



NATIONAL FEDERATION  
OF THE BLIND

**THE ILLINOIS INDEPENDENT**

**The Newsletter of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois  
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## **CARRYING OUT OUR MISSION** **by Denise Avant**

The constitution of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois states that we are not a social organization. As an organization of the blind, we are to formulate programs and work actively to promote the economic and social betterment of the blind. Certainly we can plan occasional social events and attend social outings. However, critical to our identity is our mission to advocate on behalf of blind people in Illinois. Whether you live in Springfield or Chicago, the Quad Cities, Belleville, or any other place in our state, you should engage in advocacy within your community.

### **REHABILITATION SERVICES**

One of our most important advocacy efforts is communicating with the Illinois Bureau of Blind Services (IBBS). Debbie Stein, David Meyer, and I have been talking to IBBS Chief John Gordon and Assistant Bureau Chief Ingrid Halvorsen about building quality rehabilitation services in Illinois. Many newly blinded adults and even some who have been blind for a number of years do not realize that their blindness need not hold them back. We continue to push for rehabilitation services at the Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education (often referred to as ICRE Wood) that raise the expectations of trainees. As blind people we need to be able to travel confidently and independently using the long white cane, to take care of our daily living needs, to use a computer effectively, and to read and write Braille. Members of our organization have spoken to the last two ICRE classes about our NFB philosophy and the programs we offer as an advocacy organization.

The NFB also has advocated for the right of blind people to seek advanced training in blindness skills at one of the NFB training centers in Louisiana, Colorado, or Minnesota. For a number of years, blind Illinoisians who wanted to attend one of these training centers were routinely turned down and sent to ICRE Wood instead. In the past two years, at least six people from Illinois have been able to attend the training centers in Colorado and Minnesota.

To learn more about the state of rehabilitation services for the blind in Illinois, we invite Mr. Gordon and Ms. Halvorsen to our state convention each year. We also express any concerns we have about the services. At the 2019 convention we hope to have a counselor or perhaps Ms. Halvorsen available to sign people up for state rehabilitation services. Patti Chang, NFB outreach

chair, has discussed with Mr. Gordon and Ms. Halvorsen the possibility of agency workers attending the employment seminar at the 2019 national convention.

The Bureau of Blind Services is looking to provide transitional services to youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two. Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), IBBS is attempting to develop direct and/or support programs to assist blind youth in making the transition from high school to competitive integrated employment. The required transitional services to eligible students are as follows:

- (1) Job exploration counseling
- (2) Work-based learning experience
- (3) Counseling on postsecondary education
- (4) Workplace readiness training
- (5) Instruction in self-advocacy.

I would like to talk with Chief Gordon about having IBBS customers attend the employment seminar at the 2020 NFB national convention. This seminar meets the pre-employment criteria of WIOA.

At last year's face-to-face board meeting, the NFBI voted to participate in a career mentoring program if such a program is developed by IBBS. Many of us have had and still have successful careers, and we believe that we would make excellent mentors for blind students. Our board chose not to seek direct WIOA reimbursement for our Freedom Link program, winner of a 2017 Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award. However, we have talked to Mr. Gordon and Ms. Halvorsen about signing up Freedom Link students for pre-employment services under WIOA. We want to make sure that each of our eligible Freedom Link students has a IBBS counselor and can seek vocational rehabilitation services from IBBS upon graduation from high school. We have successfully received reimbursement for four students who attended the 2019 Midwest Student Seminar, as the state determined that we met the pre-employment services criteria.

#### INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Recently NFB members in Chicago have been working with the city regarding various initiatives and pilot programs centered around orientation and mobility. The city is in the process of installing audible traffic signals at several intersections throughout the city. Many companies make these signals, and we believe that some are effective while others are not. The National Federation of the Blind is not opposed to audible signals, but we want to ensure that they meet the needs of the blind community. The signals should be uniform throughout the city, they should be placed only at complex or noisy intersections, they should be activated on demand, and they should not cause unnecessary disruption to others. Steve Hastalis and Michal Nowicki have been representing the NFBI at meetings with the city to ensure that quality signals are installed in places where they are needed. Their advocacy is ongoing.

Many cities, including Chicago, now permit the use of electric scooters for travel purposes. In Chicago ten vendors are participating in a pilot project that involves these electric scooters. A

person uses a smartphone app to rent a scooter to ride from Point A to Point B. The app also can be used to report any complaints or problems regarding a scooter. These electric scooters make very little sound at all. The blind person must rely on the driver's awareness that a blind person is crossing the path.

The drivers of these scooters are not to ride or leave the scooters parked on sidewalks. But there is a difference between what should happen and what actually does happen. In many cities scooters are frequently ridden on sidewalks, and they often are left in front of homes, businesses, and restaurants. It appears that Chicago officials rolling out the pilot scooter project have not considered all of the ramifications that affect blind people.

Recently, I wrote a letter to Karen Tamley, Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. I set out our concerns and asked a number of questions. Commissioner Tamley has agreed to discuss our concerns in an upcoming telephone call. Officials from one of the scooter companies, Lime, have scheduled a conference call to discuss our concerns and to see what steps can be taken to provide accessible information to blind citizens. We need the app on smartphones to be fully accessible with Voiceover for IOS and Talk Back for Android so that blind persons can file complaints or rent scooters if desired. We need Braille and large print signage on these scooters so we can have the number and name of the company involved should a complaint need to be filed. The city suggested that a person employed by the city take our complaints, but there are a couple problems with this solution. How would the blind population know who to contact? And if a sighted person can complain directly to the scooter company, a blind person should be able to do the same.

