

AUTHENTICITY, DIVERSITY, AND THE SYNERGY OF THE ORGANIZED BLIND

An Address Delivered by
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At the Banquet of the Annual Convention
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NATIONAL FEDERATION
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Any single moment in time can be an opportunity for reflection, for commitment, or for action. That we share this moment together means that we combine our unique perspectives, backgrounds, and talents into one unified experience. Publisher Malcolm Forbes noted that diversity is “the art of thinking independently together.” Artist Vincent van Gogh explained that “great things are done by a series of small things brought together.” And Aristotle is credited with observing that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This philosophical musing has now been applied in almost every aspect of life—from the Gestalt psychological theory that, “the whole is something else than the sum of its parts,” to applications in physiology, economics, and theology.

This concept is now better known as synergy, from the Latin word *synergia* meaning working together. Synergy is broadly understood to be a mutually advantageous conjunction or compatibility of distinct participants or elements. Leadership coach Stephen Covey describes it this way: “Synergy is what happens when one plus one equals ten or a hundred or even a thousand! It’s the profound result when two or more respectful human beings determine to go beyond their preconceived ideas to meet a great challenge.” In this construction, synergy can be understood as the product of successful organizing. One of the best examples of synergy that I have experienced in my life is the organized blind movement. What are the distinct characteristics that have allowed us to achieve synergy, and how can we continue to grow the exponential impact of our combined effort?



Mark Riccobono delivers the banquet speech.

Blindness has almost always been understood to be a characteristic that distinguishes one as lacking ability. Throughout the centuries the fear of darkness shaped the myths about blindness that were shared through oral storytelling and later retold in written works. On many occasions, the blind attempted to come together to move beyond the myths, but they were always marginalized or overtaken by people having the distinct trait of keen eyesight. The dominance of the vision-centered approach resulted in deeply rooted misconceptions about blindness and pushed blind people to the fringe of society—we did not belong. By the twentieth century it seemed as though the great misunder-

standing of blindness was unstoppable. That was until blind women and men in the United States gained enough momentum to begin to organize and share their authentic insights.

In the fall of 1940, representatives of seven state organizations of the blind came together to form a unified national organization of blind people led by elected blind leaders—the National Federation of the Blind. Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, a blind scholar of constitutional law, was elected as our first President, and his leadership was critical to keeping the new organization together. For nearly eight decades we have distinguished our movement by continuing to build on the authentic organizational principles that brought us together. The hopes, dreams, and actions of a diverse and committed corps of individual blind people, unified in purpose, and led by elected blind representatives have resulted in synergy. When others who are not elected by the blind have attempted to knock us off course, we have held the line. When those who choose not to join together with us have tried to divide us, we have held more tightly to the bonds that connect us. When others have said the blind cannot, we have followed our dreams and made them come true. With synergy, we are the blind—the National Federation of the Blind.

Blindness is merely one of a thousand characteristics we individually bring to this movement. Yet, for our organization blindness is preeminent to our mission and our governance structure. In everything we have done, we have kept a strong and singular focus on blind people. Although we welcome those who do not possess the characteristic of blindness as members, collectively they may not

constitute a majority of our membership, and they cannot run our governing boards.

Kenneth Jernigan, the second great President of the National Federation of the Blind, articulated our philosophy regarding the definition of blindness this way: “One is blind to the extent that the individual must devise alternative techniques to do efficiently those things which he would do if he had normal vision. An individual may properly be said to be “blind” or a “blind person” when he has to devise so many alternative techniques—that is, if he is to function efficiently—that his pattern of daily living is substantially altered.”

Under this functional definition of blindness, we reflect one class of people—blind people—a class that deserves equal treatment. There are those who attempt to divide us based upon how much remaining eyesight we have—carving us into categories such as low vision, visually impaired, hard of seeing, partially sighted, visually challenged, and that most feared group, the totals. We reject this hierarchical vision-centered approach which threatens our common bond and our unified interests. While some of us may use visual techniques now and then, as blind people we recognize that vision is not a requirement for success in the world. Blindness is our primary distinction, and it gives us authenticity and power, but when we choose to determine our own direction and speak for ourselves, it transforms into synergy.

