



Vision Loss Alliance

of New Jersey

Formerly NJ Foundation for the Blind

FALL 2022



Bill Schuldt

President and CEO

Dear Friend,

We've had many positive developments at Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey since I last wrote to you. One big one: after a two-year hiatus, we're able to resume our multi-sensory fundraiser, **Dining in the Dark**. The 2022 event is on Oct. 26 at **Brooklake Country Club in Florham Park**. I've heard the stories, seen photos and watched videos from prior years, but now I'll get to experience it firsthand. I'm looking forward to it, and hope you are too!

At a recent staff meeting reviewing programs, I felt awed by the growth in our offerings and participation over the past two years. There's a lot of excitement about how we're evolving with both virtual and in-person programs. As awful as the pandemic has been, a silver lining is that it was a catalyst for VLANJ to expand beyond our physical space. Adults with vision loss or blindness who had been left out of programming because of transportation and/or mobility issues are now engaged.

One of our strongest virtual programs is the speaker series, **ARISE (Achieve Resilience, Inspiration & Self-Empowerment)**. Since its launch last September, ARISE has featured impressive, inspirational guest speakers and attracted significant participation. I'm proud to share that in April, the Morris County Chamber of Commerce recognized ARISE for its innovation with a **2022 Not-For-Profit Excellence Award**.

For some, participating in person is paramount. We now offer a stipend to those with no paratransit

options to get to us. We introduced a weekly **Independent Living Skills** program at our Denville location, and look forward to welcoming more people who can benefit from it. In our effort to reduce barriers to our programs, we also hired a part-time bilingual coordinator to help us connect with people with vision loss whose primary language is Spanish.

As you'll read, we hosted our first-ever **Day of Giving** in June and raised more than 30% above goal. What impressed me most was the number of first-time donors. That is a true mark of success!

October is around the corner, ushering in **Blindness Awareness Month**. I look forward to seeing you at Dining in the Dark. Until then, I wish you well, and welcome your feedback.

Sincerely,

Bill Schuldt
VLANJ President and CEO
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(973) 627-0055

EXPERIENCE DINING IN THE DARK ON OCT. 26

Dining in the Dark is back after a two-year hiatus. VLANJ's biggest fundraiser will be held Oct. 26 at the elegant **BrookLake Country Club in Florham Park**. Guests will enjoy a three-course gourmet meal using their senses of taste, smell and sound — but not sight — to briefly experience what dining is like for people with vision loss or blindness.

Festivities include a cocktail hour, live music, a silent auction, and a wine pull. VLANJ participants will

offer guidance to diners, and volunteers from the **Chester Lioness Club** will serve as sighted guides. Tickets, tables, and sponsorships are available online. Your support is greatly needed.

Go to vlanj.org to register and view a listing of sponsorship opportunities and perks. Contact Vice President of Development and Communications Jennifer Singer at jsinger@vlanj.org or (973) 627-0055, prompt 2 for more information.



VLANJ'S O&M COMMUNITY EXCURSIONS BUILD Confidence and Community Connection



Coping with accelerated vision loss, Mary Ann Zino joined a VLANJ outing in Morristown to practice using her white cane to navigate sidewalks and intersections and learn ways to advocate for herself when shopping, banking, and dining in public. “It was really good for building my confidence, and the best part was being with other people with vision loss who are managing on their own — that’s inspirational to me!” Zino said.

Last October, VLANJ added community excursions to its orientation and mobility program (O&M), which already provided on-site training in basic skills. Community excursions set VLANJ’s program apart from most other O&M training programs. Participants practice orientation to traffic and safety, learn navigation apps, and locate destinations following directions and using landmarks, cues and clues. The first community excursion was to downtown Denville, followed by the Montclair Art Museum in March, downtown Morristown in May, and the Short Hills Mall last month.

“Self-advocacy, asking for help and assistance when interacting with service personnel and business owners, is a central focus of each excursion,” said VLANJ Vice President of Programs Elsa Zavoda. “A crossover benefit of us being

out in the community is creating awareness. When VLANJ clients use assertive communication techniques to clearly explain what it is they need and how they can best be assisted, both clients and the public benefit.”

The excursions were funded by the William G. and Helen C. Hoffman Foundation and the Lydia Collins deForest Charitable Trust. O&M specialists, including VLANJ trustee Lukas Franck, volunteered their services. The Provident Bank Foundation recently awarded a grant to VLANJ to continue the program for 2022-2023.

Participants’ feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. In surveys, many described learning safety protocols, picking up tips for better experiences in businesses, and educating business owners and employees on how they can assist people with vision loss or blindness.

At Provident Bank in Denville, participants demonstrated the human guide technique to staff, and explained how their use of money reader apps required a private space for banking because the apps announce information aloud. They practiced using an ATM using a headphone jack to hear verbal directions. “I had never used an ATM machine and now I am willing to try,” Ursula Rucki reported.

