**The Blind Missourian**

**June 2021**

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Paying Tribute to a Man Who Embodied Rehabilitation in Missouri

by Gary Wunder

I suspect this will be but one of many tributes written to our friend Mark Laird. I first met Mark when he came before the State Rehabilitation Council in the 1990s. The message he brought was what he was doing to encourage employment of blind people in Springfield Missouri. One example that I remember quite clearly is his going to the Huffy Bicycle company and telling them that they had a number of jobs for which he had blind people who would make excellent workers. I don’t remember how many folks he placed, but these were good, competitive jobs.

What I saw in Mark was what I wanted to see in every rehabilitation counselor: a real belief in blind people, seeing that they got education and training, and then aggressively helping them look for jobs - which, of course, was the end goal.

Each time Mark moved up the ladder at Rehabilitation Services for the Blind, I found myself with mixed feelings. I certainly did not want his competence to be used against him, but I have often found it sad when the reward for doing a good job is to be moved out of it. I have to say that I think that Mark was just as fine a director of Rehabilitation Services for the Blind as he was a counselor, but it isn’t easy to find people who are as competent as the person being replaced.

One of the things that used to bother me about inviting people to be on our convention agenda was that they would come just in time to speak and leave after the last question was asked. I understand they thought they were doing us a big favor by meeting on the weekends and taking time from family and leisure activities. While I certainly could respect this, I wanted them to get to know us just as much as we got to know them. Mark Laird never let me down. He came not just for his Rehabilitation Services for the Blind presentation but for the entire convention. He was there on Friday evening to move in and out of our committee and division meetings. He was there on Saturday for the entire day, and many times I said goodbye to him on Sunday, the day normally devoted to internal business.

We have a saying that we intend to be a complement to sighted people; we say that they are blind at heart. There is no stretch in saying this about Mark. As time moves along, I find that there are more and more people I hope to meet on the other side. Mark is most certainly one of them. I’m ready for the handshake that often turned into a hug; I’m ready for the spirited conversations that often started from assumed philosophical certainties but tried to encompass the real world; I’m anxious to once again hear the voice of my friend and to see what task he is undertaking that will continue to take advantage of his competence, his kind heart, his intelligence, and his unwavering presence as a friend.

Braille Testimony:

By Gary Wunder

We have had a long struggle to get blind children taught where they live, where their parents live, and our success is generally something we view as good. But environmental integration is not the same as educational integration, and when blind children aren't educationally integrated, they sit and they listen while others do and learn. They become spectators rather than participants, so not only do they fall behind, but they have to overcome a mindset that says that in life they are necessarily a spectator, passively watching as others progress.

Braille is a skill we consider crucial. At one point the legislature thought so too, and it was put in the statutes that Braille shall be the default for blind students. The only exception would be if the education team felt differently after their discussion. But in reacting to the new legislation in the early 90s, DESE's first act was to send out template language saying this is how you document you talked about Braille and found it inappropriate. As consumers who are blind, we didn't and still don't consider this at all appropriate—certainly not in the spirit of the law that said if you are blind, you will get Braille.

Educators spend too much time deciding whether to teach Braille, print, or both, and while they evaluate the blind student, sighted students learn to read. By the time the blind student is evaluated, their sighted peers have already progressed to where they are no longer learning to read but reading to learn.

When Braille is taught, it is too often offered not as a primary or important reading method but like a foreign language. I took Spanish but wasn't expected to use it for history, geography, or mathematics, but Braille should be used for all of these. It is not a language; it is a way to read and write.

The act you have before you provides definitions for all of the services we believe blind children need. It provides a clear expectation that during and after their training they will function at the same level as their intellectual peers. Some children have disabilities in addition to blindness that preclude measuring everyone using one standard. So it is with sighted children.

The time I have spent on Braille could have been spent on cane travel and overall mobility. Both are essential. Blind children go to school at the public's expense, get training in blindness skills at the public's expense, often go to college at the public's expense. We want to keep the only promise we are asked to make for all of that: that unenforceable promise is that we will try to get a job and to become a tax payer. We are thankful for what we have been given, but we are even more thankful and proud when we can count ourselves among those who now are able to give. You might find it hard to believe, but what an honor it is to be able to pay taxes and then to gripe about it.

This is what BRITE is all about, and as this bill moves, we are working with educators to see that we agree on every word. The world is too competitive to write off people who have something to give, and blind people do. Our own self-respect and desire for economic success means that we want to be just like you. Please do what you can to help us in this cause: Braille, cane travel, daily living skills—all of the things that go into being truly independent and productive.

Thank you for your commitment to public service, to learning about the issues, and to putting your hands to the work of changing that part of the world you can—today let part of that be for blind students who are Missourians.

Testimony

By Carla Keirns

I am here to speak in support of HB 1360 and HB 1381, the BRITE Act.

My name is Carla Keirns, and I live in Kansas City with my husband Michael and our son Russell, who is here with me today. Russell is seven years old. He was fourteen weeks old when his eye doctor told us he was legally blind due to albinism, a condition he was born with.

Russell was blessed to attend the Children’s Center for the Visually Impaired (CCVI) in Kansas City, Missouri from age two to six, where he first learned to use his fingers to do some of the work his eyes could not. Even the vision he has degrades over the course of the day, going from 20/200 to 20/1000 – meaning that by the time he would need to start his homework, he sees at 20 feet what someone with normal vision can see at 1000 feet.

Children like Russell may do okay in early grades when the print is big and books have only a few words on each page, but by third or fourth grade, at the transition from learning to read to reading to learn, the letters get smaller, reading loads increase, and Russell will not be able to keep up using his eyes. We are grateful, therefore, that starting at CCVI and continuing in our local school, Russell has been learning Braille. This will allow him to continue to learn with his peers. He will be able to read with his fingers when his eyes get tired.

