

ILLINOIS INDEPENDENT

The Newsletter of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois

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Photo of Rami Rabby speaking during General session

THE 2018 NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND CONVENTION

Honoring Our History

by Denise Avant

I believe it is important to know your history, to celebrate your successes, and know the people who made it possible for you to succeed. I would like to share some impressions and things I have learned about the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois following our fiftieth anniversary convention. In these fifty years, with love, hope and determination, we have helped to turn blind people's dreams into reality.

Our convention theme this year was "Commemorating the Past, Building the Future." During convention we focused on our successful programs for blind children and young adults. At the same time we celebrated our fifty-year milestone, and honored the people who were with us at the beginning.

As state president, I know about the founding of our national organization in 1940 and our history since that time. I know about our state programs of today; Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning, the Nationwide Braille Readers Are Leaders contest, our state and national scholarships, and our successful legislative advocacy to pass a Parental Rights for the Blind bill. I know our most recent state presidents, Cathy Randall and Patti Chang, who are my friends and mentors.

But before our most recent convention, I knew very little about the history of the Illinois affiliate and the people who shaped us. I suspect this is true for most of our members.

The Illinois affiliate was one of the original seven members of the National Federation of the Blind, but Illinois left the national organization in 1960. We rejoined the National Federation of the Blind on August 10, 1968, as the Illinois Congress of the Blind. Our first meeting took place at the Sherman Hotel in Chicago. In 1972 we became the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois. Our affiliate hosted national conventions at the Palmer House in Chicago in 1972, 1974, and 1975. Two more national conventions were held in Chicago, at the Hyatt Regency in 1988 and at the Hilton and Towers in 1995.

In addition to our national representative at this year's convention, Jeannie Massay of Oklahoma, we were thrilled to have two special guests. Ramona Walhof, who helped organize the founding meeting of the affiliate, traveled from Idaho. Rami Rabby, our first state president, came all the way from Israel to celebrate with us. Over fifty years ago Rami met with Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, president of the National Federation of the Blind from 1968 to 1986, and told him of the need for an NFB affiliate in Illinois. Dr. Jernigan agreed, and he sent Ramona, James Gashel, and Mary Ellen Halvorsen to Illinois to support the organizing effort. Their task was to go to people's homes, explain their reasons for being in the NFB, and ask them about their hopes and dreams for blind people in Illinois. In appreciation of Ramona's love for the Federation and her efforts in helping to organize our affiliate, we presented Ramona with a general service award during our morning session.

Dr. Jernigan, Rami Rabby, and core Illinois member James Nyman all attended the first meeting in August 1968. Sixteen-year-old Steve Hastalis also attended, along with his mother, Coula. Also in attendance was Steve Benson, who later became our longest-serving state president. Another attendee was Gwendolyn Williams. Gwendolyn was sighted, but she truly understood blindness. Over the years she gave rides to our members whenever they went to the state legislature to demonstrate or testify about legislation that was either helpful or harmful to blind people. She remained active in the Illinois affiliate until her death in 1985.

Because of Ms. Williams charter membership, her dedication, and her service to us, we have named a service award in her honor. This year's Gwendolyn Williams Award went to Mary Grunwald, who became a member in the mid 1970s. Mary was recognized for her legislative advocacy in helping to pass a technology bill, and for her tireless efforts to mentor the youth of our affiliate. Elsewhere in this issue you can read Mary's story of her efforts to help establish a union for factory workers at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind in 1976. Finally, we recognized Mary for helping bring the blind vendors of Illinois into the National Federation of the Blind. I think it is fair to say that Mary saw one of her dreams come true during this year's convention.

For the first time the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois held our convention jointly with the Illinois Association of Blind Vendors (IABM), coinciding with the IABM annual conference. The vendors were active participants in our IABS Idol, our student fundraiser. The students and vendors hosted a joint luncheon, and many vendors attended our convention banquet. The vendors enjoyed getting to know members of our affiliate and came to understand more about our organization. We are looking at the possibility of holding future joint conventions and conferences with even more integrated programming.

Another NFBI award is the Eileen O'Brien Award. Eileen O'Brien became a member of our affiliate in 1975. She was given a kidney by her sister, and this donation sustained her life for a number of years. While Ms. O'Brien was at the Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education (ICRE), she became very upset about the poor meal choices for diabetics. She was a constant advocate for proper diabetic education in and out of the Federation. Steve Hastalis received the Eileen O'Brien Award this year for his advocacy in transportation matters and his dedication to helping blind people in our state use public transportation.

