

A Publication of National Industries for the Blind

# OPPORTUNITY

Volume 12 | Issue 2 | Spring 2019



**2019**  
**EMPLOYEES**  
**OF THE YEAR**

## **Innovation by Design**

**Innovative practices, programs,  
and training build career paths  
for people who are blind**

# OPPORTUNITY

**Opportunity** is published quarterly in the winter, spring, summer, and fall. It is also available at [NIB.org/opportunity](http://NIB.org/opportunity).

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*Since 1938, National Industries for the Blind (NIB) has focused on enhancing the opportunities for economic and personal independence of people who are blind, primarily through creating, sustaining, and improving employment. NIB and its network of associated nonprofit agencies are the nation's largest employer of people who are blind through the manufacture and provision of SKILCRAFT® and other products and services of the AbilityOne™ Program. For more information about NIB, visit [NIB.org](http://NIB.org).*

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

# INNOVATION THAT WORKS

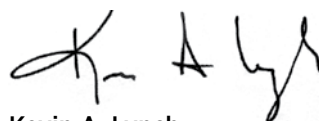
In today's rapidly changing world, businesses must constantly innovate to stay ahead of the curve. For some, innovation is a challenge. At NIB, innovation is at the heart of all we do, and has been since our founding more than 80 years ago.

To carry out our mission of growing employment for people who are blind, NIB consistently examines and re-examines processes to find new ways of performing tasks that are not only accessible for people who are blind, but more efficient. And as technology has advanced over the years, NIB has been at the forefront of implementing changes that expanded career options from manufacturing and sewing products for the federal government, to managing crucial supply chains and providing a myriad of professional services to our nation's military and veterans.

Today, technological innovation is opening up even more career avenues for people who are blind, and NIB is on the leading edge of creating employment opportunities in knowledge-based fields. Our comprehensive career training programs empower people who are blind to unleash the potential of new technologies that unleash their own career potential.

This issue of Opportunity features innovative programs, practices, and training at NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies that prepare people who are blind to build careers in high-demand fields of their choosing. And the best is yet to come: With our new state-of-the-art training center in Northern Virginia's Innovation Corridor, NIB is building partnerships to provide more career paths for people who are blind.

Apple founder Steve Jobs said, "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." Just as NIB's culture of innovation has led to thousands of once-unimaginable careers for people who are blind, we continue to embrace innovation and push boundaries so people who are blind can build careers for today and tomorrow.



**Kevin A. Lynch**  
President and  
Chief Executive Officer



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# DOING EVERYTHING HE CAN

**R.B. Irwin Award winner Bill Hudson spent 50 years doing everything within his power to build opportunities for people who are blind.**

BY JENNIFER CLICK

When R.B. Irwin Award winner Bill Hudson started out in business, employment for people who are blind wasn't even on his radar. A sales representative for a home improvement chain, one of his best customers served as chairperson of the board for NIB associated nonprofit agency LCI and suggested Hudson meet with the agency to discuss opportunities.

"I'm not sure that I was really interested, but if your biggest customer asks you to do something, what are you going to do?" Hudson said in a 2014 interview with Office Products International magazine. His scheduled 30-minute conversation at LCI turned into a four-hour conversation and Hudson was hooked.

"Something about this business really infatuated me," Hudson recalled. After he accepted a job with the Durham, North Carolina-based agency in 1968 the infatuation grew into something deeper. He took the helm at LCI 14 years later.

## Spotting Opportunity

LCI grew to become one of the largest U.S. employers of people who are blind as Hudson diversified the business to include the manufacture of office products, tactical supplies, and furniture, and the provision of distribution, e-commerce, and technology services. His ability to spot and pursue opportunities to grow employment for people who are blind was key to LCI's growth. The development of the AbilityOne Base Supply Center™ program is a perfect example.

In the mid-1990s, cost-cutting efforts by the U.S. military led to the closure of on-base stores stocking everything from office supplies to



▲ When Bill Hudson joined LCI, the agency employed about 20 people. Today it employs more than 400 people who are blind.

cleaning products. The move was unpopular with military personnel, who were forced to travel off-base — sometimes a considerable distance — to purchase basic supplies.

Learning about the situation through a relationship with the U.S. Army at Fort Bragg, NIB offered its associated agencies the opportunity to operate an on-base supply store staffed heavily with people who are blind. LCI ran with the idea, opening the first base supply store among NIB associated agencies. Today more than 150 Base Supply Centers employ hundreds of people at locations across the country.

## Building a Legacy

In 2009, Hudson's interests expanded when he went to a meeting with the

chief of the Vision Rehabilitation Center at Duke University Eye Center, Diane B. Whitaker, OD, to talk about establishing a low-vision clinic at LCI's Research Triangle Park facility. He left the meeting with a vision for a new, state-of-the-art clinical eye-care pavilion at the Duke Eye Center.

The LCI board approved a gift of \$12 million to the Duke Eye Center, later pledging an additional \$4 million for the project. In 2015, a four-floor, 116,000 square foot center for comprehensive low-vision rehabilitation opened bearing Hudson's name.

As he explained in an interview for Duke Eye Center, "Anything that we can do to help a person who is blind have a better life, that's what we want to do." Establishing a treatment and research center at a major university would be enough for most people, but Hudson wasn't quite done.

In 2018 LCI partnered with NIB associated agency Envision, in Wichita, Kansas, to open the William L. Hudson Blind and Visually Impaired (BVI) Workforce Innovation Center. The Center's extensive employment-centered program aims to provide training to people who are blind or visually impaired and educate employers about building more inclusive work environments.

