**The**

****

**Advocate**

**Summer Edition 2019**

**PCB- A Peer Network for All Impacted by Vision Loss**

PENNSYLVANIA COUNCIL OF THE BLIND

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MISSION

To promote independence and opportunities for people with vision impairments.

VISION

To continue to be recognized as the leading advocacy organization for people with vision impairments in Pennsylvania. The aim of all our efforts is to encourage and assist people in achieving their potential as valued members of society. PCB assistance, advocacy, and encouragement will be carried out in such areas as, but not limited to, all aspects of accessibility, transportation, education, and employment.

The PCB Advocate is available by network subscription in large print, braille, audio cartridge and email. Send changes of address or format preference to the PCB office. Contents are available to the public via pcb1.org and our information line at 773-572-6314.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Articles in this publication reflect the views of the individual writers. They do not necessarily represent the views and policy of the PCB.

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If you wish to submit articles for consideration, submission deadlines are March 1, June 1,

September 1 and November 20

Send articles to ADVOCATE,

c/o Sue Lichtenfels Email- advocate@pcb1.org or 96 Robb Hollow Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15243.

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The Currency of Commitment

By Sue Lichtenfels, President

As we work toward achieving the council’s mission, we often challenge the beliefs of others. Sometimes though, it is necessary for us to take a step back and examine our own beliefs and the practices we support.

Two years ago, we in PCB voted on an amendment to drop the payment of dues as the mechanism for joining our organization. Proponents of keeping dues chiefly argued that payment of dues insures commitment to the organization. More recently, in response to the mere suggestion of ACB’s antiquated dues structure, a staffer responded that dues allow people to feel they have “skin in the game.” Essentially, that dues make people feel they are making a financial commitment to the organization. Based on my twelve years of involvement at the leadership level, I believe this is a flawed way of thinking that jeopardizes our organization.

Consider the many commitments you’ve made in your life. They may include marriage, raising children, employment, or faith. Commitments require that we pay them special attention and give them priority in our lives. For commitment, Google provides synonyms such as allegiance, dedication, devotion, faithfulness, attentiveness, loyalty and bond. Many of us have made PCB such a commitment in our lives. Our commitment is year-round, and more valuable to the organization than $5. An imposed annual contribution does not carry the significance of commitment.

According to Urban Dictionary, “commitment is what transforms the promise into reality.” Commitment means going beyond showing interest or offering token support such as paying dues. It is doing, to the best of one’s abilities, all he or she can to accomplish the goal or achieve the mission. The act of paying dues does not move PCB closer to its mission. Commitment to the council means volunteering to do things like working on projects, speaking up at public meetings, being a peer mentor, participating in discussion calls, attending council events, contacting legislators, leading teams and chapters, organizing outreach activities, supporting fundraising efforts, giving community presentations, etc. Commitment is engaging in transformative action, not making a simple business transaction.

While it would be nice to believe that with every dues payment comes commitment, the reality is quite different. People join for different reasons. Some may be fully committed to the council. But others may join for the newsletter, because someone twisted their arm, or just to make a gesture of support. If the council starts offering incentives to join, the true intention for paying dues will become even more muddled. Payment of dues does not guarantee a person’s commitment.

It’s important to remember the council is a volunteer-dependent organization. Its most valuable currency is the people who do the work, not the funds generated from dues. When the council goes around selling membership as commitment, it sends the opposite message. The psychological impact of paying dues is that people feel they have met their commitment to the organization, and they need not do more. So, while they may now have “skin in the game,” the organization is no closer to achieving its mission.

It shouldn’t be a surprise to anyone that the council struggles with engaging people. Beyond not volunteering, people are not actively participating. Because council leaders have fooled themselves into believing that every dues-paid individual has made a commitment to council activities, much time and resources have been wasted trying to capture this phantom commitment. . Engagement will become an even greater challenge as the council focuses on boosting membership numbers and dues revenue.

Setting a price on commitment brings with it some rather disturbing practices. When the council says commitment is worth $5, it completely devalues those who offer real commitment. Morale is depleted further when, at the end of the year, the council turns around and asks the people who have been doing and giving all year to “prove” their commitment by paying dues. On the other hand, by setting such low standards for commitment from others, the council reinforces societal attitudes that lowered expectations for the blind are okay. It’s a patronizing practice when the council allows them to think that their $5 payment satisfies their obligation to the organization.

Clearly payment of dues has nothing to do with commitment to the organization. Dues are insignificant to the payer and inconsequential to the organization’s mission. Payment of dues provides no mechanism for determining a person’s intention. By believing in this false assumption, we do damage to our organization and disrespect our most precious resource.

What’s Happening with BBVS & OVR?

By Christine Hunsinger, Second Vice President

This is a brief overview of the happenings at the Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) and its parent agency, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) as of June 1, 2019.

There are four topics in this short update from PCB’s Advocacy and Government Affairs team.

First, OVR has named a new director. OVR has had an Acting Director since about June of 2018. Shannon Austin, who had been the District Administrator of the Pittsburgh BBVS Office for the past 2 years, was named the Director of OVR effective May 26, 2019. As you may recall, BBVS has also been without a permanent director since July of last year. Hopefully, this OVR hiring means that we will soon be able to go from an Acting Director of BBVS to a job announcement and then selection of a Director of BBVS as well. Shannon has experience in both the OVR and BBVS areas here in Pennsylvania. She brought several innovative programs to the Pittsburgh BBVS office during her time there.

Second, we hope that we are getting close to putting to rest the topic of combining all services of OVR and BBVS as a cost-cutting measure for now. A work group that included Representatives from the Client Assistance Program, PCB, several other blindness stakeholder groups, and outside rehabilitation experts put together a paper explaining why we think that blindness services should not be combined with the general OVR services. We expect that this paper will be presented at the OVR Board meeting on June 13 to reinforce this opinion to all decision makers. In support of our position, we used evidence from University studies, a letter from Governor Ridge explaining the rationale he used when moving BBVS from the Department of Public Welfare to the Department of Labor and Industry in 1999, Anecdotal information from several states demonstrating better work outcomes for people being served by employees specializing in blindness-related services instead of generally-trained employees, and a letter of expert testimony from Dr. Fred Schroeder, a former head of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Once the questions started coming from legislators, stakeholders, and members of consumer groups, the Department of Labor and Industry said at every opportunity that there was no such consolidation plan currently being considered. The question was brought up at the meeting of the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council and will also be brought up at the Advisory Council of the Blind of Pennsylvania on June 12 so that we are sure to have notified all concerned about our position on this issue.

Third, because of a budget shortfall in OVR, it has been proposed that Order of Selection be closed on July 1, 2019. What this would mean is that if you don’t already have an open case with BBVS by July 1, 2019, after they take your information and determine that you could qualify for vocational rehabilitation services, you will be put on a waiting list. We don’t have any information about how long this might last. Because this would be a change to the Combined State Plan for Pennsylvania, public meetings were required to be held about the Proposal and were held on May 22. Comments were taken by the Department of Labor and industry until June 4. They then sent this information to the federal Administrators at RSA for approval. By the time you read this article changes possibly influenced by public comment will have taken place.

