

SIGHTLINES

LIFE IS AN ADVENTURE!

“Life is an adventure,” said Jennifer Eaton. “Take it by the strings and glide!” Jennifer is the Coordinator of Youth Services for VisionCorps. With such an engaging personal philosophy, you can bet there’s fun to be had. And you wouldn’t be wrong.

The program sends teachers into the home and school environment.

They work directly with parents, family members, preschool staff, and educational teams. The first five years of any child’s life are crucial to their development. But when a baby is born with impaired vision, the first adjustment belongs to the parents.

“It can be hard for a new parent to digest a diagnosis of blindness or visual impairment,” Jennifer said.

“Initially, they may go through a grieving process of sorts. They may expect the worst. Not knowing where to turn, they may assume their child can’t or won’t be successful. The path for their future isn’t clear. It can be overwhelming.”

The Early Intervention Services can begin right in the NICU and continue for the first 3-5 years of the child’s life. Teachers help navigate family dynamics and offer guidance, tools, and training.

For children who are born with physical disabilities in addition to their vision loss, other supports may be necessary. VisionCorps follows the Active Learning techniques of the late Danish psychologist Lilli Nielsen. Nielsen created the opportunity for sensory enrichment by suspending items within reach of a student’s hands, feet, or body. The student initiates his or her own learning.

“If a student is going to need assistance with mobility,” Jennifer said, “we like to get them started as soon as they can walk independently. The earlier, the better. It helps the family understand and support the training. And the cane becomes integrated into the student’s life.”

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Message from the President



Do you remember playing games as a child and when the game didn't go your way you asked for a “do over” — another chance to change something that didn't go your way? An agency director reminded me of that a few years ago. I realized that's what member agencies of Pennsylvania Association for the Blind do every day — they give people with vision problems an opportunity to “do over” and change their lives. We are dedicated to the proposition that if a vision loss has presented you or someone you know with problems and challenges, we will provide the resources for you to make a fresh start.

I'd like to tell you a little more about the organization that you have so generously supported in the past. Perhaps you know PAB as the little organization in your community that employs a caseworker and a person to do vision screening. Or, if you live in another part of the State, you may know PAB as the large agency that employs visually impaired people in its industrial operation, or the one that operates the low vision clinic, conducts classes in computer technology, or has programs for blind kids. PAB is all of these things. We are the only private, nonprofit statewide network in the United States serving persons who are blind or visually impaired. We have 32

physical facilities across the Commonwealth, with a workforce of several hundred people, supplemented with a volunteer pool of more than 1,000 people.

We provide Pennsylvanians with access to a low vision evaluation that will help them to make the best use of their remaining vision. We have computer and access technology training classes to help them stay connected, and in many cases, employed. People who have recently lost their sight can join one of our support groups and gain insight from their peers, as well as useful tips. Many of our sites have programs that help students make a successful transition from high school to college, or to employment.

Losing one's vision can be traumatic, but it doesn't have to define you. If you, or a loved one, has a vision loss, and you want a “do over” in your life, Pennsylvania Association for the Blind is dedicated to giving you that opportunity.

Sincerely,

Elaine Welch
President/CEO

MARCH is Workplace Eye Wellness Month

Think of workplace eye safety, and what images come to mind? Lab workers wearing goggles? Construction workers wearing safety glasses? Those are both good examples. Those specialized glasses are protecting the eyes from dust, debris, projectiles, and chemicals. But, those aren't the only things that could damage eyes. Office workers experience ongoing strain to their eyes, and the increasing use of electronic devices — both in and out of the office — adds to that strain. Those who already wear glasses would benefit from both an anti-reflective (anti-glare) coating as well as a tint to block the blue light of the electronics. Everyone would benefit from following these simple guidelines:

- Keep the screen 20 to 26 inches from your eyes.
- Adjust the text size to a comfortable level.
- Adjust lighting to prevent glare on the screen.
- And, follow the 20-20-20 rule: every 20 minutes, focus on something 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

APRIL is Women's Eye Health Month

In America, more than 3 million people are blind or visually impaired. Approximately 68% of those are women. Studies have shown that women are more likely than men to develop cataracts, glaucoma, and age-related macular degeneration (AMD). Hormonal changes during pregnancy can lead to dry eye syndrome and changes in refraction; and the added hormones when using birth control or hormone replacement therapy could result in blood clots which also affect vision. Diabetes, which can lead to diabetic retinopathy and other eye diseases, affects one out of every 10 American women. Because of the relationship between physical health and eye disease, it is important that women receive regular exams from both physicians and optometrists.

