



Vision Loss Alliance
of New Jersey

Annual Report

2023



Image above of a VLANJ
program participant painting
with a VLANJ volunteer



Vision Loss Alliance
of New Jersey

19 CELEBRATING 80 YEARS 43

Transforming lives, one individual at a time





Vision Loss Alliance
of New Jersey

Mission

We empower people with vision loss or blindness by providing support, education, and training in assistive technology and independent living skills.

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* VLANJ would like to thank Cliff Brookes for designing the 2023 annual report



Image above is a VLANJ program participant working on a pottery project.



William Schuldts
President & CEO

Dear Friend,

2023 was an extraordinary year at Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey, as we reflected on our rich, 80-year history and advanced our mission to empower people who are blind or have low vision. VLANJ created new programming, expanded accessibility and deepened community connections. Throughout our 80th anniversary celebration, we honored our participants, volunteers, donors, instructors and staff — the pillars of this amazing organization. Their dedication and enthusiasm are what power VLANJ, laying the groundwork for a robust future.

What began in 1943 in Newark as a social club for people with vision loss transformed over the decades. Through each advancement, fulfilling the needs of those we serve has remained our driving force.

VLANJ@Home

After months of preparation, we launched VLANJ@Home in September 2023 to bring occupational therapists specializing in low-vision into people's homes. The program is a first of its kind in New Jersey, and we are on the leading edge of a growing movement in the field. It was a huge undertaking, but so worth it! Adults with diminished

or no sight learn strategies to safely accomplish daily activities, building their skills and confidence. (The therapy is approved by most insurance plans, including Medicare). In the first three months, 13 people received at-home OT.

Beyond the comfort of home, VLANJ ran three orientation and mobility (O&M) outings to help participants navigate their communities. They practiced getting around in public spaces and provided feedback to business owners and employees on how to best assist a customer with vision loss. Our participants said the experiences provided excellent practice in self-advocacy.

First-Time Collaboration

In our first collaboration with the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, we offered an intergenerational fellowship program. Participants young and old shared wisdom and encouraged and inspired one another. They met twice a month, virtually over four months and twice in person, building lasting connections. It was a huge success, and we intend to offer it again.

Lack of affordable and reliable transportation has long posed an obstacle for people with vision loss. Thanks to funding from the Lydia Collins deForest Charitable Trust Grant and the VLANJ Investment Fund, VLANJ was able to provide rides to and from our Denville location for 25 people who otherwise couldn't get there. That has been a tremendous gift for those individuals and our entire VLANJ community.

Successful Fundraisers

Guests of our **Tasting in the Dark** event during Blindness Awareness Month are still raving about our biggest fundraiser of the year. More than 130 guests sampled wines paired with music while wearing light-blocking eye shades. They had

fun and gained better understanding about the fortitude and resilience of our participants. Our second annual Day of Giving in June was also a success, raising more than \$10,000.

A Farewell, and New Faces

While beloved longtime Senior Program Director Linda Groszew retired after 20-plus years, I'm pleased to introduce Victoria Lowrie as our new program director. Vicki is doing a fantastic job, à la Linda. In 2023, we also hired technology coordinator Chris O'Neill, who helped launch a virtual learning lab, and part-time development assistant Jennifer Santosuosso to help with fundraising and event planning. I'm proud of our talented, cohesive, and forward-thinking team. VLANJ Vice President of Programs Elsa Zavoda was honored by Accessible Pharmacy Services as a certified low vision therapist of the year.

I hope you enjoy the annual report, which provides a window into VLANJ's impact on the lives of participants as they reclaim confidence and purpose. I and the entire VLANJ Board of Trustees and staff are grateful to you, our generous supporters, for recognizing the value of this organization. We are committed to fiscal responsibility and ensuring VLANJ is worthy of your trust and investment.

Kind Regards,

William Schuldts

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

Financial Statement

The Following is a brief Summary of VLANJ's Audited Financial Statement from 2023

Revenue	2023	2022
Program Revenue	\$ 61,664	\$ 22,553
Legacies & Bequests	\$ 93,255	\$ 5,622
Contributions	\$ 274,594	\$ 324,972
Special Events - Net	\$ 12,739	\$ 22,016
Other Income	-	\$ 81, 235
**Net Investment Income - Unrealized loss/gain	\$ 828,414	\$ (1,449,882)
Total Revenue	\$ 1,270,666	\$ (993,484)
Expenses		
Program Expense	\$ 891,074	\$ 597,456
Development & PR Expenses	\$ 108,197	\$ 120,811
General and Administrative Expenses	\$ 131,458	\$ 273,076
Total Expenses	\$ 1,130,729	\$ 991,343
Net Loss/Gain	\$ 139,937	\$ (1,984,827)
Net Assets Beginning of Year	\$ 6,560,773	\$ 8,545,600
*Net Assets End of Year	\$ 6,700,710	\$ 6,560,773

*The Organizations' Net Assets enable us to fund annual deficits

Our Impact in 2023

Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey offered a total of 1,728 instructional hours across 33 virtual programs and 18 in-person programs.