An important second distinction fuels the synergy of our movement—equality. Since our founding, we have taken responsibility for setting the standard of equality for the participation of the blind in society. We have rejected society’s second-class accommodations. We have never sought

greater advantages than our sighted peers, but we have insisted upon equality of opportunity and freedom from artificial barriers. Over time, we have raised the expectations for equal treatment. One example is our participation in voting for public officials. Blind people were once forced to have their paper ballot filled out by whomever the polling place assigned as a scribe—the blind did not have a choice. We fought for the right of blind people to vote independently by bringing a person of their own choosing into the voting booth. Today, we favor a new standard of equality where the blind use the same voting systems as every other voter with the expectation that the electronic machines will be fully accessible, and our ballots will look the same, allowing us to cast a vote independently and privately. We must continue to explore the limits and evaluate equality within our movement and throughout the broader society.

Equality contributes to our synergy in another important way—it strengthens our diversity. Blindness is not constrained by race, gender, economic status, or any of a thousand other characteristics. Therefore, if we are going to be a movement of blind people who synergize around equality, we must reflect a diverse range of blind people with a large variation in characteristics beyond blindness. We must continue to value and cultivate diversity as we have in the past, and we should guard against our diversity becoming a fracture that divides us as blind people.

I have been reflecting upon what we know about blind people throughout history and during the time of the National Federation of the Blind. A pattern of leadership is evident that I believe exemplifies the value we place on equality within our movement. In the stories

of blind people prior to our founding, most of the prominent figures are men, not women. Consider the nineteenth century essays of James Wilson that profiled blind people in a series of volumes entitled *Biography of the Blind*. Wilson profiles sixty-three blind individuals, but only seven are women. While a handful of other stories of blind women have surfaced since Wilson published his sketches in the 1800s, the record is still thin.

Women have faced social, economic, and political barriers that have created inequality compared to men, and their stories have been under recorded in history. Blind women, faced with the twin low expectations of being female and having the most feared disability, blindness, have been limited in opportunities to pursue their dreams. The lack of adequate training for blind people before the organized blind movement contributed to blind women being considered inadequate for even stereotypical roles in society. The full participation of blind women has been further complicated by efforts like the eugenics movement that reached its height in the early part of the twentieth century. Proponents of eugenics believed in selective breeding, which led to a movement to pass state laws requiring forced sterilization of the poor and disabled. These forced sterilization programs largely impacted women with disabilities and contributed to misconceptions about the capacity of the blind to be effective parents—a painful history we are still trying to overcome.

In contrast, the role of blind women within the National Federation of the Blind is clear and powerful. This evening I seek to highlight a sampling of the hundreds of female leaders of our movement whose stories illuminate the characteristics that have allowed us, as

diverse individuals who happen to be blind, to synergize a movement that cannot be divided.

At our organizing on November 16, 1940, there were sixteen blind people from seven states in attendance, and two of them were women who both served on the board of directors. The first was Mary McCann of Illinois, who was elected as secretary of our organization at that first meeting but only served for a short time. The other blind woman was Evelyn Burlingame of Pennsylvania, who was not elected to the board in 1940 but was elected as first vice president of the organization in 1942.

Let me pause briefly to note that Hazel tenBroek was also in attendance at the organizing, and her notes are the most substantive record we have of the proceedings. Although she was not blind, she was a significant force in the early development of the Federation. Mrs. tenBroek set the standard for what has been a proud line of deeply loved and admired sighted marchers in our movement.

