**THE BRAILLE SPECTATOR FALL 2017**

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# ARE YOU READY THE CONVENTION CHALLENGE?

**By: Sharon Maneki**

 You will find many opportunities for a challenge whether it is your first or 51st state convention. These challenges will be fun, informative, and will expand your horizons so don’t let the word “challenge” frighten you. Here are a few examples of some of the challenges that will be available on November 10-12 at the Sheraton Baltimore North Hotel.

 On Friday afternoon, challenge yourself to try out a new workout routine called “Cardio Drumming.” Resolve to challenge yourself to use some of the apps for exercise and nutrition that you will discover at our Wellness: There’s an App for That workshop. Examine tactile art and get ideas for future projects. Think about making your home more accessible with the new Amazon and Google products in our Accessibility Around the House workshop. Enjoy the challenge of exploring the Towson Mall with the new Aira technology.

 Friday evening will be a time of fun and laughter. The evening begins with a performance of a comedy by the Braille is Beautiful Players. Challenge your friends or make friends as you play a variety of games at our carnival. You can play everything from corn hole to darts to board games to computer games! Of course all games will be accessible. Try something that you have never done before!

 NFBMD conventions do not offer only opportunities for us to challenge ourselves, they also offer challenges that will change the lives of blind persons now and in the future. Through our joint efforts we will challenge agencies to improve services for the blind in the state. Come to the Resolutions Committee on Friday at 9:30 am to learn about the challenges that we will work on in the coming year. If you want to submit a resolution, send it to Jesse Hartle, who will be the chairman of the committee this year. His email address is jesse.hartle63@gmail.com. All resolutions must be submitted to Jesse by November 3.

 I am ready for the challenge. I hope you are, too. See you in Towson.

# Meet Everette Bacon

(Editor’s note: Here is what the Braille Monitor and the NFB website had to say about Everette Bacon, our national representative for the 2017 Convention. We thought readers would enjoy getting to know about him in advance. Be sure you take the time to meet him in person on November 10-12.)

**“Everette Bacon: Rehabilitation Professional**

Everette Bacon was born in Huntington Beach, California. At the age of five he was diagnosed with cone-rod dystrophy, a condition which had run in his family on his mother’s side for thirteen generations, causing rapid-onset blindness primarily in female family members. Despite the diagnosis, Everette’s family took the advice of teachers and medical experts, believing (or, more accurately, hoping) that since Everette was male and his vision was not deteriorating rapidly like that of other family members, he was unlikely to go blind. As a result, Everette did not learn Braille or other alternative techniques during his school years. Looking back, Everette says, his mother and other family members wish that they had encouraged him to learn Braille and other blindness skills.

When Everette was around eighteen his entire family moved to Texas. Everette pursued a degree in church music at Dallas Baptist University. He jokes that he was pushed toward music because “you know, blind people sing.” His first job was teaching a seventh grade choir, but he found it not to his liking. Searching for other employment in order to earn money to help his wife through medical school, Everette ultimately accepted a management position with Blockbuster Video in 1997. He was very successful in this position, winning several awards and steady promotions. By 2004, he was managing ten stores in the Houston area.

Everette’s eye condition began to worsen, and instead of giving up, he adapted by using alternative techniques. “I started carrying a cane, mainly for identity, but I was using it when I felt I needed it.” “I was never embarrassed or ashamed about becoming blind, because I grew up around blind people, adapting was something you just became accustomed to doing.”  However, when he asked for reasonable accommodations from his employer, instead of granting these accommodations, Blockbuster terminated his employment despite his outstanding record. The company even went so far as to describe Everette’s conduct as “fraudulent,” implying that he had deceived the company about his capabilities, even though he had previously been praised and awarded for his work.

This experience traumatized Everette and his family. His wife, mother, and other family members sent angry emails to everyone they could; urging readers to avoid shopping at Blockbuster based on discrimination against the blind. One of these emails found its way to Scott LaBarre, the president of the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado and a successful disability rights attorney. Scott took Everette’s case, and ultimately Everette received a settlement from Blockbuster. More importantly, though, he learned about the National Federation of the Blind and the many battles the organization has fought in the effort to advance and protect the civil rights of blind people. “I had heard of the Federation and been told that they were militant,” Everette says, “but my experience taught me the importance of our advocacy.” There are so many reasons to be proud of whom we are as blind people, and the Federation has paved the way for our climb to the top of the mountain of civil rights!

In 2004, Everette and his wife, Dr. Angela Peters, moved to Salt Lake City, Utah. Everette became involved in the Utah affiliate and developed what he describes as life-changing relationships with dedicated Federationists like Nick Schmitroth, Karl Smith, and Deja Powell. These friends helped Everette improve his blindness skills and grow in the movement. Everette was also looking for new employment opportunities in Utah and heard about a job opening as a Blindness Skills Teacher at the Utah Division of Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Everette remembers speaking with Ray Martin about the fact that he knew nothing about teaching blind people, Martin told him that being blind was the most important qualification. The agency supported Everette in his pursuit of a master’s degree in rehabilitation. He went from teaching technology to supervising the technology staff, and now serves as the agency’s field services coordinator, overseeing all of the agency’s technology and employment services, supervising a staff of nine.

