**THE STUDENT SLATE**

**Summer2010**

Edited by Karen Anderson, Domonique Lawless and Sean Whalen

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**Editor’s Introduction**

First let us offer sincere congratulations, on the completion of exams and long-awaited graduations! No matter at what point in your academic career you find yourself, one thing is certain; the next three months are the best of the year. Whether you plan to take a summer class to get ahead, bolster your résumé with a summer job or internship, or simply relax and soak up the sun, June, July and August are a welcome break from the usual routine of classes, exams and homework. Oh, yes, and then there’s national convention!

While long languid summer days are kind of the norm, we in the National Association of Blind Students are going to have to break from the mold, because we have an exciting summer ahead of us, and, as always, there is plenty of work to be done. For those of you who are making the trip to Dallas, there are a few things to which we would like to draw your attention:

NABS will be holding its annual business meeting on Sunday, July 4, in the Wedgwood Room, on the tower side, lobby level of the Hilton Anatole. Registration will open at 6:00 pm, and the meeting will begin promptly at 7:00. Registration will cost $5.00. Students, young professionals, parents, teachers, and anyone interested in learning about issues affecting blind students are welcome to attend.

In addition to our business meeting, NABS will be holding a purely social gathering on the evening of Saturday, July 3 in the Affiliate Action Suite (2372 tower) from 8:00 pm until midnight. People will be dropping in to play cards and board games, have some snacks, and just chat with friends and meet new people. Drop by at any time during the gathering, and say hello. We look forward to meeting new friends and reconnecting with old ones!

Finally, NABS will, once again, be hosting its popular Monte Carlo fundraiser on Wednesday night, July 7, from 8:00 to 11:30 pm in the Metropolitan Ballroom (tower side, mezzanine level). Come by, play some cards, and take your shot at winning cash prizes for leading chip holders.

One final note for those of you who will be making the trip to Dallas: NABS is looking for volunteers to help us staff various events. If you would like to help out with either Monte Carlo night, or our table in the exhibit hall, please contact Darian Smith at dsmithnfb@gmail.com. Volunteering to work, despite how it may sound, is actually quite enjoyable. It is also a great way to meet new people. Shoot Darian an email, and we will be glad to put you to work.

One more piece of noteworthy NABS news: The NABS Website Committee is proud to announce that the new

[http://www.nabslink.org](http://www.nabslink.org/)

has just been launched and is now live. Please go check it out, and let us know if you have any suggestions or if there are things which you would like to see added. We have plans to add features and further develop the site, and we are excited by the potential to communicate our message and create a one-stop shop for information on issues of importance to blind students across the nation.

Ok then, now that that is all out of the way, let’s get back to the matter at hand. In the pages of this edition of the Student Slate, you will find tips on conventioneering on a student budget, as well as a reminder of why it is we all keep coming back and remain involved. There is also a review of the third annual tenBroek Law Symposium, along with another installment of our “Spotlight” series on successful student divisions, this time focused on Nebraska. Additionally, blind students share stories of how quality training can foster independence and how, with the right skills, a blind person can give back to his or her community, just like anybody else.

As always, if you have an idea for an article that you think would make a good addition to the Student Slate, please feel free to contact Karen Anderson at

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We look forward to seeing many of you in Dallas, and wish you all a happy and enjoyable summer vacation!

**Thinking Thrifty and Pinching Pennies:**

**Doing Dallas without Breaking the Bank**

**by Meghan Whalen**

**From the Editor:** Serving as a NABS Board member, and as the Treasurer of the Wisconsin Association of Blind Students, Meghan Whalen is a veteran of the broke as a joke student life style. In this article she offers some practical tips on attending an NFB national Convention without draining the bank account or racking up mounds of credit card debt. Here’s what she has to say:

Students tend to share one commonality, and that is a shortage of money. We can all relate to the depressing sensation of rounding up our nickels and dimes and frowning to realize that the next month will, once again, consist of far too many Ramen Noodles. I suffer from the same affliction, and I have developed the penny-pincher lifestyle for convention.

Before I head to the airport, I toss instant oatmeal packets, a spoon and a bowl in my suitcase. I also grab my water bottle and some of those little individual powdered drink mixes. Running water through the coffeepot gives you perfectly steaming water to pour over your instant oatmeal, and it’s no trouble it all to mix up some Crystal Lite or the like in your water bottle. If you really want to continue your poor college lifestyle, you can make Ramen with the hot water from the coffee pot as well.

The Wisconsin Association of Blind Students works together at convention to save money for all of our members. We have each student contribute about twenty to thirty dollars. Together, we compile a grocery list and designate a few folks to go pickup the groceries at the nearest store. Sometimes, we get lucky, and the hotel rooms have refrigerators. If this isn’t the case, we pick up those disposable foam coolers, and we take turns dumping the water and replacing the ice. The food is all stored in one room, and we set up times at which the room will be open. We usually have breakfast and lunch groceries, and go out as a group for dinner.

If you’re going it alone for food, and you don’t wish to deal with coolers and ice, grab a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread. Pop-Tarts get old pretty quickly, but they’re cheap, or you could go with granola bars or other breakfast bars. If you really don’t want to spend a lot of money on food, other than the banquet, you can eat all week for about $30, or less if you take the Ramen route. You can pick up one of those ninety-nine cent squeezy bottles from a local store and bring some dish soap along. You don’t want to be eating your oatmeal for breakfast over a crust of yesterday’s Ramen.

A couple of years ago in Dallas, my roommates thought I had gone off the deep end when I dramatically whipped a waffle iron out of my suitcase. They thought I was nuts, until they tasted my waffles! I brought waffle mix from home. It only required some water, but I added chocolate chips for good measure. After much sterilization, the bathroom counter became my kitchen, and the ice bucket became my mixing bowl. The waffles were so amazing that my roommates were forced to reevaluate my mental stability. I wouldn’t recommend a waffle iron to everyone, but the room smelled great! I always put it away before leaving the room; because I’m not too certain that I really should have had it along, but still, I say the waffles were worth it.

Specific to Dallas, we all know that food isn’t cheap. I discovered in 2008 that the food in the Sports Bar downstairs is considerably less expensive, though it is of the same quality as that served up in the restaurant. Most of the appetizers offered at all eating facilities within the hotel were filling enough for me. Sometimes, I made a sandwich, brought it with me and only ordered a side of fries. This way, I was still giving the restaurant business, but I was not spending nearly as much money as I otherwise would have.

The more folks you have in a hotel room, the less you have to spend. It’s worth being a little crowded to save some money. The truth is that you’re not in your room a whole lot anyways, so a lack of elbow room isn’t the end of the world. Just work out a system with your roommates, and all will go well. Tell yourself you’re only going to spend a certain amount of money each day, and don’t go beyond that. Budget beforehand so you’re not eating your left arm on the last day when all your money has gone to purchase gadgets and gizmos in the exhibit hall.