The final information that we are presenting is an update on the survey that PCB sponsored to obtain people’s opinions on the good and bad of BBVS services. While we work toward an in-depth report of findings for our fall newsletter, we can report some quick observations from the initial data. We received 85 responses to the survey. As we looked at the responses, we noticed several items which we expect to bring to the attention of BBVS Administrators. Many people didn’t get documents in a preferred format when they were sent information from BBVS. Although we know that the appeals process language including instructions to ask the Client Assistance Program for help if appealing a BBVS determination are in the correspondence, People didn’t realize that they had been given that information. This may be a result of not getting correspondence in a preferred format. Around half of the responses indicated that people didn’t recall being told about consumer groups which might be able to give them support during their journey to employment and through the changes involved because of vision loss. More than half of the responses indicated that those completing the survey didn’t feel that they had input when employment plans were being written. More than a quarter of those completing the survey felt that they were steered in a direction chosen by BBVS counselors. Forty percent of those completing the survey said that they underwent an evaluation process to determine the practicality of their vocational goals. Seventy-seven percent of those completing the survey said that they waited more than four months from the initial contact with BBVS before having meaningful conversations with staff who could help them achieve their vocational goals. Since we got completed surveys from folks served by all BBVS offices, we will also be looking to see if some offices consistently got a higher satisfaction rating from the clients who completed the survey

The Advocacy and Governmental Affairs team worked on additional items in this quarter, but we felt that writing an article about the issues surrounding BBVS were a more important task for this edition of The PCB Advocate. Please continue to read our emails and listen to the announcements on the PCB Information Line for additional advocacy news and needs.

PCB Conference Planning Update

By Tom Burgunder, Conference Coordinator

Hello, everyone! It has been rainy in Pittsburgh this week as I sit  down to write this article. I hope you are thinking ahead and  preparing to join us in Harrisburg at our annual Conference and Convention.

It is scheduled from Thursday October 17 through October 20 at the Crowne Plaza Harrisburg-Hershey. The address is: 23 S. 2nd Street, Harrisburg, Pa. 17101. Many of you may remember PCB last held its Convention in this hotel in 2016. It is conveniently located just a few blocks from the bus/train station. Since our last visit, the Crowne Plaza has made several improvements including the addition of a Starbucks in the lobby, as well as Keurig-style coffee maker and small refrigerator in every guest room. For the weekend, the hotel is also providing a 15 percent discount at its on-site restaurant (not including alcohol or Starbucks) for PCB’s overnight attendees.

Regarding hotel reservations, the hotel advises as follows:  guests can call directly at 717-234-5021 and reference the PA Council of the Blind or block code PCB to reserve rooms. The group rates include singles (1 King) at a rate of $94 and Doubles (2 Queens) at a rate of $104, plus tax. The overnight block is scheduled from October 16, 2019 through October 19, 2019. The room rate is good three days before and three days after the conference.

Conference Events begin on Thursday, October 17, 2019. The Board will meet  at 4 p.m. All are invited to attend. I am asking chapters to  contribute at least 150 small items of the same kind to share with  everyone in the “goodie bags”. These items should be mailed to the PCB office ahead of the conference so registration packets can be assembled and ready to go when the registration desk opens at  5 p.m. The Thursday evening program begins at 7 p.m. with a  greeting and update by our President, Susan Lichtenfels, followed  by our first presentation which will surely challenge your beliefs. The evening program will continue with the first reading of a proposed bylaw amendment, announcements, and a fun-filled game for both participants and spectators alike.

Friday morning will start with a free continental breakfast for first-time conference attendees. Plans are underway for a redesigned audio dart tournament and clinic. An audio-described movie will be shown on Friday morning as well. And right now, the vendor hall is scheduled to open at 10 a.m.

Our Friday afternoon session will start at 1 p.m. Our Tech Team is planning an informative online shopping presentation. Guiding Eyes for the Blind will discuss modern orientation and mobility techniques for those using either a dog or cane. We are also hoping to have a presentation about marketing yourself and your image. The general session will be followed by three breakout sessions which will include an introduction to Daisy Formatting with AccessiDocs, an introduction to social media, and a group discussion about our personal experiences with challenging beliefs, hosted by our Vision Loss Resource Team. The busy Friday will conclude with our famous auction that night. Please  donate items and come out to participate in the fun and fundraising.

Our Saturday morning program  will open at 9 a.m. and will include a very special lineup of peers challenging beliefs. We’ll hear from Kristin Smedley, a mother of two blind boys and author of Thriving Blind, a collection of stories profiling successful blind individuals. Stef McCoy, a member of the Golden Triangle chapter will present how she is challenging beliefs with her “Bold Blind Beauty” blog and her newest venture, “Captivating Magazine.” Thomas Reid, PCB Board member and dynamic speaker will present about his podcast, “Reid My Mind Radio” and following your passion. We are working on finding one additional speaker for the morning. With such an amazing lineup, PCB will be opening our Saturday morning session to the community at-large. Special publicity and invitations will be disseminated to entities serving people of all ages who experience vision loss.

Our Saturday will progress as usual. After lunch we will have our business  meeting including team and project updates, election of officers, voting on bylaws, reading of resolutions, and more. The evening will begin with a cocktail hour when winners for the various raffles will be drawn. Our banquet will follow with our awards presentation. The after banquet  entertainment has not yet been finalized.

The breakfast on Sunday morning is scheduled. It will be followed  by a continuation of business. Resolutions will be read and voted  upon. We will have a Q&A session with both our out-going and in-coming Presidents. The conference will adjourn at 11:30 a.m.

If there are any concerns, please contact me or any member of my team. They are George Holliday, Chris Hunsinger, Susan Lichtenfels, Cathy Long, Rose Martin, Kelsey Nicolay, Jeanette Schmoyer, Roberta Simmons, and Jackie Wissinger. Reach me at 412-290-5481.

Please check your emails and the PCB Information Line for the soon-to-come schedule and the announcement about registration  form availability. I hope to see all of you at our Annual State Conference in Harrisburg.

A Request for Board and Officer Candidates

By the Nominating Team

This year at our conference and convention our membership in attendance will chart PCB's course for the foreseeable future. All officer positions and four board seats will be open for election. Because our president and first vice president are both completing their second term, the organization will be electing two new leaders; the highest-ranking officers of our organization.

If you are new to PCB and unfamiliar with our bylaws, the organization's board of directors includes five officer positions: president, first vice president, second vice president, secretary, and treasurer. The board further includes the positions of immediate past president, and eight directors. Officers and directors are eligible to serve two consecutive terms in the same position, with the exception of the offices of secretary and treasurer, the number of terms being unlimited.

In addition to all officer positions, the director positions open for election are as follows:

1. May Davis is completing the term of a former director and has decided not to seek election to a full term; therefore, the seat is uncontested.

2. Michael Gravitt is completing his first term and is eligible to seek a second term.

3. George Holliday is completing a first term and is eligible to seek a second term.

4. Thomas Reid is completing a second term and is ineligible to continue as a director, therefore, the seat is uncontested.

The nomination process determined by the Nominating Team is as follows:

1. If you wish to convey your interest in placing your name in nomination for an officer or board position, please submit a statement of intent to the Nominating Team no later than Monday, August 5th, 2019. Your statement of intent to serve is to include a brief bio and up to a three-sentence commentary explaining why you would wish to serve. Statements of intent may be submitted by email to nominations@pcb1.org, or in writing to Tony Swartz, 1944 Girard Ave, Allentown PA 18104.

2. Members declaring their intent to serve will be provided with the opportunity to address the membership through a pre-recorded statement. Candidates will be contacted and a recording time and method which best suits them will be arranged. Recordings will be scheduled in mid-August. These recordings will be disseminated in several ways including posted to our website, distributed on the cartridge with the fall edition of The PCB Advocate, included on the PCB Information Line, and mailed/emailed directly to chapter presidents.

3. A candidate’s recorded statement will be in the form of a roughly three-minute response to a list of three questions relative to service as a member of the board. Candidates will receive the list of questions well before the date of recording so that talking points may be prepared in advance. In addition, candidates will be given an additional two minutes to deliver a statement explaining their potential value to the board or cite their previous experience in leadership and/or advocacy.

4. Based on candidate statements, responses, and biographical information, the Nominating Team will prepare a slate to recommend to the membership. The recommended slate will be declared to the membership via the PCB-L listserv at least ten days prior to the first day of the conference. Individuals not included on the slate may, of course, be nominated from the floor during elections as may undeclared candidates. Candidates nominated from the floor who have not declared will be permitted two minutes to speak prior to the casting of ballots for the position.