Representative Jan Schakowsky of Illinois received the Annette R. Grove Legislative Award for her longstanding support of our federal legislative initiatives, particularly her sponsorship of the Home Appliance Bill. Annette, who passed away in 2017, was a longtime member who coordinated our efforts at Washington Seminar. She made sure that our members were well versed in the issues and that we presented ourselves with dignity and professionalism when meeting with our legislative representatives.

Rami Rabby was presented with a general service award. As our first state president he was the driving force behind many of our early successes. In 1969 Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago recognized White Cane Safety Day. The Illinois legislature passed white cane safety legislation in 1970.

The Illinois Association of Blind Students (IABS) presented two 2018 Excellence in Teaching Blind Students Awards at the joint luncheon of the students and vendors. This year's awards went to Paula Sprecher, nominated by Amanda and Koji Torihara; and to Casey Byrne, nominated by Kristen and Andy Morrison.

While we recognized those who have meant so much to our affiliate, we were also being recognized for the work that our affiliate has done in these fifty years. Camille Caffarilli, executive director of Horizons for the Blind, presented us with an award. It states:

HORIZONS FOR THE BLIND Presents an award of commendation and appreciation to the NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND OF ILLINOIS for fifty years of working together with other agencies and other facilities utilizing the skills of members who are blind to promote security, equality, and opportunity.

When the first meeting of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois was held back in 1968, I was nine years old. There was a lot I did not know about living as a blind person and the challenges we faced because of society's low expectations. As a member of the National Federation of the Blind, I have come to know the challenges we still face. I have come to understand that through the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind and the Illinois affiliate we have been able to overcome some of those challenges. I can travel on interstate buses and trains and fly on airplanes without anyone insisting that I have someone accompany me because I am blind. I can buy insurance as a blind person because Peter Grunwald, Mary's late husband, and our national office worked to get regulations passed in 1978 that prevented discrimination based on blindness. I can serve as a juror in Illinois because our affiliate worked to prevent exclusion from jury service based on blindness. Fifty years is a long time to be doing anything, and to be doing it effectively.

One of the early successes of the NFBI was that we, along with our national office, advocated with the National Labor Relations Board, NLRB to reclassify sheltered workshops as factories, and not as rehabilitation institutions. As a result, the NLRB took jurisdiction over union organizing efforts at the Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired. Mary Lou Grunwald was one of the people involved in the organizing effort that fell just short by a couple of votes. She was dismissed from the Lighthouse, but people in the Federation, many of whom she did not know, sent her checks to help make ends meet. Mary witnessed the love from Federationists from across the country during this difficult time in her life. Her sacrifice was a factor in changing the culture of the Lighthouse, helping to make it what it is today.

The past fifty years have been full of challenges and triumphs. Though we have accomplished a great deal, many challenges still lie ahead. With love, hope, and determination we will continue to work together to ensure that blind people in Illinois can live the lives they want.

BLIND VENDORS REPORT ON THE 2018 NFBI CONVENTION

by Ed Birmingham

President, Illinois Blind Merchants

On the weekend of October 26-28, the Illinois Blind Merchants strengthened our affiliation with the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois (NFBI). The Illinois blind vendors held our fall training conference in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary convention of the NFB of Illinois. This joint event was held at the Sheraton O'Hare Hotel in Rosemont, Illinois.

On Friday morning the vendors kicked off the weekend activities with the quarterly meeting of the Illinois Committee of Blind Vendors. We had several very special guests in attendance, including NFBI President Denise Avant and our NFB national representative, Jeannie Massay. We also had two other special guests who are well known to the vendor community: Nicky Gacos, president of the National Association of Blind Merchants (NABM), along with Terry Smith, the executive director of the NABM. Also in attendance were NABM board members Melisa Smith from Tennessee and John Fritz from Wisconsin. The Committee met for three hours to discuss all of the issues we face here in Illinois, along with the issues that affect all Randolph Sheppard blind entrepreneurs across the country.

On Friday evening the vendors had their annual product trade show. This is an opportunity for the vendors to see the latest in technology along with the new products that are offered in the vending industry.