There is a Denny’s a short walk from the hotel, so when you get tired of the same burger and fries for lunch each day, venture out. Take someone new with you, and share with them what you learned about saving money at convention. Maybe you can split one of their massive platters of nachos and both head back to general session well-fed, but still plump in the wallet.

Regardless of how you choose to spend your money, branch out and network while at convention, or you have just wasted a lot of money. Convention is an amazing resource for networking and mentoring, so do your best to be a resource and friend to other conventioneers. Follow some or most of these steps, and you will definitely get your money’s worth out of the Dallas experience.

**Long Walk**

**by Kimberly Aguillard Flores**

**From the Editor:** Kimberley Flores, a long time member of, and active participant in, the National Federation of the Blind, Graduated from Texas A&M with degrees in Political Science and Psychology, before going on to earn her Masters in Human Service Management from Saint Edwards University, in 2008. After several years working for nonprofit agencies, she now works for the Texas State Department of Aging. In this article, Kimberley makes a compelling case for why it is important to give back and remain involved, even after finding one’s own personal success. Here are her thoughts:

Come on, be honest. We’ve all been there. All federationists have checked our watches a few too many times during chapter meetings, ducked out of a general session at convention to grab a power nap, left the envelope stuffing and call-making to someone else, and felt that sting of irritation when our work has gone unnoticed and our reliability has been taken for granted. I have now been a member of this organization for half of my lifetime. Someone asked me recently what it is that keeps me here. Instead of simply spouting a bubbly, optimistic and rehearsed answer, I paused to really ponder the question. My train of thought weaved through many episodes of my history, some hugely important and some seemingly minor. I could not pinpoint when I made the decision to stick with the National Federation of the Blind through thick and thin. The decision was formed, over time and composed of pieces of my experience with the organization, strengthened by the relationships I have made, and sealed by my understanding and appreciation for the history and the foundation of the federation. The lessons I have learned made the decision easy, and the alternative impossible. My mentors and friends in this organization have consistently personified great leadership qualities and lessons.

Reflecting on what personal quality makes great leaders like these so important and valuable reminded me of a story, originally told by Gerald Horton Bath. The story is about the experience of a small African boy who at tentatively listened to his teacher explain why Christians give gifts to each other on Christmas Day. The teacher explained that the gifts are an expression of joy over the birth of Jesus and friendship for one another. When Christmas day came, the boy brought to the teacher a breathtakingly beautiful seashell. "Where did you ever find such a beautiful shell?" the teacher asked as she gently touched the gift. The youth told her that there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found. When he named the place, a certain bay several miles away, the teacher was left speechless. “It's gorgeous… wonderful, but you shouldn't have gone all that way to get a gift for me." His eyes brightening, the boy answered, "Long walk part of gift.”

Lesson number one: Actively give in order to learn. My first national convention could have easily been a complete failure. It was overwhelming and like nothing I had ever witnessed before. One thing I gathered immediately was that everyone was busy! Canes and dogs raced by me, and everyone seemed to have enthusiasm and determination. These blind people were on a mission! I had been to seminars of blind people before, where kind sighted people brought us punch and cookies while we, the blind people, sat in a circle and talked or listened to a presentation about how to make fruit salad or dress ourselves. I wish this was an exaggeration, but it absolutely is not. At the convention of the National Federation of the Blind, the blind people are the ones planning, working, hosting, facilitating, and presenting. The atmosphere feels like a reunion, with an energy that is tangible. The people I did meet that year were friendly and very helpful. No one seemed too busy or uninterested when I had a question. It is important to point out that if I had sat quietly, because of shyness or a lack of confidence, I might not have met anyone. The convention was a challenge, but even my minimal and hesitant efforts to meet people were incredibly rewarding. This lesson was more clear the next convention I attended, when my mentors did not hesitate to put me to work, marshaling, passing out agendas, speaking on panels, counting chips at Monte Carlo night, writing articles, stacking chairs, and on and on. I was never asked to do anything that my mentors were not cheerfully doing right alongside me. Instead of resentment, I felt accepted and included.

Lesson number 2: Once you have received the training, pass it on to others. As the years went by I attended the Louisiana Center for the Blind and worked on improving my skills in cane travel, Braille, technology, and cooking. I was lucky because my parents had always taken time to teach me what they could, but I quickly discovered that I had plenty left to work on and improve. I was taught by blind people who had also completed similar training. They understood when I got frustrated and scared, and they believed in me enough to keep pushing, even when I resisted and pushed right back. It was my privilege to teach at the Louisiana Center’s summer programs for Three years.

Lesson number three, make time to reach out, to share, and most importantly, to listen. Once my skills were enhanced through training, I had the tools to navigate college and enter the workplace. I served in a couple of leadership positions on a state and national level of the NFB, and I had given back through teaching at the center. Never was my appreciation greater for my mentors. Both leading and teaching were extremely challenging tasks, and the time and effort competed with a dozen other priorities and interests. It was easy to become selfish and complacent. I was busy with other things, I was involved in campus and community activities, gaining work experience, and having a social life, too. And then I would meet someone who reluctantly began to learn more about the NFB. I would have the opportunity to see this person slowly begin to believe that his blindness didn’t mean his dreams were out of reach, or that her blindness would prevent her from living independently and finding meaningful work. I would have the chance to talk to these people about my experiences and challenges. I could answer their questions and help them to network with people with expertise in the field they were interested in studying. These interactions and watching the gradual signs of confidence and excitement, made my heart lift with joy. I had played some small part in passing along the unmistakable and intangible gift of hope and self-respect.

Lesson number four: The network and support in the NFB are irreplaceable. The relationships I have been blessed to make through the NFB are incredibly special and valuable to me. No one else could quite understand those mortifying moments when I’d accidentally walk into the men’s restroom or casually side-step down a row of seats all the way from one side of a huge, auditorium class room to the other only to discover I had picked the one and only row with no empty seats available. My friends would often laugh with me, and the really good ones would then offer an equally humiliating personal story to try to top mine. When someone called with a glowing appraisal of my resume and job qualifications, only to tell me at the face to face interview after a couple of minutes of shocked awkwardness that a blind person could not do the job, my support in the NFB understood and felt the sting of injustice with me. My victories and celebrations were also triumphs that were shared by all. Recently one of my best friends in the federation landed her dream job, after years of working her way up to that summit. Words cannot describe my joy for her: not because it was impossible, but because I knew that it was possible and she proved me right.

Lesson number five: The long walk is part of the gift, and the true joy is in joining in that march and carrying the gift forward. Finally, I have been taught through my mentors in this organization, and various speeches and literature, to respect the history of the movement. I marveled at the unselfishness of leaders, like Dr. TenBroek, Dr. Jernigan, Dr. Maurer, Joanne Wilson, Pam Allen, and many, many more. I understood that these bright individuals could have easily learned what they needed to learn, made the friends they wanted to make, taught a few people a couple of things, and then lived happily ever after as successful blind people, never giving the NFB another thought. For some reason, the more these people give, the more people expect and the more demanding the responsibilities. At any moment, any one of these individuals could have said, “no thanks, I’m content with who I’ve become and I don’t need an organization of blind people to be happy or successful.”