If you have an interest in serving PCB as an officer or member of the Board of Directors and intend to stand for election, please submit your statement of intent as soon as possible. Should you have questions regarding the nominating process, contact Tony Swartz at 610-799-4565. Please read on for additional information which details both the responsibilities and expectations of members of the board, and suggested points to include within your biographical statement.

## **Basic Criteria for Nominating Board Members:**

I. Qualifications for Candidates for the PCB Board of Directors

 A. Background of candidate

1. Some degree of experience in advocacy activity.

2. Ability to participate on and/or chair a PCB Team.

3. Time available to work on one or more PCB teams.

 B. Preferred qualifications

1. Experience on one or more PCB teams and/or participation in a PCB chapter or affiliate.

2. Demonstrated leadership qualities.

3. Ability to communicate via email and have basic technology skills.

4. History of membership in the American Council of the Blind.

 C. Responsibilities of those serving on the board

In addition to officer responsibilities as enumerated in the organization's bylaws, it is expected that all members of the board will:

1. Attend all meetings of the PCB Board of Directors except for a medical or other compelling reason.

2. Attend a majority of the meetings of a team on which the board member serves.

3. If serving as a Team liaison, shall see that the team leader submits a team progress report two weeks prior to each board meeting.

4. Read all submitted team reports prior to the board meeting.

II. A candidate's bio shall be no more than 250 words and shall be submitted to the PCB Nominating Team by email or in writing, (reference the details above), no later than Monday, August 5, 2019. Candidate's bios shall include the following:

A. Advocacy participation/experience.

B. Past or present participation in a PCB chapter or affiliate and/or on a PCB team.

C. Reason for desiring a position on the PCB Board of Directors.

D. Incumbent candidates will discuss their previous attendance and participation during the last term served.

Prerecorded statements from candidates and biographical information shared with the team will be distributed to members of PCB through various PCB outlets as explained earlier.

The members of the 2019 PCB Nominating Team include: out-going President, Susan Lichtenfels, Board Member, Cathy Long, and Immediate Past President, Tony Swartz as Chair.

Fund Development Summer Update

By George S. Holliday, Team Leader

PCB 2019 Calendar Raffle

On behalf of the Fund Development Team, I thank those who participated in the raffle thus far. For those procrastinators, we are offering a half - price ticket. Any calendar raffle ticket purchased after June 1, will cost just $10, but it can only be used during the months of July, August and September.

Winners are based on the PA Lottery’s 7 p.m. Pick 3 (First Draw Only) Winning days and amounts are: holidays 7/4 and 9/2 $125; the 1st and 15th monthly $75; and all other days $30.

To acquire tickets, contact Christina in the PCB office at 717-920-9999 or toll-free 877-617-7407. Email her at pcboffice@pcb1.org. Good Luck! And thanks in advance for your support of PCB.

ACB Exhibit Hall Table

PCB is sponsoring a table at the 2019 ACB Conference. With assistance from Kathy Keck of Loving Touch Connection, (LTC), several items will be available for purchase for those attending the conference and those at home. Also, attendees will be able to enter a free drawing to win a unique LTC item while visiting the table. The exhibit hall will be open: Saturday from 1-5 p.m., Sunday through Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Now, for this fundraising event to be successful, we are requesting assistance from those attending the conference. By now, you have begun to schedule your daily activities. Please consider volunteering at the table and talking to visitors. To volunteer, contact me at 215-796-9813 or george.holliday@comcast.net.

For the summer season, LTC is offering a great promotion for PCB friends and ACB attendees. From June 15 through August 15, a set of summer themed salt and pepper shakers with watermelons and the “S” and “P” in braille are on sale for $13, regular $15. These glass shakers with metal tops are the perfect accent for picnics and patio dining. To purchase your set, stop by the PCB table in Rochester or call Kathy Keck, owner of LTC directly at 610-657-9869 if you will not be in attendance.

PCB and Amazon Smile

PCB has been a benefiting charity of Amazon Smile for a few years. If you purchase from Amazon Smile, is Pennsylvania Council of the Blind designated as your charity? Amazon Smile will donate .5% from your qualified purchases. It doesn’t cost you anything to sign up. So, what are you waiting for? Follow the steps below and choose Pennsylvania Council of the Blind as your designated charity.

Using the web browser on either your phone or computer, go to smile.amazon.com and sign in like you normally would to your Amazon account. Where it asks you what charity you would like to support, type Pennsylvania Council of the Blind and hit enter. (Just typing PCB brings up lots of hits that have nothing to do with our PCB.) When the resulting list of organizations appears, select Pennsylvania Council of the Blind. You will then land on an I accept page that says you agree to use [smile.amazon.com](http://www.smile.amazon.com) in order to ensure that PCB gets the .5% donation from your qualified purchases. Hence, every time you go to [smile.amazon.com](http://www.smile.amazon.com) and shop for qualified items, you will be donating to PCB. It’s important to note that if you purchase directly through the Amazon app or Alexa, purchases do not qualify for Smile. However, if you use the app or Alexa to place items in your cart, and then log-in to Smile.Amazon.com through an internet browser and purchase the items in your cart, PCB will get the donation. Have fun shopping!

Fresh Ideas

Finally, the PCB Fund Development Team is looking for new fundraising ideas and opportunities. If you have any, please consider sharing them with our team. If one of your ideas is selected and implemented by PCB, you will be rewarded with a gift card. Suggestions can be sent to me at george.holliday@comcast.net or 215-796-9813.

The Fun Is in Participating!

By Mary Ann Grignon, Auction Coordinator

By now I’ve reached out to our PCB chapter presidents about our 2019 live auction. Some have already committed to donating some great prizes. While we’d sure love for you to join us in Harrisburg, just as in past years, you do not have to be there in person to join in the fun and the bidding. We will once again have a dedicated phone line for bidders at home. But, would it entice you to try to save those pennies if I told you that the hotel has donated a one-night certificate which can be used for this year’s conference?

Speaking of donations, are you an entrepreneur with a service or product to donate? How about all you awesome bakers and crafters, have you considered contributing something special made with your own two hands?

For us mere mortals without any such talents, stay tuned to the PCB-L for suggested items and websites for your consideration when deciding what to contribute. As always, we will post the list of contributed items as it evolves.

Help PCB Honor Excellence

PCB will bestow its annual awards as part of its banquet celebration at the 2019 PCB Conference and Convention. The ceremony will take place Saturday evening, October 19 in Harrisburg at the Crowne Plaza Harrisburg-Hershey. Please take some time to consider and nominate deserving people and businesses for the awards. Criteria for each award follows. Members of PCB’s current Board of Directors are not eligible to be nominated.

Please email nominations to awards@pcb1.org or call the PCB office at 877-617-7407. Please include the following information about you and your nominee: name, mailing address, phone, and email address. Please indicate which award the nomination is for and share an explanation of why the nominee is deserving of the award. Nominations are due by Friday, August 30, 2019.

John A. Horst Champion of Independence

\* The award may be given to an individual who has:

A. performed at least 20 years of professional service in fields related to the rehabilitation or the education of people who are blind or visually impaired or

B. Dedicated more than 20 years of service to collective advocacy and public awareness efforts that promote independence and opportunity for people with blindness or vision loss.

\* Additionally, the recipient's service contributions must be well recognized in the community in which they live or throughout the state or nation as significant to the betterment of the lives of those with vision loss.

TheReImage Leadership Award

\* The recipient must have overcome both the real and perceived challenges of blindness or vision loss to achieve an active, multi-faceted life;

\* Have proven him/herself as a role model and leader within the blindness community through service, perseverance, empowerment, or achievement and;

\* Have demonstrated to the world, through his/her independence and action, TheReImage of people with vision loss

PCB Peer Excellence Award

\* The recipient must be or have been a member of the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind for more than 10 years;

\* Have provided a long history of volunteer service to PCB’s events, projects, or chapters and;

\* Have demonstrated distinguished service by taking on leadership roles within PCB or regularly going beyond expectations in service to PCB and fellow peers.