For the past eighteen months the city of Chicago has been considering providing the visual interpreting service, AIRA, free of charge to blind users at O'Hare Airport. A blind person would simply use an app on the smartphone to call an AIRA agent to get visual information while traveling at O'Hare. The AIRA agent provides visual information but does not make choices for the blind person. Cities such as Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Boston have purchased a block of minutes that allows blind people to use AIRA free of charge in airports and subway stations. We are still waiting for Chicago city officials to provide blind travelers with AIRA access.

Meanwhile, Karen Tamley has asked members of our organization and other stakeholders to test a service from Boni Loud Steps. This is an application to be used with WIFI on a smartphone to give blind people information about their surroundings. Little information is known about Boni or its application. But a check of Boni's website suggests that the company has a misunderstanding about blind people and how we travel. For example, the company states, "Most venues are complicated for the visually impaired, overloaded information for sighted people is not accessible to the visually impaired in an indoor space." The company invites visitors to click on a link that says, "See how our app arms individuals with confidence in complex areas." Aside from being grammatically incorrect, the messaging seems to claim that the app will provide confidence to a blind traveler rather than simply be an aid. Some of our members will work with Boni to explore the app and learn about its possible advantages and

disadvantages.

For as long as I can remember, I have heard that the National Federation of the Blind is not an organization speaking for the blind; it is an organization of blind people speaking for ourselves. I have come to appreciate why we are of the blind, rather than for the blind. We as blind people have the right and the responsibility to speak for and against issues that have an impact on our lives; to speak to local, state, and national officials about policies, programs, and legislation that affect us; and to make our own life choices.

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**OWNING OUR FUTURE:**

## The 2019 Midwest Student Seminar



Maurice Paret at the podium during Spring Student Seminar 2019.

On the weekend of March 15-17, 2019, the National Association of Blind Students (NABS) held its second annual Midwest Student Seminar. The seminar took place at the Holiday Inn O’Hare, and the NFB of Illinois was the host affiliate.

The seminar brought together blind students from six midwestern states—Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Iowa, and Indiana—for a weekend of learning, sharing, and fun. The seminar began with a dinner outing on Friday night that introduced the students to the CTA (Chicago Transit Authority) and the independence it offers to blind travelers. On Saturday and Sunday, the students heard presentations about transitioning to college, public speaking, interviewing for a job, and much more. On Saturday night participants were invited to take part in a talent show or try their hand at sculpting and drawing.

Many of the presentations at the seminar were of such high quality that we want to share them with a wider audience. The following three articles are based on presentations at the seminar: “Own Your Future,” by Marilyn Green; “To Become a Nurse,” by Lindsey Fritz; and “The Next Big Step,” by Yusef Dale.

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## **OWN YOUR PRESENT**

by Marilyn Green

*Namaste.* At the end of this talk I will tell you what that means, if you don't know already.

When I started looking for something to do for physical fitness, I went to the gym. I got tired of having to ask for help with the machines and trying to figure out where the buttons were. Then I talked to a friend who was in love with yoga. At that time I was stressed out at work, and I was reeling from the deaths of my parents. I said, "Okay, let me try this yoga thing."

The place where I practice is called Core Power Yoga. They have a lot of locations here in Chicago. They offer a seven-day free trial, because yoga can be expensive. So I said, "Okay, I'm going to do this," and I tried it.

It was heated yoga, and it's hot! Our unheated class, as we call it, is at 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Our heated classes go up to 102 degrees, and add to that 20 percent humidity! Afterward I was literally sweating for an hour! It detoxifies everything!

After my first class I was so intimidated I waited about six months before I went back. When I finally went back, I got so involved I became a fixture. I was there three to five days a week. All the instructors knew me. Everyone there knew me.

Then the instructors started talking to me about teacher training! I said, "You do realize that I'm blind, right?" and they said, "But your practice is so wonderful! You have such body awareness, much better than most people we've seen!" I was talking to instructors who had been teaching for years. I was like, "Hey, I do what feels good in my body."

I don't have a stereotypical yoga body, mind you. I'm a curvy girl, and I'm not a twenty-something. I said, "What are you guys thinking?" I thought, they just want my money, right? They want me to pay thousands of dollars to do this training. So I said, "No, I'm not doing it. But I love being here. I love the community."

After a while I started to lose more vision. I was doing yoga a lot, trying to cope with everything, and I realized that these people really see *me*. They don't see me as a blind person. They see me as a person, and they feel that I have something to offer. This was before my NFB days, and it was the first place where I felt I was accepted. They didn't just see that I'm blind; they saw that I love doing yoga there. I could go there and talk to people about whatever, and they just listened. It was an awesome experience, and I believe in giving back.

Recently online I found a *Huffington Post* article where people talked about the thirty-five quotes from Maya Angelou that changed their lives. One of those quotes speaks to me especially, for yoga and for NFB. “When you get, give; when you learn, teach.” So I decided to do the teacher training.

