

The Palmetto Blind

The voice of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina



Image caption: NFB of SC President Marty McKenzie and National Federation of the Blind Representative Jessica Beecham at the 68th Convention of the NFB of SC

WINTER 2024-2025 edition

NFB PLEDGE:

I pledge to participate actively in the effort of the National Federation of the Blind; to achieve equality, opportunity, and security for the blind, to support the policies and programs of the Federation, and to abide by its constitution.

ONE MINUTE MESSAGE:

The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Every day, we raise the expectations of blind people because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. You can live the life you want; blindness is not what holds you back.

Edition notes:

- The PALMETTO BLIND is published twice yearly in large print, Braille and accessible digital format, by the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina. David Houck, Editor.
- The National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina is chartered under the laws of the state of South Carolina to promote the spiritual, social and economic well-being of all blind South Carolinians.
- The state organization is an affiliate of the nation's oldest and largest organization of the blind-The National Federation of the Blind.
- The PALMETTO BLIND is available free of charge to any blind individual or member in large print, Braille or accessible digital format.
- Other subscribers are encouraged. If readers desire to do so, donations to cover the annual subscription cost of \$10.00 per year may be made payable to the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina and sent to:
Valerie Warrington, Treasurer
National Federation of the Blind of SC
119 South Kilbourne Rd., Columbia, SC 29205
- Our thanks to Shannon Cook who serves as copy editor for this publication.
- The accessible digital edition is built by Sarah Massengale, CPACC, ADS in compliance with recognized standards for document accessibility. Should you have any difficulties accessing any information included herein, please reach out to her at:
<mailto:communications@nfbofsc.org>

Contents

The Palmetto Blind	1
NFB PLEDGE:	2
ONE MINUTE MESSAGE:	2
Edition notes:	3
2024 National Federation of the Blind Convention	5
National Convention: A Kenith Jernigan Scholarship Winner’s perspective	8
National Convention: Your Editor’s Perspective	9
68th National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina Convention Exciting and Informative!	10
Blind Broadcast Journalist Pursues her Dreams	17
Blind Journalists Remain an Untapped Resource	19
Governor McMaster’s White Cane Safety Day Proclamation	22
Informed Choice and the Empowerment Circle	25
Charleston Chapter Celebrates Blind Equality Achievement Month 2024	32
From the President’s Desk	32
From the Editor	35
Final Thought	39

2024 National Federation of the Blind Convention

By Marty McKenzie, President

(Note: The below article is excerpted from the National Convention Edition of the Positive note, a weekly NFB of SC publication.)

We have just returned from the 84th annual convention of the National Federation of the Blind which took place in Orlando, Florida July 3-8, 2024 and Federationist are energized! The Rosen Center embraced the Federation warmly and attendees were treated with dignity and respect. I had to leave on July 8, 2024, so there may be updated numbers. During the last general session, there were 2,589 attendees registered for the convention and South Carolina had 89 people registered. It was an exciting convention! There was friendly competition between affiliates regarding the amount being given to PAC. South Carolina ranks high on this list but the exact placement is not available at this time.

Congratulations to Sonia Timmons who was elected to the Board of Directors of the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children! Sonia had her three daughters and her parents with her at convention. This was her first time and we will feature her thoughts about convention in a later Positive Note.

There were the usual division and seminar meetings which were very informative for those who attended them. There was a huge focus on artificial intelligence (AI) by several vendors and I attended many of these sessions. The tools that are becoming available to assist blind people to live the lives we want continue to evolve and we are glad to participate in trainings and testing of such tools.

Day one of the convention general sessions began with the expected opening ceremonies and development of the nominating committee. There were some changes to the National Board of Directors this year as shown below. Congratulations to our elected and re-elected board members:

- President Mark Riccobono of Maryland
- First Vice President Pam Allen of Louisiana
- Second Vice President Everette Bacon of Utah
- Secretary Barbara Manuel of Alabama
- Treasurer Norma Crosby of Texas
- Shawn Callaway of District of Columbia
- Jamie Richey of Nebraska

- Jim Marks of Montana
- Donald Porterfield of Arizona
- Ben Dallin of Wisconsin
- Sheila Wright of Missouri

At the National Board Meeting, President Riccobono announced the dates and locations for the next five conventions. We will travel to New Orleans, Louisiana July 8-13, 2025 for the 2025 convention. We will travel to Austin, Texas for the 2026 and 2027 conventions and then to Chicago, Illinois for the 2028 and 2029 conventions.



Image caption: 2,500 in person NFB Convention delegates



Image caption: South Carolina NFB Convention delegates



Image caption: Blind Veterans March to the Podium to introduce themselves

National Convention: A Kenith Jernigan Scholarship Winner's perspective

By Michelle Scott

President: Charleston Chapter

I had the amazing experience of attending my first NFB National Convention this year. It was astonishing to see so many visually impaired people navigating their way quickly and independently through the extremely large crowds. Entering the exhibit Hall and Independence Market was initially overwhelming, but once I started testing out the demos, learning about the new updated devices and playing the accessible games, it became an educational and fun filled experience. I attended seminars where I met national board members of divisions. I participate in and learned valuable information about increasing membership, effective leadership skills, accessible applications and self-defense moves and techniques. As a recipient of the 2024 Kenneth Jernigan Scholarship, the unforgettable moment of the convention for me was the unexpected interaction with Mary Ellen Jernigan. This led to an educational, uplifting and encouraging conversation about her husband, the Jernigan Institute and the importance of using my White Cane. I will forever be grateful for that significant conversation. Overall, I have to say attending my first NFB National Convention was Absolutely Fabulous.”

The Friday NFB Board meeting room was packed. We found out the locations of future conventions. We also heard from NFB board members with long years of service who were stepping down. Lastly, we learned about the candidates for the NFB Board of Directors and a few details of convention arrangements.

The Saturday morning session had a rousing band, introduction of blind veterans, a huge welcome from our NFB Florida host chapter and the roll call of states where each state affiliate announces their delegate, alternate delegate, who will serve on the Nominating Committee and any state convention details. Of course, each state likes to brag on their accomplishments during their report.

The Saturday afternoon session featured President Riccobono's Presidential Report detailing the accomplishments of the NFB. We heard about raising expectations in education, with the Calgary, Alberta, Canada police service and in STEM concerning Oceanography. Each area has its barriers to overcome; however, high expectations can make it all a reality!