PCB Community Impact Award

\* The recipient of this award shall have made a significant difference in the lives of people with blindness or vision loss through a product, a service, or an employment practice that leads to greater independence and opportunity; or

\* This award may be presented to a corporation, agency, or foundation that has provided significant support to the mission or projects of PCB.

# A Request from the AccessiDocs Team

The AccessiDocs Team continues its work. We have just completed a project to convert into a Daisy3 navigable document a UPMC kidney transplant after care publication.

When we receive a request for a document conversion into Daisy3, our team prefers to receive the original document in some electronic format; a Word document, PDF, or the like. In this instance, we had no choice but to settle for a printed copy of the 120-page document. It was, therefore, necessary to scan in the document and convert it by means of optical character recognition (OCR) into an electronic format. Though OCR scanning has advanced considerably from its early days, those who have some experience into OCR scanning will know that an error rate of five to seven percent is quite common and considered good. To ensure a clean copy free from errors, once the document is scanned in, it is then necessary to compare each scanned page with the print version of the document, making corrections to the electronic version. This requires the assistance of a sighted individual.

While the team was fortunate to recruit a sighted individual to work with us for this project, we do not have a permanent member of the team to rely on for future projects. So once again we on the AccessiDocs team ask anyone out there who is able to read print to please consider joining our team. If you would like to join us or would have questions about what your assistance would require, please contact Tony Swartz at tbswartz@ptd.net or call 610-799-4565. Thank you for your consideration of our team's request.

Happenings from the Membership Team

By Mary Ann Grignon, Team Leader

First-Timer Opportunities:

Just as summer is heating up, so are your offerings from PCB. We are once again approaching the PCB annual conference and convention to be held from October 17-20 at the Crowne Plaza in Harrisburg. As in the past, we will be offering some first-timer opportunities. If you have never been to a PCB conference, you may qualify for one of our first-timer scholarships. One is for a current PCB peer who has never attended a conference. A second scholarship opportunity is for a person who has experienced their vision loss within the last five years who may or may not belong to PCB. What better gift could you give a friend than to let them know about these opportunities. If you have been to a conference, if you can remember back to your first, then you know how valuable the experience is. In either case, the attendee will receive a scholarship valued at up to $500 which will cover double occupancy overnight accommodations, ground transportation, conference registration and activities, and more. Anyone interested in these scholarships should write to me at maryanna0407@gmail.com to tell me of your interest and for which opportunity you are applying. Include your name, email address, phone number and a paragraph or two about how you hope to benefit from attendance at our 2019 conference in Harrisburg.

This year, our student opportunities are structured a bit differently. We are in search of individuals who are enrolled in post-secondary educational or vocational programs in Pennsylvania. We want to salute one person’s hard work and achievement by awarding a $500 cash prize. So, if you are over 18, blind or visually impaired, and seeking some sort of professional licensure, vocational certification, academic degree, or the like, we encourage you to fill out the application for the 2019 PCB Merit Award. The application can be downloaded from pcb1.org/meritaward or by request to pcboffice@pcb1.org. PCB will pay for the top three finalists to attend the conference weekend for the grand prize announcement. Please spread the word about these wonderful opportunities far and wide.

Calling Guide Dog Users and Supporters:

Psst! Did you hear? The buzz has been all about town. PCB now has a guide dog users and supporters affiliate, PAGDUS. We meet each even numbered month on the second Wednesday beginning at 7:15 p.m. The calls are informative and always interactive. Topics for discussion are endless from grooming tips to emergency preparedness to how do we deal with the public’s interaction with our service animals and really, anything of interest to us as guide dog users and those who support us. If you’d like to check us out, feel free to join us on August 14, by calling 605-313-4802, access code 985255#. We welcome your input, ideas and just your enthusiasm.

Monthly Discussion Calls:

On May 29th, ten of us called in to talk about getting out and about now that the good weather has arrived. I know, can you believe only ten people took advantage of the opportunity to share their experiences and get hints about ways to enjoy the outdoors, vacationing and just frolicking about? Well, let me entice you to think about joining the membership team for our upcoming calls by giving you just a glimpse of our discussion from this call.

Have you ever wanted to go to a baseball game but couldn’t figure out how to navigate the environment as a person with vision loss? Well, according to a few call attendees, you can call either security or guest services and they will greet you at the gate and get you to your seat, even stop to purchase food and drink. What about the play by play you ask? Call in advance to ask if they provide assisted listening devices and if that fails, bring a radio to listen in, keeping in mind that there will probably be a slight delay to the real-time action.

A couple of call attendees had some good advice about how to enjoy one of my favorite places, the beach. At lots of commercial beach sites, there are those who will set up a cabana and chairs for you either as an individual or for a group. When you go for a walk or into the water and you return to the sand, you can do a couple of things to get yourself back to your spot. First, if you are an iPhone user, download an app called iMove. Before you leave your cabana, create a voice note using the app. Now when you near that spot, the voice note will trigger and you will know it’s time to begin asking for assistance finding your exact location. The other thing you can do is to purchase a remote beeper system and when that voice note is triggered, begin pressing the locate button on your remote. Remember, people at the beach are in a happy place and are most likely willing to assist, you need only ask. My own advice to add one more layer of security is to make sure you have a very distinctive blanket, chair or towel to describe when seeking assistance.

Several call attendees sang the praises of app services like Uber, Lyft, Uber Eats, grocery delivery services and navigational apps which, simply put, have changed the game for blind travelers in a positive way.

As you can see, our discussion calls are all about you, all about sharing and learning from our peers. You don’t want to miss future calls. Stay tuned to the monthly PCB calendar either on the listserv or the information line for future call dates and descriptions.

Dialing for Danger

By Cathy Long with Martha Moser, Vision Loss Resource Team

When I was a student at the Overbrook School for the Blind, I took switchboard classes to learn this skill so I could work after school and some weekends. My teacher was Lucy Boyle, one in a million! I was scared to death of her, but I applied myself and learned all the things she had to teach me. It put me in good stead as I worked in my chosen field of clerical worker for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. After I finished the course, I then worked one school night evening and every other weekend. I was very honored to be one of the few students who earned money while I was still in high school.

To do the job, I needed to know how to dial the phone, which I did know already, but I also needed to memorize every extension in the school so that when I answered a call, I could route the call immediately where the caller wanted it to go. In those days’ phones did not have buttons. They had little holes all around the dial and a person would put certain fingers in the holes to dial the number. The easiest number to dial was one, because it was the first hole, and the number that took the longest to dial was zero because it was the last number around the dial.

But today things are much different. If you have a phone with keys on it, there is a method for people to dial the phone without looking. A member of the Vision Loss Resource Team told me recently that she was having difficulty dialing numbers because she could no longer see the numbers on the keypad and was not dialing correctly. I told her that it would be okay because she can learn to dial without seeing. Here is how it is done.

On the phone, there are four rows of numbers.

Row one: Numbers 1, 2, and 3.

Row two: Numbers 4, 5, and 6. We will call this the home row. Notice the 5 key usually has a dot on it or a slit on it at the end of the key to identify it under your finger.

Row three: Numbers 7, 8, and 9.

Row four: Star, 0, and pound, otherwise known as hashtag or #

As I stated already, the second row will be the home row. This is where three fingers will stay until a number is needed above or below the home row. You can use the pointer finger, the long finger, and the ring finger. This depends on what hand you use and how you will hold the phone. Here is how it works. Pretend for now that you are dialing with your right hand. The pointer will rest on the 4, the long finger will rest on the 5, and the ring finger will rest on the 6.