The training was twelve hours a week for eight weeks of intensive learning, and it involved a lot of physical practice. I didn’t just have to learn it, I had to do it! I had to feel it in my body. It was the hardest thing! In my first classes, I found out that the girl who couldn’t see and needed all the verbal cues couldn’t give verbal cues herself! I’d say, “Okay, root your feet, move your legs . . . oh, just look at what I’m doing!” I didn’t have the language skills, so I worked on it. I worked really, really hard. By the end of my teacher training the feedback was, “Your verbal cues are on point!” That was the best thing they ever said to me.

Then there was hands-on position adjustment. I said, “How do you expect me to adjust people when I can’t see them?” But we worked that out, too. I always had someone in my classes who could assist me with direction. I knew how to adjust, it was just the visual aspect of adjusting people that was a challenge sometimes.

I did my two hundred hours of teacher training, and I graduated in 2016. I started teaching at a place in downtown Chicago called Second Sense. I enjoy it, and the students enjoy it, too. The staff say it’s one of their best attended classes. When I went back about eight weeks ago, I had nine students. Nine students is a big deal in that little board room that we use! We were staggering mats—and mind you, my students are blind, and the majority are over fifty. It’s a challenge for me a lot of times, and it’s a challenge for them, but we make it work. A lot of times I do the poses in my own body so I can feel what it feels like.

So right now, because we’ve been sitting for an hour and some, I’d like you all to stand up and feel it in your body! Are you all with me?

Stand tall! We are owning our futures this weekend, right?

Root your heels in the floor beneath you. Sway from side to side, and begin to feel comfortable in your space.

Hug your thighs together—squeeze tight! Melt your belly button toward your spine.

Float both arms up over your head. Rotate your pinkies in toward one another.

Find your *drishti*, which is Sanskrit for your point of focus and concentration. Breathe deep in through your nose and out through your mouth. Let your breath go. Deep inhale through your nose, even deeper exhale through your mouth. Inhale, exhale.

Continue these breaths on your own, and in these few minutes that we have, find your space. Own your future. Own your present. Whatever it shall be, this moment, just breathe and take the time.

That is the thing that I love about this practice—the time. Time for yourself, time to breathe, time to explore. We all know with NFB it's about exploring, it's about being curious, it's about challenging yourself. Right now, if you're still with me, this is your challenge. This is your moment, right here, right now. Own it. Be comfortable in it. Challenge yourself to be right here.

Inhale, exhale. Inhale, reach your fingertips to the ceiling. Exhale, reach your arms wide like a cactus. Inhale, raise your arms to the ceiling; exhale, reach your heart center. Inhale, bring your thumbs to your third eye space between your eyebrows. Your space of all knowing, your space of ownership. *Namaste*.

*Namaste* in Sanskrit means, "I see you." What yoga and NFB mean to me is to be seen. It's not being seen as the blind girl or the curvy girl or the girl who can't do a headstand. It's being seen for who I am and what I am. So at this moment I say to you truly, *Namaste*. The light within me bows to the light within you. *Namaste*.

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## **TO BECOME A NURSE**

by Lindsey Fritz

I am from Madison, Wisconsin, and currently I am a fulltime nursing student at Madison Area Technical College. I'm completing the first semester of my program while working as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at Belmont Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.

I grew up in the Federation, and early on my family taught me that hard work was required if I was to become successful. I want to join the handful of blind people working in the nursing field. Right now I am thinking about specializing in trauma treatment or labor and delivery.

My mother has been a paramedic for a long time, and she is my major inspiration for going into the medical field. One of my role models is Dr. Tim Cordes, a totally blind medical doctor who works in Madison, Wisconsin.

Because of my boyfriend, Nathan, I've decided to take my education farther than obtaining my Registered Nursing (RN) license. Nathan is a Type I diabetic who was diagnosed much later than most. He lost a bunch of weight and got severely sick out of nowhere. Some people even thought he was on drugs, which was not the case. I am able to check his sugars and make sure he is getting the correct amount of insulin by using accessible meters and insulin pens. The pens click, and with every click the dial adds one unit of insulin.

My classes include advanced anatomy-physiology and microbiology. I struggle with these classes because we use microscopes, and I am unable to see the slide and the arrows pointing to the parts of a cell that I need to identify. As an alternative technique I use my phone to take a picture through the microscope. I blow up the photo with my computer so I can see it. We also use tactile diagrams and models of cells so I can learn through touch how certain body mechanics work.

Madison College has a great disability resource office; I work with Kevin Carini, who has helped me get the specialized technology I need. For example, in my organic chemistry class last semester, I needed to know how much chemical I was adding to a beaker or flask. I was not able to feel or see the lines on the beaker. Kevin ordered me some large-print chemistry equipment, extra large petri dishes for culturing microorganisms, and gloves that would not be affected by some of the harsh chemicals we used. In my anatomy and physiology classes our instructor is a medical doctor. This is nice because I'm not only learning about the body and how it works, but I'm also learning how to relate my knowledge to the medical field.

My education plans include obtaining my Registered Nurse license and eventually moving on to get my Nurse Practitioner license. I will have to go to graduate school to get my master's degree.

In the fall of 2017 I obtained my Certified Nursing Assistant certification, which is required in order to become a registered nurse in the state of Wisconsin. The CNA course was accelerated, and it only took three weeks. I spent two weeks in class and one week in clinicals. In clinicals I worked from 0700 to 1700 hours every day. This may sound strange until I explain that we use 24-hour time in the medical field to avoid confusion, especially when it comes to giving medications. So I worked from 7 AM to 5 PM every weekday.