It is the long history of sacrifice, unselfishness, and patient persistence that is the greatest gift of all; a gift that deserves my hard work in return. If someone had not taken the time to stop from the frantic convention pace to talk with my mother and me, I would not have joined the NFB. If my mentors had decided that they didn’t have time to listen to my teen-age woes and worries, and offer me reassurance and encouragement, I would have felt a terrible and painful isolation. If my role models were not so incredibly unselfish and did not make time to send me a note or make a quick call telling me not to give up when it took me months to find a job, I would have found it too hard and discouraging to keep trying. If they were not all giving, not only to me, but also back to the organization that guided us all, then I would not have the desire to contribute to the organization either. But they have and they do. I cannot disrespect their devotion and kindness and generosity by having such a small, self-centered sphere to only worry about my own well-being. If I left the organization when I had learned enough, leaving the task to someone else, I would not have grown as much as a person, and I would not have had the joy of meeting new people and helping them find their place in the federation. My involvement with this organization has honed important leadership skills. It has also blessed me a thousand times over in countless, often unexpected ways.

I am grateful to the person who asked me what it is that keeps me devoted and involved to the National Federation of the Blind because it was helpful for me to define the reasons again. It is easy to go through the motions, grumble through the activities, and say the same lines over and over. It is in the tiniest of tasks, calling a chapter member to check in, passing out a flyer about a Meet the Blind Month activity, helping to set up a room for a meeting, or mentoring someone the way we were all mentored, that makes the federation live and breathe. Now that I have looked for the answers, I feel reenergized, grateful, and humbled by what has been done for me. Serving in this organization is an honor and a privilege, one which I hope never to take for granted in the future. I thank those who have shown me the way and exemplified unselfish service, patience, kindness, compassion, and the tough love required to help the next generation reach our potential. We gladly join you in the long walk and the march for independence.

**Third Annual tenBroek Law Symposium:**

**Addressing Issues in Disability Rights**

**by Kathryn Carroll**

**From the Editor: Originally from New York, Kathryn Carroll now resides in the District of Columbia, where she attended American University, and now works with BlueLaw International. As a prospective law student and somebody interested in legal issues, she offers a valuable perspective on the NFB’s tenBroek Law Symposium. Here are her thoughts on the recent event:**

The third annual tenBroek law symposium was a wonderful success, thanks to all involved. It brought together lawyers, activists and other disability rights-related professionals from a variety of government agencies, disability rights organizations, local law clinics, universities, and law firms. As a prospective law student, I was able to learn a lot about the legal issues present in the pan-disability rights movement. The symposium was ideal for networking and getting information about law school from current law students, especially if one is interested specifically in disability law. It was easy to discern which universities had strong disability law programs; Syracuse University College of Law, of up-state New York, and American University Washington College of Law of Washington, DC both had strong showings among the attendees.

The symposium consisted of general sessions featuring speakers on broader or more controversial topics with Q&A sessions following, and small workshops on more specific topics relating to disability and law. I got the feeling that the attendance was higher than in the past, as the time allotted to the small workshops rarely seemed enough to hear all voices and cover all aspects of the agenda.

With the first address of the symposium, Chairman of the Board of the American Association of People with Disabilities, Tony Coelho set a highly enthusiastic tone for the rest of the symposium. Mr. Coelho shared his personal experience as a person with epilepsy. His story gave me appreciation for the battles that have been fought on behalf of disability rights in the past. It reminded me, that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was not always around for our protection. Mr. Coelho then gave an overview of developments in the disability rights field. He expressed his wish that the U.S. Senate ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The U.S. is one of the eighty-five signatories of the Convention, but Congress has yet to ratify it. Also, he expressed satisfaction that the ADA has been amended to include people with conditions that, when they are active, qualify as a disability, such as epilepsy, and other conditions such as diabetes. Also, the recently passed healthcare bill prohibits insurance companies from denying medical coverage to people based on pre-existing medical conditions. At the same time, Mr. Coelho expressed disappointment that federal employment of people with disabilities has decreased. Additional issues he mentioned included the push to put people with disabilities in a position to go to law school and get appointed to be federal judges, and ongoing access-to-technology issues. While celebrating the 20th anniversary of the ADA, Mr. Coelho reminded the audience of the work still ahead of us; “We should applaud ourselves, but only for a few seconds,” he said.

In the spirit of increasing legal appointments of people with disabilities and educating judges without disabilities on disability issues, Chief Judge Richard Brown of the Wisconsin Court of Appeals spoke about legal theory. He operates on what is called the “critical legal studies” approach, which emphasizes the importance of the particular people we employ as our lawyers and judges. Their opinions and education come into play when they represent clients, hear cases, and write opinions. Therefore, Judge Brown argued, we should increase our involvement in determining “bench appointments” and making sure that employment cases get heard in state courts. We can do this by submitting questionnaires to and interviewing candidates for appointments to the bench in order to gauge their opinions on disability, and writing press releases informing the public about the people who may be interpreting law on its behalf. I found this address to be the most intriguing. It was stunning to hear how influential politics are in the formation of law. What’s more, attorneys and activists can actually influence the direction of law by strategically ensuring the hearing of certain cases in court and the appointments of the judges who hear them! This was covered in more depth in one of the workshops I attended; it was exciting to hear how involved the work of attorneys gets beyond the courtroom.

The highlight of the symposium was the keynote address by Assistant Attorney General Thomas Perez of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. Assistant Attorney General Perez gave a lively address chronicling the recent events in disability-related court cases across the country. Many cases he mentioned involved the closure of institutions and support for people with disabilities living in the community. Perez thanked the community of disability rights activists, whom he sometimes referred to as “serial activists,” for the hard work they do. The closure of segregating institutions is a necessity for equality of the disabled, and more work remains.(1)

Many of the people present at the symposium readily agreed that we as disability activists need to educate others about disability. Also, more attention should be paid to political appointments and the improvement of the education system. However, there are many controversial issues in disability rights. David Ferleger, Esquire, for instance, argued in a panel discussion that the real obstacle people with disabilities face in our society is exclusion. The lack of opportunity for acquiring multiple human relationships is the key cause of disadvantage. For instance, the physical isolation of people with disabilities in institutions, nursing homes, mental hospitals, residential settings and separate schools limits human relationships in the community and hinders people from developing their world through participation. This argument is one of the arguments used by proponents of the social model of disability, as opposed to other views of disability such as the medical model. Mr. Ferleger took the unconventional view that the focus of improving disability rights should be on these interpersonal relationships, with the ultimate goal that the ADA is repealed. To get a more theoretical understanding of disability rights, it is a great idea to know the difference between the medical and social models of disability.(2)

The symposium closed with another controversial subject: bioethics. We heard from Adrienne Asch, Director of the Center for Ethics at Yeshiva University, and Dan Brock, Director of the Medical Ethics at Harvard Medical School. Mr. Brock argued that there is a moral decision to terminate a pregnancy which would result in the birth of a severely disabled person. Ms. Asch, argued to the contrary. This topic of course raises the question about the morality of abortion, but also the question “for whose benefit would the abortion be performed, the parents, the child, or the society?” as well as “what should our response be to multiple and severe disabilities?”

