



V I G I L A N T

THE BLIND AT WORK Tracy Soforenko uses alternative techniques to manage technology projects for a government agency. PAGE 2	MEMBER SPOTLIGHT Our protest in front of Amazon's headquarters showcased the need for accessible e-books. PAGE 5	UPCOMING EVENTS Make plans to attend the National Convention this July, where we will set the policies for the Federation. PAGE 4
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THIRD SEVILLE ALLEN AWARD PRESENTED AT 2012 CONVENTION

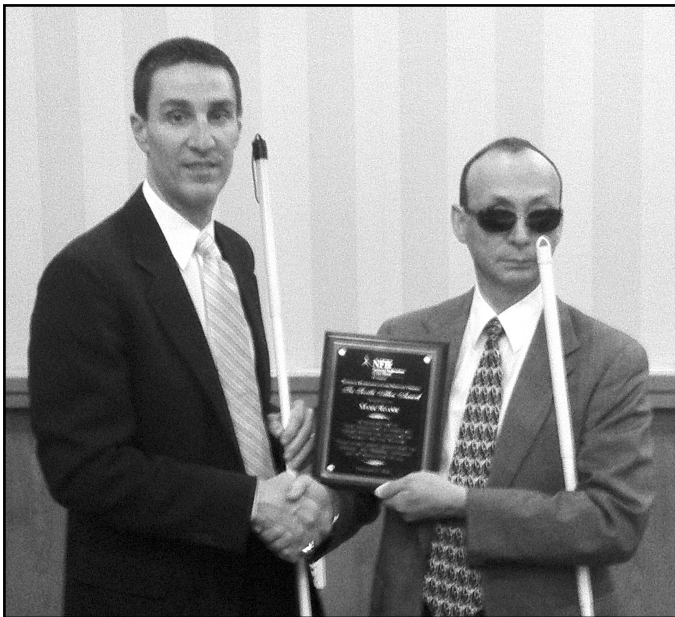
President Fredric Schroeder made the following presentation at the conclusion of our annual banquet on November 3, 2012 in Richmond.

Many of you had the great honor and privilege of knowing Seville Allen. Seville was one of those rare individuals who gave fully of herself to help others gain the skills and confidence to live active, productive lives. Seville knew that the lack of opportunities

blind people face stems from society's low expectations and are not the inevitable consequence of blindness. She knew that by coming together and by working together we could change our collective destiny. Seville has been gone for two and a half years, but her example and inspiration live on.

This year, it is my pleasure to present the third Seville Allen Award to an individual who, like Seville, has given all

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Mark Roane accepts the 2012 Seville Allen Award.

I'M RUBBER, YOU'RE GLUE. WHATEVER YOU SAY BOUNCES OFF ME, AND STICKS TO YOU!

By: Tracy Soforenko

EDITOR'S NOTE: Tracy Soforenko serves as President of the Potomac Chapter, which reaches the greater Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church areas. He is also a Technology Project Manager for the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation, an independent government agency responsible for ensuring that employees will receive their pension money even if their employers go bankrupt. The following is excerpted from a speech delivered at our recent state convention on November 3, 2012 in Richmond.

A childhood phrase goes like this: I'm rubber, you're glue. Everything that you say bounces off me and sticks to you.

But who's the glue? What things make activities happen when an organization is trying to get something done? Someone needs to bring the team together and make that happen. The project manager—my role—is the glue.

Project managers around the country are the ones who make things work. The pyramids in Giza would not have happened without a project manager, the Apollo missions would not have happened without a project manager, the iPhone would not exist without a project manager. And so I'm going to talk with you today about five things: I'm going to talk with you about what a project manager does, how I became a project manager, how this Federation taught me how to do my job as a blind person, the techniques that I use as a blind project manager and how you could learn some of these techniques and tools by being involved in your chapter in the work that we do in our great Federation.

ACCOUNTABILITY, REFEREEING, AND COMMUNICATION

A project manager's core job is to break down someone's dream into steps to make that idea into a reality. So, accountability is simply figuring out what are all the steps, who needs to do each component, how well are they progressing, how much it will cost, what time it's going to take, and did they get it

done on time? Technically, I have nobody who works for me. But, in reality, everybody works for me. I have a set of 25 contractors at the moment who all work for somebody on their side, and I have people throughout my organization responsible for doing this. The goal is to make sure everybody knows what needs to be done, and I hold them accountable for holding up their end of the bargain.

