percent; and

WHEREAS, the paper tactile maps that may be provided as the only alternative to a digital map are not part of the website, require physical contact to view, are simplified, are typically inaccessible to low-vision users, take days or weeks to be produced, and are often out of date; and

WHEREAS, visual interpreting services and chat-based alternatives can only provide answers to basic questions about the map, do not facilitate spatial knowledge acquisition, are not available to everyone desiring to view the map, are not part of the website’s accessibility, and are not a substitute for compliance to digital accessibility legislation; and

WHEREAS, inclusive digital maps, effectively utilized in over a hundred published research articles and nearly a thousand games over the past two decades, have shown that blind individuals can both independently create maps and attain a level of spatial comprehension equivalent to that of sighted individuals using visual maps, encompassing the ability to accurately grasp survey knowledge, including distance, direction, orientation, shape, size, and the overall layout of a map; and

WHEREAS, inclusive digital maps are fully Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) AA compliant, and allow low-vision users to fully manipulate the interface, including, but not limited to, adjusting contrast, using patterns instead of colors, adjusting feature border width, adjusting spacing, using the map as it’s zoomed in 200 percent, using the map with the keyboard, and having a clear visible focus; and

WHEREAS, Title IV higher education institutions and federal agencies in the United States currently use digital maps that are not accessible to screen reader users and fail to meet even the basic WCAG A compliance; and

WHEREAS, these current practices by Title IV higher education institutions and federal agencies are in violation of multiple digital accessibility laws, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (as Title IV educational institutions), Section 508 (through being a federal agency), Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (as state or local entities); and

WHEREAS, blind, deafblind, and low-vision users have the right not only to fully consume spatial information from digital maps, but have the right to be creators, designers, and editors of digital maps: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization call upon Title IV higher education institutions and federal agencies in the United States to, over the next three years, simultaneously with the new ADA Title II rule, implement inclusive digital map technologies that are at least WCAG AA compliant for all geographic content on their websites and mobile applications, including but not limited to campus maps, accessibility maps, parking maps, habitat maps, walking maps, evacuation maps, building maps, topographic maps, road maps, weather maps, voting maps, emergency maps, climate maps, land use maps, cadastral maps, transportation maps, and utility maps; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization demand that these Title IV higher education institutions and federal agencies also implement an inclusive digital map editor for use by blind, deafblind, and low-vision employees and students, ensuring full participation in updating and creating geographic information; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization urge the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights to publish guidance affirming that digital maps are included in their accessibility mandate; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization urge the United States Access Board to publish systematic criteria for evaluating digital inclusive map accessibility, thereby ensuring that all Title IV universities and federal agencies comply with existing laws to make all content, including digital maps, equally accessible to everyone; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon all the Title IV higher education institutions and federal agencies to work with the National Federation of the Blind to implement and evaluate systems which will meet the map-reading and creation needs of the blind and low-vision citizens of the United States.

### RESOLUTION 2024-12

### Regarding the Accessibility of Social Media Management Tools

WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind champions accessibility as a means of achieving full participation by the blind in all areas of academics, employment, and recreation; and

WHEREAS, social media marketing is an industry in which blind people can excel given accessible technology and other accommodations; and

WHEREAS, social media management tools including Buffer, Hootsuite, Sprinklr, Sprout Social, Zoho Social, and others are an industry standard, allowing professionals to centralize and analyze social media marketing efforts; and

WHEREAS, the vast majority of these managers have web and app interfaces that present accessibility issues, preventing blind people from using them effectively, if at all: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization urge social media management products—including but not limited to Buffer, Hootsuite, Sprinklr, Sprout Social, and Zoho Social—to incorporate blind people’s user experiences and expertise when evaluating the accessibility and usability of their products through collaboration with the National Federation of the Blind and others; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization demand that all social media management product developers remediate their products for accessibility, thus making the social media marketing industry more inclusive for all blind people.

### RESOLUTION 2024-13

### Regarding Microsoft’s Free New Outlook

WHEREAS, Microsoft is a company which has, historically, invested a tremendous amount of time and effort to make many of its products accessible to the blind and, by so doing, enabled literally thousands of blind people to succeed in life and employment; and

WHEREAS, examples of accessible programs from Microsoft include, but are not limited to, Microsoft Word (for creating and editing documents), Microsoft Excel (to create and manage spreadsheets), and Microsoft Outlook (to send and receive emails and organize calendar events); and

WHEREAS, the aforementioned software—particularly those versions running under the Windows operating system—provide a plethora of useful keyboard commands which enhance the productivity for nonvisual users who cannot point and click with a mouse and whose livelihoods, productivity, and independence are directly related to their ability to perform work effectively and efficiently; and

WHEREAS, information available online about keyboard commands for the New Outlook clearly demonstrates that the New Outlook does not contain all of the built-in keyboard commands that nonvisual users of the paid version of Outlook have available to them: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization call upon Microsoft to ensure that its free New Outlook software contains a set of keyboard commands that are as rich, robust, and as useful to the blind as the keyboard commands available in its Outlook Office software; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization call upon Microsoft to ensure that new products have the same level of accessibility as products they are replacing.

