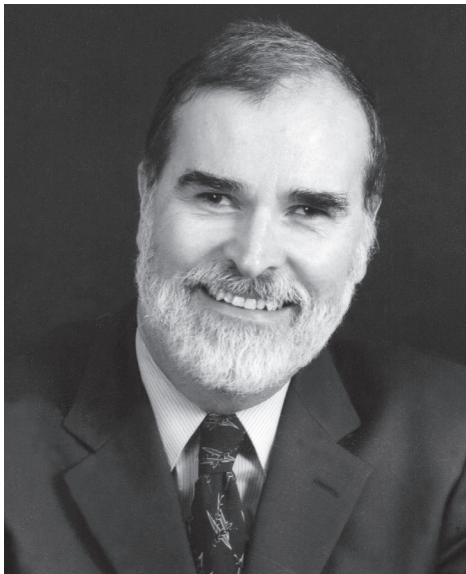


## RETIRED AFB LEADER Takes Helm of VLANJ Board



**CARL AUGUSTO**

Carl Augusto is passionate about Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey's work empowering people who are visually impaired.

"Severe vision loss is a serious challenge, but with the right attitude, perseverance and adaptive skills, people can — and do — live and work with dignity and success alongside their sighted peers," Augusto said. "Our students prove that every day."

Augusto, himself blind, took over as chair of the Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey Board of Trustees last month. The retired president and CEO of the American Foundation for the Blind said he will seek to increase financial support so VLANJ can expand beyond its current communities. VLANJ is the only non-governmental, comprehensive

life-skills training program in the state for adults with vision loss.

"My vision is that Vision Loss Alliance will continue to grow, serving more people and covering more areas in New Jersey," said Augusto, who joined the board in 2016.

Augusto is proud VLANJ introduced low vision occupational therapy services in 2018, and that it's prepared to kick off the Technology Learning Lab. He said the staff impressed him by quickly shifting programs onto Zoom after the COVID-19 crisis forced shutdowns.

The 74-year-old has included the nonprofit in his will, and he hopes others will follow his lead. "Increasing legacies will ensure that VLANJ continues to serve future communities of people with vision loss," Augusto said.

Augusto has been a successful advocate at VLANJ's Dining in the Dark events. Last year, after guests ate a three-course meal with their eyes covered and heard moving testimonials from VLANJ participants, Augusto took the stage. He asked guests to commit on the spot to making a donation. The effort added several thousands of dollars to the fundraiser's total.

In addition to increasing contributions and the donor base, Augusto is committed to expanding the trustee board. "We want to include members with a diversity of expertise to maximize the board's ability to govern VLANJ at the highest level," he said.

Augusto began losing his sight at age 8 to a recessive gene disorder. During the 45 years the disease

took to fully claim his sight, he learned adaptive skills like Braille and using a cane before he needed them, and came to terms with it emotionally as a young man.

Before his 45-year career in the blindness field, Augusto was a rocker. He played guitar and sang in three 1960s rock bands over seven years. The last one, Pulse, released an album as well as several singles. Augusto left the band for graduate school, earning a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling. He went on to lead regional and national organizations, including the AFB for 25 years.

The Mahwah resident and father of two traveled extensively for work. He and his wife, Sue, continue to seek out warmer climes in the winter. Augusto said he cannot wait for the couple's next adventure.

### Vision Loss Alliance announces Annual Giving Circles to recognize donors

The Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey Annual Giving Circles recognizes our most loyal and generous annual supporters. They lead with generosity and we are deeply grateful for their support!

#### The Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey Giving Circles

- President's Circle  
Gifts of \$5,000 or more
- Benefactors Circle  
Gifts of \$2500-\$4999
- Patrons Circle  
Gifts of \$1,000- \$2499
- Friends of VLANJ  
Gifts of \$500-\$999

The 1943 Loyalty Circle- Named for the year Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey was founded. The circle honors our generous donors who give five or more years in a row. We are thankful for our most loyal donors.



**KRIS MARINO**  
Executive Director

Dear Friend,

I hope this note finds you and your loved ones well. When I last wrote to you in the fall, who could have imagined we would be in the midst of a pandemic, with so many lives and jobs lost. The coronavirus outbreak has certainly upended our sense of ‘normal,’ but we are resilient beings and I’m impressed

by the way people are adapting.

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey quickly adapted too. When New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy enacted COVID-19 restrictions mid-March, we closed our locations to protect participants and staff. And then, we innovated. We wanted to be sure our community had a way to connect and continue to flourish.