I'm also a referee, because the federal government does not have employees building the websites, tools and technology. All of that work is done with outside parties. There are people who are the chief buyers in the federal government—now for those of you at the auction table, it's not me and it's not my wife, who is the chief buyer at my house—called contracting officers. These people know all the rules about government buying, and they have people who serve as their right-hand men on-the-ground managing the project. I am one of those people.

It's easier to understand how project managers serve as referees if you envision us as preschool teachers. When a student demands another cookie at snack time, the teacher has to stand there and say, "Have you had enough cookies?" And when another student argues, "He can't have any more cookies. He's not eating them. He's building towers with them!" The project manager must say, "You promised you were going to provide cookies to children."

Generally, I work with large teams where communication is key. I'm really good at correcting the rumors, holding people accountable, communicating with management, and making sure that the people above don't mess up the work of the people actually doing the work. All of these things are the role of communication.

Accountability, refereeing and communicating are key to doing my job.

AN INDIRECT PATH TO LEADERSHIP

I started out as an analyst, because I was a good writer, I loved talking to people (not a surprise to many of you), and I was eager to try to understand what the business people wanted versus what the technical people needed to know. I went on to take on larger and larger roles. I tried programming, and I was such a bad programmer! Then my life became sort of like Dilbert. My boss, the project manager, quits and gets a new job.

They go, "Tracy, you talk to everybody and you understand what is going on. You even talk to customers! Let's make you the project manager. We don't have to pay you any more, we'll give you all this responsibility, we can save money, and make more money on this project." Sound familiar?

However, I also had some things going on with me. My vision was diminishing, and I started to really question myself. I had two toddlers at home, and I thought about activating my disability insurance. I couldn't imagine how I could continue in the relationship business, especially how I could take in all of the required reading material. I didn't think that I could do this job as a blind guy.

I lost my mojo. I lost the rhythm of thinking that I could do this. And when I was lost, I found the National Federation of the Blind.

Our chapters are amazing tool sets for you. I found blind role models and mentors out there in the work world living full, active and productive lives. I found them making a difference in their communities and succeeding in their jobs. I found my chapter to be an amazing resource to help me and make a difference. Sometimes, I could come down and say, "I don't know how to do this, I want to know how to do that, I want to learn how to do that." I drove them crazy! Now, what happened next is interesting. They would have very animated debates about the right solutions. It was like the vice presidential debates without the Malarkey references!

So, I'm so grateful to this Federation family for helping me solve my problems and figure out that maybe—and now, I know definitely—the alternative techniques used by blind people are just as good as (if not sometimes better) than the ones I used to do as a sighted person. I could deliver results on time without my blindness stopping me. I was ready, I could do stuff, and I could be a project manager in different ways.

MY DAILY ALTERNATIVE TECHNIQUES

First, there was a lot of material and I needed to get a handle on meetings, reading and preparing notes. With the help of my Federation family, I learned braille. My chapter worked with me to develop those skills by meeting with fluent braille readers for a few hours every week. So, I went from trying to struggle with large print to being comfortable using braille in my every day life to run meetings and take notes. Colleagues would

say, "Oh you're a tech guy, so why aren't you using this technical equipment?" I'd say, "My slate and stylus never fails me."

Once I got through my head that using the alternative techniques of blindness – that a little tapping in a meeting would be acceptable – everybody else said, "Oh, okay, no big deal."

I am responsible for facilitating meetings. I'm an individual who spends all day in meetings. Some of you would dread this, but I love it. As part of this role, I need to know who is in the room, what materials are being passed out, what materials are being made available, and what nonverbal cues people are using.

I always set up a conference call. I then have everybody announce themselves in the conference room. Now I know everyone who is in the room, where they're sitting and what's going on. I make sure that if we have a conference bridge, materials have to be sent out in advance. Therefore, I have a moment to read the materials from my desk rather than struggling to read while running the meeting.

I use a spotter to help me know when there are non-verbal cues. My spotters will tell me things like, so-and-so was rolling their eyes. Afterwards I'll talk to that person. Other times, I'll bring squishy KOOSH balls. I'll say, "If I'm forgetting you, if I've offended you, throw a KOOSH ball at me." Nobody has ever dinged me in the head. In the end, though, the goal is to make them realize that I want to know what's going on.

