**The Blind Missourian**

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Presidential Report

National Federation of the Blind of Missouri

Presented March 28, 2015

By President Gary Wunder

Some who have studied the agenda, (and from the number of corrections I received, I believe there are many), you may have observed that I have asked for a little less time in presenting this report. To ensure I would actually live by the self-imposed limit, I placed it right before lunch, knowing that if you had to choose between this message and enjoying a good meal, the good meal would win out.

One of the things that will make this report shorter is that many activities I would normally summarize in a paragraph or two actually appear on the convention agenda. The BELL Program gets a slot, tomorrow we will talk about the seminar for social workers, our governmental affairs chairman will talk about the two pieces of legislation we are supporting, and the substantial changes we have helped to bring about in the recertification of blind pension recipients is still fresh in your minds.

Since 1979 we have been attending the Washington Seminar, and this year our representatives were Dan Flasar, Bethany Bennington, Shelia Wright, and Gary Horchem. Because I was already in DC to witness and report on the event for the *Braille* *Monitor,* I came along to most of our meetings, and Debbie was present, at our family's expense, to make sure I behaved myself and stayed on topic.

Now I know all of you are up to date in reading the *Braille* *Monitor,* so I can probably restrict to a sentence or two a discussion of the legislation we've worked to advance. The TEACH Act addresses deficiencies in the education we receive, the TIME Act speaks to the issue of the unfairness in paying blind people less than the minimum wage, and the Marrakesh Treaty asks the Senate to embrace a policy that will let blind people share with other countries in the world books already adapted for our use. Our team was collegial, congenial, enthusiastic, and very effective. Now it is up to us to move the ball down the field by pressing each of our members to become cosponsors. You will hear more about this tomorrow in Shelia's report.

While we are on the topic of legislation, let me say a few words about the Jefferson City Seminar without stealing Shelia's thunder. We know about and believe in the power of Braille, but sometimes this leads us to the mistaken belief that other people do as well. Our experience with the Missouri General Assembly proves beyond any reasonable doubt that for most of them Braille is a mystery. Some of them know that it is used by the blind, but they have had so little experience with it that they are easily taken in by the argument that it is a way of reading and writing whose time has long since passed. Another way to say this is that they are absolutely amazed when they see that someone can read from our fact sheet as rapidly as they can read it in print. Realizing this means we need to think of new and innovative efforts to publicize just how important Braille is to us and how linked it is with our success in education and employment.

In the seventy-fifth year of the National Federation of the Blind, we have been honored by being asked to host the National Convention in Florida along with the other states that compose the founding seven affiliates. It is tremendously important that we get as many people to the convention as we can, both for what it will give them in being a part of such a momentous celebration, and for what it will let them contribute to us in our work as a host affiliate. We will be a part of the welcoming ceremony, will help host the dance, and will be a part of giving the door prize at the banquet. One of our jobs will be to staff the affiliate suite, and while we will have six other affiliates to help us, there is no question that we will have to put significant effort into this. We are going to have a tremendous door prize to commemorate this milestone, and no less than $7,575 will be given at the convention.

Just before Christmas we were alerted through television coverage about a young student in North Kansas City whose cane had been taken away and replaced with a pool noodle. This not only made the local television news, but it created a firestorm on the internet. Since things are not always what they seem, and sometimes the enthusiasm of a reporter will take second place to the facts, we sent our first vice president to help determine whether we should be involved. She concluded that there was reason to be concerned, and we put this out on our list. After seeing reports of the incident, some of you took action directly. Lawrence Luck called the superintendent and was surprised to have his call promptly returned. The superintendent apologized for the pool noodle, said the cane had been returned, and vowed that this would never happen again. Similar reports made their way back to local television and again featured prominently in their newscasts.

Given that this happened during the Christmas season, President Riccobono created a special Christmas package and mailed it to our Kansas City chapter for delivery. The family was *very* impressed that we cared enough to visit with them, and, what do you know, inside that Christmas package was a cane!

Shelia Wright has since been involved with Dakota and his family in trying to figure out how to address other educational issues he faces. The family is understandably impatient, and at this point we are not sure whether Dakota will remain in the North Kansas City school district or whether his family will have him transferred to another school. We have suggested that a geographical cure is seldom the answer and that this school district has the resources to teach Dakota. But we know that our role as advocates is to support what the family decides, and this we will certainly do.