The Sunday morning session opened with the elections and NFB financial report. We then heard from the National Library Service about

moving back into the Library of Congress building and updates on new and future services for Talking Books. Next was an update on indoor navigation for the blind, a service with many applications in everyday living, shopping and travel situations.

The Sunday afternoon session began with information on section 504 and the development of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is the standard for blind students' future success. High expectations are needed here along with an education on blindness literacy, braille, technology, mobility and educational goals. A two-decade history was presented on blindness driven training innovations, demonstrating that the blind know who we are, where we are going and what we want. As the final talk of the session, we heard from a panel on the power of collective action toward gaining equality.

There were several Resolutions voted on during the convention sessions, and those that passed were detailed in the August/September Braille Monitor.

The Monday morning session featured speakers on Social Security, Rehabilitation Services and the arts and film making. We also heard about taking charge in employment by controlling your own success. A highlight of Monday morning was an informative discussion concerning our lived experiences and the use of artificial intelligence (AI).

Monday afternoon the Jacob Bolotin Awards were presented, followed by a presentation on integrating Artificial Intelligence with human intelligence and how to use both effectively and productively. Accessing health management with technology to promote equal opportunity was followed by an item on telling our stories from a retired federal judge. The final speaker shared updates on civil rights protections from the Department of Justice.

The convention closed with a Monday evening banquet. Federationists and guests were dressed to the nine's as they listened to President Riccobono's banquet speech on dignity and took part in National Scholarship and other award presentations. It was a wonderful time of fine dining and Federation fellowship.

[National Convention: Your Editor's Perspective](#)

By David Houck

David Houck, Executive Director of the Federation Center of the Blind has attended NFB conventions dating back to 1983 in Kansas City, Missouri. During all these years and those before, we have witnessed progress in the field of blindness, agencies serving the blind, in understanding blindness and the correct philosophy and capabilities of blind people. During the Founder, Dr. Jacobus tenBroek's tenure, basic economic opportunities were few and far between. The NFB began to deal with aid for the blind, the federal Randolph Sheppard Act for blind vendors, educational and literacy enhancement and the need for braille. During Dr. Kenneth Jernigan's tenure as NFB President and Commissioner of the Iowa Commission for the Blind, there was much growth in the size and scope of the federation both nationally and by affiliates. He made strides in rehabilitation services for the blind, expanded blindness skills education, job opportunities and moved the NFB to its Baltimore Headquarters. During Marc Maurer's tenure, the expansion of new opportunities opened up almost any endeavor a blind person may wish to undertake. He brought to life Dr. Jernigan's dreams, turning them into what is now the Jernigan Institute; a place that has become the headquarters of the National Federation of the Blind and home of many innovative programs. Mark Riccobono continues the tradition of opening new opportunities, erasing barriers for the blind and shaping the NFB into a strong, cohesive unit. After all, he did drive a car around the Daytona race track unassisted by any passenger. There is always much to be accomplished so that horizons become limitless for the blind!

68th National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina Convention Exciting and Informative!

By Marty McKenzie, President

“One hundred ninety-four enthusiastic Federationist gathered at the Embassy Suites Hotel by Hilton located at 200 Stoneridge Drive, in

Columbia, South Carolina August 15 to 18 for the 68th Annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina. Included in our guest list was our National Representative, Jessica Beecham of Colorado, Brandon Werner of Michigan, Allen Chao of Nevada and Jay Salene of New Jersey as well as Sarah Nelson-Norwood of Detroit, Michigan. It was exciting to have so many from out of state represented at the NFB of SC State Convention.

Friday began with the At Large Chapter and division meetings. This year, there was a Youth Track designed by Sonia Timmons, Andrena Corder and others. The students had arts and crafts all Friday afternoon with the Pelican Snowball truck sandwiched in the middle. Derique Simon led one of the most upbeat SC Association of Blind Students meetings I ever remember attending. The students were enthusiastic and competitive, seeking to serve on the SCABS Board of Directors. Each student took time to share why they wanted to serve and what they would bring to the table if elected. Trenton Smith was elected as the new SCABS president and we can look forward to great things from this team.

The convention kicked off Friday evening with the reception which had a fairytale theme and Federationist embraced this idea! There were prizes throughout the evening and everyone enjoyed the music and comradery generated by being together as the NFB of SC family. The SC Association of Blind Students, under the direction of Successful Transitions staff and the leadership of outgoing President, Derique Simon, showed up and showed out for the weekend. During the Friday evening reception, several musical selections were rendered by students and it was enjoyed by everyone!

The students continued to participate in the convention by providing the invocation and National Anthem Saturday morning during the opening ceremonies. The Saturday morning agenda was filled with the National Report by Jessica Beecham, reports from the SC Commission for the Blind, the SC School for the Deaf and the Blind and the SC State Library Talking Book Services. Other topics of interest included Dr. Tina Herzberg's report on Orientation and Mobility Training Program: A Journey to Success. The

morning concluded with the Presidential Report by Marty R. McKenzie. In this report, I reviewed the year and the accomplishments that took place. The importance of “Stronger Together” was also discussed in this report.

The Saturday afternoon session included information about the benefits of the Palmetto Able Savings Account, reflections from Janice Bright on the Kenneth Jernigan Leadership in Service Pilot Program, information on DART, PUP and VTRIP from Ali Ruegamer from Able SC and a final report from Dr. Tina Herzberg on Filling Your Transportation Toolbox, a camp conducted this summer by Drs. Herzberg and Rosenblum. Federation Center and Rocky Bottom reports were also provided by David Houck, Ed Bible and Thom Spittle.

One of the most exciting presentations was AI: What It Can Do for You by Steve Cook and Sarah Massengale. Steve and Sarah demonstrated how ChatGPT can describe images, provide written thank you notes within parameters and provide a brief history of the Federation. Additionally, Steve Cook demonstrated the descriptive capability of JAWS PictureSmart which can describe pictures in significant detail. There are many other things that can be done with AI, and this just scratches the surface.

The highlight of the Banquet was the wonderful banquet speech given by Jessica Beecham which focused on the Federation family table. Jessica reminded us that we do not have to settle for the scraps, we can have the entire gourmet meal. She provided examples from her personal experience of how things do not always work as they should. Yet, she purposed in her heart to be successful and she discussed how the National Federation of the Blind is a part of her success.

Scholarships were awarded to Alena Hamlin, Patrick Ordonez and Elijah Taylor totaling almost \$6,800. This is the largest amount awarded in scholarships in recent years! A huge “thank you” to everyone who donated to this very important program in the South Carolina affiliate.