By early April, we had taken a number of our Beyond Sight wellness classes online, along with peer support groups and an apps club, using the Zoom video conferencing platform. It may seem counterintuitive for a nonprofit that serves people who are blind and low vision to use video conferencing, but it works! Our participants who have no vision can access the audio; in fact, a number of participants simply call into the sessions.

As you’ll read in this newsletter, we’ve also added a monthly Tech Talks to help participants learn technologies. (The first session covered the ins and outs of using Zoom.)

One big upside to virtual sessions is that they transcend the need for transportation. This is especially beneficial for students who rely on public options and spend hours getting to and from weekly programs.

That said, VLANJ participants and staff can’t wait to be together again. A major highlight of reopening the Denville location will be launching the Technology Learning Lab. We believe it will greatly enhance the professional and personal endeavors of our participants. We’re so grateful to the foundations that believe so strongly in the initiative.

Until then, be safe and stay connected to the people who make you smile.

Sincerely,

Kris Marino  
Executive Director

## INSPIRED BY PEOPLE WITH VISION LOSS

### **Denville Resident Joins VLANJ Board**

Working in Manhattan after college, Carol Burgio marveled at people with vision loss who confidently navigated the midtown streets. “They seemed fearless,” Burgio said. She began volunteering for a nonprofit in the neighborhood that helped people with severe visual impairment.

After she and her husband relocated to Denville in 2002, Burgio discovered the town was home to New Jersey Foundation for the Blind. Unfortunately, her long days commuting to New York for work in finance prevented her from volunteering regularly.

Fast-forward to May 2019: Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey advertised for volunteers for its ‘Beyond Sight’ picnic on the first Saturday in June. Burgio jumped on the opportunity — not realizing VLANJ was the former New Jersey Foundation for the Blind.

At the picnic, she met Carl Augusto, a VLANJ trustee (now

board chair). Then she volunteered at Dining in the Dark in October. At Augusto’s urging, Burgio joined the board of trustees in November. “I have so much respect for people who are visually impaired. They inspire me,” Burgio said.

Burgio, who has more than 20 years of experience working in the futures industry, intends to use that expertise to help VLANJ remain financially sound. Burgio is a senior product specialist with the Global Markets division of Santander Bank. She works in the Exchange Traded Derivatives department assisting Latin American clients.

“I’m so impressed by the range of programs and services Vision Loss Alliance offers, and by the camaraderie and fun the participants share,” she said. When VLANJ had to close its locations because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nonprofit moved quickly to get key programs online. That included a newly created Tech Talks, which



dives into technologies that can make participants’ lives easier.

“It’s so important to have a good command of technology,” she said.

She’s also a fan of the meditation and mindfulness offerings, which “help ease anxiety caused by COVID-19 and provide a sense of connectedness.”

Burgio lives with her husband, Jake Ray, a special education teacher.

## 'TECH TALKS' TEACH PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT Tools for Online Engagement

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey was about to launch its long-awaited **Technology Learning Lab** when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the nonprofit to temporarily close its locations.

Nine students had signed up for the six-week pilot to learn the Microsoft Windows 10 operating system for desktops and laptops. They would use JAWS, a screen reader, or Fusion, a combination screen reader and text magnifier.

VLANJ put the Technology Learning Lab on hold, and introduced **Tech Talks**, a monthly webinar that covers a different technology topic each session. The webinar is funded by a major grant from The Provident Bank Foundation.

In Tech Talks, instructors Susanne Sytsma and Christina Brino demonstrate a technology and answer participants' questions during the hourlong class. For example, the 15 people who participated in the first Tech Talks were shown how to use the

Zoom video conferencing app for computers, iPhones and iPads.

"There's a lot to learn, especially on computers because it involves many key strokes," Brino said. During a second session in May, participants discussed grocery store shopping apps.

Zoom has become an important platform for VLANJ. The nonprofit in early April began offering virtual versions of its Beyond Sight wellness classes, support groups, and an apps club using Zoom to keep participants active and connected.

Future Tech Talks topics include navigating Facebook; using the Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) service; an introduction to Fusion; and Amazon Basics. The free sessions are held the fourth Wednesday of each month at 7 p.m. They are open to all with vision loss. To register, or if you have questions, send a message to **BeyondSight@vlanj.org**. Registrants gain access to the VLANJ Tech Talks Facebook group.

