



Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

Formerly NJ Foundation for the Blind

FALL 2020

PAUL CARUSO MISSES HIS LONG COMMUTE TO VLANJ But Feels Fortunate For Virtual Programs

Paul Caruso spent up to 90 minutes on a bus for people with disabilities to get to Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey in Denville. The ride back to his Lodi home after weekly classes consistently took an hour and a half, and often involved a transfer.

That was just fine with Caruso. "I considered it all part of the experience, being out and connecting with people," said the 53-year-old, who has been blind since birth. "I devoted my day to it, and that began as soon as I stepped on the bus."

Since March, when VLANJ switched to virtual programs because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Caruso has immersed himself in the nonprofit's online classes and support groups. "It's really good for my peace of mind," Caruso said. "It gives structure to my days. It's nice to feel, 'I've got to get onto that meeting,' " he said.

Caruso is a big fan of VLANJ's self-advocacy group, Moving Forward One Step at a Time. He volunteers as a mentor for the Apps Club, an extension of VLANJ's iPhone and iPad technology program. He's enrolled

in a peer support group, the Fit and Balance exercise class, and Inquiring Minds, a discussion group that often features guest speakers.

Caruso recently added VLANJ's new Technology Learning Lab to his busy schedule. He's learning computer skills using JAWS, a screen reader. Caruso said he wants to be prepared should a job opportunity arise. "It never hurts to try to think ahead, and that's what I am trying to do," he said.

Caruso lost his vision to retinopathy of prematurity (previously known as retrolental fibroplasia or RLF). The disease affects some people who were born prematurely and received oxygen therapy as part of their neonatal intensive care.

Caruso attended Lodi public schools. After graduating, he operated a vendor stand at the Richard J. Hughes Justice Complex in Trenton for 22 years. Through a New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired program, Caruso didn't pay rent, but managed his own inventory of snacks and drinks. He moved back to Lodi in 2010. He first attended VLANJ in 2015 and enrolled in the



technology program. The following year, he signed up for the all-day wellness classes. "Thursdays are awesome! It's great getting out and connecting with people," Caruso said.

While he enjoys the virtual programs, Caruso plans to resume his long commute to VLANJ and in-person classes when the pandemic ends. "When we go back, I will be going back!" he said.



KRIS MARINO
President and CEO

Dear Friend,

When we had to close our locations because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I thought certainly we'd be able to resume in-person classes by summer. Here we are eight months later and the coronavirus still poses a serious health threat.

I am proud of the way the organization pivoted to virtual programs, and appreciate our participants' adaptability. We've expanded our online programming to 13 offerings; close to 200 individuals are registered for at least one class — and in

most cases, many — this fall. Paul Caruso, who you'll read about, is enrolled in a half-dozen of them!

We are currently piloting our Technology Learning Lab virtually, thanks in part to funding from The Provident Bank Foundation. Participants are learning the Microsoft Windows 10 operating system and ways to maximize use of the virtual home assistants.

We also launched LIFT, which stands for Living Independently for Tomorrow. We took the core of our Essential Low Vision program for people new to vision loss and modified it for an online experience. You can read more about LIFT in the newsletter.

Our goal is to reopen in person in 2021, once we can do so safely. Social distancing is particularly challenging for people who are blind or low vision because you can't see where others are in relation to yourself.

Virtual programming has allowed

us to transcend the boundaries of transportation and serve people wherever they are. We plan to keep our Beyond Sight program online even when in-person classes resume.

That said, staff and participants alike long to be back together! And, of course, classes in orientation and mobility, cooking, art and pottery are much better suited to an in-person experience. Until we can reopen, we will continue to make our virtual offerings more robust.

As always, I would like to hear from you. Send me questions or comments at kmarino@vlanj.org. I wish you all good health, and look forward to the day the pandemic is behind us.

With best regards,

Kris Marino
President and CEO

FOUNDATIONS SUPPORT VLANJ THROUGH PANDEMIC

Three foundations have made generous donations to keep Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey programs accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic:

The Grotta Fund for Senior Care awarded VLANJ nearly \$10,000 to provide Beyond Sight wellness classes, peer support groups and technology-focused offerings over Zoom video conferencing through the end of 2020, at no charge to participants.

