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## Accessibility Matters

(Editor’s Note: Beginning with this issue of the Braille Spectator we are initiating a new column called “Accessibility Matters.” Please send ideas and materials to Judy Rasmussen [judyras@sprynet.com](mailto:judyras@sprynet.com).)

In the 2017 session of the Maryland General Assembly we sought legislation to improve the enforcement of the states existing accessibility laws. We wanted to establish consequences for vendors who sold inaccessible software and information technology to the state. We also wanted the state to assign responsibility for accessibility to an accessibility officer so that products could be tested to ensure real accessibility. Currently, two often, vendors check the box that their product is accessible when it is not. Many thanks to the Senate of Maryland for their willingness to pass SB439. The bill did not become law because the House Health Government Operations Committee failed to take action. However, the committee did instruct the Maryland Department of Disabilities to work with the Department of Information Technology and the National Federation of the Blind to remove accessibility barriers. The committee instructions read in part: “By December 1, 2017 please submit to the Committee an update on any progress that has been made on the issue and recommendations regarding any potential legislation for consideration next session.”

On March 1 Judy Rasmussen offered the following testimony to the House Health Government Operations Committee on HB1140/SB439 to demonstrate the problems that state employees face due to lack of accessibility.

“I am here to testify in support of HB1140/SB439. I have been a blind state employee for the past 11 years. In the past two or three years, doing my job has become increasingly difficult due to changes the state has made in terms of how we access our e-mail, scan documents, and submit our time sheets.

It is quite clear to me and those with visual impairments that nobody is "minding the store" when it comes to testing and implementation of the software which we are expected to use to provide timely customer service, one of Governor Hogan's priorities for state employees.

Let me begin with submission of time sheets. Recently, state employees were asked to submit their time sheets electronically, which is not bad in and of itself. However, Maryland purchased timekeeping software called Workday. I know for certain that no one who used our standard screen reading software, JAWS (Job Access With Speech) or ZoomText (which magnifies the print on the screen) tested the Workday software before it was purchased, or for that matter, until a few weeks before it was scheduled to be rolled out. When some state personnel were finally given a preview of the software and raised accessibility issues, they were told "This system was designed for the many, not for the few."

Just a couple of weeks before implementation and mandatory use, employees with visual impairments were asked to begin testing the Workday software. The hundreds of hours of time spent by nearly 20 people to point out the inaccessibility of the software in its current form, not to mention conference calls and face-to-face meetings was astounding and shameful. While some improvements were made, there was still much work to be done to make Workday easily usable with screen readers. The response we continued to receive was that the accessible version would be released in a few months.

In March an updated version of the Workday software is scheduled to be released. Since the "accessible" version is still not ready, state employees with visual impairments will be given a very short time to determine whether the new standard version is usable. According to the current timetable, the new Workday is scheduled to be released on March 10. To my knowledge, no timetable has been given for the release of the accessible version. Again, we are playing catch up and forced to find workarounds to accomplish the essential task of submitting time sheets when they are due. If "the many" had found this software too difficult to use, I am sure that implementation would have been delayed until its usability issues had been corrected.

Sending And Receiving Secure e-mail: Exchanging private information in a secure manner is essential in this day and age. In an effort to send confidential information in a secure manner, the state now requires employees to send and receive e-mail via a system called Virtrue. Again, nobody tested Virtrue to see if it would be reliably usable by people who use screen reading software.

The concept is that you verify who you are and then unlock the e-mail you have been sent. The difficulty arises when the Virtrue software often won't, for whatever reason, allow people who use screen readers to unlock the e-mail, which defeats the whole purpose of sending it securely. In addition, reading attachments is nearly impossible in this system, which often renders the e-mail useless, unless the blind employee is able to obtain assistance from a sighted employee. While blind employees have done what they could to see that changes are made, Virtrue remains a difficult and unproductive program to use. Again, employees with visual impairments have been left behind because forethought was not given to whether Virtrue is an efficient and accessible program to use by all state employees.

Scanning Documents: In an effort to reduce the number of paper files created, the state instituted a policy whereby all important documents were to be scanned and then uploaded into a database. All of the scanners which have been purchased have flat screens and are in no way usable by blind employees. Once the files are scanned, they contain only images of the paper documents. This means that the words appear on the screen, but screen reading programs need the actual text in order to present it to the user. If a blind person wanted to apply for a position as a secretary, he/she would be unable to perform the essential functions of the job because of the inaccessibility of the scanning process.

Outlook and Google Chrome: State employees will soon all be required to use the Google Chrome web browser to access their Gmail accounts. This has created another problem for employees who use screen reading software. Accessing multiple calendars in Google Chrome is nearly impossible. While e-mail can be read using Google Chrome, the process which must be employed by screen reader users is inefficient and requires many keystrokes to accomplish a task that would only take seconds if the system were accessible. Due to these productivity issues, all blind employees have been allowed to continue using Microsoft Outlook to access their Gmail accounts. This sounds good in theory. However, every time an update is made, or whenever the system goes offline, Outlook doesn't synchronize with Google, and it is often difficult to get back online quickly.

If the procurement article is amended as proposed in HB1140/SB439, nonvisual accessibility will become a standard operating procedure, rather than an afterthought.”

## Federationists Tell Their Stories

Editor’s note: The following six stories were originally posted on the NFBMD Facebook page. We are reprinting them because of the inspiration and hope they provide and in case you missed them. Look for additional stories in the next issue. Many thanks to our Facebook committee ably chaired by Karen Anderson and all of the authors for sharing why they are Federationists.

### Ronza Othman

I was born just a few months after my parents and five older siblings came to the United States as Palestinian refugees. When I was 14 months old, my uncle noticed that “something wasn’t right” and convinced my mother to take me to the eye doctor. My family learned that I was legally blind, but we had come from a culture where people with disabilities are hidden in back rooms and don’t have opportunities to participate in society. And so “blind” is really a bad word. In the Arab culture, it’s not just not respectable to be blind, it’s something to hide because it shames the entire family.

My mother made it her mission to find every doctor who could suggest treatments. When she accepted that treatment wasn’t an option, she shifted her goal to finding every teacher who could teach me. She was going to make sure that I would live a full, meaningful, independent life regardless of blindness. She refused to hide me, even though we didn’t use the word blind. I learned how to read, how to write, and how to use what little sight I had to get along as though I were sighted. I used some alternative techniques related to cooking, construction, and non-academic tasks. I just didn’t know they were non-visual techniques – they were just the way that my mom or siblings taught me to do things. I did well academically, but I suffered from eye strain, headaches, and severe back pain from leaning forward to bring my face inches from the words. I remember thinking often: “There’s got to be a better way.”

And thus I didn’t really realize I was blind or that the word applied to me until one day in college when I was walking across the campus and dove out of the way of a drunk driver. I stumbled into a construction hole I hadn’t seen. I broke my ankle, and I thought: “There’s got to be a better way.”

I began attending law school where I had to read and analyze a great deal in a short time. I could not visually keep up with the assignments and I was falling farther and farther behind my classmates. Once again, I thought: “There’s got to be a better way.”

I stumbled across a scholarship program, figuratively this time, for the National Federation of the Blind. I applied and, though I was not chosen for the national program, I was chosen for a State scholarship. That is the first exposure I had to the myriad of better ways. I was invited to a State Convention, where my parents only allowed me to go if I brought a family member or family friend along to stay in the hotel room with me because where I come from, “Muslim girls don’t sleep outside of their fathers’ houses without a chaperone.” The NFB accepted my cultural idiosyncrasies even though bringing someone along to the hotel room was contrary to some of the goals of lodging winners at the convention in the first place.

