



# GEM STATE MILESTONES

## Spring & Summer 2021

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## The 2021 NFB of Idaho Virtual Convention

*Dana Ard, President*



Our 2021 convention, held March 25-27 on Zoom, was a rousing success. I thank all the committees and all the participants for the hard work that made the convention so successful. Special thanks are given to James Bybee, from Utah, who helped the Idaho zoomees (members who helped coordinate and manage the Zoom system we all used to connect during the Convention) with the Saturday meetings and banquet.

Our convention began with our Thursday night reception hosted by the Treasure Valley Chapter. We had several breakout rooms where people could move around and talk. There was a separate breakout room for our national representative, Marc Maurer, and many members visited with him in that space. We even had virtual brownies in the form of a recipe provided by Erin Olsen.

Our Friday general session began with an inspirational keynote address by Mike Hingson, who is best known for surviving the 911

attack on the Twin Towers. We heard updates from the Idaho Educational Services for the Deaf and Blind, and the Talking Book Library. A panel of blind gardeners shared their techniques and experiences. Ramona Walhof and Vickie Bateman talked about growing vegetables, while Candy Harris emphasized her flower gardens. Donna Beronda, who is a master gardener, talked about working with her blind cousin who maintained a beautiful flower garden in southern California. Both Donna and Candy had pictures of their gardens, which provided enjoyable beauty for our members who have some sight. Kelly Buckland, Executive Director of the National Center for Independent Living, provided history of our Idaho laws that protect parents with disabilities. Our laws in Idaho coincide with the NFB legislation that other states have passed to protect blind parents.

We were fortunate to have four exhibitors who each had a half hour to present their products. The exhibitors were Karl Smith, Axis Technology; Joyce Shoemaker, Vision Matters; Joseph McDaniel, Vispero; and Aileen Zaken, Leading Edge Vision.

Our Friday afternoon began with two breakout sessions. Ramona Walhof, who filled in for Lisa Baker who was ill, asked participants to share about an event that was anticipated to be difficult because of blindness, and how they handled it. The other breakout was an exercise class put on virtually by the Northwest Association for Blind Athletes (NWABA). Our chapter-building discussion produced several ideas which will be acted on. The first is to have a social activity on Zoom once a month, which would be open to all. We also discussed using the Idaho listserv for communication among members. Standardizing our communications to members was also discussed.

Following our board meeting, we had our Friday night activity, an Escape room. Although parts of the activity involved using the

computer, there was plenty of opportunity for discussion about the clues to keep all interested. Thanks to Vispero for making this activity possible.

We began our Saturday morning general session with our national report by Marc Maurer. The report was very comprehensive and brought us up to date on activities in our national organization. From our panel on blind people in science, we learned about different techniques blind scientists use to do their work. Dianna Willis and Jeremy Maxand talked about how the Idaho Access Project is working to make recreational parks, trails, and related websites more accessible to Idahoans with disabilities. Carlton Walker, president of the National Association of Parents of Blind Children, explained that schools have received large amounts of money during the pandemic, and lack of funds should not be used as a way to deny blind children necessary equipment for school.

The afternoon session began with the state report, highlighting the accomplishments of the Idaho affiliate over the past two years. Beth Cunningham gave an update for the Idaho Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and Shane Low presented information on the Supersense and Superlidar, two new apps for the blind which his company is developing.

One of the most moving parts of any convention is hearing the stories of new members. Shane Ostermeier, Tom Newhof, and Natalie Morgan, who are relatively new members, helped us to get to know them better.

The following individuals were elected at the business meeting: President, Dana Ard; First Vice-president, Sandy Streeter; 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice-president, Erin Olsen; Secretary, Susan Bradley; Treasurer, Don Winiacki. Board members elected for a 2 year term Alison Steven, Megan Geisler, and Natalie Morgan. Board members

elected for a 1 year term are Frank Skogsberg, Garren Aubrey, and Vickie Bateman. Dana Ard was elected delegate for the National Convention and Sandy Streeter as the alternate delegate. Three resolutions were sent to the convention floor and passed.