### RESOLUTION 2024-14

### Regarding Continuous Glucose Monitors and Their Use by Blind People

WHEREAS, Continuous Glucose Monitors (CGMs) are crucial for the effective management of diabetes, significantly reducing the need for fingerstick blood tests, which are particularly invasive for blind people who rely on their tactile sense for reading Braille and performing other tasks; and

WHEREAS, the majority of CGMs come with reader devices that are not accessible to blind people, because these devices provide output solely in a visual format, thereby excluding blind people from independently monitoring their blood glucose levels; and

WHEREAS, Medicare mandates the purchase of a reader device before approving sensor coverage, placing a financial burden on blind people who cannot use these readers, forcing them to seek alternatives and often less accessible means to access their CGM data; and

WHEREAS, Medicare’s policy of allowing the replacement or upgrade of CGM devices only once every five years limits access to technological advancements that could offer significant health management improvements for people with diabetes, particularly affecting those who are blind; and

WHEREAS, the reliance on smartphone technology for accessing CGM data, while beneficial for some, excludes those who cannot afford such technology or lack the skills to use it, further limiting the independence of blind people in managing their diabetes; and

WHEREAS, the resolution of these issues requires the attention and action of several entities, including CGM manufacturers, Medicare, private insurance companies, and regulatory bodies: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind, in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that we urge manufacturers of CGM devices to prioritize the development of reader devices accessible to blind and low-vision people, ensuring these essential health management tools are usable by all who need them; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the National Federation of the Blind calls upon Medicare to reevaluate its policies regarding the upgrade and replacement of medical devices such as CGMs, to ensure that technological advancements are accessible to beneficiaries, particularly those who are blind, based on functional improvements rather than arbitrary time constraints; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization call upon relevant authorities, including Medicare, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to enact policy changes that reflect the needs of blind people.

### RESOLUTION 2024-15

### Regarding Collaborating with Technology Companies on an Accessibility Solutions Framework

WHEREAS, in an age where technology plays a critical role in all aspects of society, the National Federation of the Blind has been relentless in its advocacy for accessible technology as one means to advance the lives of all blind people, the effectiveness of this advocacy being evident through a reflection on how much more information to which we have dynamic access today as opposed to forty years ago; and

WHEREAS, accolades mainstream companies receive for their accessibility initiatives are well deserved, as the blind have immediate access to computers, smartphones, and other life-changing tools in the palms of our hands for a fraction of what they used to cost; and

WHEREAS, achieving the degree of accessibility we enjoy today required the use of a range of advocacy tools, including building strong relationships, being thought leaders, and, when absolutely necessary, legislative and legal action; and

WHEREAS, while impressive innovation continues at pace, the provision of accessibility by mainstream companies has created new advocacy challenges involving the quality and reliability of some of the tools we use, resulting from a poorer standard of products for the blind consisting of show-stopping bugs that significantly degrade our ability to use some mainstream devices and would be unacceptable to the sighted, including:

* + If your screen reader suddenly and regularly stops speaking, which would be the equivalent of a sighted person’s screen flickering and then completely blanking out at random intervals;
  + If you are typing on your smartphone using Braille Screen Input and you are regularly experiencing unexpected behavior that slows you down or results in you typing gibberish, which would be the equivalent of the virtual keyboard being next to useless for a sighted person;
  + If you are blind and wear hearing aids, and your screen reader is quiet to the point of being unusable when on a phone call, which would be the equivalent of a sighted person having their screen so dim every time they make a call that they can’t see it well enough to use it;
  + If you, in good faith, install the beta of an operating system and then find that your screen reader doesn’t work at all on it, which would be equivalent to a sighted person installing a beta, understanding that there may be defects, but finding with horror that their screen was blank, making their device completely useless;
  + If you scrimp and save to buy a popular Braille display, only to find you can’t connect your smartphone to it via Bluetooth because a protocol about which there was an industry-wide consensus, and that the company promised to support, hasn’t been implemented, which would be the equivalent of a sighted person buying one of the leading printers on the market today, only to find that the operating system developer hasn’t kept their promise to support it; and

WHEREAS, a poorer standard of product for the blind is not merely a legal issue; it is a moral and financial one, because if competent blind people are unable to perform their jobs due to serious accessibility defects in a mainstream product that are not fixed in a timely manner, this perpetuates the myth of incapacity of the blind and threatens our ability to support ourselves and our families; and

WHEREAS, when the blind, just like the sighted, purchase a product, we have a reasonable expectation that the product is fit for purpose, we integrate the technology into our lives, we come to rely on it, and there should not be such egregious accessibility defects that a blind person is left unable to benefit from the tools readily accessible to the sighted; and

WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind recognizes that our active engagement in addressing this problem is essential, but requires information and collaboration to be effective: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that we call on any and all technology companies that have built accessibility features into their products to consult with the National Federation of the Blind in the development, implementation, and publishing of a framework that provides a clear definition of the type of accessibility bug that is so critical that it requires extraordinary remedial action beyond the usual software release cycle; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that with this framework in place, these technology companies should collaborate with the National Federation of the Blind to resolve the under-resourcing that is contributing to this situation, which should include employing the talent of more blind employees throughout the product development and testing cycle; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that each technology company should establish a public database of its accessibility defects, which allows users to identify which bugs have already been submitted and what priority they have been accorded; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that technology companies making these commitments use Global Accessibility Awareness Day as an opportunity to provide a transparent, independently audited report that demonstrates their progress as measured against the framework that has been established for their products.

