**THE FREEDOM BELL**

*by Joanne Wilson*

"Let freedom ring" is a theme that runs through American Democracy from the founding of the republic to the present day. It has meant many things to many people, but to the staff and students at the Louisiana Center for the Blind it means the chance for a full life the rights (but also the responsibilities) of first-class citizenship. It means the chance for a job, a home, and the opportunity to give as well as take.

The founder of the Louisiana Center for the Blind is Joanne Wilson. In the mid 1960s she was a student of mine, struggling with the problems of how to function as a blind person. She went on to become a successful elementary school teacher and a wife and mother. Today she is running a center to train the oncoming generation of the blind. She learned; she lived what she learned; and today she is giving to others, passing on not only her knowledge but also her beliefs and dreams. Here is what she said at a recent meeting of the National Federation of the Blind.

The Louisiana Center for the Blind gives to each of its students at their graduation party a plaque, and on the bottom of that plaque it says, "Together We Are Changing What it Means to be Blind." All of our students know that that "together" means the National Federation of the Blind. It means what has been done since 1940. It means the beliefs, the goals, and the dreams of all of us. They know when they are in the Center, that it's not just the staff, and it's not just the other students or the former student or the Louisiana chapter. They know that it is the entire National Federation of the Blind. They know that what they accomplish is in our hopes, our beliefs, and our dreams. When they leave the Louisiana Center for the Blind, they know that there is a whole structure behind them in the form of the National Federation of the Blind. And most importantly, they know that they must give back to that structure. They must give back to the National Federation of the Blind and pass on the dreams and the beliefs and the opportunities that they have received at the Louisiana Center for the Blind.

The Louisiana Center for the Blind was started on October 1, 1985. We now own our own classroom building and our own apartment complex, which the students live in. We have students now coming to us not only from Louisiana but from seven other states.

We teach cane travel, typing, Braille, home economics the usual courses that are taught in rehabilitation centers. But beyond all that, we teach genuine belief and hope and high expectations and confidence to our students. We teach them that they truly can change what it means to be blind.

One of the traditions that we have at the Louisiana Center for the Blind is our freedom bell. We have a big old school bell (a hand-rung school bell) that sits up in our Braille room. Throughout our short history, whenever a student calls us with some success or some good news, when something very important happens that affects all of us as blind people, we ring the freedom bell. In the past few months we have rung the bell for George, who called up and said, "I got my first check today from the naval base." We rang the bell when Maria said, "I'm twenty-two years old, but this is the first time I went out and bought a dress for myself."

We rang the bell when John, our young lawyer, came running in. He had graduated from the program: "I haven't called my parents yet. I haven't told my girlfriend yet. I am telling you first. I just got a job as a lawyer."

We rang the bell after two trips down to the state legislature to work on the Braille law. We rang the bell when we found that the Braille law indeed got passed. We rang the bell for Lillian, who received her high school graduation equivalency diploma, and for the many other students who received their diplomas. We rang the bell when Nancy and John, two of our former students, got married. We rang the bell when Lina and Jimmy had their first baby. We rang the bell for our first play on opening night. We rang our bell when the first crop came in from our garden, when we had our first produce as blind people from our very own garden. We rang the bell when all of our nervous and scared students got back from Mardi Gras, an event that they had been dreading for weeks. They got through the crowds. They got through the mobs and proved to themselves inside that they could be successful, capable individuals.

We rang the bell when Maria was able to cross Bonner Street, a street which she was scared to death to cross with a cane. We ring the bell when our college students call in and say, "Hey, I passed a course, and I got a 3.0 average this semester."

We rang the bell when Patty passed her bar exam. She is now working as a public defender in Shreveport. We rang the bell when Barry began managing three restaurants in Shreveport, when A.J. got his vending stand, when Joie got his factory job working for Boeing Aircraft, when Connie got a job as a nurse, and when Yvonda successfully finished business school.

We rang the bell when our students successfully prepared and served a meal for forty. We are about ready to ring it again. One of our students is ready to go back to being an elementary school teacher and another back to being a scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratories in New Mexico. We have another student, who is about ready to graduate and go into child care.

We ring the bell when our students call up and say, "Hey, I was elected president of our local chapter, or vice president," or "I just joined my local chapter." We rang the bell when Zach and Sheena said, "We got Pennsylvania and New Jersey to send us to you. We want good rehabilitation training." We rang the bell when Chris lit her first fire on a camping trip.

These are all times when we rang the freedom bell, but the real truth is what happens to our students. Here, in their own words, is what a few of them have to say.

Zach Shore: My first day at the Center I went into cooking class, and I asked my instructor, "What should I make today?" She said, "You are going to bake Andrea's birthday cake today." I thought she was insane. I'd never done that before, but she said, "You can do it." It really turned out to be pretty good.

When I got to my cane travel class on my second day, my instructor said, "Zach, I'm sending you out on a route today." He had me on the street on the second day, and a wave of panic came over me. This teacher is obviously a raving lunatic. I didn't think I could do it, but I did. I came back safely, and my travel is getting better. The staff is very good. They really care about us. They really push us to do what we don't think we can do, and we find that we really can.

Tom Ley: I'm currently a senior at Louisiana Tech, majoring in mathematics and physics education. Before attending the Center I had limited myself, simply because I didn't have confidence in myself as a blind person if it involved going into an unfamiliar situation or doing unfamiliar things. After being there for only a month and a half, I could feel the limiting bonds I had placed upon myself melting away, and my horizons expanding about me. That's a gift I can never repay except by working as hard as I can for the Federation and its goals.

Roland Allen: I completed my training at the Center about a year ago. When I left, I felt that I gained several important things. But the most important thing that I got from the Center was the fact that I have accepted my blindness. When I first went to the Center, I had planned on going to college, and I was real scared to go. I knew that I wouldn't make it with the skills I had. After I left the Center, I felt confident that I could get in there and do what I wanted to.

Cheryl Domingue: I, too, like Zach, when I first arrived at the Center, thought that not only was the cooking instructor insane, but that they all were insane having me do the things they wanted me to do. The thing I thought was more horrifying than anything else was having a blind travel instructor. I thought that was really crazy. But after a few days of being there, and after seeing what all of the other students who had been there for some time had done with themselves, and after I saw how well my blind instructors were doing, I figured if they could all do it, so could I. I didn't have any confidence in myself at all when I came to the Center but now have all the confidence in the world in myself. I am now a college student. I completed my first semester at the Nickel State University with a 3.0 average. Without the support of my family and all the friends I have made in the National Federation of the Blind, and especially my two children (Sheila and Shawn) who are here with me, I could not have made it.

So there you have it. Let the freedom bell ring!