Many deserving awards were given during the banquet. Below is a list of these awards and their recipients.

Midlands Gives Award presented to Linda Dizzley as the District 5 representative in recognition of the district that raised the most money during Midlands Gives.

The Educator of the Year Award was presented to Dr. Mary Robbins for her high expectations of students who are blind or have low vision along with her willingness to go the extra mile to ensure that her students receive the best possible instruction.

The Donald C. Capps Award was presented to Shannon Cook in recognition of her decades of service to the blind of South Carolina. Shannon serves as secretary of the NFB of SC, Rocky Bottom and the Federation Center along with many other roles that she plays in this big program of service to the blind.

The newly established Betty R. Capps Award was presented to Diana Singleton in recognition of her more than two decades of service to the blind on the local, state and national levels. Diana is willing to do her fair share and then some.

The Distinguished Service Award was presented to Catherine Williams for her more than three decades of service at the local, state and national levels. Catherine can be found in any location doing what needs to be done. She prefers to remain in the background and serves with passion and high expectations.

The highest recognition presented to a blind Federationist is that of the Presidential Citation. President Marty McKenzie presented this award to Vice President Lenora Robertson for her 45 years of service to the Blind of South Carolina. Lenora joined the South Carolina affiliate in 1979, became a chapter president in 1986 and has served on the executive board for more than 30 years. Additionally, except for two years, she serves as the door prize chairman and masterfully distributes many door prizes during conventions. She also is responsible for food preparation for the annual board retreat at Rocky Bottom and for many other events. Lenora is able to secure contributions when needed and does an excellent job for the NFB of SC affiliate.

The banquet fundraiser was one of the most successful ever this year! In the space of about 35 minutes, approximately \$11,300 dollars was donated or pledged to the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina to help fund the state's programs.

Sunday morning brought Remembering Those Who Went Before Us: A Memorial led by Melinda Jones and her team. It was a beautiful memorial service which had a poem including those who went before us and a musical selection by Thom Spittle.

The Legislative and Advocacy Committee co-chairs provided an update on Washington Seminar and H. 3127 which is the Homestead Exemption Act. We are lobbying to have this increased by \$50,000 to \$100,000. While not successful in the last legislative year, plans are already underway to push this bill forward. There was also a report from Frank Coppel on PAC, SUN and the Dream Maker's Circle. The NFB of SC does an excellent job with contributions to our National Office and we must continue this good work.

There was a healthy discussion about charter bus transportation for upcoming national conventions. The cost of a charter bus for travel to New Orleans in 2025 is estimated to be approximately \$17,000. After discussion from individuals who are for and against continuing this program, the convention voted to discontinue the use of charter buses at this time.

Two resolutions were passed in convention assembled this year. Resolution 2024-01 discussed the importance of the Homestead Exemption Act and the NFB of SC's commitment to see the amount raised to \$100,000. Resolution 2024-02 addressed the inaccessibility of the [Midlands Gives](#) website and encourage the Central Carolina Community Foundation to reach out to the NFB of SC for partnership and guidance on resolving these accessibility issues.

Elections were held with the following results:

President – Marty McKenzie

First Vice President – Lenora Robertson

Second Vice President – Debra Canty

Secretary – Shannon Cook

Treasurer – Valerie Warrington

District 2 – Andrew Adams

District 4 – Demetrius Williford

District 6 – Sarah Massengale

At Large – Thom Spittle

At Large – Janice Smith

Unexpired At Large – Belinda Banks

Congratulations to new board member Belinda Banks as well as all of the board members who were re-elected. We also extend our appreciation to Derique Simon for his time on the NFB of SC Board of Directors.

I want to take a moment to extend my sincere appreciation to everyone who assisted in any way at all to make the 68th Annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina the huge success it was! No one person can do this and it takes a village to put on a convention. So many people gave of their time, money, door prizes, gift cards, gifts and many other items. Our volunteers were awesome and we appreciate them for all of their hard work! There are individuals who do so much behind the scenes and we extend our appreciation to them as well! I will not call names as I will clearly leave someone out. The convention belongs to all of us just as does the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina.

The 68th Annual Convention of the NFB of SC was something very special! Having the students sitting directly in front of me as I presided over the convention was an absolutely wonderful thing and I appreciate their attendance and participation so much! The family atmosphere, love that flowed among members and visiting guests and the excitement in the air was invigorating for members! There were many new members of the NFB

of SC and several first-time convention attendees. Elijah Taylor said it best when he said, “I have found my tribe!” With love, hope and determination, let’s go build the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina!”

In addition, this year’s convention had our exhibitors spread out in the fountain area of the Atrium where everyone had easy access.



Image caption: Convention Exhibit Hall



Image caption: Friday Night Reception



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Image caption: Convention's 194 Delegates



Image caption: NFB of SC 2nd VP Debra Canty

Blind Broadcast Journalist Pursues her Dreams

Jul 2, 2024, reprinted courtesy of CommPRO.
Written By [Dominic Calabrese](#)



Photo credit: Randy Lee Belice, Lisa Birmingham and The Chicago Lighthouse

She co-hosts a segment on one of Chicago's top-rated radio stations. She dishes out news and information on her own podcast. She even serves as captain of her "beep baseball" team.

However, what gives Kalari Girtley, who is totally blind, the most joy are her three children.

"I have been truly blessed," she smiles, and I hope that others who are blind or disabled will find their niche and realize their dreams as well!" A native of the Windy City, Girtley, 40, lost her vision at the tender age of 6. With the strong support and encouragement of her family, she still persevered, earning a journalism degree from the University of Illinois and a master's from Columbia College Chicago.

"As long as I can remember, I've had a passion for journalism," Girtley recalls, noting that from an early age, she possessed all the requisites for an intrepid reporter.

"I've always had a love for reading, was curious about the world around me and have been inquisitive or downright noisy about other people's business," she laughs.

Her career got a big boost in 2014 when Girtley joined The Chicago Lighthouse, a nationally respected social service enterprise assisting people who are blind, visually impaired, disabled and Veterans.

While employed as a call center representative, Girtley also had a chance to hone her journalism skills through Chicago Lighthouse Media, a multi-faceted platform that fully utilizes the talents of blind broadcasters, writers and researchers.

"In addition to preparing copy, I had a chance to produce and host my own podcast, "Coffee with Kalari," she says, "which focused on such topics as education, lifestyles, employment, recreation and health."