The current statute supporting Braille Education in Missouri mirrors the Braille provision in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, Section 614 (d)(3)(B)(iii)(B) Consideration of Special Factors. —The IEP Team shall—

(iii) in the case of a child who is blind or visually impaired, provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP Team determines, after an evaluation of the child's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the child's future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child.

When Russell was ready for kindergarten, we transitioned to our local elementary school. Our district is full of dedicated educators, but because blindness in children is rare, they have little experience with children like him. They recognized that the law required them to teach him Braille because he is legally blind, and individual testing found that he would need it. But the law does not specify how much instruction children should receive or what outcomes they should achieve. This is why we consider the BRITE Act’s provision calling for grade-level achievement crucial for children like Russell.

Section A (2) 3. "Instruction in Braille reading and writing shall be sufficient to enable each student to communicate effectively and efficiently at a level commensurate with the student's sighted peers of comparable grade level and intellectual functioning."

At an IEP meeting in February, my son's Teacher of the Visually Impaired tried to convince our IEP team that while "print readers learn all of their letter sounds to read at grade level, Braille readers don't learn everything they need to read at grade level until the end of third grade." This is only true of Braille readers who have other disabilities and those who receive inadequate instruction in Braille.

Russell’s Braille teacher works for multiple school districts across Kansas City, and over the past two years when she has worked with him, she has had twenty-four to thirty-two blind children on her caseload, across as many as ten school districts. As a result, it has been difficult for her to provide more than three hours per week of Braille instruction, 30% of what is called for in the seminal study by Koenig and Holbrook that forms the basis for Braille instruction recommendations at the national level, including those incorporated by the American Printing House for the Blind in their widely used Braille reading curriculum, Building on Patterns.

Alan J. Koenig and M. Cay Holbrook, Ensuring High-Quality Instruction for Students in Braille Literacy Programs, Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, November 2000; 94(11): 677-694.

My son has above-average intelligence and spoken language, and I was shocked and disappointed to learn that his Braille teacher did not share a goal of grade level reading. Clarifying the existing Braille standards for Missouri would be extremely helpful for our family, our school, and to set a standard that will ensure that blind children like my son will be able to learn with their peers instead of falling behind starting in the first grade.

The provisions about assistive technology are also critically important. We asked our school to start to consider technology needs when my son started kindergarten in 2019. We were advised that the school didn't have the children use computers until third grade, and so that is when they would consider our son's need for access technologies, other than a digital magnifier. That is not what state and national-level experts in the education of blind children told me.

The experts explained to me that blind children need to learn keyboarding early because their handwriting will never keep up, that they need to be able to use keyboard commands rather than a mouse to control their computers because it is difficult to see and control a cursor when you are blind, and that screen reading software and refreshable Braille displays should be introduced as soon as kindergarten so students will be ready to use them when they and their peers start using computers for learning in second and third grade.

By the end of that school year, of course, the pandemic had closed our school, and my son had no training or experience with the kind of screen reading and magnification software that is used to make a PC or tablet accessible to the blind. He struggled for months in virtual learning, unable to see what was being shown on the screen, unable even to mute and unmute his microphone or raise and lower his hand. Testing in November showed he had learned no Braille since schools closed in March. My son was finally placed at the School for the Blind at the end of the third quarter, where he is thriving. But he lost a full year of learning due to lack of access and inadequate training in assistive and access technology.

Finally, the focus on Orientation and Mobility and qualified instructors in the bill is a pressing need. According to DESE, there are fifty counties in Missouri with at least one blind child and no Teacher of the Visually Impaired and fifty-seven counties with at least one blind child and no Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist (COMS). We went a full year with our district in Kansas City unable to find a COMS to provide instruction to my son in critical skills like safe street crossing and knowing when traffic is coming–I think of these as the "don't get run over by a car" lessons.

All of these legislative provisions will help my son and so many children like him in Missouri. Thank you for having faith in them and helping us to ensure he learns what he needs to complete school and be ready for higher education, work and independent living, just as the federal and state special education laws offer as their goal.

The Missouri Historical Society

By Sarah Sims, Director of Accessibility

The Missouri Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind is invited to explore the Missouri Historical Society (MHS) and to learn how we are improving accessibility for visitors who are blind or have low vision.

MHS shares the history of the St. Louis region through exhibitions, publications, and public programs. We operate three buildings that are free and open to all: the Missouri History Museum, located in Forest Park; the Library and Research Center, located across from Forest Park; and Soldiers Memorial Military Museum, located downtown. You can plan your trip at [mohistory.org/welcome-back](https://mohistory.org/welcome-back).

Our mission is to serve as the confluence of historical perspectives and contemporary issues to inspire and engage audiences in the St. Louis region and beyond. We know we cannot achieve that mission without a commitment to ensuring that our buildings, collections, exhibits, programs, and services are accessible to all. Our commitment to accessibility is achieved through regular development of new accessible programs and features, evaluation of exhibits for barriers, training for staff and volunteers on best practices in accessibility, and more!

We are especially excited to share about our recent enhancements for visitors who are blind or who have low vision. All three sites of the Missouri Historical Society now have Audio Description! In addition to the three buildings, we also offer audio description for all special exhibitions at the Missouri History Museum and Soldiers Memorial Military Museum. As new exhibits are developed, we add new audio description. Visitors can listen at home before their visit or listen on their own smart device while on-site. These playlists describe interior and exterior spaces, points of interest, highlighted artifacts, exhibit experiences, and general wayfinding information. Check our [SoundCloud page](https://soundcloud.com/mohistorymuseum/sets) for the latest offerings! We want to extend a special thank you to the staff and volunteers at MindsEye who trained our staff and helped us write and record the audio description for the Soldiers Memorial Military Museum.