Everette began advocating for Utah’s blind residents with an effort to encourage a prominent local cinema chain to incorporate audio description technology into its theaters, so that blind people who wanted to experience movies with audio description could do so. An avid movie fan with an extensive collection dating from his Blockbuster days, he believes that audio description can enable blind people to connect more easily with their sighted peers when discussing entertainment. “One of the most valuable lessons I have learned from the NFB is the understanding that blending in to society is an important skill. Being able to relate to our sighted colleagues about movies, television, politics, and sports are excellent paths to opportunities that help change common misconceptions about blindness.”

In 2012, Everette was elected president of the National Federation of the Blind of Utah. He is proud of the affiliate’s successful advocacy for a state “mini-508” law requiring accessibility of new state websites and procurement of accessible electronic and information technology; subject to fines when agencies fail to comply. His advocacy for accessibility made him an outstanding candidate to serve as the Federation’s representative on the Disability Advisory Committee to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). He was nominated for appointment to this committee by President Riccobono and duly appointed to serve by the FCC in 2015. Everette is chair of the Utah Library Advisory Board. He also sits on the Utah Assistive Technology Council and the Library of Congress’ National Library Service for the Blind’s Audio Equipment Advisory Committee (Western Region). He was unanimously elected to the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind at the organization’s 2015 convention. He and Angela and their two dogs live in Salt Lake City, but Everette still roots for his beloved Dallas Cowboys. “

# Successful Paths to Employment: Using Reasonable Accommodations and Seeking Minority Business Status

By Judy Rasmussen

The NFB of Maryland is in the business of promoting employment, and sharing the successes of those who find and maintain it. All of us encourage each other as we struggle to gain equality, fight discrimination, and rejoice when the barriers are broken down and one more person joins the ranks of the employed. The following article is a summary from our two employment panelists presented at the 2016 NFBMD convention. As you will see, these panelists followed very different paths to success, but both achieved it, which is obviously the ultimate goal.

Our first panelist was Annette Carr, M. Ed., Senior Accommodations Analyst employed with the Department of Transportation in Washington, DC.

Ms. Carr said she attended college in the early 1980s with the goal of becoming a teacher. She taught in the classroom for three years. She enjoyed the teaching, but not all of the paperwork involved. To continue teaching, she needed to obtain a master's degree. She obtained a master's degree in special education, with an emphasis on assistive technology. Annette emphasized that throughout her education and the various jobs she obtained, she continued to focus on a plan. She worked hard to do her best and to truly shine at the tasks she was asked to perform.

She was hired by her university before she graduated. She wrote grant proposals for 20 years for them. She realized that if she did not do her research and write successful grants, she would be unemployed, which was a definite motivator to keep going.

Then she became a mother, and only wanted to work part-time. She went back to her university, but the work wasn't the same. She decided to market herself in the assistive technology world. She worked part-time for five assistive technology companies. She enjoyed the work, but it was exhausting and didn't pay much. One benefit of this work, however, was that she made many business contacts. Through one of these contacts, she received a call from someone who was a recruiter for a contractor with the Department of Transportation. The recruiter felt she was perfect for the job because it involved ensuring that people with disabilities who worked for DOT received the accommodations they needed.

Oddly enough, the people in charge of hiring for this contractor did not want to give her the job because "she needed accommodations." However, she got the job because of the persistence of the person who initially contacted her. The contract lasted for 18 months, but was not renewed. Several weeks later she received a call from staff at the Department of Transportation stating that there was a permanent job for her at DOT, doing the same work she had been doing as a contractor. Within two weeks she was back at her old desk with the same phone number and e-mail address she had as a contractor. The difference was that "now she was a fed."

Annette emphasized that she did not find any of her jobs by sitting at home. Unless people see your face and know what kind of work you are looking for, finding a job will be much more difficult. She encouraged people to get involved with their local NFB chapters and to volunteer in the community.

Our second panelist was Dr. Michael Gosse, president of Data Speech Computer Solutions, Inc. Michael is an active member of the NFB of Maryland and served as president of the affiliate from 2006 through 2008.

Michael began by stating that he did not have the opportunity to learn braille as a child, so he was giving his speech without the benefit of notes. He said he was present during the initial discussion which led to the creation of the Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) program, and he had no idea it would be so successful.

Data Speech Computer Solutions is currently a one-man operation. He is proud that his company prepares and delivers more than 350 newspapers and magazines to thousands of blind people across the country. He said that because he is solely responsible for the success of his company, if there is too much work, he can't sleep. If there isn't enough work, he can't sleep either.

Michael said that when he began his company, he planned to make it into a powerhouse like Facebook and Twitter. He planned to do this by receiving contracts through the Minority Business Enterprise program. The Minority Business Enterprise program allows approved businesses to receive a set-aside portion of all state of Maryland contracts issued. Michael applied for this program two years ago, but was initially denied because the Board felt he had gone to college, and already received contracts without the benefit of being considered a minority owned business. Michael decided to appeal the decision on the basis that as a person with a disability, he qualified for the program. Many people with disabilities had tried to apply for this program, and had been unsuccessful in being considered a minority owned business.