As an example, we will dial the PCB Information line. This is a great resource for people who want information but do not have access to a computer. That number is 1-773-572-6314. Note: this is a long-distance number and will cost unless you have an unlimited long-distance plan on your phone.

With the fingers on the home row, bring up the pointer finger one row to hit 1. Then the pointer finger goes back to the home row so it can go down one row to dial 77. Then the pointer finger once again rests on the home row on the 4 again. Now it is time for the ring finger to move up one row to the 3. Now that ring finger comes back to rest on the home row on the 6. Our next number is 5. What great luck! The middle finger does not have to move, it just has to press the 5 and stay put. Now we need 7. Remember what the pointer finger did last time when it wanted 7? Yes, it’s going to have to do that again. Down one row. Back up to the home row on the 4 it goes. Now the next number we need is 2. Get that middle finger ready to go up and get that number and push it, then come back to the home row and rest on the 5. Now the ring finger is in luck, because the next number to dial is 6 and the ring finger is already on it. Push down. Now the ring finger must find the 3 key. Just up one row and it is there. Push that. Now back to the home row the ring finger goes to rest on 6. There are only two more numbers to dial and the pointer will have the pleasure. First it goes up one row to press the 1, back to the home row on the 4 and it pushes the 4 key.

If you have a cordless phone, do you know you can dial a number first, and then press the “talk” button? Try it. You will hear the dial tone quickly followed by the number you dialed. This is most important for people who have trouble dialing as fast as the phone company requires.

You can practice this technique dialing your own number and most definitely, the PCB Information Line. I encourage you to call the PCB Information Line regularly to stay up to date on the offerings PCB has for you.

I hope you have found help in this article. Please call regularly to listen to the PCB monthly calendar. It is usually updated by the 3rd of the month. Team member, Ed Facemyer, does a fantastic job keeping the Information Line updated. Please use it and feel free to practice your new dialing skills to attend any PCB discussion calls. I am always amazed by the things I thought I knew but learned new things by listening in on the PCB discussion calls.

Why did I call this article “Dialing for Danger?” Because that is what a few of us switchboard students referred to as we were learning and perfecting phone skills with Lucy Boyle. Looking back on that, I realize I was just a silly teen-age girl and I don’t know what she saw in me to believe I had what it took to do the job. It turns out she was right. I credit much of my success to Mrs. Boyle because she taught me so many things to help me get ready to work as an adult. I am retired now but as you can see, still actively engaged in the community and still typing!

Fetching Highlights and the Dog Days of Summer

By Rose Martin, PAGDUS President and

Rebecca Ilniski, PAGDUS Recording Secretary

The dog-days of summer are fast approaching, and Pennsylvania Guide Dog Users and Supporters (PAGDUS) are preparing for our third meeting on Wednesday, August 14, at 7:15 p.m. We wanted to extend another tail-wagging welcome to all of you, remind you who we are, and share some quick highlights of our discussion topics from previous meetings.

Our membership is not only open to guide dog users, but those who support or are interested in guide dogs. We also welcome all dogs and humans, not just those living in Pennsylvania. Our chapter meets on the second Wednesday of each even-numbered month at 7:15 p.m. Eastern. We conduct business to start each meeting, then lead into the discussion. It’s never too late to join our chapter for 2019. Please send a check to the PCB office with “PAGDUS” in the memo field. For current members of PCB, our dues are $2. If you are not yet a member of PCB, dues are $12. Subscribe to our chapter listserv to participate in online discussions, receive detailed notes, and access to meeting recordings. Send a blank email to pagdus-l-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. You will instantly receive an email response to which you need only reply to confirm.

After the business portion of our meetings comes the fun. In February, we discussed grooming and preparing your guide dog for the weather. We discussed different types of equipment that can be purchased from the following companies: Ruffwear, Amazon, and Chewy. For warm weather, we talked about cooling vests and collars, Pawz booties, and Paw wax. The Pawz booties and paw wax such as Musher’s Secret are used to protect dogs’ paws during the summer for walking on hot surfaces. Cooling vests and collars help to keep our pups cool if we have to be out in the summer heat. During cold weather, Musher’s Secret and Ruffwear booties can protect our dogs’ paws from the snow and ice as well as the salt on sidewalks. There are also jackets that you can purchase from Ruffwear and Amazon as well as other sites to keep your dogs warm. We closed out the meeting by touching on grooming. Some products covered were the Kong ZoomGroom, the Furminator, slicker brushes, and solutions to keep your pup’s coat feeling great such as bath wipes and dry shampoo.

Our April topic of discussion was Bring Your favorite Toys and Treats. Some favorite toys discussed included: tennis balls, supersonic toys, Kongs, GoughNuts, Wubbas, durable NylaBones, antlers, and Tuffy Toys. Wubbas are made by Kong, and are nylon rope toys with a tennis ball attached that also squeaks. Dogs enjoy playing tug of war or fetch with Wubbas. Kong has also expanded their Wubba line to include soft animal Wubbas which have plush animal heads and softer ropes for more gentle play. Supersonic toys contain squeakers which only dogs can hear. They are great for playing while traveling as an extra reward for your dog, or in the office so that no humans are distracted by the squeaking. One good brand of supersonic toys is HearDoggy. A GoughNut is a doughnut-shaped toy that is made of thick rubber for strong chewers; there are now additional shapes beyond the original GoughNut. Dogs can use GoughNuts as a chew toy or for fetch. GoughNuts claims to provide a guaranteed free replacement, excluding shipment, “**If your dog chews through the outside wear layer of any GoughNuts Ring or Stick, Green, Black, Yellow or Orange, to expose the indication layer, Red, GoughNuts will replace your toy.”** Many of these toys that were mentioned can be purchased from Amazon, Chewy, and tractor supply stores.

There are several brands of treats for dogs. Mini Milk-Bones, Charlee Bears, baby carrots, and even your dog’s kibble rationed out, are good options for treats. It’s best to avoid rawhide or anything that your dog can splinter and swallow that may be dangerous. It’s always a good idea to keep your dog’s weight down. These are good low-calorie options. All these treats can be purchased from Amazon, Chewy, and pet stores.

We concluded our discussion by talking about play which is crucial for balancing work and play for your guides. Some members talked about getting a basket and having their dog learn to throw the Kong in the basket. The member taught her dog with the clicker to drop the kong in the basket. Hide-and-seek is also a great game to play with your dog. Having or going to a good fenced-in yard is an excellent way of getting that penned-up energy out.

Be sure to join us for our next PAGDUS meeting on August 14 at 7:15 p.m. Eastern. Dial 605-313-4802 and enter passcode 985255#.

The Heat and Sun Stop No One at LVCB

By Liz Oleksa, LVCB President

As the summer heat and sun begin to take over in the Lehigh Valley, no one at LVCB can be stopped. Our chapter continues to be active not only during our monthly meetings, but also with members of our community. LVCB takes great pride in the fact that we are active as a whole chapter, but also able to share in personal successes and accomplishments of our members. Starting with the bigger picture and narrowing down to our individual members, we look at the current happenings at LVCB.

We are continuing our fundraising efforts through selling Gertrude Hawke Chocolate bars. We have a selection of solid milk chocolate, solid dark chocolate, Peanut Butter Melt-away, Dark Chocolate Raspberry, Dark Chocolate Mint, Chocolate Lava Cake and Dark Chocolate Coconut Crème. Each bar is only $1, allowing us to earn 40 cents per bar. All our members are active in our chocolate bar sales, even showing some competition among members. We look forward to selling our bars throughout the remainder of the year. If anyone is interested in purchasing any bars, please contact our fundraising committee: dmichels@yahoo.com.

The Lehigh Valley Council of the Blind partnered with the Center for Vision Loss and the Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living to host an Accessible Voting Machine Demonstration on April 11, 2019. This event was a huge success, bringing in almost 40 attendees. After demonstrations of both models of ES&S voting systems, all attendees were able to do hands-on testing. This was an excellent experience for all who participated. Thank you to Tony Swartz for helping to set up this great opportunity.