After I completed the class and my clinical work I had to take a written state exam and a skills exam. For the skills exam I had to perform some tasks on a mannequin in front of two board certified representatives from Pearson Vue. Pearson Vue is the state board that certifies nursing

assistants in Wisconsin. To take the written exam I had the option for listening to a recording of the questions, and I was able to mark my answers on the paper.

I learned along the way that I had to find my own methods of completing certain nursing tasks. One skill that challenged me was vitals, or taking the patient's vital signs. I am not able to use our standard medical thermometers or blood pressure cuffs because they do not speak and the print is far too small for me, even with my magnifier. Therefore I use my own equipment, which I leave at work on the nurse's carts. I have a talking automatic blood pressure cuff, and I use a pulse oximeter that tells me the patient's O<sub>2</sub> intake, also known as oxygen intake. When I use a stethoscope I place my hand on the patient's shoulders to count the respirations, because I am unable to see the chest or shoulders rising and falling as sighted CNA and nursing students do.

My biggest challenge as a CNA does not pertain to my blindness at all. My biggest challenge is my height. I know—laugh it up! Well . . . it is funny. Many of the beds in the facility where I work don't go low enough for me to reach the patient easily. This is an issue, since I stand only 4 feet 10 inches tall.

When I walked into my interview for my job as a certified nursing assistant with my long white cane, the first thing the Director of Nursing said to me was, "Oh, you're blind." What kind of statement is that? She asked me some questions pertaining to my training, and she checked my credentials. At first she was very timid toward me and didn't seem very interested. I knew that I had lost her interest in hiring me. Then I started telling her about the adaptations I use for assisting residents with certain tasks. Her face just lit up! She seemed astonished that someone like me, with my blindness, was able to obtain my certification on the first try for both exams.

Then she offered me less money than CNAs in the Madison area earn on average. I told her I could go somewhere else, and that I had other places interested in me. I thanked her for her time, and I got up to leave. As I turned toward the door she said, "Hold on." That's when she gave me a better offer, and I was hired on the spot.

All of my residents except in the dementia unit know me, and they know I do things a little differently than the other CNAs. They see me with my cane, and they know not to be afraid of me. They know that I am more than capable of assisting them in anything they need. When you're working as a CNA, trust is a big deal.

At first some residents were uneasy about allowing me to assist them. This was understandable, and I needed to respect it. That uneasiness is an unfortunate response in society. That's where establishing trust comes into play.

Having some simple conversations with people, calling them by name, and asking how their

families are doing usually does the trick. It took about two weeks for my residents to get to know me and for them to start trusting me to care for them. Now I'm no different from any other CNA. I can come into their rooms, we greet each other, and I assist them with what they need.

Blind people have entered many professions, but the medical field has hardly been touched. I plan on changing that. I want to pave the way for more blind students to enter the world of medicine.

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**THE NEXT BIG STEP:**  
**How to Keep Your Job and Thrive in the Workplace**  
by Yusef Dale



At this seminar you've heard quite a bit about interviewing and getting hired for your first job. only This morning I'd like to talk about what happens next. Once you get that job, you have to do some key things in order to retain that employment and to advance.

#### REPUTATION: THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE

It may surprise you, but when it comes to keeping a job and advancing in the workplace, the guiding principle is reputation.

What do I mean by reputation? Reputation is part of the human condition in almost every institution. People talk. As a blind person, you're going to be scrutinized more carefully than most, and people are going to talk about you more than they talk about other people. You have to be prepared for that reality.

Reputation has its own momentum, and that momentum is exponential. When you start on the job, you need to get your reputation rolling in the right direction. To build that favorable momentum you have to be excellent at what you do, and you have to be excellent early!

Let me assure you that being excellent does not mean you have to be perfect. There's no such thing as perfection! Excellence, though, does mean striving for perfection and striving for it sincerely, with everything you have.

In the workplace reputation is key for everyone, whether you're blind or sighted. But when you are blind, people will attribute any mistake you make to your blindness. And guess what—you cannot undo your blindness! You are going to have to take your reputation seriously in the beginning and be excellent.

### NO SHORTCUTS!

What steps do you need to take in order to be excellent? The first thing I want to say is no shortcuts! No shortcuts! I cannot tell you how important this is!

I work at the US Attorney's office in Chicago. It's a very prestigious office, one of the top litigation offices in the country, maybe just behind the Southern District of New York. Pat Fitzgerald was the US attorney when I started, and he is legendary. When he was working in New York he prosecuted some of the biggest bomb terrorism cases. When I came to the US attorney's office, I knew right away that I was going to be scrutinized. I said to myself, "Yusef, no shortcuts!"

The first thing you have to do to implement the no-shortcuts strategy is read, read, read! When you start a job you're going to undergo a training program for new employees. You're going to go to lectures, you're going to take notes, and you're going to get a vast amount of written material. Inevitably you'll be tempted not to read it all. You might think: *I'll go to the lectures, and I'll take notes on everything the trainers talk about. I'll learn that way.*

Don't do that! Read everything, and make sure you understand it all. If you don't understand something, ask questions of someone whose trust you have gained so that they don't judge you.

Once you start with the substance of your job, you're going to get what we call "go-by's." Everything has a go-by. For instance, in my office somebody has prosecuted a multi-defendant gang case, and they all pled out. What does the plea agreement look like? What does the cooperation agreement look like? If I'm flipping one person against another, what does that look like? Give me a document I can go by.

