

AFTER BLINDNESS, ARTIST BECOMES **Tireless Advocate for the Visually Impaired**

As Claudia Schreiber was losing her sight and becoming increasingly dependent, both her mother and sister died. Then her husband left her, and two weeks later, her dad passed away.

“Suddenly, all my support systems were gone. I cried, and I cried and I cried,” recalled Schreiber, who at the time was in her mid-40s and had two children in elementary school.

When Schreiber learned about Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey (then called New Jersey Foundation for the Blind) 11 years ago, she had her driver take her the 50-plus miles from her home in Marlboro Township to the program in Denville.

“At first it was strange. I’d never met a blind person before,” she said. Schreiber explained: “I’d always tried to pass as a sighted person because I was ashamed of being blind.”

Schreiber began attending VLANJ weekly, learning skills to reclaim her independence and rekindling her passion for art. The first pieces she created was a self-portrait with clay. The instructor “gave me the courage to get back into my life,” said Schreiber, who’d earned a degree in art and sociology from New York University in 1982. “I fell in love with this organization.”

A sculptor and former owner of a successful import business,

Schreiber now devotes her time to empowering others who lose their sight. That effort includes serving on the VLANJ Board of Trustees since last year.

“On Rosh Hashana one year, I committed to changing one person’s life,” she said. That has snowballed into a life of advocacy, providing practical and emotional support.

Schreiber works one-on-one with people, teaching them useful smartphone apps and the VoiceOver program that can help in their daily life. Sometimes, she just listens to their concerns. “Some people get stuck in the mud and can’t get out. They need to learn that life isn’t over because they’ve lost their sight,” Schreiber said.

She teaches art classes and serves as a peer support facilitator for the New Jersey Commission for the Blind, overseeing four support groups.

For three years, she ran an art program for the New Jersey Blind Citizens Association in Monmouth County, volunteering her time and donating the supplies. Schreiber served as president of the nonprofit’s governing board.

Since becoming a VLANJ trustee, Schreiber has strongly advocated for more mobility and skills training, and for creating the Technology Learning Lab, which will open in early 2020.



“I just want people to raise the level of their lives back to where it was before this happened to them,” the 59-year-old said.

In her teens, Schreiber developed an auto immune disease that caused joint pain before it went into remission. The disease returned in her early 20s, this time affecting her vision. Schreiber suffered eye hemorrhages, and underwent various treatments and surgeries over many years. Doctors insisted she stop stone sculpting, concerned dust exacerbated the problem.

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KRIS MARINO
Executive Director

Dear Friend,

Important things are happening at Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey. Our collaborative efforts have really taken off. We're partnering with other nonprofits and funders to ensure adults who've experienced life-altering vision loss have access to crucial services.

We held our second annual Agency Summit in June and attracted 20 area nonprofits — more than twice as many as

attended in 2018. Participants brainstormed about how we can help each other reach the people who need our services. We've already begun collaborating with three organizations that attended the event.

Transportation is a big issue for people losing their sight, so we've decided to take our one-day Essential Low Vision program on the road. By the time you read this, we will have presented the program to seniors at the Saint Francis Residential Community. On Nov. 18, we'll bring the program to Zufall Health Wellness Center in Morristown, teaching people basics in kitchen safety, mobility training, and in using devices and techniques to maximize their remaining vision.

Six foundations, meanwhile, contributed a total of \$80,000 to fund various VLANJ programs, including the Technology Learning Lab, set to open in early 2020.

I hope to see you at Dining in the Dark on Thursday, Oct. 24 at The Meadow Wood in Randolph, as we celebrate Blindness Awareness Month and begin our 76th year serving New Jersey residents. This year's event will be hosted by author and columnist Mark Dilonno, who spent his newspaper career chronicling the struggles of New Jersey residents.

Enjoy the rest of the newsletter. Don't miss the article about our participants' emailed newsletter, Blind Vine, which offers readers advice, reviews and laughs. I always enjoy hearing from supporters and encourage you to contact me at (973) 627-0055, ext. 1333 or kmarino@vlanj.org.

Sincerely,

Kris Marino
Executive Director

VISION LOSS ALLIANCE ATTRACTS FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM FOUNDATIONS

Six foundations recently awarded grants totaling \$80,000 to support Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey's programs promoting independence and wellness.

Morristown Medical Center donated \$25,000 to the low vision occupational therapy program. "We were impressed with the collaborative efforts of Vision Loss Alliance and felt our support would be leveraged to a broader reach," Morristown Medical Center Community Health Advisory Committee Chair Joseph Nazzaro said.

Novartis awarded \$10,000 to help train 280 adults who are visually

impaired or blind, and their family members. Novartis US Foundation President Tracy Furey said the foundation was proud to support the nonprofit's "efforts to help meet the urgent need for vision services among the elderly and underserved communities in Morris and surrounding counties in New Jersey."

The **William G. and Helen C. Hoffman Foundation** contributed \$25,000 and **The Hyde and Watson Foundation** gave \$10,000 for the creation of the **Technology Learning Lab**, which will enhance both the personal and professional lives of people with vision loss when it opens in early 2020.

The **Jay Frank Parmly Foundation** awarded \$5,000 to help Vision Loss Alliance offer quality programs at an affordable cost to participants.

The **Allergan Foundation** gave \$5,000 to support the Essential Low Vision one-day class for adults new to vision loss.

"We are grateful to these generous foundations, which recognize the crucial role we play in the lives of people who are blind or have vision loss," Vision Loss Alliance Executive Director Kris Marino. "We continue to hone our programs and services to ensure they meet the needs of participants."