Our June meeting will be an exciting one again this year, as we will be holding our 2nd Annual Bowling with Boy Scouts event. This year, our event will be held at the Rosebowl, 801 N. 15th Street, Allentown, PA, from 10 a.m. – 1 p.m. Our members will be teaming up with Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts to give them a hands-on opportunity to interact with people who are visually impaired while enjoying an afternoon of bowling. This offers a great experience and allows the young men to earn credits toward achieving the “Disabilities” Merit Badge.

Moving the focus to our individual members, we congratulate the following members for being chosen as Member of the Month during the last quarter: April, Dorothy Montero; May, Joanne Rath; and June, Logan Oleksa. Each Member of the Month is chosen and acknowledged at our meetings for the special gifts he or she brings to LVCB.

At LVCB, our members, whether young or young at heart, share the highlights of our chapter with all whom we meet in the community. A shout-out goes to our newest member, Alex Waldron, a senior at Emmaus High School. Alex joined LVCB in May and is anxious to share in our mission while bringing a younger perspective. Alex is legally blind in both eyes since birth. She has a passion for foreign language and bettering herself and others through education. She will be graduating from Emmaus High in June, attending Lehigh-Carbon Community College in the fall, and then transferring to Kutztown University. She will pursue a degree in Special Education with a focus on teaching students who are blind and visually impaired. Our Junior member, Logan, met Alex in German II class, where Logan encouraged her to check out our chapter. Welcome Alex!!!

Congratulations to Debbie Rozear for her latest promotion at the Lehigh Valley CIL!  Debbie has worked at the CIL since May of 2004, providing guidance to all those she meets. Debbie is an excellent resource for anyone living with a disability, and even more of an inspiration to those at a difficult time in their life. Many who meet Debbie have found her to be an outstanding mentor and friend.

Jeanette and Dick Schmoyer were busy this past month, celebrating four graduations in their family. We wish them success in their future endeavors.

Enjoying a Bike Ride

By Joanne Rath

I have always enjoyed summer! I enjoy being outside, and spending time with family and friends. Every summer, since I was a little girl, we traveled to the Jersey Shore, specifically to Avalon, NJ. We usually spent two weeks there. I enjoyed taking long walks on the beach with my family and friends, and alone with my guide dog. I enjoyed walks during my college years, and later when I had young children too. My husband and children would stay on the beach making castles while I walked. I would tell my husband to start watching for me in an hour. It always worked out, even though my dog really loved the ocean!

So, let’s forward to the summer of 2016, which is when a new adventure began. We started going to Wildwood, NJ with our daughter and her family. That summer, we decided to rent a surrey. The surrey held 6, and we could all peddle. I think that my husband, Hank, and Katie’s husband, Joe, got quite a workout that day. The rest of us were not helping quite as much as we should have. Hank and I enjoyed it so much that the next day, we rented a 2-person surrey. When we returned home from vacation, Hank began researching the purchase of a surrey.

Quite a few years ago, we had a tandem, and we rode it a lot for a while. As I got older, I was not as comfortable because my balance has never been exceptional, and I felt a bit insecure when we rode. We found that another problem with a tandem is with the riders positioned one behind the other, it made it difficult to have a conversation.

Hank found a company in Illinois that makes a “quadricycle.” We were able to go to see one. Fortunately for us, there was one at the manufacturer’s marketing company, located near Lancaster, PA. They told us that if we liked the bike, we could buy it, and they would send another one to the marketing company. We bought it.

Our bike is a four-wheeled bike, and we sit side-by-side. It has a recumbent seat, 21 speeds, a steering wheel for the driver, and a hand break. It has a canopy, and a light, making us very visible when we ride. In the 2 years that we have had the bike, we have ridden about 455 miles. I am glad to be able to tell you that we are in our late 60’s and staying active!

For further information, you can email me at jrath1@rcn.com or contact the company directly. Their website is Vierbike.com. Hank noticed when he was looking on the site that shipping is free! Enjoy your summer! Go outside and be as active as you can!

Celebrate Your Sensuality

By William H. Grignon

Winter is a slushy memory. Spring unsheathes in a moist green sigh. Summer beckons with a sultry smile. It's time to shed those clumsy layers, step out from your stuffy hibernation, and dance in the sunshine!

Why not treat yourself to a feast of sensuous experiences this summer? So what if you might not be able to stand in awe of a technicolor sunset or observe the human parade from a sidewalk café. Vision loss shouldn't stop us from enjoying all that summer has to offer.

Get out in the sun, feel the warm breezes on your skin, luxuriate in a long afternoon languor. Study after study show that exposure to sunlight improves your mood, feeds your skin with Vitamin D, and enhances your sense of well-being. Besides, it just feels so glorious! Just remember the UV shades and the SPF!

Go jump in the lake! Or the river, the pond, a pool, or maybe a cool bath. Water is the ultimate rejuvenator and combining it with sunlight, fun, and the play of buoyancy, ebb, and flow gives you a chance to feel lighter, freer, more alive. And while you are playing in all that H2O, don't forget to get a goodly amount inside to wake up your cells and keep you hydrated.

While you are treating your skin, give your nose a treat. Plant some aromatic herbs and flowers. Not into the whole gardening thing? Try some new bath and body oils, maybe a new sunscreen or hair mask. Light a scented candle. Maybe you will find a new you in a new smell.

Sick of listening to the same song lists? Explore new music on Pandora, Spotify, Tune-In, or any of a number of free apps. Find stuff that makes you feel good and maybe even stuff that makes you dance. Remember, dancing can be one of the best ways to get that cardio workout. You can dance by yourself or, for a real blast, get out there and dance in public, not caring what anyone thinks of your bodacious moves. The key is to move --- and have fun!

Speaking of moving, why not try something just for the thrill of it. People with vision loss do bungee-jumping, skydiving, parasailing, zip-lining, water-skiing, white-water-rafting, canoeing, kayaking, and even ax-throwing! Admittedly, some of these are a little spendy and you might have to call on your advocacy skills to get the operators to take you on, but you will store up memories for a lifetime and be a hit at social gatherings.

Weary of Siri, JAWS, and all those electronic voices? Turn off the devices and tune in to the world around you. Listen to the myriad birdsongs. Feel the insects thrum and chirp. Revel in the majesty of a thunderstorm and the hypnotic rhythms of rain falling through leaves. Fall asleep to the many voices of the wind. Slow down, open up, and feel a part of the big beautiful world.

Finally, try some new summer recipes. The Internet is chock full of food, drink, dessert, and other delectable ideas. Think fresh new combinations. Summer is a time for fruit and fresh vegetables. Maybe try a fast for a day. Maybe try juicing for a week. Foody experts say that your summer food should be as light as your summer clothing.

And while you are treating yourself, treat others. Go to new places, meet new people, try new things, take your smile out of your pocket and share it with others. Try to be as bright, warm, and vital as the summer day around you!

Summer Senses

By Liz Oleksa

The warmth of the sun beats down on my skin.

Lush blades of grass beneath my feet.

The scent of lilac blooms float through the air.

The fresh earth covers my hands as I prepare the ground for new plants.

The bird songs heard from high in the trees.

The distant laughter of children playing outdoors.

The smell of grilling hamburgers on charcoal grills.

Festive music drifts through the neighborhood.

The sun shines through the occasional passing clouds.

My toes buried in the warmth of the beach sand.

The distinct and unquestionable smell of sunscreen fills the air.

The salty sweat that glistens my skin dries.

The squawks of soaring seagulls from high above.

Children squealing as they race their kites up and down the shoreline.

The crashing ocean waves calmly soothe my ears.

The sounds of the seaside resonate through the summer air.