We’ve also been hard at work reproducing all special exhibition labels and key informational brochures into Braille and large print. Please visit the information desks at the Missouri History Museum and Soldiers Memorial Military Museum to check out these free resources. Thanks to the Midwestern Braille Volunteers who printed these accessible materials!

Connect with us to learn more! You can:

* Read about all of our accessible features at [mohistory.org/visit/accessibility](https://mohistory.org/visit/accessibility).
* [Subscribe to our eNewsletters](https://mohistory.us7.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=4eaa2a5eaae236d5ecc09f850&id=88cb7b72c7), which are offered for a variety of interests, including accessibility!
* Follow us on Social Media–we're on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/mohistorymuseum/), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/mohistorymuseum/?hl=en), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/mohistorymuseum), and [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeMi9mDFlG3JdsLsEXTiOSw)!
* Send questions, accommodation requests, and feedback about accessibility to [access@mohistory.org](mailto:access@mohistory.org)

2021 Annual Presidential Report–March 27, 2021

By Shelia Wright

At the end of each calendar year, wordsmiths and language experts select the word of the year. It was no surprise that pandemic and unprecedented were two of the top considerations for 2020. In the end, dictionary.com chose pandemic as the clear winner. While the pandemic demanded much of society’s attention and resulted in disruptions and restrictions, I want to look back over the past year and focus on the positive lessons and accomplishments of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri, since our last state convention. Let’s draw on these to launch us into a new year of love, hope, and determination as we move forward into the coming year.

As you will recall the first change brought about by the pandemic was that our annual state convention was delayed, and since we could not hold an in-person convention, we immediately began exploring the virtual platform that would become a part of our everyday life.

Therefore, I delivered my last presidential report about nine months ago as we gathered for our first virtual annual state convention ever. By that time, we had some experience hosting many small discussions and meetings via Zoom, which felt much different from what we were facing. Our hard work and the butterflies that often come with trying new things paid off. We had a very successful state convention for which we could all be proud. Many of our Federation brothers and sisters–from across the country–were able to join us for the convention. Both we in Missouri and other state affiliate leaders had an opportunity to learn what worked well and what changes might work better. Who knew then that we would be holding our second virtual state convention? We believe we will use our virtual tools even better, and we are already off to what I believe will be an outstanding convention. Thank you to all our members that help this to happen.

We have developed skills and a way that we can reach prospective members, include members that cannot attend live events, and better serve blind Missourians that do not live near other blind people. It will not take the place of face-to-face interaction but will expand and enhance what we can do.

Even while our state convention was getting under way last year, our Missouri Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Academy Coordinators, Jenny Carmack and Debbie Wunder, were engaged with our Missouri families participating in the first of three summer sessions of our BELL Academy in Home Edition. Missouri had seven students participating throughout the summer with their family’s support. This was our first contact with four of these families. Thank you, Jenny and Debbie, for your work and to our national program that provided the framework.

July brought another first: our first virtual National Convention. With the convention, we learned about new tools and ideas that we could use, and we are using a few of these tools and ideas to help us carry out this year’s state convention. Leave it to the National Federation of the Blind, to find viable solutions to help us carry out the work of the Federation. Our virtual National Convention allowed many people to attend their first NFB Convention. Both members and nonmembers tuned in to take part in the convention and Missouri had a record number of 120 in attendance.

During the fall of 2019 we received notice from the Commerce Trust Company that the National Federation of the Blind St. Louis Chapter had been named as a beneficiary by Virginia Schenk in her living trust. As the St. Louis Chapter has been dissolved, The National Federation of the Blind of Missouri was the appropriate recipient. Chris Tisdal in his capacity as President of our Lewis and Clark Chapter received the first correspondence concerning the Schenk Living Trust and worked with the state affiliate to connect us with the financial institution handling the estate. Unfortunately, none of us who remain had the privilege of knowing Virginia Schenk. What we do know is that she had a huge impact in her community, both in her lifetime and beyond. Based on the timeline that the living trust was established, it is probable that she made her selection of the National Federation of the Blind St. Louis Chapter, from having contact with our long-time member, John Dower. John Dower was an insurance salesman in St. Louis and President of the St. Louis Chapter. He would close his business every Friday to get out into the community to sell candy and pass out cards and literature on behalf of the Federation. As a result, the National Federation of the Blind has received a number of bequests from the contacts he made. In late summer, the National Federation of the Blind received $427,014. Thank you, Virginia Schenk, for making room for the National Federation of the Blind in your heart. Thank you, John Dower, for the work you did that still impacts us today. Your legacy lives on because you not only worked on our behalf, but you shared our work and our mission with whomever you came in contact.

In keeping with NFB policy that affiliates will share at least fifty percent of bequests with our national organization, we immediately shared $214,000.00 with our national organization. All of us benefit greatly from our national programs, our national literature, our branding, etc. Every dollar that we spend on a national level goes further than those we as an affiliate spend. Our collective effort includes efforts to fund our movement and it is our collective movement that gives us the strength that we have. We are proud to have been able to share this gift with our national organization.

I want to say one more thing about the Virginia Schenk Trust and the added benefits her gift gives us in funding our state affiliate. Having these available funds, especially more than we have had in a very long time, can be a blessing or a curse. It will be a blessing if we use it to build the Federation by using it to develop programs that teach blind people that it is respectable to be blind, to help blind people to learn skills, build dreams, inspire them to live the life they want, and to help us educate those in our communities that have low expectations of us.