He hired Brown, Goldstein and Levy to represent him. When the Assistant Attorney General heard he had hired an attorney, he felt it was better to settle the matter. Michael was asked to write a letter stating why he should qualify as being disadvantaged because he has a disability. Michael told us that it was a painful process writing about all of the opportunities he had been denied because of his visual impairment. These included being denied work at McDonalds and at his father's company, where his brother and sister had both been hired. Michael had tried to purchase disability insurance for himself, in case he could no longer run his company. He was denied the disability insurance on the basis that he was already blind.

After five pages of showing why he should be considered as disadvantaged, he was awarded the status of being a minority-owned business. Because he had gone through this lengthy process, he was also awarded minority business owner status for federal contracts. This shows the persistence of not giving up, even when things look bleak.

Michael ended his presentation by encouraging people to start their own businesses, if that was their dream.

# The Bells Rang Out In Maryland Again!

By Judy Rasmussen

Summer means attending the NFB convention, going on vacation, and participation in the Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Academy program.

For the tenth consecutive year, the NFB of Maryland has sponsored a two-week program to give legally blind students between the ages of 4 and 13 the opportunity to spend time with blind role models, and improve their braille reading and writing skills.

From July 17 to August 11, twenty-seven blind Marylanders participated in three BELL Academy programs. One was held in Salisbury, one in Baltimore and the other in Prince George's County. Welcoming back returning students to see how much they have grown and matured is always a treat! Meeting new students who come into the BELL Academy not quite knowing what to expect, but who leave with new-found confidence, improved blindness skills, and new friends is one of the many things BELL is all about. Here are a few highlights from each of the three programs.

The theme of the Baltimore BELL Academy was Growing Readers as Leaders. All students planted an herb in a small flower pot and watched it begin to grow during the two weeks.

The Baltimore program was divided into two categories—the BELL X students, who were older and more experienced braille readers, and the younger students who were just beginning to learn to read and write braille.

The Bell X students focused on improving their overall technology skills. Their assignments included making presentations about their dream vacations, and interviewing blind adults to gather tips on travel. Taking notes, writing down what they learned, and formatting their work in an organized manner are all essential skills they will need to succeed in school and later on in the work place. Public speaking before groups is also a skill they worked on.

The younger students participated in many fun activities, such as twister, creating slime, and locating objects that were dropped. Learning to stack a plate in a cafeteria, navigating an obstacle course with a cane, and how to draw a flower pot with a braille writer were only a few of the many activities they participated in. All students made caramel nut sticky buns in the microwave.

Field trips to the Jewish Museum, the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and a swimming pool were all favorites. At the museum, the students made a stained glass project out of popsicle sticks and tissue paper. At the library, they made faces out of foam blocks. The blocks were then put on a machine that made the blocks take the shape of the face the student had just created.

The theme of the eastern shore program was discovering the solar system. In addition to working on braille reading and writing activities, the participants made rockets and spaceships. A water day where the students got to really squirt each other was very popular. Making lunches, including learning to use a food processor, was a great time for the students to interact and learn new skills in a relaxed and fun environment.

Walking a mile on a nice new trail was a good chance to use a cane in an outdoor setting, and it was great exercise.

Many students don't get to learn how to measure things. Measuring food is one thing, but learning what other things you can measure, such as shoes, is also important.

Everyone went to the mall and had to purchase one item in a store. Learning how to keep track of what bills and change you have, how to know what you are handing a store clerk, and how much change you should get back, increases confidence and independence.

Going to the Wallops Flight Facility was definitely something special. Students got to climb on old rockets, feel a space suit, play on the imagination playground, and learn the characteristics of each planet in the solar system.

The Glenn Dale program had a record number of students (nine). Some had only been blind a couple of months. Others had been in America less than a year. It was heartwarming to watch participants help each other say their braille contractions, cheer as each one practiced going up and down the stairs with a cane, and use their imaginations to play very creative games on the playground.

Everyone dipped pretzels, strawberries, and apples into chocolate they had melted in the microwave. The chocolate hardened nicely, and made for a great afternoon snack. Several students had not seen a microwave oven with braille on it, and encouraged their parents to put braille on their microwaves at home.

Glenn Dale participants took a trip to a pool where they played many fun games, and had pizza afterwards. A trip to the National Building Museum allowed them to take paddles and play on all kinds of pipes to make cool high and low-pitched sounds. They were also very creative in building houses, boats, stair steps, and a host of other things out of foam blocks.

A scavenger hunt which included finding onions, breaking little Louis the piñata (named after Louis Braille), and working hard on their song to perform at the parents' seminar were other highlights of the Glenn Dale program.

The last day of BELL was a learning experience for both parents and participants. Parents attended a seminar where they were able to discuss specific issues facing their students, take a tour of parts of the Jernigan Institute, including the Independence Market, and receive information about braille and other topics.

The students experienced Pokémon in many different ways. Touching Pokémon figures, listening to Pokémon tales, and playing Pokémon games were a part of a fun-filled day.

The highlight of the afternoon was when all groups performed for the parents, and when every student received their goody bag. You could feel the energy in the room as students realized their accomplishments, and proud parents watched their children on stage.

The NFB of Maryland wishes to thank the following organizations for their most-appreciated contributions to make our three BELL programs happen. They include The Friends of the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, the ICAN Foundation, The Laurel Lions Club, and the Central Maryland, Greater Baltimore and Sligo Creek Chapters. Funds raised from the gospel concert were also a tremendous help. We couldn't have pulled this off without all of you!