I met lots of people who were successful blind people. I thought I had been successful, but when I attended that first NFB convention and met over 100 other blind people who were out in the world reading independently without eye strain and headaches, traveling independently and avoiding construction holes with long white canes, using technology, human readers, and other methods to access information simultaneously with the sighted world, and all of the other things to which I didn’t even know existed…I realized the NFB knew what I didn’t – not just that there was a better way, but how I could find all the better ways. And this is #WhyImAFederationist

### Rachel Olivero

As a child I was blessed with family that always encouraged me. There was never an outward hint of, “we have no idea how you can do that as a blind person.” Who knows what they were actually thinking, but the message was that of positivity and encouragement. Fortunately, as a general rule I embraced that philosophy. What I wasn’t always sure of was the actual how of doing certain things without sight.

In 2001, I was invited by then National Federation of the blind of Wisconsin president Mark Riccobono to attend the national convention in Philadelphia. This would be the first time I would travel without family or a school chaperone. My new federation friends assured me that they had it all under control and there would be no issues. In fact, they had it so under control that Mr. Riccobono challenged me to change planes, at O’Hare airport, wearing sleep shades. At this time in my life, I was still referring to myself as, “visually impaired,” so it was a bit of a step out of my comfort zone to try this. Nevertheless, with a small amount of trepidation, I took the proffered sleep shades and off we went. Sixteen years later, I don’t recall the details of the experience, except to say we successfully evaded an attempt to place us in the “holding area for people like you”. No cart for us, thank you very much. We walked. On our own. News flash: No one died. The experience was a positive one and left me feeling empowered. That feeling continued, and grew, throughout the week as I met, and was frequently put to work by, blind students, computer science professionals, teachers, parents, and every other label imaginable. No matter the differences, the one thing they all had in common was their blindness, and their unending confidence that blindness was a characteristic, not a limitation. I left that week in Philadelphia knowing that this organization was something I wanted to be a part of. That convention gave me the knowledge that there were other blind people that would be there if I ever needed suggestions or support.

I’m lucky, and thankful, that blindness hasn’t caused a lot of resistance in my life. From the support of family during my early years, to the encouragement of friends, to the emergency management director who I never saw blink an eye when I said, “I want to take the CERT class. You can teach me to get people out from under a collapsed wall too, right?” to all those who supported my gender transition. I’ve generally never felt that I couldn’t do something as a blind person. However, it’s the love, hope, and determination of my family in the National Federation of the Blind, that has given me the extra strength and answered the, ‘but how do I…” And that is #WhyImAFederationist

### Isabel Espinales

I was born in Nicaragua. At 10 years old, I was forced to leave my country to escape death threats because of my father’s reputation in the military. I came to America, went through school, and then worked as a nurse in hospitals and nursing homes. I was first exposed to blindness by my patients; yet, I only saw the first stages of vision loss and not the aftermath of how they succeeded.

Then I too became blind. I lost my vision 2 years ago due to Diabetes. I felt that my life completely stopped. I felt stuck, overwhelmed, and so depressed that I considered suicide. But thanks to God, I was surrounded by family and friends who supported me and refused to let me quit. I worried about what job I could have, how I could get around, and who would understand me. But the hardest part about blindness was that I had to depend on people after being independent for so many years.

One year ago, I decided to get training in an adult blindness program. It showed me that I can go back to being independent and it also introduced me to the National Federation of the Blind. I participated in the 6-Dot Dash race, which was the first time I was surrounded by so many blind people. Soon after, I was asked by Sharon Maneki and Melissa Riccobono to volunteer as a translator for Spanish-speaking parents who were learning tools to better raise their blind children. I fell in love with the kids and the parents. I fell in love with the NFB because of all that they do to pave the way for blind persons and to spread the message that it is okay to be blind. I felt that I found a new family. At my first national convention, I was initially overwhelmed by even more blind people in one area. Yet I soon realized that I was surrounded by talented, powerful, and professional people who achieved their goals, and blindness was not an obstacle for them. That gave me more power to press forward and finish the training program, go back to school, become a Physical Therapist, and reenter the medical field with boldness. Meanwhile, I will also continue helping the NFB in any way that I can, both in my state and nationally.

To anyone who is losing vision or is blind, I encourage you not to give up. That should never be an option. You have to get your mind together, get yourself together, and keep pushing forward. If you need a family, a group of people who understand and who fight every day for equality and opportunity for blind people, then consider joining the National Federation of the Blind. For me, this was the greatest opportunity to use my gift of advocacy and stand up for the rights of blind persons. It also ignited my passion to encourage and educate more Spanish-speaking blind persons and their families. The tools, resources, and support that I received are meant to be passed on to others. Because of the Federation, I feel that I am a part of change. I am learning, growing, and sharing with others. #WhyImAFederationist

### Teresa Romero Graham

My name is Teresa; most people refer to me as the blind girl’s mom or Naudia’s mom...

I walked into the doors of the National Federation of the Blind in 2008 when Naudia was three years old. I felt like I was the only parent who had a blind child which was worrisome as a parent. Ms. Farber from the infant and toddlers program was coming to my home at the time. She was teaching me how to teach Naudia certain tactical skills such as, potty training, walking, etc.

In December of 2008, I was told that Naudia was three years-old and it would be time for school. I enrolled her into my local school not knowing any better. The school began to ask me questions on how I wanted my daughter to learn. At that time I had no clue, but I attended an IEP meeting where I sat in front of a panel of four people that asked questions. The option to learn by audio seemed like the best option, in my opinion. I assumed that since they were teachers, they would know best. I also assumed this was routine. However, when they continued to question me I felt as if they were unsure about to teach Naudia everything she needs to learn/know before Kindergarten. I felt my expectations was fading away as I sat across the table it was overwhelming to say the least.

Summer time came by and the school said that a meeting for ESY would be held. What was ESY? They said it’s just summer school and to not worry because Naudia didn’t need to attend; great, I thought! When I attended the ESY, I found out that the county I lived in couldn’t afford the ESY program. It wasn’t so much that she didn’t need it, I just thought it was unfair. Someone attending that meeting whispered in my ear as if it was a secret society, and suggested I contact the NFB. I went on the internet to do my research. The next morning I was waiting at the NFB, waiting for them to open. As I pulled up to their beautiful building, I stared with amazement when seeing so many people with canes walking alone; it was an enlightening moment.

I approached the front desk receptionist and informed her that I have a blind child, what do I do? The lady said she would get someone for me. They put me in contact with Susan Polanski who is Jason’s mother. She said she wasn’t located in the building, but would be happy to talk and answer any questions or concerns that I may have. It was hard for me to open up initially, but a wonderful thing at the same time. It has been a joyous experience more than anything else. My mind was eased in knowing that I was doing what I thought was right for my daughter and the joy came from seeing my attitude towards blindness change.

Susan and I stayed in touch on a constant basis; she had so much information to offer. She gave me hope and shared her useful knowledge. She inspired me to be the parent I needed to be for my child. Within months, I looked at my circumstances in a new light and knew that I needed to prepare for my daughter’s future. The answer of “I don’t know” was not an answer any longer. I wanted her to grow up in a place where she felt “normal”, so I decided to get more involved with the NFB.

I learned that the more I reached out, the more they would respond about the various types of situations, but one that would change her life completely in knowing my rights and what an INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM truly is; I no longer felt alone. I met countless families and other blind adults who I interviewed with and I still continue to do so. I met a man by the name of Marco Carranza at my first state convention and followed him around as he would interact and walk with his cane with such confidence. He appeared happy as if that was unheard of, and I can smile about that now. That was my “wow” moment and decided that’s how I want my daughter to be like Mr. Carranza. I encouraged my other kids to come along anytime and they too have learned so much.