### RESOLUTION 2024-16

### Regarding Medicare and Hearing Aids for Deafblind Individuals

WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind is the transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind people in the United States; and

WHEREAS, according to the 2022 American Community Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau, nearly 65 percent of blind people are either unemployed or underemployed; and

WHEREAS, blind people rely heavily on hearing to obtain information needed for communication, accessing information, orientation and travel, and participation in society and the workplace; and

WHEREAS, the loss of hearing as a blind person renders them as deafblind and significantly affects their access to information, particularly for those who lose hearing in later life; and

WHEREAS, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain hearing aids through Medicare, even though they are almost always of benefit to deafblind individuals; and

WHEREAS, research links unaddressed hearing loss with dementia which leads to expensive healthcare needs that far exceed the cost of hearing aids: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization call upon the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services to establish a uniform exception clause to allow Medicare to provide hearing aids, as prescribed by an audiologist, to deafblind individuals who are eligible for Medicare.

### RESOLUTION 2024-17

### Regarding Audio-Described Library Content

WHEREAS, the Institute of Museum and Library Services estimates that two-thirds of all Americans have library cards; and

WHEREAS, many blind individuals avoid registering for or using their library cards because they believe books and video content will not be accessible to them; and

WHEREAS, an increasing number of public library systems contract with Hoopla and other third-party providers of streaming or downloadable library content that do not pass through audio description or other accessible content information; and

WHEREAS, Hoopla has thus far chosen to build its streaming software incompletely, so the audio description content originally included with the video content isn’t passed on to blind users, ironically shutting blind patrons out from content that has already been made accessible; and

WHEREAS, blind library patrons and allied librarians have been asking Hoopla to add an option for consuming audio description content for nearly eight years; and

WHEREAS, Hoopla has not rolled out this feature and has no estimated timetable on its development roadmap; and

WHEREAS, this is out of compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and many related state laws, which all generally stand for the concept that blind patrons cannot be excluded from programs and services of government, including public library systems: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization call upon the American Library Association (ALA) and related state libraries to halt future contracts with Hoopla or other vendors whose software does not permit inclusion of all accessibility features already present in streamed and downloaded content; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization demand that Hoopla immediately enable audio description in its streaming systems in response to the requests of blind patrons and concerned libraries.

### RESOLUTION 2024-18

### Regarding the Harmful Namesake of the Perkins School for the Blind

WHEREAS, the New England Asylum for the Blind was incorporated in 1829 and opened its doors in August 1832 in Boston, Massachusetts; and

WHEREAS, in 1839, the Asylum was renamed after Thomas Handasyd Perkins after he donated to it, and, after further name changes, that entity is known today as the Perkins School for the Blind; and

WHEREAS, the Perkins School for the Blind, as a collective institution including its library and products, remains an important provider of blindness-related services today; and

WHEREAS, born in 1764, T. H. Perkins used money from his wealthy family to start an international trading business, where he traded slaves and the goods produced by their labor, including cotton, sugar, and rum in the Caribbean until the Haitian Revolution in 1791; and

WHEREAS, T. H. Perkins later expanded his fortune by illegally smuggling opium into China; and

WHEREAS, pairing valuable products, services, and educational experiences with the name of a known opium smuggler and slave trader teaches students and community members of all backgrounds that these immoral acts are not disqualifiers for being publicly honored; and

WHEREAS, continuing to honor a known slave trader and opium smuggler perpetuates intergenerational trauma for people of all colors; and

WHEREAS, on its website, the Perkins School for the Blind acknowledges that it has financially benefitted from both the slave trade and opium smuggling, and acknowledges the problems caused by this, particularly to those in Black and Chinese communities: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization assert that the enslavement of human beings and illegal smuggling of opium are unequivocally immoral; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization applaud the Perkins School for the Blind for courageously acknowledging how it has benefited from these historical wrongs; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization urge the Perkins School for the Blind to advance its efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion by changing its name to remove all references to Thomas Handasyd Perkins.

### RESOLUTION 2024-19

### Regarding Enhancing Self-Checkout Accessibility for Blind People

WHEREAS, self-checkout systems are proliferating across major retailers like Walmart, Target, and Kroger, offering speed and convenience to shoppers; and

WHEREAS, the current design of many self-checkout systems, relying on visual interfaces and touchscreens without audible instructions or tactile feedback, poses significant accessibility barriers to blind people; and

WHEREAS, the reliance on barcode scanning exacerbates these challenges, further impeding the ability of blind people to use these systems independently; and

WHEREAS, the reduction of human cashier options in favor of self-checkout systems limits the usability of shopping environments for blind people, compromising their independence and right to equal service; and

WHEREAS, adherence to the principles of inclusivity and equality, as well as the legal obligations of stores under the Americans with Disabilities Act, necessitate that retail services be accessible to all customers, including those who are blind: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization demand Walmart, Target, Kroger, and similar retailers implement self-checkout options that are accessible to blind people, including but not limited to voice-guided instructions, tactile buttons, and interfaces designed for ease of use; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that these retailers ensure the availability of human cashiers in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of all customers, including those unable to use self-checkout stations due to blindness; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that these entities collaborate with the National Federation of the Blind to understand the needs of the blind and work on developing accessible solutions; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that all retailers provide staff with ongoing training focused on the accessibility needs of blind customers, including assistance at self-checkout stations and throughout the store.

