



Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

Formerly NJ Foundation for the Blind

SPRING 2022

YOUNG ADULT WITH VISION LOSS FINDS HIS PLACE Volunteering at VLANJ

Aaron Grimes



Five years after attending Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey's technology program as a high schooler, 23-year-old Aaron Grimes now spends his Tuesdays teaching others without sight all the ways their iPhones can serve them.

"I like sharing my knowledge, and making someone's life a little bit easier," he said. Aaron was pre-school age when he became blind. He was born with both congenital glaucoma and aniridia, a genetic disorder that prevented his irises from fully developing, he said. Aaron doesn't recall much about his sighted years, but has memory of colors. An infection that hospitalized him for weeks claimed

all his sight except for a little light perception in his left eye. Aaron attended public primary schools in Jersey City, where he's always lived. "When I was a kid, I didn't feel included," he said. While attending a high school for the blind in 2017, his rehabilitation counselor encouraged him to take classes at VLANJ.

"I learned how to use advanced apps on the iPhone," he said. One of his favorites is Seeing AI [Artificial Intelligence], which reads documents, handwriting, and barcodes on products, and identifies denominations of money. With Be My Eyes, a sighted volunteer appears on video and provides assistance. Volunteers have helped Aaron adjust his thermostat and pick out clothing. For news, he turns to NFB-NEWSLINE from the National Federation for the Blind, which reads aloud articles from popular sources.

"I still use all of them," he said. When VLANJ reopened in-person classes in September, Aaron began volunteering with the mobile technology program. He takes two Access Link buses to get to Denville, often spending two or more hours traveling each way.

On a recent Tuesday, Aaron was showing Susan, a student with glaucoma, how to use the VoiceOver app that reads what is on her screen. "Aaron is great! He really helps me," she said.

Aaron is typically paired with an instructor in the morning, and then works one-on-one with a student in the afternoon. He is eager to teach advanced apps, but understands students need to know the basics first. Aaron also makes sure students' iPhones have the latest updates. "They call me 'Zippy' because I'm fast," he said with a laugh.

Aaron hopes more younger adults discover VLANJ, but for now, he enjoys helping the older participants. Volunteering with VLANJ has given him purpose. "I'm happy with what I'm doing," said Aaron, who lives with an older brother and sister-in law. (His mother died 10 years ago.) "I like spending time here. It's nice making friends."

“I like sharing my knowledge, and making someone's life a little bit easier.”

-Aaron Grimes

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: VP of Development and Communications Jennifer Singer



Bill Schuldt
President and CEO

training was added in the late 1990s. By 2006, the nonprofit offered the only comprehensive, nonresidential vision rehabilitation program for adults in New Jersey.

A decade later, we became VLANJ and continued to add services such as low vision occupational therapy. Everything we do is focused on our mission of empowering adults with limited or no sight to live independent, full lives. With your continued support, the future is looking bright!

The introduction of virtual programs in April of 2020 has allowed us to serve people unable to attend in-person programs due to distance or access to transportation. (You'll read about the ARISE virtual speaker series in this newsletter.) Prior to that, we typically had 50 to 60 people per session attending our in-person classes. Our virtual programs reach an additional 250 people from across New Jersey, and beyond.

Our in-person classes are going strong too. We welcomed students and volunteers back to our Denville and Ridgewood locations in September, following safety protocols. Our technology programs are robust, and

we launched orientation and mobility community outings so participants can learn and practice getting around in public spaces.

It's wonderful to widen our community. We hope you'll enjoy the article about 23-year-old Aaron Grimes, who went from VLANJ participant to volunteer at our Technology Tuesday program. We hope his story inspires other young adults to see all we have to offer them.

Mark your calendars for our annual Dining in the Dark event on Oct. 26. It's a fun night and great learning experience, where sighted guests wear wearing shades during a multi-course meal to glimpse life without sight. It's also our big fundraiser of the year!

As always, I welcome your ideas and questions, so feel free to send me an email or call. Happy spring!

Sincerely,

Bill Schuldt

VLANJ President and CEO
wschuldt@vlanj.org
(973) 627-0055

Dear Friend,

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey looks completely different today than it did when founded nearly 80 years ago, yet our essence — a dedication to improving the lives of adults with vision loss — has remained the same all these years.

We are proud of VLANJ's strong history. The nonprofit began in 1943 in Newark as a gathering place for the visually impaired. In 1955, it became NJ Foundation for the Blind, a summer camp for blind women in Denville. Year-round independent skills

ARISE VIRTUAL SPEAKER SERIES SPREADS INSPIRATION

More than 150 participants have enrolled

A legally blind reverend offered advice on breaking the cycle of negative thinking. An English musician who lost his sight in his late 30s described how writing poems and lyrics helped him reclaim his purpose. A dietician specializing in diabetes gave tips to maintain well-being through healthy eating and exercise.

