**The Blind Missourian**

 **August 2025**

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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.

The Belief Message

The National Federation of the Blind advances the lives of its members and all blind people in the United States. We know 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. Our collective power, determination, and diversity achieve the aspirations of all blind people.

2025 Presidential Report

By President Shelia Wright

I want to begin today by looking at unity. What is unity? It is when different people can come together and live or work as one, caring for each other despite their diversity. But to have unity like that requires something essential. It requires understanding. That is why – The key to unity is understanding. While it sounds simple, practicing this can be challenging. But whenever we choose to understand the people around us, we are choosing unity. For example, can two people walk together without agreeing which direction to walk? This simple question shows the significant role understanding plays in unity. To move forward in any relationship – whether marriage, family, friendships, or within the NFB – we must share a common purpose and direction. Because – Unity requires Our purpose anchors. Anchors are what we agree on. They remind us that what unites us is greater than what divides us. They keep our relationships strong and hold us together. What are our anchors in the National Federation of the Blind? Our common bond is blindness. We know that blindness does not define us. We believe in blind people.

We create programs and opportunities for blind people to develop skills and confidence needed to achieve our goals. We defend the rights of blind people in the courts when discrimination occurs. These are anchors that came to mind as I read about unity and anchors. The list I mention here is far from complete but you may think of others. What are your anchors? I encourage you to think about this later. It might just be a good topic for an upcoming chapter meeting.

We as an organization plan our work based on blindness. The issues we take to congress and state legislators are nonpartisan. When there are threats to the laws and funding, we must have healthy discussions, respect one another, and what is best for Blind Americans. While a nap may seem tempting to some of you, I encourage you to participate in this afternoon’s breakout on Advocacy. We must clearly identify what our positions are and how we will proceed based on what we have heard. No, we do not have all the answers because we cannot see the future. Just remember Understanding is key to unity.

Let us turn to highlights of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri:

We have had several changes in key committees and affiliate roles. I want to thank Roger Crome for his work in the past as our Governmental Affairs Chair. In October, Janice Grisham became the new chair of this Committee. She did an excellent job with our Jefferson City Legislative Seminar and our work there continues. Daniel Garcia stepped down as chair of Public Relations, and Randy Carmack became the new Chair. Gene Coulter is now the Chair of our Website and Archive Committee. Speaking of the Website, Randy Carmack stepped down as the Website Administrator. Dan Miner is the New Website Administrator. Randy continues to assist with the webpage, and we so appreciate this. Finally, our Ways and Means Committee Chair has changed from Jeff Giffen to Carol Morgan. Thank you, Jeff, for your work as Chair and for your continued work to help facilitate the work of our Ways and Means efforts, even at this very convention.

At last year’s NFB of Missouri State convention, we set a goal to get more Missourians to the convention. 11 of 13 state board members attended the convention. We had 7 first-time attendees. We did indeed increase our numbers. While at the convention many of us gathered in the Presidential Suite and we handed President Riccobono a check for $25,000 to complete the Missouri Affiliates $50,000 pledge to the Museum of the Blind Peoples Movement. In addition, we submitted three resolutions for consideration by the National Resolutions Committee. Two of these resolutions were adopted at the NFB of Missouri Convention last year with direction by the convention to send two of the three to be considered by our National Convention.

Linda Coccovizzo participated in the first IEP Academy the last weekend in May.

In June we conducted BELL academies in Saint Louis and in Kansas City.

In preparation for the November General Elections, we utilized our videos which you saw at last year’s convention in Kansas City. These were posted to Facebook and a few were even used by the Green County Clerk when he conducted training to poll workers in Green County.

October brings our annual Blind Equality Achievement Month. Our online campaign was our best yet. There were activities throughout the state conducted by our chapters. While we focus on increasing awareness about the NFB and our truth about blindness during October, this is something that we need to continue throughout the year.

You will hear more about our Youth programs and the progress we are making from Jenny Carmack later in our agenda. However, we continue to reach new families and engage more students with each event. Jenny Carmack pours her heart and energy into building these programs. Thank you, Jenny, and thank all of you who volunteered to collaborate with her.