The rays of sun peer through partly clouded skies.

The drying grass fields flatten below my strolling feet.

The undeniable scent of funnel cake and cotton candy dance through the crowds.

Carnival prizes and plastic bags filled with water and goldfish fill my arms.

The dinging of prize bells and the laughter of clowns drift past the bustling people.

Giggling children run by with balloon animals and face paintings.

Hot dogs and cheesesteaks sold in stands throughout the fair.

The summer carnival music puts a smile on the faces of all.

The summer can be enjoyed by every person, even without sight.

The senses of the body mixed with the scents of summer make a beautiful couple.

Survey Results on Voice-Activated Smart Speakers

By Jule Ann Lieberman, Assistive Technology Specialist, TechOWL

Last year, an article appeared in The PCB Advocate called “At Your Beck and Call.” In it, I requested survey participants to provide data on their use of devices such as the Amazon Echo (Alexa), Google Home, and Apple’s HomePod. I want to first thank the 40 respondents who provided feedback either through the on-line survey or from the telephone survey interview. Smart speakers are Internet-connected devices that allow you to obtain information, play music, and operate some appliances by using voice commands. I presented the survey results at three conferences: Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) in late January, California State University Northridge (CSUN) in March, and Penn-Del AER Conference in Harrisburg in late April. Each presentation provided me an opportunity to add feedback from conference attendees. I was also able to hear about new products and skills from Amazon. The following is a synopsis of the survey results and new findings from the conferences.

I want to first set the stage with how Americans indicate they use these smart speakers. According to “Smart Speaker Report,” around 39 million (1 out of 6) American adults use a smart speaker. This report, found at CNBC.com had results similar to my survey results. The report indicated percentages of use as follows: 60 percent using the devices to play music for guests, 30 percent asking it a general question, and 28 percent asking it for weather updates. Thirty-one percent of smart speaker owners are asking their virtual assistants to control other devices in the home, with 61 percent controlling devices in the living room and 38 percent controlling devices in the kitchen.

With regard to my survey, a total of 40 people responded: 30 identified themselves as blind, 8 as having low vision and 2 provided no identification of vision status. Those currently using a smart speaker numbered 28 with 8 indicating they were not currently using a smart speaker. Of those not currently using a smart speaker, 3 indicated they were planning on

acquiring a device, 3 had no interest in acquiring a device, and 2 did not answer the question.

The most popular smart speakers were those from Amazon: 14 Amazon Echos, 14 Amazon Dots, and 3 Amazon Taps. The remaining speakers being used were: 3 Google Homes, 5 Google Minis, and only one person identified as using a HomePod from Apple. One possible explanation for the popularity of the Amazon and Google devices is the lower price compared to the Apple product.

I divided the questions into two categories; listening tasks and daily living tasks. Listening tasks included the following results: 60 percent listen to music, 61 percent check the weather, 50 percent listen to news, 18 percent listen to books, 16 percent listen to podcasts, and 19 percent play games. Results within daily living tasks included: 52 percent set timers, 48 percent set alarms, 15 percent place hands-free phone calls, 48 percent set appointment reminders, 25 percent shop, and less than 10 percent control appliances. When comparing my results with those from the survey of Americans; blind and low-vision users perform very similar tasks except for using the smart speaker to operate an appliance.

Let me share some of the feedback I gathered from conference attendees. Some people have used MyBuddy, which can place a phone call by voice to a contact list saved in the Alexa app. This saves time if an emergency call is needed. Smart speakers can be paired with a smartphone and be used as a speaker. Some use the smart speaker to play books that have been downloaded to the smartphone’s BARD app. Amazon and Google are moving toward home automation. Amazon described the Amazon Microwave which is controlled by an Amazon Dot and security features which can be paired with security alarms to detect glass breaking or smoke alarms while you are away. Through the Alexa Guard you will be notified on the Alexa app and your security company will be notified.

When asked about setting up the smart speaker, 50 percent indicated they had a friend or family member set up the device, 25 percent said they set it up themselves based on experience with connecting to Wi-Fi, and 1 indicated he used a manual or tutorial to accomplish setup. Similar percentages were noted when asked how they learned about a smart speaker. Fifty percent said a friend or family member recommended the smart speaker. Respondents listed three barriers to using the smart speakers: not having Internet Access, concerns of privacy because of the microphone, and my favorite, “I don’t need another gadget.”

It is not surprising that persons who are blind or have low vision are much like the rest of Americans who find smart speakers helpful. As the costs of these speakers continue to become more affordable, their popularity will grow even faster. I learned from a conference that a veteran’s program is already providing smart speakers as a tool to help veterans who are blind or have low vision remain living independently. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in Massachusetts is currently conducting a pilot study where they provide the Amazon smart speakers to older adult customers along with set up and training.

If readers have more ideas on creative ways to use a smart speaker, please share with our peers by sending a message to our listserv or call the PCB office to pass it on. Many thanks to all the great survey participants from PCB!

The Bright Side of Darkness by J.E. Pinto: Book Review and Author Interview

By Rev. Rebecca L. Holland

Previously Published on BeckieWrites.com

The Bright Side of Darkness is an award-winning novel. It is available on Kindle, Audible, Barnes & Noble, and Book Share.

The Bright Side of Darkness Includes One of the Best Depictions of a Blind Character in Fiction That I’ve Ever Read.

As a person with sight loss, I am always searching for books that include characters with disabilities, especially characters who are blind or have low vision. The Bright Side of Darkness by J.E. Pinto is one of the best depictions I have ever read of a blind character in fiction. Often, characters who are blind are written in a way that is both flat and two-dimensional. Many times, authors fall prey to the temptation to characterize a blind character simply by his or her lack of sight. I have become so weary of reading insulting depictions of blindness in literature that at this point I will refuse to read a book that includes a character who is blind if the author is not blind or visually impaired.

The Bright Side of Darkness is an incredibly well written book by an author who understands that blindness does not define either herself or the characters that she writes. I absolutely loved Daisy. She was my favorite character and one of my favorite aspects of this book was the fact that Daisy’s blindness was not her defining characteristic. Daisy is a three-dimensional, fully-formed character, and a great representation of blindness in literature.

While Daisy is not the protagonist of the book, she plays an incredibly important role in the plot. The plot centers on a group of young friends as they do their best to rise above their circumstances. This group of friends, who call themselves, “The Crew,” look out for one another. They support one another as they all fight in their unique ways to escape from the cyclical system of systemic poverty.

J.E. Pinto’s skilled writing brings all her characters to life. They seemed to jump off the page and take shape before me. I read the Audible version of this book and the narrator did a great job. His narration also helped breathe life into the cast.

The Bright Side of Darkness has a powerful message. I loved the elements of faith that were clearly at play in the text; however, readers who are not Christian will still be able to enjoy this novel. The text is written by a person of faith, but the author does not proselytize. Instead, she presents a deeply moving story that speaks for itself.

I recommend this book for anyone and everyone. Anyone who loves to read should pick up a copy of The Bright Side of Darkness. I wish that there were more books like this one.

One of my favorite parts of starting my own website (BeckieWrites.com) is that it has given me the opportunity to interview so many talented authors. I was particularly delighted when J.E. Pinto agreed to allow me to interview her about her inspiration, writing process, and future writing plans.

Rev. Rebecca: I just want to say that I really enjoyed reading your book. I loved all your characters, but my favorite character was Daisy. Could you share a little bit about your inspiration for writing Daisy? Also, what would you like other writers to know when they attempt to portray a character with a disability?

J. E. Pinto: Writing Daisy was a little like walking a tightrope. She had found her strength early in life, but not only because of her blindness. She’d cared for a mom who died of breast cancer and lived with an abusive, drunken father, probably moved around too much; she’d learned to shoulder a lot of responsibility for a teenager. Then she’d been placed with a foster mother who insisted on treating her like a china doll because she was blind while at the same time opening the world to her by helping her get a guide dog. Her circumstances were different from mine growing up, but I could relate to the tug of opposing forces in her life—independence versus overprotection, self-advocacy versus respect for authority, freedom versus fear.