The symposium could have been extended another day, as there were so many topics to cover. Especially disappointing to someone interested in international law was the lack of any dialogue on the international component of disability rights. Apart from Mr. Coelho’s mention of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there was no talk on the CRPD. While we certainly are cognizant of the obstacles to equality here in the United States, I think it is important to remember that the plight of persons with disabilities in the developing world is far worse.

According to Dr. Marc Maurer, President of the NFB, in his Closing Remarks, this year's symposium was very successful, and the discussion extended beyond allotted time more so than in past years (not an unusual occurrence for the NFB). Many people left the symposium with a greater understanding of disability and law. We shared strategies for improving the practice of law as well as for educating others. Importantly, the symposium gave people the opportunity to meet others with expertise in areas in which they were unfamiliar. As a future lawyer, I am confident in saying that attending the tenBroek symposium really helped me develop my understanding of and interest in disability law.

Footnotes

1. Mental Disability Rights International recently wrote a report on the Judge Rotenberg Center in Massachusetts which has been using unacceptable means

to control persons with mental disabilities enrolled there. See Torment not Treatment at http://www.mdri.org/mdri-reports-publications.html

2. For an introduction, try reading the “medical model of disability” and “social model of disability” pages on Wikipedia. For a more in-depth read, try Disability,

Society and the Individual by Julie Smart or Exploring Disability by Colin Barnes, Geof Mercer and Tom Shakespeare.

**The Building Blocks for Success**

**by Ben Schuler**

**From the Editor:** Ben Schuler is a recent graduate from the Louisiana Center for the Blind. In May, he successfully completed his first semester of college, and this summer he plans to work as a counselor for the Buddy program in Ruston, where he can pass along his knowledge to younger students. Here is what he has to say on the importance of getting good training in blindness skills:

I can vividly remember the night of my high school graduation. I remember standing in my bedroom dressed in that ridiculous cap and gown just wanting it to be over. While my classmates were all excited to walk across that stage and finally receive the diploma that they had worked so hard to earn, I was out of my mind with anxiety. I had decided that I would not use my cane for the ceremony. I had received a couple of cane travel lessons through the school system, but I did not ever use my cane in high school. After all, it wasn’t like I was blind or anything.

I had spent a good hour walking the rout of the empty football field that my graduation would be held on. I was just praying that there would be good enough light to see the person in front of me. That way I could follow them, and maybe manage not to make a fool of myself in front of the whole school. At the time I could see well enough to sort of pull this off; sort of.

Before I knew it, I was sitting in my seat on the field. By some miracle, I had managed to make it out to the field from inside the school. Then the waiting began. My last name begins with “S,” so I sat there and waited while they got closer and closer to my name. (They were going in alphabetical order.) With every letter closer to “S,” I was more and more nervous. It must have looked kind of ridiculous. All of my friends sitting there talking and clapping, and then me sitting there with my jaw clenched, as though I were on my way to be hung rather than get my diploma.

All of a sudden, it was my row’s turn to get up and start heading towards the stage. I struggled to try and keep the person in front of me in sight, and then almost walked into him when he came to a stop on one side of the stage. I will never understand how in the world I pulled this off. I got a little mixed up when I was walking back to my seat, but the person behind me saw me and walked with me to the row that we were in. I am just going to assume that no one saw this because they were too busy staring at the stage.

After high school, I was planning on going to college. I was not the most motivated person in the world, but I figured I could get through college somehow. I went to my freshman orientation at West Georgia University and had no idea how I was going to even begin to get around campus. My vision had gotten worse during the summer after high school, and something had to change. There was no Way College was going to happen if I didn’t do something.

Because of a combination of problems with Vocational Rehabilitation, I was not able to start college in the fall. I sort of sat around for a couple of months, dreading the spring. I had no idea how I was going to get through school. In an effort to do something productive, I started taking piano lessons during this time. I never got very good at the piano, but my teacher put me in touch with Jim Omvig. Mr. Omvig started talking with me about getting training. I had looked into a couple of places that offered blindness training, but he told me that I should check out The Louisiana Center for the Blind. So, after looking at their website, I decided to take a tour of the center. Why not? It wasn’t like I was doing much of anything else.

This place was definitely different. I had not seen anything like this at any of the other training centers I had toured. Blind people were doing everything sighted people do. By the middle of the tour I knew that was where I needed to be.

Now, when I first began to consider going and getting training, I thought that it would be a nice break before starting school. I was still clueless as to how I was going to get through college. But how hard could it be to read some Braille and cook a couple of things? Besides, I was very ready to move out, my dad and step-mom were also very ready, and this was as good a way as any to get out on my own.

Before I knew it, I was moving into my apartment in Ruston. The first few days of the program went by in a blur. I was psyched to be living on my own, and happy to meet some really cool new people. I remember one cane travel lesson that I had in my first week. I was talking with Roland, my cane travel instructor, when the other student in my class came into the room. Roland told him to go find an address and he just left. I was blown away by this. I was used to my cane travel instructor in high school, who would walk in front of me when I would cross a street so that I didn’t screw it up and veer into the road. I had a long way to go, that was for sure.

After the first few days, I started to learn very quickly that this was not going to be the vacation that I had thought it might be. It was tough. I was being challenged like I never had been before, both mentally and physically. But I was also learning a lot. I was learning to read with two hands in Braille to help increase my reading speed. I was slowly but surely getting the hang of the slate and stylus. I was cooking and learning how to clean. (No easy task for an 18 year old guy.) I was constantly learning new tricks with JAWS. I was even using power tools in woodshop. It was a blast.

One of the biggest problems that I had with being blind was having to go sighted guide everywhere. After high school, my vision had gotten to the point where I could not travel safely on my own. That didn’t stop me from giving it one hell of a go, but it created an insane amount of anxiety. I would constantly decide that I “didn’t really feel like going” to a lot of things my friends and family would go to. For me, as an 18 year old guy, there was nothing worse than having to hold onto someone’s arm every time I went anywhere. I was spending an enormous amount of time and energy trying to act like I could see, and failing miserably. So one of the most exciting things for me was learning to use a cane. I could finally just get up and go. I did not have to wait for anyone to go with me. All of a sudden I started to see that the training was paying off. . The feeling that learning to travel gave me is indescribable.

During this time I was surrounded by blind people. Throughout my training, one of the most beneficial things was the ability to ask, “How do you do this as a blind person?” Having blind instructors and sighted instructors that had put in a significant amount of hours under sleep shades was another priceless thing about The Louisiana Center for the Blind. These people knew what it was like to be blind, and they had realistic expectations of their students as a result. Being around so many competent blind peopled helped me to realize that blind people were just normal people. The high expectations that the staff had of me as a student, along with the friendships that I built with my fellow students shaped my attitude about blindness to be more positive.