Let us return to Evelyn, who was born in Pennsylvania in 1906. After graduating from the Overbrook School for the Blind, she worked as the lead stenographer in the legal department for an insurance company; later she managed a small business among other jobs. In her free time she worked to bring together many small community-based organizations of the blind into a statewide organization called the Pennsylvania Federation of the Blind (which officially came into existence in 1934). It was the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Federation that served as the backdrop for the constitutional meeting establishing the National Federation of the Blind. While early Federation leaders had to expend

considerable time and energy convincing blind people that we could gain synergy by directing the future through building our own organization, Evelyn already knew the value of organizing, and she was prepared to make personal sacrifices for the movement.

Evelyn's hard work, information sharing, and wise counsel to the Federation's President were likely factors contributing to her election to the national board. In the National Federation of the Blind we elect leaders to speak for us, but those leaders must be able to synthesize the hopes, dreams, and innovative approaches that the members bring forward. In that regard, Evelyn may get credit for the Federation's first major outreach and fundraising strategy. On November 9, 1941, she wrote to Dr. tenBroek to propose that we approach state and national unions to enlist their support in the Federation's cause and to give specific examples of the circumstances in her state. This idea was developed into a significant program for making connections and gathering financial resources for the young organization. Evelyn's early and active participation in our movement gave credibility to the notion that the blind can and should speak for themselves. For Evelyn the characteristic of blindness did not hold her back, and for the Federation the characteristic of blindness was most important to Evelyn's leadership in our movement.

Francis Lorraine Goranson was born in 1918 to farmers near Huron, South Dakota. She was the youngest daughter of the family and, like her older sister, she was blind and received an education from the South Dakota School for the Blind. In 1936 President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law the groundbreaking Randolph-Sheppard Act, giving blind individ-

uals opportunities to operate vending facilities on federal property. By the time Lorraine graduated from the school in 1938, she was aware of the new program and prepared to build her own future.

By the early months of 1940, South Dakota had two vending locations run by blind people and, determined not to be restricted to a life of low expectations, Lorraine took the initiative to secure the resources needed to open the third. She began by convincing the officials at the Huron post office to provide her with space for a stand. She then used her previous contacts at the local Kiwanis Club to make a skillful presentation that resulted in the club building out Lorraine's location and providing the early inventory of newspapers, magazines, candy, and cigars she needed to open the doors in April 1940. Lorraine is the first known woman to operate a facility under the Randolph-Sheppard program anywhere in the country.

Her early success did not leave her satisfied. She learned about the newly formed National Federation of the Blind through an editorial in the *All Story* magazine authored by Dr. tenBroek's mentor, Dr. Newel Perry. On February 7, 1941, she wrote to Dr. tenBroek expressing excitement about a movement for the blind to speak for themselves. In her

opening paragraph she notes, "I find that it is more difficult convincing my sighted friends of my capabilities, than the duty to be actually performed." She later shares her ambition and commitment, "I am writing you because I am interested in what can be done for the blind, and am ready and willing to do whatever I can at any time. To be frank, as I feel

I may be, I am so very anxious to get out and make a place in the world."

Lorraine possessed another important characteristic that distinguishes members of the Federation—hope for the future. In 1942 the characteristics of blindness, a drive for equality, and a hope for the future combined with a readiness to work led her to be elected to the Board of Directors of

the National Federation of the Blind. Her self-directed efforts to build opportunities out of the Randolph-Sheppard priority laid the foundation for the leadership we have provided to that program.

Another woman from the Midwest was effective in teaching the synergy of local organizations connecting into a national movement. Ada Bates-Tiernan was born in Coon Rapids, Iowa, in 1889. She was blinded in an accident at age five, and her parents sent her to Iowa's school for the blind, where she stayed until her graduation. In the early part of the twentieth century, Iowa had no



Francis Lorraine Goranson



The crowd claps during the 2018 banquet speech.

adult rehabilitation program, and Ada recognized that bonding together with other blind people was critical in creating opportunities for herself. She started by regularly attending the annual gatherings of the school's alumni group known as the Iowa Association of the Blind.

