

## The Gifts of Kenneth Jernigan

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**by Tim Cranmer**

*from the Summer 1999 Kentucky Cardinal*

Kenneth Jernigan lived and died for the organized blind movement in America. He now belongs to all blind people; to be proud of, as one like ourselves in blindness.

He belongs to all of us as an icon symbolizing what blind men and women can be.

His gifts of philosophy and wisdom reflected in his writings will inspire future generations of blind people.

His numerous tangible gifts are often cited in newspapers and other public media. I will not enumerate them here, except to say that the National Center for the Blind is truly spectacular.

This article is prompted by a desire to call attention to what I regard as his most valued contributions. He gave to all of us the Organized Blind Movement as we now know it.

Of course I know, as well as you do, that Dr. Jacobus Tenbroek was the leader that started the National Federation of the Blind and was prevented from completing the task by his untimely death.

From the small beginning of the organized blind movement in 1940, a stormy history began to unfold. Local organizations of blind people quickly formed. Their number steadily grew over the years. These organizations were loosely associated, sometimes by common names and sometimes by philosophy. It was the work of Dr. Kenneth Jernigan to make these separate organized groups into one great organization, one great movement. Thanks to his genius, the National Federation of the Blind has become one organization with a presence in all states as chartered chapters. Thanks to him, we have the history, music, philosophy, traditions and

solidarity of a great social movement.

In the early years, little towns, big cities, and about half of the States had organizations with variable names, disparate structures and fragmented philosophies. Kenneth Jernigan introduced State Charters to the movement that were granted, one per state, to organizations that exhibited a common NFB of State name structure and a constitution that tied it to the National organization. Through these and many other measures, he legitimized our slogans "Its respectable to be blind," and "We are not an organization speaking for the blind, WE ARE THE BLIND SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES."

And so, the greatest gift was bestowed: The movement itself based on accountable charismatic leadership. And then, he knew, that to survive, it is essential that the Federation Philosophy be passed on to an acceptable successor. Some one with the talent, dedication and commitment to lead for another generation. He groomed Marc Maurer to assume this role. He spent well over a decade preparing his successor. His wise choice has been affirmed and reaffirmed as we elected Marc Maurer for seven terms as the NFB president.

The soundness of the movement is demonstrated by the fact that we have had seven presidents, and chose to keep only three. These are the great blind leaders of the 20th century, well known to the readers of this newsletter.

These are but a few of the thoughts that came to mind as I sat and quietly wept on learning of Kenneth Jernigan's death on the evening of October 12, 1998.

Some of my most cherished memories of Dr. Kenneth Jernigan were formed at the close of the day. When, on winter evenings, blind visitors from around the States and foreign countries would gather in the Harbor Room in the National Center for the Blind as he stacked logs in the giant fireplace and set them flaming with a torch to the tender. With flickering noisy fragrant fire as a backdrop, our host would tell of great Federation moments from the past and visions of future progress for all blind people, with occasional stories of fine wines, great coffee, fine food, and fellowship appropriately tossed in.

And, at the end of the work day, on long summer evenings, Dr. Jernigan would invite all who were at the National Center attending committee meetings and other Federation business, to join him for a cook out in the back yard of his home. There, he rolled out the huge iron grill that he had designed, and went to work building a just-

right charcoal bed of hot coals. He personally placed the steaks, fish, chicken, burgers and franks on the grill, watched over them and flipped things over at just the right moment. The many Kentuckians who shared the wonderful evenings will tell you that they never had better food or more gracious hospitality before or since.

We all know about the great works of Dr. Jernigan as the leader of the organized blind movement in this country. We have read about these deeds, and we have personally witnessed many of them. But I, and many other Kentuckians will remember him most as a wonderfully warm and caring personal friend.