I went blind when I was 16. Like so many people, at first I struggled tremendously with my blindness. It was something that caused a lot of anxiety in my life every day. An essential part of my training was re-shaping my attitudes. I am not perfect. I would be lying if I said that it is never on my mind these days. But, I do not spend nearly as much time or energy worrying about how I will get through the day as a blind person.

I would urge anyone reading this to consider getting training at one of the NFB’s training centers. It doesn’t matter if you have been blind since birth, recently went blind, have some usable vision, or are total. No matter what situation you are in, if you feel as though you can gain something from learning new blindness skills, don’t put it off. If I had known what I know now during high school, it would have saved me a lot of frustration and worry. The Louisiana Center for the Blind changed my life in ways that were well worth sacrificing nine months. You can find more information about the NFB’s training centers at this website: http://www.nfb.org/nfb/training\_centers.asp

**The Language of Employment**

**by Mike Harvey**

**From the Editor:** Mike Harvey is a new Federationist from Tennessee who is currently attending the Louisiana Center for the Blind. After graduating from the Center he plans to get his masters degree at Louisiana Tech and become a teacher of blind students. Here is what he has to say about his experience in the working world:

Do any of us become the answer to the commonly asked question of “What do you want to be when you grow up”? Certainly, as a four-year-old learning to read Braille and dreaming of becoming a lawyer, I could not have foreseen what my future would truly hold for me. I graduated from the Mississippi School for the Blind in 1996, having performed well in my classes at the school for the blind and the public school, which was part of the main stream program. To be close to my parents, I enrolled in Mississippi State University in Starkville, but after three semesters I realized Starkville had few employment opportunities. I had worked as a DJ with my own sports show at the local radio station being paid eight dollars per hour and working a maximum of twenty hours per week, certainly not enough to support myself.

I had a friend living in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and in 1998, decided to transfer to the local college, Middle Tennessee state University (MTSU). I learned of their summer study abroad program. Having been denied for the Costa Rica study abroad program at Mississippi State, I was really nervous when I met with the professor in charge of the program, but she did not hesitate to tell me “Michael, you are more than welcome to go to Spain with us.” At that moment, I knew I had made the right decision, and I had moved to the right place. I always did well in school when I applied myself to my work, and fitting in to social groups was never a problem for me. So, I thought I had this whole real world thing figured out. Being denied the chance to go to Costa Rica at Mississippi State was the first of many wake-up calls that I would receive over the course of my life. It was then that I learned that what is right doesn’t always happen. After coming back from Spain, I took some time away from school, and I got my first taste of life in the working world.

In 2001, I made the decision to leave school for a while until I could decide what to do for a career. I had been going to college to be a Spanish teacher, but the prospect of teaching 150 high school students each day did not seem appealing to me. I do enjoy teaching and have aspirations of teaching Braille, Spanish, and O&M, but at the time, the thought of teaching so many students in a day overwhelmed me.

Finding a job proved to be more difficult than expected. One of my closest friends had just graduated college, and he searched for several months before finally landing a mediocre job which was not in his field of study. It is difficult for us as blind people to gain employment, but it is not impossible by any means.

The Spanish speaking population in the Nashville area experienced a major growth beginning in 1998. Consequently, a government grant was given to a local medical clinic to offer classes for medical interpreting. After receiving news from a friend who was planning to take this class, I too signed up. I did not know what I was getting in to, nor did I know that the next two and a half months of that class would change my life, but I needed a job, so I was willing to take the class.

The class lasted 10 weeks. During this time, we had nurses, doctors, and native speakers come in to talk to us about common medical conditions that affect the Spanish speaking population. We also learned about proper conduct and professionalism that is expected of interpreters. There were several people in the class already working as interpreters, and this helped me greatly as I got to know those who I had never met previously. No less than 4 people from this class helped me land a job the next summer as a medical interpreter at the Rutherford County Health Department in Murfreesboro Tennessee. When I say they helped me, I mean they bugged the director constantly. It was only because of their pestering her that she finally relented and gave me a chance. I think she just wanted the ladies that knew me to leave her alone.

I started work there on June 18, 2002. There were still challenges to overcome, and many people needed to be educated on the abilities of the blind. Three other people started with me, and though I was the most qualified of us, I received the fewest hours of work.

The director at the time did not know if blind people could do the work required of an interpreter. She had concerns that seemed normal to her. These included but were not limited to: The building is rather large, and you have to do a lot of walking from place to place, you will need to be quick in answering the pages, how can you write down phone numbers and dial the phone, and will you be able to make it to work. These concerns were only the ones she voiced to me in conversation. Who knows how many other concerns she failed to voice to me.

The first two weeks I worked there, I was assigned to answer phones. I was expected to sit at a desk in the front and field phone calls. Becoming restless one day, I got up and started walking around. Within 2 hours, I learned the entire building and began answering pages to clinic rooms. The nurses and director were surprised as they had never seen a blind person move around like that previously. Little did they know their education was only beginning.

The building in which we worked was only three months old at the time, and I soon began showing old employees short cuts through the building that they had not yet found. I moved through the building and answered calls arriving at rooms as quickly as my fellow interpreters. The various dialects of the patients from different regions of Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin-American countries were a challenge at first, but one that I was able to overcome. Another challenge was the attitude of my co-workers. It took them several months to realize my capabilities as a blind person. I answered all kinds of questions from co-workers in my first year of employment. Some were reasonably intelligent questions like, “how do you grocery shop?” Or, “How do you cross streets?” Others were absolutely ridiculous. Examples of these include asking, “How do you use the bathroom,” and, “How can you live by yourself?” Fortunately, I was patient and answered my co-workers questions. I was the first blind person many of them had ever met. I did show a sense of humor and sarcasm at times, but it was taken the right way, and many people with whom I worked respected me for my direct approach and for my patience in answering their questions.

After working at the Rutherford County Health Department for a year, I finally got extra hours. It helped that I filled in for people when they were sick, and I had been coming in to work on last minute’s notice for the previous three months. In July of 2003, I was given a 30 hour per week schedule. This was the maximum number of hours allowed for interpreters at the time, because we did not have full time positions. That did not happen until 2005.

Our clinic provided a variety of services. We had a prenatal doctor and nurse practitioner who cared for our pregnant patients. All of our pregnant patients were Hispanic because the American patients could receive Tenncare (Tennessee’s version of Medicaid), and we only cared for prenatal patients that were not eligible for any kind of insurance. Therefore, I learned more about the phases, events, screening processes and details of pregnancy than 99% of the male population.

Our clinic also had a WIC department. WIC is an acronym for women, infants and children. I learned all about nutrition during pregnancy, and I know way more than any man who has never been a father about proper nutrition during the first five years of a child’s life. I would venture to say that I also know more about nutrition than the majority of men who are parents. Sometimes it was necessary to be gentle and have a calm voice with patients, while at other times it helped to have a sharp edge and ask parents why in the world their child was still sucking on a bottle at two years of age. If I ever have children, I will be well prepared for the nutrition part of raising a child. After all, that is the only part of parenting that comes with instructions.