By 1941 Ada had moved to Des Moines where she was president of the local association. She met the tenBroeks while in Chicago, and a stream of information sharing began between them. Ada joined the Federation as an individual member since the Iowa association was interested only in the school for the blind locally. She understood that the new National Federation of the Blind was essential to bringing inspiration and innovative training practices to Iowa.

The hope and determination that came from a national movement fueled Ada's leadership of other blind advocates in Iowa. The Federation's National Convention was held in Des Moines in 1942, and Ada was critical in managing local details, including securing speakers. During that time the relationship between Ada and the tenBroeks developed into something more personal—what we would today describe as the Federation family. At the 1944 National Convention in Cleveland, Ada was elected to the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind. In later correspondence Ada demonstrates a deep commitment to supporting Dr. tenBroek and advises him on many matters. At the same time, she expresses her own doubts about whether she has the right talents to support the leadership where she has been asked to serve. During a series of correspondence from

February 1946, Dr. tenBroek expresses a deep belief in the talents Ada brings to the organization, a personal commitment to their friendship, and a faith in her capacity to provide leadership among the board members.

Ada served on the national board until 1948, and her story helps to illuminate another important characteristic of Federationists—leadership. She wondered if she was really the right person for the job, whether she had the qualities needed to serve, and whether she was adequate to work closely with such a dynamic force for equality as Dr. tenBroek. These are doubts many of us have experienced when considering the work of this great organization compared to the individual contributions we make—doubts that are often a result of our internalizing society's low expectations. When she did not believe in herself, the Federation believed in her. That is the bond of faith we pass from generation to generation in this movement. We believe in each other, and it is that element that brings out the potential for leadership in each of us. For Ada Tiernan her leadership was inspired by her participation in the organized blind movement, where the most important characteristics were that she was a blind person seeking equality, with

hope for the future, and a willingness to lead when called.

A woman who was not born in the United states and who was not blind at the time of

our founding came to be a force for sharing our message around the world. Isabelle Lyon Dean was born in 1896 in a fishing village on the northern coast of Scotland. At the age of twenty-eight, Isabelle and her husband, Dr. Alexander Grant, left Scotland to build their life together in the United States. In 1927 Isabelle began teaching in the Los Angeles County schools where, aided by her fluency in Spanish, she became a vocal advocate for

the sizable population of Mexican American students. In 1940 she further enhanced her teaching credentials by earning a PhD in comparative literature.

Her career took a turn when she developed glaucoma and, by the fall of 1948, Dr. Grant was totally blind. She found no hope among the agencies for the blind she visited, and her uncertainty grew regarding how to manage her job as vice principal at Belvedere Junior High School. Hope and opportunity returned to her when a friend introduced her to a blind man who was a member of the National Federation of the Blind—an encounter that put her on the road to mastering the skills of



Ada Bates-Tiernan

blindness, to internalizing our shared philosophy, and to becoming an active member in our California affiliate.

Dr. Grant's own determination, the unwavering support of her professional colleagues in the school, and the shared bond with her sisters and brothers in the Federation assisted in rejecting the school district's attempt to force her to retire based on her disability. Yet, Dr. Grant would endure more than a decade of maneuvers by the district to sabotage her work by regularly shifting her assigned school and the students on her case-load. The discrimination she faced caused her real pain. One example is that the district assigned her a sighted teaching assistant to be with her at all times. When the sighted person left the classroom, the door was required to be locked as a safety precaution—a circumstance she described as "the blind teacher in a glass cage."

As the first blind teacher in the California public school system, Dr. Grant worked tirelessly so that future generations of blind educators would not face similar barriers. She advocated for new state laws, organized conferences for blind educators, and innovated quality educational services for blind children based on the authentic experience of

blind people. A trip to an international conference in 1957 sparked a passion for working on issues of education and self-organization of the blind outside of the United States, which would drive the final twenty years of her life.

