

ILLINOIS INDEPENDENT

The Newsletter of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois
Summer 2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Living As a Blind Person in a COVID-19 World, by Denise Avant
It Pays Not to Back Down, by David Meyer
Literacy Is for Everyone! by Linda Hendle
Freedom Link Career Day
Learning My Way, by Michael Gallo
From Mentee to Mentor, by Sara Luna
Somebody Else's Survival Guide, by Amy Bosko
Failure Is Not an Option, by Steve Pangere

Breaking into the Workforce, by Nadia Sherman

In Memoriam: Steve Benson, Camille Caffarelli, and Rami Rabby

LIVING AS A BLIND PERSON IN A COVID-19 WORLD

by Denise R. Avant

In early February I flew four times in an eleven-day span. The planes were colder than usual, but apart from that, COVID-19 was being treated like an ordinary flu outbreak. At that time we thought of COVID-19 as a health threat that could be addressed simply by washing one's hands more frequently than usual, covering one's mouth when coughing or sneezing, and wiping down surfaces.

Three weeks later many people were seriously ill, and some had lost their lives due to the virus. The World Health Organization declared a pandemic. Across the country events were canceled or postponed, and stay-at-home orders were issued in many states, including Illinois. Schools and businesses closed, and unemployment went up week by week. Even now, after nearly four months, the death toll continues to rise.

At first, information about the virus and how it spread was confusing. Eventually, we learned that, to slow the spread of the virus, we would have to wear masks and practice social distancing. Now the lock-down orders in Illinois are slowly being lifted, and we are moving back to our normal lives, albeit with some restrictions and modifications.

Over the past ninety days or so, I have heard blind and sighted people alike ask how blind people will manage during the COVID-19 era. How will the blind community access information about the pandemic? How will blind people handle shopping and travel in an era of social distancing? What about education for our blind children and college students?

In many ways the National Federation of the Blind worked to answer these questions. We were not going to sit on the sidelines and wait for others to give us answers. We were determined to adjust and participate actively in society, as we have done for the past eighty years.

In ways both small and large, our leaders and members educated and advocated. We understood that blind people needed accurate information about the virus in an accessible format. At the beginning of the pandemic the National Federation of the Blind posted resources on our website, nfb.org, and on NFB Newsline® to educate our community about COVID-19. We also helped blind students and parents navigate the world of online distance education. Affiliates held Zoom conference calls on a range of topics, from iPhones and screen readers to cane travel techniques. Affiliates even sponsored book discussions and exercise classes that were open to people anywhere in the country.

Everette Bacon, president of the Utah affiliate and my fellow national board member, worked with Federationists in his state and with other consumer organizations to gather information helpful to blind people in Utah. Following Everette's example, I worked with leaders and members of the Illinois affiliate to compile a list of resources specific to our state that would be helpful to blind people during the crisis. The list included websites and telephone numbers on where to learn about COVID-19 and how to get essential services such as

food, medicinal care, and mental health and drug and alcohol counseling. The list was posted on our website and on NFB Newslines. We also emailed it to members of the affiliate, government entities, and organizations that serve blind people. Our chapter presidents and I, along with many of our members, called to check on our members and other blind people we knew to see how they were doing.

When NFB Treasurer Patti Chang discovered that information about COVID-19 on the website of the Chicago Department of Public Health was not accessible, she and I contacted city officials. I am pleased to report that they responded quickly and worked with us to make the COVID-19 information accessible. I urged Governor J. B. Pritzker's office to make all orders and information placed on state websites accessible to people with print disabilities.

At the beginning of the outbreak PACE Paratransit in Chicago and Cook County considered not picking up blind riders unless they were accompanied by a personal care attendant. Paratransit claimed that the drivers would not be able to provide door-to-door assistance to help riders get to and from the vehicles. I urged a modification of the policy by simply asking that the passenger receive a call when the carrier's vehicle arrived on location. The driver then could provide verbal cues to direct the blind rider to the vehicle.

Recently I read a post on Facebook that essentially said that under lock-down sighted people will now understand how blind people feel, because we the blind live in isolation all of the time. Although some blind people, for an assortment of reasons, may live isolated lives, this is not the way most of us experience the world. Another misconception I have heard is that blind people are going to have a hard time because we are always touching things.