On Saturday we gathered in the morning for our mandatory training session. The agenda was packed with speakers who showed us ways to improve our businesses and maximize our potential. After the morning training, we dispersed for a short time while the hotel set up for a joint luncheon that combined our vendors' awards with the business activities of the Illinois Association of Blind Students (IABS).

The luncheon festivities were kicked off by a surprise appearance by the Blues Brothers! During the vendors' portion of the luncheon, several seniority awards were presented. Ken Blum was also presented with a Special Service Award. John Moore, Jr., was presented with the Marlene Katsion Award. John Holpgreve was presented with the Homer Steele Award, and Giovanni Francese was the recipient of the prestigious Larry Jones Vendor of the Year Award. The entire luncheon also recognized Marco Giannotti for all of his hard work in handling the sound and the streaming of the 2018 NFBI convention.

It's unclear at this time if we will be able to combine these events again. However, rest assured there are discussions taking place to see if that possibility may exist in the near future.

A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

by Mary Lou Grunwald

Longtime NFBI member Mary Lou Grunwald delivered the following presentation at the joint luncheon for vendors and students on October 27.

I'm so excited to be at an event like this. It's kind of a dream come true for me. I'm up here because I was asked to speak about one very specific reason why I'm in the NFB. There are many reasons why I'm involved, but this is a story many of you may not know.

For a little background, one of the early successes of the NFBI was that we, along with our national office, advocated with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to reclassify sheltered workshops as factories and not as rehabilitation institutions. As a result, the NLRB took jurisdiction over union organizing efforts at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind.

In 1976 I was in my early twenties. I wasn't able to go to college, so my first stop in my career journey was the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind. At that time it was not the place that it is today. They paid subminimum wages and they had substandard working conditions. I worked in the factory making big ones out of little ones. It was tough work for very little money, but my mom and I needed that money desperately.

I had recently gotten to know the NFB and become involved with the Chicago Chapter. Through our involvement with the NFB some of us at the Lighthouse started trying to form a union there. We worked very hard on it with the support and the guidance of the chapter and of the state and national NFB, and also the help of the Teamsters Union. Unfortunately we lost by only a couple of votes because of some ugly scare tactics that were going on.

I'm not at all sorry I did it. It was wonderful experience that prepared me for things I did later on. But when I got home, the reality set in. I had done something that I thought was very important, but now I had no job, and Mom and I had very little money. My mother was very upset with me because I had done all of this advocacy. I started trying to figure out my next career move. And while I was working on that, something started happening. I started getting envelopes in the mail. These envelopes had people's names on them, people I didn't recognize. When I opened them I found checks, checks from people, and I didn't know who the heck they were. I thought, Who could this be? What is this? Then I recognized a couple of the names, and I realized that these checks came from Federationists all over the country who were supporting me! People I had never met in my life were sending me money to help support me!

That experience solidified my desire to be helpful in this organization at whatever level my talents would allow. That's one of the reasons I'm in the NFB. Thank you!



Photo of Marilyn Green and scholarship winners performing the winning song of IABS Idol

THE 2018 NFBI SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

At the luncheon for vendors and students on October 27, NFBI Scholarship Chairperson Debbie Kent Stein introduced the finalists for the 2018 NFBI Scholarships. The finalists became scholarship winners when they received their awards at the convention banquet.

Debbie Stein: When the NFBI Scholarship Committee chooses scholarship finalists, we look for academic excellence, leadership, and community involvement. Both of this year's finalists richly demonstrate strengths in all of these areas.

I would like this year's finalists to introduce themselves to you. We'll start with Bex Leon.

Bex Leon: Good afternoon! Thank you for having me here! I'm so excited! I am a social work student at the University of Chicago. I'm getting my master's in social work, and I'm interested in going into policy reform for public systems that serve youth at risk. I'm interested in juvenile courts, DCFS [Division of Child and Family Services)', and work in legislation and policy. I'd like to share a few of the things that helped me to get here, and I hope this will be helpful to other students.

My word is *access*. A is for *Advocacy*. In social work we say, "You are the expert on your life." That means you are your own best advocate. That's something I have had to learn throughout my time in undergrad and grad school.

C is for *Community*. You don't do this alone. There are other people who can advocate with you. There's a whole roomful of them right here! Don't forget that people are there for you. Find people who will help you and believe in you. Find strength in them.

C is for *Creativity*. As Jeannie Massay and Dan Wenzel said this morning, blind people are great problem solvers. We're used to looking at a task and saying, "What are the other ways that we can get this done?" As students we really need to take this to heart. We can be creative.