We owe special thanks to all our teachers and volunteers. The teachers included Philip Cowit in Glendale, Mindy Demaris, Sheena Manuel, and the BISM staff who teach the seniors in Salisbury, as well as Chelsea Page and Melissa Riccobono in Baltimore. There were numerous volunteers for each program. Many thanks to all for their creativity, dedication and leadership in making BELL both a fun and a great learning experience for our students. We are already beginning to plan for the BELL Academy program in 2018.

# Federationists Tell Their Stories

(Editor’s note: Here is another installment of stories that 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. Many thanks to our Facebook committee ably chaired by Karen Anderson and all of the authors for sharing why they are Federationists.)

Melissa Lomax

I am scared of roller coasters. And I am the person who would jump at any climactic scene in a suspense movie—so, we all know horror is completely ruled out. In 2014, I fought my fear of heights to swing across a zip line, dangling high above a lake. As I stood at the top, thinking about quitting, I had to ask myself: why did I agree to do this? Then I thought about one of my students who though scared, told me that he would only go across the zip line if I did it too. I faced my fears because in doing so, I could set an example for younger kids to do the same.

If someone told my 16-year-old self that I would grow up to be a mentor, I would laugh. I barely stepped outside my comfort zone, did not use all the techniques I knew would make life easier for me, did not know what my future could hold, and definitely did not fully accept my blindness. Many of my family members are blind too, and so I grew up with role models. Yet as we know: you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink. For me, this meant that my family could not force me to let go of what stopped me from being confident and independent.

When I moved from New Jersey to Maryland to attend college, I decided to remake myself. I chose to use my cane everywhere, which was a huge step since I rarely used it before. I also decided that I would limit the amount of materials I read with my eyes. However, being an English major through a wrench in those plans because I had a lot of books to read. By the end of my freshman year, I knew that I had to find better ways to achieve the success I longed for.

That summer, I attended the National Federation of the Blind convention in Dallas, Texas as a scholarship winner. I went to conventions before several times, but I never went to the meetings or ventured out to meet new people. At this convention, I was paired with great mentors and given ample opportunities to network with my peers. People kept talking about the benefits of training and how it would impact my life. After asking questions and doing some research, I left that convention determined to experience this transformation for myself.

Also that summer, I had the opportunity to travel to Damascus, Syria to attend the Open Hands Youth Abilities Summit. Together with 9 American and 15 Syrian youth, we discussed the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and created the storyline for a comic book—The Silver Scorpion. During that trip, I battled my thoughts about training. I knew I needed it to get better at traveling, reading braille, using adaptive technology, and cooking, but at the same time, I did not want to leave college and graduate one semester behind. IN the end, I realized that holding on to that “4-year” dream was worthless and that I should embrace the opportunity that I have here in America to gain such independence.

After training, I came back to college a new person. I found it easier to get involved in service projects, make friends, excel academically, travel independently, and feel secure about my future. After graduating, I received a job running programs for youth. I get paid to teach students the same lessons I learned, encourage them to pursue their dreams, build their confidence through activities, and have fun! I enjoy passing on what I learned just as so many other Federationists do. Together, we advocate for opportunities and equality for the blind, and we make it our mission to encourage others not to view blindness as an obstacle. I love my extended family #WhyImAFederationist

Terry Hall

I first heard about the National Federation of the Blind in 2000 through friends who were involved in the organization. I attended my first New York state convention in 2000 and my first national convention in Philadelphia in 2001. At first I thought the federation was more of a social organization.

Many of the things the organization was working for didn't really feel like they applied to me. However, while I was unsure about some things, and it took a while for me to understand some of the legislative issues and resolutions, I slowly grew to believe in the Federation.

Over the years, my relationships with Federationists, including my affiliate president and my girlfriend, brought me to a deeper understanding of the Federation, what it stood for, and the impact it has on blind people. I began attending chapter meetings more regularly in 2013. While enrolled in a structured discovery training program I had the opportunity to attend events like the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland's Day in Annapolis, which helped me feel connected to the legislative issues we were fighting for at the time, as well as connecting me with other Federationists.

I'm a member of the National Federation of the Blind because we are fighting for equal rights & opportunities for blind individuals across the country.

#WhyImAFederationist

Jason Edward Polansky

I was born in Gettysburg, PA with a very rare form of blindness called bilateral anophthalmia (no eyeballs). Even though my mother was and still is a nurse by occupation and had seen just about everything imaginable, her, my father, and the doctors were in great shock when they looked at my eyes. They were not sure what I would be able to do and how I would learn to accomplish everyday tasks. We saw several different doctors until we were lead to an eye surgeon, an ocularist, and education services in Frederick County, MD. In a nutshell, our contacts led us to other contacts who introduced us to the National Federation of the Blind.

My parents attended their first NFB convention with me when I was two years old. During our first convention, my parents saw blind adults who had their own families, jobs, homes, and hobbies and who were living the lives that they wanted to live. Most of all, they learned to model a positive philosophy of blindness as a foundation for how they raised me. I attended public school just like all other children my age, learned to read Braille, travel with a cane, and use technology as it became available. As my teenage years approached, I had responsibilities including cleaning my room, doing my laundry, taking out the trash, helping my father with yardwork and handyman-work, just as many of my sighted peers did. I also swam all four years of high school and was very involved in my church youth group.