Participants on the Montclair Art Museum trip heard audio descriptions of artwork and had access to multisensory objects to help visualize pieces. They, in turn, provided feedback to museum personnel so they could improve experiences for people with special needs.

Marvin Morgan has not participated in O&M training in 13 years and was astounded by how much he learned during the outings in Montclair and Morristown. Morgan has put the training to use, as

he travels the country playing beep baseball, a sport that uses a sound-emitting ball for players with vision loss to locate it. Morgan said he has been walking city streets confidently with his cane. “My whole mobility world has changed. It’s given me much more freedom,” he said.

Businesses interested in being an outing destination can contact Zavoda at (973) 627-0055, prompt 3, or ezavoda@vlanj.org. To donate a gift card for Uber or Lyft to provide a participant’s transportation to an outing, contact Vice President of Development and Communications Jennifer Singer at jsinger@vlanj.org or (973) 627-0055, prompt 2.



O&M TERMINOLOGY

Orientation: the ability to know where one is and where one wants to go.

Mobility: the ability to move safely, efficiently and effectively from place to place.

VLANJ'S FIRST DAY OF GIVING Surpassed Goal



Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey’s first annual **Day of Giving** in June raised \$11,200 — surpassing its goal of \$7,900 by more than 30%— and attracted 23 first-time donors.

One of the highlights of the high-energy event was an in-person visit from Dave Steele, aka ‘The Blind Poet,’ a writer and musician from the United Kingdom with a huge following. Steele was one of the first guests for VLANJ’s award-winning virtual speaker

series, ARISE. When he learned he would be in New Jersey during the Day of Giving, Steele offered to make an appearance in Denville.

“It truly was serendipitous,” VLANJ President and CEO Bill Schuldt said. Steele shared his journey with vision loss and read his poetry, inspiring staff and participants, Schuldt said. Other influencers with vision loss or blindness energized the event with shout-outs to VLANJ on their social media platforms.

VLANJ set the goal at \$7,900 in honor of VLANJ’s 79th anniversary. The event ran for one day, nine hours and 43 minutes to mark 1943, the year the nonprofit was established.

Of the 74 people who contributed, 23 were first-time donors. VLANJ program participants contributed

21 of the 77 gifts, and several businesses contributed prizes that kept donations flowing, said Jennifer Singer, VLANJ’s vice president for development and communications.

“We’re grateful to everyone who donated, helped spread the word, and made an appearance at the event.”

- Jennifer Singer

SUMMER MUSINGS: MISSING VLANJ

By Debbie Azzarone

It’s always hard for me when we reach the last day of each VLANJ session. I feel like a boat untethered from its mooring, forced to face the rough currents of everyday life alone. It’s rather paradoxical, since VLANJ has succeeded in making me more self-sufficient, giving me the tools to take on so much independently. But it’s the social interaction, the friends I have there, and the relationships I’ve made with both participants and staff, that is my rock, my safety net. VLANJ is the one place on earth where everyone just gets it. They are my support system and are equally important — if not more so — to the skills I’ve acquired.

Summer, with its sweltering heat and the blazing sun, is not for me. I can’t be outside in bright sunlight without immense pain in my eyes that always leads to severe headaches. That’s one thing everyone at VLANJ gets, while the rest of the sighted world can’t understand why I wish the summer away. We commiserate over well-meaning family members who are perplexed that we would decline an invitation to a summer picnic or barbecue. We know that preparing for and attending those large gatherings can be more trouble than they’re worth. It’s tough negotiating unfamiliar spaces and being among strangers. Most times, we sit alone, counting the minutes till we can go home. All those issues float away when we enter the doors of VLANJ. I’m so glad it’s September!

*This is an edited version of a column published in the **Blind Vine**, an emailed newsletter for VLANJ participants. Azzarone will be a keynote speaker at **Dining in the Dark**.*



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



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WELCOME NEW BOARD MEMBER

Phil So



Phil So is an expert for national initiatives with the American Foundation for the Blind, where he serves as a workforce development and training specialist. His personal mission is to help people — especially those with disabilities — achieve their dreams. The Fort

Lee resident is founder and leader of three community initiatives, and served as a sub-committee member with the New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. In the public opinion research field and later in the corporate world serving Fortune 500 companies — including Kraft and Toyota—So specialized in data analytics and market insights. He taught digital skills and marketing courses to blind college students at the Computer Center for Visually Impaired People at Baruch College, where he also led the center's marketing team and served on its advisory board.

So holds a bachelor's degree in economics from Columbia University. For his master's degree in instructional technology at Touro Graduate School of Technology,

he conducted analysis on Israel's successful assistive technology innovation ecosystem. So is inspired by VLANJ's history and mission, and believes the nonprofit can address inequities faced by people with vision loss or blindness, including high rates of joblessness. He will use his expertise to provide VLANJ guidance on programming and organizational strategies, and to develop approaches for fostering social inclusion and economic advances for adults with vision loss. So also intends to serve as a VLANJ volunteer/mentor.



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