

Eighty Years of NFB History

Eighty Years of NFB History

by Cathy Jackson

from the Spring 2020 Kentucky Cardinal

"To the blind of the nation: The time has come to organize on a national basis." so declared the first president of the National Federation of the Blind, Jacobus tenBroek. He made this declaration at the organizing convention of the National Federation of the Blind at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1940. Dr. tenBroek believed the time was right for the blind to organize so that their voices could be heard, and the needs of the blind could be met. At that first convention there were only 16 delegates from 7 states. Compare that to our 2019 NFB convention in Las Vegas, Nevada where 51 Affiliates were represented and we registered 3,284 delegates. We take it for granted that we will have our annual convention every year, not to mention our state conventions, local chapter meetings and division meetings. Things were quite different in the 1940s. The blind had to actually fight for the right to organize. Agencies for the blind and the public in general believed that the blind should stay home and be taken care of. Dr. tenBroek and his colleagues continued to fight for their right to organize and today we are enjoying the fruits of their labor. We can be proud to say we are members of the nation's oldest and largest organization of the blind, speaking for the blind, The National Federation of the Blind. We are very visible in the 21st century.

In the 1940s jobs for blind people were far and few between. In fact, they were almost nonexistent. In California it was estimated that only about 200 blind individuals were employed. The majority of these workers were in sheltered workshops performing, what was commonly referred to as (blind trades), such as chair caning and broom making. They were earning 5 cents an hour and there was little hope of ever finding a job outside the sheltered workshop. Others considered themselves lucky if they could sell pencils on the street corner. The really fortunate blind person was a teacher at the state-run school for the blind, or worked washing dishes in the kitchen at the school. Still others played the organ in church on Sunday, or worked in the state agency that served the blind. Even those who were working were living in poverty. They were hardly bringing home enough money to support

themselves, much less a family. They were unable to provide the most basic of human needs. The rest of the blind population wasf totally dependent on their family, friends, their church, or handouts from total strangers. Social Security was signed into law in 1935. The purpose of this sweeping legislation was to protect against unemployment, the security of destitute of age, and despair of the blind. However, by 1940 it was apparent to Dr. tenBroek that the intent of the Social Security Act was not being upheld. Consequently, this became one of the first issues undertaken by the newly organized National Federation of the Blind. The NFB helped pass Social Security legislation which ultimately provided an income for the blind. Once blind people were able to contribute financially to the support of their families things slowly began to change. Blind people began to feel good about themselves both physically and mentally. The whole idea was if blind individuals had enough food in their bellies and decent clothes on their backs, their level of confidence would be raised. In short it would be easier to face the world.

Blind people came out of the shadows and began to assert their independence. The word and work of the National Federation of the Blind began to spread to every state in the union. Kentucky jumped on the Federation band wagon in 1947 and elected Harold Reagan as our first president. In those early days, blind people hungered for more input in how they were going to be rehabilitated. In the 1930s and 1940s vocational rehabilitation efforts were ineffective at best. There were attempts on the state and local levels to provide some limited training. It wasn't until 1943 when the Federal-State Rehabilitation Program became law that the blind officially were recognized as "feasible" for rehabilitation services. Today every state in the U.S. provides rehabilitation services for the blind. Admittedly, some state agencies do a better job of rehabilitating the blind than others. But it was the overall failure of these agencies and some charitable organizations that made the NFB step up to the plate and get involved in a big way. The National Federation of the Blind made a huge impact on the lives of the blind in the mid-1980s when our NFB training centers were launched. We currently have three centers: the Louisiana Center for the Blind in Ruston, LA, the Colorado Center for the Blind in Littleton, CO, and Blind Incorporated in, Minneapolis, MN. Although there are some differences, each of these centers strictly adheres to our NFB Philosophy. This philosophy promotes high expectations and challenges students to become independent and empowered as blind people. It's through the structured discovery methods and opportunities that blind men and women leave our centers knowing they can compete on terms of equality with their sighted peers. Through the continued work of the NFB in those early years more and more parents were beginning to realize that it was just as important that their blind children be educated as it was for their sighted children. At this point in history the