When Lighthouse Media partnered with WBBM-AM, the city's powerhouse all-news and information station, to broadcast the "Disability Minute," Girtley was tapped as a co-host and regular contributor for the weekly segment, which examines issues of interest to the city's often overlooked blind and disabled community.

"It is an amazing opportunity for my colleagues and myself to get this kind of top-notch experience with a major market radio station like WBBM," she acknowledges.

When asked what makes for a successful interviewer, Girtley points to being a good storyteller.

"Everyone has a story to tell and my job is to dig beneath the surface, to get to know the person I'm speaking with and ask probing questions," she states.

Girtley further polishes her craft by being actively involved in professional associations, including the Disabled Journalists Association and National Association of Black Journalists.

In addition, she also is an accomplished athlete who enjoys playing beep ball, a form of baseball for individuals who are blind, which uses audio cues and special equipment to alert and guide players.

In fact, Girtley helped the local beep ball team, the Chicago Comets, win its first ever championship in 2003.

Going forward, she expresses optimism about the future. "There is still a lot I want to do," she smiles. "My personal philosophy is to not take no for an answer, to keep pushing, always have a sense of purpose and never stop believing in yourself!"

Blind Journalists Remain and Untapped Resource

By: Dominic Calabrese

(Reprinted with permission of Com-Pro)

Editor's note: The below essay by Mr. Calabrese was published as a companion article to his journalist profile, which precedes it. This article is intended to highlight the untapped workforce of blind journalists and how other news agencies should consider following the example set by Chicago Lighthouse Media.

Communicators in management seeking to bring about more inclusion and diversity in their newsrooms may look to Chicago Lighthouse Media as a role model to follow.

An initiative of The Chicago Lighthouse, is to engage blind journalists to produce the content, conduct the research and serve as hosts.

Noting that the CDC shows that nearly 61 million people - about a quarter of the population - identify as having a disability, Chicago Lighthouse President and CEO Dr. Janet Szlyk says, "Chicago Lighthouse Media provides people with disabilities a place to tell their stories, using their own voices accurately and respectfully."

Chicago Lighthouse Media is also unique, according to Sandy Murillo, one of the blind journalists actively involved in the program.

"To the best of our knowledge, we may be the only media platform in the nation that fully utilizes our talents," she observes.

On a typical day, Murillo and her colleague, Kalari Girtley, who is also blind, scan news sites and social media for compelling story ideas, do background research and prep for interviews.

Then both women take to the airwaves and report on such topics as accessible travel and tourism, cooking without sight and service animal discrimination.

These items and more comprise the "Disability Minute," a weekly segment focusing on issues of concern to Chicago's disabled community while at the same time championing access and inclusion for a group that has all too often been marginalized.

Airing on the city's top-rated CBS Radio affiliate, WBBM AM, the "Disability Minute" is the lynch pin of Chicago Lighthouse Media.

What helps Murillo and Girtley, who serve as producers and hosts of the broadcast, bond with their audience is not only their disability but that both are also young women of color.

A native of the Chicago area who is a ten-year veteran of The Lighthouse, Murillo, 36, earned a degree in journalism from the University of Illinois.

Girtley, 40, who is also observing her tenth anniversary at the agency this year earned a journalism degree from the U of I as well.

"Sandy and I are almost soul sisters in that we are among the first U of I journalism grads who are totally blind," she smiles.

Both women credit Lighthouse Media for enabling them to gain invaluable experience while helping to hone their writing and interviewing skills. For Murillo, it was hosting her own blog, "Sandy's View." For Girtley, it was hosting her blog, "Coffee with Kalari."

They point out that the program originally began with CRIS (Chicagoland Reading Information Service), a radio reading service for Chicago area residents who are blind and disabled. Funded in part by local Lions clubs, CRIS showcased the talents of volunteers who would come into the studio each day and share information about politics, sports, entertainment and other topics.

Incidentally, Murillo and Girtley are Lions, and the organization continues to support Lighthouse Media.

Originally housed in space provided by the Chicago Cultural Center, CRIS moved its operations to The Lighthouse in 2006 under the direction of longtime radio broadcaster Bill Jurek, who was blind himself.

"In 2018, we discussed plans to transform CRIS and incorporate it into a more extensive media hub, called Chicago Lighthouse Media," recalls Murillo, adding that the operation's facilities were made fully accessible one year later in 2019.

"Fortunately, COVID 19 receded and we were able to get back on track with the launching of the "Disability Minute" in 2021," she says. "We are so grateful to WBBM for their commitment to our community and their faith in us to produce a segment that is in keeping with the station's very high standards of excellence."

Noting that a sizeable segment of the U.S. population identifies as having a disability and with the aging of the massive baby boom generation, even more people will fit into this category, Girtley maintains that programming like the "Disability Minute" is absolutely essential.

"There are so many topics for us to tackle and issues to spotlight," she says.

Murillo notes that CRIS Radio remains an important part of Lighthouse Media but now much of the recording is done remotely by volunteers.

"We are fortunate to have a corps of talented and dedicated people we can rely on," she says.

Both Murillo and Girtley express the hope that platforms like Chicago Lighthouse Media will thrive in other cities around the country.

"Not only does it provide an invaluable public service, but it helps to break down barriers and promote a more inclusive and just society," Girtley states.

[Governor McMaster's White Cane Safety Day Proclamation](#)

State of South Carolina

Governor's Proclamation

Whereas, the white cane, which every blind citizen of South Carolina has the right to carry, demonstrates and symbolizes the ability to achieve a full and independent life and the capacity to work productively in competitive employment; and

Whereas, by allowing every blind person to move freely and safely from place to place, the white cane makes it possible for the blind to fully participate in and contribute to our society and to live the lives they want; and

Whereas, every citizen should be aware that the law requires that motorists and cyclists exercise appropriate caution when approaching a blind person carrying a white cane; and

Whereas, South Carolina state law also calls upon employers, both public and private, to be aware of and utilize the employment skills of our blind citizens by recognizing their worth as individuals and their productive capacities; and

Whereas, the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina has promoted independent living, mobility training, braille literacy rights, and voting and jury duty rights, not to mention the White Cane Law passed in 1972; and,

Whereas, the South Carolina Commission of the Blind came into existence in 1966 by the National Federation of the Blind advocating for legislation in

order that this state agency shall assist in implementing vocational, assistive technology, braille, and computer literacy so the blind may find competitive employment and the elderly blind may live independently; and Whereas, the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, celebrating its 175th year of service this year, prepares this generation of blind children for their educational goals;

Whereas, with the cooperative assistance of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina, along with the Commission for the Blind and the School for the Blind, South Carolina can and should facilitate the expansion of employment opportunities for greater acceptance of blind persons in the competitive labor market as the General Assembly has done by defeating subminimum wages for the blind and disabled workers in this state going into full effect in 2024.