During the 1959-60 school year, she took a sabbatical from teaching to make a remarkable journey through twenty-three countries, traveling alone, with the aim to learn from the educational and living conditions of other

blind people, and to raise expectations through self-organization. She chronicled her adventures in a manuscript entitled, "Crooked Paths Made Straight," which went unpublished until 2016. She would make many more international trips and correspond regularly with hundreds of blind people around the world. Significantly, 1960 also marked Dr. Grant's election to the Board of the National Federation of the Blind on which she served until her death in 1977. In everything

she did, no matter the continent, she was a constant promoter and information gatherer for the Federation. Blindness was what brought Dr. Grant to the Federation family, but it was only one of many dynamic characteristics that added synergy to our movement.



Isabelle Grant

Isabel Grant was most certainly influenced by a blind educator from New Mexico named Pauline Gomez. Blind from birth, Pauline was educated at the New Mexico School for the Blind, where she graduated in 1940. A scholarship from the Perkins Institute for the Blind gave her an opportunity to meet blind people from around the country and set her on the path to be a teacher. In the fall of 1941, Pauline became the first blind student to enroll at the University of New Mexico, where she had to pioneer methods for gaining access to instructional materials and navigating the campus independently.



Pauline Gomez

Upon successful graduation from the university, Pauline returned home to Santa Fe, where she planned to teach in the public schools. Despite her qualifications, the public-school administrators could not imagine a blind teacher working with children, but Pauline was determined to build her own opportunity to share her talents with the children of Santa Fe. On October 1, 1946, Los Niños Kindergarten School opened in the back room of Pauline's home. There were eight children in her first class, and Pauline served as the only teacher, in addition to managing the administrative details of the school. From that modest beginning, Pauline expanded her school over the following decades, serving the children of all of the most prominent families in Santa Fe.

Pauline's school had been open almost a decade when she assisted in organizing the New Mexico affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind in 1956. When Pauline became president of the affiliate in 1960, she began aggressively working on legislative proposals to improve opportunities for the blind. A keen educator, Pauline recognized the efficacy of Kenneth Jernigan's Iowa training program using the Federation's philosophy. She wanted that level of training in New Mexico. In 1963 she persuaded the state legislature to study

the value of establishing an adult rehabilitation training center in the state, which threatened the monopoly that the workshops for the blind had on the employment pipeline. Workshop supervisors attended the 1963 Convention of the NFB of New Mexico where they were able to coerce their blind employees into electing four agency supporters to the affiliate's board of directors. Pauline took swift action to guard against the hostile takeover of the organized blind movement by sending affiliate documents to the President of the Federation, securing the treasury, and reorganizing the affiliate, all of this while running her own growing school in Santa Fe.

Whether it was in the president's chair or another position within the Federation, Pauline had a hand in more victories than we can do justice to this evening. From leading New Mexico to be the first state in the nation to pass the Federation's model White Cane

Law in 1967, to developing the teachers division of the National Federation of the Blind in 1970, for Pauline the Federation was personal. Her community contributions outside of the Federation were extraordinary and widely celebrated. Her school was admired for its quality and innovative practices. It would have been easy for her to decide that the organized blind movement did not matter. Except for her it did matter. She was a blind person, she felt the pain of discrimination, and she understood the synergy of equality. The National Federation of the Blind fueled Pauline's hope for the future, and we helped her to know she could do something to shape that future. She brought perspective, diversity, knowledge, and determination to us, and we gave to her the place where her blindness was a most important factor in her leadership, but the least important factor in her success.