This year we had excellent representation for our annual Washington Seminar. Our team consisted of Jenny Carmack, Janice Grisham, Gary Wunder, Tony Waterhouse-Leal, Sveta Ehlers, Carla Keirns, and Russell Dorn. Now that an introduction of our legislative priorities has occurred, the bulk of the work falls on all of us. We need you, the members of our chapters, to follow up with your Representatives and Senators. Set up appointments with them in their offices to talk with them. They do like to hear from members in their districts. Tell your personal stories and why the proposed legislation affects you. Afterward make a direct ask for them to cosponsor legislation. In addition, when you see emails or announcements calling for action, please accept the leadership assignment. We need each of you to respond because numbers speak and every call and email is counted. Please do not stand by and assume someone else can take care of it. Collectively we have the power.

The Missouri Association of Blind Students have focused on building a solid foundation. Both Sveta Ehlers and Isaac McBurney have participated in the National Association of Blind Students regional seminars. Sebastian Underhill participated in the Midwest Student Seminar. Other members of the board have been engaged throughout the year. The mission now is to build membership of the Division and thus the Affiliate.

I want to end here by saying, we need you, our members throughout the state, to engage in our work. The challenges ahead are real and our progress depends on how much we the members of the National Federation are willing to give of your time, talents, and energy. I ask you to stand with me for our NFB Pledge and ask you to think anew on how you can support the policies and programs of the Federation.

The following resolutions were passed at the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri 2025 state convention.

Resolution 2025-01

A RESOLUTION REGARDING THE IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL FROM AND DISMISSAL OF TEXAS V. KENNEDY

WHEREAS, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a landmark civil rights provision for people with disabilities, protecting us from discrimination by federal agencies and recipients of federal funding in public education, work readiness programs, healthcare, elections, the court system, and more; and

WHEREAS, seventeen states’ attorneys general have filed suit in Texas v. Kennedy alleging that Section 504 is unconstitutional and should be entirely or partially enjoined, limiting it only to those programs, services, and activities directly funded by and through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; and

WHEREAS, those seventeen states submitted a status report to the Court on February 21, 2025, stating in pertinent part, “Plaintiffs clarify that they have never moved--and do not plan to move--the Court to declare or enjoin Section 504. . . as unconstitutional on its face. Plaintiffs have not sought and do not seek to enjoin the disbursement of funds from the Department on the basis that the statute is unconstitutional.”; and

WHEREAS, at the time of this resolution, Plaintiffs have chosen not to amend pages 37 and 42 of their complaint, which directly contradict the previous paragraph by stating: “Count 3: Section 504 is Unconstitutional,” and “Demand for Relief . . . d. Declare Section 504, 29 U.S.C. § 794, unconstitutional; e. Issue permanent injunctive relief against [the Department of Health and Human Services] enjoining them from enforcing Section 504.”; and

WHEREAS, when asked by members of the National Federation of the Blind, Plaintiffs have repeatedly directed those members to the quoted language from the status report without ever addressing the language in the actual complaint; and

WHEREAS, if Plaintiffs’ demand is granted, it will have a devastating impact on blind Americans’ rights to effective communication and reasonable accommodation in connection with government programs, services, and activities, including but not limited to education, employment, housing, healthcare, and other forms of civic life: Now, therefore,;

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri, in Convention assembled this 13th day of April, 2025, in the City of Columbia, Missouri, that this organization immediately call upon the state’s Attorney General to withdraw their name from Texas v. Kennedy because of the far-reaching and harmful effects the lawsuit could have on Section 504 and the lives of blind and other disabled Americans generally; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization call for the immediate dismissal of Texas v. Kennedy in order to protect blind people and all other Americans with disabilities by preserving the full force and effect of Section 504.

Resolution 2025-02

Calling Upon Missouri’s Congressional Delegation to Protect Blind Federal Workers from Efforts to Undermine Their Rights

WHEREAS, the federal workforce includes many blind Missourians who serve the public in various capacities, contributing their skills and talents to the efficient operation of government agencies; and

WHEREAS, federal workers, including the blind and others with disabilities, rely on longstanding legal protections such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure equal access, reasonable accommodations, and protection from discrimination in the workplace; and

WHEREAS, the second administration of President Donald J. Trump has taken actions to weaken the rights of federal workers, including efforts to erode collective bargaining, due process, and workplace protections, thereby threatening the job security and fair treatment of blind federal employees in Missouri and across the nation; and

