Minutes: NFBNJ State Affiliate Caucus

NFB 2021 National Convention

Friday, July 9, 2021

11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

**1. Roll Call:** There were approximately 70 participants at the NFBNJ State Caucus Meeting. Officers and special guests in attendance included:

Officers:

Linda Melendez, President

Joe Ruffalo, 1st Vice President

Mary Jo Partyka, 2nd Vice President

Ellen Sullivan, Secretary

Annemarie Cooke, Treasurer

Board Members:

Linda DeBerardinis

Jane Degenshein

Zoraida Krell

Lia Stone

Special Guests: Dr. Bernice Davis, Executive Director, NJ CBVI and Pamela Gaston, Executive Assistant, NJ CBVI

**2. Welcome to all and opening remarks from President Melendez:**

President Melendez welcomed all to the NFBNJ State Caucus and thanked everyone for being here and at our National Convention that represents the supreme authority of our organization.

**3. Review of the procedure with the Zoom platform: Linda Melendez**

All members (with the exception of Board Members and speakers) were muted and some brief Zoom instructions were provided on how to raise your hand and unmute yourself to be called upon.

**4. Welcome CBVI Staff:**

President Melendez introduced Dr. Bernice Davis, Executive Director of NJCBVI. Dr. Davis talked about the virtual platform they have been living in due to the pandemic and all the services that continued to be provided to clients. In May 2021, the Commission began providing in-person services and have been able to assist people who want in-person engagement. These services continue to come on board and the JKTC has been upgrading its facility both inside and outside and staff and clients are looking forward to resuming in-person training. Dr. Davis said she is very proud of the CBVI Staff for their dedication and is happy to be partners with our consumers who have worked so collaboratively together. She is grateful for the partnership she continues to have with the NFBNJ under the new leadership of Linda Melendez and the creative programs they have worked on i.e., Townhall Meetings, Senior and DeafBlind Resource Fair.

President Melendez thanked Dr. Davis, the CBVI Staff and special thanks to Pamela Gaston for joining us at the National Convention and at the NFBNJ State Caucus Meeting.

**5. Welcoming first time convention attendees: Linda Melendez**

President Melendez welcomed first time convention attendees with a special shout out to Treasa Marie Praino who not only attended her first National Convention she was also a National Scholarship Finalist.

**6. Overview of the NFB National Scholarship application process: Evangelia Stone**

Lia shared how it is an honor for her to participate with President Melendez on the State Scholarship Committee and to meet so many talented NFB Leaders of Tomorrow!. She said this is an ongoing process and the next scholarship round opens November 1, 2021 and closes on March 31, 2022. Winners receive between $3,000 to $12,000 in scholarship money as well as a lot of “extras”. She briefly described the process including the interview. Lia commended this years’ winners Kaleigh Brendle and Treasa Marie Praino and encouraged all students to continue to apply. Selection is difficult because there is so much talent out there and if you did not win this year you may win in the coming year.

**7. Welcome NFB National Scholarship winners:** **Kaleigh Brendle and Treasa Marie Praino**

President Melendez congratulated our New Jersey National Scholarship finalist and said there were 30 finalists, and we are so proud of our two from New Jersey! She asked the scholarship winners to speak.

Kaleigh Brendle shouted out to the Student Division and said she is so proud to be the Secretary and Treasurer for NJ Association of Blind Students. She said she is so grateful to be a National Scholarship Finalist and has been “loving” the National Convention and Zooming in and out of a broad variety of meetings. Kaleigh aspires to be a Civil Rights Attorney and will be attending Villa Nova University in the Fall.

Treasa Marie Praino shared that she is working on her Ph.D. at Syracuse University and has had the opportunity (before the pandemic) to spend time in South Africa and advise the government, human rights commissions and the United Nations of accommodations that are needed for the blind and disabled populations. She will continue her studies addressing the intersectionality of persons with disability and the impact of poverty and domestic violence. She thanked Lia for chairing the NFBNJ Scholarship Committee.

**8. Legislation: Linda Melendez and Ryan Stevens**

**a. NFB National Resolutions: Ryan Stevens**

There are 16 National Resolutions to be voted on this Saturday, and the NFBNJ will select from these resolutions those to be pursued at the state level. The Resolution Committee will present these at our State Convention.