Many people comment they could not do what I do as if raising a blind child with such high expectations was difficult, but I respond “I do what you do with yours and my other two”. Someone once said to me, “Why do I pretend that my child isn’t blind and why would I live in denial?” I can laugh about that now. This journey has not been easy, but who’s to say raising children in general was going to be easy. Regardless of such, I thank God for guiding me to the NFB and meeting my NFB family. I feel the genuine love and they truly care and stand up for equality. #WhyImAfederationist

### Emma Mitchell

My name is Emma Jane Mitchell, and I am 21 years old. In 2012, I went into a medically induced coma for 2 years after a surgery to correct my esophagus. When I woke up, I had to use a breathing tube, and that’s when I realized something was wrong with my vision. I can now only see shadows in my peripheral vision and all of my central vision is gone.

My high school denied services for me even though they were necessary. In order to finish schooling, I had to pretend that I could see. I would get A+s in the courses, but as soon as I had to go to an exam without a scribe, I would fail because I could not see it at all. I graduated high school, but I knew that I needed some more skills to be even more successful. I did research the summer before my freshman year of college to find ways to learn braille, technology, and cane  
travel. I successfully taught myself how to use VoiceOver on my Mac and phone. Also during that time, I called the National Federation of the Blind and they connected me with the Vocational Rehabilitation agency in Pennsylvania. This connection enabled me to get more  
technology for college. I also gained enough confidence to teach myself how to use a cane while simultaneously navigating in my wheelchair.

The next thing I wanted was to find people who understood my situation and could encourage me. My braille teacher, Conchita Hernandez, is very involved in the NFB, and she encouraged me to do likewise. I spoke with the President of the Maryland Association of Blind Students, Chris Nusbaum, who then invited me to start calling into their monthly conference calls. I now serve on the Membership committee and legislative committee for MDABS. My first convention took place in Baltimore, MD in October 2016. It was very overwhelming and eye-opening, and I left feeling like I have a new family, a new place where I belong.

I am a Federationists because The National Federation of the Blind empowers me to be the woman I want to be. It has also brought me many long-lasting relationships with other blind people that I will never forget, such as Jason Edward Polansky. The federation also gave me the confidence to apply for the Honors program at George Washington University, where I go to school. I am now an honors student and am living the life I want in college. [#WhyImAFederationist](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/whyimafederationist?source=feed_text&story_id=1325895874132961)

### Karen Anderson

I came to the Federation as a high school senior looking for free money. I was pretty sure I knew all about “those people,” they were crazy, radicle, all about independence, and I wanted nothing to do with them. But, I decided that applying for the scholarship couldn’t hurt, and when I was offered one it seemed silly to turn down a chance at free money and a weekend in a hotel. When my friend, who also happened to be a member of the scholarship committee, told me that she thought I should run for secretary of the student division, I was more than a little hesitant. But, since I wanted the free money, I decided to try to impress her by agreeing to run for office. Much to my shock, I won the election, which meant I was now committed, at least for a year.

The next year I attended a student leadership seminar in Baltimore, traveled to my first national convention, and participated in Youth Slam. I began to realize that I was surrounded, not by the crazy people I had expected, but by an entire group of people who believed in me. They saw potential in me that I never would have imagined, and with their encouragement I began doing things I never dreamed were possible.

I have not always lived up to the high expectations my friends in the Federation set for me, but I have never felt shunned or rejected. During a time in my life when I felt like I was severely failing at pretty much everything, my friends in the Federation gave me the wake-up call I badly needed, and then helped me obtain the blindness skills that would allow me to be successful. Even on the hard days I knew they loved me, and that I had a whole organization cheering me on.

I have been a member of the federation for more than ten years now, and it has helped shape me into the confident blind woman I am. Because of the connections I have made, I am employed, and spend my days sharing the encouragement and lessons in confidence I have received with other blind people. My hope is that they realize their potential and live the lives they want. #WhyImAFederationist

## 50TH ANNIVERSARY CONVENTION HIGHLIGHTS

**By: Sharon Maneki**

Every state convention has its own high points and special memories. This was especially true of our 50th anniversary convention which was held at the Baltimore Marriott Inner Harbor at Camden Yards on the weekend of October 28 – 30, 2016. This convention claimed many firsts. It was the first time in decades that we held a convention in Baltimore City. We had a special welcome message from Jim Hunter, one of the radio broadcasters for the Orioles. He explained how he changes his mindset between describing the game on the radio and commenting on the game on television. This venue enabled us to offer Friday afternoon tours to Oriole Park at Camden Yards and to the Westminster Hall & Burying Grounds. This Halloween weekend provided the perfect backdrop for the tour of the Burying Ground which includes the final resting places of Edgar Allen Poe, Sam Smith, and General James McHenry.

This convention featured the debut performance of the Braille is Beautiful Players. The blood- curdling scream at the end of Friday night’s production of the radio drama, “Sorry Wrong Number,” will long haunt the memories of everyone who attended. All of the performers, including both new and experienced readers, delivered their parts by reading Braille.

Convention activities also included the first ever NFB of Maryland Crab Race fundraiser. Many thanks to the crab racers Judy Rasmussen, AKA Fearless Crab; Michelle Clark, AKA Cool Crab; Ellana Crew, AKA Baby Crab; Liam Lindsay, AKA Diamond Crab; Anil Lewis, AKA Sebastian (of Disney’s Little Mermaid Fame); and Jessie Hartle, AKA King Crab. Many thanks also to everyone who placed bets on their favorite crabs. I am sure we will do this race again since it was great fun and a huge success. Will Fearless Crab be able to defend her title next year?

On a more serious note, all of the living past presidents of the NFB of Maryland were on hand to address the convention. We were pleased that Jim Omvig addressed the banquet remotely from his home in Iowa. Dr. Marc Maurer spoke about moving the national headquarters from Iowa to its present location in Baltimore, in 1978. Dr. Michael Gosse told us how he overcame his struggles with state and federal bureaucracies. Today, his company, Data Speech Computer Solutions, Inc. is recognized as a minority business. Melissa Riccobono was part of a panel describing how we are making systemic changes in the local school systems by requiring more orientation and mobility instruction for blind students. As you can observe, all of the living presidents of the NFB of Maryland remain active leaders in our movement.

We were honored to have Brian Frosh, the Attorney General of Maryland, address the convention on the subject of Protecting Civil Rights. We look forward to continuing to work with him on voting and other issues.

The banquet is always a special feature of every convention. Our Key Note speaker at the banquet was Gary Wunder. Gary’s speech demonstrated why he is the editor of The Braille Monitor. His address was thought provoking. We especially enjoyed stories about his childhood. We awarded two scholarships to college students, Erin Daring and Jason Polansky. Erin is a student at Montgomery Community College, who plans to be a teacher of blind students. Jason is a student at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Both are active in the student division, Erin is the treasurer of the Maryland Association of Blind Students and Jason is the Treasurer of the Pennsylvania Association of the Blind Students.

In addition to celebrating our 50th anniversary, we also celebrated the passage of the Maryland Equal Employment Act which will eliminate the practice of paying persons with disabilities less than the minimum wage by 2020. We were very pleased to recognize Delegate Jeffrey Waldstreicher, the House sponsor of this bill. Three members from People on the Go, Ken Capone, Matt Rice, and Tammy Goldsmith were also recognized for their tireless efforts in the enactment of this legislation.

In every convention, members talk about why they are Federationists and how the Federation has helped them live the life they want. This year we had memorable presentations from Sandra Burchette, a vivacious, active senior, Belinda Hooks, who has worked in the accounting department of the National Federation of the Blind for 17 years, and longtime Federationist Tom Ley. We were very happy that Tom was able to join us at this convention, and we wish him well in his continuing battle with cancer. The panel presentation entitled ‘Together with Love, Hope and Determination, We Help the Newly Blind’ was a great reminder of our major focus to engage our members. The panel presentation by John Paré, Nikki Jackson and Gabe Cazares on how they live the lives they want, gave testimony to the reality of this philosophy. To listen to their stories again go to <https://www.nfbmd.org/success>.