With Hudson's recent retirement, the Irwin Award, presented to those who have made outstanding contributions to creating and improving employment opportunities for people who are blind, seems the perfect capstone to a career of doing everything he can to help people who are blind live more independent lives. □

*Jennifer Click is editor-in-chief of Opportunity magazine.*





**ANNE MARIE**

*Contact Center Supervisor*

# *Connect to* what matters

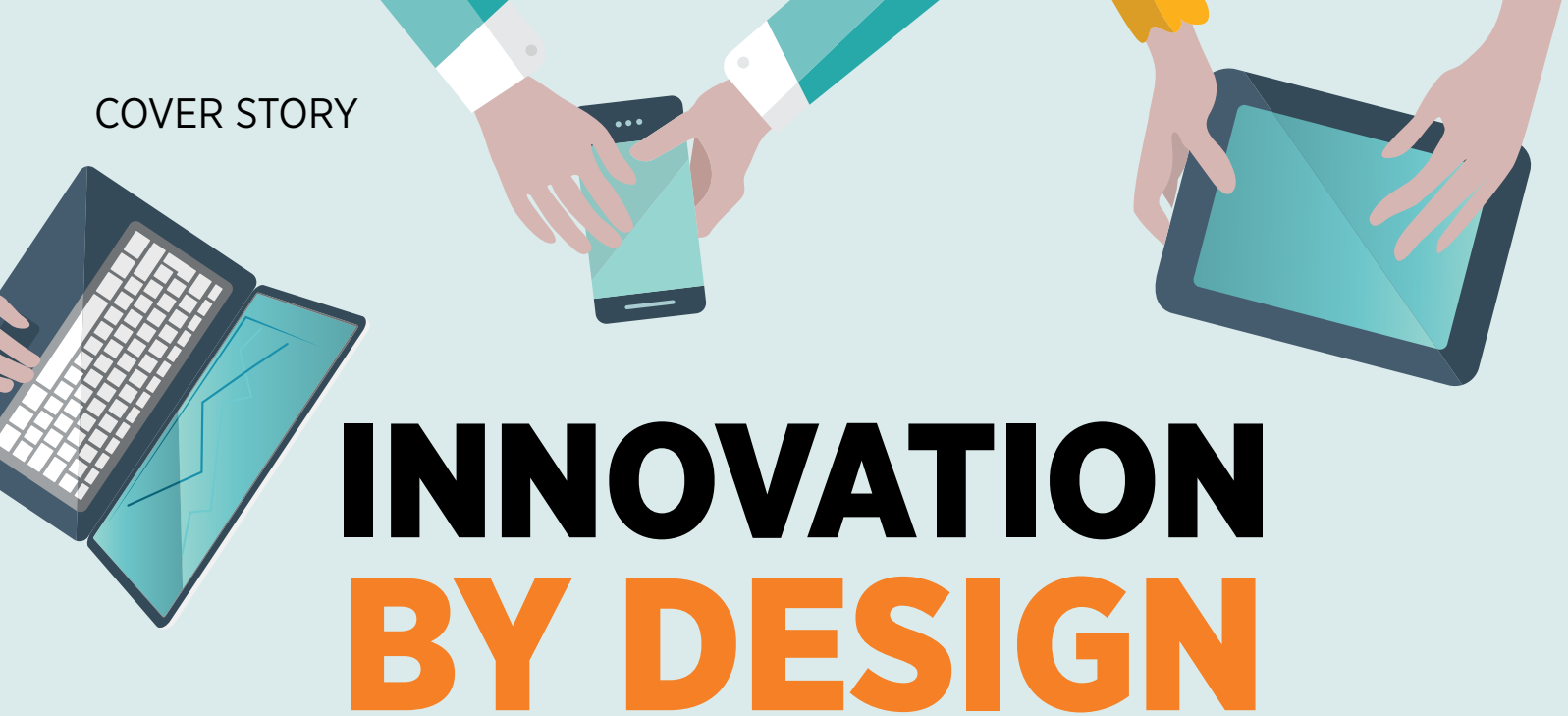
## ***Business Solutions With an Impact***

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# INNOVATION BY DESIGN

**Innovative practices, programs, and training help NIB and its associated agencies realize their mission to provide not only jobs, but career paths for people who are blind.**

BY SHARON HARRIGAN

The one constant in life — and in business — is change. NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies have learned not only to embrace change, but to plan for it. Innovation is not merely the latest business buzzword; it is deeply embedded in an organizational culture that recognizes innovation creates better workplaces and helps provide meaningful employment for people who are blind.

## **Innovation Improves Productivity — and Morale**

NIB's continuous process improvement (CPI) program started when the organization adopted Oracle, a cloud-based software program, at headquarters. "We started using Oracle in 2011," recalls Chuck Froemke, NIB's director of continuous process improvement. "Before we migrated the Operations Phase 3 Oracle roll-out, our leaders wisely decided to pause and conduct an in-depth analysis of all of our processes, map them out, and flag any downstream impacts."

The analysis found that, as in many growing organizations, information silos were contributing to process inefficiencies. With the support of senior leadership, NIB issued CPI guidance in 2015 and launched a full program in 2016. The CPI program uses the Lean Six Sigma approach, which defines a project or problem and gets stakeholder agreement before taking measurements, identifying root-causes, and implementing solutions. NIB uses a formal process to track larger or more complex projects, but Thomas Miller, CPI program manager, notes that the team often works informally with employees on smaller projects.