It is a curse if we take the money we have and determine we are going to save it for a rainy day, if we become complacent and feel like we don’t really need to do any fundraising. If we take either of these positions, I assure you, the rainy day will come soon. The money will dwindle more quickly than you ever imagined. The members will forget how to raise money. Our communities will forget who we are because they no longer see us out in the public working to fund our programs. We’ve seen this happen within our own affiliate before, and we’ve seen it happen elsewhere. Let’s be sure not to fall into the trap of complacency. Let’s turn our blessing into opportunities to reach blind people of all ages and to help them understand they can live the life they want!

We were all very excited when the new STEM2U Program was announced and immediately applied to be one of the fifteen states to be selected to host this event. We were selected and had started making plans to hold the event in Jefferson City this past fall. Like everything else, this became a virtual program and much of the work was planned by our national colleagues. Jenny Carmack volunteered to help teach and was selected to do so in both sessions that were offered. In addition, we were proud to have seventeen Missourians participate. We were familiar with some of the students, but again, we were able to make contact with several families for the first time.

For over thirty years, the NFB of Missouri has received some funds from the National Federation of the Blind Service Foundation. In December, 2019, the thrift store and pick-up service in Kansas City was closed, and the work of the NFB Service Foundation began winding down. For the first eight months of 2020 we continued receiving distributions from the Service Foundation. In September, we were notified that we were eligible for a final distribution in the amount of $50,000.00, but that we needed to identify how we were going to use the money and that it should not go to regular operating expenses or projects we were already doing.

In October, at the direction of the affiliate board, a special committee was appointed to accept proposals and make recommendations to the board. The committee was given thirty days to do their work. The committee was chaired by Becky Boyer; others that served were, Jenny Carmack, Tezzie Wells, Cory McMahon, Daniel Garcia, and Dennis Miller. This committee worked diligently and recommended that we set aside $40,000 to begin a transition program for students ages fourteen to twenty-one and $10,000 to start a program to assist newly- blinded seniors in adjusting to blindness. Committee members were concerned that the proposal that was submitted requested $15,000 and decided to appeal to the board to set aside an additional $5,000 to help get this program off the ground.

There were three other proposals submitted that the committee thought would be worthwhile projects. The first was at the request of the Sports and Recreation Committee for a Health and Wellness program with emphasis on nutrition. The benefit of this program is that it could begin immediately as an instructor and curriculum had already been planned and a lot of the instruction could be done virtually. The second proposal came from our Scholarship Committee, who recommended that we send our top scholarship winner to the national convention. This proposal would be for a three-year period to help determine if this would help our scholarship winners to become more connected with the Federation. The third proposal was one that really could not be acted upon at this time and should be reconsidered at a later time. The NFB Board accepted the recommendations of the committee including setting aside the additional funding.

Thank you to those that submitted proposals and to those who served on the special committee. Planning committees were appointed for the transition program and for the senior program; both have begun their work. Much work has already been done on the transition program for ages 14-21. The new program will be known as Mission BEAM (Blindness, Empowerment, Advocacy, and Mentoring). You will hear more about this program from Jenny Carmack, chair, later in the convention. Gary Wunder is chairing the Senior Blind Program.

Washington Seminar brought new challenges as we needed to move it to a virtual platform. The beauty of it being virtual is that we had at least twenty members participating in this event, and many of them were participating in their first Washington Seminar. We were able to have constituents from every congressional district which also was a first and a delight to members of congress. You have already heard about the legislative priorities this morning, so I will not go over those again; however, we made the most progress on the Access Technology Affordability Act. Both Senator Blunt and Representative Luetkemeyer have cosponsored the ATAA. Just yesterday afternoon, some of us finally had an opportunity to meet with Representative Cleaver. We were delighted that at the beginning of the meeting we were assured that the congressman had signed on to the Access Technology Affordability Act earlier this week. We should be certain to express our thanks to these members and to follow-up with the rest to encourage them to do likewise. Remember, Washington Seminar is the beginning of our legislative work on the national level. We’ve laid the groundwork, but the outcome will be based on the work we do the rest of the year.

I’d like to turn to our Jefferson City Seminar and our legislative concerns on the state level. Once we realized that we really did need to go virtual with our legislative work on the state level, I think we all started out thinking it was going to be a difficult year; however, we felt it was important for us to show a presence and bring our concerns to those we could meet with. We extended our seminar dates from two days to five to allow for scheduling meetings, and in some cases, the appointments stretched out over a two-week period. While we did not accomplish meeting with someone in every office, we had some really great meetings with representatives and senators. We found them to be more relaxed, in less of a hurry, and more likely to ask questions. I believe we established the beginnings of a good relationship with a number of new representatives.

One of our goals this year was to introduce the BRITE Act, which deals with blind students’ rights to learn Braille, cane travel, technology, and a quality education. Early on in the seminar, we had two representatives that agreed to submit the model bill we presented to legislative research and get the bill filed. This was despite the fact that the deadline for filing a bill was drawing near. Everyone realized that we did not have much time, but the commitments were sincere. Today there are two bills which have been filed and both have been referred to the Elementary and Secondary Education Committee in the House. We're waiting now for a hearing to be scheduled on these bills, which are identical and closely follow the model language. Since we are running behind, I will not go into the other issues, but I would definitely consider our efforts to be successful in many ways and we are not done yet.

We have acquired the legal services of Amy Coopman to help Sarah Coccovizzo. Sarah is a senior in high school, and she and her parents have requested to attend a one-year transition program at the Kansas School for the Blind. One of the emphasis in the transition program outlined in the federal regulations includes community involvement. Sarah wants to participate in the Kansas School’s program because it is a one-year program near the community resources where she plans to live, attend college, and work. She probably could go to the Missouri School for the Blind across the state, but it is a two-year program and does not give her the benefit of tapping into community resources she will be able to use. This plan has been discussed for about a year, but only recently did the school district rule this out saying they cannot cross the state line. This is despite the fact that it is not at all unusual for school districts in the Kansas City metropolitan area to enroll their students in programs at the Kansas School for the Blind. Ms. Coopman will assist Sarah and her parents in navigating the school district complaint process to ensure that Sarah’s needs are addressed properly and to determine next steps.