After graduating high school with honors, I attended the Louisiana Center for the Blind to increase my skills and confidence. While there, I gained more confidence to travel in unfamiliar environments on my own and improved my kitchen skills. I also built a cedar chest using power tools, went to New Orleans during Marti Gras, planned a weekend trip to Dallas, Texas, and cooked a meal for roughly 40 people. After graduating, I won a national scholarship and felt ready to start college. I completed my sophomore year at Messiah College where I am majoring in business and marketing. During my time at Messiah College I have been involved in several campus organizations, have attended many networking events, and have excelled both academically and socially. I held two summer jobs as a mentor to blind youth and am also a member of the Maryland and Pennsylvania student divisions. I know that I would not be the person who I am today without the National Federation of the Blind. #whyimafederationist

Gabe Cazares

As a first-generation Latino Texan, the Federation has given me self-confidence, self-assurance, independence and passion. When I met the National Federation of the Blind, I instantly found mentors who challenged me to achieve more than I thought was ever possible. Those same mentors continue challenging me to be the best that I can be both professionally and personally. I am a Federationists because the National Federation of the Blind has played a major role in shaping me into the man I am today. And, because I love big families! #WhyImAFederationist

Ellana Crew

I came to the Federation with no cane, having never met another blind person, and having already had three different career ideas shot down by my TBS’s (teachers of blind students) and special educators. I was 16, I was failing half of my classes with no motivation to fix it, and my parents had finally convinced me to go to this residential summer program for blind high schoolers to learn a bunch of independence skills that I was pretty sure I didn't need. I threw a fit the first time I had to wear sleep shades, and I begged to come home for the first three weeks. These people were way too ambitious for me and there was no need for me to do all this stuff.

Around the halfway point, though, I attended my first NFB national convention with that summer program, and the longer I sat there and listened, the more I started to get it. I was surrounded by an entire community that I didn't even know existed, and these people were loud and proud and getting things done to change the nation. It was like I had found an incredible secret that had been just under my nose the entire time, and it initiated the biggest change my life had ever seen. I finally started to see the point in everything I was learning.

I wasn't completely on board right away, though. I was still relieved to finish the summer program and didn't see any reason to come back again or try out the adult program. But after I left, the change was unmistakable. Suddenly I was using voice over and walking around with a cane, and I started to actually do my own homework. I was starting to do all kinds of things I'd never tried before, and two years later, I came back. I went through another round of summer training, and after that, I came back again for 10 months of adult training. I started taking risks I had never dreamed of before, taking on tasks and challenges I would have previously declined without a second thought, even stepping up and becoming an officer of the Maryland Association of Blind Students. I became loud and proud and dedicated to getting things done to change the nation.

The National Federation of the Blind had finally given my life to ME. They had shown me what I was really capable of and taught me that I was as equally deserving of living exactly the life I wanted as anybody else. I finally learned to be comfortable with myself and to even be proud of myself, and I felt like I had even found a second family. I finally had the confidence to go after exactly what I wanted and the skills to know exactly how to do it, and that is #WhyIAmAFederationist.

Amy Mason

I have a tremendous sweet tooth. Cookies, cake, pie, ice cream, you name it... if it contains enough sugar, I'm going to at least try it. At some point during my high school years, a teacher put a set of sleep shades on me, and taught me to bake a cake. Subsequent kitchen adventures have yielded equally delightful results.

I love books. When I was growing up I would sit curled for hours over novels. They carried me to all new realities. I rode upon Aslan's back with the Pevensies. I followed the Little Women on their Pilgrim's Progress. I loved Black Beauty and Kaavik the Wolf-Dog for their loyalty to people, even when we didn't always deserve it, and I learned that the funniest books have three chapter 19's. Books were some of my best friends. When one night, I couldn't force my eyes to focus... I wasn't terrified that I had lost them. I was very upset, but my summer camp counselors (and their rowdy, awesome college friends, who let us hang out with them!!!) all read Braille. They left me believing that this was the obvious and logical choice for me too, so even though it was hard at first, I learned it, and am glad of it every day.

I'm a (very) amateur singer. Karaoke was made for me. Two of my musically gifted friends went to a lot of effort to arrange and perform my favorite musical theater song with me at a most memorable talent show.

I travelled to Kenya for college. I ran down a mountain and leapt a stream with my guide. I learned to cook Chapatti in a fireplace. I bathed in hot springs, outside. I wouldn't have had the courage to tackle any of this if I hadn't gone to Colorado first. My teachers there taught me to travel safely, efficiently, and finally with style. They pushed me past my fears, and to the tops of a few mountains while they were at it.

I was once asked to help with a student seminar. Not knowing what I was agreeing to, I said yes. I learned more about dancing, hotel booking, and video editing than I would have ever guessed. I also learned that a bottle of Coke, some adrenaline, and a fairly new friendship are just enough incentive to keep me up all night long.

I have cosplayed (costume play) as Carmen Sandiego and "The Chief". I've even sung Ke$ha in public. My friends have proof of it all.

Finally, I get to teach all sorts of people about how blind folks use technology. Here's the crazy part, they pay me to do it!