### RESOLUTION 2024-20

### Regarding Inaccessible Retail Kiosks

WHEREAS, many retail stores, restaurants, and other businesses are increasingly deploying kiosks for a variety of tasks, including placing orders, checking out after selecting items to purchase, presenting menus, checking prices, and more; and

WHEREAS, these kiosks may partially or fully replace human staff, meaning that there may not be any personnel available to assist blind customers with the tasks for which the kiosks have been deployed; and

WHEREAS, frequently these kiosks lack accessibility features for blind or low-vision users; and

WHEREAS, accessibility features can include, but are not limited to, audio-based interfaces, tactile keypads, and Braille signage; and

WHEREAS, the absence of these features can make it difficult or impossible for blind users to place orders, shop, or otherwise fully enjoy the products and services of a business; and

WHEREAS, blind customers deserve to be able to fully participate in the economy and take full and equal advantage of the products and services provided by businesses; and

WHEREAS, accessible kiosks, kiosk software solutions, and alternative devices (e.g., accessible tablets like the iPad and some Android devices) are available and have been deployed by some businesses, including the McDonald’s restaurant chain: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that this organization strongly urge all businesses deploying kiosks to choose and demand accessible devices so that all users can take full advantage of them; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization urge kiosk manufacturers to work with the National Federation of the Blind to develop accessible kiosks; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon Congress and federal regulators to consider solutions to require or facilitate the manufacture and deployment of accessible kiosks.

### RESOLUTION 2024-21

### Regarding Calling Upon the News Media to Use the Word “Blind”

WHEREAS, blind people are held back by a common set of misconceptions about being blind, low expectations for blind people, and barriers resulting from a lack of equal access to information and public services; and

WHEREAS, since 1940 the National Federation of the Blind has used the word “blind” as an inclusive term with a functional definition that encompasses individuals with varying degrees of blindness, but who have in common the need to use nonvisual tools and techniques, some or all of the time, in order to learn, work, play, and otherwise live the lives we want; and

WHEREAS, throughout our history, we have rejected the tendency of society to treat the word “blind” as a word to be avoided; and

WHEREAS, for example, in 1993, our convention affirmed in Resolution 1993-01 that “We believe that it is respectable to be blind, and although we have no particular pride in the fact of our blindness, neither do we have any shame in it. To the extent that euphemisms are used to convey any other concept or image, we deplore such use”; and

WHEREAS, because of our belief in the normality and capacity of blind people, we reject the idea that eyesight or vision is a requirement for success, and believe that vision-centered language focuses on what we are perceived to lack, a negative framing of blindness, rather than on our fundamental normality as people who share a characteristic that, while it does not define us, is a positive part of who we are; and

WHEREAS, increasingly other groups of people with disabilities and the wider society have embraced the idea that “blind” and other words describing disabilities are not words to be avoided, but positive indicators of identity; and

WHEREAS, a common euphemism for the word blind is the phrase “visually impaired,” or variants thereof, which is an example of vision-centered language that portrays us as broken because of our lack of eyesight; and

WHEREAS, the news media, in all its forms and to varying degrees, uses words to inform and shape the perceptions of those who consume it; and

WHEREAS, the phrase “visually impaired” continues to be used by many media outlets to describe blind people, even in stories about individuals who embrace their identity as blind people and which purport to be positive and affirming: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the City of Orlando, Florida, that we call upon all of the major broadcast, print, and digital news outlets, services, and other entities that influence the language used throughout the American news media to stop using the term “visually impaired” to describe blind people, and to instead use the word “blind” in the way that those of us who have the authentic lived experience of blindness use it; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon all of these entities to consult with the National Federation of the Blind as they review and revise their guidance to journalists, editors, and producers, and otherwise make decisions about the language they use in describing and characterizing blindness and blind people.

### RESOLUTION 2024-22

### Regarding the Use of the Term "Visually Impaired" when Referring to Blind People with Some Vision

WHEREAS, language plays a crucial role in shaping society’s perceptions and understanding of different perspectives and aspects of life; and

WHEREAS, accurate terminology is an essential factor in the creation of a climate which fosters respect and inclusivity for everyone, including the blind; and

WHEREAS, at its 1993 convention, the National Federation of the Blind unanimously adopted Resolution 93-01, which says in relevant part, “…the word blind accurately and clearly describes the condition of being unable to see, as well as the condition of having such limited eyesight that alternative techniques are required to do efficiently the ordinary tasks of daily living that are performed visually by those having good eyesight…”; and

WHEREAS, this resolution clearly declares that the word “blind” is meant to include people with poor vision or no vision and does not circumvent the use of a word which, in other circles, is either avoided altogether or combined with other terms such as “visually impaired,” “visually challenged,” “sight-challenged” or “hard of seeing,”—euphemisms which are thought to be more acceptable and less off-putting to the broader community; and

WHEREAS, the term “visually impaired” (often combined with the word “blind” as in Blind and Visually Impaired) is used by many programs and agencies serving the blind as an attempt to clarify that their services are available to individuals with limited or no eyesight and not just to individuals who are totally blind; and

WHEREAS, the word “impaired” when combined with the word “vision” or “visual” implies a sense of deficiency and inferiority and perpetuates the incorrect notion that people who have lost part or all of their eyesight are automatically less capable or limited in their abilities as compared to people with normal eyesight; and

WHEREAS, when referring to a group of people comprised of individuals with varying degrees of sight—from total blindness to legal blindness to significant vision loss—the term “blind and low vision” is a more accurate and positive description in that it correctly indicates less-than-20/20 vision without connoting the negative assumptions and stereotypes that have too often been associated with the blind; and

WHEREAS, other minorities, such as the deaf community, have successfully advocated for the use of terms like “deaf or hard of hearing” in place of “deaf and hearing impaired,” recognizing the value of moving away from terminology that includes the word “impaired”; and

WHEREAS, self-advocacy and asserting preferred terminology can do much to challenge existing misconceptions and encourage others to adopt more accurate and respectful language; and

WHEREAS, raising awareness and educating the public to use appropriate terminology that is free from negative assumptions and stereotypes can be achieved through educational campaigns, media initiatives, and inclusive language guidelines in academic and professional settings: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind, in Convention assembled this seventh day of July, 2024, in the city of Orlando, Florida, that this organization reaffirm the respectability of the word "blind" as articulated in Resolution 93-01; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization call upon organizations, agencies, and entities that work with or serve individuals who are blind who feel that it is appropriate to use terms such as “blind and visually impaired,” “visually impaired,” or similar terminology in their names and/or promotional materials to use instead "blind, ” “blind and low vision, ” “low vision,” or similar phrasing instead; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization acknowledge and praise the United States Federal Government for making a strong effort to use the term “blind and low vision.”