We were contacted by James Shelton, who lives in Kirksville. James explained that he has been caring for his mother for several years because her health is declining, and she wants to stay in her own home. Recently, James’ mother fell, and he reported that a social worker has indicated that he cannot provide his mother with the care that is needed because he is blind. He indicated that there was going to be a hearing and asked for help. Dennis Miller agreed to assess the situation and has been working with James directly as he is familiar with all the players and resources there in Kirksville. Since the initial contact, James has brought up several other areas in which he has been denied services or roadblocks. He has reached out to several affiliate leaders. We will assess the situation for each area and advise him accordingly.

Finally, I want to talk a little bit about Daniel Garcia in his capacity as Chairman of our Public Relations Committee. You all see Daniel work hard in our state affiliate and on the chapter level. He is bright and very creative. He has excellent communication skills and does a great job chairing our Public Relations Committee. When we think about public relations, we may think about getting out a press release about something we are doing or contacting the newspaper or TV station to get a story, or coming up with a new brochure or advertisement. All good ideas but most can be expensive. One of the things Daniel does is particularly creative, as far as I am concerned, and is encouragement to me and to at least one of our young members in Kansas City, and it is absolutely free: thinking outside the box. I share this to encourage us all to recognize the opportunities there are out there to tell our story to influence attitudes, and to get the NFB of Missouri’s name out into our communities.

Daniel uses NFB Newsline every day to read the paper, and he reads the Opinion Section. On several occasions he has written a letter expressing his opinion on issues related to blindness and has used this as an opportunity to promote the work we in the NFB are doing. I think I started paying more attention to this in November. Daniel saw an invitation to the column’s readers to send in letters on what they are thankful for. Daniel prepared his letter and sent it off to the paper for consideration. At the Kansas City Chapter meeting in November, he told the chapter about the recent invitation and that he had sent in his letter which indicated he was thankful for the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri. He went on to encourage our chapter members to send in their letters of thanks for the NFB. He said that maybe if the editor got several letters from people who are thankful for the organization, maybe they would select one to be included in the paper.

Tarra Coccovizzo, one of our NFB Cane Drivers and a member of the Kansas City Chapter, took the challenge and wrote and submitted her letter about why she was thankful for the National Federation of the Blind. I don’t know how many people took the challenge Daniel extended that day, but just as Daniel hoped, the strategy worked. Congratulations to Tarra for accepting the challenge and getting published. Thank you, Daniel for thinking outside the box and providing us an example of how to think outside the box to promote the National Federation of the Blind.

Just last week, there was another article in the Opinion Section, and it was about some state legislators who wanted to eliminate the internet divide and increase infrastructure that would bring internet service to rural and less populated areas of the state. Daniel wasted no time at submitting another letter about the existence of a second internet divide. Although they didn't use his play on words, his letter was published and it was an excellent letter about the inaccessible issues revolving around webpages and apps.

There are all kinds of ways that we as members can educate the public and further our efforts as an organization. Thank you, Daniel for demonstrating this to us. There are all kinds of platforms we can use to make the work of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri known throughout Missouri. We all have different strengths and talents, feel free to share your successes. You never know who you will inspire, teach, or reach.

I am very pleased that almost one-fourth of our members are on one or more committees and or have specific assignments. The scope of our committee work is greater than it has ever been. We are limited only by the number of hands we have to carry out our programs. If you are not serving in some special way in our affiliate and want to get more involved in what we do, please reach out and let me know where you would like to serve. We need your help as we continue to build the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri.

As I wrote this report, I considered what would be the word of the year within the National Federation of the Blind. I don’t know that I settled on one specific word, but what seemed to resonate with me were words like resilient, commitment, and determination.

Resolution 2021-01

A RESOLUTION REGARDING ACCESSIBLE VOTING.

WHEREAS, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was passed in 2002 in part to ensure blind people would be provided an accessible, private, and independent method of voting in all federal elections; and

WHEREAS, this organization has attempted ever since to extend the provisions of HAVA to state and local elections through legislation and interaction with the Missouri Secretary of State’s office; and

WHEREAS, repeated legislative efforts have been unsuccessful and the Secretary of State’s office has shown a total unwillingness to work with us to ensure that blind people have the right to a private and independent vote as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: Now, therefore:

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri in convention assembled this 27th day of March, 2021, that we shall immediately do whatever is required to ensure that blind people have full and equal accessible voting rights regardless where they live, whether it be in a local or national election and whether they choose to vote at the polls or by absentee ballot; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that our efforts include working with the United States Department of Justice, filing legal action in the courts, or by any other means that will achieve this goal in giving blind people the right to vote privately and independently in every election.

Adversity

By Svetlana Ehlers

Have you ever lived on a farm? Living on a farm you can learn so much, like watching a chick hatch. You watch the poor chick struggle, and struggle, and struggle. Then you see a tiny crack in the shell, so you decide to pull the shell apart because you felt sorry for the chick. Once you pull the shell apart the chick will eventually die because it had to build its strength by pushing its wings against the shell. It needed that adversity to survive. Adversity can be a blessing as it will grow your confidence, determination, and faith in Jesus Christ.