"The CPI program helps us discover and eliminate waste in processes, create efficiencies in jobs, save time and money, and most importantly, it gives us a common, structured way to approach problem-solving throughout the organization," says Froemke.

NIB offers Lean Six Sigma Yellow Belt training to all employees, so they can use the concepts to improve business processes. To date, 80 percent of all NIB employees have participated in the voluntary, two-day training.

"Everybody who goes through the training says it's a great experience," says Froemke. "We see people starting to use the tools they learn during training almost immediately. We see that employees don't ignore problems, but instead work together to address them. It's been a wonderful culture shift."

The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., headquartered in Seattle, Washington, also uses Six Sigma to design innovative solutions to make jobs more accessible to employees who are blind and DeafBlind. In 2018 alone, the Lighthouse used the Six Sigma approach to convert nearly 30 jobs from sighted-only positions to jobs that employees who are blind or DeafBlind can perform, says Brent Weichers, the agency's director of continuous improvement.

"We do a lot of great work with graduate students at local universities to come up with innovative solutions," he says. The agency is currently working with a group of students to create a camera that will allow an employee who is



blind or DeafBlind to inspect a part on a hydration system manufactured for the military, a job currently open only to sighted employees. The camera will scan the part for quality assurance and report audibly, tactilely, and visually whether it passes inspection.

The Lighthouse also developed an audio-tactile system to notify supervisors when an employee needs assistance. The simple touch of a button triggers a flashing light and chirping noises to get a supervisor's attention.

Weichers recalls that originally, tools for use on the shop floor were stored on pegboards with outlines drawn around them, making them difficult for blind and DeafBlind employees to access independently. The Lighthouse substituted a foam substance that each tool's shape could be carved into in place of the pegboards, making storage tactile. Each tool fits snugly in its unique spot in the foam, and all employees can safely, efficiently, and independently store and access tools as needed.

Using 3D printers, the Lighthouse has made a host of fixtures and tools to improve efficiency and accessibility. "We've made hundreds and hundreds of parts on our 3D printers," says Weichers. "We once made a special crescent wrench with braille on it using a 3D printer," he recalls. The agency even uses a 3D printer to make tiles for braille keyboards.

Noting that keyboards can cost up to \$8,000, he explains, "We buy blank tiles and make our own, which cost us about \$300 to make."

### Communication Spurs Achievement

San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind has been part of NIB's quality work environment (QWE) initiative since it was launched in 2009 with the aim of enhancing employee work experiences and developing opportunities for career growth. In 2018, the agency received the QWE Outstanding Achievement Award at the NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo.

Mike Gilliam, San Antonio's chief executive officer, is proud of that accomplishment because he sees the QWE program as a key driver of a culture the agency has developed over years. "Working here is more than a job, it's a family," he says. And family members, Gilliam notes, support each other. The agency has hosted engagement and wedding receptions, and been involved in eight weddings of employees over the last nine years, with another wedding slated for September.

Gilliam credits open communication for much of the QWE initiative's success. He holds meetings every other month with groups of eight non-management employees from across the agency to brainstorm ways to improve the workplace, so team members look forward to coming in to work. The meetings also give employees a chance to provide



▲ NIB launched its Continuous Process Improvement program in 2016 using a Lean Six Sigma approach. Since then, 80 percent of all NIB employees have participated in the voluntary two-day training sessions.

# COVER STORY

*Continued from page 7*

updates on what is happening in their departments, and for Gilliam to give agency-wide status reports. In the off months, Gilliam meets with managers using the same format.

These meetings and the open communication they inspire have made an impact, says Gilliam. As a result of employee suggestions, the Lighthouse's employee onboarding program was changed to focus more on people, and less on paperwork. Employee financial education has also become a priority, with an emphasis on preparing for retirement that has increased employee participation in the agency's retirement plan from 40 percent in 2009 to 85 percent in 2019. Gilliam personally makes weekly morning announcements, one of the first suggested improvements, to ensure that all employees — blind and sighted — are informed about agency activities.

And then there's just plain fun. Employee suggestions led to creation of a choir that performs all over the city and a beep ball team. The Lighthouse also hosts a Lions Club chapter, catering their meals, and celebrates Halloween, Thanksgiving, the winter holidays (all employees receive gifts paid for with profits from the agency's vending machines), Mother's Day, and Father's Day.

The cost for all these programs, Gilliam says, is not as much as one would think. "I'd say we spend about \$5,000 total a year on all of these initiatives."

More important, the engagement initiatives appear to be working. Two local publications have named the Lighthouse

a Best Place to Work in San Antonio, and the agency has been on both Texas Monthly magazine's list of Best Places to Work in Texas, and AARP's national list of Best Employers for Workers Over 50.

## Creating Knowledge-Based Jobs

As assistive technology (AT) advances, NIB and its associated agencies are constantly working to develop opportunities for knowledge-based jobs that offer greater upward mobility.

NIB's contract management support (CMS) services program, launched in 2010, trains people who are blind to close out executed contracts for the Department of Defense (DOD). Participants in the program must be legally blind, have a four-year college degree or equivalent work experience, have good computer skills, and be highly proficient in assistive technology. The program has been a win-win for DOD and NIB associated agencies. In addition to training several hundred people who are blind, nearly 200 people are currently employed in CMS positions and nearly 100 have been hired by the federal government or federal contractors for career positions as contract closeout specialists. And CMS professionals have identified more than \$2 billion in taxpayer dollars for de-obligation.

Tapping into a growing field, Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind (CLB) in Washington, D.C., has developed a Section 508 Assurance program that has trained dozens of employees who are blind to audit websites for compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 508 requires all technology developed, provided, managed, or used by the federal government to be accessible to people with disabilities.