Now, therefore, I, Henry Dargan McMaster, Governor of the great State of South Carolina, do hereby proclaim October 15, 2024, as White Cane Safety Day throughout the state and encourage our schools, colleges, and universities to offer full opportunities for training blind persons, employers, and the public to utilize the available skills of competent blind persons, to open new opportunities for the blind in our rapidly changing society, and encourage all South Carolinians to recognize the white cane as a tool of independence for blind pedestrians on our streets and highways.

State of South Carolina

Governor's Proclamation

- WHEREAS, the white cane, which every blind citizen of South Carolina has the right to carry, demonstrates and symbolizes the ability to achieve a full and independent life and the capacity to work productively in competitive employment; and
- WHEREAS, by allowing every blind person to move freely and safely from place to place, the white cane makes it possible for the blind to fully participate in and contribute to our society and to live the lives they want; and
- WHEREAS, every citizen should be aware that the law requires that motorists and cyclists exercise appropriate caution when approaching a blind person carrying a white cane; and
- WHEREAS, South Carolina state law also calls upon employers, both public and private, to be aware of and utilize the employment skills of our blind citizens by recognizing their worth as individuals and their productive capacities; and
- WHEREAS, the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina has promoted independent living, mobility training, braille literacy rights, and voting and jury duty rights, not to mention the White Cane Law passed in 1972; and
- WHEREAS, the South Carolina Commission for the Blind came into existence in 1966 by the National Federation of the Blind advocating for legislation in order that this state agency shall assist in implementing vocational, assistive technology, braille and computer literacy so the blind may find competitive employment and the elderly blind may live independently; and
- WHEREAS, the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, celebrating its 175th year of service this year, prepares this generation of blind children for their educational goals; and
- WHEREAS, with the cooperative assistance of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina, along with the Commission for the Blind and the School for the Blind, South Carolina can and should facilitate the expansion of employment opportunities for greater acceptance of blind persons in the competitive labor market as the General Assembly has done by defeating subminimum wages for the blind and disabled workers in this state going into full effect in 2024.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Henry Dargan McMaster, Governor of the great State of South Carolina, do hereby proclaim October 15, 2024, as

WHITE CANE SAFETY DAY

throughout the state and encourage our schools, colleges, and universities to offer full opportunities for training blind persons, employers and the public to utilize the available skills of competent blind persons, to open new opportunities for the blind in our rapidly changing society, and encourage all South Carolinians to recognize the white cane as a tool of independence for blind pedestrians on our streets and highways.



Handwritten signature of Henry Dargan McMaster.

HENRY DARGAN McMASTER
GOVERNOR
STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Image caption: Text of the proclamation written above with SC state seal and governor's signature.

Informed Choice and the Empowerment Circle

by **James H. Omvig**

reprinted with permission from Gary Wunder, Editor of the Braille Monitor, July 2000

From the Editor of the Braille Monitor: Through the years Jim Omvig has written many articles for the Braille Monitor grounded in his years of experience in rehabilitation. They express common-sense notions about what works and what doesn't in rehabilitating blind people. He was born and raised in Iowa, where he became one of Dr. Jernigan's early students at the Adult Orientation and Training Center of the Iowa Commission for the Blind. He became an attorney and has done important work to help blind and disabled people across the country. Among other things he has directed adult training centers serving blind people in Iowa and Alaska. Today he is retired and lives in Arizona, where he is a leader of the NFB of Arizona. In the following article Jim explains what is and is not meant by the rehabilitation term "informed choice." This is what he says:

To choose or not to choose or, more accurately, what to choose? That is the question--the question for the new vocational rehabilitation (VR) customer. In recent years far too many blind customers of the VR system have been shortchanged because they have chosen unwisely; they have not known how or what to choose. It can be said that they have made uninformed choices. As a result, without ever even knowing it, they have sold themselves short.

Vocational rehabilitation for people with disabilities became a national effort in America in 1920, but this first program did not include the blind at all. Apparently, people assumed the blind had no rehabilitation potential and thus could not become employable. The original law, the Smith-Fess Act, established the National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 66-236).

By 1943, as blinded veterans were coming home from the Second World War, the blind were finally included in VR programs and presumed to have at least some kind of employment potential. The 1943 law which brought the blind into VR programs was the Barden-LaFollette Act (P.L. 78-113). In the eighty years since VR was inaugurated in the United States, and in the fifty-seven years since the blind were included in VR programs, many new concepts have come along, and doubtless many have gone. Also it goes without saying that at times nothing short of mass confusion has been the order of the day.

However, no concept in the VR process has ever been more confused, misunderstood, twisted, and misused than that of informed

choice. Since the concept has been so misconstrued and misapplied, large numbers of blind VR customers actually have been hurt rather than helped by what was intended to be a positive plan of grand design.

The concept of informed choice was first introduced to the United States Congress and to those involved in the field of work with the blind by the National Federation of the Blind in 1990. At that time a few orientation and adjustment centers around the country were consistently providing high quality, proper training--they knew the secret of full empowerment for the blind and taught it regularly. The fact was, however, that most training centers didn't have a clue about what proper training really is, let alone provide it.

The NFB thought that a blind customer--no matter where he or she happened to live--should have the right to choose to go at VR expense to an orientation and adjustment center which offered proper training and full empowerment, so the proposal went to Congress. No action was taken in 1990, but the seed was planted. The blind of the NFB worked hard, and by the time Congress passed the 1992 VR Amendments, the First Choice Provision was put into the Act (The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as Amended). In the 1998 Rehabilitation Act amendments the informed choice provision was strengthened and stated much more strongly.

The concept caught on, was used, and became confused. Then it began to be misused. Now the concept of consumer choice is as clear as mud. What then is informed choice? It simply means that the customer is to be treated with dignity and respect--as an equal partner--with the service provider. Unlike the old days when the VR counselor made decisions and then told the passive customer what to do, the customer now has the right to participate fully in the planning and decision-making.

In addition to selecting the employment objective and the broad range of needed services, the customer also generally has the right to choose the training program--pre-vocational or vocational--in which he or she would like to participate. The customer does not, however, have the right to tell a program how it should run its business. In other words, the customer cannot compel a VR vendor to change the nature of its services. If the customer does not like some aspect of a given training program, he or she should choose a program which offers what is wanted.