I have never lived in social isolation. As I did before the outbreak, I travel to stores to shop for groceries and fill prescriptions. Since social distancing has gone into effect, I have not experienced the usual amount of unwanted touching and grabbing when I am out in public. Sometimes all I need are simple verbal directions on how to get to a particular counter or department. If directions are not feasible, I can follow my shopper or customer service representative, who pulled the cart from the front. Both of us wear masks. I ask for descriptions of things. If I need to touch anything, I wear disposable gloves or use a paper towel or Kleenex as a barrier.

I do not have all of the answers to issues about navigating in this COVID-19 world. There are many things I have yet to try. I have learned much by being a member of the National Federation of the Blind, including using a cane longer than that suggested by most travel instructors. I know that when I don't have the solution to a problem, others in our organization will share their knowledge with me, and I will be sure to pass it on. I suspect that as we adapt, life will not be all that different for blind people than it will be for anyone else.

IT PAYS NOT TO BACK DOWN

by David Meyer

When I was a senior in high school I was a blend of contradictions. I was sometimes timid and sometimes outspoken. I could be somewhat unconventional, and sometimes I found ways to get into trouble. I guess all in all I was a typical teenager.

I attended a residential school for the blind, and I lobbied to take my academic courses at the local high school. The administration of the residential school finally agreed, but it was with some trepidation and a caveat. They were quite concerned about my behavior. I was directed to keep my cool and not to start or engage in fights or

arguments with anyone. The previous year I had gotten into a serious disagreement with the superintendent and one of his assistants. Now I was being told that it was necessary for me to be a "good boy."

I managed to keep a fairly low profile throughout my senior year. However, a recurring problem in one of my classes at the public high school tested my resolve.

In the speech class that I attended, the instructor set aside free time for us to work on individual speeches or group projects. If we were not inspired with an idea during these times, we were free to do other homework or engage in recreational reading. I often chose to read a Braille book, and that was when the test of my resolve began.

As I mentioned, we often were assigned to work on group projects. Students were broken up into groups of three, and each threesome worked together throughout the year. Though my group worked well together, I faced one persistent problem.

The problem began a couple of months into the school year. One of the boys in my group began to slap my hand when I was trying to read my book. He didn't slap hard, but he would knock my hand away from my place on the page. As time went on, the slapping became more frequent, and both of the other boys in my threesome participated as equal opportunity slappers.

This situation continued for close to three months. Warnings sounded in my head. I needed to behave in order to retain the privilege of taking my academic classes at the public high school. I forced myself to do nothing, but the cat-and-mouse game became more difficult every day. What could I do to stop this foolishness? Finally, I decided to take a risk.

I was a member of the wrestling team at the residential school. The residential school had a tradition that all wrestlers wore their jackets on the day of a match. On the day I decided to deal with the hand-slapping, I was scheduled to participate in a wrestling meet, and I wore my wrestler's jacket to class. I wasn't much good as a wrestler, but at least I looked the part.

The day started as usual, with each of the boys in my group slapping my reading hand a couple of times. Finally, I had had enough.

I turned to my left. "He did it!" said the boy on that side, referring to the boy on my right. "He did it!" announced the boy on my right when I turned to face him.

I extended a hand in each direction. "It doesn't matter which one of you did it this time," I said forcefully. "You've both been doing it, and this is the last day it will happen. If either of you slaps my hand again, I will knock both your heads together."

I must admit I was scared after that bold announcement. I had no idea whether I could take on one of them, not to mention both.

Luckily, the boys must have had a little fear themselves. For the rest of the period the two offenders talked to each other over my head. Their conversation revolved around one question, "Could he really do what he said he was going to do?"

The question must have been a serious one in their minds, as they never slapped my reading hand again. Eventually the question of whether I could take either of these boys didn't matter. They respected me enough not to test me again, and that mattered a great deal. We continued to work well together as a group for the remainder of the school year, and we interacted in social situations without a problem.

If this were a Grimm fairytale, it would likely be said that we lived together happily ever after. And so we did, for the rest of that school year.

LITERACY IS FOR EVERYONE!

by Linda Hendle

When I lost my sight I was forty-six years old, and I started to learn uncontracted Braille. At that time my husband was living with a serious illness. I was his primary caregiver, so for a while Braille had to wait on the back burner.