Go-by's are part of what everyone does, but sometimes you're tempted not to read those documents all the way through. You might think: *This paragraph is in every plea agreement—I don't have to understand it. I'll just put it in.*

Don't do that! Read and make sure you understand every statute. Don't fall to the temptation of

not reading everything and not understanding everything. Remember that your reputation is everything, and if it gets rolling in the wrong direction, you're done.

As blind people we cannot afford the leeway of taking shortcuts. Question everything. Research everything. Make sure you know that everything in your document is right! Be excellent!

### ASK THE RIGHT QUESTION

The next thing I want to tell you is to ask the right question, and ask it in the right way. Everyone has questions starting out in a new job. But everything applies to us disproportionately as blind people, so what we ask and how we ask it is very important.

What does it mean to ask the right question in the right way? No one respects a person who comes into their office and says, "Hey, what's the answer to this?" When you ask a question in the workplace, particularly if you're blind, you need to demonstrate that you have context for your question. You need to show that you have tried to answer the question before you go into your colleague's office.

Soon after I started at the US Attorney's office, I dropped by the office of Lisa, one of my coworkers. I said, "I'm having an issue with understanding the safety-valve proffer. I've read Guidelines Section 5K1.1. I've read the statute that applies. Here's what the statute says, and the seminal case says this. Here's what I don't understand." I didn't just walk in and ask Lisa a question. I made sure she knew I had tried hard to get the answer. I showed her that I was thinking and that I'm not lazy.

I cannot tell you how important it is to ask the right question in the right way. Guess what's going to happen? The next time Lisa talks to one of her buddies, she'll say, "Wow! That new hire who's blind, he came into my office with a question, and you could tell he had read and researched before he asked me." Because we're blind, people are not going to expect that from us. There's a lot of depth to the ignorance out there in the work world. They will assume the worst unless you ask the right question in the right way.

### BE INTENTIONAL

Be intentional about demonstrating your work ethic. Make sure people know you're willing to work long hours. When I first got to the US Attorney's office, I worked seven days a week a lot of the time. I worked till seven, eight, or nine every night, and people knew it. You can't be phony about it. Don't send a 10 PM email if you don't have to send a 10 PM email! People will see through that! But if you have to send an email at 10 or 11 PM, send it! You want people to know you have a strong work ethic, that you're willing to work long hours, and you're willing to work hard.

As a blind person coming into a new job, you have to deal with one huge issue that other people aren't dealing with. You have to learn to do your job without sight. That's an additional challenge that requires some extra work. Don't be ashamed to let people know you work hard. They're going to tell their friends, "Hey, I see him here on the weekends! I see him here late at night!" They respect you for that, and your reputation gets rolling in the right direction.

## NO EXCUSES!

My next point is really a big one. Don't allow others to make excuses for you! I know you folks in here are not going to make excuses for yourselves. You've achieved a certain amount of success, and you're used to not making excuses for yourselves—at least you should be!

But a sneaky thing happens in the work world. People will try to make excuses for you. It can be very subtle, and you might not notice at first. Your boss might come to your office say, "You're doing great work here. But we've got these mortgage fraud cases, and they have a gigantic document load. We'll give you some other cases instead. You'll be doing the same amount of work as everyone else. We're just not going to assign you these document-heavy cases."

When that happens, the answer is *no!* Never let people make excuses for you and tell you what you cannot do. They may sound like they're complimenting you, but they're setting you up for failure. They're saying to themselves, "There are certain things I can't ask that employee to do." I don't want to sound melodramatic, but that is going to doom you to failure.

Once I got a lecture about this issue from someone I really liked and respected. So when that assignment came up I said, "I can do mortgage fraud cases. I've got this." And when you do the mortgage case and do it well, your reputation gets rolling! It's cooking now! It's cooking! So never let anyone make excuses for you!

Here's another example that was important in my career. I was handling a case with a really great prosecutor. She clerked for a Supreme Court justice. I always strive for excellence, but this time I understood I'd be measured by an especially tall yardstick. Whatever this prosecutor said about me—and she would say something, because that's human nature!—whatever she said, I needed it to be good!

The case was a more or less straightforward bank robbery, but a lot of surveillance video was involved. Dealing with video is one of the biggest challenges for a blind person in this profession. You have to figure out how to explain it to a jury. She said, nicely, "I'll handle this main FBI agent, because there's this video. But we'll still question the same number of witnesses."

I said no. Once I knew she thought I'd have trouble with the FBI agent, I insisted that I take that

witness. I was really direct with her because I liked and trusted her. I said, “If I don’t do this, you’ll have doubts about whether I can do it. It’s important that you not have those doubts.”

I went out to the bank like we always do. I looked at the terrain. I had an assistant explain to me what was in the video, exactly what time things were happening. I went over and over it in my head. I went back to the bank. I walked the terrain again to make sure I understood it, and I put that FBI witness on the stand. It came out fine, and that’s the point. The prosecutor was ready to make an excuse for me. But once I knew she thought I couldn’t deal with the video, I insisted that I do it.

### WRITE IT RIGHT!

The last thing I want to talk about is proofreading your written work. If something goes wrong, you will not get the benefit of the doubt. I know, because I’ve been there. I know other blind professionals who’ve gone through it. When you’re writing something in an email, be very, very careful about your grammar and your spelling! Make sure you have automatic spell-check turned on before you send an email. If you know you confuse certain words in your head, make sure you don’t confuse them when you send out emails or when you turn in written product.