We also had a pediatric dentist, a doctor of general medicine, a nurse practitioner who did both annual exams and basic sick visits. We also dealt with vaccinations, dispensing of birth control pills, along with many other types of birth control methods. I learned about all kinds of different medicines, their uses, side effects, and who should and should not take those medicines. To make sure this knowledge stuck with me, I learned all of this in two languages. This was necessary of course to do my job effectively, but it also means that most of that knowledge will forever be embedded in my brain.

Lastly, we had a diabetic nurse and nutritionist that dealt strictly with diabetes cases. I learned about blood sugars, nutrition for diabetics and side effects of this horrible disease. I now know how to check blood sugars, the normal range for blood sugars, and what to do in cases of low or high readings. It is my belief that my work with the diabetic team will help me greatly as I seek employment in the blind community as much as any knowledge I obtained in my seven years at this clinic.

Three years after I began working, I finally got the state to pay for JAWS. This gave me the ability to use the computer to make and check appointments, print schedules, check prescriptions, and many other tasks that I had been unable to complete previously. This increased my value as an employee, and six months after I was granted access to the computers, they gave me a full-time job.

I finally had benefits, direct deposit for my paychecks, and a more secure position in the clinic. My co-workers expected as much from me as any other interpreter and in some cases even more. I was able to prove myself not only as an interpreter, but as a capable person. My friends learned to tell me what foods were where in the buffet lines, ask me to help move things, and treat me like anyone else that worked in the clinic. I believe whole heartedly that if another blind person were to apply for a job there, they would only have to prove that their language skills are competent to receive employment.

My time there changed the minds of 80 people about blindness, and through my example, a large group of people now have a better idea of the capabilities of blind people. The patience to answer questions (even the ridiculous ones) enabled me to gain the respect of co-workers. I will always be able to get positive references from the Rutherford County Health Department. This job helped me tremendously. I learned how to be a professional, and I know that I can hold a good job. I always believed that I would be an effective employee, but working somewhere for seven years proves it to me. Changing attitudes, gaining knowledge of many different aspects in the medical field, expanding my vocabulary in English and Spanish, gaining professionalism and learning accountability are all characteristics acquired during my seven years as a medical interpreter. For anyone that can speak Spanish and English fluently, interpreting is a challenging and rewarding job.

**From the Bottom Up: Spotlight on NABS**

**by Karen Anderson**

**From the Editor:** In addition to serving as Vice President of the National Association of Blind Students, Karen Anderson also lends her hard work and leadership skills to another NABS; the Nebraska Association of Blind Students. In this article she not only offers insights on how to raise funds and build a student division, but also reflects on why raising money and recruiting members is important. Here’s what she says:

As students, we are constantly learning. Whether that means reading our textbooks, writing essays, or interacting with each other, we are constantly learning and growing as individuals and leaders. The Nebraska Association of Blind Students has had a very productive year, full of lots of growth and opportunities to define who we are as an organization.

At convention in October we hosted our third annual NABS Idol contest. Students and long term members of the Federation alike competed to see who had the most talent. Performances went from hilarious to heartwarming, and all proceeds benefitted the student division.

In March, thanks to a grant from the Imagination Fund, NABS held our second Student Seminar in Lincoln, Nebraska. For nearly three months before the event students worked with members of the state affiliate to plan this event and make sure it would be fun while spreading the Federation philosophy. Members from state and chapter boards helped us learn how to do everything from choosing a hotel and negotiating contracts, to planning the menu for the event, to putting together a fun and informative agenda. Nearly 20 students, as well as the entire seminar planning committee, came from all across the state to have the chance to interact with other blind people, talk about topics that are important to students, and get their hands on some cool technology. On Saturday night students were split into groups led by experienced Federationists and given bags containing a few food items and either playing cards, dice, music, or movies. Their challenge was to plan a social night that they could host in their dorm room, as well as to make something using the groceries they had in their bags. Each student left the seminar with a cookbook full of recipes that can be made in the microwave, and a new network of friends.

At the end of April NABS had the opportunity to partner with Delta Upsilon, a fraternity from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Each year the fraternity hosts a philanthropic event, and this year they chose NABS as the beneficiary. Members of the student division worked alongside members of the fraternity to plan, and then host, a benefit concert. The money raised was much appreciated, but perhaps the most important part of this event was the opportunity we had to change people’s perceptions about blindness. For the months before the event NABS members met weekly with the members of the fraternity and answered questions about blindness, and also explained the mission of NABS. It was wonderful to see the attitudes of the fraternity members change, and it also gave new members of NABS a chance to really come to understand what the organization stands for and how we are a part of a bigger whole.

In May, one of our new members volunteered to host a garage sale as a fundraiser for the student division. The original plan was to get students at the local university to donate things that they would normally throw away in the course of moving out, but the project soon took on a life of its own. Family members drove around the city collecting donations, and NABS members stayed up until all hours organizing and pricing items. When all was said and done NABS raised over $400, which will be put toward a scholarship for a blind student in Nebraska.

It is easy to look at all of the fundraisers I have discussed and say that NABS has had a successful year. And indeed, I believe we have. But that belief comes less from the growth we have seen in our bank account, and more from the growth I have seen in our members. While I was out of the state receiving training I watched as board members and members at large grew into leaders and came to truly see the division as their own. We have had two students, myself included, graduate from NFB centers, and two more have recently made the difficult decision to go for training. One of our members, a young lady who recently graduated from high school, has started using her straight cane and admitting she is blind. Members of our local chapters an our state board have become mentors to our division members, welcoming them to the larger federation family with open arms and making them feel like part of the movement.

NABS is looking forward to having a record breaking number of students at the National convention in Dallas, Texas. We are also planning a trip to an amusement park, which will serve as both a recruiting tool and a confidence builder, for later in the summer. Most importantly, we are looking forward to continuing to learn from each other, and to changing what it means to be a blind student in Nebraska.

**Changing what it means to get things done:**

**An AmeriCorps Experience**

**by Darian Smith**

**From the Editor:** Darian Smith currently resides in California and attends the City College of San Francisco. He also serves on the board of the National Association of Blind Students. In this piece, Darian chronicles his experiences in AmeriCorps and demonstrates how volunteerism and community service can provide opportunities not only to better the lives of others, but also for personal growth and the education of our peers. Here is his story:

The Beginning

The Idea of serving one’s country via team-based national community service was something that struck me as a very powerful way to positively impact individuals, meet new people, better myself and change what it means to be blind. The Journey started as a small yet ever-present thought that was fostered in the summer of 2002 while I was a summer student at the Colorado Center for the Blind. A team of AmeriCorps national Civilian Community Corps members and their Team Leader spent a project at the center doing construction work on the building. After a positive few days of interaction with these great people and positive role-models, the then- Coordinator of the Colorado summer program suggested I look into the program and its benefits.