President Melendez said that there is a special resolution from the National Board calling for a “Safe Fund” to be established to help provide counseling and mental health services for victims of sexual abuse within the NFB. President Melendez has sent out a link to the National Resolutions in her daily convention updates as well as the telephone number for voting. All people who registered for the convention by May 31 and were dues paying members of the NFB or NFBNJ by June 10 as well as completing the voting registration form are eligible to vote.

First Vice President, Joe Ruffalo emphasized the importance of our votes and the need to have our voices heard.

**b. Virtual Washington Seminar and issues: Ryan Stevens**

Ryan shared about our very successful 2021 Washington Seminar held virtually this year. He described the process of breaking into six geographical teams with a leader and four other team members to address the issues to our House of Representative Members and the strategy to address issues to our Senators. He described the four legislative initiatives:

1. **The Access Technology Affordability Act (ATAA) (HR431) (S212):** Makes access technology more affordable so that blind Americans can procure these items for themselves. It establishes a refundable tax credit for blind Americans in the amount of $2,000 to be used over a three-year period to offset the cost of access technology.

Ryan was pleased to let us know that as of “today” we have eight out of 12 of our House Representatives who have signed on as co**-**sponsors. This is our highest success rate to date! President Melendez commented that more “New Jersey” strong advocacy will come after the convention!

1. **The Medical Device Nonvisual Accessibility Act:** Calls on the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to promulgate nonvisual accessibility standards for home-use medical devices, and to consult with stakeholders with disabilities and manufacturers. It also requires manufacturers to make their devices non-visually accessible within three years after passage of the act.
2. **The Twenty-First Century Mobile App and Website Accessibility Act:** Directs the US Access Board to promulgate access regulations regarding mobile apps and websites that will harmonize with Section 508 accessibility standards. It also empowers the US Department of Justice to investigate the accessibility of mobile apps and websites.
3. **The Americans with Disabilities Voting Rights Act:**

This Act has been merged with the For the People and the John Lewis Voting Rights Acts to ensure that in-person voting is accessible to all voters, in a manner that provides for access and participation (including privacy and independence). The NFB is also supporting electronic voting for the blind and print disabled to ensure equal access in the voting process.

Ryan said that an NFBNJ Legislative Committee has been established and has a liaison from each chapter. Ryan will be sharing information with the liaisons so they can share with the chapter members. We make friends within our chapter and when a “friend” asks you to make a call to support an initiative you may be more inclined to do so.

**c. New Jersey Parental Rights Bill: Linda Melendez**

President Melendez said this bill dropped in the state legislature and in June she was contacted by Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez Legislative Assistant, Juan Carlos and asked to testify on the floor. She was given “one day” advanced notice. Linda spoke from her heart and the bill passed unanimously in the Judiciary Committee and will now move into the Assembly for final approval. She also said, ARC (Adult Rehabilitation Community) is behind the bill, and she is also hoping to get the NJ DeafBlind Community to stand with us to support the bill. More to come! Ryan Stevens said 18 states have passed this bill and we intend to join them! Joe Ruffalo thanked Linda and Ryan for the advocacy leadership and said we won’t stop till the bill passes.

**9. Donations to National : Annemarie Cooke**

The NFBNJ made a total donation of $1750 to National to support the various funds and DOOR Prizes. Ellen Sullivan gave a shout out of thanks to Rick Fox and the Northern Chapter for their donation of $500 in addition to the above amount.

**a. BELL Academy:** Linda Melendez said that we received a $1500 grant from the Chester Lions Club and a $100 donation from the At Large Chapter and all $1600 was donated to National to support the BELL Academy. Linda shared a special thanks from President Riccobono for this generous contribution from the NFBNJ membership.

**b. Gifts to various NFB National Funds:**

The NFBNJ Board Approved the following donations from the Affiliate:

Door prizes:                        $250

JTB (Jacobus tenBroek ): $250

SUN:                                  $250

White cane:                        $500

Jernigan:                            $500

Total:                                  $1750

**c. Give $20 Campaign:** This campaign will be open until 2:00 p.m. on Saturday and you may choose the fund you want to donate to. Monies raised will go to support first timers at the National Convention and the winner will receive two round trip air tickets to the 2022 National Convention in New Orleans, hotel accommodations, registration, and banquet tickets for two and $1000 spending money. Also, you may opt to collect $2000 cash instead. We are all winners here!