E is for *Equity*. Equity means that we all have our own needs, and we deserve the supports to be able to succeed and to live the lives that we want.

S is for *Strengths*. We all have needs, but we also have strengths. In social work we have the strengths principles, and the first one is that every family and community has strengths. I have leaned on that a lot and looked for my own strengths in getting here.

Finally, S is for *Self-care*. Don't forget sometimes it can be really hard doing all this advocacy, studying, and everything else. Take time to breathe, relax your jaw, let your shoulders down, and remember that you're not alone. Find your community. Thank you so much!

Debbie Stein: Thank you, Bex. Now we will hear from Gretchen Nordhausen.

Gretchen Nordhausen: Good afternoon everyone! I'll tell you a little bit about how I got here to Chicago, Illinois. I'm Japanese and American. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. After a couple of years I moved with my family to San Diego, California, and then to Tokyo, Japan. After the 2011 earthquake we had to evacuate back to the United States, and I lived again in Atlanta. I went to the University of South Carolina for my undergraduate degree in marketing data analytics and human resources management with a double minor in Spanish and Japanese. I graduated with leadership distinction in professional and civics excellence due to my peer leadership activities and my two hundred and fifty hours of community service. Right now I'm a second-year law student at DePaul University, and I'm externing for a federal judge at the Northern District of Illinois.

I would like to tell students, do not let anyone tell you that you can't do something! Do not let anyone tell you that you are not worthy of doing something! Take every opportunity that you can, because in the long run it will help you in your career. Any interaction, any event you attend will lead to something special, and it will help you learn how you can advocate for others. I never had a group like this before. It wasn't until I was in law school in Chicago that I decided to look up the visually impaired attorneys I had heard about. I was told to contact Ms. Denise Avant and Ms. Patti Chang, who directed me to this scholarship program. To them I am truly grateful. Thank you!



Photo of Amy Lund presenting with the BELL students during General Session

THE 2018 ILLINOIS BELL ACADEMIES

by Amy Lund

This article is based on a presentation given at the NFBI convention on October 27.

Amy Lund: My name is Amy Lund, and I am the lead teacher for the BELL Academies in Illinois. BELL is an acronym for Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning. I love working with the BELL Academy! The philosophy and the meaning behind the BELL Academy is to have a Braille-enriched environment. All of the activities these kids do are adapted for them. It's not like being in a regular school where people have to change and adapt things. Everything is designed for them to have a ton of fun.

Illinois hosts a two-week day program in Chicago, held at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind downtown. We use mass transit and take four field trips. Last summer we went to the grocery store and bought the ingredients for the lunches we make, and then we got ice cream. We went to a park and played beep kickball and had picnic lunches that we made ourselves. One of our awesome mentors, Sara Luna, does judo. We went to her dojo, and she and a bunch of her judo buddies and masters led the group. All of the kids got to participate in judo. We also went kayaking last summer. We had a blind mentor and a blind child in each kayak, and away we went. No modification was needed.

Our other Illinois BELL program is held in Springfield. It is a one-week residential program that includes parent-child pairs. We put up the parents and children at a hotel and reimbursed their food costs. Every day while the regular BELL Academy curriculum was going on, we also incorporated a parent component. The parents participated on our field trips, and we had a picnic on Friday, with beep kickball and pizza. We got the parents to play beep kickball, which was a lot of fun.

Before I introduce some of our BELL participants, I want to acknowledge our phenomenal mentors. I can't begin to name them all. Chaquita Vinson is here, and Sara Luna, Debbie Stein, Leslie Hamric, Dave Meyer, Steve Hastalis, Bill Reif, Jemal Powell—we have so many amazing mentors, and we're so grateful! The kids really need to see successful blind adults living the lives they want. They need to know

that they can do these things, too. They need to know they have people who will challenge them to set high expectations.

I also want to thank Lauren Mehalek and Brooklyn Geers, who are my other teachers. They are wonderful, and they love these kids so much! It's really special that in our Chicago program we have three licensed, certified teachers of blind students, and we have two in Springfield. Having these teachers and our blind mentors makes the program successful.

Now I'm going to turn the microphone over to our kids. I'm going to ask them some questions so you can hear from them about their experiences. Thomas, can you tell us your favorite part of BELL?

Thomas: My favorite part of BELL is probably being able to make our own lunches every day.

Amy: What was your favorite lunch?