WHEREAS, President Trump has specifically disparaged the contributions and capabilities of federal workers with disabilities in a nationally televised press conference, suggesting that disability recruiting policies of the Federal Aviation Administration may have led to the deadly collision of a commercial airliner and a military helicopter on January 29, 2025; and

WHEREAS, the administration’s efforts to undermine worker rights and President Trump’s comments about workers with disabilities risk reversing decades of progress in workplace accessibility, accommodations, and employment protections for blind federal workers, making it harder for them to fully participate in and contribute to the workforce; and

WHEREAS: the unemployment rate among the blind is still extremely high, and unfair treatment by the Trump administration threatens to make it higher as a result of weakening diversity, inclusion, and accessibility protections; and

**WHEREAS,** the laws protecting Americans with disabilities have generally been supported by politicians of both parties, and therefore lawmakers should act in a bipartisan fashion to protect and uphold the rights of blind workers: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri in Convention assembled this 13th day of April, 2025, in the City of Columbia, Missouri, that this organization call upon the Trump Administration and the members of Missouri’s congressional delegation to take immediate and decisive action to protect blind federal workers by:

1. **O**pposing any effort to roll back disability rights protections under the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and other relevant laws that ensure fair treatment in federal employment;
2. Defending collective bargaining rights and due process protections for all federal workers, including those with disabilities;
3. Opposing any effort to terminate any individuals serving their two-year trial period who were hired using the Schedule A Hiring Authority for individuals with disabilities due to the two-year trial period’s disparate impact on employees with disabilities;
4. Supporting oversight and accountability measures to prevent any further administrative or regulatory actions that would weaken workplace protections for blind federal employees; and
5. Advocating for policies that promote accessibility, inclusion, andequality ofopportunities for blind and other disabled federal workers; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that copies of this resolution be transmitted to each member of Missouri’s congressional delegation and to the White House.

**Resolution 2025-03**

**i***n Support of the Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act*

Whereas, websites and mobile applications have become essential for full participation in modern life, with 96 percent of Americans using the internet, including millions of blind and other disabled people; and

Whereas, current law fails to offer a consistent or enforceable standard for digital accessibility, leaving blind Americans to face daily barriers in accessing information and services online; and

Whereas, small businesses are unfairly held liable for inaccessible websites developed by third-party vendors, creating legal uncertainty and potential financial hardship that can stifle innovation and economic participation; and

Whereas, other countries such as Canada and members of the European Union have adopted clear and enforceable accessibility standards, while the United States has not kept pace despite its leadership in disability rights and technology innovation; and

Whereas, the Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act would provide a statutory definition of accessibility, hold developers accountable, preserve protections for small businesses, and establish technical assistance centers and regulations to support compliance: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVEDby the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri in Convention assembled this 13th day of April, 2025, in the City of Columbia, Missouri, that this organization strongly urge the United States Congress to pass the Websites and Software Applications Accessibility Act to eliminate uncertainty, enforce accessibility, support small businesses, and ensure that blind and disabled Americans have equal access to digital information and services; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we look to our Missouri delegation to lead in this effort and communicate their efforts to us in recognition of the importance full accessibility plays in our lives.

Resolution 2025-04

REGARDING THE Blind AMERICANS RETURN TO WORK ACT

WHEREAS, Title II of the Social Security Act provides that disability benefits paid to blind beneficiaries are eliminated if the beneficiary exceeds a monthly earnings limit, creating a financial penalty for working blind people known as the "earnings cliff"; and

WHEREAS, under this cliff, if a blind person earns even one dollar above the substantial gainful activity (SGA) limit—$2,700 per month in 2025—they lose all SSDI benefits; and

WHEREAS, this creates a disincentive to work, resulting in blind Americans turning down promotions, raises, or additional hours out of fear of losing their entire SSDI income; and

WHEREAS, the current trial work period and related rules are unnecessarily complicated and fail to provide a clear and consistent path back to the workforce; and

WHEREAS, the Blind Americans Return to Work Act would eliminate the earnings cliff by instituting a two-for-one gradual reduction in benefits for income earned above the SGA limit, simplifying the rules and aligning SSDI more closely with the Supplemental Security Income program: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVEDby the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri, in Convention assembled this 13th day of April, 2025, in the City of Columbia, Missouri, that we urge the United States Congress to enact H.R. 1175, the Blind Americans Return to Work Act, in order to eliminate the unjust earnings cliff that discourages blind Americans from reaching their full economic potential; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVEDthat we look to our Missouri delegation to lead in this effort and communicate their work to us in recognition of the importance employment incentives and being productive citizens plays in our lives.