majority of blind students were sent to the state schools for the blind. Back then more often than not they received a better education at the state school. That is not necessarily the case these days. Now the tables have turned, and the majority of blind children are enrolled in their neighborhood schools. Even if a student is attending a school for the blind he or she is often given the opportunity to be mainstreamed part day to a public school. We want to make sure that blind students in our public schools are receiving an appropriate accessible education. So, we the NFB were instrumental in presenting the legislation that was signed into law by President George Herbert Walker Bush that guarantees that blind students will receive their textbooks in the desired format, including Braille, the same day as the other students are receiving their books. It goes without saying that there are more and more blind students than ever entering college to pursue degrees in every field imaginable. We can boast that there are blind lawyers, nurses, college professors, ministers, teachers, social workers, and the list goes on. The success of blind college students is due in large part because of legislation put forth by the National Federation of the Blind. Our Accessible Instructional Materials in the Higher Education Act, which we are currently striving to have put into law, will promote instructional technology and educational content that is accessible to the blind and others who are print impaired.

Through the passage of the Randolph-Sheppard Act in 1936, business opportunities for blind men and women began growing. Vending stands as they were referred to in the early days were a simple counter where the proprietor sold candy, gum, cigarettes, newspapers and the like. These vending counters began popping up all over the country in state, federal, and municipal buildings. This entrepreneurial opportunity continues to grow and in turn, provides this generation of blind men and women a business opportunity equal to, or in many cases superior to their sighted peers. These entrepreneurs are operating cafeterias where meals are prepared and served on site to federal and state workers. Many of the vending facilities in the rest areas that we patronize along the interstate highways are being maintained by the blind. Again, it is the oversight of the NFB that keeps this program viable and intact. We will stand strong against those who are trying to dismantle the program; those who do not know the history and origin of the Randolph Sheppard Act.

If it wasn't for the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind, we would not have the pleasure to enjoy the continued advancements in the area of accessible technology. Many of the original pieces of Braille technology and special equipment were developed by members of the Federation. They knew there had to be a way to overcome barriers to reading and writing print. The fact of the matter is, there was no

one else more capable of tackling this project than the blind. A longtime member of our Kentucky Affiliate, Tim Cranmer and a friend, Dean Blazie were instrumental in developing one of the first speech output devices called the Braille n' Speak. This piece of technology has morphed in to the many Braille note-takers we use today. The National Federation of the Blind is directly responsible for the Kurzweil Reading Machine, the KNFB Reader, and NFB NEWSLINE. Each of these has made reading the printed word possible for the blind. It was Dr. Kenneth Jernigan's dream that blind people would one day have access to the timely information in newspapers. We are living that dream today. We are enjoying over 500 local newspapers along with national and international publications, including a variety of award winning magazines.

The NFB continues to be heavily invested in the Legislative process in state and federal government. Each year in late January or early February, we make our pilgrimage to Washington D. C. to take part in the Washington Seminar. Each Affiliate sends representatives to speak directly with their congressional delegation. We are prepared with our position papers and fact sheets which clearly outline the pressing issues for that legislative session. Although many of our issues are new and reflect the time in which we live, some seem to have a life of their own. For example, we continue to monitor Social Security benefits and how they are appropriated just as we did in the 1940s. But we are also keeping an eagle eye on other aspects of the administration. The National Federation of the Blind recently won a lawsuit against the Social Security Administration for failing to provide their printed materials in an accessible format. We are also promoting the passage of the Access Technology Affordability Act. This legislation will facilitate the purchase of accessible technology by establishing a per-person refundable tax credit to be used over a three-year period to offset the high cost of much needed technology for the blind. The Transition to Integrated Meaningful Employment is by no means new legislation, but continues to be of utmost importance to the blind and others with disabilities. If Congress can see fit to pass this law, we will erase section 14 (C) of the Fair Labor Standards Act which allows employers to apply for a wage certificate giving them the right to pay the blind and others with disabilities far less than the federal minimum wage. This will greatly change the complexion of the sheltered workshops by creating more job opportunities and removing the stigma of low expectations. Parent's Rights Legislation is something near and dear to our hearts. We are adamant about protecting our blind parents against the discriminatory practices in our hospitals, courts, social services agencies, and guardian's ad litem (appointed by the court to represent a client or estate in a particular legal action). This battle is being waged in many Affiliates across the country including Kentucky. This is an act relating to

preserving families that include a parent who is blind. This bill will ensure that blind parents are treated fairly in custody cases, adoption proceedings, foster care cases, and with social services in general when our ability to parent comes into question. The individual or agency bringing the charges must prove that the blind parent is unfit. It will no longer automatically be assumed that we are not capable of raising children based solely on our blindness.