One time before I had learned contracted Braille, my in-laws gave me a Braille birthday card, but I couldn't read it. I couldn't read it until I learned contracted Braille.

About a year after I lost my sight, I enrolled in a course on beginning Braille at the Hadley School for the Blind (now the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired). I wanted to learn Braille so I could be literate again.

Hadley courses are taught by mail. I had a month to complete each assignment and mail it back to the teacher. She would then mail me a tape with her responses. Based on her responses, I would go over my work. Each month I sent in the next assignment. Before I knew it, I had passed the course on contracted Braille.

Once I set out to learn Braille, I found I could feel the dots just fine, but at first I would reverse letters. I learned that if you put your left forefinger on the next line you're going to read, you read faster.

In my everyday life I use Braille for labeling movie DVD's and some of the items in my kitchen. I don't do a lot of cooking right now, and I drink instant coffee, which I prepare in the microwave. As far as prescriptions go, I have my bottles arranged in a long plastic container so I know where they are.

Once I mastered contracted Braille I was ready to start reading novels. I joined the LIFE group, a group that was created to support adult Braille readers. LIFE stands for Literacy Is For Everyone. The group meets once a week by phone, and we read a novel together. We each get a hardcopy version of the book from the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), and we take turns reading aloud. For homework we assign ourselves a given number of pages, and we're ready to read those pages to each other when we meet a week later. I've been reading with the LIFE Group for the past eight years, and now I serve as the group's chairperson.

Another way I enjoy using Braille is by taking part in Braille Is Beautiful, an event at our annual NFB of Illinois convention. Readers are assigned roles in a Braille script for a play that we will read aloud during convention weekend. We have a couple of rehearsals over the phone, and then we perform live up at the podium.

Learning Braille later in my life was the best thing I ever did after losing my sight. I strongly urge others to do the same. Literacy is for everyone!



FREEDOM Link CAREER DAY

Nick Robertson shares his experiences working in the world of politics as someone with a visual impairment.

One of the important programs sponsored by the NFB of Illinois is Freedom Link, a mentoring program for blind youth in middle and high school. Each year Freedom Link sponsors Career Day, an opportunity for the students to hear from blind adults in a wide variety of careers. This year the students heard presentations by professional fundraiser Patti Chang; librarian Marilyn Green; attorney Michal Nowicki; and Nick Robertson, who served as a small-town mayor. The presentation given by Steve Pangere about his work in the construction business appears later in this issue. We deeply appreciate Steve's generous support of the Freedom Link program.

During this year's Career Day, present and former Freedom Link participants shared some of their thoughts about the program. In the following articles Michael Gallo, Sara Luna, and Amy Bosko reflect upon their experiences and aspirations.

LEARNING MY WAY



by Michael Gallo

I came to Chicago from China when I was almost fourteen. I had to learn English and many other things. This is my third year in Freedom Link. I'm a junior at Walter Payton High School.

I especially remember our Freedom Link trip to the Christkindlmarket. It's a big outdoor market that opens around the Christmas holidays. They sell German food and gifts and play a lot of loud music. We got experience asking for information to get to the places we wanted to find.

The first time we went to Christkindlmarkt, it was kind of scary for me. I was fifteen, and I wasn't used to asking questions of people I didn't know. Now I'm a lot more confident asking questions to get information.

Freedom Link also has helped me learn to cross streets more confidently. I've learned how to listen for parallel traffic in downtown Chicago. It's so exciting to be able to cross those busy streets!

FROM MENTEE TO MENTOR



by Sara Luna

I'm a double major in history and communications at North Park University. I have a second-degree brown belt in judo. Most importantly for today, I have experienced Freedom Link as both a mentee and a mentor.

A long time ago, back in 2013, I was a junior in high school. I was fairly shy. I was fortunate to have people tell me I could be successful and have a career, but I didn't really know what that might look like. I was beginning to learn to travel independently around the city when the opportunity to join Freedom Link came along. It sounded intriguing, and some of my friends were signing up, so I got on board.

It was very impactful for me to take part in Freedom Link and meet so many blind adults who were happy and had careers, people who were living their best lives. We took many memorable field trips. We went to the

Lincoln Park Zoo, the Field Museum, and the Kristkindlmarkt. We rode the Metra. On our field trips I learned from blind people like Steve Hastalis, people who travel confidently all over the city.