Resolution 2025-05

Regarding CERTIFIED MAIL for BLIND PENSION

WHEREAS, House Bill 520 would end the practice of sending annual review forms and other material to recipients of the Missouri Blind Pension using certified mail; and

WHEREAS, HB 520 has passed the House of Representatives and is awaiting Senate action; and

WHEREAS, Similar legislation has been submitted for at least the past six years and has passed the House of Representatives each time; and

WHEREAS, passing of this legislation would save the state of Missouri thousands of dollars, lessen the workload on eligibility specialists of the Family Support Division, and reduce barriers for recipients: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri in Convention assembled in Columbia Missouri this 13? day of April, 2025, that we urge the Senate to pass the elimination of the certified mail requirement, thus saving the taxpayers this unneeded expense.

Resolution 2025-06

i*n Support of Preserving Federal Laws and Programs that Safeguard the Rights of Blind Americans*

Whereas, blind Americans rely on long-standing federal laws and programs to participate equally in education, employment, and community life; and

Whereas, laws such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibit discrimination and ensure accessibility in the public and private sectors; and

Whereas, Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act addresses employment practices of federal agencies, Section 503 prohibits discrimination by federal contractors, Section 504 ensures that programs receiving federal funding are accessible, and Section 508 requires that federal technology be accessible to the blind; and

Whereas, the ADA includes Title I on employment, Title II on public services and transportation, Title III on public accommodations and commercial facilities, and Title IV on telecommunications, all of which provide important protections for blind people; and

Whereas, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates Braille instruction and specialized education services essential to the success of blind students; and

Whereas, federal funding for programs such as vocational rehabilitation, older blind programs, and Medicaid are essential in helping blind people live independently and with dignity; and

Whereas, services such as Free Matter for the Blind and the National Library Service provide critical access to reading materials and information; and

Whereas, efforts to reduce or restructure the federal government must not come at the expense of the civil rights and essential services that blind people have fought to secure: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri in Convention assembled this 13th day of April in the City of Columbia, Missouri, that we strongly urge the United States Congress, the President of the United States, and the courts of this nation to protect and preserve the federal laws and funding programs that empower blind Americans to live, learn, and work with full participation and equality; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we place special emphasis on our Missouri delegation to exercise leadership in seeing that the intent of this resolution is carried out and that they report to us on their ongoing work and progress.

Resolution 2025-07

REGARDING NONVISUAL ACCESS TO MEDICAL DEVICES

WHEREAS, an increasing number of medical devices, including glucose, oxygen, and blood pressure monitors, CPAP machines, and in-home treatment equipment such as those used for dialysis and chemotherapy, now require interaction with digital interfaces; and

WHEREAS, these devices are frequently inaccessible to blind people, thereby compromising our health, safety, and independence; and

WHEREAS, the inaccessibility of these devices is particularly harmful given the growth in telehealth services, with 20 percent of medical visits now conducted remotely and the limited proximity many Americans—especially in rural areas—have to hospitals and pharmacies; and

WHEREAS: accessibility in medical devices is both achievable and affordable, as demonstrated by the accessibility of ATMs, accessible voting machines, and the widespread integration of gesture-based screen readers found in touch screen mobile devices on the market today; and

WHEREAS, current disability laws do not protect the rights of blind people to independently access medical devices, leaving a gap that endangers lives and perpetuates inequality; and

WHEREAS, the Medical Device Nonvisual Accessibility Act would amend the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act to require Class II and Class III medical devices with user interfaces to meet nonvisual access standards and would give the Food and Drug Administration regulatory authority to enforce these standards; and

WHEREAS, this legislation would finally provide meaningful legal protection and accountability to ensure blind Americans have equal access to critical medical devices: now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVEDthat the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri, in Convention assembled this 13th day of April, 2025, in the City of Columbia, Missouri, urge the United States Congress to enact the Medical Device Nonvisual Accessibility Act and to ensure that blind Americans are no longer left behind by the rapid evolution of digital health technologies; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVEDthat we look to our Missouri delegation to lead in this effort and communicate their work and progress to us in recognition of the importance full accessibility to home health devices plays in our lives.