Thomas: I think I liked the walking tacos the best.

Amy: The participants make their own lunches every day. We made omelets in a bag,, we made walking tacos, we made mac and cheese and hot-dogs, pizzas, and cold-cut sandwiches. Okay, Lincoln, can you tell me your favorite thing about BELL? Do you like the solarium?

Lincoln: Yeah. It has a lot of things that you think are real, and you can play there.

Amy: The solarium is part of the Chicago Lighthouse, and it's a great indoor play area. The kids love to explore there, and they do a lot of imaginary play. There's a train, and they like to take the train places. Thank you, Lincoln. Charlie, what do you like about BELL?

Charlie: I like to go to the solarium.

Amy: It is usually a favorite. Something we do at BELL every day is what we call Bell-ringers. It's an opportunity to celebrate our successes of the day. We ring bells to celebrate each one.

Thomas has come to our Springfield program for the past two years. Thomas, is there a lesson you liked besides making your lunch?

Thomas: I definitely liked going to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum.

Amy: As you know, a museum can be a hard place to visit—it's a don't-touch zone. The Abraham Lincoln Museum was awesome! They let the kids touch everything! They understood that that's how the kids take in the world, that using the sense of touch is how they learn. They have wax figure characters all over the museum, and the kids got to touch them. They got to see how tall Lincoln was, and they got to see his hat. They got to see how tall Tod Lincoln was before he passed away. The alarms were going off the entire time, but it was fine. The museum staff were right there with us, encouraging the kids to touch and enjoy

and learn about our sixteenth president. It was very cool to experience a museum in a touch way, not in a don't-touch way!

Some of the parents are here, and if they don't mind, I'm going to put them on the spot and have them talk about the program, too. Anyone volunteering?

Alana Rybak: My son, Lincoln, has attended the BELL Academy for the past three years. He started when he was four. We love having something in the summer for our son to do besides summer school, something that helps him work on his independent living skills. Well, my kids are fighting over the microphone now, so I'll pass it to the next parent.

Liza Jager: I'm Charlie's mom. Charlie's favorite place to be in the summer is the BELL Camp. In December he's already asking me, "When is BELL Camp?" He's been going for five years. It's amazing how it opens possibilities for him! He talks about the books he reads. He comes home and he's more interested in his Braille. He loves the trips! He gets home feeling empowered by the ability to go everywhere. He loves trains, so taking the El and the Metra have been great experiences for him. As parents we love this program. Thank you, NFB!

Justin Howe: I'm the father of Thomas Howe. He's been going to the BELL Academy for the past two years. As a family we love going down to Springfield. Thomas has learned some great independent travel skills and life skills. He's really happy learning new things. He gets the Braille that he doesn't get in school. We've also met some great parents. It's a great way to network. We have built bonds that have lasted beyond the camp, and we keep in touch. This is a small community, and it's great to meet other people and continue the relationships. We've had some terrific mentors, both students and adults. The Federation provides a wealth of resources and knowledge and comfort to us as a family.

Jennifer Howe: Another thing Thomas learned from BELL is something very, very important. He learned to say, "No, thank you." Everyone wants to help him. He had a one-on-one aide at school, and they even had him going to a separate bathroom. Now in fourth grade he's in the gifted program, and he says, "No, thank you," and "Give me more, please!"

Amy: I want to give some demographics of our programs. In Chicago, as I mentioned, we have three teachers, and that allows us to include students with other disabilities in addition to blindness. Being able confidently to say that we can meet their needs, that we can provide the appropriate supports for our kids with additional disabilities, is significant. Too often these children are excluded. The NFB of Illinois is able to provide the programs they need. In Chicago we had eleven participants last summer, and eight of those eleven had additional disabilities. In Springfield we had nine participants, and four of those had additional disabilities. We're glad we are afforded the opportunity to include as many kids as we possibly can. I have conversations with parents all the time: "Your kid has a one-on-one aide at school; we'll figure out what we can do at BELL Academy to meet his needs." If you know of children between the ages of four and thirteen (or older—I don't mind!) we have phenomenal mentors who will work with them.

Charlie has written a poem that he'd like to share with us. Charlie, are you ready, sir?

Charlie:

I love my cane,

Because it helps me know
What's in front of me,
Like stairs, curbs, sidewalks, people,
Cars, buses, trucks, and trains.
It gives me super powers,
And it makes me independent.
[Applause]

Amy: Charlie is one of our youngest participants. You can see the independence and the strength that he gets. Your cane can give you information and even superpowers, right Charlie?