One of our most exciting efforts this year has been in the area of employment research. We say that getting a job is a significant part of joining in the activities of society, but often it is difficult to know just what to do to get more blind people employed. We all know about the discrimination faced by a blind job applicant when she appears at the door of a potential employer. But we also know that discrimination is only one element that figures into the high level of unemployment we experience. If we want jobs, we must be competitive; to be competitive we must be well-educated, and, to be well-educated, means having accommodations that let us put most of our effort into learning and proving what we know, and not into figuring out how to get along as best we can with electronic gadgets that won't speak to us, learning management systems that cannot be efficiently used with screen-reading technology, and textbooks that are electronically available but keep us out because of the digital rights management intended to keep them from being pirated.

Knowing that we can't hope to tackle all of this through the work of one committee, we have decided to focus on the thing which seems to be most obvious in determining whether or not a blind person gets a job: we decided to focus on Braille. Not every Braille reader is employed, but the vast majority of blind people who are employed are Braille readers. After months of discussion and preparation, in June we will begin a program using Code Master, and you will—this very afternoon—hear a good bit about that program from Kevin Faust. I want to take this opportunity to say thank you to him and other members who work for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind for agreeing to participate with us in this work. I also want to say a special thank you to members of the employment research committee, who have devoted an inordinate amount of time to conference calls, the minutes that chronicle them, and the documents that were the result of all this work.

Tomorrow we will have elections. I am putting the finishing touches on this report before knowing what slate the nominating committee will propose or even who may be interested in the positions we elect this year. If you elect me to be your president tomorrow, this will be your last opportunity to do it. I have been blessed to lead this organization for a long time, but I think that all of my talk about transition has to come down to a date after which we simply must elect someone else. There has been no one to whom the Missouri affiliate has been kinder or more loving than it has been to me, and I appreciate more than I can tell you how it has made me feel to be the president of this organization. But I can tell you that I am excited by the change that must come, and I want it to come in time for me to be able to help with the transition in leadership that must occur. I want to work on building membership without having to worry about appointing committees or approving expenditures or smoothing out all of the rough spots that sometimes come when people of strong minds and strong wills have set upon the same goal but have different ways to accomplish it. I know we have people who are capable of being the president of this organization, and I have every hope that, should you reelect me tomorrow, we will have even more people to choose from two years from now. People will now clearly know that the prize of the presidency is there for the taking and can begin to demonstrate that they both want and are capable of taking on the job.

I want to thank each and every one of you for being here today and for the commitment that your presence demonstrates to furthering the cause of people who are blind. This is a wonderful mission we share, and I feel blessed to call you my colleagues, my friends, and members of this special family we call the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri.

Here are the resolutions that were passed at the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri state convention which was held March 27-29 in St. Louis, MO.

Resolution 2015-01

A Resolution Regarding Braille in the Schools

 WHEREAS, one of the most valuable tools a child can be taught is reading and writing, which for blind children means learning Braille; and

 WHEREAS, too many blind and low vision children in Missouri are not learning Braille, in part because a standardized research based reading assessment is not being mandated to determine which children need Braille; and

 WHEREAS, House Bill 1003 has been introduced in the legislature modifying RSMo167.225 to mandate such a standardized measure; and

 WHEREAS, passage of this bill would lead to brighter futures for blind children who would no longer have to suffer back problems from bending over their books, eye strain from holding a book too close, or reading speeds that are inadequate for learning: Now, therefore,

 BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri assembled this 28th day of March, 2015, in the City of Saint Louis, Missouri, that we urge the General Assembly to pass House Bill 1003 so that all blind children in the state of Missouri can obtain the same literacy as their sighted peers and therefore are more ready for the workforce when they grow into adulthood.

Resolution 2015-02

A Resolution Regarding the Value of a Secret Ballot

 WHEREAS, the right of a person to cast a secret ballot is as old as our Republic and is a right that men and women have fought and died for; and

 WHEREAS, the Help America Vote Act guarantees this right to blind and visually impaired individuals in Federal elections by providing accessible methods of casting a ballot; and

 WHEREAS, Missouri House Bill 454 would extend this same right to state and local elections thereby extending another full right of citizenship to blind and visually impaired persons; Now, therefore,

 BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri assembled this 28th day of March, 2015, in the City of Saint Louis, Missouri, that we urge the General Assembly to enact this legislation so that their blind constituents may have the full right of suffrage.