Once again, we were pleased to have the participation of all of Maryland’s service providers at the convention. A special thanks to BISM not only for being a major sponsor of the convention, but also for its generous anniversary gift. I was pleased to be able to remind us of our many accomplishments throughout the last 50 years in my presidential report which is available both in this newsletter and on the website. To review the five resolutions passed at our convention, go to <https://www.nfbmd.org/advocacy>. Don’t miss Anna Kresmer’s article, elsewhere in this issue, on Maryland activities before the creation of NFBMD.

Be sure to join us for inspiration, information, and fun in Towson at the 51st convention on November 10, 11 and 12. I am sure there will be some interesting surprises.

## The Spirit of the Federation in Maryland before NFBMD

Anna Kresmer, Archivist, Jacobus tenBroek Library, NFB Jernigan Institute, Baltimore, MD.

(Editor’s note: The material in this article came from a talk that Anna Kresmer gave at our 2016 State Convention. It clearly illustrates that she is a talented archivist. We are lucky to have such a good researcher and storyteller. )

Good morning Maryland! I am thrilled to be here with you today to speak about one of my favorite topics: the history of the National Federation of the Blind! The story of the NFB in the state of Maryland is long and eventful, but something that all of us can be proud of. Fifty years is an immense achievement and I would like to congratulate all of you, both those in the room and those who could not be here today. But I also want to thank those who came before us. Without the foundation they laid down, this affiliate might have turned out very differently. I speak both of the leaders who formed this organization in 1966, like Ned Graham and John T. McCraw, and those who came after them, like Sharon Maneki, Marc Maurer, and Melissa Riccobono. But the history of the organized blind movement in Maryland, and its involvement with the NFB, goes back much further than just fifty years. It is this history that I want to talk to you about today.

The organized blind movement in Maryland actually dates back to 1927 and its roots are deeply entwined with the city of Baltimore. In 1927, five blind men came together in Baltimore and created the Maryland Camp for the Blind. At first merely a social group for blind men, within a year these men had grown their membership; expanded their scope to include legislative, commercial, educational, and philanthropic work; changed their name to the Blind Brotherhood of Maryland; and received incorporation status from the state. Their motto up until the 1960s was “Light Kindly Lead” and they occupied offices on Eutaw Street near North Ave for many years. The Brotherhood continued to grow throughout the 1930s and although they remained mainly a social club limited to Baltimore area, they maintained an active legislative committee. One of their early significant achievements was helping to pass the state’s first White Cane Act in 1939, which would make Maryland the sixth state to pass such a law.

In 1935 the Social Security Act, which provided the first federal pension for the blind, was passed without any input from blind people; the final straw which set in motion the founding of the NFB in 1940. Eager to become a national movement able to deal directly with the federal government, the fledgling Federation immediately began to seek out existing like-minded organizations of the blind across the country. President Jacobus tenBroek reached out to the Blind Brotherhood of Maryland with an offer of affiliation in early 1941. However, by this time the Brotherhood appears to have slowed down and become a more sedentary organization. Aside from a few interested members, the group seemed unexcited by the prospect of banding together with other blind people and plans to affiliate went nowhere.

It was not until 1945 that the Blind Brotherhood of Maryland finally became an affiliate of the NFB, due mainly to the efforts of their legislative chairman, Rosario Epsora. Epsora, known as Rosy to his friends, was a New Yorker rumored to have a bit of a temper, but he was also a passionate supporter of equality for the blind who understood the need for a coordinated national movement. According to correspondence, Epsora was the chief supporter of affiliation and quickly became a marcher in the NFB. Not only did he embrace the NFB’s legislative program with gusto, he became a national leader by serving as NFB secretary from 1948 to 1954. He is also credited with lobbying for and then orchestrating the 1948 National Convention in Baltimore. This was the first national convention held outside of the Mid West and the first to encourage attendees to sit in state delegations to aid the voting process. Epsora also arranged for the convention to be opened with a prayer given by a clergyman (possibly the first known instance of a now long-standing tradition), for local boy scouts to serve as sighted guides, and for a crab feast hosted by the local affiliate. Epsora would continue to be a major figure in the Brotherhood for years to come, but we will come back to him in a minute.

Despite these early achievements in the NFB, the bulk of the Blind Brotherhood of Maryland remained largely uninterested in the affairs of the national movement. It membership was male, white, and located almost exclusively in Baltimore. Female members were not allowed until 1948 and none held office until 1957. And despite the seemingly tireless efforts of Epsora, the Brotherhood never really shook off the lethargy that initially kept them from joining the NFB. They remained primarily a social club, funded by ticket sales to a few yearly events: a picnic in July, a bingo party in December, and a dance on St. Patrick’s Day. They were set in their ways and didn’t really wish to change. It was several years before the national office caught on to the fact that their seemingly active Maryland affiliate was in fact a one-man show. For a time the national office was content with this situation, the process of Federation-building being something like herding cats and working with existing organizations was less time-consuming than building a new organization from scratch. But the status quo could only last so long.

In the early to mid-1950s, the NFB began paying closer attention to the structure and habits of their state affiliates, due in part to a wildly successful national fundraising campaign selling greeting cards which was now sending thousands of dollars to each participating affiliate every year. In 1954, the national office began a quiet investigation of the Brotherhood. It had come to light that the Brotherhood had a long tradition of taking a quarter of their treasury and dividing it among their members as a gift every Christmas. They also quietly paid monthly stipends to a few select members who did not report this extra income to the state welfare agency. These practices were not in line with the NFB’s affiliate standards and they also threatened the Brotherhood’s status as a nonprofit organization. The results of the NFB's investigation yielded promises from Brotherhood leaders that these questionable practices would end, that all greeting card money would be kept separate from locally-raised money, and that they would share financial information more readily with NFB leadership. Unfortunately, these remained nothing more than promises and money management would continue to be a problem for the Brotherhood.

In the mid to late 1950s, the Federation entered a period later known as the NFB Civil War. The reasons for this conflict are too complicated to deal with in this presentation. The short version is that a minority faction of the membership came to disagree with the leadership on how the Federation should be run and things became messy. This faction believed that power should be held by the affiliates, rather than by the president and the executive committee, and did not take it kindly when the NFB’s leadership began to scrutinize the way some states ran their organizations. In the case of the Blind Brotherhood of Maryland, closer national attention once again raised questions about money management. The NFB Executive Committee now required each affiliate to submit a detailed accounting of their books each year, which the Brotherhood at first failed to produce and then later flatly refused to provide. This eventually led to Maryland’s share of the greeting card money for 1959 to be withheld.

In a seeming about-face, Epsora, always a passionate man and now president of the Brotherhood, transformed from a dedicated Federationist to a vocal member of the minority faction. He responded to the administration’s requests with accusations of executive overreach, calling the NFB a dictatorship and comparing Dr. tenBroek to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Epsora proceeded to convince his membership to pass a series of resolutions denouncing and deploring the tenBroek administration and even hired a lawyer to demand that the national office release their greeting card money.

All of this predictably did not go over well and at the 1960 national convention, the Maryland affiliate was suspended along with five other states. Facing possible expulsion within a year if they did not comply with the Federation’s requirements, the until now sleepy Blind Brotherhood of Maryland, which previously had been content to let Epsora have free rein, jumped to attention. Within months of the suspension, Epsora was replaced by a new president, the accounting documents were produced, and the Brotherhood was formally welcomed back into the fold at the 1961 national convention.