And then there was Career Day. It was very motivating to hear the stories of the mentors and guests. It was empowering to learn about the struggles and successes of other blind people.

I was in Freedom Link for two years, until I graduated from high school. When I started college I was invited to come back to the program as a mentor, but I didn't feel I was mature enough to fill that role adequately. I didn't feel confident enough in my travel skills, either. I decided to step away for a few years.

I started college, and I even became a straight A student for the first time in my life! I grew more comfortable with traveling around the city. Two years after I finished high school I got a call from Debbie Stein, asking me if I would like to be a Freedom Link mentor. This time I said yes.

As a mentor I got to meet a new crop of students. Being only a few years removed from their experience, I could definitely relate to what they were going through. Some of them were struggling with access issues I had gone through myself. I was very pleased to see them overcoming some of the problems I had struggled with. I very much enjoy getting to know all of the students. I hope that a few years down the line, when I finish my degree, I'll be able to speak at Career Day about my burgeoning career!

SOMEBODY ELSE'S SURVIVAL GUIDE



by Amy Bosko

I started in Freedom Link when I was fourteen years old. When I was younger I wanted nothing to do with the blind community. I felt I was too cool, I wasn't like any of those other blind people!

Then I went to the summer program at BLIND, Inc., in Minneapolis. I realized that these were people who truly could understand me. I might complain to my sighted friends, I could say, "I had a really bad day at work. My boss was discriminating against me!" They might understand, but not on the same level that another blind person will understand it.

When I was in Freedom Link we did a lot of traveling on the trains and buses. Those experiences really boosted my confidence! I knew I wanted to go to college, and if I went to school in a big city, I needed travel skills.

I remember the first time we went to the Kristkindlmarket. It's a big German street fair downtown, and it's all outdoors. I went up to Debbie Stein and I asked, "How are we going to do this? We're all blind. Are we going to have someone guide us around?" She said, "We'll go by ourselves. You'll see."

We went to Christkindlmarket, and we had no sighted assistant. There we were, a group of blind people, and we all found our way through that big, crowded place! That really showed me what I could do!

After a few years in Freedom Link I finished high school and got accepted at UIC (University of Illinois/Chicago). Currently I'm majoring in sociology, and I hope to go on to a master's degree in social work. I would like to work with troubled and abused teens.

After I finished high school I was able to return to Freedom Link to mentor a bit. One day we got some students together to prepare a meal. We planned the meal and went to the grocery store to buy the ingredients. Then the students cooked the meal for their parents. I remember thinking, "Wow! I'm teaching these high school students how to cook! We just served an entire meal to their families!" I felt so proud that I had come that far!

One of the students started asking me questions about how I handled things at school. It really felt good to know that she wanted to learn from me.

Currently I'm a junior at UIC, and I hold a part-time job. I'm proud to say I was able to use the skills I learned in Freedom Link and the ideas I got from the Freedom Link Career Days to find my part-time position. I have found balance between school and work, and I have arranged my living situation here in the city. I don't think I could have done it without the support of my blind mentors and my mentees as well. Believe it or not, mentees, your mentors learn a great deal from you!

I read a quote recently that says, "Some day the hard things that happen to you will be somebody else's survival guide." As I listen here today I'm thinking, a blind lawyer? That's impossible! But then I listen to Denise Avant and Patti Chang and Michal Nowicki talk about the positions they've held. I hope that some day I'll be in the place to tell another scared twenty-one-year-old, "You can do this!"

FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

by Steve Pangere

We started this meeting today by talking about careers you think a blind person can't pursue. I heard astronaut and racecar driver, brain surgeon and deepsea diver. Let me tell you—there are plenty of sighted people who can't do those things, either. There's a fellow who works for me who is six foot eight. When he was in high school, his father was the head coach for the San Antonio Spurs basketball team. But this guy who works for my company, he's got two left feet. There's no way on earth he could ever shoot a basket. As blind people there may be some things we can't do right now, but there are plenty of things we *can* do!

My mother passed away when I was seven years old, and my father raised me and my brothers. He raised three sons who all became blind.

Our father never babied us. He never told us we couldn't do things, and he never stopped us from trying to do something new. If we tried something and it didn't turn out well, he never criticized us. He used to say, "Failure is not an option. Go out and do the best you can."