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Carlos R. Serván]

## Beyond Routes and Techniques: The Energy of Structured Discovery in Blindness Training

**by Carlos R. Serván**

**A Speech delivered at the Contemporary Issues in Rehabilitation and Education for the Blind—twenty-third Annual Rehabilitation and Orientation and Mobility Conference**

**July 3, 2024**

**Orlando, Florida**

**From the Editor: Each year I asked presenters and meeting attendees to send me articles we might use for the *Braille Monitor*. We don’t usually get much in response to those requests, but when panning for gold, one strike makes it all worthwhile. This is certainly the case with the article you’re about to read. It speaks to the low expectations that people have of blind folks and the magic of the intervention of key people who see the potential in a man whose heart and brain have too much to offer and give him the encouragement and resources to live the life he dares to dream about. Here is his presentation:**

In the last few decades, scientists went from a conviction that there is no such thing as an energy field around the human body to a certainty that such fields exist and are scientifically important. Since living tissues are conductors of electricity, the laws of physics require that the currents set up by the heart and other muscles, and the brain and peripheral nerves, will produce fields in the space around the body, producing an aura. The aura has layers of vibrational frequencies and mindfulness. Thus, our thoughts shape our reality. We are more than flesh and bones; we are energy that influences others.

Other words that describe energy are vitality, vigor, action, and power. So, when we talk about empowering consumers, we are also talking about transferring energy.

As we talk about Structured Discovery in rehabilitation programs, we must recognize the work of Dr. Jernigan, who brought and perfected this approach throughout his tenure in Iowa. The Iowa experience was characterized by Dr. Jernigan’s magical energy he had when working with people.

To make a real difference in the training we provide, we must recognize that the main problem blind people face is public misconceptions and low expectations. Our Structured Discovery teaching extends beyond techniques. It infuses lessons about attitudes—attitudes that empower greater confidence, advocacy, self-esteem, and hope.

I am originally from Peru. I became blind and lost my right hand as a result of a grenade explosion. I went from being in good physical condition, about to graduate as a lieutenant with a future full of opportunities, to being blind, missing my dominant hand, doing nothing, with a future full of uncertainties—including whether or not I could get married and start a family. The only exposure I had to blind people before I lost my sight was a blind beggar who played some music with a couple of sticks and an empty can at a flea market.

A year after becoming blind, I spent a few months receiving traditional training at a center in Peru and trying to find independence. I was happy to get that training but did not know they were limiting my expectations. I wanted to go to college so eventually I could become an administrator, but they told me that blind people can only work with their hands or voice, such as massage therapists, musicians, phone operators, broom makers, and so on. I have respect for all jobs, but I don’t think blind people should be limited to a few options. In the back of my mind, I knew I could do more but had no idea how. I felt frustrated.

As I was part of society, I also had misunderstandings about blindness. I lost my dignity, my expectations, and my self-esteem; it was painful, a constant pain in my soul. I decided to look for more opportunities in the USA.

I came to America in 1989 and searched for help. I eventually ended up at the National Federation of the Blind National Center. It was here where I was introduced to the philosophy that, with proper training and opportunity, blind people can be full-contributing members of society and that the main problem we face is society’s misconceptions about the capability of the blind.

I went to New Mexico, a Structured Discovery Center, to start training. Not knowing much English or much about American culture other than some tv shows, and with no friends or family, I wondered about this training center. I remembered a short story where a grandpa is encouraging his granddaughter to get into the ocean. She asks, "Is the water cold?"

The grandpa says, "If you want to know how it is, dive into it." So, I dove into it.

Upon arriving at the Center, I immediately noticed a stark contrast with the traditional approach in Peru. When I met the director, Dick Davis, he posed an unexpected question: “If you weren’t blind, besides being a detective, what would you like to do?”

Without hesitation, I replied, “I want to go to college and then graduate school so I can eventually become an administrator, a director.”

Dick Davis’s response caught me off guard: “Good, we will help you then.” What frightened me the most was the matter-of-fact tone he used. Despite my excitement and elation, I was also gripped by fear, worrying that I might not meet his expectations. However, his matter-of-fact tone, though initially intimidating, also conveyed confidence in my abilities and a steadfast commitment to supporting me in reaching my full potential.

The Center staff showed, in their actions and in their attitude, that they believed in me, that they wanted me to be successful. I sensed their vitality, their energy when working with the students. They were investing in us. I had hope, I had control over my life again.

Structured Discovery also provides the foundation for critical problem-solving. We encourage our consumers to adapt, innovate, and find unique solutions to the challenges they encounter. One of the most difficult things for me was to figure out how to type with only one hand. I thought I couldn’t, as that is what they told me in the traditional center in Peru. However, at this Structured Discovery Center, the teacher encouraged me to try and not give up. I could sense her aura; I could feel her honest belief in my capabilities. This gave me motivation to try harder; I became determined. After several weeks of much trial and error, I was able to create my own typing system.