VLANJ served 74 in-person program participants in our weekly center-based programs, 222 participants in our virtual programs and 20 people in low vision occupational therapy. In addition, we reached 283 people via our outreach and education efforts in the community.

The VLANJ@Home Program, which provides in-home occupational therapy, was certified by the NJ Division of Consumer Affairs in June 2023, and officially launched in September 2023. Between September and December 2023, 13 people received in-home occupational therapy for a total of 50 home visits. In a recent survey, 100% of VLANJ@Home participants reported having an in-home OT to be extremely valuable and that they would recommend this program to other people with vision loss.

With the support of our Board of Trustees and additional grant funding, VLANJ provided transportation to 25 students who would otherwise not have been able to attend programs, for a total of 418 trips.

Liz's Story

As Liz Edwards' eyesight slowly deteriorated, her world unraveled. Corporate downsizing in 2019 cost her a 20-year career in information technology, and soon after, her nearly three-decade marriage ended. Her sons, who'd grown up with a self-sufficient mother, grappled with the reality of her now needing help with daily tasks.

"I felt like a victim. I felt minimized physically, mentally, and emotionally," said Liz, who holds a Master of Science in computer science. "Here's a woman who used to be independent, strong and self-sufficient, and now you've got to come to terms with your own shifting, and the fear and disappointment of loved ones."

Fear of Being Defined by Disability

Liz's journey with diabetic retinopathy began 13 years ago, and the initial struggle to accept the diagnosis went beyond the fear of losing sight: she dreaded being defined by her condition. "People think when you are low vision or blind, that that's the only thing happening in your life. But the low vision only exacerbates an already challenging life," Liz said. "There's a whole humanity behind a person who is low vision or blind."

With her strong faith in God and a lot of soul-searching, Liz began to rebuild her life. She went for counseling and, in 2021, reached out to the state Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Liz received training in daily living, vocation, mobility skills and assistive technology in her West Orange home. She learned about Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey through the commission and was intrigued.

Living a Purposeful, Fulfilling Life

When she joined VLANJ in 2022, Liz initially focused on the fitness program but soon gravitated to the self-advocacy and peer support groups. "VLANJ is seeking to empower the total person to be able to live an impactful, purposeful and fulfilled life," she said. "VLANJ offers classes that say to me, you are more than your physical challenges. It reignites the fire and the fight within me."

When the facilitator role in the self-advocacy group opened, Liz happily volunteered, putting to use her 2021 certification as a life coach. She believes strongly in community "as a necessary and evolving part of navigating vision loss."

Each week, members listen to each other's challenges and successes. "We encourage empowerment on our transformative journeys of self-discovery and fulfillment," she said. The point Liz regularly drives home is this: "The



Image above is Liz smiling in front of a brick wall.

shifts and adjustments we have to make as people with vision loss do not equal inadequacies."

At 61, Liz said her involvement with VLANJ has solidified her life's purpose to help others find theirs. Her vision loss makes reading a challenge — she must significantly magnify print — and she can't take in the details of anything, including people's faces. Still, Liz refuses to let the degenerative disease stop her from enjoying life.

Liz recently traveled to England solo and then to Ghana with her sister to attend a festival celebrating African and Caribbean music. Liz decided to do "something brave," and for the first time in her life went horseback riding on a beach in the West African country. She saw it as "a necessary part of my journey towards deeper self-discovery and new experiences."

While initially scared, Liz said, "I felt capable, more expectant, excited, and happy! In that moment, I realized that I don't need to wait for life to be good for me to be happy," she said. "I just need to have the courage to embrace what's in front of me."

Programs

Center-Based Programs

Our center-based programs consist of our Independent Living Skills program, Holistic Wellness program, and Technology programs. All are designed to help participants adjust to vision loss and gain skills necessary to live confidently and independently. The programs build community and connection with others and enhance participants' emotional and physical well-being.

Our Independent Living Skills program helps people adjusting to vision loss gain self-confidence. Working in small groups, they practice skills and strategies to cook and perform daily living activities independently and safely.

Our Holistic Wellness program provides skills training, peer support, and creative expression through a variety of classes, including yoga, art & pottery studios, horticulture, West African drumming, and the self-advocacy and peer support groups.

Our Mobile Technology program teaches individuals how to use the built-in accessibility features of an iPhone and iPad and to learn about assistive apps such as Seeing AI and Be My Eyes that help with daily living.

Our Leaning Lab supports participants in pursuing employment. It teaches them how to access the Windows platform using Fusion, a software program that combines screen reading (JAWS) and screen magnification (Zoom Text).

Low Vision Occupational Therapy Services

Many individuals experiencing vision loss struggle to use their functional vision to complete ordinary tasks. Our low vision services, provided by an accredited occupational therapist with specialty certifications in low vision, help them learn skills to maximize the vision they have.

VLANJ provides education in techniques and skills training in personal care, home management, financial management, reading, writing and assistive technologies. All services are provided under the guidance of an eye care specialist and are approved by most major insurance plans, including Medicare.