I graduated from Purdue University when I was twenty-one. I had lost a lot of vision by then, but I was still driving a car. I knew I shouldn't be driving, but of course I didn't want to stop. Then I got into a car wreck. Fortunately nobody was hurt, but that was the turning point. I said to myself, "I shouldn't be driving anymore."

That was a very difficult time in my life. I was pretty scared. Because of my blindness I really didn't think I could do much of anything.

My father was a contractor, but I didn't know much about the business. While I was at home, trying to figure out what to do, my father suggested I go down to his office and help out. I didn't know what kind of help I could offer, but I said okay.

After about two days hanging around the office, I went into the warehouse. I looked around to see what was out there, and I asked the workers to tell me about the equipment. Another day I rode around to the various jobs with the truck drivers. I talked to the guys at the work sites and learned about what they did. Everywhere I went I learned more about the business.

I went out and met some of our customers. I got them to explain what they needed and what they wanted from us. Talking to those people I was scared to death! How much could I tell them about my vision loss? Should I try to pretend I could see? It took me a long time to admit to people that I am blind. It's been a real journey.

I learned the business by listening. I heard about problems we had on the job, and I heard about how we solved those problems. I realized I would have to work harder than anyone else in order to gain the respect of my fellow workers. The business employs people in many fields. We hire ironworkers, laborers, and carpenters. They're tough folks to deal with sometimes, but they're good people. You have to work hard to win their respect.

I began working in the business in 1972, and I worked my way up. I started to take over the company in 1994. By that time I had the support of the people who work for us.

We're a commercial contracting company. We've build restaurants and retail stores. We've remodeled schools. We just finished building a four-story rehab unit. It took us a year and a half to build it. It's the biggest project we've ever handled.

How does a blind person run a contracting company? Over the years I've had to learn the business from one end to the other. I learned about contracts. I learned about insurance. I learned about safety rules and payroll. I learned about writing proposals. I've developed the ability to create a mental picture of how buildings are put together.

Is there room for other blind people to work in my business? There definitely is! Here are some of the positions in which a blind person could be very capable.

We have a paralegal who reviews all of our legal documents. When we get a proposal or a bid, we get a contract. We need to know every detail of what we're going to sign. We need to know about the insurance and the safety rules—everything that will go into the job. The contract may tell us what kind of insurance we have to carry, and which products we will have to use. The contract says we have to complete the job within a certain number of days. If it isn't done in that amount of time, we have to start paying! Our paralegal goes over every clause of the contract and writes up all the requirements. Being a paralegal doesn't require eyesight. It requires a willingness to learn and pay close attention to detail.

The field of human resources is another area where a blind person could work very effectively. Someone in human resources has to negotiate for health insurance, life insurance, and short-term and long-term disability insurance.

Our company has administrative assistants. An administrative assistant needs to have many skills. For instance, we contract with plumbers and electricians when we're planning a project, because we don't do plumbing or electrical work ourselves. Those are very specialized fields. Administrative assistants need to learn to talk construction talk when they negotiate with subcontractors.

The administrative assistant goes to the project manager, and the project manager outlines what the contract should look like. The administrative assistant puts a contract together and shows it to the project manager. They have to know what we can live with and what we can't. We put changes into the contract, and we negotiate.

Now let's talk about project managers. Can you be a project manager if you're blind? I certainly think so! Recently we finished a very big project. I was there for two months. I've learned a lot about construction by listening and asking questions. I go out to the job and ask questions. You have to learn how to solve problems. We are looking for people who can solve problems.

I've heard people say, "The owner's here, and he's blind! How the heck can he run that job?" I organize things, I understand when we have issues. When people say, "You really don't know about these things," I say, "You're right. I don't. I hired you guys! I'm paying you to do it." I put the team together. We all work together. Communication is really important.

I used to be afraid to ask for help. But all of us need to be a bit dependent upon other people. Now I'm not embarrassed to say I don't know. You can learn anything if you want it badly enough. If you're passionate and you like what you're doing, nothing will stop you.

As I was learning the business, my father taught me that there's always a sense of urgency on a project. If you start a project and they tell you they want it done by Wednesday, you better have it done by Wednesday. Don't come up with excuses!