The National Federation of the Blind is an organization working for the good of the blind of all ages. We are welcoming and innovative which can be seen through the variety of projects offered to members and nonmembers alike. Take our Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs for example. Until the NFB got involved and decided that blind students will no longer take a back seat to their sighted peers, it was thought that blind students could not fully participate in these subjects, much less ever dream of a career in these fields. These week-long science camps developed and facilitated by the NFB have given blind youth the experience of a lifetime. Participants are taught how to use alternative techniques and adaptive equipment to perform a myriad of experiments, including launching a rocket. Blind students have entered a new world of learning taking part in class projects and experiments alongside their classmates. Even our very young blind people are taking part in an innovative NFB programs. Our four to eleven-year-old kiddos are spending a week at BELL Academy (Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning.) This is an all-out effort to show these youngsters the importance of Braille and to provide that extra tutoring one might need during the summer. Braille teaching is woven into every facet of the curriculum. If the students are cutting vegetables or baking brownies they are reading Braille measuring cups and Braille recipes. If we are playing a game the playing cards and instructions are in Braille. One very significant aspect of our BELL Academy is the mentoring these young children are receiving from the blind teachers and volunteers that are with them the entire week.

There is a new problem facing the National Federation of the Blind. It is not unique to the blind. It is a problem that has engulfed the world as a whole. I am of course speaking of the COVID-19 pandemic. This national crisis has caused us, the members of the NFB to cancel our face-to-face chapter meetings, our fundraising events, and planned meetings at our National center, our scheduled BELL Academies, and worst of all our National Convention. It has forced some of our Affiliates to postpone their annual conventions until late summer and early fall. You notice however, I said face-to-face meetings. Nothing stops the National Federation of the Blind from following through on our commitments. The Zoom platform has been made available to us by our national organization. This media has allowed us

to continue with business as usual. NFB Chapters all across the nation are once again holding their monthly meetings. Our Scholarship committee will convene using Zoom to choose our scholarship finalists. Affiliates have gotten creative and planned exciting and different topics of discussion to engage not only their members but blind people everywhere. These themes may range from NFB philosophy, to membership building, and technology training (Zoom in particular), socialization and relaxation, and goodness knows what else. President Riccobono hosted the first ever live Presidential Release in April. I am estimating that well over 1,500 people were in attendance. We were also afforded the opportunity to ask questions which was a rare treat. The event was such a success that President Riccobono has already announced that the May Presidential Release will go live. For the first time in history we will conduct our National Convention using technology. We will use the Zoom technology to bring together the nation's largest organization of the blind, the National Federation of the Blind! We are anticipating that this will be the largest convention ever. Registration is free, and we urge each and every one of you to participate in as much of the convention as humanly possible. President Riccobono has already begun working on convention programming. One huge hurdle to overcome will be scheduling meetings to accommodate the time differences. Remember Hawaii is 6 hours behind those of us here in the Eastern Time zone. I don't think we should plan on opening ceremonies starting at 9 AM Eastern time, unless we want our friends in Hawaii to rise and shine at 3 in the morning. Of course, times will be made available to hold annual division meetings, reports and resolutions, guest speakers and our national business meeting. Some of you have asked if there will be door prizes. Well, the answer is yes. Just how all of this will be handled hasn't been determined yet. But, I can tell you that you must register as usual. I am hoping that by the time our national convention rolls around many of our social distancing and group restrictions will have been lifted. I would like very much for the NFB of Kentucky affiliate to, at least, be able to plan a caucus. But even better, I am hoping we can enjoy a dinner together. This journey through the past 80 years shows just how far we have come, and how far we are willing to go to enhance the lives of the blind. Our forefathers knew they had to take a stance against society's negative attitudes about blindness, and the low expectations these attitudes generated. Because of Dr. tenBroek, Dr. Jernigan, and countless others both past and present we have a solid foundation on which we can continue building. It is with love, hope and determination that I will carry on the work of this organization preserving its rich history and doing my part to make the National Federation of the Blind even bigger and better for future generations.



Eighty Years of NFB History

Published on National Federation of the Blind of Kentucky