Image above is a VLANJ program participant in cooking class slicing tomatoes.



Image above is a VLANJ program participant in art class working with the art instructor.



Image above is a VLANJ program participant working on her low vision occupational therapy skills.

Community-Based Programs

VLANJ @Home

Our newest program was launched in September 2023, bringing the convenience of low vision occupational therapy services to a person's home. VLANJ@Home focuses on addressing safety and independence in completing daily living activities. The occupational therapist provides timely, specific individualized recommendations in strategies to adjust lighting, enhance contrast, improve household organization, and reduce the risk of falls and self-injury in the home. These services are provided under the guidance of an eye care specialist and are approved by most major insurance plans, including Medicare.

Orientation & Mobility Excursions

VLANJ offers community excursions with certified orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists, giving participants opportunities to learn and practice safe and proper techniques for navigating sidewalks and businesses, and crossing streets using mobility tools such as a white travel cane. Participants interact with business owners and employees, practicing self-advocacy and helping community members better understand the needs of individuals with vision loss.

Virtual Programs

VLANJ offers weekly classes and enrichment programs virtually over Zoom, so people can participate from home. Among them is the ARISE speaker series, which features inspiring leaders with vision loss who achieved their dreams and motivate others to pursue their own personal and professional goals. STRIVE is a monthly peer support program. Tech Talks delves into accessible technologies each month, and our VLANJ Voices program addresses mental health, O&M and other health-related topics. We also offer a one-day educational program called LIFT in both Spanish and English. LIFT provide education and resources for individuals newly adjusting to vision loss and their family members.



Image above is a VLANJ program participant working on orientation and mobility skills in Denville.



Image above is a VLANJ program participant working on technology skills with his iPhone.

Events

During its 80th anniversary year, Vision Loss Alliance of New Jersey hosted two memorable and successful fundraising events: the second annual **Day of Giving** in June and **Tasting in the Dark** during Blindness Awareness Month in October.

The Day of Giving raised more than \$10,000, surpassing a goal of \$8,888 set in honor of VLANJ's 80th year. The event garnered shout-outs from two nationally recognized low-vision advocates. Donors included 21 program participants. VLANJ Vice President for Development and Communications Jennifer Singer thanked all donors for "their understanding of how vital our programs are for maximizing the independence and life satisfaction of adults with vision loss or blindness." In a video posted on social media, Hobie Wedler, a Ph.D. chemist and sensory expert born without sight, credited VLANJ with "reshaping what it means to have vision loss in this sighted world that we live in."

Glimpsing Vision Loss

In October, Wedler headlined VLANJ's **Tasting in the Dark** at the Park Avenue Club in Florham Park. Wedler led the 130 guests in sampling wines paired with music while they wore light-blocking eye shades.

With tastings poured, Wedler directed everyone to sniff and taste the first wine as he played Dave Matthews' "Walk Around the Moon." When the song ended, he asked the crowd to guess the wine's color and type and describe the flavors. On the third wine, guests were asked to describe its differences to the second wine, a Sauvignon Blanc. Plenty of guests confidently called out "Chardonnay" and described different flavors, only for Wedler to inform them the two tastings were the same wine.

Joe Cicchetti said "the experience was a lot of fun — and enlightening." Cicchetti and his wife, Antoinette, made VLANJ one of their charities of choice years ago because "I can see the true benefit of what they do."



Image above is of Tasting in the Dark attendees enjoying the wine tasting.



Image above is the VLANJ staff celebrating 80 years at the Day of Giving event.

Recognizing VLANJ's Pillars

VLANJ President and CEO Bill Schuldt honored VLANJ's pillars, the participants, staff, instructors, donors and volunteers who have provided "invaluable contributions to our past success along with their contributions to our future."

Schuldt thanked VLANJ participants for being loyal advocates. They "have been at the center of everything we have done and will continue to drive our efforts." Tasting in the Dark was generously sponsored by: New Jersey Natural Gas; Modera Wealth Management; Samsara Vision; General Vision Services; Thatcher McGhee's; Carl and Sue Augusto; Kelly and Kevin Bleach; and Hoby Wedler, Ph.D.

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VLANJ's Journey Through 8 Decades

1943

New Jersey Association for the Blind Created

Social club in Newark for camaraderie
and to challenge societal biases.



Image above is a black and white picture of program participants enjoying time together.

1955

NJFFB Opens Summer Camp for Blind Women

As NJ Foundation for the Blind (NJFFB), the organization opens a summer camp for blind women at Diamond Spring Lodge in Denville. The founders focus on women's needs because they have fewer options for leading an independent life at that time.



Image above is of two VLANJ program participants working with a yoga instructor.

1991

A Focus on Independence

A year-round independent skills training program for men and women is added at Diamond Spring Lodge. Technology courses follow.



Image above is of VLANJ program participants using long white canes walking outside.

2018 - Present

Introduced New Innovative Programs

Low vision occupational therapy, virtual programs, community-based programs, and VLANJ@Home help bring VLANJ into its 80th year serving 300 adults with vision loss in programs.