There's urgency in any business. When you order a steak at a restaurant and you expect to get it in twenty minutes, you want it in twenty minutes! If you still haven't got it in forty minutes, you'll say, "I'm not coming back here again!"

In any work you do, in any environment, you need to appreciate the people you work with. Our laborers have to educate their kids and put food on the table. They're doing dangerous work sometimes. It's important for me to let them know they are valued and appreciated.

I use several pieces of assistive technology on the job. I have a laptop with JAWS, and I have a talking calculator. I also have a scanner for reading documents. I check things with Google all the time.

I've come a long way from the days when I tried to hide my blindness. When I got my first guide dog, I realized that working with a dog could serve my best interest. People love dogs, and I stand out for them because Hope is with me. My company puts out a newsletter every other month. It always has a picture of Hope along with items about construction. Hope is my best PR person. The dog attracts people and helps me open conversations, but it's

up to me to make something of that connection. In business you have to use everything you have and turn it to your advantage.

BREAKING INTO THE WORKFORCE

by Nadia Sherman

Reprinted from *Future Reflections*, Volume 39, Number 1, Winter 2020

I graduated from Walter Payton High School, one of the most rigorous academic high schools in Chicago. I survived the program, but I struggled with math and some of my other subjects. Although people encouraged me to apply to college, I never felt comfortable with the idea. I had always wanted to work with my hands. During high school I thought about becoming an auto mechanic, and I even met a blind mechanic who works in the Chicago area. Unfortunately I learned that it's becoming more difficult for blind people to enter the auto-repair field because so much of the work now relies on inaccessible touch screens.

A couple of years after high school I enrolled in the adult training program at BLIND, Inc., in Minneapolis. The program totally changed my life. I gained more confidence than I ever thought possible. I especially built strength in two areas, cooking and independent travel. I used to be pretty scared in the kitchen, but now I can deep fry with the best of them! I learned to travel throughout the Twin Cities in Minnesota, and I use those skills every day now that I'm back in Chicago.

After BLIND, Inc., I still want to work in a trade rather than going to college. I did some research to figure out what career would suit my interests and skills. Finally I decided to enroll in a trade school where I could learn to install and maintain heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems (HVAC). Most of the work in HVAC is still done by hand, and I think I'd really enjoy it.

I applied to two HVAC programs in the Chicago area. As I worked on my applications I struggled with the question of when to disclose that I am blind. I told them before my interview with the first school, and they never called me back. That was pretty discouraging.

As I prepared for my interview with the second school, I faced the same looming question. After my last experience I worried that this school might write me off, too. Finally I decided to be frontal about my blindness and to disclose it before the interview. They were going to find out sooner or later anyway.

To my relief the second school was very open to considering my application. They asked some good questions about how I would do things, and they accepted my answers. Now we're working out a few issues around accommodations before I start the program.

When I returned to Chicago I moved back in with my mother, and I wanted to help cover my expenses. I decided to look for part-time work while I applied to trade school. Applying for jobs was very, very challenging. I applied for many, many positions, everything from telemarketing to being a pizza chef. Over a period of three months I went on interviews nearly every day, and sometimes on the same day I went to two interviews. I quite literally went on one hundred interviews. Sometimes I didn't get hired because I simply was not qualified for the position. Many employers clearly were not interested in hiring me because of my blindness. It was all very discouraging, but I knew I just had to keep going. I couldn't let myself think of giving up.

I'd always heard that networking is important when you look for a job, and in my case it turned out to be true. I remembered a woman I had known when I was a child. Back then she ran a restaurant, so I decided to look her up. I found out she runs a barbecue restaurant on Chicago's South Side. When I contacted her she remembered me, and she was very receptive to hiring me. Now I work three days a week as a dishwasher, and I'm very grateful to have the income.

In my job I work alone most of the time, running dishes through a big commercial machine. The staff helped orient me when I started my job, and I learned other parts of the work on my own. When the dishes come out of the dishwasher, I have to put them in their proper places, which means I have to move around in the kitchen quite a lot.

Sometimes other members of the kitchen staff get very anxious when I do certain things. This was especially true in my first few days on the job, but it still happens every now and then. One day as I was about to put a serving platter on a shelf above the stove, the chef tried to stop me. He said he was afraid I would burn myself. I explained that I could feel the heat, and I said there was no way I'd ever put my hand on the hot burner! Another time one of the waitresses was afraid to hand me a sharp knife. She kept saying, "I don't want to give this knife to you. It's very, very sharp, and you might cut yourself." Most of the time, though, I'm just another member of the crew. I do my job like everybody else.