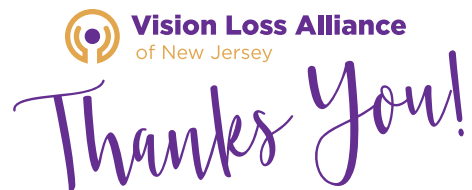
The William G. and Helen C. Hoffman Foundation contributed \$25,000 for VLANJ's new Technology Learning Lab, now running virtually. The Technology

Learning Lab focuses on computer skills that can help participants gain employment. They're learning the Microsoft Windows 10 operating system using JAWS, a screen reader, or Fusion, a combination screen reader and text magnifier.

The Novartis US Foundation awarded \$10,000 to fund VLANJ's essential life skills programs for adults who lose their vision, as well as the nonprofit's Beyond Sight wellness offerings.

"We are grateful to the foundations for the financial support and the recognition that our programs empower a tremendously underserved population," VLANJ

President and CEO Kris Marino said. "People with vision loss face added challenges during the pandemic. The funding helped us pivot quickly and effectively from in-person to virtual offerings that are reaching an ever-growing number of participants.



Donations to Vision Loss Alliance can be made online at vlanj.org/donations or by mailing a check to Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey, 155 Morris Ave., Suite 2, Denville, NJ, 07834, ATTN: Development Director Jennifer Singer

LONGTIME TRAINER AT THE SEEING EYE Joins VLANJ Board of Trustees



Had Lukas Franck liked working with children, his 43-year career with The Seeing Eye guide dog school might never have taken

off. Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey's newest trustee intended to use his undergraduate degree in speech pathology and audiology to work with deaf children. But after a stint in a school, "I realized it wasn't a good fit."

An acquaintance of his father, the Dutch-American artist Frederick Franck, offered the younger Franck an apprenticeship at The Seeing Eye in 1978. "I loved it. I got to be outside all the time, training dogs and teaching blind people," he said. When daily dog training caused a strain injury in his left shoulder, Franck designed an ergonomic harness handle. He holds a patent.

Franck left after eight years to earn a master's degree in orientation and mobility from Western Michigan University. He rejoined The Seeing Eye as a certified orientation and mobility specialist.

By 1993, Franck was traveling the U.S. and Canada as a community instructor, troubleshooting for guide dogs owners, meeting applicants, and teaching classes at universities with mobility and orientation programs. He is now a senior consultant at the Morris Township-based guide dog school.

Witnessing the challenges of blind people in their communities, Franck became an advocate in environmental access. For example, he worked with New Jersey traffic engineers to install pedestrian signals in busy Morristown that use sound to notify visually impaired people when to cross an intersection. Franck belongs to the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired and chaired its environmental access committee. "It's been a charmed life," the 67-year-old said.

At the urging of VLANJ Board of Trustees Chairman Carl Augusto, Franck joined the nonprofit's board over the summer. "I'm impressed by the organization's dynamism and clear vision through the pandemic," he said.

When the coronavirus forced VLANJ to halt in-person instruction

in the spring, the nonprofit quickly pivoted to virtual wellness and technology classes. It has since expanded its offerings and attracts visually impaired participants from beyond northern New Jersey.

Franck remains passionate about mobility, and believes a new model is needed to make training more accessible. Currently, a blind person's options are to commit to a weeks-long residential program or get in-home training that, because of large caseloads, is often bare bones, he said. One of Franck's visions is for VLANJ to team up with the New Jersey Commission for the Blind to develop an intensive weeklong mobility program. "I'd like to see if we can develop a different model of service," he said.

Franck lives in Chester Township with his wife, Pauline, and a 4-year-old retired Seeing Eye breeder named Wynter. The couple has four adult children and two grandchildren. Franck is president of Pacem in Terris, a museum in Warwick, New York created in the 1960s by his father and stepmother. Pacem in Terris, which means peace on earth, features 70 of Frederick Franck's sculptures on its six acres.

VLANJ Gives People New to Vision Loss a LIFT During Pandemic

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey this fall launched **Living Independently for Tomorrow (LIFT)**, a virtual adaptive skills program for people adjusting to sight loss and their family members. LIFT is an online version of VLANJ's effective in-person Essential Low Vision course, providing basic training in daily life activities.