Resolution 2025-08

Concerning the Preservation of Library Services for the Blind and Print Disabled through Continued Funding of the Institute of Museum and Library Services

WHEREAS, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is a federal agency that provides essential support for library systems throughout the United States, including state libraries for the blind and print-disabled; and

WHEREAS, in Missouri, Wolfner Library serves as a lifeline to thousands of blind and print-disabled residents, offering access to Braille books, audio materials, and other specialized resources needed for independent living, education, and employment; and

WHEREAS, while the reading material distributed by Wolfner Library and its counterparts comes from the Library of Congress’s National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS), the operational funding that allows these materials to be circulated and services to be delivered comes largely through IMLS support; and

WHEREAS, the proposed elimination of the IMLS through recent executive action would severely disrupt or eliminate services offered by Wolfner Library and similar institutions across the country; and

WHEREAS, the 2023 American Community Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau estimates that 8.3 million Americans—approximately 2.5 percent of the population—are blind or have low vision; and

WHEREAS, the threat to library funding will especially affect blind people living in rural areas, where state libraries for the blind may serve as their sole source of Braille, talking books, and accessible technology assistance; and

WHEREAS, even if only 1 percent of the 66 million Americans living in rural areas are blind or low-vision, more than half a million people would be placed at risk of losing access to essential library services; and

WHEREAS, the Library Services and Technology Act (20 U.S.C. § 9121) and its Grants to States program (20 U.S.C. § 9141) provide the legislative foundation for this support and must be maintained to preserve equal access to information and literacy for all Americans; and

WHEREAS, more than 124,000 libraries nationwide, including public libraries that provide internet access, homework help, research assistance, and job search support, depend in part on IMLS funding and would also suffer from its elimination: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri in Convention assembled this 13th day of April, 2025, in the City of Columbia, Missouri, that this organization strongly oppose the proposed elimination of the Institute of Museum and Library Services and call for its full funding to be maintained; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we urge the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies to preserve full funding for the Library Services and Technology Act and its Grants to States program in Fiscal Year 2025 and beyond, thereby ensuring the continued operation of Wolfner Library and other state libraries for the blind and print-disabled, and maintaining essential library access for all communities, particularly in rural America; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVEDthat we look to our Missouri delegation to lead in this effort and communicate their work and progress to us in recognition of the important role that information provided through library services has in our lives.

Resolution 2025-09

REGARDING ADDITIONAL LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES FOR BLIND AMERICANS

WHEREAS, fully autonomous vehicles, if designed with nonvisual accessibility, offer a transformative opportunity for blind Americans to gain equal access to transportation; and

WHEREAS, legislation related to these vehicles must include nondiscrimination provisions and ensure blind people can fully benefit from their operation; and

WHEREAS, the Access Technology Affordability Act, HR 1529, proposes a $2,000 refundable tax credit over three years to help blind Americans afford access technology that is otherwise cost prohibitive, while also helping to increase workforce participation and tax revenue; and

WHEREAS, the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act seeks to phase out the outdated and unjust practice of paying people with disabilities subminimum wages under Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVEDthat the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri, in Convention assembled this 13th day of April, 2025, in the City of Columbia, Missouri, call upon the United States Congress to enact legislation that guarantees nonvisual access in fully autonomous vehicles, provides a refundable tax credit for access technology through the Access Technology Affordability Act, and phases out subminimum wage through the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVEDthat we look to our Missouri delegation to lead in this effort and communicate their work to us in recognition of the important role transportation, technology, and the payment of fair wages plays in our lives.

Resolution 2025-10

Regarding HB 1308 and the SSP Program

WHEREAS, the loss of both vision and hearing creates severe communication problems between DeafBlind people and the public; and

WHEREAS, in 2016, the Missouri General Assembly passed legislation creating the DeafBlind Grant under which the Support Service Provider (SSP) Program was established; and

WHEREAS, the use of an SSP allows the DeafBlind individual to gain information and actively communicate with individuals who do not know how to communicate with a DeafBlind person to acquire critical information; and

WHEREAS, this program provides a trained SSP to accompany the DeafBlind person to allow them to interact with medical professionals, attorneys, salesclerks, elected officials, etc.; and