Washing dishes is fine for now, but I'm eager to start school and prepare for a real career. Whatever happens, blindness isn't going to stand between me and my dreams!

IN MEMORIAM

Steve Benson, Rami Rabby, and Camille Caffarelli

In the first months of 2020 the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois lost three of its charter members. Steve Benson, Rami Rabby, and Camille Caffarelli all attended the affiliate's inaugural meeting in August 1968. All three worked hard to ensure that the fledgling organization would grow and thrive. The NFBI honors their lives and mourns their passing.

Stephen O. Benson died in Chicago on March 20 at the age of seventy-eight. Steve served as president of the NFBI from 1978 until 2002, and for many years he was a member of the national board of directors of the NFB.

A graduate of dePaul University, Steve taught Braille at Hines VA Hospital and later worked at the Guild for the Blind in Chicago (today called Second Sense). For several years he worked in public relations for the Chicago Public Library. He hosted a program on the city's public television channel, interviewing local authors.

In the Federation Steve was famous for his outstanding skills as a cane traveler. He shared his positive philosophy about blindness in some twenty articles that appeared over the years in the *Braille Monitor*, the Federation's flagship publication. "He was a loyal friend and a great guy," recalls his longtime friend Ken Staley. "We had a lot of laughs together."

Avraham (Rami) Rabby died in Israel on April 17. He was born in Palestine in 1943, before the creation of Israel in 1948. When he was ten his parents sent him to study at a school for the blind in England, and he went

on to graduate from Oxford University. In 1967 he came to the United States on a Fulbright fellowship to earn a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) at the University of Chicago.

Dr. Kenneth Jernigan encouraged Rami to contact blind people in Illinois and establish an NFB affiliate in the state. With a recruitment team from the national office, Rami kindled enthusiasm and organized the first meeting. He became the founding president of the new affiliate, serving from 1968 to 1970. At first the affiliate was called the Illinois Congress of the Blind, and its official newsletter was the *Congressional Record*.

Rami Rabby made national headlines when he became the first blind person to be hired as an international diplomat by the US State Department. The State Department had refused to consider his application due to his blindness, and it took an intense congressional investigation to pave the way. Rami held posts in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Peru, India, and Trinidad. He retired and returned to his family in Israel in 2007.

In October 2018 Rami traveled from Israel to attend the golden anniversary convention of the NFB of Illinois. At the convention banquet he spoke eloquently about why he became a Federationist. "In large part I am a Federationist for the same reason that I believe we are all Federationists: that is, because the work we do in changing what it means to be blind, transforming public agency attitudes toward us, and spreading the message 'live the life you want' is supremely important. But beyond that, my debt to the Federation has an added, more personal dimension.

"Before coming to the United States I had lived in four other countries: Israel, England, France, and Spain. In none of them was I ever politically engaged, either because I was a child as in Israel or because my studies and girls occupied all my time, as in England and France, or because speaking out against the government could land you in jail if not worse, as under Franco's dictatorship in Spain. So it was the Federation that taught me how to challenge government bureaucracies. It was the Federation that taught me how to negotiate the complexities of the legislative process and the judicial system. And it was the Federation that taught me how to convince the media to report on us, not under the rubric of human interest, but rather under the rubric of social revolution. Through the Federation I came to appreciate American democracy and America's open and freewheeling political culture. It is this appreciation that led me first to apply for and receive a green card, which allowed me to stay in this country, and then to seek and obtain US citizenship. That, too, is why I am a Federationist."

Camille Ann Caffarelli died on May 29 at her home in Lake in the Hills at the age of seventy-three. Camille was active in the early years of the Illinois affiliate, and her husband, John Myers, served as NFBI president from 1970 until his death in 1974.

Camille was a passionate advocate for Braille. She founded and directed Horizons for the Blind, producing Braille versions of everything from gas and electric bills to restaurant menus and theater programs. She also worked to convince museums to make programs and exhibits accessible to blind visitors.

The NFBI extends condolences to the friends and families of these three people who played such an important role in the founding of this affiliate. May they rest in peace!