Resolution 2015-03

A Resolution Regarding a Commendation for Representative Elijah Haahr

 WHEREAS, recipients of Missouri’s Blind Pension were required to undergo eye examinations at least every five years even though many of them had permanent inoperable eye conditions; and

 WHEREAS, after learning of this wasteful provision in Missouri Law, Representative Elijah Haahr introduced House Bill 1835 exempting persons with permanent blindness from such periodic exams; and

 WHEREAS, Representative Elijah Haahr successfully advocated for this legislation along with members of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri resulting in it becoming law:

Now, therefore,

 BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri assembled this 28th day of March, 2015, in the City of Saint Louis, Missouri, that we hereby commend Representative Elijah Haahr for his sponsorship and efforts on behalf of the blind of Missouri to pass House Bill 1835.

Resolution 2015-04

A Resolution Regarding Greyhound Lines

 WHEREAS, Greyhound Lines is the nation’s major inter-city bus company providing needed transportation to those, such as blind persons, who cannot drive; and

 WHEREAS, the reservation system on its website is not fully accessible for blind persons to purchase tickets; and

 WHEREAS, recently blind persons purchasing tickets on the telephone had to pay an additional $10.00 for their ticket even though they explained that they were unable to use the website as it is not accessible: Now, therefore,

 BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri assembled this 28th day of March, 2015, in the City of Saint Louis, Missouri, that we demand that Greyhound Lines make its website for ticket purchasing accessible and that until they do, they cease and desist from charging an extra fee for telephone purchases made by blind persons.

Resolution 2015-05

A Resolution Regarding Accessible Set Top Boxes

 WHEREAS, cable and satellite television providers make available hundreds of channels of diverse programming allowing viewers to enjoy shows that suit their particular tastes; and

 WHEREAS, programming is now provided through set top boxes that also allow viewers to watch shows on demand, record shows, set the box to record entire series, and even rewind and fast forward live programs; and

 WHEREAS, very few features of these set top boxes are usable by blind and visually impaired viewers other than turning on and off the box and changing channels; and

 WHEREAS, current technology will allow for much greater accessibility as demonstrated by new set top boxes being made available by ComCast: Now, therefore,

 BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri assembled this 28th day of March, 2015, in the City of Saint Louis, Missouri, that we demand that other cable and satellite providers including, but not limited to, MediaCom, Charter Communications, Century Link Prism, Time Warner Cable, Dish, and Direct TV take immediate steps to provide accessible set top boxes.

Resolution 2015-06

A Resolution Regarding the Efforts of the Family Support Division

 WHEREAS, the President and Social Services Liaison of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri met with Program and Policy staff of the Missouri Family Support Division on November 15, 2013 concerning numerous difficulties recipients were having with the Blind Pension and Supplemental Aid to the Blind programs; and

 WHEREAS, over the next 15 months communication lines remained open resulting in dozens of individual cases being positively resolved while the agency made assurances of progress on the broader issues; and

 WHEREAS, on February 26, 2015 a follow-up meeting was held in Warrenton at which time information was shared that the agency was transferring all Blind Pension Fund and Supplemental Aid to the Blind Fund cases to Warren County so clients would be able to call an Eligibility Specialist to get questions answered, and a robo-call system would soon be in place to notify clients of the most important mailings among other changes: Now, therefore,

 BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri assembled this 29th day of March, 2015, in the City of Saint Louis, Missouri, that we commend the Family Support Division for working with consumers to remove the problems that had plagued the programs and their continuing effort in making the system more accessible and user friendly to clients; and

 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we encourage Family Support Division to continue the fruitful dialogue with the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri and that we stand ready to help in any way to strengthen these programs.