Charlie: Right!



Photo of Rami Rabby accepting award at banquet

THE FIFTY-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

An Interview with Ramona Walhof

On the morning of Friday, October 26, NFBI board member Cathy Randall interviewed Ramona Walhof, one of our special guests at this year's convention.

Cathy Randall: I'm talking to Ramona Walhof about the beginning of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois fifty years ago.

Ramona Walhof: The National Federation of the Blind organized a student division in 1967 in Los Angeles. Jim Gashel was the president, and I was the secretary. My future husband was second vice president. After the convention we were invited to go to Montreal and organize students in Canada. Jim Gashel and I did that, and we succeeded in organizing a group up there. There was a lady named Lucy Sienkowicz who wanted it to happen. If you come across Paul Gabias, he will tell you he was at that meeting. He's active in the Canadian Federation of the Blind, and so is his wife, Mary Ellen.

Somewhere during the winter between the 1967 and the 1968 national convention, I met Rami Rabby in Des Moines. Dr. Jernigan invited him to come to Des Moines to visit. I was working there for a while, so I met Rami. We didn't talk about Illinois when I met him, but he was interested in the student division. He was working on a graduate degree at that time. After the 1968 convention, which was held in Des Moines, Dr. Jernigan planned that we would go to Illinois and organize an affiliate. We students had no clue how to do that, but he got six of us together, and he said, "I want you to go to Illinois." He said we would go one Saturday and organize an affiliate the next Saturday. We said, "How will we do that?" He said, "We've got a list of people." I don't know where that list came from, but they did indeed have a list of people, and Dr. Jernigan gave the names to us. Rami knew a few people also. By that time he'd been in Illinois for a few months.

So we drove into Chicago and met with Rami and Mrs. Hastalis, Steve's mother. We might have met Steve that first day, but we didn't see much of him until the next week.

Cathy Randall: So you spent the week calling people?

Ramona Walhof: First we would call, and we would ask people if we could go and visit them. We spent a lot of money on cabs. We took cabs all over Chicago! I took a train down to Galesburg, Illinois, and met with a woman who had adopted three children. She was blind, and it was rare in 1968 for a blind person to be an adoptive parent.

Gwendolyn Williams, who was a very dedicated volunteer, drove us some places, but of course she couldn't drive us to all of the places we needed to go. We went two by two into people's homes. We would talk about why we had joined the Federation and what we thought the Federation could do for them personally. We'd talk a little bit about legislation and making better vending programs and better rehab.

At that time the programs in Iowa were unique in the country. We learned to travel independently. We were not afraid to travel in Chicago by ourselves. We had enough training that we knew how to do that, and we felt comfortable. We would talk about how we got that training and how we wanted other people to get it, too. We would talk about what we did in college and what our majors were. We'd talk about the people we met at convention.

I met a man named Gaspardus Belhuysen from Wisconsin. I met him at the Washington, DC, convention in 1965. He said, "Ken Jernigan always wants me to go down to Des Moines and get some training, and I'd love to do it, but I can't afford to get what I need." I thought that was the craziest thing I'd ever heard! I asked one of the people I knew in the Federation what he knew about Belhuysen, and he said, "Oh yeah! He's a millionaire!" He was not in the vending program, but on his own he had gone out and found places where he could put machines, and he hired a full-time driver to help him. I had never met a blind millionaire before, and I was impressed. That's one of the reasons I joined the Federation—because I heard about what Belhuysen and other blind people were doing.

We told people about Belhuysen and other people we had met. Dr. tenBroek was a lawyer, and there was a whole bunch of blind lawyers in California. There was a whole bunch of blind chiropractors in Iowa.

We talked about our experiences, but we also listened to what the blind people wanted. We would say to them, "If you had your choice about what kind of service you could have, what would it be?" Then we'd try to help them figure out how an organization of blind people, locally and statewide, could address something like that. We'd stay for about an hour talking.

We spent about five days, maybe six, and we talked to a lot of people. A lot of them said, "I just can't do anything, and you can't do it for me. I don't want to help." But we found some who were responsive. Jim Gashel went into Steve Benson's home and met him. I think Steve went to the organizing meeting.