▲ Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind in Washington, D.C., has trained dozens of employees to audit websites for Section 508 compliance using tools like those employed here by Nai Damato, assistant director of DeafBlind and Technology Services at the agency.



A man with glasses is pointing at a computer screen. The screen displays a hierarchical project structure. The visible text on the screen includes: Week8, Week9, Week10, Project: Build a battle station app, SuperBadges, SuperBadge: Business Administration Specialist (2) - make an, Project: Customer service to create a new business app, Unit: Manage information, Unit: Manage Change, Unit: Modify your, Unit: Configure a, Unit: Automate your, SuperBadge: Lightning Speed, SuperBadge: Lightning Speed, SuperBadge: Phoenix Automation, SuperBadge: Security Specialist (2) - make an.

 The 320-hour BosmaForce training program prepares people who are blind for careers as Salesforce administrators, one of the most in-demand positions in today's workforce.

United States use Salesforce to track customers, products, and sales contacts, making certified Salesforce administrators one of the most in-demand positions today. The average Salesforce administrator makes \$85,000 annually, and a recent search showed nearly 3,500 job openings.

Michaels teamed with Adam Rodenbeck, Bosma's assistive technology specialist (now accessibility specialist at Salesforce), and T.J. McElroy and Richard Holleman, two veterans who are blind, to design BosmaForce, a program to provide the training people who are blind need to become certified Salesforce administrators.

The training program, which is completely virtual, is based on the Salesforce administrator training course. Students spend four hours a day, five days a week, over the course of 16-18 weeks in training.

“By the end of the course, students have completed 320 hours of training and have 40 hours of HTML experience,” says McElroy. Students completing the course earn a BosmaForce certificate they can put on their resumes and are eligible to take the Salesforce certification exam. Of the four students who completed the first class in August 2018, three passed the certification exam, which normally has a 40 to 45 percent pass rate.

A second BosmaForce class of six students recently wrapped up, and Michaels is confident those students are on their way to exciting careers. “Given the right equipment and training, a disability shouldn’t stop anyone from getting a high-tech position,” he says.

Michaels isn't alone in that conviction. As technology advances, NIB and its associated agencies are determined to continue finding innovative ways to grow upwardly mobile career opportunities for people who are blind. 🗨️

*Sharon Horigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.*

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2019

EMPLOYEES  
OF THE YEAR

MILTON J. SAMUELSON  
CAREER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

ELTON  
THOMAS

LIGHTHOUSE FOR  
THE BLIND, ST. LOUIS



**“He simply seizes every opportunity to better himself and then applies what he learns in his position at the Lighthouse to improve our performance.”**

John Thompson, President,  
Lighthouse for the Blind,  
St. Louis

In 15 years at the Lighthouse for the Blind, St. Louis, Elton Thomas has made a mark on the agency and the city. Originally hired to work as a line attendant in aerosol production, Elton’s embrace of opportunities for personal and professional growth has taken him from the production floor to the halls of Congress, where he advocates on behalf of people who are blind.

Growing up in the South City area of St. Louis, Elton never let blindness come between himself and his goals. That perseverance helped him progress from an entry level position at the agency to a supervisory position in just four years. Completing NIB’s Business Management Training program in 2007 inspired Elton to participate in additional trainings on communication and people management. With each course, he wasted no time in applying the new knowledge and skills to his supervisory duties.

Completing NIB’s Effective Supervision training program in 2013

motivated Elton to return to college, taking classes at night. In 2016 he graduated from Ashford University with a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration with an emphasis on Organizational Management and Leadership. He is currently enrolled at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, where he expects to graduate with a Master of Business Administration degree in the spring of 2020.

“It’s been a privilege to see Elton progress in his career over the years,” says Lighthouse President John Thompson. “He simply seizes every opportunity to better himself and then applies what he learns in his position at the Lighthouse to improve our performance.”

In 2017, Elton joined NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment program, where he has learned about complex issues affecting people who are blind. Not content to advocate only on the national level, Elton started a local advocacy team at

the Lighthouse that has been very effective in presenting issues to state and local representatives.

In addition, he serves on a number of community boards and panels, including working with Metro Transit St. Louis to improve paratransit services for people with disabilities; and with the Starkloff Institute advocacy team, where he is helping to show the value of removing the earnings cap for SSDI recipients.

“I am humbled to receive the Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement award,” says Thomas. “For me it represents the opportunities I have found at the Lighthouse for the Blind and NIB, and it represents the amazing people I work with every day, who encourage me to become a better person. Our relationships transcend the workplace because we serve a higher cause and purpose: To bring employment opportunities to people who are blind.”

**PETER J. SALMON  
EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR AWARD**

## **JAMES BRIAN RUTHERFORD**

**BLIND AND VISION  
REHABILITATION SERVICES**



**“His commitment to advocacy and employment for people with vision loss has been an asset to our organization as well as the general community.”**

Erika Petach, President,  
Blind and Vision  
Rehabilitation Services

James Brian Rutherford fell in love with the theater arts at an early age. During his high school years, Brian won competitions for design and fabrication of theatrical costumes, and was named Outstanding Theatre Student in his home state of West Virginia. He then attended Point Park University in Pittsburgh, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

After earning his degree, Brian chased his dream of being a costume designer for Walt Disney World. He moved to Orlando, where he thrived for 11 years, met his wife Kristie, and had a son.