Our banquet began with the presentation of the Vic and Uldine Thelander award to Senator Jim Risch, for his critical support of the Marrakesh Treaty, which provides a means for books and documents in special formats (braille, audio, etc.) to be more easily distributed internationally.

The Senator then gave his remarks about this important treaty that will greatly increase the number of publications in special media for the blind and print-disabled. Our banquet address by past president Marc Maurer gave the history of our work on the treaty, explaining that many skeptics believed it would never become a reality.

Through this and other examples, he showed how the NFB takes on projects that others believe to be impossible. The presentation of our scholarship awards, funding our movement through our PAC plan, and our final door prize completed the banquet celebration.

Following the banquet, Larry Bateman, as auctioneer, helped us to raise over \$1800 in our live auction. We showed that an auction on Zoom can still be fun, lively, and very competitive.

Our 2022 convention will be in Idaho Falls. We are looking forward to being together in person next year to share our federation spirit, as we continue to build the National Federation of the Blind of Idaho.

## Remembering Katy Pirnie

*Sandy Streeter*



Katy Pirnie joined the Snake River Valley Chapter with her husband Kevin in 2003. She was always a loyal active member. You may know her as the soft spoken but cheerful lady selling candy during one of our fundraisers. She often served as a runner for President Ard at conventions. Once for our Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning program (BELL) in Idaho Falls, she crocheted Braille cells with the Braille alphabet.

Katy enjoyed crocheting, cooking, and collecting new recipes. Her family was very precious to her, and she loved spending time with her young grandchildren.

Katy was rushed to the hospital one week before Christmas with Covid-19. Sadly she never returned home. She passed away on March 9, 2021, due to Covid related complications. We mourn the passing of Katy Pirnie and miss our beloved friend.

## NFBI 2021 Scholarship Winners

*Vickie Bateman*

Janine Schollander, a single mother of five children, lives in Moscow, Idaho. She will be attending the University of Idaho in Moscow this fall and be working on her major in English with an emphasis on creative writing. Her anticipated year of graduation will be 2024. She is hoping to use this degree to help her gain a profession in editing or publishing. Janine has also attended the College of Northern Idaho. She received our top Scholarship Award in the amount of \$2,500.

Alyssa Loftus lives in Post Falls, Idaho and is currently attending Western Oregon University. She is planning to attend the

University of Idaho in Moscow this fall pursuing a major in English Creative Writing and Psychology. The profession she would like to enter would be Writer/Journalist or Psychologist/Counselor. Her anticipated year to graduate would be 2023. She is currently 19 years old, but soon will turn 20 in June. Alyssa uses Braille, Voice over and a guide dog. She received our \$1,500. Scholarship.

Abigail Disney lives in Blackfoot, Idaho and is currently attending the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls, Idaho. She plans to attend the same college this fall pursuing an Associate's Degree in Criminal History with a projected date of graduation in 2022. The profession she would like to enter is in Law Enforcement. She is 19 years old. Abigail received our \$1,000. Scholarship

## 2021 NFB of Idaho Scholarship Recipient

*Alyssa Loftis*

Receiving this scholarship means the world to me, and I cannot thank Dana Ard and the scholarship committee enough for their overwhelming generosity. Not only will it lessen the financial burden that comes with having to pay for college, but it will also allow me to pursue both my educational and extracurricular dreams.

I have always dreamt of attending a large university, but never thought that I had what it takes—until now that is. Moving to Idaho and receiving my darling guide dog has definitely inspired me to step out of my comfort zone and shoot for the stars. I've come to learn that it's better to attempt to do something great and fail than attempt to do nothing and succeed.

