



Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

Formerly NJ Foundation for the Blind

SPRING 2021

VLANJ KEEPS PARTICIPANTS CONNECTED AND ENGAGED Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

It's 2021 and over a year since New Jersey ordered the closure of businesses, including nonprofits. Remember those first weeks of the pandemic? Frightening daily news accounts of mounting COVID-19 cases. Empty shelves and long lines at grocery stores. The Zoom learning curve. Fear of other people, yet a longing for human contact.

Now imagine if you will, what the pandemic has been like for people with vision loss, who uniquely rely on touch and proximity to others to navigate and communicate. Public transportation options cancelled. An inability to see 6 feet means you cannot maintain mandated social distances, and rules are listed on signs you cannot read. You struggle to use online shopping apps and virtual conferencing platforms that were not designed with vision impairment in mind.

"A lot of our participants stayed home because they weren't able to navigate the COVID-pandemic world, and that heightened isolation. We looked for solutions that brought people back together in a virtual environment," said Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey Program Director Elsa Zavoda.

In response to the closure order, VLANJ quickly pivoted to online wellness classes, skills training,



and enrichment opportunities for adults with vision loss. We started by offering classes using the Zoom video conferencing platform and how to access various shopping apps to help people obtain necessities such as food and prescriptions. We then moved to classes that helped participants stay connected, share advice, and give one another support. Transportation was no longer a barrier to participation.

Through these efforts, VLANJ's enrollment increased three-fold in 2020, as people from across the state and beyond logged in or called in to a growing list of virtual programs. About 200 people signed up for at least one offering — and most for two or more — over the winter session.

Delores 'Dee' Eliassen had only recently given up driving before the pandemic, so she was grateful when VLANJ went virtual.

Dee states "Why it has been wonderful! The changes and isolation that came in the last year from COVID have been incredibly stressful. It's wonderful that virtual learning has allowed me to do more than I was ever able to in the program. Now I participate daily. I exercise, do Yoga, have organized my kitchen for safety and easy cooking, and even meditate. Of course, I miss friends and the staff, but the Zoom meetings bring everyone together and without the stress of transportation - there is so much I can do."

Through VLANJ's pivot to virtual programming, individuals with vision loss have sought and found a community of support, education, and skills development. What we have seen in their efforts to address COVID restrictions was a tremendous resiliency and a flexibility to embrace new strategies to achieve their goals.



KRIS MARINO
President and CEO

Dear Friend,

March 17, 2020 marked the last day VLANJ met in person before New Jersey went into lockdown. We had no idea how long the COVID-19 crisis would last, only that we had to keep our community supported and together. I'd always wanted to offer programs online, and the pandemic became a catalyst. Within two weeks, we pivoted to virtual classes over Zoom.

Over the months, we added programs and enrollment tripled.

We now have more students attending weekly than ever before. Virtual programming transcends one of the biggest obstacles people with vision loss face: a lack of transportation options. We continue to develop new programming and prepare for the time we can safely restart in-person gatherings.

As I look back on my 6 years at the helm of this wonderful organization, I am proud of the strides we've made. I oversaw the non-profit's transition from NJ Foundation for the Blind to VLANJ in 2016, as we stabilized our finances and created more skills-based programming. We hosted nonprofit summits to find solutions to shared challenges. We added occupational therapy and negotiated with Medicare and private insurers to cover the services. And we launched the Technology Learning Lab, planting seeds for more employment-gearred training in the future.

My decision to relocate was not an easy one. I am sad to be leaving people who are dear to me, who inspire me daily. I remember touring the nonprofit as part of Leadership Morris years ago. I was so impressed that I applied for the top job as soon as it opened.

I leave VLANJ on a high note, confident my successor will build on the foundation we created. The hardest thing is not getting to say goodbye in person. So here, I bid adieu to everyone in our VLANJ community, and wish you all good health and good fortune. Always remember, we're the little engine that could.

With best regards,

Kris Marino
President and CEO



The staff and board thank Kris for her many accomplishments at VLANJ and wish her well!