Then disaster struck – Kristie became ill, went into septic shock, and eventually lost her leg. On the eve of her return home from a rehabilitation facility, Brian suffered four strokes, losing his eyesight at the age of 38.

Brian returned to Pittsburgh for a visit with family and, after touring Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services (BVRs), decided to relocate to be

near to family, friends, and peers in the theater community. When he completed the BVRs Adjustment to Blindness training program, he was a natural fit for a position sewing in the textiles department. An outstanding employee, with his background as a costumer for Disney, Brian regularly offers suggestions and advice to co-workers on different ways to improve processes and sewing accuracy.

“I’m delighted that Brian was chosen for this prestigious award,” says BVRs President Erika Petach. “His commitment to advocacy and employment for people with vision loss has been an asset to our organization as well as the general community. I’m constantly impressed by his motivation, positive attitude, and desire to help others.”

In addition to his outstanding work and support for colleagues, Brian has played a major role in making theater in Pittsburgh more accessible for people who are blind or visually

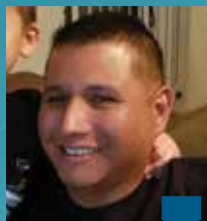
impaired. As an audio description coordinator for the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and Pittsburgh Public Theater, and an audio description consultant for the city’s Prime Stage Theatre, Brian is helping individuals in the community with vision loss experience theater, whether it be for the first time, or the first time in years.

“Brian is a shining example of overcoming adversity and continuing to find beauty in everyday life,” says Leslie Montgomery, vice president of external affairs at BVRs. “He lives his passion everyday through his work at BVRs and the theater community. His efforts to make our community more accessible and enjoyable for all are making life better for many.”



# 2019

## EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR



**Ricardo Aguirre**  
Mississippi Industries  
for the Blind



**Angel Brassard**  
Northeastern Association  
of the Blind at Albany



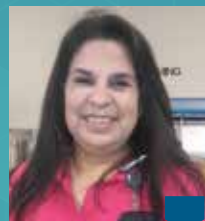
**Beau Ellerbee**  
Lighthouse Louisiana



**John Flessner**  
Chicago Lighthouse  
Industries



**Alison Fortney**  
Industries for the Blind  
and Visually Impaired



**Diana Garza**  
South Texas Lighthouse  
for the Blind



**Cherry Johnson**  
Alabama Industries  
for the Blind



**Ronita Jones**  
NewView Oklahoma



**Jason Jude**  
Virginia Industries  
for the Blind



**Brandye Lacy**  
Travis Association for the Blind



**Todd LaFlame**  
Lighthouse Works



**Bellamina Likens**  
LCI



**Samantha Porter**  
The Lighthouse for the Blind



**Suellen Porter**  
North Central Sight Services



**Ted Rois**  
Alphapointe



**Jared Sims**  
Georgia Industries  
for the Blind



**Brice Smith**  
RLCB



**Earl Arthur Tillman**  
MidWest Enterprises  
for the Blind



**Jerome Brown**  
Mississippi Industries  
for the Blind



**Trish Chisholm**  
Envision



**Karen Cole**  
NewView Oklahoma



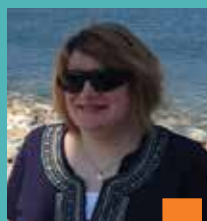
**Mary Ann Donelan**  
Cincinnati Association for the  
Blind and Visually Impaired



**Lynn Drake**  
IFB Solutions



**Paul Ducharme**  
The Lighthouse for the Blind



**Teresa Howard**  
Olmsted Center for Sight



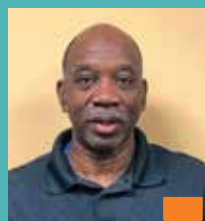
**Diane Hubbard**  
Northeastern Association  
of the Blind at Albany



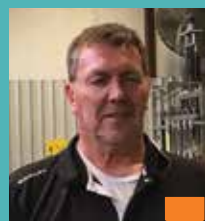
**Jerry Ingram**  
Lions Volunteer Blind  
Industries



**Charles Johnson**  
Lions Services



**Byron Jones**  
Lions Industries for the Blind



**Harry Kastrup**  
Lighthouse for the Blind,  
St. Louis



**Shaina Mitchell**  
Alabama Industries  
for the Blind



**Philip Myers**  
San Antonio Lighthouse for the  
Blind and Vision Impaired



**Albert Perez**  
South Texas Lighthouse  
for the Blind



**Torri Phifer**  
Georgia Industries  
for the Blind



**Larry Reed**  
East Texas Lighthouse  
for the Blind



**Romy Saldana**  
West Texas Lighthouse  
for the Blind



**William Skinner III**  
Beacon Lighthouse



**MILTON J.  
SAMUELSON  
AWARD**

**PETER J.  
SALMON  
AWARD**



**Jarrett Gist**  
East Texas Lighthouse  
for the Blind



**Teresa Harper**  
Lions Industries for the Blind



**Lester Hawthorne**  
Envision



**Gene Hubbard**  
Beyond Vision



**Richard Janes**  
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**Kathryn Jedynak**  
Association for the Blind  
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**Varnard Louis**  
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**James Martino**  
Central Association for the  
Blind and Visually Impaired