Our approach is also about elevating expectations. Dave Andrews, a blind man now working for the Minnesota State Services for the Blind, was a staff trainee in New Mexico when I was in training. I remember telling a group of students, "Listen, if you are frugal enough, you can live on minimum wage. You can rent a small apartment and find a roommate and split the cost. Only buy the groceries you need—no sodas, no cookies, only what is necessary. You can even only buy second-hand clothing."

Dave said, "Carlos, you don’t want to settle for minimum wage. You can do more. I am making almost four times more than minimum wage. You can go to college; you have the skills and the brains. You don’t have to rent a small apartment; you can own a house and don’t need to have a roommate. You can have a family, buy nice clothing, own a car, go on vacation, save for a better retirement." Then I realized I was looking for excuses not to go to college or giving my best effort. Often, it takes the unwavering belief of someone like Dave to push past our own self-imposed limitations and strive for excellence.

I did learn the non-visual skills and was ready to start an independent life in America.

We also prepare our students to advocate for themselves, to be ready to deal with low expectations from the community. Despite skepticism from many in Peru and a few in America who told me I couldn’t handle the demands of law school, I drew inspiration from several successful blind attorneys and knew I could achieve that too. After finishing my training at the Center, I learned enough English within six months to be accepted into college. Then, within seven years, I completed my bachelor’s degree, master’s in public administration, and a juris doctorate. Additionally, while attending school, I worked part-time for the Commission for the Blind and remained active in my community.

So, what set others and me apart and led to success? It was the vitality and high expectations set by other blind mentors and professionals who possessed an honest belief and understanding that, with proper training and opportunity, blind individuals can be fully contributing members of society. When blind individuals recognize their full potential and have opportunities, then we have a sense of purpose.

Neuroscientists have discovered that when we have a purpose, our body generates dopamine, which manufactures adrenaline, and thus gives us energy. When we crave success, when we want to win, our body is generating dopamine. Therefore, our bodies are made to have forward action.

In New Mexico, Structured Discovery was expanded to field services and other programs, such as transition. When I began running the Summer Training and Employment Program (STEP) for blind youth, I sent application packets to all the school districts and the school for the blind. Many of the teachers working with blind students, including those at the school for the blind, initially disagreed with the changes being implemented by the New Mexico Commission for the Blind, particularly in its training center using the Structured Discovery approach.

I offered to visit the school for the blind to talk to the students about STEP, but the school administration informed me that it wasn’t necessary and requested that I just send the applications. That year, twenty-one students applied for STEP, eleven of whom had additional disabilities. All the applications from the school for the blind were from students with additional disabilities. While I didn’t want to entertain the idea that they would try to sabotage our program, it was clear that there was a misunderstanding. Knowing that most of the students didn’t have any opportunities for the summer, we decided to accept all the applicants.

STEP offered more than just a job; it provided non-visual skills training, had high expectations, and fostered a positive attitude about blindness. Regardless of their additional disabilities, we set high expectations from the beginning. Since the students with multiple disabilities hadn’t been expected to do much at home or at school, they were eager to try new things and prove to themselves that they could be independent and successful. At the end of the program, we encouraged participants to continue being independent at home and at school: take out your garbage, make your beds, clean your rooms, carry your trays in the cafeteria, and use your canes at all times. Never forget, you can achieve anything you put your mind to.

About three weeks after the program ended, I received a call from an irate student named Michelle, who asked, "Why didn’t you send me an application for STEP? I was at home all summer doing nothing!" Confused, I asked her what school she attended. Michelle, from the School for the Blind in Alamogordo, insisted that she never received an application. After getting her parents’ contact information, I assured her that an application would be sent to her next year. Michelle and other disgruntled blind students who hadn’t been informed about STEP complained to the school’s administration.

The following summer, at the start of the program, I asked Michelle, "How did you learn about STEP, and why were you so upset?" Michelle explained, "Well, Carlos, when we returned from summer break, we noticed a big change in some of the students." Intrigued, I asked for more details. Michelle continued, "We saw several students walking on their own, using their canes all the time—different from the ones we have—carrying their trays, and disposing of their garbage after meals. Not only that, but they were students with multiple disabilities. We observed a significant difference in their confidence and independence, so we asked them where and how they learned all of that. They told us about STEP and that they also worked and got paid. We were never informed before that we could get jobs or learn to be independent. That’s why we were upset!"

The year Michelle joined us, we received thirty-six applications, the majority from the school for the blind, including those without additional disabilities. By the midpoint of the program, a couple of staff members from the school for the blind came to observe our activities. We demonstrated what we do. The crucial aspect was conveying, through both our actions and words, that these were normal teenagers and that we believed in their capabilities and potential; moreover, that we not only care about them but trained them with love—at times, employing tough love.

It is now recognized that the energy we emit is sensed by those we encounter, influencing how they perceive and react to us. No wonder that our students often surpass their initial expectations when leaving our centers.

About four years ago, in Nebraska, we organized a one-week training on robotics for blind high school students. They coded and assembled the parts, constructing their own robots. We filmed portions as well as the culmination of the training, where each student showcased their robot. We then uploaded the video to our website. A few months later, a blind college student expressed interest in studying robotics in college. However, upon arriving in class, the professor informed her that she couldn’t participate, as sight would be required. Without contention, the student left and conducted research and found the training on robotics video on our website. She forwarded the link to the professor, who not only welcomed her to the class, but also gained insight into the capabilities of blind individuals. Success begets success.