I was born in Armenia; Armenia is located north of Iran and east of Turkey. I was born at twenty-four weeks; I just didn’t want to waste any more time. Just call me an over-achiever. Poor planning on my part: my eyes didn’t develop right. So my parents could not care for me, and they put me in an orphanage. Over the next nine-year period, I moved from a hospital to two different orphanages and a blind school. I don’t remember much about my first orphanage, but I remember this one person named Guion who was abusive. She would hit me if I talked or moved. Sometimes I felt she would just hit me for no apparent reason. I also had a friend named Samvel. He was like a brother to me. We were each other’s anchor. I don’t know how I would have survived without him there. He went with me to my second orphanage and to the blind school. I was hoping that when I moved the abuse would stop. And it did, for about a week. After that week the abuse started again. But it was different in this new orphanage.

The orphanage staff let the other kids play, but Samvel and I had to just sit and listen to the other kids, because we were both blind and couldn’t get around on our own. If I got up from my chair, I would immediately be hit. I think my blindness was a burden to the staff. Also, when we went to bed, we had to be asleep as soon as we put our heads on the pillow. Most of the time that was very difficult, because it was scary at night. So, I just pretended to be asleep and listened to the other kids being hurt by the staff. I started thinking that this was normal, so I figured out ways that I could avoid being abused.

One day a priest named Father Grigor and his wife Anahit came to visit the kids with disabilities. They took Samvel and me and some of the other kids to church every week. They even took us on vacation to a lake for a week. This was the only place where I felt safe and the only time I ever felt loved. This is where Father Grigor introduce me to God. I think this helped me to see that there was something good in life. But then we had to go back to the orphanage. This made me very upset because I had to go back to that place. That same year Samvel and I went to the Blind school.

The school was not abusive, but I did not learn much. They brushed my hair and teeth, and they even dressed us. I didn’t even learn how to lift a fork to my mouth. I just put my mouth on the plate and pulled food in. My mom called it my puppy dog eating. If I hadn’t gotten adopted, I would be finished with school by the age of fourteen. People in Armenia believe that children who are blind don’t need to obtain an education above an eighth-grade level.

Then one day the orphanage staff told me that the Americans were coming to steal my organs. I’ve seen kids disappear before. So, I was scared when my new mom came and took me away. Once I was adopted, my life changed very quickly. At first I was very immature. My mom said that because I couldn’t touch anything all my life, I made up for lost time and touched everything. Remember I see through my fingers. Imagine me going out to dinner with family friends. Everyone else looks around to see what each person ordered, but for me, my hands immediately went into everybody’s plates.

My mom taught me how to read Braille, and then my whole world opened up. Everything that I couldn’t see in the orphanage I could now see in books. Since then, I’ve never stopped learning. My goal is to become a lawyer, and I am going to do what it takes to achieve that goal.

Are you wondering what happened to Samvel? Well, he got adopted also. Remember Father Grigor and Anahit, the people that took us to church? I think once I was being adopted they realized they could lose us, so they adopted Samvel. Most people in Armenia don’t care about kids with disabilities, but these folks did. I would commend them for going against their culture, because not only did they adopt Samvel, but they also adopted another child from that orphanage who had challenges. Today Samvel is a beautiful opera singer doing concerts all across eastern Europe. Samvel’s life will be very different from mine. He finished school at the age of fourteen. Because of this, he will not be able to support himself in Armenia. The good thing is that he has a family that can support him. God has a purpose for everything that He does. “’For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” –Jerimiah 29:11

I wouldn’t wish for anyone to go through what I had to go through in Armenia. It was a horrible experience. No child should ever have to endure that type of abuse. But everyone has adversity in their lives. Some experience adversity more often and to a greater or lesser extent. What matters is how you view your adversity. We can become a victim of our adversity, or we can grow from the challenges that God gives us. I choose to grow from my adversity, and I am going to encourage you to teach your children to grow from theirs as well. Adversity can be a blessing, as it will grow your confidence, determination and faith in Jesus Christ.

First, let’s talk about confidence. If I had not gone through the challenges I did, I would not be the person that I am today. “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along’.”–Eleanor Roosevelt. When you let your kids experience adversity, they will be more self-reliant as an adult. For example, if your child is having a problem with their friend, let them talk to their friend so that they can resolve the issue. Once you let them do that, they will build a sense of self confidence that will get stronger with time. Dr. Laura Markham says, “Manage your own anxiety so you don't make a habit of rescuing your child. Instead, when she gets into a jam, support her in brainstorming possible solutions. If you lecture, teach, or solve the problem forher,you're teaching her that she can't solve things herself.” Also, God commands us to have confidence. Joshua 1:9 states “Have I not commanded you?Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Adversity builds determination. This year I wanted to learn how to put wood in our wood stove. I kept telling myself that I couldn’t do it. It was just too hard. And I was afraid that I would touch the flames, ouch! Finally, I decided to use the fireplace tongs to put the log in the fire. I figured out that this wasn’t going to work, so then I tried to put the log in the fire with my gloved hand, and it worked! I had to stop thinking about the negative aspects about putting wood in the fire. You might think that is easy, but again I am totally blind. If I were to touch the flames that would be very bad. I did melt my dad’s firefighter gloves because they are not designed to actually be in the flames.

He was very surprised, but I haven’t burned my hands. That is okay right! “I really believe in the old expression that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. It’s through adversity that you find the strength you never knew you had.” –Christie Brinkley

Lastly, my faith in God has greatly increased. When I think back to the past, I thank God for what He let me endure. If I did not go through hardships, I would have not reached out to God. So, I encourage you to thank God for your hardships. “… adversity is not the time to abandon the faith that has brought us this far.Instead, we should ask the Lord to use the adversity as a tool to strengthen our trust in Him. Let us pray that God will give us courage, boldness, wisdom, and faith as a result of walking through adversity.” **–**Pastor David Delman. When you trust in the Lord, He will help you through hard times. “I can do allthings through Christ who gives me strength”–Philippians 4:13. God is not going to take that hardship away, but He will help you through it.