Resolution 2015-07

A Resolution Regarding a Commendation of the University of Missouri-Columbia Disability Services

 WHEREAS, many universities all over the country do not meet the needs of their blind students due to the existence of inaccessible websites or material; and

 WHEREAS, many students work with disability service offices that work retroactively to find materials in accessible formats and solve problems related to inaccessibility in the classroom; and

 WHEREAS, the University of Missouri Adaptive Computer Technology Center has a team of experts working to make university websites and online programs accessible to all students as well as looking forward and placing accessibility at the forefront of negotiations when new technology is being considered for the university; and

 WHEREAS, the Adaptive Computer Technology Center is an example of a university service that does not simply provide accessible materials but education to faculty, staff, and students on the rights of people with disabilities; and

 WHEREAS, the university Disability Center has been a strong advocate for blind students for over four decades; and

 WHEREAS, the Disability Center has a positive philosophy of blindness that allows students to truly learn the material in their classes rather than spend their time finding the materials they need to learn: Now, Therefore,

 BE IT RESOLVED by The National Federation of the Blind of Missouri assembled this 29th day of March, 2015, in the City of Saint Louis, Missouri, that we commend the University of Missouri-Columbia’s Adaptive Computing Technology Center and Disability Center.

Two Generations of Heroes

By Carol Coulter

On Monday, May 25, 2015, thirteen members of the Columbia Chapter gathered to participate in the annual Memorial Day festivities. The morning started with the parade. Chapter members walked as Lawrence Luck drove our honored Veterans Lieutenant Colonel Charles Stevens and his son Colonel Mark Stevens. The parade route ends at the Boone County Court House where a ceremony is held in which distinguished Veterans are honored. We are proud to say we personally knew two of these heroes this year as Lt. Col Charles Stevens and Col. Mark Stevens took their place on stage. Here is what the Master of Ceremony had to say about this father and son.

Colonel Mark Stevens United States Army retired: Col. Stevens thirty year career of reserve and active duty service included a wide variety of command and staff assignments. His combat zone assignments included tours in Bosnia Herzegovina, Iraq, and the much contested district surrounding Kandahar, Afghanistan. His awards include the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star with two Oak Leaf Clusters, and multiple awards of the Meritorious Service Metal, and the Army Accommodation Metal. Col Mark Stevens is accompanying his Father, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Stevens United States Army Retired.

Lieutenant Colonel Stevens was commissioned in 1955 as a distinguished military graduate from Southwest Missouri State University. His distinguished service as an Infantry Officer included multiple tours in Vietnam during some of the toughest years of that war from 1966 to 1969. His awards include the Legion of Merit, seven awards of the Bronze Star to include a Bronze Star with “V” Device for Conspicuous Gallantry against a hostile force. He was also awarded the Air Metal, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and two awards of the Purple Heart. In 2013 Lt. Col. Stevens was inducted into the Missouri State University ROTC Hall of Fame.

I can only imagine how proud each of these gentlemen must have felt standing on that stage shoulder to shoulder sharing in such a special moment. Let us not forget Helen Stevens, wife and mother who has more than likely endured many worrisome nights over the years. How moving for her and the rest of the family to see such a memorable event. We salute the Stevens Family and all the Veterans and their families for their dedication and service to our country.

 

The Making of a Video

By Carol Coulter

On July 27, 2012 President Gary Wunder and I made a trip to Jefferson City to meet with Marta Halter, Director of Children’s Division, and Christy Collins of her staff. Keith Roderick and Mark Laird of Rehabilitation Services for the Blind were also in attendance. In fact we have Mr. Laird to thank for arranging the meeting. Ms. Halter was very supportive of our desire to provide a program to educate the Children’s Division staff on the abilities of blind individuals as capable parents. We discussed many different ways to get our information out to staff and since they had over one hundred and fourteen meetings across the state, we decided that one way was to make a video that could be shown without us being there. Thus the journey begins.

Now that the decision to make a video has been made, we needed a videographer, children of various ages and blind adults to care for these children. Gary had a friend who knew of a young man who did videography and she had us all over for dinner one evening to meet. We discussed our project with him and he agreed to take it on and at no cost. This was the start of a wonderful relationship with a very talented and gracious young man named Samuel Ott.

Now we needed to find the children. If this would have been about twenty years earlier we would have had quite a few children and parents to choose from, but the children have grown and the adults have aged a little as well. An email went out asking if people knew of children we could use for the video and the committee of Gary Wunder, Rita Lynch, Keith Roderick and Carol Coulter also were on the lookout. Rita contacted two fellow workers who had both had children in the last couple of months and they both agreed to let us use their precious little ones in the video. Thank you Ellen Clapper and Jennifer Kixmiller, we couldn’t have done it without you. We also had Charlotte, Dacia Cole‘s niece to help us out. Three children are not enough, but we would get started and continue our search. Over the next several months our search brought us to the Huckaby girls, Emma and Haylie, Timmy Grauel, and Michael, whose mom was new to the Kansas City Chapter. We didn’t forget about the east side of the state either or we would have missed out on meeting Ben Carmack and his wonderful mother Jenny.