WHEREAS, the program has grown from benefiting around eighteen DeafBlind Missourians to currently having around eighty who have experienced a cut in services and even an interruption of services; and

WHEREAS, the current statute specifies that no more than $300,000 can be expended annually; and

WHEREAS, HB 1308, introduced by Representative Brenda Shields, removes the $300,000 restriction and makes this program subject to appropriations; and

WHEREAS, if this bill is not passed in the first Session of the One Hundred and Third General Assembly, the problem cannot be resolved until 2027 at best: Now, therefore

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri in Convention assembled in the City of Columbia, Missouri, this 13th day of April, 2025, that we call upon the House General Laws Committee to schedule a hearing for this bill; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Committee do everything possible to expedite the passage of HB 1308.

Meet This Year’s Scholarship Winners

By Robin House

Sebashton Underhill is a sophomore at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) studying computer science. He plans to go into a career specializing in AI. Sebashton was recently elected to the NFB of Missouri Association of Blind Students Board as the at-large board member. In his free time, Sebashton enjoys hanging out with friends and playing the marimba.

Isaac McBurney is a sophomore at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), studying special education. He wants to become a TVI (teacher for the visually impaired), giving back to blind students, like himself. He is currently serving his second term as vice president of the Missouri Association of Blind Students. In his free time, Isaac enjoys being outside, hanging out with friends, and occasionally kayaking down the Missouri River.

Sveta Ehlers is a blind student currently pursuing an Associate Degree inBusiness Management at Metropolitan Community College – Maple Wood. She serves as the president of both the Kansas City Chapter and the Student Division of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri. A passionate advocate and leader, Sveta is dedicated to empowering blind youth and building stronger more inclusive communities.

In addition to her work within the Federation, Sveta is a recipient of the prestigious Carl Spaatz Award—the highest honor in the Civil Air Patrol cadet program. She served as Cadet Commander for a summer encampment where she led over 150 cadets in leadership development and aerospace education.

Sveta has spoken at six major conferences, including the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri Convention, the Missouri Assistive Technology Conference, and the American Council of the Blind South Carolina Student Division. Her presentations focus on overcoming adversity, self-advocacy, and accessibility, with a mission to inspire others to see beyond their limitations and strive for their goals.

Remembering Tom Stevens: A Life of Service and Dedication

A Tribute to a Remarkable Leader and Advocate

By Eugene Coulter and Gary Wunder

Tom Stevens, a visionary leader and staunch advocate, passed away on January 18 at the age of 92, leaving behind his loving wife, Helen, and a legacy of extraordinary contributions to the NFB of Missouri spanning 50 years. The profound impact he had on countless lives cannot be measured.

As we honor Tom Stevens, we also extend our deepest sympathies to his wife, Helen, who stood by his side through all his endeavors. Together, their shared values and unwavering support created a partnership that enriched the lives of the members of the NFB of Missouri. Tom's legacy will continue to inspire future leaders and advocates, ensuring that his contributions will resonate for generations to come.

Gary Wunder brought Tom to his first meeting. At that meeting or the one just

after, he was elected as our Columbia Chapter president. Tom was accustomed to being a part of leadership, having been a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army. He was, however, surprised to be elected, but he learned a lot about the NFB quickly and was not at all passive. He was 20 years older than the college students that made up the bulk of the chapter membership, but fit right in leading the car washes, candy sales, walking in various parades and every other activity of the chapter.

He led by example and set a pace that would challenge any of us. He soon came to be a part of the State Board of Directors. At his first board meeting he heard the body talk about closing down its longtime newsletter, the Blind Missourian; he volunteered to edit it. When he was told the problem wasn't just the editing but that there was no funding, he said, "Well, if I'm going to have something to edit, I guess I'll just have to fund it too.” This was one of the many out-of-pocket sacrifices he made because the affiliate simply had little in the way of money to address our tremendous desire to be active and to have programs.

Tom became the State President in 1977 and served one term which lasted until 1979. During his tenure, Missouri saw the passage of the Model White Cane Law, the Fraudulent Portrayal of Blindness Act, and a regulation from Missouri's insurance commissioner making it illegal to charge people more for insurance based on blindness alone. When we sometimes decry the length of time to get a bill passed, we should keep in mind that our White Cane Bill passed on its eighth introduction.