Sadly, this action was short lived and all too soon the Brotherhood settled back into its sleepy state: a small organization of 60 or so white people that seldom, if ever, ventured outside of Baltimore. They had never been a true state-wide organization, although there had been a few isolated efforts to address this over the years. Amendments to their constitution and a name change in 1964 to the Maryland Council of the Blind reflected this desire for expansion, but they seemed to lack the will to achieve it and it was not until 1965 that things really began to change for the better.

On October 6th, 1965, Ned Graham wrote to the current president of the Maryland Council applying for membership on behalf of himself and nine other blind African Americans. Sadly, his request was met with discouragement and delay tactics by members of the Maryland Council who were not willing to integrate their organization. Thankfully, this did not deter Ned Graham. He next wrote to NFB President Russell Kletzing asking for advice on how he and his colleagues could become part of the Federation. Kletzing responded to his letter, stating that the NFB’s goal had always been to be a national organization that represented all blind people, regardless of race, but that there was no national rule actually requiring affiliates to follow this policy. However, he recommended that Graham and his colleagues create their own organization which could then negotiate with the Maryland Council on equal footing. Graham took his advice and founded the Greater Baltimore Chapter of the Blind. By the way, this means that the Greater Baltimore Chapter is actually older than 50 years.

While this new organization of the blind was busy being formed, a few changes took place within the Maryland Council—with a bit of encouragement from the national office, I might add. By January 1966, the Maryland Council had a new president named Albert Balducci and those members who supported integration quietly staged a campaign for change. And just like that the issue of race, which had previously looked like a recipe for disaster, was nullified. On March 5th, 1966, under the guidance of NFB Washington Bureau chief John Nagle, both organizations – the Greater Baltimore Chapter of the Blind and the Maryland Council of the Blind—came together to form the first true, state-wide organization of the blind in the state of Maryland. They adopted a new name and constitution, elected their first state-level officers, chartered both of the existing organizations as local chapters, and became the Free State Federation of the Blind. Balducci was elected the new organization’s first president, an office he held until 1969, and Ned Graham, president of the Greater Baltimore Chapter, became his vice president. Both men represented the new affiliate at the 1966 national convention and received their new state charter together during the banquet. I wish I could say that the transition to a united affiliate was seamless, but the clash of big personalities over time eventually led to the withdrawal of the Maryland Council from the Free State Federation in 1970. However it must be stressed that the infusion of positive energy and the addition of a new and diverse membership that was eager to grown the affiliate did the trick. The lethargy of the previous organization was gone and the Federation in Maryland has been on the move ever since.

Fifty years later, many things have changed in this affiliate and there are many things for which we can be proud. We changed our name to the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland in 1970. The number of chapters we have boasted over the years has swelled and contracted and swelled again, but with the love and support of our state leadership, many have stood the test of time. Among them are the Greater Baltimore Chapter, which remains at the nucleus of the affiliate; the Greater Cumberland Chapter, which was originally founded in 1969; and the Sligo Creek Chapter, which dates all the way back to 1967 when they were known as the Twin Counties Federation of the Blind. Our first Maryland student division was formed in 1977 and our Parents of Blind Children Division has stood strong since 1984.

Traditions run deep in this affiliate. There have been 20 years of crab feasts, 38 years of Annapolis Day, and the first Maryland state convention at the Carousel Hotel in Ocean City was held in 1985. Our newsletter, the *Braille Spectator*, has been in publication since 1969. We have hosted two national conventions in our state, the first in 1978 and the second in 1981. Three Marylanders have served as members of the NFB national board, and four adopted Marylanders have now served as national President. Our affiliate was instrumental in moving the NFB national headquarters to Baltimore in 1978 and just about every year we boast the highest state attendance at national convention. As I said at the beginning of my presentation, our state’s history has been long and eventful, but our present is strong, and our future is bright. I’m confident that the next fifty years will be more interesting than all of the years that came before. And I look forward to documenting it in the NFB archives. Thank you.

## Celebrating Fifty Years of Progress in Maryland: a Report from the President

**By: Sharon Maneki**

Fellow Federationists:

At this, our fiftieth annual convention of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, it is appropriate for us to take this occasion to celebrate our past, reflect on the present, and think about planning for our future.

Let us begin by remembering our debts to those who have come before us. I wish to recognize Ned Graham, who was primarily responsible for uniting separate chapters into a cohesive state affiliate and who served on the national board of directors for several years. We are fortunate to have a long list of talented presidents: John Mc Craw, the second longest serving president, whose commitment and achievements continue to inspire those who knew him; Willie Thompson, who helped us to keep the faith after John Mc Craw’s sudden and untimely death; Jim Omvig and Marc Maurer, for building us into an affiliate worthy of being the home to our National headquarters and to the Jernigan Institute; and Michael Gosse and Melissa Riccobono, who continued our legacy of advocacy and action. Affiliate Presidents alone are not responsible for our success. Therefore, we salute our many longtime members who continue to remain active and give us the benefit of their wisdom and experience. We also welcome our newer members, those attending their first or second convention.

Since this is our golden anniversary convention, let us ponder whether we are really a golden organization. Do we have the attributes associated with gold? Some of the attributes of gold that I will examine are wisdom, importance, discovery, courage, longevity, wealth and love.

Historians refer to the golden age of a civilization as its high point. While we cannot yet judge when the golden age of the National Federation of the Blind will be, there is no doubt that we are an organization of importance and wisdom. Gold is an important symbol in many religions. Kings and queens were adorned in gold to demonstrate their importance. Families in many cultures must provide gold at the time of a woman’s wedding to ensure a successful marriage. The Federation’s importance is not in its trappings, but in its influence and actions.

Let us consider the effect of Federation philosophy on each of us. Our founder, Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, proclaimed our right to live in the world. He also taught us how to demand that right through collective action. Dr. Kenneth Jernigan revolutionized the way that we think about blindness by arguing that blindness is not a handicap; it is a characteristic. As he explained:

“No one is likely to disagree with me if I say that blindness, first of all, is a characteristic. But a great many people will disagree when I go on to say that blindness is only a characteristic. It is nothing more or less than that. It is nothing more special, or more peculiar, or more terrible than that suggests. When we understand the nature of blindness as a characteristic—a normal characteristic like hundreds of others with which each of us must live—we shall better understand the real needs to be met by services to the blind, as well as the false needs which should not be met.”

Over the years, through our collective experience, we have deepened our understanding of our philosophy. Today, President Riccobono is enhancing our philosophy by communicating it in simple concrete terms:

“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.”

While searching for gold, mankind has stumbled upon numerous discoveries. One of the most famous discoveries while looking for gold was the discovery of the new world by Christopher Columbus. The Federation has always encouraged blind people to explore and discover. In his 2007 banquet address entitled “Expanding the Limits: The Uncertainty of Exploration” Marc Maurer states:

“We do not know what the possibilities are for us, for we have not explored all of the elements that constitute the pattern of what we are and what we will become. However, we know more about the pattern than anybody else, and we have decided to explore it all, to reach as far as anybody can, to dream as much as anybody will, and to build in a way that will bring into being possibilities for us beyond anything that has ever previously been imagined. What are the limits, and where will we stop? Nobody can say. Perhaps the limits expand along with our knowledge, our imagination, and our courage.”

Blind people have made many discoveries through the National Federation of the Blind. How many seniors know the joy of independence because through the Federation they discovered that they do not have to give up their homes due to loss of vision? How many students have discovered their full potential because of the opportunities they received through scholarships and youth empowerment stipends from the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland? How many blind children discovered hope and understand that they are not alone because of our NFB BELL academies?