In regards to the NFB of Idaho Conference, I thoroughly enjoyed hearing from the various speakers in attendance. I haven't met very many people who are able to relate to the challenges that I face on a daily basis, so I found comfort in the fact that I was

surrounded by other blind individuals. It was a privilege to be able to interact and hear from such capable and inspirational beings.

## 2021 NFB of Idaho Scholarship Recipient

*Abigail Disney*

I first heard of the scholarship from someone that works for the Commission for the Blind; they encouraged me to apply for it. At first, I didn't want to, but I finally got some free time after being busy with mid-terms, so I decided to apply. Getting a scholarship means a lot to me and my family. We've never had a lot of money, and growing up that made me never think about attending college, especially since my grandmother was still in debt from going to college thirty or so years ago. The scholarship will be going towards helping me pay for college. The convention had a lot of information; it was a little boring to me, but that's because some topics weren't that interesting to me personally. I did, however, learn about technology that could help me some point in my life.

## Heard Birds

*Steve Bouffard, Orma J. Smith Museum of Natural History*

Earlier this spring you may have heard the exuberant calls of geese and sandhill cranes as they flew over on their way north. Their haunting calls are the harbingers of spring. When you hear them, you know that winter is gone and promises of regrowth and warmth abound. Around town, the volume and variety of birdsong has been increasing as courtship and nesting ramp



up. By the end of March most of the hawks and owls already are raising young. In mid to late April there have been reports of new ducklings along the greenbelt and of hummingbirds nesting in Boise. You can hear lots of bird song right now. Pick a pleasant day, grab your favorite beverage and sit on the patio and just listen to the bird symphony. You can hear robins, nuthatches, goldfinches, houses sparrows, song sparrows, chickadees, California quail, crows, and starlings. You can hear downy woodpeckers and northern flickers (another species of woodpecker) tapping; they use the rhythm of their tapping as their territorial song. See how many bird “instruments” you can hear in the symphony.

Getting back to the migrating geese and cranes, it’s amazing to realize how sensitive birds are to differences in air currents. Each wingbeat creates an eddy in the air; it’s called a wingtip vortex. The wingtip vortex can be used like a miniature tailwind to get a boost from the bird in front of you. It saves energy in flying, especially for long distances. Large birds fly in V formation to take advantage of these vortices. They take turns being the leader. It doesn’t work so well with small birds, but is normal with geese, cranes, pelicans, cormorants and others. The birds can sense the right place to get the best lift and boost. They automatically adjust their spacing to the vortices, which change with the size of the bird and the rate the of wing beats. As you sit on the patio sipping your morning coffee, feel the breeze on your face and imagine you are a bird on the wing. Everyone one of your feathers is a sensitive weather vane that allow you to sense the air currents all around you in all three dimensions. With the help of the vortex you are flying with your flock mates and singing an enthusiastic song of spring.

Happy Birding & Smooth Flying

# My Jury Experience

*Dana Ard*

I received my first ever jury summons letter in mid-February. Since the dates that I was to appear were in convention week, I requested a postponement and was soon notified by mail that my dates of service would be April 5-9. I was told that I would have to call in at the end of each weekday to find out when I needed to appear at the Ada County Courthouse. I called in on the Saturday night before the Monday which began my time of service. I learned that I would need to appear at the courthouse at 12:30 on that Monday, April 5. When I arrived, I was checked in through security, and a marshal escorted me to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and into the large room where the prospective jurors were to wait. There was an informational video played, describing jury service.

About an hour after arrival, about 35 of the 100 plus prospective jurors were given placards with a number on them. We were told to line up in order and move to a room where we would be interviewed. My number was 7. The judge, Michael Reardon, asked questions which focused on our critical thinking and analytical skills as well as learning about our biases. Near the end of his questioning, he asked if there was anyone who had never been summoned for jury duty. I raised my placard, because although my husband was called at least 5 times, I had never been summoned for jury duty. He then asked who was excited to serve on a jury. I raised my placard and I was invited to speak. I explained that I was honored to be there even if I wasn't selected. I stated that I wanted to fulfill my civic duty and serve on a jury. After a short recess, we returned to our room for a few more comments from the judge and

then the selection began. Numbers were called: 4, 6 and then 7! I was selected to serve on the jury for the trial!