**10. PAC  Plan: Mac Biggers**

Mac Biggers said that National needs money to support the myriad of programs it has including legal and legislative support, scholarships, free white canes to the blind and training future leaders of our organization. The PAC Plan (Pre-authorized Contribution) is a way for each of us to help here. For as little as $5/month (taken from your bank account, credit, or debit card) you can participate. Mac said you may sign up by calling 877 NFB 2PAC or online at [www.nfb.org/pac](http://www.nfb.org/pac) . At last count the NFBNJ was #17 in PAC contributions, and we want to move up to the ranks of the top 10 affiliates.

**11. NFBNJ State Convention Update: Linda Melendez**

President Melendez shared that the Board approved the State Convention theme for our 45th State Convention: “We are More Than the Sum of One”. Our convention will be virtual again this year from November 10 through 13 and will have a similar format as last year with regard to a Tech Seminar, Division Meetings, Resolutions, Business Meeting, Opening Ceremony, General Sessions and Banquet. Some format changes will be made, based on feedback Linda received from the 2020 State Convention and this will involve our exhibitors. Linda will start assigning committees in August so please do let her know if you want to participate here. We need member participation to be successful.

Joe Ruffalo commented that we will have our usual “Rookie Round-up” and meeting with our National Rep before the convention. Jane Degenshein said the Tech Sect will be jammed packed with information.

**12. Town Hall Meetings, Resource Fairs and Technology Training Seminars: Linda Melendez and Jane Degenshein**

President Melendez said that in January, Ryan Stevens led a Town Hall Meeting to discuss the Washington Seminar. In June we had a Senior and DeafBlind Resource Fair that had 83 registrants and over 70 attendees. We partnered with CBVI and the NFB Senior Division for this very successful virtual event.

On June 26, the Technology Division held a “Tech Workshop” with close to 90 attendees. Folks learned about Zoom, iOS Devices, accessibility Apps, podcasts, websites, and other valuable resources. Jane Degenshein, President of the NFBNJ Technology Division thanked the wonderful Tech Team who exceeded all expectations! Tony Santiago, Vice President of the Technology Division further commented on the great teamwork and our plans to have round two at our State Convention.

President Melendez gave a shout out of thanks to Brian Mackey for all his work and dedication in preparing the online registration forms for the events.

**13. Membership: Linda Melendez**

**a. Discuss initiatives of the Membership Committee**

President Melendez said that Mary Fernandez is co-chairing this committee and another co-chair will be appointed in the near future. The Committee is looking to reach out to our partners and encourage them to join the NFBNJ.

**b. Discuss the Membership Form and PayPal initiatives**

President Melendez talked about our online Membership Form to help keep membership information updated for the National Connection Database and enable members to have another option for paying dues i.e., PayPal (including credit and debit cards). These forms and PayPal have been developed for the Senior Division, the Sports and Rec Division, the Student Division, the Technology Division, and the At Large Chapter. Other chapters will come on board in August through November so that this is available to all members by the time of our State Convention. Another shout out of thanks to our Webmaster Brian Mackey for all his hard work and dedication to make this happen.

**c. Discuss Membership Rosters (Excel) being available in DropBox and accessible to NFBNJ Leadership (Board Members and Chapter/Division Presidents)**

President Melendez shared about putting the Membership Rosters (Excel) into the DropBox for access by NFBNJ leadership (Board Members and Chapter and Division Presidents). Implementing this technology will make our affiliate more productive as we reach out to our membership. Linda commented that if anyone has any concerns about their membership information and its security please reach out to her at [president@nfbnj.org](mailto:president@nfbnj.org) or by calling her at 732 421 7063.