After listening to this speech what do you think about adversity? Should we wait until the child is a grown adult to experience adversity, or should we let them start experiencing little adversities now? I hope that you start now because it will greatly increase their confidence, determination, and faith in Jesus Christ. Remember let your little chicks break out of their shells on their own.

Reflections on our 2021 State Convention Banquet

By Rita Lynch

The convention banquet was again the highlight of the convention weekend. Our Master of Ceremony, Dennis Miller, along with Amy Wilson, as our Door Prize Chair, kept us all thoroughly entertained. I found the banquet address given by our National Representative, Anil Lewis, to be very moving and truly insightful!

Our Jefferson City Chapter was pleasantly surprised to win the King and Queen Contest with a donation of $500 to our State Affiliate. We also want to Congratulate our Kansas City Chapter for winning the Roy Zuvers Traveling Trophy for 2021. Their contribution of $4,024 to our state affiliate for the year is nothing short of outstanding work!

The winner of the Jacobus tenBroek Award this year was our Jefferson City Chapter fundraising chairperson, Linda DeWeese. Linda has been very loyal and dedicated to our cause for the past thirteen years. Linda is always anxious to give of her time and energy and is always ready to contribute in whatever way is needed for the Federation. She not only is an integral part of our Jefferson City Chapter but also helps on the Missouri Affiliate level. She can be found serving at state board meetings to helping at the State Capitol, often on short notice and even with snow coming down. We sincerely thank you, Linda for all you do to help us build the Federation.

Congratulations to our loyal and steadfast Federationist Gene Fleeman, this year’s winner of the Jernigan Award. We thank you, Gene, for the many years of dedicated service you have given to help us in achieving our goals. Those of you who know Gene would agree that when he undertakes an assignment, we know that he will carry it out most successfully in his quiet and unassuming manner. We love and appreciate you, Gene, more than you know!

President Wright presented the Gary L. Wunder Award to Jenny Carmack. Jenny is the second person to receive this award since it was renamed in 2017. The number of projects Jenny has worked on over the past year, and the importance of the work she has done really is so significant that we wanted to recognize Jenny at this time with this special award. Thank you, Jenny, for all that you do on behalf of the NFB of Missouri.

It is always a historic moment when we welcome and charter a new chapter into the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri. President Wright presented the Charter of Affiliation to President James White of our Ivanhoe Chapter located in Kansas City. We look forward to seeing our newest chapter grow and serve.

Robin House, Scholarship Committee Chair, presented scholarships to four deserving students. The Scholarship Class of 2021 included the following: Jordan Walker, Aida Talic, Nancy Aguilera, and Kendra Damron. Congratulations to these students as they pursue their education goals. The members of the National Federation of the Blind allocate funds for our scholarship program at our annual convention for the following year. This provided the committee with $2,500 for this year’s John & Rhoda Dower Memorial Scholarship Fund. In addition, the Columbia Chapter annually donates $500 for the Hentges Memorial Scholarship in memory of Mary Lou Hentges. There was also a $500 donation for scholarships by the Jefferson City Chapter in memory of Glenda Elgin who passed away in early 2020. Thank you all for helping build our 2021 Scholarship Program.

All of the programs we do are based on our ability to raise the money needed to carry out the work we have planned. For this reason, it is tradition that we end our banquet raising a portion of the money we need. Jeff Giffen, our affiliate PAC chairman, opened the floor for members to get on the Pre-Authorized Check Plan or to increase their monthly contribution. One of the disadvantages of a virtual convention is that it is just not as easy to sell popcorn, candy, baked goods, auction tempting items, etc. To keep our traditions going, Jeff and a few other members made sizeable donations to the affiliate and invited others to do what they could. As the pledges ceased, Mark Harris indicated that he wanted to match the total amount that was raised for the affiliate during the evening in memory of his father who passed away earlier this year. What a loving and generous gift from Mark as he pays tribute to his father. Mark, we love and support you through this tender time of your life. We the members of the NFB of Missouri truly believe in the organization and in carrying out the work of the Federation so that those who come behind will have opportunities and fewer battles as they conquer their goals.

BELL Academy

By Jenny Carmack

The 2021 BELL (Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning) Academy  
will be held virtually this year. We need your help to spread the word about this wonderful and free opportunity for students ages four to twelve years old. For a flyer that provides all of the details, go to [www.nfbmo.org/bell](http://www.nfbmo.org/bell). Please share this with your chapter members, friends, family, or acquaintances, anyone you know who knows a blind student.  
 Last year we had seven students from Missouri participate, and we already have several signed up this year. Spaces are limited, and we want our Missouri families to have the chance to participate in these fun and engaging activities to promote the use of Braille. If anyone has any questions, they can contact Debbie Wunder or myself. Let's bring as many families to the NFB BELL Academy at Home Edition as possible!!! Thanks for your help.

Below is information from the flyer.

Attend 2021 NFB BELL® Academy In-Home Edition

Enhance your Braille and nonvisual skills with us!

The National Federation of the Blind is offering three virtual programs of the NFB BELL Academy this summer to prepare blind and low-vision children to grow into confident and independent blind people by enhancing their education. Options are available for beginner, intermediate, and advanced students. Receive Braille and other fun materials for lessons, connect with experienced teachers, and build relationships with other blind students and mentors.

Take advantage of this opportunity for your child to connect with blind role models and more by applying for one of the following sessions.