To clarify the point, let's look at a couple of simple analogies. I decided to become an attorney, so I chose to go to law school and to attend Loyola University of Chicago. The university, of course, chose what it would teach me and how it would do it. I could have chosen to go to some other law school, but each in turn would have chosen what and how

to teach me and how I would be expected to dress, behave, and participate and what I would study.

Or, to illustrate absurdity by being absurd, try this one on for size: How would you react if your youngster were to come home from school some day and say, "Hey, Dad, we have this new thing in school. It's called 'Choice.' I get to decide whether or not to take English or Spelling or History or Math or Science. It's really cool. Hey, Dad, I choose recess!"

Obviously there are certain presumptions in this world. Whether we are going to law school or grade school or high school or night school or an adjustment center for the blind, it is presumed that those who run the schools and training centers know more about what is needed and how to achieve the objective than those who attend the programs. If they don't, then the roles should be reversed, and the administrators had better become the students.

"So," you ask, "what in the world does all of this nonsense have to do with blind VR customers and informed choice?" Everything! In the confusion and frustration which now exist, customers attending training centers for the blind incorrectly believe that they have the right not only to make the choice to attend a particular program but also to make choices as to whether or not they will take all core classes, stay all day, use and carry white canes, take and use Braille, use sleepshades during training, etc. Worse still, most rehabilitation counselors, rehabilitation teachers, and training-center personnel have also bought into the erroneous notion that this is what the NFB proposed and Congress meant when it offered VR customers a choice. This, of course, is absurd.

There is an even more dubious aspect to this entire mess. The customers have obviously learned this mistaken view about choice from someone since they would have had no reason to have the slightest bit of knowledge about the subject. No doubt they never heard of the phrase, "informed choice," until they began working with their VR agencies. I believe that the customers have learned and are learning this erroneous view from the professionals in the field--the very rehab counselors, rehab teachers, and training-center personnel whose sole reason for being should be to help blind people adjust properly to their blindness.

Chaos has been the result. But, even more than that, when service and training personnel not only gave up their right but also failed in their responsibility to set the curriculum needed to provide proper training--to empower their customers--those customers have become the losers. They have been short-changed by the very programs which were created to provide meaningful help. Since such customers have had little or no

adequate guidance, far too many have chosen unwisely and thus have failed to get the training they really needed.

To spell it out bluntly, the customer who is new to the blindness system has no foundation upon which to make an informed choice about anything dealing with proper training or adjustment to blindness. He or she has nothing by which to measure, no knowledge upon which to exercise judgment, no perspective. A person who has never been exposed to the blindness system wouldn't even understand the terminology.

Just consider: The new student or customer doesn't know about the wide range of possibilities which exist for the blind who have had meaningful training. That customer doesn't know a properly trained blind person can live a normal, happy, productive life. He or she must be taught and often persuaded by someone who does know. The new customer doesn't know, for example, why it is critically important in the adjustment-to-blindness process to learn to use the word "blind," rather than actively to continue to engage in denial. He or she must be persuaded by someone who truly knows and understands the importance of the customer's acceptance of and adjustment to blindness.

Similarly, the newly blinded adult doesn't know that prevocational training in a residential orientation and adjustment center is always preferable (if it is available) to training in a daytime-only program. This new customer does not know why it is important to use the long white cane rather than a short one; why sleepshades are necessary for the partially blind person during training; or why Braille and other alternative techniques are so important. Someone who really knows and cares must guide the blind person to recognize the truth of these and a myriad of other facts.

All of the foregoing is simply the way that it is in the real world, and no amount of hoping or wishing that it isn't so can change it. To complicate the issue even further, all of this persuasion and teaching must usually be accomplished in spite of the fear and stubborn reluctance of the blind customer involved. For the simple truth is that, because of the prevailing negative attitudes about blindness, the typical new adult VR customer believes that he or she can really do nothing of significance as a blind person and that, therefore, the offered state services are totally useless and irrelevant if not impossible to achieve. He or she will have been taught since infancy that blindness means inferiority, and this attitude will usually not change until the quality service provider intervenes and helps to change it.

Dr. Fredric K. Schroeder, Commissioner of the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration, told a marvelous story about choice at a training

seminar for Arizona rehabilitation professionals. "When I went to work in Washington," he said, "I was asked by a personnel official if I would like to choose a federal health insurance plan. I said that I would like that. The personnel specialist and I went into a room and began picking up packets of information about my various options."

Commissioner Schroeder continued, "We took a large stack of books and pamphlets back to my office, and I began to sort them. Then I said, 'This is ridiculous. I'm not going to read all of this stuff!'

"I went to a colleague--an employee who had worked for RSA for several years--and asked him if he had federal health insurance. He said that he did, and he told me which policy he had. I asked him if he liked it, and he said, 'I do like it,' so I said, 'Me too,' and I signed up for what he had.

"I then asked my secretary to take a copy of each piece of paper having to do with all of the federal health plans and to weigh the whole stack. She did. It weighed thirteen pounds. This was great. I had thirteen pounds of choice about my health-care plan. Of course, until I asked for information from a trusted colleague, I had no rational basis whatsoever for making a sound decision."

This story should make the point. As with RSA Commissioner Schroeder, the customer who is new to the blindness system has no rational basis whatever for choosing the right adjustment program to attend. The employees of the quality service provider--those with the empowerment motive--must teach and lead and demonstrate and persuade in order to help elevate the new VR customer's expectations and to sell him or her on the proper training which can reasonably be expected to result in empowerment.

Two questions arise on the topic of how best honestly to equip the customer to make an informed choice--the kind of choice which will lead to true empowerment for the blind. First, what is the real role in the real world of the professional as it relates to informed choice and the correct adjustment center to attend? Should that professional remain neutral and, like a robot, simply hand the customer thirteen pounds of paper, or should the professional learn what it takes to empower a blind person and then do his or her very best to influence positively the choice the customer makes?

At the Arizona rehabilitation seminar referred to above, RSA Commissioner Schroeder answered this question directly and unequivocally. "A rehabilitation professional," he said, "absolutely has an appropriate role to play in the choice process by giving the very best information he or she can possibly provide. . . .The professional ought not

to remain silent on the issue of the type of services which will empower the customer. . . . The professional ought truly to help the individual to make an informed choice. . . . Informed choice does not mean that a professional must simply sit passively when a customer comes in and says, 'This is what I want,' and think, 'That's a terrible idea, but under choice I'm not allowed to say anything. . . .' That is nonsense. That is not at all what choice is about. That type of behavior will simply get you about thirteen pounds of meaningless paper."