Now we have our videographer, our children and, oh yes, parents. Some of the children came with blind relatives so no problem but two of the children needed to be paired up with a blind adult so Carol Coulter, Gary Wunder and Debbie Wunder willingly stepped in to be grandparents. Now everything should be full steam ahead right, not quite. We all know how there are the bad spots on the tracks where it seems like the train is just crawling, well the same holds true for making a video.

Arranging for a time to meet and video tape required working around several people’s schedules. I had to juggle anywhere from four to seven people’s schedules at a time in order to do a taping. We also had to work around the holidays, bad weather and even the birth of one of our babies. Yes you read correctly. When we first contacted Jennifer Huckaby, she was pregnant with her second child and wasn’t due until the end of May and of course we had to allow her time to recuperate as well.

Since we did not know two of the children and we were strangers to them, I felt it necessary for us to meet with them first before taping and then schedule a second visit for the actual taping. This wasn’t necessary for the rest of the children since they had relatives that would be working with them.

After spending the last half of April juggling schedules, we had our first visit in May of 2013 in Fulton and then proceeded to Jefferson City. By the end of June we had our first two children on “film”. Now we had to wait patiently for baby Emma to arrive and mom to recuperate, but in the mean time we captured Charlotte at play in a local Columbia park with her Aunt Dacia. In August of 2013 it was time to meet Emma and her older sister Haylie, so we traveled to Kansas City. The group returned to Kansas City the first weekend in November to finish taping the children and to start interviewing blind parents for the question and answer portions of the video. Several of us met at Shirley Grauel’s home where we videotaped Michael and Timmy. We then ask the blind parents questions such as: how did you give your child medication, keep track of them when they became mobile, help them with school work, etc. On November 30, 2013, we traveled to St. Louis to visit with Jenny and her son Ben. I was so glad they were able to squeeze us in during the busy holiday season. Our last trip was back to Jefferson City in early December. We were welcomed into the home of Rita Lynch and we ask the same interview questions of her and Gail Lundberg.

We finally finished up with the videotaping and now we need to add the narrative. Gary and I set to work creating the narrative. He took the first part and I the second since I was at all the tapings and knew what had taken place. It was fun retracing our steps and getting all the visits in the right order. When we were done Sam let us know that the narrative was a little long, and we needed to shorten it a bit. After a couple attempts Gary, Sam, and I came up with the final product.

The taping is all done, the narrative written and now it is time for Gary Wunder and Elisabeth Coulter to have their voices recorded for all to hear as they read the narrative on to tape. We say good bye to Samuel Ott and sit and wait as he takes what we have done and turns it into what we hope will be something we can be proud of; something that will get our message across to those who need to hear it.

The day has come, Sam has finished the editing and we have gathered at Gary’s house to view the final product. Tears come to my eyes as I watch our video. Sam has taken this raw footage, that I was quite frankly worried about how it could all possibly come together, and turned it into something wonderful!

I was so proud to share this wonderful video with all of you at our 2014 state convention. How blessed we all were to have our then future National President Mark Riccobono present to watch it with us. I was then honored to find out that we had not only been nominated, but won the Bolotin Award for this project.

Remember those rough tracks I spoke of earlier, well the train hasn’t reached the station yet. The video still has to reach its destination, the Social Workers and others who don’t believe that blind people can be good parents. While all of this is going on, we find out that Marta Halter has retired and that budget cuts have changed the way Children’s Division does their trainings. Luckily Christy Collins is still there for us and helps us get a seminar arranged. Christy hooks me up with Lori Masek who has to approve the seminar material and takes care of advertising the event to all the staff.

The day finally comes March 20, 2015, the Friday before our state convention. The seminar was held in Columbia, Missouri at the Department of Social Services building. We had sixteen participants and while this is not as many as we would have liked, it is a start. We showed the video and then had three panel discussions. First we had Melissa Riccobono and Jenny Carmack talk about child rearing from infancy to school age. Next Rita Lynch, Gary Wunder and Debbie Wunder discussed the school age child and dealing with homework and other issues. The final panel was Susan Ford, and Rita Lynch. They discussed general household chores such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, etc. I felt it was important to touch on this topic because that is one of the things that Social Workers look at when they come into a home. They want to know that the home and children are clean and there is food for the children to eat. I had a great time as Mistress of Ceremonies until Gary let it be known that he had been multi-tasking with one of his Braille devices, but even that worked out since several people wanted to check it out after the seminar was over.