On Friday evening Dr. Jernigan came, and we met all together. All six of us who had been pounding the pavements met with Dr. Jernigan. He said, "Who have you met who has leadership capacity?" There was no trouble with the presidency; we thought Rami Rabby should be president, and he was willing. (Dr. Jernigan probably would have twisted his arm if he wasn't!) I don't remember who the other board members were. We may have elected Steve Benson to an office.

Cathy Randall: Bill Myers?

Ramona Walhof: Steve Hastalis still had a year of high school to finish. He was very young. His mother was the spokesperson at the time. Steve was kind of quiet, but he was there. Anyway, that Friday night we planned what we were going to do about leadership. The next day Dr. Jernigan introduced himself. He explained what the Federation is. There were a few hostile people in the audience, and he said, "If you pay your dues, you can vote. If you don't want the Federation, you should leave the room." A couple of people did.

Dr. Jernigan presided at the meeting. After he answered questions he said, "We need to adopt a constitution before we elect officers." He had a model constitution, and he read it article by article. A few changes were made. I believe that at first the affiliate was called the Illinois Congress of the Blind. Rami was very interested in politics, and since this was America, he thought we should have the Illinois Congress of the Blind, so we did.

After that meeting everyone dispersed, and it was up to Rami to keep it going. I'm sure he was in telephone contact with Dr. Jernigan every day. I went off to Idaho because I was engaged to a man from there. I actually delayed my move from Des Moines to Boise to come to Illinois and organize.

When I came to Illinois we still had fewer than forty affiliates. When Dr. Jernigan was elected president in 1968 he set the goal that we would have affiliates in all fifty states. By about 1974 we did. We organized very vigorously. I went ahead and organized in Kansas, Oregon, Washington, Tennessee, and Michigan, and a little bit in North Carolina. Other people did other states. We organized Nebraska and several of the southern states and the smaller states. We still have to reorganize from time to time, but we've had affiliates in all of the states for about forty years now.

I remember one person who said, "I'm in college, and I'm working for the summer. I can't afford to take a week off work to go organize." Dr. Jernigan said, "We'll take care of that. We need you, so we'll take care

of your salary for the week." We didn't have very many people available, and Dr. Jernigan knew that if we sold the Federation for a week to as many people as we could, we would become stronger Federationists ourselves. He was absolutely right!

WHAT WE DO AND WHY WE DO IT

Through the NFB and the NFB of Illinois, blind people are able to help one another in a multitude of ways. Youth programs such as our BELL Academies, STEM programs, scholarships, and internships help our young people develop skills and confidence. Recently we received a note from a parent whose son was given an iPad through our NFBI Freedom Link program. The mother wrote as follows:

I just wanted to send you a video of Rudy using the iPad you bought for him last year. He has downloaded Bookshare and is using Dolphin to read, and, in Rudy's normal goofy fashion, he is reading and learning Latin in slow motion with a smirk on his face! Thank again for all you do to help him with his learning!

You can hear Rudy learning Latin at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ5sNVWLW6E>

Our conventions and seminars bring us together and inspire us to meet new challenges. However, much of the important work we do in the Federation goes on quietly behind the scenes. All of us work as ambassadors, sharing information with other blind people, giving them encouragement, and building positive attitudes about blindness.

Recently NFBI Treasurer Patti Chang spoke with a man whose father is dealing with progressive vision loss. Here is the letter he wrote to express his appreciation.

From: Adam S.

Sent: Sunday, October 7, 2018 2:57 PM

To: pattischang@gmail.com

Subject: Your help with our quest for resources for my father

Dear Ms. Chang,

I am writing you a quick note to thank you so very much for your thoughtful and informative guidance as we deal with a very difficult and sensitive situation regarding my father's failing vision, which has accelerated in recent months.

This change has affected him in many ways; he struggles with daily tasks, especially related to his diabetes self-care, but also with maintaining his reading of books and the news. Meanwhile, since he no longer can get around well, lack of exercise has made him more frail.

There are so many uncertainties in such a situation, and your confident advice and wealth of knowledge have helped us gain a better footing. I phoned you out of the blue, but you took the time to find out about my father's situation and guided us to excellent resources such as the National Library Service for the Blind Talking Books, NFB Newslines®, and the Illinois Assistive Technology Program. Your generosity with your time and your excellent understanding of available resources give us much more confidence that we can help him function and maintain some quality of life in his new normal.

Thank you once again for your invaluable help.

Sincerely,

Adam S.

Evanston, IL