**Daniel Molina**  
Envision



**Rosemary Nedimyer**  
Olmsted Center for Sight



**April Oliver**  
Lions Volunteer Blind  
Industries



**Mark Plutschak**  
Outlook Nebraska



**Troy Wackford**  
Association for Vision  
Rehabilitation and Employment



**Amos Ackerman**  
Central Association for the  
Blind and Visually Impaired



**Maurice Atkins**  
Alphapointe,  
Kansas City, Missouri



**Brian Bauer**  
Bestwork Industries  
for the Blind



**Scott Berube**  
VisionCorps



**Kenneth Bower**  
North Central Sight Services



**Abram Graham**  
Industries of the Blind



**Todd Gray**  
Association for Vision  
Rehabilitation and Employment



**David Green**  
Lighthouse Louisiana



**Shimika Harris**  
IBVI



**Yannick Hill**  
Chicago Lighthouse  
Industries



**Michael Horn**  
Clovernook Center for the  
Blind and Visually Impaired



**Matthews Lassai**  
Envision



**Cody Leal**  
Travis Association for the  
Blind (Austin Lighthouse)



**Marques Manuel**  
Louisiana Association  
for the Blind



**William McCallister**  
Outlook Nebraska



**Norma Mendez**  
Lighthouse Works



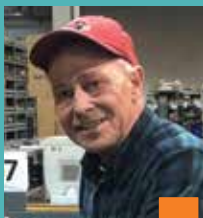
**Michelle Mills**  
Associated Industries for  
the Blind



**Jerry Swinehart**  
Bosma Enterprises



**Bonnie Jo Warner**  
Association for the Blind and  
Visually Impaired



**Doug Westereng**  
Arizona Industries  
for the Blind



**Calvin Whitehead**  
Lighthouse for the Blind  
of Fort Worth



**DeLonna Williams**  
Beyond Vision



**Shirley Williamson**  
LCI



**Gregory Zerbe**  
Keystone Vocational Services

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# WeWALK SMARTCANE WINS ACCESSIBILITY PRIZE AT CES 2019

BY DOUG GOIST

The Consumer Technology Association, the entity responsible for putting together the massive 4,600-exhibitor, 182,000-attendee Consumer Electronics Show (CES) held every year in Las Vegas, announced its 2019 awardees for disability-specific technologies during its Fourth Annual Eureka Park Accessibility Contest in January.

This year's winner in the blind technology category is the WeWALK smartcane. What is WeWALK? The short answer is a piece of hardware that turns an ordinary white cane into an interactive navigational tool. The long answer is much more complex.

Invented and designed at the Young Guru Academy (YGA), a non-profit university research center in Istanbul, Turkey, dedicated to identifying and creating technologies for people with visual impairments, WeWALK aims to give cane travelers more environmental feedback than most sonar-type smartcane.

I had the pleasure of meeting WeWALK co-founders Kursat Ceylan and Batuhan Demir at their CES 2019 Eureka Park exhibitor booth, provided as part of the contest's \$2,500 cash prize for what CTA calls "extreme" disability technology.

The somewhat boxy hard plastic WeWALK device looks and feels like an oversized cane grip and attaches to standard folding-type canes. Among many features, WeWALK includes an external speaker with voice feedback, along with Bluetooth and headset compatibility for noisy surroundings.



▲ National Industries for the Blind Program Manager Doug Goist, left, tests out the WeWALK Smart Cane for the visually impaired with WeWALK co-founders Batuhan Demir (rear) and Kursat Ceylan at the CES technology show in January.

When activated, WeWALK's onboard ultrasonic sensors scan outward for physical obstacles at chest level or higher (up to 12 feet, although three feet is the recommended setting). When an obstacle such as a column or tree branch is detected, the grip vibrates in the user's hand, allowing the traveler to steer clear of the hazard.

While "sonar" obstacle detection is at the core of the device, WeWALK's strength lies in its software and app integration with the unit's onboard compass, accelerometer, gyroscope, touchpad, microphone, and low energy Bluetooth capabilities. All work in tandem with common Android and iOS apps to give users a virtually hands-free smartphone experience. We WALK eliminates the need for travelers to

# WeWALK

**Product:** WeWALK

**Cost:** \$399

For more information, visit  
[NIB.org/TechCorner](http://NIB.org/TechCorner)

occupy both hands with a cane and a smartphone – a chronic pain point for the majority of blind cane travelers.

Swiping WeWALK's touch pad like a smartwatch, users can make calls through their smartphones and can receive pedestrian turn-by-turn GPS directions through Google Maps.

As if that wasn't enough, Kursat and Batuhan showed me how the smartcane is designed to integrate with Alexa — providing mobile access to Amazon's 24-hour voice assistant. "Alexa, what's the capital of the United States?" I asked. "The capital of the United States is Washington, D.C.," answered the familiar voice from the external cane grip's speaker.

Ceylan and Demir said they plan to have Uber and Lyft ride-sharing integration with WeWALK, along with Google Voice Assistant. They are also working hard to offer more app integrations and software features through regular updates.

Manufactured by Vestel, a Turkish consumer electronics giant and Europe's largest television manufacturer, WeWALK is currently priced at \$399 and is available for order at WeWALK's IndieGoGo crowdfunding page. □

*Doug Goist is program manager for IT services projects at National Industries for the Blind. A recognized leader in the field of technology accessibility, Doug has worked with the U.S. Department of Defense, the military services, federal agencies, and private sector partners. In 2013, he served as the technical steering committee representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development on a study of mobile money transfer and handset accessibility in Africa.*

# BRINGING OUT THE BEST

**VisionCorps' innovative approach to developing growth opportunities motivates rehabilitation clients and agency employees to reach new goals.**

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

Dedicated to finding innovative ways to create professional growth opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired, NIB associated nonprofit agency VisionCorps is always eager to explore new approaches in both its rehabilitation and employment programs.