The second question has to do with the role, if any, which the organized blind movement should rightfully play in the process of choice. Should the NFB have any role? Yes. In addition to doing his or her very best to direct the new customer toward training which will lead to empowerment, the blindness professional who understands and is truly committed to full empowerment will also routinely refer that new customer to the local chapter of the National Federation of the Blind. The new customer needs successful blind role models, and he or she also needs a support group. Further, that new customer needs the inspiration and encouragement which flow naturally from being a part of the collective community of successful blind people.

Let me be very clear about the point I am making here. Some VR agencies bring in a speaker every month or two to talk to new customers for a half hour or so about his or her organization of the blind. This is not what I am talking about.

The entire point of this article is that we have come to the place in history where the seventy-percent unemployment rate among the blind is absolutely unacceptable. If we are interested in successful outcomes, we must deal with the world as it is, not with fiction. We must recognize and accept the reality that the mere fact that a person has become blind did not bring with it great insight into blindness. Therefore, choice in a vacuum is pointless. The very best way for that new customer to have a real chance to exercise choice meaningfully is to associate with people who have themselves been through the process and who can therefore give perspective and meaningful opinions, informed opinions.

The views of these veteran VR customers will be based upon the experiences--both the good and the bad--which they and their friends have had. The new customer can then judge for him- or herself whether those experiences are relevant--whether those experiences relate or at least partially relate to the goals and ambitions he or she has.

A friend here in Tucson tells a great story on this point. He became blind overnight in Illinois, and he needed help since he knew nothing about

blindness. He quickly applied for VR services, and within two days a VR counselor (a blind person) came to my friend's home to see him.

Among other things the counselor said, "It is critical that you meet and associate yourself with other blind people. Here is information about both the American Council of the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind. Check them out, and join something so you can learn from other blind people."

My friend ultimately visited and then joined the NFB. He says that, while VR gave him some home teaching and other services, it was through the NFB that his road to empowerment began in earnest.

To close the loop on what I'll call the empowerment circle, the next step is for that new customer to become actively involved in the NFB. His or her personal empowerment will truly be completed by getting involved and helping to make life better for all blind people. Soon this new individual will be the veteran inspiring and encouraging and giving hope to yet another, newer member. This new role for the customer will, in and of itself, be empowering, since one can gain much by giving back. The unbiased rehabilitation professional with no axes to grind will encourage such activity.

The Director of the Louisiana Center for the Blind, Joanne Wilson, reports dramatic VR outcomes when the empowerment loop has been closed through active participation in the NFB. An informal study (a formal one will be conducted later) reveals that 97 percent of her students are successful when they become actively involved in the NFB after completing training.

The secret of how best to empower the blind has long been known. The truth about blindness is known, the techniques for instilling that truth in the new customer are known, and the question of how to deal appropriately with the negative public attitudes about blindness is known. All of this has been tried, tested, and proven over and over again. What remains is for large numbers of professionals in the field of work with the blind who operate from the empowerment motive to learn about and become committed to full empowerment for their blind customers. Only then will they be able to pass on accurate information so that rank-and-file customers can make truly informed choices about their lives.

Those who have mistakenly believed that the concept of informed choice gives the customer the right to pick and choose only certain parts of a particular program obviously focus only upon the word "choice." As we have seen in this article, however, the word, "informed," is of at least equal significance. A choice without information and perspective--an uninformed

choice--is utterly meaningless. Even worse, it may be devastating to the success and well-being of the customer.

Charleston Chapter Celebrates Blind Equality Achievement Month 2024

By Michelle Scott, Chapter President

The Charleston Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina, celebrated Blind Equality Achievement Month (BEAM) with a variety of activities, from showcasing talents to spreading awareness and providing information to the community. We began with President Michelle Scott, Secretary Amber Milligan, and Irving Middleton; having news interviews on September 30, 2024 with Ann McGill, on WCSC channel 5, October 2, 2024; with Taylor Miller on WTAT Fox 24 and October 3, 2024; with Hannah Powers on WCBD News 2. These interviews allowed us to bring awareness and educate the public about BEAM and its importance as well as provide details about our chapter BEAM events. We had our Talent Showcase on October 5th, which allowed blind and low-vision performers to display their singing and musical talent to the community. Our annual White Cane Awareness Day Walk was held on October 12th 2024, where we proudly walked with our white canes around Marion Square in downtown Charleston. Our last BEAM event was the Liberty Hill Octoberfest on October 26th where we participated by providing the public with information pertaining to the NFB and membership.

From the President's Desk

By Marty McKenzie

This is the third year end for me as President of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina and we are definitely in exciting times! The 84th Convention of the National Federation of the Blind took place in Orlando, Florida at the Rosen Center Hotel and it was a wonderful experience! We had approximately 89 South Carolinians who attended in-person including several Kenneth Jernigan scholarship winners. These scholarships assist first-time conventioners with the cost of attending the National Convention and they enable individuals who might not otherwise

be able to attend to do so. There were many great presentations and a lot of information about artificial intelligence (AI) available at the convention and I engaged in these presentations and demonstrations as much as possible. I find myself using AI and services like AIRA and Be My Eyes more than ever before.

The 68th Annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina was held August 15-18, 2024 at the Embassy Suites in Columbia with 192 attendees present. This is the highest number to attend our state convention in several years and it is exciting to see the NFB of SC continue to grow and flourish! Jessica Beachum from Colorado served as the National Representative and did an outstanding job in this role. She engaged with members in an extremely positive way, was of great assistance when we had a medical emergency during the Presidential Address and she delivered an excellent National Report and Banquet speech. Jessica spoke on the topic of Eating at the Federation Table. She shared much of her personal story and reminded us that we want the entire feast, not just the crumbs from the table.

We had an awesome Youth Track thanks to Sonia Timmons, South Carolina Parents of Blind Children leader and Andrenia Corder, Director of Successful Transitions. They orchestrated the youth engagement peace, but the entire Successful Transitions team and others worked diligently to make it happen. Outgoing SC Association of Blind Students President, Derique Simon led an enthusiastic student division meeting and facilitated the election of an excellent new board. A scholarship winner, Elijah Taylor, took my breath away when he stated, "I have Found my tribe" in that meeting. What a convention!