Session 1 June 7-18, 2021

Session 2 July 19-30, 2021

Session 3 August 9-20, 2021

Limited space available. Learn more and apply now at nfb.org/bell

Jefferson City Chapter 40th Anniversary

By Rita Lynch

     Our Jefferson City Chapter was formed on May 27, 1981, according to the minutes of the organizing meeting. There are no current members of our chapter at this time who were members back then. Jan Akers was our chapter’s first president, Dave Dillon served as vice-president, Adrianne Dillon secretary, and Barbara Cheadle treasurer. In late 1981, the Dillons moved to St. Louis. Jan was again elected president in 1982, Gary Wunder was our Vice-President, John Cheadle secretary, and Barbara remained chapter treasurer. The chapter membership must have been very few.

     LaVern Benne-Toebben and I joined in late February of 1982, when a membership seminar was held at the Lohman Hotel here in Jefferson City. A couple months later Alvin Toebben joined, and in August of 1982, Brian Wekamp and his parents, Jim and Donna Wekamp, joined our Chapter.

     Several members from our Columbia Chapter had come to the seminar including Gary Wunder, Ed and Gail Bryant, and Tom Stevens. I remember hearing Gary and Tom present at the seminar, but I did not meet them in person that day. I do remember meeting Ed and Gail as I happened to be sitting at the same table with them. At that time, I wasn’t brave enough to ask questions, but listened and took it all in.

    LaVern and I attended our first chapter meeting in late March of 1982 at the Cheadle home. Then, later that month was the state convention in Springfield. John and Barbara encouraged me to go. They could not attend because their youngest and only daughter, Anna Katharine, was soon to arrive. Here is where I met lots of Federationists, including: Lawson and Billie Weaver and Joan Davis from the host chapter; Nick Whitney, Bill and Florence Neal from the Gateway Chapter; and John and Rhoda Dower from the St. Louis Chapter. I got to know Gene and Carol Coulter and June Holman from our Columbia Chapter as I sat at their table during banquet.

My first in-person meeting with Gary was a few days after the state convention, when members around the state gathered at what then was known as the Governor Hotel. From there, we walked over to the Capitol to meet with legislators regarding the Bureau for the Blind budget. That was my first experience meeting with state legislators and the first time I had been to our State Capitol. What an experience that day! My husband and I along with our three children had moved from where we had been living out in the country to Jefferson City in late May of 1981. In fact, it was evidently the same weekend that the membership seminar was held.

     As I think about these past forty years, I am proud to say that our chapter has been very active as a part of our state affiliate. We hosted six state conventions: 1985, 1993, 2000, 2006, 2013 and 2018. We have won the Roy Zuvers Traveling Trophy many times and been able to keep three of them, and we have won the King and Queen contest at least nine times. We’ve been very blessed in our fundraising activities especially our walk-a-thons which we have been holding in the month of October for thirty-three years now. Four years members of our chapter have received the Jacobus tenBroek Award: Alvin Toebben, Phyllis Wilson, Ron and Kathy Hurley, and Linda DeWeese. We’ve had several scholarship winners and Jernigan Award winners, as well. Our chapter has maintained a membership each year in the thirties for decades now.

     We are pleased to be able to help in all activities of our state affiliate, especially with Governmental Affairs. When things happen quite unexpectedly, we are here to do whatever is needed. We are planning our 40th anniversary chapter picnic on June twenty-seventh at theMemorial Park pavilion. We hope those of you who were around when our chapter was organized can come join us, and anyone else who would like to come to celebrate the past forty years are certainly welcome as well.

Learning from Our Past

Some Facts and a Trivia Quiz

By Eugene Coulter

The Data Retention Committee is working on salvaging our records from the last sixty years. The unfortunate part of this endeavor is that some memories are forever lost especially from our first ten years. The last two months has found me searching high and low for memorabilia to preserve memories for the future generations. Hopefully this will answer the question as to how we got to where we are now. Below I will share a couple of tidbits followed by a short trivia quiz; I love trivia.

In 1983, we had a wonderful convention in St. Joseph with Jim Omvig as our National Representative. We passed over a dozen resolutions, including the first of many urging that blind children be taught Braille. On Sunday morning, March 27, we held elections. I was privileged to serve as Nominating Committee Chair. There were three candidates for president because Gary Wunder was not running for re-election. The election was quite dramatic; only one vote separated all three candidates with the second and third place candidates tying. So, a run-off was held between them. In the third and final round of voting, everyone who voted for the loser of the two run-off candidates, voted for the person that finished on top in the first round electing Billie Weaver President.

In the Summer 2002 Blind Missourian, it was reported that Debbie Houchen and Gary Wunder got married and that J. C. Moynihan, Megan Worley, and Melissa Wunder had graduated from high school. In addition, Elisabeth Coulter had been named to Who’s Who in American High Schools.

How about state convention banquet prices over the years? In 2003, we paid $20.00 which increased to $25.00 in 2011 and $35.00 in 2019. But, going further back in history to 1971, the banquet cost a lofty $4.25 with registration costing $2.00 and a single room, at the Aladdin Hotel in Kansas City, priced at $7.00.

Now for a short quiz. Sorry, I will not give the answers until the next issue.

1. According to *The Blind Missourian* when did NFB Newsline Start in Missouri?
2. Since 1971, how many editors has this publication had?
3. In what cities, have we had state conventions (Suburbs of Kansas City and Saint Louis are considered as being part of those cities)?
4. Who served the longest as a chairman of any state committee, having served for twenty-three years? Name the person and the important committee they chaired.
5. How many years did Shelia Wright spend as First Vice President?
6. In What year did the Model White Cane Law pass in Missouri?
7. Who was Gary Wunder’s first Guide Dog?
8. Name four chapters that served the Saint Louis area.
9. Which of these have been state affiliate fundraisers? Wooden toys, stuffed animals, t-shirts, skate-a-thon, carved elephants, raffles.
10. In what year did the Student Division host the state convention and in what city?

One Minute Message

The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. You can live the life you want; blindness is not what holds you back.

Pledge of the

National Federation of the Blind

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.

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