I want to thank everyone who had a hand in putting this video and seminar together. I especially want to thank my daughter Elisabeth who drove her mother all over the state and lent us her wonderful reading voice for the narrative on the video. I also need to thank my son Larry for driving me to Fulton twice for the videotaping. I would also like to thank Gary Wunder for having the confidence in me to pull this off. At times I felt like I was left out there hanging, scared I would mess up something I knew was so very important. I had never done anything like this before. I will take it as a positive sign that he had more confidence in me than I did. I know that some people will look at the dollar figures and focus on how costly the seminar was, but we can not put a price tag on a blind parent’s right to keep their child. We must keep spreading the word.

A Busy Mom

By Carol Coulter

Jenny Carmack was born and raised in St. Louis, MO. She has one sister who is four years younger than her. Unfortunately, Jenny did not grow up with her parents. When she was five years old her mom had a brain tumor which was not cancerous, but after the doctors operated to remove it, she was left with permanent brain damage. Jenny’s mother was left with no short term memory, which meant she needed supervision twenty-four hours a day.  Her mother was in the hospital for a long time, but she did come home for a short while.  Her dad, family members, and friends worked together to care for her mother and the girls, but it was very difficult and after a few months her mom went to live in a nursing home. As Jenny’s mother got older, her dementia and paranoia progressively got worse.  Sometimes she didn’t even recognize Jenny or her sister.  Jenny said her dad was overwhelmed with everything in the beginning and then she believes he really did not know how to take care of her and her sister.  He also worked a lot to pay for her mom's medical bills.  When Jenny’s mom went into the nursing home, her dad had to divorce her mom because he wouldn't be able to afford the cost of the nursing home. Jenny’s mom became a ward of the state. Her mother remained in a nursing home for the rest of her life, which ended up being 31 years.

As time passed her dad became less and less involved with her mom as well as her and her sister. Jenny thinks maybe they reminded him of everything that had happened.  Her dad remarried twice, but neither of his wives was interested in being a decent mother to the girls. Jenny and her sister lived with her dad off and on and with different family members. The sisters ended up spending a lot of time living with their dad's brother and his wife. Unfortunately Jenny and her sister do not currently have any relationship with their dad.

Jenny attended Ft. Zumwalt High School in O’Fallon, Missouri. She participated in the marching, symphonic, and pep bands. She said she worked very hard during marching band season to memorize the music so that she could use what vision she had to stay in formation with the band. Jenny was chosen to march in the Missouri All State Lions Band and perform in Disney World. A top performer from each school was chosen to be part of this band. “It was very challenging and fun,” Jenny said.

While in high school Jenny also volunteered at a local elementary school. She knew by the age of thirteen that she wanted to be a teacher. She also did a lot of babysitting. “I could make money while doing something that I enjoyed, being with children,” Jenny said.

While she was in college Jenny substitute taught for several of the school districts where she lived. It gave her some practical experience and some extra money. Since 2003 she has worked full time as an early childhood teacher. Jenny has worked with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. From 2009-2013 she was a mentor teacher which gave her the opportunity to work alongside teachers in the classroom as well as gain some management experience. Jenny is currently a lead preschool teacher.

Jenny was born with Glaucoma and although doctors worked to save her eyesight, by age one it was determined that she had no sight in her right eye and was legally blind in her left eye. About two and a half years ago her vision began to slowly get foggy; she was told that she had scarring on her cornea. With her cornea being clouded doctors could not monitor Jenny’s Glaucoma very well. In January Jenny had a cornea transplant and is still healing from that. She was told it can take up to a year to completely heal. “Right now I can see better than I could before the surgery, but not as well as I could before my cornea began to get cloudy. I am not yet sure if Glaucoma damaged my eye during the time when my cornea was clouded,” Jenny said.