Elections were held with minimal changes to the NFB of SC Board of Directors. Derique Simon stepped down mid-term, because he relocated to

Baltimore, Maryland to take a job there. Belinda Banks, his mother, was elected to complete his unexpired term. The board remained unchanged otherwise.

The National Federation of the Blind celebrated Blind Equality Achievement Month (BEAM) in October and there were too many events within the NFB of SC to recount here. They are all featured in the weekly Positive Notes. Of note was the event organized by the South Carolina Commission for the Blind on Monday, October 14, 2024 at the State House. Commission employees, clients along with Ed Bible and others from the Federation participated in this enlightening activity. Misty Williams, Lead Orientation and Mobility instructor, organized a scavenger hunt at the State House and it was a challenging event for all. It was a great experience for those who attended.

On October 15, 2024, an exciting BEAM event was held at the Federation Center of the Blind! Commissioner, Darline Graham, Director of Consumer Services, Carol Anderson and Director of Communications, Mark Gamble attended this event along with Misty Williams and clients from the Commission. Of course, Federationists including myself were on hand for this one as well. Commissioner Graham read the White Cane Proclamation which is an important part of this special day. Dr. Shirley Madison delivered remarks about the history of orientation and mobility in South Carolina and her remarks were enjoyed by all. The event ended with lunch provided by the Federation.

In 2024, the Successful Transitions program under the able leadership of Andrenia Corder, took it to the next level! The summer was filled with activities and events for transition age students who learned so many things. Several were able to participate in the national and state convention which was so exciting to see. During the school year, the team

continued to provide Pre Employment Transitions Services to students across the state. Congratulations to Director Andrenia Corder, Assistant Director Andrew Adams and the entire Successful Transitions team for a wonderful year!

We are less than ten days from the end of the 2024 calendar year and there is so much to be thankful for! I am thankful for the National Federation of the Blind and the South Carolina Affiliate, because you demonstrate that there is hope in a dark world for individuals who are blind or have low vision. Through the example each of you show every day, you inspire others to be the best that they can be. You empower them to reach for their dreams and go where others have not gone before. You, my friends and colleagues, demonstrate that we can live the lives we want! Blindness is not what holds us back!

From my home to yours, I wish each of you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year!

[From the Editor](#)

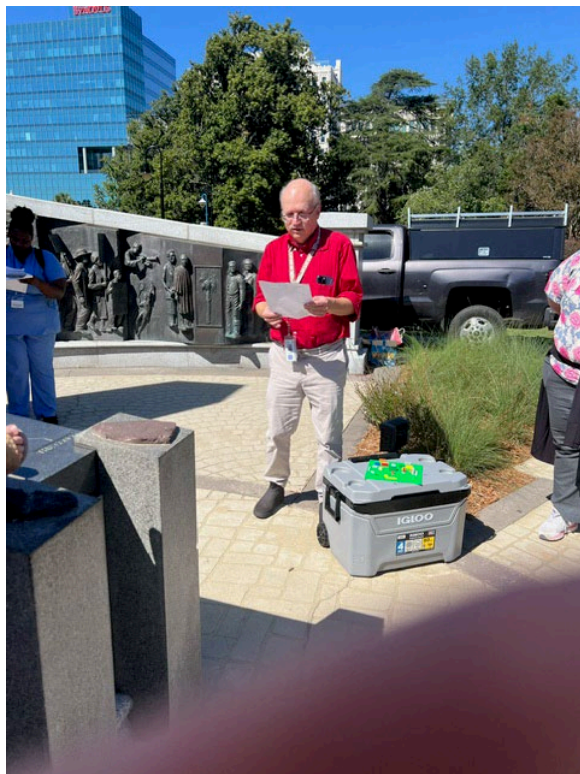
By David Houck

It has been an interesting summer and autumn season! The Orlando NFB Convention was well attended and so was our Columbia NFB of SC State Convention. The State convention Exhibit Hall being in the Atrium was a big hit with both vendors and convention attendees. Jessica Beecham was also a great national representative at our Columbia convention.

A popular topic at both conventions was artificial intelligence (AI) It seems that AI is the wave of the future, not just in word processing but in assistive technology. Smart Glasses can tell what you are looking at with description, even if you can't see it yourself! Some say there may be dangers in AI but there will be good uses of it as well.

Hurricane Helene caught many off guard. It proceeded from Florida into Georgia, up the Savannah River and on into North Carolina and beyond. Many South Carolinians including the blind had trees and power lines down losing electricity for hours, days or weeks. Rocky Bottom Retreat and Conference center of the Blind was affected, but the damage was not too extensive. Thanks goes out to John Sarpy, former RBRCCB Advisory Board Chairman for giving us a first-hand description of the property. Blue Ridge Electric was able to restore power by October 13 thanks to Tennessee electrical crews working to get power poles and lines restrung. During the November 15 to 17 Rocky Bottom board retreat, attendees saw the destruction first hand

October was Blind Equality Achievement Month (BEAM). Chapters, divisions and the Federation Center of the Blind participated in activities educating the public about blindness and introducing them to blind people in their communities. The governor's White Cane Safety Day Proclamation was distributed far and wide. The Federation Center of the Blind attended a "scavenger hunt" at the State Capitol, providing water for blind participants and the next day performed a white cane walk, had a display of white canes and held a "Lunch and Learn" giving the history of the white cane and the white cane law passed in 1972.



Image

caption: Attendees at scavenger hunt



Image caption: White Cane Safety Day Cane Tip display



Image caption: Attendees at White Cane Day Lunch and Learn



Image caption: Letoya Gibson, moderator for White Cane Lunch and Learn



Image caption: Dr Shirley Madison, Keynote Speaker for White Cane Lunch and Learn

A week before these White Cane events, a USC Journalism graduate student came to the Federation Center to interview David Houck about blindness. She then attended a Columbia Chapter meeting and our White Cane event at the Center to do more interviews

For the Columbia Chapter Thanksgiving event, the Church of the Harvest, Pastored by Ken Jumper with hymn singing by Levonne Stack, and a whole host of church volunteers fed us a delicious dinner with all the trimmings. We had an excellent audience as The Harvest has provided this meal and service annually for decades.



Image caption: Columbia chapter Thanksgiving event

Chapters all across the state are getting ready for the Christmas season. We wish that each chapter grows in 2025, is involved in all aspects of the Federation and we hope to see all of you on Saturday, January 11 at the Statewide Seminar.

Final Thought

The past is good for reflection. There is much we can learn from it.

The future is ours to plan, to capture and to make a success.

But now is the only time we have, not to waste, but to do what will make our dreams come true!