As we know, today winners of various competitions receive a gold medal as their award. Although the practice of awarding gold medals at the Olympics was not established until 1904, Greek mythology contributed to the choice of gold as an appropriate award. If our state affiliates were to receive gold medals, the one that Maryland would deserve would be for establishing the Braille Enrichment Literacy and Learning (BELL) program. Parents such as Jackie Anderson were tired of school systems that offered poor instruction or no instruction in Braille reading and writing to children with limited vision. If the school systems won’t do it, we determined to teach Braille to children ourselves. It was fortuitous that Michael Gosse was our president when we talked about and came up with the name BELL. Dr. Gosse knew first hand about the limitations created when children do not have the opportunity for Braille instruction. Jackie Anderson and Jackie Otwell were the first teachers in our BELL program which was established in 2007. From these humble beginnings, the NFB BELL academies have grown into a national program. In 2016, 34 states conducted BELL academies, including three in Maryland. It is appropriate to have pictures of students, staff and volunteers from the Baltimore, Glendale and Salisbury programs in our golden anniversary convention agenda.

Courage is associated with gold because of the many risks that were taken and the many battles that were fought throughout history in order to acquire it. Most of the motives of gold seekers were for personal gain. For instance, in the 1500s, Spanish conquerors destroyed the Inca civilization of Peru just to obtain their gold. Many Federationists demonstrate similar courage, but our motives are not for self-aggrandizement. Our motives are to benefit the lives of all blind people. I am proud to know many parents, some of whom are here at this convention, who have had the courage to stand up to school systems to demand appropriate services for their children. These parents do not take a stand once, they do it for years.

One of the myths that confront us as blind people is the notion that we are safety risks. When Amber Elia needed backup day care for her 6 year old blind son, Max, she was denied services by the La Petite Academy in Frederick, MD. When Amber dropped her son off before work, the staff asked her what Max would need. Amber explained that all Max needs is verbal directions since he knows how to use his white cane. By early afternoon, La Petite corporate headquarters had decided to refuse any further day care for Max, because they assumed that he needed a one-on-one assistant for his “safety.” Amber had the courage to stand up to this corporation. With the assistance of the National Federation of the Blind, we will make sure that Max and all blind children will not be denied services from this national day care chain.

Employment discrimination cases abound in Maryland as they do in most other affiliates. Over the years we have helped many individuals with these struggles. Currently we are helping several individuals who lost their vision while on the job. Rather than following the law and offering these individuals reasonable accommodations, too many employers try to push the individual into early retirement. Employers who should know better, such as the State of Maryland and Baltimore County, are guilty of this practice. When blind people have the courage to fight back, we will support them with our collective resources.

When I think of courage, I think of Yasmin Reyazuddin. With the help of the National Federation of the Blind, Yasmin has fought with Montgomery County government since 2009. The county refused to provide Yasmin with accessible equipment so that she could do her job as a 311 information specialist, even though such equipment was readily available. Thanks to Yasmin’s courage and the assistance of the National Federation of the Blind, this coming Monday, October 31, Yasmin will begin her job as an information specialist with accessible equipment.

Consider the courage of Mike Bullis and Gail Broda. The long arduous battle that Mike Bullis fought to gain shared custody of his daughter is well known to most of us in Maryland. This four-year battle finally ended with a ten day trial, and cost Mike over $60,000. Mike turned his personal battle into a quest to make systemic changes in the legal system to protect the rights of all blind parents and caregivers. In 2009, companion bills HB 689 and SB 613 were enacted into law because of our efforts. This law stated that, “in any custody or visitation proceeding, a disability to a party is relevant only to the extent that the court finds, based on evidence in the record, that the disability affects the best interest of the child.” This law was a good beginning, but we needed to do more.

In 2016, when we went to the Maryland General Assembly to seek greater protection for disabled parents and caregivers, Mike Bullis was there once again to help make our case. He was ably assisted by other Federationists including Gail Broda.

Gail demonstrated great courage because she had never testified about anything in her life and was very new to the Federation. The custody of Gail’s grandson was in question because Gail’s son lived with her. Since Gail, who is blind, would be involved in the care of her grandson, social service officials had to determine whether putting that grandson in the custody of his father and blind grandmother was appropriate. The social service worker handling this case conducted a home visit but never interviewed Gail, even though she was present. The social service worker wrote a report stating that because of her disability, Gail could not care for her grandson. This testimony helped to convince the General Assembly to enact SB 765, which Governor Hogan signed into law on May 10, 2016.

This new law places the burden of proof on the party who alleges that the disabled parent or caregiver is incapable of caring for the child. The law also directs judges to offer supportive parenting services to a disabled parent or caregiver before making a decision to change the living arrangement for the child. However, our work in the General Assembly to protect the rights of disabled parents is not complete. The law does not cover Children in Need of Assistance (CINA) cases and other cases handled by the State of Maryland through its Department of Human Resources. We will persist until every disabled parent in Maryland can care for his or her child without fear of discrimination.

Peter L. Bernstein, in his book The Power of Gold: the History of an Obsession, explains that: “gold is chemically inert so its radiance is forever. In Cairo, you will find a tooth bridge made for an Egyptian 4,500 years ago. Its condition is good enough to go into your mouth today.” Does the National Federation of the Blind have the same longevity as gold? I cannot really answer that question, but I can say that the NFB seeks to make systemic changes that will have a long-term effect on the lives of blind persons.

Consider the systemic changes that we have made in Maryland in education, blindness services and in access to information. For many years, the National Federation of the Blind has viewed the decline of literacy skills of blind and visually impaired children with alarm. The passage of the Maryland Literacy Rights and Education Act in 1992, remains one of our most significant achievements. This law requires that the starting point for every blind or visually impaired student’s educational program shall be Braille. Furthermore, this law requires the consideration of both the student’s prognosis of vision loss and future literacy needs if instruction is to include other reading media.

Over the years, we have worked to ensure that this law is enforced throughout the state. To reduce the barriers of low expectations, we encouraged the Maryland General Assembly to enact HB 413 and SB 230 in 2010. This legislation instructs the Maryland State Department of Education to create standards for students from pre-kindergarten through grade 12 to meet in Braille reading, writing, and mathematics. Since there are standards for students to meet in reading and writing print, why not require standards for blind students to meet in reading and writing Braille? We successfully collaborated with a committee of vision teachers to create the Maryland Common Core State Curriculum Frameworks for Braille in language arts and mathematics. These standards, which were issued in 2012, also include benchmarks for students to meet in Braille, Formatting, and Tactile Graphics. These standards, which have become a model for other states, have also been a helpful guide for parents to use when assessing their child’s progress in Braille reading, writing, and mathematics.

In 2017, to mark the 25th anniversary of the Maryland Literacy Rights and Education Act, we intend to conduct a literacy conference jointly sponsored by NFB and the Maryland School for the Blind. In this conference, we will measure our progress and look for additional ways to enhance the literacy skills of blind and visually impaired students in Maryland.

We have always understood that services for the blind improve when agency directors respond to consumer input. Affiliates of the NFB have worked tirelessly to improve these services. Consider the Maryland Workshop for the Blind. Workers at this facility were paid a mere twenty five cents an hour and there was a separate entrance for African Americans. It was no accident that things began to change in the 1970s, when the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland became an effective statewide affiliate. This workshop was reinvented as Blind Industries and Services of Maryland (BISM.) The old workshop model was tossed out and replaced with a new business model. BISM acknowledged the capabilities of blind people. Productivity and efficiency became paramount, enabling more workers, now known as associates, to be hired at minimum wage or higher. This transformation did not happen overnight. The composition of the board of trustees of BISM was expanded to 11 members. In time, Federationists John Mc Craw, Doris Samuels and Georgia Myers were appointed to the board of trustees. Thanks to their efforts, significant changes occurred. We owe them a large debt of gratitude and I am sure that they are marveling at our progress.