Not yet knowing when locations



can reopen, VLANJ now plans to roll out a virtual version of the Technology Learning Lab, VLANJ Executive Director Kris Marino said. One student is currently enrolled in a test run.

The Technology Learning Lab will teach participants computer skills that could help them gain employment, Marino said. The initiative has attracted financial support from The Provident Bank Foundation, The William G. and Helen C. Hoffman Foundation, and The Hyde and Watson Foundation.

While VLANJ participants have embraced the virtual class offerings, "we're all missing Vision Loss Alliance and being together," Sytsma said.

## Meet VLANJ Technology Learning Lab Instructors

Blind since birth, **Christina Brino** spent eight years of her career developing self-help groups for people with vision impairment at St. Clare's Medical Center. She then served 15 years as the disabilities coordinator for Morris County's Office for the Disabled. After retiring, Brino volunteered with VLANJ as a facilitator for its apps club, introducing participants to new apps and encouraging them to share with the group apps they've discovered. She was subsequently hired as a technology instructor and is one of two instructors of the virtual Tech Talks monthly series. The Pompton Plains resident also volunteers for the Seeing Eye, which has provided her six guide dogs over the years, including her current one, a black Labrador named Shasta.

**Jackie Millard** had just completed teacher training following a 17-year career as a product manager at AT&T/Lucent Technologies when she lost her sight in 2004. Millard became a community volunteer, a leader of her church choir and a yoga instructor. At VLANJ, the Long Valley resident learned screen-reader technology for computers and later how to use iPhone features and apps to assist her. Millard shared what she learned as a VLANJ volunteer, before she was hired as an instructor. Millard is also part of VLANJ's Essential Low Vision instructor team.

**Susanne Sytsma** worked 25 years as a registered nurse caring for patients in intensive care, neurology and oncology departments until vision loss forced her to retire. At VLANJ, Sytsma learned skills to regain her independence. The Jefferson Township resident became adept at technology and volunteered in the technology program. As an instructor, Sytsma conducts iPhone/iPad training for VLANJ in addition to teaching the virtual Tech Talks monthly series. The married mother of two and grandmother of an 8-year-old grandson counts Valdez, her Seeing Eye dog, as part of the family.



Join us on  
**October 29, 2020**  
for a virtual  
*Dining in the Dark* event!

## Vision Loss Alliance goes Virtual!

VLANJ puts the health and safety of our program participants, donors and staff as a priority. The pandemic will keep us from gathering in person this year, but we have some exciting news....

*More details coming soon!*



## Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

Formerly NJ Foundation for the Blind

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



## VIRTUAL YOGA, NOW AND ZEN

*Jackie Millard's encouraging voice comes over Zoom's audio, piano music tinkling. She directs listeners in their own homes to sit comfortably, then inhale deeply and exhale slowly.*

*"Feel the slow cycle of the breath moving in and out of the body; it's like a gentle wave," she says. Spring is a time of renewal, she notes. "Even in this time of challenge, we can use this opportunity to try something new, to think in a new way."*

Welcome to **Now and Zen**, a virtual yoga class Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey is offering during the COVID-19 crisis. VLANJ tapped Millard, one of the nonprofit's instructors, to teach the hour-long hatha yoga class on Wednesday mornings.

"I think that in this time, we all can benefit from the calm and stillness," said Millard, who became a certified yoga instructor seven years ago.

During a recent class, Millard had students begin the session seated, imagining "white light flowing from the base of our spine, through the torso, through the neck, to the crown of the head." She then had them visualize the light flowing "like a fountain" down the outside of their bodies, spreading relaxation.

Millard led students through head-to-toe stretches. She then had them stand for a series of gentle yoga poses. The class moved to nostril breathing exercises.

She rounded out the class with a relaxing guided meditation: students imagined walking through woods, coming upon a river gently flowing over rocks and logs. That, she said, is how people can approach life, "moving over and

around obstacles...yielding and bending...moving peacefully and calmly forward."

In the final minutes, the class offers divine peace to the world, repeating the word, "Shanti."

In addition to teaching Now and Zen, Millard takes five yoga classes a week. Millard, who is blind, teaches mobile technology and essential low vision classes, which were suspended mid-March because of the coronavirus response restrictions. She is one of three instructors for the new Technology Learning Lab, which will launch once the Denville location reopens.

Now and Zen is free to anyone who lives with vision loss. To register, or if you have questions, send a message to **BeyondSight@vlanj.org**.