Nebraska is well known for having a Structured Discovery Center since the seventies, even though we did not use that term back then. We also have expanded this comprehensive approach to other services. We have a robust transition program, even before federal law required us to do so. We have a robust Business Enterprise Program, doubling the number of vending sites and increasing the vendors income in the last few years. We have a robust older blind program, being able to get over a million dollars from the state in the last few years and providing quality services to more blind seniors. We have been contracting with blind engineers and blind scientists to train consumers on STEM such as robotics, dissecting organs, and doing chemical experiments using adaptive lab equipment we purchased. Most recently, we are partnering with museums to bring accessible art and science to blind consumers using 3D technology and audio description. Furthermore, to expose our clients and staff to the depth of vitality, action, energy, and power, we bring them to state and national conventions.

We have challenged stereotypes by showcasing the achievements of blind people. From lawyers, judges, politicians, teachers, administrators, assembly and factory workers, to farmers, successful businessmen and women, rehabilitation professionals, and those working in STEM fields, the list is endless. We have moved beyond mere belief; we now know and have proven that blindness doesn’t inhibit success or hinder contribution to society.

So, what is our challenge? As professionals in the blindness field, our challenge is not to be complacent, but to keep pushing ourselves and our students beyond our comfort zone.

Advocates worked tirelessly for us to have laws that protect the disabled. However, the power of law is restricted; it may set limits on behavior, but it cannot create understanding. We are dedicated to continuing training blind students, training new professionals, and training ourselves. We should keep striving to lift blind people out of poverty.

About a year ago, I attended a conference pertaining to quality management for vocational rehabilitation. One of the statistics they gave is that around 35 percent of people with disabilities are unemployed and that people with disabilities, compared to people without disabilities, make $7,000 less per year and have less health insurance. We know the disparities for blind people are even higher. While some blind individuals may have humble aspirations, these should not be confined to a narrow range of options, nor hindered by the misconception that blind people are unable to compete.

When blind people come to us, it is often the last place they go, their one chance to live a full and productive life. We can make a difference, we hold the key to breaking the cycle of dependency, underemployment, and the myths about blindness. Our goal is to provide proper training to our students so that they reflexively use the non-visual skills and reflexively know how to deal with negative attitudes about blindness.

We are progressing, we are evolving; there is continuity, but not sameness. Structured Discovery is not static; it evolves. Evolving requires fresh perspectives to tackle new problems and develop new solutions. We learn from each student and from each other, refine our approaches and embrace innovation. We are part of this evolutionary process, shaping the future of O&M in rehabilitation, ensuring that blind people have the opportunity to navigate the world on their own terms.

We use the Structured Discovery model in our individual teachings, in our training centers, in our agencies; yet each of us, each training center, and each agency has its own identity. Like Oscar Wilde said, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

As we empower our students toward true independence, we honor the legacy of those who paved the way. We have the energy and collective experience to empower our students. We ignite a spark that propels them beyond our teaching. Like renewable energy, our influence endures. The knowledge we impart becomes the fuel for lifelong learning journeys.

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## A Long-Overdue Step Forward for Blind Cubers

**by Paul Martz**

**From the Editor: I believe this is Paul’s first contribution to our magazine. He started going blind in 2004, and in 2014, he switched to screen readers, learned Braille, and bought his first tactile cube. That’s when he began to identify as blind. He worked for thirty years as a software developer. In his retirement, he writes. Beyond the Rubik’s Cube book, he is a published author of science fiction. He also blogs about blind technology at the AppleVis website. In addition to all of this, he reads voraciously. Here is what he says about the Rubik’s Cube:**

NFB’s partnership with Spin Master to develop the Rubik’s Sensory Cube is exciting news. It sets a standard for tactile cube markings, increases the legitimacy of non-visual cubing, and opens cubing to a much wider audience.

What? You’re not excited? You should be.

Solving the cube provides many benefits. It’s a great tool for exercising both short- and long-term memory that develops tactile sensitivity, fine motor skills, and problem-solving ability—valuable skills for anyone living in today’s fast-paced world.

The cube is also relaxing and meditative. When solving, I enter the same flow state that many authors, musicians, and athletes experience. It’s a pleasant form of concentration that exercises my brain, nervous system, and muscle memory.

Never mind all that. It’s infectiously fun. It’s a craze that has endured for decades, attracting new enthusiasts every day from ages seven to seventy. Once you learn to solve a cube, you’re unlikely to put it down.

I’ve been a cuber since the Ideal Toy Company launched the Rubik’s Cube in 1980. At the time, I was a seventeen-year-old puzzle nut with low vision. Solution guides hadn’t been published yet, and the internet was a distant science fiction dream. To solve the cube, I spent weeks filling a notebook with ideas and observations until I had devised my solution.

When I lost my remaining vision to retinitis pigmentosa, I switched to off-brand tactile cubes or modified standard cubes with bump dots. The quality has been variable, and of the many cubes I own, no two are exactly alike. I’m looking forward to comparing a Rubik’s Sensory Cube to my ad hoc solutions.

Today, I solve the cube in World Cube Association events, competing alongside my sighted peers. I’m part of a global cubing community that puts me in contact with other cubers around the world. I’m not setting any world records, but as a sixty-plus senior solving a tactile cube, I’m rather proud of my unofficial one-minute, seventeen-second personal best.