The defendant in the trial was accused of knowingly possessing, depositing, and attempting to cash a stolen third-party check. I took braille notes on all of the witness testimonies, as well as the guidance from the judge on what we had to consider when deciding this case of grand theft. When we began deliberations, I thought the case was a slam dunk. I believed that the defendant was guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, but surprisingly, not everyone agreed with me initially. After approximately 2 hours, we reached consensus that the defendant was indeed guilty as charged. Following our rendering of the verdict in court, we learned that the defendant had two prior similar charges.

I am proud to have been able to exercise my civic responsibility as a juror. I am hopeful that my service will demonstrate to judges and attorneys that blind people should not be disqualified from jury service based solely on blindness.

## Young People Today

*Alison Steven*

As we move into our second summer dealing with the restrictions caused by the pandemic you may be wondering what our young people are finding to do with their time. The NFB BELL Academy, the program that drew me in to working with blind youth back in 2013, is returning in its virtual national format this year. At the time of writing I do not know how many of our young people will take advantage of one of the 2-week long offerings but I know that those who do will have a fun time connecting with peers from across the country. The NFB National Headquarters Team send out

a box with all the materials needed to complete all the activities whether based around braille, O&M, science or daily living skills. Students interact twice a day on Zoom with stories, activities, games and songs. Watch out for a later GEM State Newsletter for stories of how our Idaho kids get involved.

While the BELL Academy helps serve the needs of our elementary age kids, the older kids are looking elsewhere for social interaction and growth. Many of those students that I first met in 2013 at BELL Academy are now eligible to become clients with the Idaho Commission for the Blind and visually Impaired (ICBVI). For youth 14 years old and up who have a visual impairment there are many great opportunities to learn about the worlds of work and college. Several of these former BELL students just started a 6 week program online with ICBVI called “Blind and Socially Savvy” where they have the opportunity to hear about and practice different social and soft skills that will equip them to interact in the adult world.

ICBVI’s summer programming continues with adjustments to accommodate the restrictions of the pandemic. For 2021 The Summer Work Experience Program (SWEP), is a hybrid model. Students will participate in work experiences developed in their local communities. ICBVI counselors are working with CRPs to find appropriate placements for students in their region. They will join as a group for 6 sessions in the virtual setting for teaching on work readiness from David Denotaris and the ACE Academy.

The regular College Days program where students learn about the realities of working, studying, playing and living at College is once again virtual this year. Students will take classes from Tyler Merren, Paralympian Goalball athlete, and Kathy Nimmer, finalist for National Teacher of the Year in 2015, amongst others. They will also develop relationships with peer mentors and professional

mentors from their field of interest. Once they have completed this orientation and preparation week, they will participate in an online college class for credit to implement the skills they have learned. They will be supported through this summer class by ICBVI staff and mentors so they can have a positive experience to prepare them for their transition to college.

ICBVI is once more partnering with the Idaho Educational Services for the Deaf and the Blind (IESDB), for the Ready, Set, Go to work! Camp. This is shorter and virtual this year with two days of programming one week apart. In the intervening week, students will participate in a job shadow in their local region. We are very happy to have Michael Hingson joining us as a guest speaker for this program and for College Days.

Through these programs our young people get to interact and connect with each other, with blind role models and with professionals in the workplace. The virtual world may be slowing them down a little but it will certainly not be holding them back.

## It's *Your* Toolbox

*Larry Sebranek*

*Ed. Note: It's Your Toolbox is a recurring discussion on everyday "tools" used by blind and visually impaired people. Each discussion is by a guest writer.*



When AI asked me to talk about a blind tool I use, I struggled to come up with something unique. I want to get down to a basic tool, a white cane.