Ok, I know that sounds like a lot of random facts, but I promise there's a connecting thread. These aren't just random vignettes. Each of these things helped to mold me into the person I am today, and directly, or indirectly, the National Federation of the Blind and its members were linked to each tale. (Yes, that includes both Carmen and Ke$ha.)

I won't name anyone here, as I would miss as many as I would call out, but the people I mention in the above stories are all Federationists. My first blind friends and mentor's in The Nebraska Association of Blind Students, and NFB of Nebraska, my off-the-record teacher of blind students, staff and fellow students at the Colorado Center for the Blind, my wonderful colleagues at the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute, and all those others I've met along the way have changed my view of blindness, and myself. They've even given me opportunities to do the same for other blind people. This is # WhyImAFederationist.

# Tom Ley, Advocate, Friend, Devoted Husband and Father

# November 30, 1966-August 30, 2017

By Judy Rasmussen

Tom Ley is known to many Federationists as someone who worked tirelessly to improve access technology for blind people with diabetes. He spent much time helping newly blind people adjust to vision loss, negotiating with manufacturers of diabetic products to improve their accessibility, and networking tirelessly with legislators and corporations regarding diabetes issues. We all owe Tom a debt of gratitude for his persistence and ongoing efforts to make it easier for blind people, and blind people with diabetes in particular, to live independently.

Tom spent most of his younger years in Louisiana. At 17, when others are learning to drive, planning their futures, and thinking about their next dates, Tom was wondering if he had a future at all, since he had just become blind.

After graduation from high school, Tom attended the Louisiana Center for the Blind, where he received blindness skills training. He graduated with highest honors from Louisiana Tech University with a degree in mathematics education. He found employment as a math teacher at a high school in rural Louisiana, which shows his determination and is a credit to the independent living skills training he received.

While other teachers were on vacation, Tom spent his summers teaching blind youth at the Louisiana Center for the Blind. Tom served as Chairman of the Board of the Louisiana Center for the Blind until 2017. He also served as President of the Diabetes Action Network, a division of the National Federation of the Blind. For the past few years, Tom moderated the monthly diabetes conference call sponsored by the NFB of Maryland.

Tom married Eilene in 1999, after meeting her at an NFB national convention several years earlier. He cherished their children, JonCarlos and Maria. He served as an elder and Sunday school teacher at Asquith Presbyterian Church for several years.

Tom began working for United Parcel Service as an International Help Desk Analyst in 2000. In 2012, he was promoted to Senior Business Systems Analyst, a position he held until his death.

All of us who have attended national conventions are grateful to Tom for obtaining sponsorship from the UPS Foundation to support our programs in braille literacy. Many of us have received help from a UPS volunteer just when we needed it. Tom designed a training program for all of the UPS volunteers who help at our conventions. This just shows what one person's determination and ingenuity can do in improving attitudes toward the blind.

On August 20 Tom wrote:

“18,525.

- Being a math guy, I calculated this morning that I've lived 18,525 days as of today.

- That's quite a lot.

- The time we have each day of our lives is truly "life."

- Is there any more precious commodity we have than the time God gives us each day and hour?

- You cannot buy more of it, you cannot recycle it, you cannot borrow time from a friend, it is all completely yours to do with what you will.

Love One Another!

Tom's faith in God never wavered, no matter how ill he was. He told his children that "death is just an intermission, and act two is going to be great."

 We will continue to honor Tom's memory as we help blind people to live the lives they want.

# From the President’s Mail Basket

by Sharon Maneki

Dr. Jonathan Lazar, Professor of Computer and Information Sciences and Director of the Undergraduate Program in Information Systems at Towson University, is well known to many Federationists. He is an ardent advocate for accessibility. He frequently teaches a course on web accessibility to computer science students. During the spring 2017 semester, he incorporated a new feature into his course. He asked us to provide blind people who would talk to the students about themselves and about the importance of accessibility. Dr. Lazar hoped that personal contact would raise the students’ level of commitment to accessibility. The program was very successful. Many thanks to all the volunteers. Many thanks to Dr. Lazar for continuing to find new ways to promote accessibility. Here is what Dr. Lazar had to say about the outcome of his latest enhancement to his course.

“Ellen and Sharon,

I just want to say thanks again for all of your help this semester, in setting up my students with partners from NFB. I just submitted final grades, and from reading what the students wrote, I can tell that the project was truly a success. My students learned about the capabilities of blind people, and simply got to know their partners as people. Many of the students remarked that they had never gotten to know someone Blind before, in a one-on-one setting, and now, they will be more committed to ensuring that the technology that they build, is truly accessible. Together, I think that we all had an important educational impact!

Best wishes,

Jonathan”

# Meet the 2017 NFBMD Scholarship Winners

By Judy Rasmussen

The NFB of Maryland believes in supporting students both financially, and by encouraging them as they pursue degrees and then go on to achieve competitive employment. Many of our past scholarship winners are still active Federationists, and are contributing in many ways to the growth of our affiliate. The scholarships are awarded in memory of John T. McCraw, a past president and long –time member of the NFB. This article will introduce you to our two 2017 scholarship winners. Not only do they win money, but even more importantly, they receive the support and friendship of the National Federation of the Blind.