Having a successful model of the capabilities of disabled workers helped us to gain an important victory. In May of 2016, the Equal Employment Act was enacted into law. The practice of paying workers with disabilities less than the minimum wage will end in Maryland by 2020. We must be vigilant to make sure that this law is properly and fully implemented.

Obtaining quality rehabilitation services in Maryland has been a challenge. However, we have made some progress. Clients who receive services from the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), are wondering how I can say that we are making progress because unfortunately, bureaucratic red tape and delays in the delivery of services are increasing. If you need a KNFB reader, you can purchase it in six minutes with your own funds. It took DORS six months to purchase a KNFB reader for one consumer who didn’t have the money. Clients suffer because the State of Maryland is an indifferent employer. Too many counselors and teachers are forced to quit their positions for better paying jobs elsewhere.

Although rehabilitation services for blind people in Maryland are far from perfect, we have come a long way. As I think about the progress we have made, I am reminded of the poignant story often shared with us by the late Ralph Thompson many years ago. He told us that his case was essentially written off by his rehabilitation counselor with the explanation that: “your problem is that you have the three Bs: y’re black, y’re broke, and y’re blind.” Rightfully, such talk by a professional in the field of work with the blind would be deemed unacceptable today.

One reason for the poor adjustment to blindness training is that state agencies have frequently had a monopoly on this training. By working on both the federal and state levels, the National Federation of the Blind sought to break this monopoly by promoting consumer choice in service providers. In Maryland, we have been promoting client choice since 1989 when we insisted that Kay Monville had the right to attend the Louisiana Center for the Blind, and James Story had the right to attend the Colorado Center for the Blind. During the appeal hearing for James, the rehabilitation agency maintained that he did not need training in the skills of blindness because he had a sighted girlfriend to assist him. These were the first of many victories for choice in rehabilitation.

Experience dramatically demonstrates that clients who are served by separate identifiable rehabilitation agencies for the blind, receive better services. Clients of these agencies are also more likely to be successful in competitive employment. Several times throughout our history, we have attempted to create a separate identifiable rehabilitation agency for the blind in Maryland. After our most recent attempt in 2004, DORS sought to placate our political activism and to quell the growing unease in the Maryland General Assembly by establishing within its bureaucratic structure, the Office for Blindness and Vision Services (OBVS) in January, 2005. OBVS remains subservient to the rules and policies of a general rehabilitation agency. However, OBVS is a big improvement over the earlier arrangements.

Sue Schaffer, the first director of OBVS, understood that there must be balance in carrying out the policies and procedures of a state agency, when weighed against the needs of clients. There must be consistency in enforcement of the rules. Ultimately, the agency exists to meet the needs of the clients so that they can become employable. DORS must be mindful that the ‘I’ in IPE stands for *individualized* plan for employment. We look forward to working with the new director of OBVS, Toni March. We appreciate the presence of many OBVS staff at this convention. This is a challenging time in the field of rehabilitation because of new laws and budget pressures. Staff and advocates need to work together to find creative and imaginative ways to meet the needs of clients. You can be sure that the Federation will continue to inform consumers of their rights and will monitor what happens to blind persons in the rehabilitation system.

The growth and improvement of the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (LBPH) are inextricably linked to the involvement of the organized blind in Maryland. Prior to 1968, blind library patrons in Maryland were served by the regional library in Richmond, Virginia. Two years after this affiliate was organized, the blind had our own library in Baltimore. LBPH had a humble beginning in leased quarters of a mere 7,776 square feet on Charles Street in Baltimore. Throughout the years, our complaints about the poor quality of library services, the inadequate collection of books on Maryland subjects, and the wretched conditions of LBPH quarters were legion. Because of the publicity we generated and the political stance we adopted, LBPH moved into a brand new building four times larger than its original quarters in December, 1992.

LBPH is part of the Division of Library Development and Services in the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE.) The growth of LBPH has been stifled by the bureaucracy at MSDE. It was easy for MSDE to rob funds from LBPH because LBPH did not even have a budget in this bureaucratic structure. In 2014, NFBMD convinced the Maryland General Assembly to place LBPH in the same formula used to fund other public libraries. We finally have our own budget.

To date, we have not seen the improvements in services that having a set amount of funding should have produced due to the bureaucracy and inept management at MSDE. There is a plan to redesign library services by moving the Division of Library Development and Services out of MSDE. LBPH and other library services would be moved into a new and separate agency which would be known as the Maryland State Library. We must support this plan and help to make it a reality. It is time for LBPH to be freed from the bonds of MSDE so that it can reach out to the newly blind and provide the quality services that we need in the 21st century.

For decades we have been working with the Maryland General Assembly to create laws to improve nonvisual access to information. Because of our efforts, the General Assembly has enacted specific laws on access as well as inserting language about access into other laws such as laws about on-line learning, the health care exchange, and access to public information. Maryland also has a permanent source of funding for NFB-NEWSLINE®, thanks to our efforts.

The Federation believes that the best way to achieve access to websites, and other information technologies and services, is through the procurement system. Maryland has excellent laws instructing agencies of state government to purchase and use accessible products. The problem we face now is that these laws are either ignored, or state officials are duped by vendors who claim that their products are accessible, when they are not. The latest example of this trickery was the purchase of a new state personnel system.

Governor Hogan recently created the Commission to Modernize State Procurement, which is to submit its recommendations to him by December 1, 2016. We have been encouraging this commission to introduce accountability and penalties for violations of the nonvisual access laws. We have done a good job in establishing a legal structure for accessibility. Now we must get the system to work.

There is no doubt that gold represents wealth. The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland does not have monetary wealth. Our wealth resides in our human capital. We have members who willingly sit through endless hearings so that we can make our case for equality. We have members who make sacrifices by supporting our crab feasts and our Bid for Opportunity dinners and auctions. These annual events allow us to award educational scholarships and youth stipends for alternatives to blindness training. This year we awarded over $3000 to tweens to attend summer independence training programs. Tonight, we will award two scholarships of $2000 and $1500 to deserving college students. Our members give freely of their time to set up booths at conferences to educate the public about our capabilities. Our Meet the Blind month calendar posted on www.nfbmd.org shows the breadth and depth of our local activities. We have increased our presence on Facebook and Twitter. This year we took part in a new public outreach campaign with Harris Teeter. Harris Teeter offers non-profit organizations the opportunity to put small public service messages on their pharmacy bags. Twenty-four thousand customer pharmacy bags are being distributed in each of three locations: Columbia, Glen Burnie and Silver Spring. This means that 72,000 Harris Teeter customers will have received the positive message on blindness promoted by the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland.

The last attribute of gold that I will talk about is the most important one: love. If you are wearing a gold band on your finger, feel it and think about its significance. Think about the promise that we make to each other in the Federation. With love, hope and determination, we turn dreams into reality. Are we a golden organization? You bet we are.

Speculate with me for a moment about the future. Who will be the first blind person to win a Nobel Prize? Will it be in literature or chemistry? Perhaps it will be the Nobel peace prize. What will happen at the hundredth anniversary convention of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland? Perhaps the keynote speaker will be the first blind president of the United States. I am sure that we will accomplish all of these things, and more.

One of my favorite quotations from Dr. Jernigan is his description of the future which is just as true today as when he stated it in 1996 in his address to the convention entitled “The Revolution of the Kernel Books”:

“I am absolutely certain of the general direction that our organization will take. Our mutual faith and trust in each other will be unchanged; and all else will follow. I know to the depth of my being that our shared bond of love and trust will never change; and that because of it we will be unswervable in our determination and unstoppable in our progress. We have come a long way together in this movement. Some of us are veterans going back to the 1940s; others are new recruits fresh to the ranks. Some are young; some are old. Some are educated, others not. It makes no difference. In everything that matters we are one; we are the movement; we are the blind.”