VisionCorps was launched in Lancaster City, Pennsylvania, in 1926 when six people created a small organization where several individuals who are blind learned skills such as chair caning. As the agency grew, it developed light manufacturing and assembly, print mailer assembly, and kitting capabilities, among others. The agency today has a workforce of roughly 150 employees, including several military veterans.

## Rehabilitation Programs Change Lives

"VisionCorps takes a 360 degree approach," explains Amy Giangliulo, director of marketing communications. The agency strives to apply profits from its business endeavors toward services provided to the community. Rehabilitation programs serve Lancaster, Lebanon, York, Adams, and Chester counties, providing early intervention, occupational therapy, low vision rehabilitation, orientation and mobility, and assistive technology training. Free vision screenings are available for preschool-age children.

The rehabilitation department employs about 30 specialists and "does an amazing job," says Brian Brightmeyer, a former VisionCorps rehabilitation services client now employed at the agency. When Brightmeyer developed retinitis pigmentosa, causing a rapid decline in vision and endangering his job in the automotive industry, VisionCorps rehabilitation staff introduced him to assistive technologies that allowed him to maintain his position another three years. "I never would have thought that was possible," he says, "but with their help, I was able to continue at the dealership."

When Brightmeyer could no longer continue in that position, he was hired by the VisionCorps manufacturing group. He moved on to a sales position for the computer recycling program, and soon was promoted to his current position in channel operations and sales.

Brightmeyer's outgoing personality and experience made



▲ VisionCorps was launched by six people in Lancaster City, Pennsylvania, in 1926.

him a natural fit for the client-facing position, but he worried about his very limited computer skills. "That's the great thing about VisionCorps: They really worked with me and helped me to develop my knowledge and use of assistive technologies," Brightmeyer says. He now uses a panoply of devices in his position working with distribution and acting as liaison to suppliers. "There are lots of opportunities here, and VisionCorps helps you to take advantage of them."

Brightmeyer also cites the Visually Impaired Persons (VIP) program, an employee support group spearheaded by VisionCorps CEO and President Dennis Steiner, as an invaluable tool for learning about technology and daily living skills. "Meeting with others with the same disability allows us to learn from each other. This is a great group of people I value as family," he says. "Working here gives me a sense of purpose, provides me with goals, and generates revenue, not just for my family, but for community outreach programs."

## A Variety of Employment Opportunities

VisionCorps operates three lines of business — food processing, manufacturing, and administrative services — that offer a variety of jobs. The agency's most recent endeavor, food processing, is typical of its manufacturing and packaging capabilities. The food operation requires multiple certifications and the agency's success in this area is a point of pride.

VisionCorps' manufacturing operation maintains facilities in all five counties. "The bread and butter of our manufacturing is military textiles, especially helmet pads and rifle slings," Giangliulo says. The agency also manufactures other sought-after products, ranging from door hardware assemblies to "delineators," the reflective posts used for increased visibility on highways.

The agency's government and administrative services positions offer people who are blind opportunities to build knowledge-based careers. Ten years ago, VisionCorps played an instrumental role in development of the AbilityOne Contract Management Support (CMS) program when it piloted the program with the Department of Defense (DOD). VisionCorps employees showed not only that people who are blind can work in the complex world of government contracting, but exceeded expectations for accuracy and

efficiency. Today, the CMS program has expanded beyond DOD to include many federal agencies, with VisionCorps set to launch an on-site contract closeout operation for the Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C., in May.

Annamarie Parker, a CMS supervisor, is a member of the team temporarily detailed to Washington to get the program up and running. Parker, who worked in procurement for 17 years, was hired to work on the original pilot program. “Contracting was a new side of the business for me and I found that I love it,” she says.

Soon promoted to a supervisory position, Parker was selected to participate in NIB’s Effective Supervision training program. “I’ve been at VisionCorps for 10 years and they’ve given me opportunities I couldn’t have imagined at any other employer,” she says.

When the Upward Mobility pilot was announced, manufacturing employee Maribel Surita knew she wanted the opportunity and applied. Two months later, she literally cried with joy upon learning she was selected as the first participant.

To meet the year-long program’s extensive training requirements, Surita put in several hours of coursework and skills practice after her regular shifts. In addition to learning keyboarding, basic software programs, and assistive technologies, she took online business courses and met with the head of each department to learn more about the structure of VisionCorps.

“It was a very big challenge,” Surita recounts, “but it gave me such a wonderful opportunity. There were days I felt overwhelmed, but I gave it all I had.” Along the way, management offered consistent support. “VisionCorps provided everything I needed to succeed — supplies, training, books, encouragement.”



▲ Contract Management Support Supervisor Annamarie Parker participated in the CMS pilot program and is now helping VisionCorps launch an on-site contract closeout operation for the Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C.



▲ Brian Braightmeyer, shown here with Guide Dog Dewey, credits the assistive technology and other training he received at VisionCorps with preparing him for a new career in channel operations and sales.



▲ Access Technology Specialist Tony Heath (right) was one of many staff members who helped former manufacturing employee Maribel Surita master the skills needed for her new administrative position.

Today, Parker is pursuing a degree in business with the aid of a partial scholarship from VisionCorps while looking forward to working on the team writing standard operating procedures for the Commerce Department project and hiring and training a new CMS team in Washington. Of VisionCorps she says, “They recognize talent and care about your dreams. They are behind their employees 100 percent.”