VLANJ WELCOMES NEW PRESIDENT AND CEO **Bill Schuldt**



Bill Schuldt has over 33 years of experience in the non-profit field at Spectrum for Living, which serves developmentally disabled adults. Most recently he served as the VP Of Operations, overseeing

internal operational functions including Facility & Fleet Management, Purchasing, Technology, and Construction & Expansion Activities. Prior to that he served as the Director of Supervised Apartments. In this role he managed 100 staff members and the daily care of 68 disabled adults in four apartment programs.

Bill created the care guidelines and policies that are still used today to provide these services in Spectrum's Supervised Apartments. He has chaired and/or co-chaired several committees including The Board Committee for Infrastructure, The Annual Golf Classic Fundraiser, The Safety Committee, and The

Incident Management Committee.

Bill graduated from Springfield College with a BS in Rehabilitation Services. He has dedicated his professional career to helping people with disabilities live purposeful and meaningful lives.

“I'm excited for the opportunity to join VLANJ and be a part of this well established, dynamic organization. I'm grateful to the Board of Directors putting their faith and confidence in me and I look forward to working with the team towards continued growth.”

VLANJ WELCOMES NEW BOARD MEMBERS



MING WU

Ming has spent most of her career working in business development and marketing in the legal sector. She has worked for international law firms in the UK and in Hong Kong. She has a BSc (Hons) Psychology from the University of Leeds. Originally from the UK, Ming now lives in New Jersey.

In recent years Ming has volunteered for UK based non-profits, The Royal National Institute for the Blind and Wakefield District Sight Aid. Ming has a passion for improving the lives of people living with sight loss and raising awareness of related topics, which she writes about on her blog.



FRANK MORTIMER

Frank worked in higher education publishing for over twenty-five years. He was the Director of Marketing, Higher Education, North America at Oxford University Press, a not-for-profit, mission-driven institution, where he was responsible for all facets of their marketing operations for a \$54 million portfolio of print and digital products across the United States and Canada. Frank is currently an adjunct instructor at the Cornell University Master Beekeeping Program, Vice President of the New Jersey State Beekeepers Association, and a Certified Master Beekeeper.

Frank is the author of *Bee People and the Bugs They Love*, (Kensington Publishing, March 2021), which was reviewed by the New York Times, and he has written multiple articles featured in the widely circulated *Bee Culture Magazine*. Frank also serves on Ridgewood New Jersey's Parks, Recreation and Conservation Board. Frank is married and lives in Ridgewood with his wife and three children.



DORA MELER

Dora has more than 37 years' experience in the IT field implementing and running technology and product solutions for financial services firms. After earning a B.S. Degree in Computer Science from Queens College in New York, she enjoyed a full career within the global investment banking industry, working most recently as Vice President /Senior Technology Project Manager at Barclays in NYC before retiring in 2018.

Despite being diagnosed with glaucoma in her late 20s and experiencing a slow, steady loss of vision in the years that followed, she has continued to pursue her many interests. These include world travel, learning new language and musical instrument skills, and enjoying the outdoors through camping, hiking, tandem cycling and cross-country skiing, all while following a healthy lifestyle including practicing daily meditation.



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Thank You To Our Donors

2020 was a year like no other. We are grateful to our donors who continued to support our mission. VLANJ provided virtual support to help our program participants feel connected during an uncertain time. We received over \$700,000 in 2020, an 18% increase over last year and were able to offer our virtual programs free of charge. We hope the accomplishments of VLANJ this past year are a source of pride for our donors who made this possible.

A special thank you to our Giving Circles donors. Your gifts had a significant impact on our programs! And to our new donors in 2020, welcome and thank you for choosing to support VLANJ!

2020 GIVING CIRCLES

2020 Presidents Circle: 14 Donors

2020 Benefactors Circle: 7 Donors

2020 Patrons Circle: 17 Donors

2020 Friends Circle: 37 Donors

2020 Loyalty Circle: 155 Donors

Our Impact

VLANJ annually serves 1200 people with vision loss and their families. We provided 871 instructional hours of service through 26 class offerings in 2020.

VLANJ program participants report a 95% satisfaction rate for our virtual classes.

VLANJ was able to translate our live programs and create virtual classes within two weeks of being closed by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Did you know people with vision loss and blindness can use a smart phone or computer completely independently with the aid of magnification or built-in screen reading technology?



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