## Maryland Ballot Markers for the Blind can be used by any Voter

**By: Michael Dresser**

Baltimore Sun October 26, 2016 (Editor’s note: the following article came from the Baltimore Sun dated October 26. In the general election, The National Federation of the Blind insisted that election officials to tell all voters that they had the opportunity to vote by using either the machine or a paper ballot. As the following article illustrates, the Attorney General recognizes the importance of protecting the right to a secret ballot for blind and disabled voters. You can be sure that NFBMD will be vigilant in protecting our rights in the 2018 elections).

A new Maryland voting system designed to make it easier for the blind to vote independently isn't restricted to the blind.

When voters begin checking in at early voting centers starting Thursday, they will for the first time be told they have the option of using paper ballots or a machine that marks voting sheets for them. The same machines will be at polling places Nov. 8 for Election Day.

Attorney General Brian E. Frosh held a news conference Tuesday at the National Federation of the Blind headquarters in South Baltimore to demonstrate the new ballot marker technology.

While the ballot markers can be used by any voter, Frosh hailed the technology's ability to let blind and other visually impaired individuals cast ballots without assistance.

"Secrecy and privacy in elections are essential to the integrity of our elections," Frosh said.

Mark Riccobono, the federation's national chairman, said most blind voters have had the experience of depending on someone else to help them vote.

"It usually doesn't matter if they're a relative or not," he said. "You still wonder are they going to put down what you ask."

That capability is not new with the paper-based voting system introduced for the primary election this year. The option of independent voting was also a feature of the touch screen technology that Maryland used between 2002 and 2014.

However, federation officers and members who attended the news conference said the new voting system brings significant improvements.

Steve Booth, a federation member from Baltimore, tried out the new system Tuesday. He cast votes in a series of fanciful elections for such things as "favorite Maryland symbol," using a hand-held control pad similar to one from a video game player. The machine read off his choices, which he could hear through a headset, and confirmed that he had made his choices.

(For demonstration purposes, a speaker system stood in for the headsets.)

When Booth finished, the machine spat out a ballot sheet, which he fed into the same optical scanner machine used to count typical paper ballots.

Booth said he has been voting since 1972 but couldn't cast a ballot without help until he moved to Maryland for the 2006 election.

The new ballot marker, he said, is an improvement.

"This is much faster because you can change speeds," he said. Booth said he wished he could skip over candidates once he's heard the name of the one he wants to select, but he understands why the system requires that all of the choices be heard before a ballot is cast.

The audio quality is also much improved, Booth said. The old system, he said, "had this Donald Duck effect."

Sharon Maneki, president of the federation's Maryland chapter, said the new system is better than the old. But she added that "we're not there" yet in terms of an ideal system. Maneki said she'd prefer to see a system where the ballots used by blind and otherwise disabled voters appeared identical. Now they come in two different sizes though they are fed into the same machines.

"We don't want to have a segregated ballot," Maneki said. She'd like to see all voters encouraged to use the system – something that wasn't done in the primary.

"We've come a long way," she said. "The fear of technology is unfortunate."

John Willis, special counsel to the Attorney General's Office, said voters should have no concerns about the machines being hacked.

"At the polling place, none of these are connected to the Internet," he said.

Willis, a University of Baltimore professor and a recognized expert on running elections, said the new system is fully compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act. He pointed out that it even has a port where quadriplegics and others with mobility disorders can plug in a "sip-and-puff" device that lets them use their breath to cast votes privately.

Nikki Baines Charlson, deputy director of the State Board of Elections, said the ballot marking device can also help people with hand tremors cast their votes. The machines also offer an option where voters can use a touch screen to mark their ballots, which still have to be fed into the scanner. Those touch screens can be adjusted to enlarge fonts or vary contrast, she said.

"It's a solution for voters with a whole host of disabilities," she said.

For non-disabled voters, the ballot marking machines could present a slight time advantage if there are lines between the check-in table and the voting booth.

Unfortunately, when there are long lines, it's usually to check in. For those, the disabled and non-disabled are equally empowered – to wait.

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## Spectator Specs

Important NFBMD News:

Join me in welcoming the newest Division of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland, the Maryland Association of Blind Merchants, to our Federation family. The new officers of this Division are: Melba Taylor, President; Patti Hollman Eitington, First Vice President; Steve Brand, Second Vice President; Tassi Thompson, Secretary; and Andre Sconion, Treasurer. The three board members are: Don Morris, Mike Bullis, and Dr. Michael Gosse. At its creation on May 6, twenty-three people joined the Division. I am sure we will be hearing more from this Division in the coming months. Congratulations and welcome!

Take five minutes to help reduce discrimination. The National Federation of the Blind has created a rideshare testing program to measure Lyft and Uber’s efforts to eliminate driver discrimination against riders with guide dogs or service animals. If you use a service animal or are accompanying someone who does please fill out a short form about your experience, each time you use Uber or Lyft. Please go to [https://nfb.org/rideshare-test](https://nfb.org/rideshare-test%20) to complete the survey. Please give us information about both good and bad experiences. Spread the word, we need information from every blind person whether they are a member of NFB or not. Sarah Baebler is the Maryland coordinator for this program. If you have questions email her at [sbaebler@bism.org](mailto:sbaebler@bism.org).

Weddings:

* On Labor Day weekend 2016, Patty Holman and Will Eitington were married. Patty and Will are active members of the Sligo Creek Chapter. Congratulations to this happy couple.
* On December 23, Wendy Cox and Barry Messersmith were married in Westminster, MD. Wendy Cox has been an active member of the Maryland Parents of Blind Children for many years. She is best known as Chris Nusbaum’s mother. Congratulations.

Deaths:

* We are sorry to report the death of Elizabeth Hall in October 2016. Elizabeth and her sister Helen were active members of the Sligo Creek and National Harbor Chapters. When Elizabeth began to have serious health problems, she and her sister Helen moved to North Carolina to be close to the rest of the family. So many of you may not have had the privilege of knowing them. Elizabeth was a stalwart member with lots of enthusiasm. She also was a tireless volunteer.
* On November 12, Sandra Price lost her long battle with the complications of diabetes. Sandra started out in the P.G. County Chapter of the NFB of Maryland. When she married William in 2004 she moved to Baltimore and was a member of the Greater Baltimore Chapter. Sandra had a great spirit and courage and was an inspiration to all who knew her.
* In mid-February Jackie Hayes, a member of the Greater Baltimore Chapter, died very suddenly. Jackie was always a willing volunteer. She was proud that after a long struggle she finally was able to be employed in the childcare field.

Achievements:

After 25 years of employment at Blind Industries and Services of Maryland Shirley Riffle retired on January 31. Over the years Shirley wore many hats at BISM, but her longest stint was as Director of Senior Services. Shirley was always cheerful, enthusiastic and kind. She worked tirelessly to help all blind persons reach or maintain their independence. Best wishes in your new career and may it be as rewarding as your time was at BISM.

Tom Bickford, a member of the Sligo Creek Chapter who has been attending National Conventions since the 1950’s, recently published a new book called “And I Quote.” This book contains interesting quotes on everything from advice to rye smiles. To get a copy of the book please visit <http://www.politics-prose.com/book/9781624290992>. The website lists the author as J. Tom, Jr. This is not Tom’s first book. He also wrote about how blind people should accomplish independent travel. The name of this book is “The Care and Feeding of the Long White Cane.” This book is available from the Independence Market.

Graduations:

Alycia Breitschwerdt graduated from Frostburg University with a BS degree in Recreation and Park Management. Alycia did this while working at BISM fulltime as an independent living instructor for seniors. Congratulations and best wishes.