Nonetheless, two barriers impede our ability to participate in this stimulating pastime. The cubing community has innumerable websites, videos, software tools, and solution guides devoted to solving the cube. As you might expect, most of this information is visual, creating an accessibility issue for the blind community.

Fortunately, this is a problem I can fix. I’m writing a solution guide intended for blind readers. The book and companion website will provide text-based instructions for solving the 3x3 cube with no images or diagrams. I hope to publish the book in Braille sometime next year.

The second barrier is a lack of standardization. The original Rubik’s Cube uses six colors in a standard arrangement, often known as BOY, for the clockwise ordering of the blue, orange, and yellow sides. Sighted cubers can pick up any cube and find the colors in their expected locations.

In contrast, there are no standards for tactile cubes. Different manufacturers use different tactile shapes and arrangements. Once you become accustomed to a particular arrangement and style of textures, it will take a significant amount of time and practice to adjust to another tactile cube. The success of the Sensory Cube and Rubik’s brand strength will pressure other manufacturers to adopt its texture style and arrangement as a standard.

I applaud NFB and Spin Master for partnering on this important development. An affordable high-quality accessible alternative to the standard cube has been long overdue. The success of the Sensory Cube might inspire other toy manufacturers to create more inclusive products. And making this classic puzzle accessible includes us in a pastime that has historically been closed.

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## *Monitor* Miniatures

### News from the Federation Family

**Save the Date: Rideshare Rally at Uber and Lyft—Stop the Discrimination**

**What**: Join our demonstration to protest rideshare discrimination against blind people using guide dogs and white canes.  
**When**: October 15, 2024, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Pacific Time

**Where**: Uber and Lyft Headquarters, San Francisco, California

As reported in the 2024 Presidential Report, “both of the leading [rideshare] companies, Lyft and Uber, are failing to meet their obligations to ensure that blind individuals are not discriminated against. While we continue to hold regular meetings with both companies in good faith to improve their policies and practices, there is rarely a day that goes by when we do not learn of another ride denied to a blind person… We will take all of the courageous steps necessary to stop this second-class treatment.”

Please plan to attend. Monitor email communications, social media, and the National Federation of the Blind website for further details, including an interest form (filling out the form does not obligate you to attend but will help us keep in touch with you as plans develop), logistics, rally route, hotel recommendations, and more.

### In Brief

**Notices and information in this section may be of interest to *Monitor* readers. We are not responsible for the accuracy of the information; we have edited only for space and clarity.**

**Ski for Light Goes for Gold in Celebration of Golden Anniversary**

Active adults from across the US and around the world will go for gold as Ski for Light, Inc. (SFL) celebrates its fiftieth anniversary at Soldier Hollow, January 26 through February 2, 2025. Ski for Light, an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization, hosts an annual, week-long event where adults with visual or mobility impairments learn the basics of cross-country skiing.

Participants will stay at the Provo Marriott Hotel & Conference Center, and ski on expertly groomed trails at Soldier Hollow, near Midway, Utah.

Each visually or mobility impaired participant is paired with an instructor guide for a week of skiing, sharing, and learning.

First year participant Lucas Rice enthusiastically sums up his experience; “For me, Ski for Light was very freeing and adventurous.”

For SFL 2025 Event Chair Sheri Richardson, there’s no better setting for a golden anniversary than the storied Olympic trails of Soldier Hollow. "In addition to the amazing location, we are planning a fun-filled week of new activities and past reminiscences,” Richardson says. "Come and catch up with old friends while we all make new ones, and help us set tracks for the next fifty years of Ski for Light.”

Join the celebration by participating as a skier, a guide, or a volunteer. Applications and additional information will be available in the summer at www.sfl.org; meanwhile, join our community on Facebook (Ski for Light, Inc.), and check out our YouTube channel (Ski for Light International).

1455 West Lake Street  
Minneapolis, MN 55408-2648

(612) 827-3232

[www.sfl.org](http://www.sfl.org)

Media Inquiries: Marie Huston

(970) 531-8652, [mtn9000girl@aol.com](mailto:mtn9000girl@aol.com)

**A Way to Make New Friends**

Fred Olver sends the following: Are you looking for a fun, friendly, and supportive community of blind and low-vision people? Do you want to chat, play games, and make new friends using your microphone and computer? Then you should check out blindcafe.net, the online home of the Blind Cafe.

Blind Cafe is a website that connects you with other blind and low-vision people from all over the world. You can join the Team Talk server, where you can chat with others in real time, participate in trivia contests, and enjoy various games and activities. You can also browse the website for useful resources, information, and tips for living with blindness or low vision.

Blind Cafe is more than just a website. It’s a community of people who share your experiences, challenges, and joys. It’s a place where you can find support, friendship, and fun. It’s a place where you can be yourself.

So what are you waiting for? Visit <http://www.blindcafe.net> today and join the Blind Cafe community. You’ll be glad you did.

But there is more: Are you looking for more than just a variety of great music? Do you want to hear from DJs who love bringing the music to you? How about joining contests to win prizes? Then you need to tune in to <http://www.blindcaferadio.com> the station that raises cane! Blind Cafe Radio is an internet radio station where music matters. You can listen to it on your Alexa device, your computer, your Victor Stream, or your phone. You can also interact with your favorite DJs on Facebook or Twitter; you can even check out their podcasts on your favorite platform.

Don’t miss out on the fun and the music. Listen to <http://www.blindcaferadio.com> today and discover the art of music!

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### NFB Pledge

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