That's a sampling of Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey's speaker series, Achieve Resilience, Inspiration & Self-Empowerment (ARISE). More than 150 people have registered for the series, which kicked off last September.

"It's about inspiring people with vision loss to persevere and rise up," said VLANJ Vice President of Programs Elsa Zavoda. "We want people to feel they have no barriers to what they want to achieve."

ARISE runs four times a year. It is one of several speaker series made possible by a nearly \$16,000 grant from Atlantic Health System/Morristown Medical Center for programs that support healthy aging.

Living Independently For Tomorrow (LIFT) is the online

version of VLANJ's effective in-person Essential Low Vision course. It provides basic training in daily life activities over three weeks. Strength Through Relationships, Insights, Values, Education (STRIVE) addresses mental health aspects of adjusting to life with vision loss.

VLANJ Voices Education Speaker Series is the newest offering, and has attracted more than 100 people, Zavoda said. For the inaugural webinar, an orientation and mobility specialist discussed tips and strategies for getting around. In February, participants learned about a national pharmacy devoted to patients with vision loss.

In addition to broadening participants' knowledge, ARISE and the other programs "establish human connection, so people don't feel alone and isolated," Zavoda said. The virtual programs are especially beneficial to participants who lack transportation to the in-person classes in Denville and Ridgewood.

ARISE has received overwhelmingly positive reviews from participants. Dora Meler said the program motivated her and made her feel

less alone. It helped her "remember that there are others out there experiencing the same life challenges as I am," she wrote. "It's important to continue to find ways to lead an independent life versus not venturing out of the comfort of my home."

Michele Valuzzi said she related to David Steele, The Blind Poet. "As someone who has written poetry but hadn't in a long time, I was inspired by Dave's talk, and I started writing poems again," Valuzzi said. "His life is a great example of resiliency because he doesn't let his visual impairment hold him back or define him."



POET DAVID STEELE

The following is a brief summary of VLANJ's audited financial statement from 2020

	2021	2020
Program Income & Contributions	\$210,667.00	\$456,145.00
Special Events	\$14,059.00	\$29,890.00
Legacy and Trusts	\$1,381,005.00	\$162,852.00
Net Investment Income	\$48,653.00	\$120,091.00
Total Income	\$1,654,384.00	\$768,978.00
Total Expenses	\$873,353.00	\$878,371.00
Net Gain/Loss	\$781,031.00	\$(109,393.00)

Thank You to Our Donors

We are grateful to our donors who continued to support our mission in 2021. Together, 620 donors raised over \$1.6 million dollars. With your support, VLANJ was able to continue to offer virtual programs free of charge to our program participants and expand both in-person and virtual programs! 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.

2021 GIVING CIRCLES

2021 Presidents Circle
17 Gifts of \$5,000 or more

2021 Benefactors Circle
3 Gifts of \$2,500-\$4,999

2021 Patrons Circle
21 Gifts of \$1,000-\$2499

2021 Friends Circle
25 Gifts of \$500-\$999

Thank you to the **LION'S CLUBS** who continually support VLANJ!

Our Impact

In 2021, VLANJ offered a total of 1,020 instructional hours across 28 virtual programs and 15 in-person programs. We increased our virtual participants by 200% since the beginning of 2021.

VLANJ is now providing virtual education to individuals in 18 New Jersey counties, 32 states in the U.S., and four countries. We have reached program participants as far as New Zealand!

As part of facilitating the adjustment to vision loss,

VLANJ offers in-person small group education and training in technology (mobile and desktop), supporting people to connect with others.

VLANJ has hosted an array of professionals as guest speakers, sharing their talents and knowledge in areas of technology, emotional adjustment, health education, inspiration, and practical life skills. Programs include VLANJ Tech Talks, ARISE and VLANJ Voices: Education Speaker Series.

VLANJ launched our in-person Independent Living Skills Program on Mondays, providing practical hands-on skills training in many areas of adaptive daily living (cooking, Back to Basics, healing arts/peer support, and yoga).

VLANJ program participants report in-person programs have contributed to their physical independence and/or mental well-being at a 96% satisfaction rate.



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

save the date

OCTOBER 26, 2022 @ 6:00PM
BROOKLAKE COUNTRY CLUB
FLORHAM PARK, N.J.



Vision Loss Alliance
of New Jersey

1943 FOUNDERS DAY CHALLENGE
June 16-17

1 DAY
9 HOURS
43 MINUTES

to raise

\$7,900

as we celebrate
79 YEARS