For several years Tom was the director of what is now called Rehabilitation Services for the Blind. To our knowledge he was the first blind person ever to head the agency. During his tenure, the employment of blind people in the agency went up, and those who acted as though they were royalty and blind people subservient subjects were removed. This was no small accomplishment in state government.

After his service at the Bureau, Tom was very involved in what we used to call the Associates Program to raise funds for our national treasury. This meant asking for donations and making people associate members of our NFB. It also meant creating a newsletter called The Associate Raiser to encourage recruitment. The newsletter was available in print and on tape. Again, it was financed by Tom and was typed and put on tape by his incredible wife and Federationist, Helen. One of the things that made Tom very sad was that he concluded blind people were reluctant to ask others who were not blind to make donations. These issues remain with us today.

Tom has been active in almost everything we have done. He has actively supported the work we have pursued in our state capitol and in Washington, DC. He did this long before we could afford to send anyone to what we then called the March on Jefferson City and the March on Washington. The harsh truth was that there was not enough funding in our treasury to carry on programs unless people who were elected to positions were willing to make significant financial contributions. Today, calling across the state or country is part of a flat monthly bill, but when Tom was in elective office, calling long distance was expensive. There was no email, so sharing an important document meant typing it, taking it to a store that made copies, collating, folding, and putting the document into an envelope which then needed to be addressed, stamped, and often delivered to a postal box. Since Tom believed that lack of communication too often translated into the perception that we were doing nothing, communicate he did, again at significant cost in time and his and Helen’s own money.

No tribute to Tom would be complete without acknowledging the significant work of his wife Helen. She drove countless hours, acted not only as Tom’s reader but read many other things on tape that Tom sent to us. His financial sacrifices were also her sacrifices, and to both we offer our undying gratitude. Rest in peace, Tom Stevens, a champion of service, a beacon of leadership, and an enduring source of inspiration.

Tom Stevens Accomplishments and Awards

President 1977-1979

First Vice President 1975-1977 and 1995-2003

Second Vice President 1993-1995 and 2003-2011

Blind Missourian Editor 1975-1983 and 1985-1987

Jernigan Award 1980

Affiliate Award 1988

Rittgers Award shared with Helen 1992

Tom Stevens

By Richard (Dick) Morris

I’m sure I’m not the only person who can say this, but I am in the Federation because of Tom Stevens. True, it was a member of the Springfield chapter who kept calling me…and calling me…and calling me…until I finally gave in and came to a chapter meeting, but it was Tom who convinced me to return.

It wasn’t necessarily a typical meeting for the Springfield chapter that Friday evening in April, 1978. They were getting ready to host their first state convention in two weeks or so, and the meeting was a bit tense. The big question was money (of course) and much of the evening was spent talking about where to get it, and once gotten, how it was going to be spent. I was sitting in the back and, to be honest, my eyes were glazing over; I was thinking, “OK, I’ve given you your chance, and I won’t be back.” That is exactly what would have happened, too, if the state president—Tom Stevens—had not been at that meeting. He sat in the back with me, and we discussed the whys and wherefores of the NFB and the whys and wherefores of blindness itself. I was expecting this to be another poor-me-I’m-blind group. It wasn’t. Tom’s articulation of the NFB philosophy struck a responsive chord in me, and by the time he had finished, I was convinced. I joined that night. Anything I have accomplished in the NFB I owe to that conversation with Tom Stevens.

Another incident stands out as well. The old-timers in the Missouri affiliate will remember when Dianna and I adopted Christopher. He had been severely abused as a baby, and was not expected to live very long. He actually lived three months past his sixth birthday, but the time finally came when we lost him. Many Federationists rallied around us at that time, but it was the article Tom wrote for the *Blind Missourian* that, more than anything, helped us cope with our loss. A long time has passed since I last read it, but I will not forget it.

I wrote the above in 2015, and now in 2025 Tom is gone. I reiterate: I owe everything I ever accomplished in the NFB to his influence on me in that April 1978 meeting. I’ll extend that: most of us in the Missouri affiliate, if not all, owe a great deal to Tom, and if I may extend that even more, the National Federation of the Blind as a whole has been a better organization because of the influence of Tom Stevens.

Tom, “thank you” probably doesn’t, and can’t fully express our emotions and gratitude, but thank you anyway.

