So, what is the National Federation of the blind?  You may already know that it is the largest organization of blind people in the country, with over 50,000 members, but I really can’t tell you what the NFB is, without talking about the history of the organization.

73 years ago when the NFB got started, our mission was first to make sure that blind people would not continue to go hungry, and we remedied that by helping to pass Social Security Laws that benefited the blind.

What it did was it forced blind people to either practically starve, or live with, and depend on a relative.  So, the NFB fought for Social Security to include people with disabilities.

Next we wanted to move from establishing security for the blind, to creating opportunity, so we pushed for policy, making it illegal to prohibit the blind from being kept off State and Federal Registers for employment.  We also pushed for the enforcement of the Randolph Shepherd Act, which had been largely ignored by most governmental entities up until that time.

Since then, we have fought at least a thousand other battles both large and small, from pressuring Apple to make their products accessible, to making sure that blind people can take the BAR Exam without discrimination.  We have moved our focus from Opportunity to equality and back again, most times taking two steps forward, one step back.

On a state level last year, the NFB of Tennessee is doing things like protecting the rights of blind parents to have and keep a family.  I’m not sure how many of you are aware of this, but it is fairly normal when a blind person is going through a divorce, for the sighted spouse to say something like this, oh my wife is blind, and consequently, she is an unfit mother.  It doesn’t matter if this mother has done an exemplary job raising her kids for the past ten years or not.   The courts tend to go along with the reasoning just because they don’t know anything about being blind.

Until last year, two thirds of all state child well fair laws in the United States allowed children to be taken away from a parent with a disability solely based on the condition of disability. Now Tennessee children cannot be taken away from us simply because we are blind.

Also last year the NFB of Tennessee fought to get a VR policy changed that penalized students with disabilities attending private colleges. I won’t get into all the technical terms, but VR was counting a merit scholarship that a gentlemen attending Belmont was receiving as a comparable benefit, and also counting institutional grants as comparable benefits. VR was paying practically nothing towards tuition for private school students and they were going deeply in debt. Thanks to the NFB of Tennessee pushing this issue the young man at Belmont is now getting around $8,000 a semester where he was getting nothing before. Needless to say, institutional grants are no longer considered comparable benefits and VR can no longer manipulate students with disabilities into attending state schools.

We have a piece of legislation this year in the Tennessee house and senate that will create a task force that will make recommendations to the house and senate that will insure that digital content in college and higher education be accessible to people with disabilities.

**In addition, the National Federation of the Blind  is now accepting applications to our national scholarship program from freshmen beginning college this fall on up through graduate students. The 30 scholarships range in value from $3,000 up to $12,000, and include a trip to Orlando this July for the world’s largest convention for the blind.  Applications must be received by March 31, 2014. To learn more and to apply, please visit** [www.nfb.org/scholarships](http://www.nfb.org/scholarships)**.**

**We also hope to have our own NFB of Tennessee academic scholarships available next year at our 2015 state convention in Chattanooga. Be on the lookout for information.**