All day I write, write, write! People think lawyers spend all their time in court. But mostly I write. I write motions and sentencing memos. I write a prosecution memo at the beginning. I draft the indictment. Frankly, writing is not one of my gifts. I’ve become a good writer, but I had to work on it. For instance, I know the difference between except and accept, but when I’m typing like crazy at my computer, for some unknown reason I’ll write except when I mean accept, like to accept an agreement. I’ve got to double-check it every time.

Listen, you might make a mistake. I’ve made one or two! But if your reputation gets rolling in the right way, people know you’re a person who works hard. Then you’ll get the benefit of the doubt.

### HUMAN ASSISTANTS

Now I want to talk quickly about working with a human assistant, such as a reader or a driver. In the law business we have secretaries. The duties of my assistant sometimes extend a little beyond the usual, but it’s not a big deal.

One thing an assistant can do for you is proofread your documents for formatting, because weird things happen sometimes when you’re typing. One time I had two pages that were all in italics. I had no idea how it happened! When your document goes to the court or to your supervisor, you want it to be impeccable.

Make sure your assistant knows his or her role. Your assistant’s job is not to think for you. Your

assistant's job is to serve as your eyes. Carefully and delicately make sure your assistant understands that. In the work world people will sometimes try to give your assistant credit for the work you do. It's shocking, but it's something we all live with as blind people. When you refer to your assistant in your workplace, make sure people understand his or her role. I might say casually, "She sees well, and that's all I really need."

These are the things I think are really important about retaining employment once you have it. Get your reputation going, be excellent, no shortcuts, make sure you're doing things the right way, ask the right questions. I want to end with a story that speaks to these points.

I got to the US Attorney's office in 2007. I had previously worked for the Social Security Administration. I went to the US Attorney's office on what they call a detail. The Social Security Administration sends over an attorney to prosecute criminal fraud against Social Security. So you're sitting in the US Attorney's office, but you still work for Social Security.

Anybody who goes to the US Attorney's office from Social Security wants to stay there. It's a very prestigious office. You'll never have another job like it! I knew that once I worked for Pat Fitzgerald I could say that for the rest of my career! So I went there with the attitude that I was going to be excellent.

One of my first trials was a complicated bank fraud case. The defendant was accused of embezzling money from a bank where she worked and shuffling funds among various accounts. Then she orchestrated a bank robbery to try to cover up the theft! I was on that trial, and I actually put the bank witness on the stand. It was hugely complicated! There were rows and rows of debits and credits, numbers all over the place! I had to explain it during my direct testimony, and then I had to explain it at closing. My closing argument was not as good as I would have liked it to be, but I had those numbers down pat! I was able to explain everything to the jury. I showed them where those debits went and how this woman set up the bank robbery so she could pretend the money had been stolen.

The judge in that case was a former prosecutor from our office. She saw all the work I'd done. I didn't take any shortcuts. She saw that.

At the end of my two years, when my detail was nearly over, I wrote Pat Fitzgerald a letter. I said I wanted to stay on and become an assistant United States attorney. Pat Fitzgerald said, "You've done good work here. Let me go back and do my due diligence, and I'll let you know the decision of the office."

Later he came back and said, "We'd like to have you stay on. You're an addition to the office." Then I went next-door to Lisa. I said, "Wow! I've got some good news! I'm actually staying

on!” And she said, “I know. I’m on the hiring committee.” So all that time I was working and asking questions, she was assessing me. And, because the judge on that bank embezzlement trial was a former prosecutor in the office, and because she randomly happened to be assigned to a few of my cases, it would not have been unusual for her to share her impressions with the office. I feel pretty certain that, if she did so, she had favorable things to say.

That’s the point of the story. You never know who you’re talking to. It’s important to remember that. Be excellent, and get your reputation going in the right way. It will lead you to success in the workplace.

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## **WALKING THE RUNWAY**

by Mary Lou Grunwald

I enjoy shopping, and one of my favorite stores is Talbot’s out at the Old Orchard Shopping Mall. Going out there is a good travel experience. I take a couple of buses to get there, and I have the chance to do quite a bit of walking.

I really like the clothing selection at Talbot’s, and as a vendor myself I appreciate that they know how to display their merchandise. Sometimes they ask customers to model outfits in the store, and I overheard the salespeople talking about it. I went to a couple of their fashion shows to find out what was involved, and I thought, Hey, I could do this! I’d always thought I’d like to do some modeling, and this might be my chance.

First I laid some groundwork. I’d visit the store wearing really nice outfits to get the salespeople’s attention. Finally I got up my courage and told one of the stylists that I would like to model clothes in the store. She looked startled at first, but then she thought about it, and she said, “Well, you’re an active boomer, and that’s the image we want to promote. Let’s think about it.”

About a month later the stylist gave me a call. We talked for a little while, and she asked, “Do you really think you can do this?” I knew that was a blindness-related question, even though she didn’t ask it directly. I told her I had attended some of their fashion shows, and I was sure there wouldn’t be any problem. She said I seem to shop in the store a lot, and I commented that my credit card isn’t too happy about that!

At first when I considered the idea of modeling, I was just thinking about myself. But as I talked to the stylist, I realized this could be a chance to educate people about blindness and maybe open up opportunities for other people. I told the stylist I wanted to use my long white cane as I

walked down the runway.