When writing about a character with a disability, the temptation is to make the disability the defining trait, which leaves the character flat on the page. Once you view the disability as only one of many facets of the whole person, as it should be viewed, you open yourself to creating a character who is neither superhero nor damsel in distress. The character is free to be tough when she needs to be and vulnerable when the time comes. Other characters might be drawn to or pushed away from the character because of the disability at first, but eventually they will react to deeper aspects of her personality.

Rev. Rebecca: One of my favorite parts of writing a book blog is that I have the opportunity to interview authors about their writing process. Would you share a little bit about your writing process? Do you use an outline? Do you start with the characters or the plot?

J. E. Pinto: Characters make a book for me every time. A book can have the most thrilling plot in the world, but if I don’t care about who’s having the adventure, I won’t stick with it. I didn’t really know where The Bright Side of Darkness would go, especially since it began as a short story. This group of loyal, smart-mouthed, struggling teenagers hanging out on a set of splintery wooden bleachers at a high-school baseball game just popped into my head and wouldn’t leave. Actually, the original short story ended at a very tragic point. I showed it to my husband at the time, and he said, “Hey! You can’t leave those kids like that! What happens to them?” That’s what inspired me to think, “What if?” That’s where the mentoring ideas came from.

Rev. Rebecca: Although your book had a relatively large cast of characters, each one had a unique voice. How did you make each character come to life? Do you have any tips for writing dialogue?

J. E. Pinto: Making characters come to life is a tricky balance of dialogue, mannerisms, and back story. Dialogue is probably the most important of the three. My biggest tip is to eavesdrop on real people regularly. Don’t bother with what they say, but listen to how they say it. People don’t speak in complete sentences. They don’t give up a whole lot of information at once; it comes out in short bursts, if at all. And men and women speak differently, but that doesn’t mean men don’t care.

Rev. Rebecca: Your book had a beautiful message about how mentorship can make a huge impact on the lives of young people. How have mentors impacted your own life? Have you ever had the opportunity to be a mentor to someone else?

J. E. Pinto: I got married at age twenty. Six weeks later, my husband fell ill with what turned out to be Lou Gehrig’s disease. We were living in a pretty rough neighborhood, struggling to get by; I was in college and my husband couldn’t work. So since we were at home a lot, our house became the hangout for kids and teens who needed fill-in meals and bits of advice, help with homework and laundry, air for their bike tires and Band-Aids for their skinned knees, while their parents were either off working or doing crazy stuff. I had started writing The Bright Side of Darkness as a short story for a high school English class. But the experiences I had mentoring neighborhood kids over the next several years broadened the scope of the tale as I lengthened it into a novel. The deepest takeaway of the book is the importance of mentoring. Not everyone is cut out to be a foster parent, but everyone can reach out to their neighbors or nephews or their children’s friends. Some people can be tutors or coaches, some can offer to drive kids to church outings or cook hot dogs at Scout camp, some can put away school library books behind the scenes and never see kids face to face. The point is, our world will be better if everybody pitches in. Nothing will get done while people choose to sit around and complain about how kids are lazy and disrespectful, and the crime rate is too high.

Rev. Rebecca: Will there be a sequel to The Bright Side of Darkness? Are you working on any either projects or other books right now?

 J.E. Pinto: People have asked for a sequel to The Bright Side of Darkness. That may happen someday if the inspiration strikes me. So far, it has not. That may be because I have a day job as a freelance braille textbook proofreader and an eleven-year-old daughter who still needs a lot of time and attention. Right now, I’m promoting this book and working on blog posts and other small projects. To write a novel, I have to completely immerse myself in the characters for long stretches of time. I’m lucky if I get an hour here and there to myself these days to write. When times are different, I may feel differently.

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PCB- A Peer Network for All Impacted by Vision Loss

Getting to Know You Survey

Fields with \* are strongly requested.

 Name\*:

 Birth Date:

What is your current age range\*: (please check one)

\_\_\_\_ Over 65

\_\_\_\_ 51-65

\_\_\_\_ 31-50

\_\_\_\_ 18-30

\_\_\_\_ Under 18

Street Address\*:

City/State/Zip\*:

County\*:

Phone #1\*:

Phone #2:

Email:

Please note: All peers will be automatically added to PCB’s email distribution list. Announcements of events, opportunities, and resources are sent out 2 to 3 times each month. For peers without email access, PCB posts monthly updates to the PCB Information Line, available by calling 773-572-6314.

Preferred Format of Material\*: (please check one)

\_\_\_Braille \_\_\_Large Print

\_\_\_Email \_\_\_Audio/NLS Cartridge

Are you a person with vision loss or blindness?\*

\_\_\_\_YES \_\_\_NO

If yes, how long have you experienced vision loss/blindness? (Please check one.)

\_\_\_\_ Since birth

\_\_\_\_ More than 10 years

\_\_\_\_ 5 to 10 years

\_\_\_\_ 2 to 5 years

\_\_\_\_ Less than 2 years

If you are not a person with vision loss, how are you impacted by vision loss?

\_\_\_Family member \_\_\_Friend

\_\_\_Community member \_\_\_Professional

\_\_\_Colleague

If you wish to tell us about any disabilities other than vision loss or blindness, please do so here:

Select your annual network membership type\*:

\_\_\_Individual Adult At-Large $10

\_\_\_Individual Junior (under 18) $5

\_\_\_Chapter/Affiliate Member $TBD

\_\_\_Nonprofit Agency $20

\_\_\_Corporate/For-profit $60

Which of the following PCB offerings are of interest to you?\* (Check all that apply.)

\_\_\_AccessiDocs Conversion Service

\_\_\_American Council of the Blind

\_\_\_Annual Conference

\_\_\_Having/Being a Vision Loss Mentor

\_\_\_iDevices for Independence

\_\_\_Leadership and Volunteer Opportunities

\_\_\_Local Chapters

\_\_\_PCB-Chat Listserv

\_\_\_PCB Telephone Information Line

\_\_\_Public Awareness & Peer Outreach

\_\_\_Public Policy/Advocacy Projects

\_\_\_Quarterly Newsletter

\_\_\_TheReImage Campaign

\_\_\_Topical Discussion Calls

\_\_\_Vision Loss Resources

Are you interested in being listed in a database of individuals who provide peer support to others impacted by vision loss? Please note, your name, email and telephone information will be shared with individuals who contact the PCB office seeking peer guidance.

\_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

If yes, what type of experience or expertise might you be comfortable providing? (e.g. assistive technology, parenting, organizing, a specific occupation, language fluency, etc.)

Which of the following topical areas are of interest to you? (Check all that apply.)

\_\_\_Accessible Products/Devices

\_\_\_Adjusting to vision loss

\_\_\_Advocacy

\_\_\_Braille

\_\_\_Education

\_\_\_Employment

\_\_\_Guide Dogs

\_\_\_Health & Fitness

\_\_\_Hobbies

\_\_\_Home Management

\_\_\_Parenting

\_\_\_Personal Development

\_\_\_Sports

\_\_\_Social Media

\_\_\_Technology

\_\_\_Transitioning to Adulthood

\_\_\_Travel

\_\_\_Other (Please list.)

If you are seeking vision loss resources, please tell us more about your needs so we can best offer assistance.

Please note PCB project coordinators will contact you to provide or gather additional information based on your responses to all questions.

Free Matter for the Blind

Or Handicapped

(Handle as 1st class Mail)

Domestic Mail Manual Sec. 135.7

RETURN TO

PA COUNCIL OF THE BLIND

931 N FRONT STREET

SUITE B

HARRISBURG, PA 17102

LARGE TYPE EDITION