President Melendez asked Ellen Sullivan to talk briefly about the Boscov’s Friends Helping Friends Fund Raiser the Affiliate will participate in. Ellen said this will be our fourth year participating here and it has helped chapters and divisions fund raise and also raised money for the Washington Seminar as 20% of the revenues raised are donated to support this critical initiative. This year’s program will be in-person vs. virtual (as in 2020) so we expect to have another great success. Meetings to address this fund raiser will be held after convention. The NFBNJ hopes to register at all eight Boscov’s locations in New Jersey (we have completed four to date!).

**14. BELL Academy Updates: Mary Jo Partyka**

Mary Jo shared that this year BELL is divided into beginning, intermediate and advanced sessions. There are three sessions. The June session is complete, and the next session will begin July 19 and the application process is closed for this session. New Jersey has five students enrolled in the July session. National sent students a “Big Box” of Braille materials relevant to their Braille reading level. There are two sessions a day (11 am and 6 pm ET) for two weeks and the children seem to be enjoying themselves. Next year we hope to return to an “in person” BELL Academy. The last session begins on August 9 and enrollment is open until July 9. Ellen Sullivan said the NFBNJ BELL Team had a great “Meet the Parents Meeting” prior to the first session and is planning to do this again for the next two sessions. Additionally, President Melendez and Mary Jo are assigning “local” mentors to the students so that they can develop a relationship with the NFBNJ and accompany their mentor to local chapter meetings and other activities. Linda said she is speaking to chapter presidents to identify people who will make good mentors. President Melendez also said that Sarah Scapardine an NFB Teacher of Tomorrow is participating with the NFBNJ BELL Team.

Carol Castellano, Founder, Parents of Blind Children, NFBNJ commented that one of our National Organization of Parents of Blind Children (NOPBC) Board Members is a parent whose child participated in the NFBNJ BELL Academy.

**15. NFBNJ Plans for October “Meet the Blind Month”: Linda Melendez**

President Melendez reminded us that October 15 is Louis Braille Day and October is Blindness Awareness Month. She asked Chapter Presidents to reach out to members and get ideas on what they would like to do to bring awareness of the blind community and all the things we do.

Linda said at the Affiliate level she would like to plan something to highlight Blind Veterans. Possibly a virtual information fair. She is hoping that at some point we will start a Blind Veterans Committee.

**16. NFBNJ Technology Initiatives: Tony Santiago and Linda Melendez**

Linda welcomed Tony Santiago as our Affiliate Technology Advisor who will be heading DropBox Training and addressing the affiliate’s technology needs, be a resource and provide continuous training for new technology initiatives. Tony said we need to become more engaged in technology especially now when so many of us use it for our work and as a key means of engagement. He expects to continue to have lots of information sharing and exchange.

**17. Round the Room with several comments highlighting the National Convention experiences: All**

Ilire Goca shared that she is part of the NFB Student Division and found the student track so interesting with so many great topics.

Joe Ruffalo said every year he attends convention and learns something new about the organization and himself. He also thanked everyone for their thoughts and prayers while he was going through a very long stretch of health issues. He is doing great now.

Kaleigh Brendle shared that this year she is fully emersed in the convention activities and enjoying them immensely.

Laura Ramos who is blind and has other disabilities is very happy that technology was available to enable her to participate. She also commented that she has a 20 minute meeting scheduled with the NFB Legal Team.

Tony Santiago said he is so proud of what we do for the youth and congratulated our two NJ Scholarship Finalists.

Monique Coleman, Educator, said this was her first National Convention and shared that she was involved with the NFBNJ in the 2020 BELL Academy and also, as head of the Braille Challenge and it is all about partnership and collaboration. (Monique will speak at Friday evenings General Session).

Linda DeBerardinis said she is thoroughly enjoying the many, many meetings she has attended and the special tours the Maryland Affiliate staged.

Pamela Gaston thanked President Melendez for inviting her to our state caucus “you know how I feel about the NFB”. She said the virtual workshops are wonderful however she still remembers the Dallas convention when Rick Fox started playing Motown on the piano in the lobby and EVERYONE engaged in singing!

**18. Adjournment:** Chris Franz motioned to adjourn the meeting, and this was seconded by Andy Smith. The meeting was adjourned by President Melendez at 12:56 p.m.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Ellen Sullivan, Affiliate Secretary and reviewed by Linda Melendez, President, NFBNJ