She really hesitated about that. She wanted to give it a lot of thought. Actually I was pretty sure I could walk down the runway without my cane. The lighting was good, and I was pretty sure I could maneuver just using my residual vision. But my cane is part of who I am. It's because of my cane that I can travel out to places like Old Orchard. So I felt that it was important for me to use my cane in the show.

We left the decision up in the air. Finally they called me back and said I could use my cane as long as I didn't stick it out too far. They didn't want me to distract from the merchandise! I reassured them about that, and they said they would schedule me to model.

You never know how these things are going to go, so I didn't tell many people what I was going to do. I thought I better just keep it quiet till I knew how it turned out.

I modeled two outfits in the spring show in April. One was business casual, and the other one was a sporty boomer-on-the-go outfit. The next day someone from the store called to tell me they had received several calls from customers who said they enjoyed seeing me. They said they really liked the way I presented the merchandise, and they appreciated that I smiled and seemed to be having a good time. I was thrilled! The callers didn't even mention that I'm blind!

After the spring show I told our state president, Denise Avant, what I had done, and she was very excited. She encouraged me to share my experience with our community. This really is an example of following a dream I've had for a long time. I want all blind people, especially our young people, to realize the possibility of doing things they might not believe they can do. Modeling, dancing, acting—all of those things are possible for us, just as they are for anybody else. You've always got to be open to new things. You never can predict what's going to happen in life!

I'm going to model in another show at Talbot's in the fall. This time I plan to let everybody know ahead of time. I hope lots of my friends in the NFB will come to see me and cheer me on! We can live the lives we want!

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**GOING BACK TO WORK**



by Kira O'Bradovich

I moved back to Chicago in the summer of 2018. I was back in the Humboldt Park neighborhood, and my former roommate lived just around the corner. But it may as well have been a different world. After two-and-a-half years living at home with my parents in Omaha and working part-time between eye surgeries and recoveries, I was ready for independence and, I hoped, for full-time employment.

A child of the lost generation, I was fully prepared to take whatever position I could find. However, now that I had a visual impairment, applying for positions was a brand-new experience. At the beginning I stuck to the nonprofit sector. My rationale was twofold. My education and past work experience were primarily in this sector, and I hoped that those in the nonprofit world would be more receptive than others and more understanding of the accommodations I might need. In addition, I focused on positions that required less experience and education than I actually had. I assumed that employers would believe I needed a less challenging position, and I set my sights low, hoping to improve my chance of being hired.

As the months passed and dozens of applications proved fruitless, I went through the arduous process of navigating the Social Security system. I decided it was time to reach out to others in my situation. Finding the Chicago Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind and attending

young-adult support group meetings at Blind Services Association gave me more than a social and therapeutic resource. My concept of what my disability meant for my future expanded. I met blind people who lived incredibly full, completely normal lives, and through them I found hope and confidence. I realized that my own ableism kept me from recognizing that I was still the same person I'd always been.

I decided I could and should apply for positions that I actually wanted. I began to seek challenging jobs that fit or even exceeded my education and skill set. Thanks to my former roommate, I learned about an opening with a federal government bureau here in Chicago. I discovered that, if I were hired, under federal law I could not be fired based upon my disability, and I could expect reasonable accommodations to be made—at least in theory. Equipped with this knowledge, I felt far more confident when I received a call for a phone interview. That interview led to my current position.

Of course, being hired was only half the battle. When I arrived on my first day, I discovered that I was the only person in my department who did not own a car. In fact, I was the only person who was unable to drive. My position required frequent travel to conduct meetings on behalf of my bureau. However, since the travel would be in Chicago and the nearby suburbs, I was confident that I could use public transit to get where I needed to go. My coordinator was not so sure. He could not conceive that any amount of accessibility would allow me to meet the demands of the position. Fortunately, his superior and others within the office were willing to work around my transit limitations. As I began to prove my usefulness and my abilities on the job, my coordinator started to recognize his error.

The largest battle I fought was outside my direct office, and it involved obtaining reasonable accommodations with technology. The first step was simple. I filled out a form and was contacted almost immediately by a wonderful specialist. She explained what she had to have from me to prove my needs, and she told me what they could offer. After sending her a document containing my diagnosis, I was approved for accommodations.

From that point on, the specialist had to work with a company to establish my need for specific aids that would make my position accessible. This became an ongoing issue. For instance, I'd been issued a projector for meetings, and the assumption was made that I could use it as a substitute for the larger monitor I needed in order to see the tiny laptop screen. As one sighted employee explained, their understanding of blindness was, "the letters just need to be really, really big." Supervisors kept telling me that the installation of Zoomtext on a government laptop was too complicated for security reasons. This was of course untrue, because people all over the United States work for the government using Zoomtext and many other programs on their computers. The reasonable accommodations specialist, fully aware of this fact, worked diligently on my behalf for the next four months until Zoomtext was finally installed and my large monitor arrived.

As in so many scenarios, those of us with disabilities must be constant advocates for ourselves and for others. I know that many have gone before me into these battles to find employment and gain accessibility in the workplace. My hope remains that these firsts for my organization will become steps on a more accessible and inclusive path for those who will follow. A number of pieces had to fall into place to create this opportunity for me, and it took no small effort for me to have my accommodations needs met. However, I believe that living with disabilities endows us with a level of self-confidence and resourcefulness that can serve to strengthen our search for productive and meaningful employment.