Many years past, and finally, six years later, fate brought me back to Denver; this time, a confident blind adult. I was a graduate of the center’s independence training program, had been a summer instructor in Colorado, and was, soon to be, a fully inducted Corps Member of the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps, to serve on the same campus as those who first introduced me to the idea of national service.

Soon after returning to my home state of California, I traveled to Oregon to start training with my first dog guide. Training was going very well, and I had reason to believe that I was going to graduate from school. Unfortunately, after a planned meeting designed to strategize the best tools and techniques to make the transition for the dog guide/handler team a successful one, there came some noticeable uneasiness and a lot of questions about what a guide dog can do (in addition to the concerns of what a blind person can do) and concerns about how much accommodation would have to take place. Additionally, the question of if I was” 100% blind or partially blind” came up. While it may have been, in their mind, for programmatic reasons, I felt like the campus was already assuming what I could or could not do. After thinking, and realizing the amount of ignorance and uneasiness that people had displayed, I came to understand that some educating had to take place and that right now would not be the best time for a dog guide. So, with that, I bid farewell to the friends I gained and the amazing dog I had began work with and returned back to the bay area.

Once there, I began the process of determining how to best go about educating 200 people I’d never met before. All the while, counting down the days until I would begin a new and exciting chapter in my life; one that only those who are willing to push their limits and are confident about their abilities as a person, blind or not, would ever attempt.

CTI

Corps Training Institute marks the beginning of the AmeriCorps NCCC Journey. As a Corps Member, you soon find out that the first couple of days are probably the most hectic days one will have in the corps.

The First days were filled with checking in and meeting your roommates, the people on your team, and the people in your unit. I met a lot of corps members within the first few hours of my arrival on campus. For most of these wonderfully enthusiastic and talented individuals, who I would come to know as my corps mates and friends, it would be the first time they had ever met a blind person. The same could be said for the team leaders, unit leaders and office staff on campus, as well.

During training, Corps Members travel across campus to different trainings and meetings, which are put on to prepare corps members for the ten months that lie ahead. Some of those trainings are diversity trainings, CPR, First Aid and trainings on how to run a Red Cross disaster shelter. They also cover rules and regulations regarding the program. The very first days served as a sort of test not only for me, but also the other people on campus- as it gave me an opportunity to show how a person who is blind travels in both familiar and unfamiliar areas; among other things. Being a person who had, just two months prior to joining NCCC, been teaching blind youth the freedom and sense of empowerment that safe and independent travel bring, I felt especially confident in my ability to navigate this new environment, and felt the need to prove that traveling and problem-solving were things I was very capable of doing.

Campus life is, generally, what u would see in a university. The campus has a cafeteria and a set of dorms. I was assigned a single room that had a full bathroom and was located by an emergency exit; as the staff had a difficult time understanding (after detailed explanation) how a blind person can effectively get from the bathroom to their room or out of a building given an understanding of its layout. So they decided to put me (against my request) in a “more accessible room.”

After a few days of learning about the corps, the campus, and the people on it, I approached the Director of the AmeriCorps NCCC campus about putting on a one-person meet the blind month event. While it was not phrased in that manner, and the conversation was a continuation of a conversation I had had with her prior to arrival, it was an idea that went over well with her. The event was spread out over the duration of our month of training and consisted of meet the blind month literature that was displayed in the main dorm lobby, a informal introduction to goal ball, a question and answer session during a corps wide community meeting, and finally an activity which, in keeping with the month long theme, I called “Cane Travel Training.” I was very fortunate to have been able to get sleepshades and canes loaned out to me by the Colorado Center for the Blind. Let me assure you that time and energy put into this activity were time and energy well-spent. Corps members, team leaders, and office staff alike participated in the series of informal trainings. In these trainings, they learned how a blind person safely and effectively navigates both familiar and unfamiliar areas and does so with a high degree of confidence. They also learned about proper cane technique, how to move about in a building, go up and down stairs and travel outdoors. One activity that proved to be a highlight was a session that took place during my unit’s team bonding time at Rocky Mountain National Park. Individuals learned how to navigate rocky paths using a cane while listening to the birds and the wind through the trees and feeling the sun on their faces. Everyone who took part enjoyed the event, those who didn’t, express interest in taking part in the event if there was to be another one.

Once the month of corps wide training and team selection process ended, I sat down with my Team Leader, and as is normal practice with team leaders and corps members pre- project round, we talked about expectations and goals for the upcoming round in Boulder, Colorado. We discussed keeping an open line of communication and she stressed to me that she understood that at times it may not be as easy interacting with individuals who may not allow me to push myself out of my comfort zone and try new things on the work site, as they may feel nervous about my participation. She also assured me that, while she knew I was a self-advocate and supported my advocacy efforts on my own behalf, she was going to advocate for me as best she could, as well.

My team leader grew up with a friend who was blind. This friend is currently in law school; and her positive views of blindness clearly have pushed her to this point in her education. It is, I believe, this personal interaction with a successful blind person which has shaped my team leader’s views on blindness, and that has made my team leader one of the more open-minded team leaders, relative to disabilities, in our corps. She always worked to keep me in the loop on little yet important things. As one Example: When I was first arriving on campus, I received a folder that was the same as the ones that all of the other corps members in my unit had gotten. However, mine had a message in Braille welcoming me to the corps. And who wrote it? My team leader. She knew Braille. This was a very nice surprise that meant a lot to me. She was always there to listen when I was having a tough time understanding a situation, or needing to vent. She sometimes did not have the answers, but she would not let me give up on myself and gave me time to figure out problems, where other people may not have had that kind of patience. When it came to being on the work site she always took the time to explain its layout and explain how I might go about doing something on the site.

Boulder, Colorado

My team’s first project was an environmental service project in Boulder working with the City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks. On this project, we worked on building two new hiking trails, cleared out a few irrigation ditches, and removed invasive species (which really just translates into pulling weeds).

On most of these projects, it was best to stick with a member of the team and work on a part of the project together, as otherwise it got rather boring and repetitive quite quickly. When it came to hiking to and from some of the sites with rougher uneven paths, I alternated between traveling alone and traveling with a human guide. I found that walking to the site with someone via human guide was simply a matter of keeping pace and having a conversation as well.

On one of our work sites, I was asked to clear grass patches out of a trench. The way I went about this was to first have my cane be stored in a safe place by a project sponsor, and then, I would walk along one side of the trench, feeling with my foot for broken up patches of grass and damp dirt and throw them in an area that was pointed out by the sponsor. The project introduced me to new tools that I had never used or heard of before, such as a rockbar and mcloud. I was also educated as to the socio – economic and recreational considerations people must think about when developing or not developing land for recreational usage or preservation reasons. I learned a lot about Colorado and its water conservation plans, as well.

During this Round, I visited the Boulder Valley Chapter of the NFB and told them about AmeriCorps NCCC and the great benefits of giving back to one’s country through national service. As one of my team roles was recruiter, the concept of talking-up our program was not too unnatural, but the best part of it was letting people know that this program is out there and, yes, blind people can be a part of it and do great things as well.