CLAUDIA SCHREIBER *Continued*

In 2005, she lost her sight completely. Schreiber had taken her son, Alex, then 6, to a gymnastics class. "All of a sudden, I couldn't see anything," she recalled. Alex, now 20, served as her eyes for several years, before she attended Vision Loss Alliance, Schreiber noted. Her daughter, Julie, is 22.

As scary it was to lose her sight, Schreiber said, "I learned that you have to get out there and not be afraid."



How would you eat in a restaurant?


Vision Loss Alliance
of New Jersey

Join

Vision Loss Alliance

October 24 as a Dining in the Dark Guest/Sponsor

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey is hosting the third annual **Dining in the Dark** — its major fundraiser of the year — on Thursday, October 24 at **The Meadow Wood** in Randolph.

Guests will enjoy a three-course gourmet meal with all their senses — except sight — so they can briefly experience what dining is like for people who are blind or visually impaired. VLANJ participants will be ambassadors, offering tips to diners wearing black eye masks. Members of the **Chester Lioness Club** will volunteer again.

Festivities at The Meadow Wood begin at 6 p.m. and include a cocktail hour, art auction, silent auction and live music. A **wine pull** has been added this year: guests can pull a cork for \$20 and will go home with the bottle that matches the number on their cork.

New Jersey author and news columnist Mark Dilonno will serve

as master of ceremonies. During his decades-long newspaper career, Dilonno worked as a sports writer, feature writer, and editor. As a front-page columnist, he wrote about the struggles and triumphs of regular New Jersey residents. His in-depth coverage of families trying to recover after Hurricane Sandy made him a Pulitzer Prize finalist. His 2018 novel, “*Gods of Wood and Stone*,” is one of five books he has written.

Joseph Ruffalo, Jr., president of the New Jersey affiliate of the **National Federation of the Blind**, and the **Morristown Medical Center Community Health Committee** will receive VLANJ’s Founders Award. VLANJ Senior Program Manager Linda Groszew will receive the organization’s service award for her 15 years with the nonprofit. Longtime VLANJ supporters Joseph and Antoinette Cicchetti are the event’s dinner chairs.

Tickets are \$125 per person, and tables can be reserved for 10 guests

for \$1,000. Visit vlanj.org/save-the-date. For details about sponsorship opportunities, which range from \$500 to \$10,000, contact Director of Development Jennifer Singer at jsinger@vlanj.org or 973-627-0055 ext. 1323.

This year, the event will include a wine pull. VLANJ will be partnering with Cambridge Wines in Morristown NJ who will donate 15% of sales back to VLANJ! Please buy a bottle (or a few!) that will be selected by Cambridge Wines to donate to our event. The more bottles, the more winners — and the more donations to our mission! At Dining in the Dark, guests can pull a cork for \$20 and go home with the bottle that matches the number on the cork. Every cork wins! Use this website link: www.cambridgewinesnj.com/search/vision+loss+alliance/. When you check out, please select “store pickup” and VLANJ will collect the donated wines. Please share the link with family and friends!

SEASONED PROFESSIONAL WELCOMED TO LEAD **Vision Loss Alliance’s Fundraising Efforts**

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey welcomed Director of Development Jennifer Singer in the spring. Singer has built her career in the nonprofit sector, increasing visibility of and financial support for the Arc of Union County, the United Way of Northern New Jersey, and Community Hope. Singer attended

Radford University in Virginia and holds a bachelor of science degree in social science. “Working for a nonprofit is important to me because nonprofits have the power to change a person’s life,” said Singer, who lives with her husband, Dan, in Randolph, and has two daughters, Catherine and Alexa.



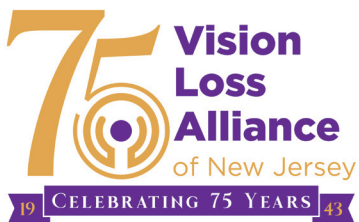


Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

Formerly NJ Foundation for the Blind

155 Morris Ave., Ste. 2
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Debbie Azzarone *Shares Tidbits and Friendship on the Blind Vine*



Every couple of days — and sometimes several times over 24 hours — Debbie Azzarone shares nuggets of wisdom, advice, or a joke in an emailed newsletter for participants of Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey.

Each **Blind Vine** installment may include an inspiring video, a recommended app, a heads up about an event, or a book review contributed by a fellow participant. For those who write and read it, the Blind Vine is a way they support one another.

“It’s kind of like therapy, like a peer support group,” said Azzarone, who created Blind Vine with her friend, Susanne Sytsma. “We thought, we need a student newsletter, because students have a lot to say.”

For Azzarone, the Blind Vine is a way to contribute to VLANJ, which helped her rebound after her vision severely deteriorated. While born with Stargardt disease, a degenerative eye disorder (she was diagnosed at age 9), Azzarone had figured out workarounds to manage until that point. For example, because she was unable to read books to her two daughters at bedtime “I made up stories,” she explained.

But in 2008, her sight loss accelerated. “I’d come up with a trick, but then it wouldn’t work. I couldn’t keep up with it,” Azzarone said. “It became harder and harder to do things so. I just stayed home,” she said.

At VLANJ, she took classes in mobility, computers, cooking, art and more, and became friends with people going through similar experiences. She became a volunteer in the computer lab, teaching newcomers useful technology, and learned the power of her iPad in navigating daily living.

“I found this to be a place where you totally belong,” the 65-year-old said. “Everyone here just gets you.” Her husband, Len, drives her weekly from their Fair Lawn home.

Last year, Azzarone organized the making of VLANJ’s first cookbook. She submitted a dozen family recipes plus some from the Healthy Options class, and urged other participants to share some favorites.

“Everyone has recipes from their family, so we all could be a part of that,” she said.