Akierra Burks is a sophomore at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. She is new to vision loss and to the federation. She began losing her vision between her junior and senior year of high school, due to pressure on her optic nerves caused by fluid on her brain. Despite three surgeries over the summer and during the first half of her senior year, she graduated on schedule with her classmates. Learning to use a computer with screen reading software, getting used to a cane, and learning how to do things differently with limited vision are all big adjustments.

She said that her grandmother encouraged her to begin researching scholarships for blind students. Her research led her to the NFBMD.org website and the application for the John T. McCraw scholarship.

Akierra is majoring in English, with a minor in criminal justice. After graduation, she plans to attend law school, where she will focus on helping juveniles. She would like to work in family court, representing at-risk youth. In keeping with this goal, she is volunteering several hours per week with an organization called Alternatives. Their mission is to help students who are struggling in school. She is learning a lot from the students, and knows that the volunteer work she is doing now will increase her confidence as she pursues her ultimate goal of becoming a lawyer.

Akierra says that in her spare time, she enjoys cutting, dying, ironing and braiding hair. We look forward to supporting her as she continues through college and goes on to law school.

Our second scholarship winner, Christopher Nusbaum, is well known to many Federationists. The following article, which appeared in the 8/18/2017 edition of the Carrol County Times, describes Christopher’s hopes and dreams:

**Blind ambition: Visually impaired Taneytown native has a radio show, teaches as he prepares for college**

Lisa Gregory

Retrieved from: Carroll County Times 8/18/2017

Oh, the questions he has been asked and the stories he can tell. And as a visually impaired person, 19-year-old Chris Nusbaum, has always responded to those questions with grace and good humor. Sometimes even with a maturity far beyond his years.

“I remember on the school bus a kid asked me if blind people got married,” said Nusbaum. “I said: ‘Yes, of course. I know blind people who are married and have kids.’ Then he asked me, ‘But how do you know if she’s pretty?’ What a great example of the middle school mindset, huh? I replied, ‘I may not know what she looks like on the outside, but I do on the inside and that’s what really counts.’ ”

According to Nusbaum, there are no wrong questions. Better to ask than not, offering an opportunity to educate and inform. And, “I think I have heard them all,” he said. An especially frequent one is whether his other senses are heightened because of his blindness. The answer is no. “I don’t have superhuman hearing,” said Nusbaum, grinning.

Nusbaum is confident and comfortable in his own skin. Political correctness aside, he will tell you, “I have no problem calling myself a blind person; I am a blind person.”

But not just a blind person. Nusbaum is a gifted musician and singer, the host of an internet radio show, a talented writer, an advocate for the blind, an adored son and a good friend. “It’s not that blind people can’t do things,” he said. “It’s just that we do them differently.”

Nusbaum, who is from Taneytown, was born nine weeks early. As a result, he developed a version of retinopathy of prematurity, which causes abnormal blood vessels to grow in the retina and can result in the retina detaching from the back of the eye.

His mother, Wendy Messersmith, remembers several months after his birth going on a vacation in the Outer Banks and “falling apart,” she said. “I kept thinking he will never see this beautiful sunrise or this beautiful sunset. I cried. I had my pity party. Then I raised my child.”

She and her then-husband Mike Nusbaum discovered the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children. And she reached out to others through an online support group. “From early on I was guided by some wonderful people,” she said. Messersmith specifically remembers the laundry basket and Hula-Hoop suggestions. “A blind child doesn’t know that their toy is there so they don’t reach for it,” she said. “So, trying to teach crawling and walking were very difficult.”

Then someone from the online group suggested she put her son in a laundry basket. “Now the toy couldn’t get out of his way,” said Messersmith. And when he was a bit older and needed more exploratory room it was suggested she use a Hula-Hoop. “When the toy hit the Hula-Hoop it didn’t move,” she said. “This advice came from parents who had been there, done that.”

In fact, Nusbaum is now part of that same online group. “I am answering some of the same questions my mother asked for me,” he said.

One message from the group was consistent though. “Don’t hold them back,” said Messersmith. “These kids need to be prepared to be on their own at some point.”

Nusbaum was a bright and inquisitive child who loved the radio. When most children were watching cartoons, he was listening to talk radio. “I pretended I had my own radio show and really thought I would grow up and do that,” he said. And while he plans to be a teacher working with blind students, he has for the past several years hosted an internet radio show called “The Blind Side” that focuses on blind issues.

By the time he had enrolled at Runnymede Elementary, Nusbaum, who had a one-on-one aide and a teacher of the visually impaired, began to realize he was different. “During recess on the playground the other kids would be in these little groups, and I would be alone,” he recalled. “I tried to understand why that was.”

“Chris didn’t realize he was blind,” said Messersmith. “I told him: ‘Chris, it is what it is. Yeah, there are days it’s going to suck and times that it’s not.’ ” Then with the sharp wit her son has inherited she said, “The only things I suggested he not choose to be is a pilot or a cab driver. But other than that, I told him the world was open to him.”

And he set about embracing it. An avid reader, as an 8-year-old he traveled to Los Angeles to compete in the Braille Challenge, an academic contest. He even made an appearance on Nickelodeon, participating in a segment on “Out of Sight: How Blind Kids See the World.” And he made friends. In fact, “Everyone should have a friend like Chris,” said Ari Lipka, who has known Nusbaum since first grade. The two often enjoyed going to the movies together with Lipka providing the commentary of what was happening on the screen.