Over four weeks, LIFT covers: cooking and kitchen safety; low-tech communications and simple solutions, including dialing a phone, medication identification and identifying bills and coins; education in lighting, contrast, optical aids, and basic assistive technologies; and an introduction to mobility and orientation by VLANJ's mobility specialist.

VLANJ also provides resources to participants. Participants meet with VLANJ instructors over Zoom video conferencing for 90-minute sessions. They also can enroll in the nonprofit's Beyond Sight wellness programs, such as Now and Zen Yoga and Fit and Balance. For more information, contact VLANJ Senior Program Manager Linda Groszew at lgroszew@vlanj.org.

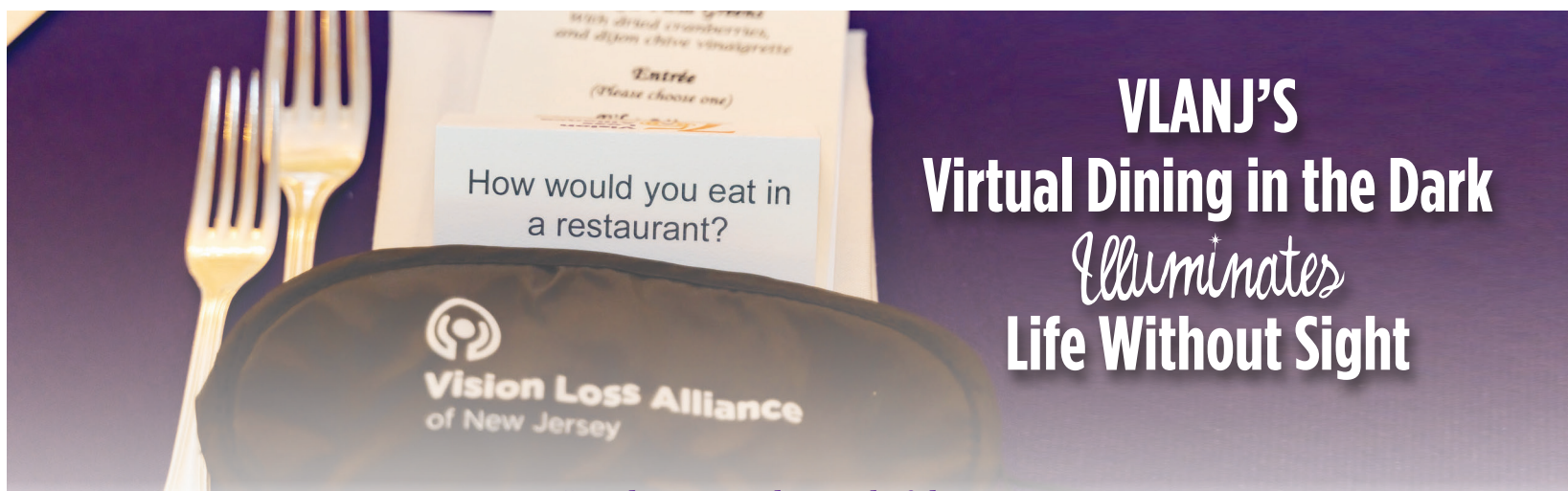


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155 Morris Ave., Ste. 2
Denville, NJ 07834



Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey's virtual **Dining in the Dark** event on Oct. 29 attracted an estimated 500 viewers — and rave reviews.

Guests of the online fundraiser learned about living without sight, as VLANJ participants shared their experiences in cooking and dining, orientation and mobility, and assistive technology.

“You have created a wonderful program out of the ashes of the pandemic,” **Maureen D** said.

“Thanks for all of your efforts to continue the excellent services VLANJ has to offer students,” **added Debbie A.**

VLANJ thanks sponsors and donors who supported the event. Dining in the Dark is the nonprofit's

VLANJ'S Virtual Dining in the Dark *Illuminates* Life Without Sight

major fundraiser of the year. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic precluded an in-person gathering

VLANJ has made the event available for viewing on its YouTube page at <https://tinyurl.com/VLANJDITD2020>.