As for my project sponsors, they were all great helps and enabled me to learn while learning along with me. The lesson? Given the opportunity and training, a person who is blind can do most of the same jobs a sighted person can do, and do them just as effectively as anybody.

Brazoria County, Texas

My team and I went to Brazoria County, Texas and started work with the United Way. We were told we were going to be doing canvassing work and talking to residents in the community about resources which were available to victims of hurricane Ike. This, of course, meant a lot of walking and a lot of talking. I had two primary roles on this project. While in the field, I mainly did most of the communicating with clients, as I have a good skill for relating to people. While away from the worksite, I would write out weekly progress reports to keep track of where we went and what we did.

In this round, my skills as a recruiter were taken to new heights. Normally, a recruiter on a team will research places that would be good to talk to the youth of the community and contact those places and set up a time to come in and talk about the program. I would do research (via a laptop with JAWS and an internet connection) about these places, call them, and get the logistics squared away so an event could take place. During This round I, along with different members of my team, would go out to high schools as well as work with and talk to venture crews to talk-up the program.

What made this round so special was my ability to be personable and to make every aspect of myself and the program a shining positive. One thing which generally made otherwise shy people want to find out more about the program was when I would mention all of the great aspects of the program and all of the great things I’d been able to do as a blind person. I don’t know if they joined or considered joining with the hopes of meeting a blind person, or if being confident and showing your personality makes the program sound like it’s worthwhile. But, either way, youth that would not normally have considered the program at first glance either seriously considered the program or planned to do it as soon as they graduated high school or college. To me, that’s a great feeling. I believe that during this round I showed many youth that anybody who wants to serve their country can do it; that ability, race, creed or anything else does not have to be a reason to not help others any chance you get.

Over this round I learned to work with the skill saw, sawzall, drill, axe and nail gun on various construction and debris removal projects. The best part of this was that team mates and my team leader had all, by this point, taken the time to teach me skills I normally would not have thought I would ever be able to learn. As was the case on my previous project, the people in the community came in with no idea of what to expect out of me. In the end they were some of the best teachers and best people I worked with during my Corps year. They never over reacted, they were always so nice and helpful to everybody, and they treated me as if blindness was the last thing they thought of when they saw me.

Hale County, Alabama

This Project round presented an opportunity and a bigger challenge than most of the others I had worked on. Hale County is the fifth poorest county in the country, and the town I lived in was like most towns in Alabama, very small and not notable to anyone who didn’t live there. The nature of this project was construction work and painting. In previous projects I had done both. The biggest challenge was convincing a new team leader, team, and the staff back at my base campus that I could do these things. Another added challenge was convincing them that I could climb scaffolding with ease and confidence. Though I could show my team leader and project supervisors that I could do the job, the campus management still had their doubts.

During this round, all AmeriCorps campuses were filling slots for their incoming class of team leaders. During this process, I was interviewed by four different campuses, who were all considering me for open positions. In the end I was not offered a position by any of the campuses, with some not even bothering to notify me. One campus admitted to altering the general set of questions they ask all their candidates, saying they were not confident that I, as a blind person, would be able to answer them. It was at this point that I started to return to questioning the true belief that this campus and organization had in people with disabilities in general and in me as a blind person. It seemed to me that they felt a person with a disability could certainly become a corps member, but would not be able to lead a group of ten young adults on challenging projects. It felt to me as if they saw this opportunity as something that someone with a disability, especially blindness, could not be trusted to take on.

I continued with the project in Alabama, working with volunteers on a piece of history in the area; an old Rosenwald school house that was ninety-five years old. I also worked in a local thrift store that benefited the community members. Most of my job this round was recruitment off the worksite, though I still carried out minimal tasks on the site. On hot days, which reached 95 degrees, I found myself near hot tin pulling old rusted nails out of old two-by-fours, while my team mates were climbing the side of the old school house to nail or paint. While one can justify this by saying the work had to get done and I was doing a job, I often found myself in just the situation I had worked so hard to avoid. I didn’t want to be sitting on the sidelines while my teammates got to challenge themselves in ways they never thought they’d be challenged.

This is not to say that I didn’t see some really interesting things. I had been to my first crawfish boil, and had been through more tornado warnings then I would have liked. There were some truly great people who were working to help people in this county change their way of life, and I had been fortunate enough to get to know some of the best folks in this small county. I learned that housing and education were not the only problems the county was facing. I was on a ride-along with a post-grad student from the University of Alabama who was testing water purity in the area. The student told Me that many residents in the county often drink and bathe in darkened water from their pipes and never know how unhealthy it is, nor know any different. Overall, I think that our Alabama project was a very educational time for me. I learned about my country, what we take for granted and the challenges we face in closing the gap between the haves and have nots.

Colorado.

In our fourth project round, I was one of the fortunate few corps members to be selected to work in AmeriCorps NCCC’s Summer of Service program (the only program of its kind to be run in the country in 2009). The Summer of Service program (SOS) gives at risk youth the opportunity to serve their local community and gain invaluable skills and an awareness of community needs. It also provides a small stipend which the youth often use to support their families.

In the three weeks prior to the youths’ arrival on campus, I, along with my team mates took part in training and then a two-week camping trip in the mountains of Jamestown, Colorado. Aside from the fun of getting to set-up a tent and hike on this project, within these two weeks, my new team and I worked on moving tree limbs to the side of the road to be gathered. Most of this involved dragging limbs from down a hillside (or “hauling slash”), and using my cane with my left arm, sometimes following the voices of my team mates. One fun thing I did was use a hydraulic wood-splitter. This machine was designed as an easier, less labor intensive way to split wood.

After the two weeks of work and bonding were complete, we returned to Denver and got ready for the Participants. Once the program started, I was asked to serve as a crew leader with three other co-crew leaders overseeing a team of seven to ten youth. Crew leaders had the responsibility to supervise the Participants, making sure that they stayed on task on the work site and maintained safe habits and respectful manners both on and off of the work site. It was always a bit of a challenge with the Participants, as they would often challenge my abilities as a supervisor. They worked hard and it was rewarding to see what great young people they grew into over just one month.

Three short weeks later, it was time for each corps member who had made it through the long and challenging journey of an AmeriCorps year to look around, look ahead, and say goodbye to the family that they had for ten months. I, to this day, will never forget the feeling of crossing the stage and thinking, “This is it! All of the challenges I faced, all of the friends I found, all of the places I’ve gone and experiences I’ve had … this is it.” I had finally completed a journey that on more than one occasion, I had considered walking away from. But in the end, when I heard in the crowd the roar of applause that was lead by the very Summer of Service Participants that we helped to graduate just weeks before, I felt so many things. When I stopped to consider it I felt finality, pride, and accomplishment. I had completed this program with so many people whom I had grown to care for and respect, and who had grown to respect me. On that day I felt like I did change what it means to be blind in the National Civilian Community Corps, a program where blindness was truly uncharted territory.