When I encounter inaccessible reading materials—like data flow diagrams, process flows, and swim lanes—I use a reader to help me. Everyone on my team knows that if they get this stuff to me by Monday at 4 p.m., I'll provide them feedback the next day.

In a sighted world, you need to present things graphically. I could not figure out how to make the technology for drawing work efficiently as a blind person. Bendaroos, pipe cleaners covered in wax, are great tools for laying things out.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE FEDERATION

My experiences in the Federation have made me a more successful project manager. They're lessons that I've learned from following our great Federation leaders.

I've learned to focus on the mission in all communications. People need to know how what they are doing applies to the mission. We do this all the time, such as when we tie our fundraising to our work that we do with students and seniors. We are committed to helping blind people achieve amazing results.

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AWARD: CONTINUING SEVILLE'S LEGACY

that he has to expanding opportunities for blind people in Virginia and across the nation. The plaque in my hands reads: "National Federation of the Blind of Virginia; The Seville Allen Award; Presented to Mark W. Roane, in recognition of your dedication to improving opportunities for the blind of Virginia and the Nation. Your giving spirit, commitment to purpose, and tireless advocacy are an inspiration to all."

Mark is an individual who embodies all that we stand for. He is ready to step in wherever the need arises. He spends countless hours maintaining our books—a thankless job and one that most people never see. Last February, when a bill was unexpectedly introduced that would have combined the Department for the Blind into the general vocational rehabilitation agency, Mark spent days walking the halls of the General Assembly, meeting with legislators and bringing attention to the need for specialized services for the blind in the Commonwealth. He did it without fanfare. He did it quietly but with determination and purpose.

Just a few short weeks ago, it occurred to me that with the national election near at hand, we should have an agenda item on our convention program addressing the voting rights of blind people. I wrote Mark a note and asked if he would find out who we should invite and make the necessary contact. Mark wrote back saying "I'll take care of it." That is Mark Roane, He is our Treasurer, he is our colleague and he is our friend and he is a true and lasting example of what it takes to make a difference.

Congratulations, Mark. I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this award, and I know Seville would have agreed.



Mark Roane, 2012 Seville Allen Awardee

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RUBBER & GLUE

Well I work for an organization that has a strong mission. I tie what people do to the mission.

We give others in our Federation opportunities to take on roles and stretch them. I do the same at work. I give people opportunities to grow and develop their career. When they see that I'm helping them to grow professionally, do better work, further the organization's mission, they will walk through fire and rain to deliver results.

Most importantly: I admit when I screwed up. Some of you probably remember arriving to last year's convention hotel in the wee hours of the morning because I insisted on our bus leave Arlington after 5 p.m. I admit that was a mistake, and you'll notice that we left around 2 p.m. this year! I've seen that people appreciate when you admit your mistakes, learn from them, and move on.

I'm a project manager, I produce results by taking things that are unknown and make them understandable. In your life, there's going to be lots of things that are unknown and misunderstood. In those times, think like a project manager.

I believe that, in what I do, supported by our great family in the National Federation of the Blind, there is nothing that we cannot accomplish.

MAKE YOUR PLANS TO ATTEND THE 2013 NFB NATIONAL CONVENTION

Every summer, over 3,000 blind and low-vision people gather for a week-long convention to discuss the policies, programs, and priorities of the Federation.

This year's convention will be held July 1-6 at the Rosen Centre Hotel at 9840 International Drive, Orlando, Florida. Make your room reservation with the Rosen Centre staff by calling (800) 204-7234. Room rates start at \$79 per night.

The Virginia affiliate will again sponsor several McDonald Fellows, a program for first-time convention goers or those who need financial assistance. Find details at www.nfbv.org in February or call Corbb O'Connor at (202) 684-6130.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

AMAZON DISCRIMINATES AGAINST THE PRINT DISABLED

Over 100 members and supporters of the Federation conducted an informational picket at Amazon.com's Seattle headquarters on Dec. 12. Briley O'Connor served as Virginia's representative.

"We certainly got the attention of the news media, people at the nearby Starbucks, and even some Amazon employees," O'Connor said.

This fall, Amazon launched "whispercast," technology that allows school teachers and administrators to push educational content to students using any compatible device, including iPads, Kindles, and Androids.