There may be no better example of the role blind women have played in the National Federation of the Blind, than the pioneering, tough, persistent, dedicated, and generous women who founded the three training programs that proudly call themselves Federation training centers. While these women, Joanne Wilson (Louisiana), Diane McGeorge (Colorado), and Joyce Scanlan (Minnesota) built upon the philosophy and methodology tested by Kenneth Jernigan, they made significant personal sacrifices and took risks that few

would even dream to pursue. While each of these women has an extraordinary personal story, they share a common bond. They are all blind people who, until they came to know the heartbeat of our movement, had internalized some of the misconceptions about blindness that threaten to hold each of us back. It was their coming to be part of our movement which allowed the rest of us to benefit from their leadership. Did the Federation believe in them more, or did they believe in the Federation more? The answer most certainly is yes. Each of these women have brought their talent and energy to our cause, and their lives have been enriched by being part of us. From the perspective of history—now having thirty years or more of graduates from these centers—we can be certain that all of us are stronger because these women invested in

equality for the blind. In case anyone doubts the impact these three women have had on our movement, how about a cheer from anyone who has been impacted by the programs and graduates of our NFB training centers?

There are thousands of other examples of contributions small and great from blind people who happen to be women. From managing our scholarship program over the past fifty years, editing our publications,

leading pickets and writing protest songs, directing our research and training institute, answering general information calls, testi-



Ever Lee Hairston



The head table gives President Riccobono a standing ovation.

fighting in Congress, building affiliates while raising families, commanding local legislatures, pioneering new teaching techniques, managing the operations of our Washington Seminar, directing fundraisers, to leading or serving wherever this movement has needed them, blind women have added synergy to our organization. That they were women was not nearly as important as the fact that they were blind people who believed in equality, had a hope for the future, and were willing to participate actively in the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind. From Arlene Hill practicing the techniques that blind people use to teach blind people to travel, to Ever Lee Hairston delivering a powerful address to the next generation of blind leaders from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, we have overcome because of the everyday and extraordinary blind people that have given synergy to our movement.

Tonight I call on us to celebrate these individuals and the thousands of others I have not named by committing ourselves to carrying the march forward. Tonight we celebrate the diversity of our organized blind movement, a movement that brings together blind people for a common purpose. We are blind people who come with varying characteristics—different races, sexual orientations, religions, political points of view, gender identities, disabilities, economic circumstances, languages, talents, interests, and priorities. Yet, in everything that matters we are one as blind people. We cannot be divided. We share a quest for equality and hope for the future. It is our diversity that gives us depth. It is our long-standing commitment to work together that gives us strength. It is our synergy that makes us unstoppable.

Tomorrow we must again pick up the tools of progress. There are those that seek to divide us and slow us down. There are those who say we do not represent those blind people who have some usable vision. There are those who claim that for us equality means only for blind people who do not have other disabilities. There are those who tell the story that in order to be one of us you must fit a certain type. To those who share these false claims about us we say, we, the blind, speak for ourselves. Our movement is for blind people, all blind people, and we will not let others who are not committed to equality and hope for the future stand in our way. We will set the direction and the pace, and we invite all blind people to contribute to our synergy.

We will not go back to a time when we must fight the agencies for the blind for recognition. We reject, as we have before, accreditation without authenticity in an effort to validate mediocrity. We leave behind the days when technologies were built and later made usable by the blind. We move past, but do not forget, the employment shackles of the sheltered workshops that pay pennies per hour. In doing so we recognize that there are those who wish

to return to the good old days when the blind received what little charity was offered, and the experts in the field were qualified by the amount of eyesight not insight. To the extent that the past belongs to others, we declare once again this evening that the future is ours. Our future is filled with love, hope, and determination. Our future is distinguished by leadership, collaboration, and authenticity. And our future, as has been our pattern since 1940, is unified in the common bond of faith that we hold with each other as blind people.

My sisters and my brothers, blindness does not define us or our future. It does serve the most important role of bringing us together in this movement, a movement that is built on equality, a movement that feeds our hope for the future, a movement that empowers us to lead in all aspects of life, a movement where we come seeking a place to belong and where we stay because of those we befriend. Let us recommit to our march toward equality. Let us welcome new members into the diverse family that we share. Let us direct our own future and reach for unimagined possibilities. With synergy, let us go build the National Federation of the Blind.



NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF THE BLIND

Live the life you want.

The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. You can live the life you want; blindness is not what holds you back.