## Cultivating Upward Mobility

In all its endeavors, VisionCorps views cultivating upward mobility as a core goal. “We actively seek to create opportunities for manufacturing employees who are blind to move up into administrative positions,” Giangliulo says. Over the years, the agency has promoted many employees from manufacturing to administrative positions, including President and CEO Steiner. The agency formalized its approach in 2016, initiating the Upward Mobility program to offer professional growth opportunities and a more structured path to advancement.

Nine months of training culminated in a 90-day trial as an administrative assistant in marketing and new business development. A year later, she is thriving in the position and continuing to look for new challenges. “I’m interested in moving up, but I’ll always want to stay at VisionCorps,” says Surita, who not only enjoys working with her colleagues, but feels “staying is the best way that I can repay their faith in me.”

Now Surita is encouraging this year’s Upward Mobility candidate to give the program her all. “I told her you can’t let anyone tell you that as a vision-impaired person you can’t do it. You can succeed at anything you really want if you stay motivated and do your best.”

For VisionCorps as well, motivation is the key to making sure employees and rehabilitation clients have the opportunity to do their best. ▣

*Rosemarie Lally, J.D., is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington, D.C.*



## NEWS & NOTES

### NIB ANNOUNCES NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The board of directors of National Industries for the Blind voted in new leaders and members at its winter meeting. Susan Costlow, senior director of the financial practice at Manufacturer's Alliance for Productivity and Innovation, assumed the role of chairperson of the board. Serving as vice chairperson is Paul M. Healy, Ph.D., A.C.A., who is the James R. Williston Professor and senior associate dean for faculty development at the Harvard Business School.

Rounding out the leadership slate are Brigadier General Kristin K. French, USA (Ret.), Chief of Staff at the Defense Logistics Agency, serving as secretary;



▲ Newly elected Chairperson Susan Costlow will serve as leader of the NIB board of directors for a term of three years.

and A. Robert Bloom, C.P.A., a director at accounting, tax, and advisory firm BDO USA, serving as treasurer.

Joining the board as NIB associated agency representatives are Jeffrey Hawting, president of LCI; and Lauren Branch, C.P.A., president and chief executive officer of NewView Oklahoma. Anita Shafer Aaron, executive director and chief executive officer of the World Institute on Disability (WID), and Carl McRae, former director of special projects, veterans affairs, at the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, were named to the board as private citizens. ▣

### A NEW GENERATION OF U.S. GOVERNMENT PEN USERS



NIB Federal Accounts Senior Specialist Jason Endicott helped introduce a new generation to the SKILCRAFT® U.S. Government Pen after meeting Andrew Taylor, assistant director of contracts at SourceAmerica agency Tresco Inc., at a recent SourceAmerica AbilityOne Academy training session. Taylor approached Endicott after a presentation to find out if the 50th anniversary edition of the pens would be available for sale on the internet.

After learning that Taylor is Scout Master for Boy Scout Troop 180 in Las Cruces, New Mexico, Endicott sent pens for all the boys with a recent article about the 50th anniversary. Taylor read the article to the Scouts and parents in attendance after distributing the pens, prompting several adults to share their own memories of the classic SKILCRAFT pen. ▣

### 2019 ROEDER SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS NOW AVAILABLE

Applications for the 2019 Joseph Roeder Scholarship are now available on the NIB website. The scholarship provides a one-time award of \$2,500 for an undergraduate or graduate student who is legally blind to pursue a college degree in a business-related field.

The scholarship is named for Joe Roeder, senior accessible technology specialist at NIB from 1997 until his death in 2010. Roeder was instrumental in the development of the Section

508 electronic and information technology accessibility standards of the Rehabilitation Act, which require all federal government agencies to provide accessible data and information for employees with disabilities.

Additional information about the scholarship and applications are available on NIB's website. Materials must be submitted online no later than Friday, May 10, 2019. The winner will be announced in June. ▣

## NIB PRESENTS BUSINESS ACHIEVEMENT AWARD TO FELLOWS

NIB presented the Achievement in Business Leadership award to Joe Conway, April Havey, and Irwin Ramirez, who completed the Fellowship for Leadership Development in 2018 in recognition of their professional achievements since starting the program in October 2016.

During the 16-month Fellowship, Conway, Havey, and Ramirez worked four-month stints with three different employers: NIB, an NIB associated agency, and a private sector employer, managing their own relocation processes for each move.

Since completing the fellowship, all three have landed professional positions. Conway is a transitional employment specialist at The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired, Havey is customer service operations manager at IBVI in Milwaukee, and Ramirez is a product development support specialist at NIB headquarters in Alexandria. [□](#)

## NEW VIDEO SPOTLIGHTS NIB'S IMPACT



For more than 80 years, NIB and its associated agencies have been creating innovative career opportunities for people who are blind. A video released in March follows the evolution of NIB, from its beginnings in 1938 as an innovative program to provide employment for people who are blind through the manufacture of products for the federal government to the opening of NIB's new national headquarters and training center, designed to prepare people who are blind for a wide range of careers of their choosing. Check out the video on NIB's YouTube channel, [NatIndBlind1938](#). [□](#)

## OPEN HOUSE INTRODUCES PARTNERS, STAKEHOLDERS TO NEW HEADQUARTERS

NIB unveiled its new headquarters and training center to the local community at an Open House reception March 11. Among those attending the event with NIB staff and board members were many associated agency leaders as well as business partners, valued customers, and other stakeholders. Speaking at the event, U.S. Congressman Don Beyer (D-VA8), expressed his support for the valuable work NIB does in providing meaningful employment for people who are blind. [□](#)



▲ Congressman Don Beyer (D-VA8) was among the government, business, and community leaders welcomed to NIB's new headquarters and training center at a March 11 Open House.



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