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## **HOW I BECAME A SUBSTITUTE TEACHER**

by Robert Hansen

I had never considered anything like substitute teaching before. As a matter of fact, I did not even know it was a possibility for me. I had heard of people substituting, but I was unsure how the hiring process worked. I thought I would need an actual teaching degree. Once I filled out the paperwork and followed the procedures, the wheels were set in motion.

I had been struggling for a few years to find my niche in life after finishing a long overdue bachelor's degree. I earned my degree from Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) in their Non-Traditional Degree Program. They serve older students who have years of work and life experience. I did all of the coursework in the social sciences, which led me to think I would get involved in social justice movements and change the world. However, I became tired of this and moved on.

At Northeastern I built up a number of years working in student media at the student-run radio station, and I thought I could pursue a career in broadcasting. After submitting a number of résumés and auditions and getting rejections, I decided to move on. I gave up for a couple of years and did nothing for a while.

My woman friend had been working for the Evanston Public Schools, first as a lunchroom/playground supervisor and then as a teacher's assistant. She mentioned to me that she spoke with a couple of substitute teachers who worked full-time up there. She directed me to the website with the forms to fill out so I could get a license from the State of Illinois to become a sub.

At first I was hesitant and did not believe her. I thought she was kidding me. It could not be that easy! But I found myself going to the website and filling out the online application. I paid the necessary application fees and submitted a copy of my official transcript from NEIU. Within three days I had been approved for a license!

The next step was to register my license with a district. I wanted the district that paid the best per day. I also wanted to be able to get to places easily, so I chose the Chicago Public Schools.

A big factor in my success with the job is using a number of blindness and low-vision techniques. I often work in several different schools within a week, and I do not have time to familiarize myself with each location in advance. Everything I do is on the fly. It has to be that way. I ask questions of people who work at each location. First I ask where the main office is. I swipe in each morning and swipe out each time I leave for the day. The time clock is not accessible. My welcome packet contained diagrams and descriptions of the time clock and its functions.

Someone from the main office often shows me where the room I will be working in is located. I am sure they do this for other subs as well, and I don't mind their help at all. It's a little like boarding an airplane; I familiarize myself with the features of the room where I will be working, including rosters and emergency folders. Arriving ahead of time allows me to look over the lesson plans for the day. I use the KNFB Reader and other apps as well as a portable CCTV. I have to move quickly, because when the bell rings, it's show time!

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### **IN MEMORIAM**

Joseph and Mary Monti

In June 2019 the NFB of Illinois lost two longstanding members, Joseph and Mary Monti. Joe Monti died on June 8 at the age of eighty-one. Mary Monti, age seventy-six, died on June 16. Joe and Mary had been married for fifty-seven years.

Joe Monti earned a Bachelor's Degree in Physics at the Illinois Institute of Technology and a Master's in Education at DePaul University. For thirty-four years he taught high school science and math at the LaSalle Institute in Chicago, where he also coached the chess team.

In his late teens Joe began to experience vision loss due to retinitis pigmentosa. He became an active member of the NFB Chicago Chapter in the 1990s. He served on the boards of the Chicago Chapter and the Illinois affiliate. For several years Joe coordinated a successful NFBI fundraiser through the Manna Gift Certificates program. He also organized the Wonton o' Fun, an annual Chinese dinner fundraiser, for the Chicago Chapter.

Mary M. Monti trained in ballet and danced professionally with the Illinois Ballet Company in

the late 1950s and early 1960s. She taught dance in Evanston and opened her own dance studio in Cicero in the early 1970s. After the death of the Monti's' young daughter, Amy, Mary returned to school to become a nurse. She worked as a pediatric nurse for more than twenty years at Loretto Hospital, the University of Illinois Pediatrics Clinic, and La Rabida Children's Hospital, all in Chicago.

The Monti's loved to attend operas and orchestra concerts, and Joe was an accomplished pianist. Joe and Mary were active members of St. Christopher's Church in Oak Park and later of St. Michael's in Berwyn. They had three children: Joseph, David, and Amy (deceased).

Due to their numerous health problems, Joe and Mary were unable to be active in the chapter and affiliate during recent years. But news of their passing brought forth a flood of memories and condolences from their Federation family. "This has been quite a shock!" wrote Pat Olson. "I always enjoyed when Mary helped with the Significant Others group at state conventions." Mary Grunwald wrote, "Joe and Mary were very special people. They contributed much to our affiliate, and they will both be missed." Eileen Truschke added, "Mary was a definite asset to the Chicago Chapter. We always could count on her to lend a helping hand."

"The last time we saw the Monti's, they came to an Oktoberfest fundraiser," recalled Patti Chang. "They both were happy to be there, even though Mary was on oxygen at the time. I will always remember Mary's efficiency and Joe's sense of humor. Joe was very committed to helping mentor our young people. We will all miss them both!"

A double funeral for Joe and Mary Monti was held on June 20, and they were buried in Oak Park. The family requests that donations be made to Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago ([luriechildrens.org](http://luriechildrens.org)), Southern Poverty Law Center ([www.splcenter.org](http://www.splcenter.org)), the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind ([chicagolighthouse.org/donate](http://chicagolighthouse.org/donate)), or the National Federation of the Blind ([nfb.org](http://nfb.org)).