BELL report for 2016

by debbiewunder

In this year’s BELL Program, we were privileged to serve eight children. We were able to do this thanks to the generous support of the board of the National Federation of the Blind and other donations which I will detail throughout this report.

Let me do my best to begin by thanking those who helped make this report possible, apologizing in advance to anyone whose efforts I have forgotten to include. I want to thank Carol Coulter, Shelia Wright, Holly carneal, Rita Lynch, Deb Bush, Robin House, Brian Schulz, Adnan Gutic, Chris Tisdal, Randy Carmack, and Shawnee Korff. These were the mainstays of our staff, but we were supported by others such as Ron Hurley, Kathy Hurley, Christian Hirsch, Carl Hirsch, and Justin Cole. These people were our transportation warriors and entertainers, and they helped make many of the activities I will describe to you possible. I also want to thank Mark Madigan for his work, and Linda Deweese for donating art supplies that the children used. Of course the Jefferson City chapter made a donation of a rental car, the Columbia chapter put $100 into our effort, and Dan Keller went to his local banks and secured two donations resulting in $600.

Although the purpose of the Bell Academy program is to teach braille to young children and thereby promote literacy, we do this and so very much more. Yes, we help them use braille writers, slates, and even high-powered technology that they sometimes know more about than we do. We not only taught them Grade Two Braille but even included Unified English Braille, UEB. There are the reading and writing sessions when we have them work on their own, and the times when we do group learning in which our students will work together to read a small book, student aid taking the first page, and then student be reading aloud for the second.

All of this is fantastic and is at the core of our program, but we do so much more. It is amazing to discover what blind children do not know or have not done. Sometimes the mobility training we offer is the first they have received and the same is true for other independent skills. We are always blessed to discover something that we think is routine but they think is new. This summer we had a student who did not know the joy of running, and we taught her the fun of doing this. We taught her not only how to run but the fun that can be found in competition. Our staff had that competition rekindled in ourselves when we decided that we were not content with the children being the only ones to enjoy running and competed against ourselves to see who could get down the rope and back the quickest.

We know that we have raised expectations when we teach children that they can carry their own trays, carry their own braille writers, handle money, order their own food, pay for it, and get back change. This year we took them to the magic house where they were able to play in replicas of the Supreme Court and in the Oval Office. In these places of power they gave speeches and even declared war. More importantly, they got to experience some of the work that a plumber does by fitting together PVC pipe and the work that a bricklayer does when he uses a pulley to lift bricks in the construction of a wall.

I think that our music component is one of the things that makes the BELL Program special for many who attend. This year we learned rhythm by playing bucket drums. These were purchased by and delivered to us thanks to the generosity of Dan Flasar. The children learn to play recorders (ouch to some of our ears), and they also learned to play as a group, requiring quite a bit of discipline, which any music teacher will tell you is a big challenge.

Since we again use the Delta Gamma center as our base of operation, we were able to take advantage of their climbing wall. This is always a popular attraction for the children, introducing them once again to physical challenge and pushing them to do more than simply exercising their minds. This, like every activity we did, was designed to get them to do things they had previously thought impossible because of what people had told them about blindness or what they had come to believe by so often being spectators rather than participants.

I have already tried to say thank you to the staff, but let me say how much all of us are aware that this activity could not of happened were it not for the commitment of the board of this organization and its members who support us at the state convention. There is nothing that we do that is so hands-on and that gets us so close to students in a way that goes beyond words, beyond intent, and helps us directly touch lives. Thank you for letting me and all of those who participated be a part of this. It is such a demonstration of who we are, the commitment we have for blind children, and the vision we have for their success and helping to ensure it.