A little history, I went through the process of going blind isolated on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. My father did the tractor work and I did the

muscle work and milked cows. So, my exposure to any other blind person just did not occur. After my early retirement. A rehab teacher came to visit and tried to convince me to go to an NFB training center with no success. She came periodically teaching me braille and just giving me some ideas about what I might do with the rest of my life. It so happened that Kenny Rogers was having a concert in the LaCrosse Center and the rehab teacher invited me to LaCrosse to go to the concert.

That afternoon, she asked me if I brought my cane. Yes, she had given me a cane, but it never got any use. She told me that I had to use it if we are going to the concert. So, she gave me one, showed me how to use it and said, "Now go around the block."

God I was scared! "All by myself?"

"Yes, by yourself!"

So out the door and started around the block taking baby steps I am sure. And after getting around about half-way, guess who met me! Yes, the rehab teacher was not going to let me fail. That started the process where my white cane is by the door ready to be used as I go out. How do you get better? Just do it! I know when I did live in LaCrosse later, I would challenge myself. After taking my vending receipts to the bank on the bus, I would walk the 20 blocks back home always taking a different route. It is interesting the clues you can pick up illustrating where you are by knowing the busy traffic on the busy streets. In fact, I now prefer walking by a busy street; it keeps me oriented better over long driveways. I hope this encourages others to use a very useful tool.

## A Low Vision Tutorial

*Valerie Ries-Leman, Sacramento, California*

Ed. Note: This story originally appeared in the March 2021 issue of  
THE BRAILLE FORUM

What does it mean to have low vision? Few things regarding low vision are absolute. What can be said that is universal? There are many diagnoses, and degrees of vision, but there is little understanding of low vision.

One area that is often overlooked is that there is an increased requirement for visual interpretation that every low-vision person must employ. It can be the visual and of the unknown until mental evaluation illuminates what one's eyes are physically relaying.

A true story comes to mind. Back in the day, a friend and her boyfriend, both young and visually impaired, were out walking to the local grocery. Each day they would follow the same route and view a gas station in the near distance. There was something strange that caught their eye. It appeared that there were two men standing at the corner of the station. Why were they always there? Was this an indication of some kind of illegal activity? They decided reasonably to avoid the area. Eventually, their curiosity got the better of them. They decided to investigate. When they arrived at the gas station for a closer look, they found that the two men standing at the corner were actually two innocuous phone booths.

The conclusions we reach can be off base or spot on, tragic or humorous, as noted above. Welcome to the world of those with low vision, a world where every day is an adventure.

**ATTENTION**—CYCLE FOR INDEPENDENCE  
WILL BE A VIRTUAL “GET TOGETHER” IN  
2021!

Although we'd love to have the CYCLE FOR INDEPENDENCE run as usual—you know, the comradery, the mass of smiling bikers heading down the road on a spring day, the live music, the food, and the special festive feeling that is our signature—we're just not seeing that by mid-May we'll be comfortable bringing 500 riders together in one spot. The 2021 CYCLE FOR INDEPENDENCE must be a virtual experience.

All distances will be \$35.00. Participants may complete their rides anywhere, there is no need to follow our



established routes. Rides should be completed and recorded between May 8 and May 22. WE'D REALLY APPRECIATE YOU COMING BACK TO THE WEB SITE AND RECORDING YOUR RIDE:

DISTANCE AND DATE. It's just sharing, communicating: a way of being together. Registration is open now.

Our *famous socks* may be picked up on May 22 between 10:00 and 12:00 at Riverglen Jr. High, 6801 N. Gary Ln., Boise.

Thank you for your continuing support of Idaho's blind and visually impaired.

*The NFB knows that blindness is not  
what defines you or your future.  
You can LIVE THE LIFE YOU WANT.  
Blindness is not what holds you back*

THE END