Jenny and Randy have been married for eighteen years. They had a long journey between the time they first met in 1991, and the time they actually married in 1997. Jenny and Randy first met at Lions World Services for the Blind. He was there for the IRS computer programmer training and she was there for braille and mobility training. When they left they never expected that their paths would cross again three years later in St. Louis where Jenny was living at the time.

About three years after she left Lions World Services for the Blind, Randy and Jenny met up again.  This was due to Randy reaching out to try and connect with her.  He remembered the address that she lived at when she was at LWSB. “I'm not sure how he remembered it.” Jenny said.  He wrote a letter to her and sent it to that address, but she no longer lived there. He got the letter returned to him with a note providing him with another address so he re-sent the letter. At that time Jenny was moving around a lot and not always putting in a change of address card with the post office. Eventually Jenny got his letter even though he had an address on it that was from several moves ago. The letter had taken about a month to get to her. Jenny wrote Randy back and gave him a correct address.  At this time he lived in Sikeston, MO and she lived in St. Louis, so they spent some time writing, making phone calls, and he came to St. Louis to see her a couple of times. Then Jenny took a leap of faith for three reasons, first she wanted to begin her college career to become a teacher and she heard that Southeast Missouri State University had a great program for teachers; second things weren't going well for her in St. Louis so she needed a change; and third to be closer to Randy so that they could see if their relationship would grow into anything. “My leap of faith was moving to Cape Girardeau, MO home of SEMO, far away from St. Louis, and only 40 minutes from Sikeston.  Our relationship slowly grew over the next three years. We slowly blended our families together. When we got married Amanda, his daughter, gave him away to me and Shawna, my daughter, gave me away to him and Stephanie, our daughter, was our flower girl.

Randy and Jenny have four children. Amanda is twenty-seven and even though she is Jenny’s step daughter, she loves Amanda as if she were her own. Amanda is married and has two children Isabella who is almost seven and Liam who is almost three. Shawna, Jenny’s daughter that Randy adopted when she was eight years old, is now twenty-one. Stephanie, who is our daughter together, is twenty and Ben, our son is eight.

In January of 2015 Jenny started her first semester toward a Master’s Degree. She is working to get a degree in Early Childhood Special Education. Jenny wants to become certified in a specific area but has not yet decided what that will be. This semester was a very challenging one for many reasons. First of all she had not been to school in ten years. Jenny said she had to become familiar with online classes, had her eye surgery, and had to learn how to depend on a screen reader (and navigate the issues that come with that). She got her electronic text books in the sixth or seventh week of class which she heard happens a lot, and Jenny helped her chapter host the state convention. She forgot to mention that she also helped me with the Blind Parents Seminar that was presented to Social Workers that took place the week before the state convention. “I am very proud to say that I got an A in both of the classes that I took and I am looking forward to taking my second semester in the fall. YAY!” Jenny said.

The two things that Jenny really enjoys doing are spending time with her family and reading. She likes to read many different genres, but not science fiction or action adventure. Between Jenny’s family, work, school and her work in the NFB, I am surprised she has time for any reading. Thank you Jenny; I am glad I have gotten to know you better.

Not Just Mere Words

By Daniel Garcia

Our tag line urges us to “live the life [we] want” and our brand value proposition begins by expressing the idea that “[we] are filled with hope, energy, and love by participating in the National Federation of the Blind.” These are not just mere words for us, we live them every day. I want to share with you how I came to be in the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri and how I live these words.

My first contact with the NFB was in Kalamazoo, Michigan in early November of 2011. Let me give you some background. In Michigan the Training Center for the Blind is located in Kalamazoo. In 2011, the Center located on Oakland Drive was undergoing a major $5 million renovation. So that skills of blindness classes would not be interrupted, the then Michigan Commission for the Blind (now Bureau of Services for Blind Persons) contracted with a hotel across town on East Cork St. Back then they called themselves the Clarion Inn. They have since undergone a name change, but in my heart they will forever be “the Clarion.” The first time I went to the Clarion was on Wednesday, September 14, 2011. Lisa Williams, a student who was midway through her skills of blindness training gave my mom, dad, and me a tour of the hotel. After the tour we ate lunch at the cafeteria with the students and then we went to meet the director. At the time this position was held by long-time Federationist Christine Boone. My mom, dad and I were very impressed with how she used the alternative techniques of blindness to do, as a blind person, what a sighted person does using their sight. Two weeks later, on Monday September 26, 2011, I started my skills of blindness training.