"Some of these devices are accessible," O'Connor said, "but the Amazon apps do not allow blind students to read at all or at the same level as sighted kids, who can take notes in the margin, look up definitions, and use interactive maps."

Despite being her first protest, O'Connor said that she felt well-prepared.

"You don't have to be an expert about the nitty gritty of the technology," she said. "You just have to have some passion, put on your extrovert face, make some noise, and wear a poncho!"

The Federation first protested at the New York headquarters of the Authors Guild in 2009 when the association blocked Amazon's attempt to enable text-to-speech engines, fearing the accessibility features would shut down audiobooks.

Amazon has made no public statements about this issue.

FEDERATIONIST WINNING IN HER FIGHT AGAINST CANCER

In early November, we learned that Kierra Davis—who found the Federation through our 2007 Youth Blowout—was battling Hodgkins Lymphoma. While she could not be at the state convention, Chris O'Meally brought our voices to her through a video greeting card.

"I loved it," Davis says. "I cried. I didn't know it was going to be that big. I was so excited...people I hadn't seen in years were popping up on the screen. I really do thank y'all."

Doctors discovered the tumor in her lungs just this past year, but the problems existed long before.

"You go through your normal life with just a cough, then bad chest pain, then throbbing left leg pain, then total confusion," she says. "So, to just have your life flip around 360 degrees in a span of minutes of going to the hospital is scary. Extremely scary."

The twice-monthly chemotherapy treatments are working, for the tumor is shrinking. However, numb fingers make it impossible to read, one of Davis' most prized pastimes, and she also has difficulty typing and tactilely identifying objects. Her only complaint about her cancer, said to be one of the most curable forms, is the general feeling of helplessness.

"I'm not used to being waited on," she says. "I'm used to getting up and doing things myself. I can't even make a sandwich or taking a bath are very difficult to do alone. Getting used to no hair is different, but it's not a big deal."

These "little things," as she describes them, don't get her down.



"Being sick and in hospital didn't mean as much to me as fighting for my life," she says of her 10 days in the Intensive Care Unit last November. "I had to be a trooper for my family and friends who need me. I couldn't just conk out."

Davis encourages those who want to keep in touch with her to do so via Twitter, @happyprecess, or e-mail, keke.davis91@gmail.com

There's no doubt that her spirits are high, her resolve to fight is great, and her only request is prayer.

"I still watch that video when I get down and depressed," Davis said. "Then I get excited and keep on fighting."

We extend our hearts and prayers to the countless others in our Federation family with health concerns.

THE FEDERATION MEETS IN YOUR LOCAL AREA

The ultimate purpose of the National Federation of the Blind is the complete integration of the blind into society on a basis of equality. This objective involves the removal of legal, economic, and social discriminations; the education of the public to new concepts concerning blindness; and the achievement by all blind people of the right to exercise to the fullest their individual talents and capacities. We would love for you to join us an upcoming meeting. Call the chapter nearest you for meeting locations.

- ❖ **Blue Ridge Chapter:** Gary Morris, President. (434) 409-7191
- ❖ **Chesapeake Bay Chapter:** Mary Durbin, President. (757) 431-1205
- ❖ **Eastern Shore Chapter:** Althea Pittman, President. (757) 787-3853
- ❖ **Fairfax Chapter:** Wanda Taylor, President. (703) 212-7392
- ❖ **Fredericksburg Chapter:** Jessica Reed, President. (540) 371-1651
- ❖ **Greater Staunton Chapter:** Dawn Jenkins, President. (540) 885-9814
- ❖ **Greater Williamsburg Chapter:** Corlis Jones, President. (757) 565-1185
- ❖ **Peninsula Chapter:** Natasha Hubbard, President. (757) 239-2976
- ❖ **Potomac (Greater Arlington) Chapter:** Tracy Soforenko, President. (703) 635-2085
- ❖ **Prince William Chapter:** Jody Silverberg, President. (703) 730-1716
- ❖ **Richmond Chapter:** Jennifer Kennedy, President. (330) 465-6245
- ❖ **Tidewater Chapter:** Stewart Prost, President. (757) 622-2797
- ❖ **At Large Chapter (for those who don't live near a chapter):** Rick Holley, President. holleymanor@verizon.net

NFB OF VIRGINIA

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