# Why I am a Federationist

By Randy Carmack

From the Editor: Randy Carmack is an active Federation leader in our Missouri State Affiliate. He is a board member, attends every meeting, runs the sound system, chairs and works on committees, and takes our work seriously. Here is what he said during our Missouri Convention when asked about the source and depth of his commitment:

In a 1970 speech, Dr. Kenneth Jernigan said: "We do not object to being known as blind, for that is what we are. What we protest is the fact that we are not also known as people, for we are that too."

I had my first experience with the Federation in 1985. I even attended the NFB of Missouri State Convention at the Jefferson City Ramada Inn that year. I was exposed and fully endorsed the philosophy, but there were no at-large or local chapters in my entire part of the state, so I never did join the Federation.

Now fast forward eighteen years. I'm dating myself. I guess Jenny and I moved to St. Louis in 2003, and the next year we both joined the Lewis and Clark chapter of the National Federation of the Blind. Over the next several years, I did what many of us do. I fully endorsed the philosophy of the Federation. I paid my chapter dues every year. I attended probably a little over half of the scheduled chapter meetings, and I had attended a couple of state conventions. Outside of these things, I didn’t do much else for the Federation. I was able to fully justify my lack of involvement with, “Hey, I have a full-time job, and I work a lot of Saturdays.” After the job had ended, I was just stuck in the same pattern of not getting involved, thinking, “What can I, a single person do? Besides, none of these issues really affect me.”

That all changed in 2010. The state of Missouri did something that I was sure they could not legally do. Missouri Child Protective Services went into a hospital and took a newborn baby from its mother and father simply because they were both blind. Let me repeat: Missouri Child Protection Services went into a hospital and took a newborn baby from its mother and father simply because the parents were blind. To make matters even worse, there was no law preventing the state from doing this. I was livid, still am! If the state of Missouri could do this to these parents, they could do it to you or me. Think on that a minute. I hope it makes you as mad as it made me. After the incident, I vowed I would do whatever it took to prevent such an injustice from happening to anyone ever again. The NFB rallied around the family of baby McKayla. Although it took two months, the NFB caused so much bad publicity and an outcry against Missouri Child Protective Services that they ended up giving baby Mikaela back to her parents.

After this incident, I began attending most chapter and state board meetings. I began to volunteer wherever my skills and ability could be best put to use in serving the Federation. I even attended my first ever Jefferson City legislative seminar. The following spring, in 2011, we were successful in making Missouri the first state in the entire union with a right-to-parent law on the books. As great as that is, our work is far from done. Fourteen years later, there are only fifteen states with similar laws on the books, which means that in thirty-five U.S. states, a child may still be legally taken from blind parents solely because of their blindness.

I think this is deplorable and unacceptable, and I vow to continue to fight for all blind parents everywhere. You ask why I am a Federationist, I am a Federationist to protect the rights of all blind people everywhere.

I wish to close with another quotation from that same 1970 speech that Dr. Jernigan gave: "The goal is just as clear; the need and the time are ours. I put the question to you again, with all that it implies in the way of sacrifice, dedication, and hard work: Will you come forward and join us on the barricade?" Thank you.

Affiliate Recognitions 2024-2025

By Eugene Coulter

Below is the list of Affiliate recognitions for 2024 and 2025. One note of particular interest, when Diane Harris received the tenBroek Award this year at the same time that her husband Mark Harris also received the Jernigan Awar, it marked only the second time in history that a married couple received these prestigious awards in the same year. The only other time was in 1982 when Lawson and Billie Weaver won the awards.

2024 in Kansas City at Hilton Airport Hotel

NFB Affiliate Award- State Representative Brenda Shields

Jernigan Award – Dan Keller

Scholarships - Margot Epstein, Sebashton Underhill, Nancy Aguilera

Roy Zuvers Travelling Trophy – Kansas City

Show Me Royal Ambassadors – Kansas City

2025 in Columbia at Stoney Creek Inn

Gary L. Wunder Award- Becky Boyer

Jernigan Award–Mark Harris

tenBroek Award-Diane Harris

Employer of the Year – Tara Martin Kreative Kids Preschool in Columbia

Scholarships - Sveta Ehlers, Isaac McBurney, Sebashton Underhill

Show Me Royal Ambassadors – Columbia

Roy Zuvers Travelling Trophy – Kansas City

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