Nusbaum also has a natural affinity for music. “He can hear a song once and then play it back to you,” said his mother. He was active in chorus during school and recently entertained fellow travelers with an impromptu performance on a cruise ship during a visit to Alaska.

Six years ago came a life-changing event for Nusbaum. He discovered the NFB on his own terms. He had had exposure to the organization early on, when his parents would attend events. However, Nusbaum’s own involvement with NFB changed when he attended the NFB Leadership and Advocacy in Washington, D.C., program in 2011. He specifically recalls a meeting with a representative of former Congressman Roscoe Bartlett’s office and a discussion about the Technology Bill of Rights for the Blind. In an article, he wrote for *The* *Braille Monitor,* Nusbaum, said, “At that moment I thought I want to be a part of this (NFB). Here was an organization in which I could help fight discrimination and increase opportunities for all the blind.”

Since then, Nusbaum has served on the board of the National Association of Blind Students and served as president of the Maryland Association of Blind Students. He is also one of the founders of the Carroll County chapter of NFB.

And he enjoys working with the NFB Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning program, which provides children with concentrated Braille instruction during the summer.

“I think Chris has the heart for leadership,” said Mark Riccobono, president of the NFB.

This spring, Nusbaum, who graduated in 2016 from Francis Scott Key High School where he was a member of the National Honor Society, returned from nine months at the Louisiana Center for the Blind, a residential training facility. This was done in preparation for him going to college this fall. He will be only the second blind student to attend Lynchburg College in Virginia.

And as he prepares for the next phase of his life, he says he wouldn’t change anything. Nusbaum is often asked if he had the opportunity to see would he choose to do so.

“Without hesitation, I wouldn’t take it,” he said. “Having been blind all my life, I have become used to life as a blind person. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

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# Spectator Specs

Weddings:

On February 11 Patty Behr, President of the Eastern shore Chapter, married Jeff Wiggs. We look forward to meeting Jeff who is a new Federationist at our functions.

On August 19 an active member of the Eastern Shore Chapter Pam Jenkins married Morrison Dennis. We look forward to meeting the new couple at Federation events.

On September 10 Eric Duffy and Shelly Johnson were married. The ceremony took place at the Jernigan Institute. They moved to Maryland this summer. Eric is a longtime Federationist who served for a time as the President of the NFB of Ohio. Eric is the Director of Access Technology at the National Federation of the Blind. Shelly is the friendly voice at the reception desk at the Federation. Both are members of the Greater Baltimore Chapter.

On October 7, Rose Sloan and Kyle Warner will be married in her grandparents’ church in Streamwood, Illinois. Rose and Kyle are active members of the Greater Baltimore Chapter.

Congratulations to all of the newlyweds!

Deaths:

In March Bella Koenig died at the age of 93. Bell was a member of the Central Maryland Chapter. She fought fiercely to maintain her independence and lived live to the full.

On Saturday, May 20 Nanci Dosh died of cancer. Nanci ran a transportation company called Harbor Express. She was very helpful in providing transportation to BELL students and to others so that they could attend NFB functions. Nanci was a true friend and an avid believer in the capabilities of blind people.

On June 22, Gabrielle Rhoads unexpectedly passed away. Although Gabrielle was ill for many years, she never let that stop her advocacy efforts on behalf of her blind son Andrew. She was always willing to help other parents of blind children. We first met the Rhoads when Andy attended the BELL Academy in Glen Dale in 2011. Our sympathy to Kevin and his children Andrew and Jacob.

On July 26, Diane Grant lost her long battle with multiple sclerosis. Diane had been a member of the Central Maryland Chapter. Diane struggled mightily to obtain her independence. She was always willing to lend a helping hand to everyone.

I regret to announce the passing of Joe Cook, who died in August, and was a founding member of the National Harbor Chapter. Joe, a retired Pastor, lost his sight later in life, but never let vision loss hinder his pleasant personality.

Accompanied by his beloved sister, Dorothy Stewart, Joe was always in attendance at meetings, National Harbor functions, and never wanted to miss a State or National Convention. Evenings at National Convention, Joe and Dorothy could be found sitting outside by the poolside eating chicken wings and Joe tapping his feet to the music. On occasion, he would come up with a funny joke but never missed a beat when called upon to deliver a word of prayer. .He also would join in with the singing when coaxed with a down home Church song. We will miss him greatly but his spirit will remain in our hearts and minds.

On August 30, Tom Ley lost long battle with cancer. Read the article about Tom elsewhere in this issue.

On Saturday, September 15, Cynthia Smith, wife of Ray Smith, lost her battle with pancreatic cancer. Cynthia was always willing to assist Ray in helping other blind people, especially those in PG County.

May they rest in peace.

Achievements:

Shawn Jacobson, who serves as treasurer of NFBMD, is also a part-time writer. His short story, “On Memory Lanes,” was recently featured on *Bewildering Stories,* an online periodical that publishes works including poetry, short stories, novels, and art. To read the story, go to: <http://www.bewilderingstories.com/issue726/memory_lanes1.html>.