In early November of 2011 the National Federation of the Blind of Michigan was holding their state convention in Kalamazoo. By pure coincidence they had scheduled to have this event in the very same Clarion Hotel where the Training Center was temporarily holding their classes. On Friday evening we went to various exhibits and I met a few federationists from the Ann Arbor area and from Western Wayne County who encouraged me to join. On Saturday a few of us decided to check out the dance. We figured that since everybody was blind they would not notice we had crashed their party. We hung out there for about half an hour and then went back to our rooms. Little did I know that this event would foretell what I would be doing three and a half years later.

Fast forward to early 2013, I had decided to go to Little Rock, Arkansas to World Services for the Blind to hopefully secure a position with the Internal Revenue Service. I needed to improve my Braille reading speed to at least sixty words per minute. One of my blind instructors at Kalamazoo, Shig Toda, had told me that in order to become proficient at reading Braille I should read until my fingers bled. I do not think that my fingers bled, but I did read quite a bit of Braille that year. During the mornings I read large Braille books from the Braille and Talking Book Library in Lansing. In the afternoons I used my little Refreshabraille 18 Braille display to read a lot of material from the Internet, including issues of the Braille Monitor. When I was not reading Braille I was reading audio books. I was frankly inspired by reading the history of the organized blind movement. I was beginning to understand that it was respectable to be blind and that blind people can lead normal lives. I also read a book about how blind Orientation and Mobility Instructors faced prejudiced in the profession and how wrong I had been in assuming that blind people could not be effective O&M Instructors. The result of all this is that two days before I was to interview with the IRS, I tested out of Braille by reading at 67 words per minute!

On Wednesday September 18, 2013 I interviewed with three different sets of interviewers from the IRS. We were supposed to pick three different cities in order of preference and I had chosen Kansas City as one of my choices because of my friend Jeff Giffen who I had met in Kalamazoo. He had gone through the program a few months earlier and had moved to Kansas City. Jeff had told me what a wonderful place it was to live in. I struggled my way through the interview and I frankly thought I had blown it. I thought I would be packing my bags for Michigan the next day. At 3 p.m. that day they called us into the library and I was informed that I was being picked up by the Kansas City Office! There is an old Chinese proverb that warns us to be careful of what we wish for, we might just get it. I was truly scared about the prospect of moving out on my own, seven hundred and fifty miles away from my family. When I called my family they were very supportive of my decision to move out of state even though it would no doubt be hard on them.

Let’s fast forward to Saturday, August 16, 2014. It was the third Saturday of the month and my brother, his wife and my nephew were in Kansas City visiting me. The Kansas City Chapter of the NFB of Missouri meets on the third Saturday of every month at a local library. I had attended a meeting in July just to check it out. In the month since then, I had decided to join. I explained this to my family and they dropped me off at 1:30 p.m. and went off on a guided Gangster Tour of the city. When they picked me up at 4 p.m., I had joined the NFB. Little did I know that less than a year from then I would be asked to join the state affiliate board.

I am writing this on Sunday March 29, 2015. After much drama and fun at the state convention elections today I was elected to fill a one year term on the board. The membership of the NFB of Missouri in their wisdom decided to reelect as board members two deserving and long-time Federationists. When a vacancy opened up due to a board member being elected to the corresponding secretary position, they decided to give me a year in which to prove that I actually belong on the board. When I called my family and told them how crazy all this seemed to me, they told me not to sell myself short and that Ruby Polk and Gary Wunder knew what they were doing.

I am eternally grateful to the Rittger’s Committee for providing the funds for me to attend an NFB state convention for the first time and I promise to pay this forward. I am also very happy about how I have been welcomed with open arms by this federation family. Even though I have only been a member for seven and a half months, it feels like I have known some of you for a lifetime. Being in the Federation has taught me to be more generous with both my time and money, which are always in short supply these days. I also understand the importance of Braille as a necessary tool in acquiring employment and believe that the statistics concerning the employability of blind people who are proficient in Braille are true. I am truly living the life I want and yes I am filled with hope, energy and love because I participate in the National Federation of the Blind. I will work hard to earn your confidence so that on Sunday April 3, 2016 I can ask for your support for a full term on the NFB of Missouri Board.

**PLEDGE OF THE**

**NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND**

I pledge to participate actively in the effort 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.

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