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“When people see someone using a white cane, it’s common for them to think the person has no vision at all,” she said. “But that’s usually not the case.” Jennifer’s own visual impairment changes from day to day. It can change depending on how bright or dark it is at any moment.

Youth Enrichment Programs focus on the development of daily living and social skills, recreation, assistive technology, orientation and mobility, and career education. Students from 6-12 learn how to do chores such as make a bed, set a table, vacuum, or wash dishes. Recreational activities, art, and music classes are often done in partnership with other organizations. These include everything from rock climbing and kayaking, to learning to play the ukulele. And the week-long summer camp program (which

includes zip lining!) secretly incorporates a variety of adaptive living skills. Students build self-confidence and self-determination.

“Many of our recreational activities involve the whole family,” Jennifer said. “And even the child’s friends. Students will be more successful if they have their community rallying behind them. We want every member of the family to embrace independence for the child. And it starts from Day 1.”

When everyone is on the same page, they’ll reinforce independence. The student will develop confidence in themselves. They’ll look forward to taking on new challenges. “Some of these kids are fearless!” Jennifer said. And since she believes life is an adventure, that’s how it should be.



VisionCorps graduation ceremony.

I’m Doing This For You, Mom *Betty Wei, R.N.*

Although it’s been years since my mother passed, I still get emotional when talking about her. I was just a child when she became blind. She

was an extraordinary woman in so many ways, with such a positive attitude despite her health issues. It saddens me that her life was cut short at age 58 due to complications from diabetes.

I remember all the things that generous people and organizations made possible for her. Someone would come to our home to show mom how to safely do activities of daily living. They gave her talking books — 78 rpm records! And a teacher, accompanied by a guide dog, would give her braille lessons. Many summers the Lions Club would sponsor her to attend a camp for the blind — she loved it!

My mother was a woman of strong faith, treasuring the braille

Bible they gave her and reading it every day. When she died, we donated it back so someone else could benefit.

By giving to the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, I can express my gratitude and thanks on a personal level. I give in memory of my mom, so that others who are visually impaired will have the help they need. It makes me happy to think I am paying it forward.



Betty and her mother on her wedding day.

WHY I GIVE!

Changing The Way People See Blindness

John Horst is retired, but you won't find him sitting around. He has devoted his life and career to improving opportunities for people, like him, with visual impairments.

"Even today," he said, "people have a hard time seeing past someone's disability. They don't see a person as an individual with interests, skills, and talents to offer. They don't see someone with cares and concerns just like theirs. People with disabilities may need some special training and skills to be successful," he continued, "but they want to be treated the same as everyone else."

Fresh out of college, John began what would be a 37-year career with the PA Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services. He started out as a teacher. While working, he earned a master's degree in vocational rehabilitation. He advanced to become district administrator over 15 counties in NE Pennsylvania, with a staff of 32. From there, he served as Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind.

He never really retired. "I'm always getting involved on boards and committees, or writing letters to legislators," he said. He brings 52 years of professional knowledge to the PAB Board. "I feel I have information and experience to share from a wide range of sources. I like staying up to date with what's going on in the field. We advocate with legislators and administrators on the State and national level," he said. "We work in tandem with membership organizations to secure funding for programs. I tell donors and funders, they shouldn't think of their support as charity. They're making it possible

for people with vision loss to get the information, training, and skills they need to get ahead."

"It's always been my desire to help people with disabilities," he said. "I'm always asking, 'How can I provide encouragement that will motivate someone to learn?' Some people will just give up. That's a problem. Sometimes counseling can help."

"It's important for younger people with visual impairments to develop their social skills. They need to know what's appropriate so they'll be able to relate to others and fit in. I want them to know there is dignity in work," he said. "They're going to feel much better if they're working and supporting themselves. When people get the training they need, they can become employed or stay employed.

They can become taxpaying citizens. They can contribute to society," he said.

"Blindness is also a problem of old age. That population is growing. So, there's no way we're going to be out of business in this effort," he joked.

With community support, the opportunities provided by PAB and its network of member agencies can make life better for people of all ages who are blind or visually impaired.

In addition to his work with the PAB, John advocates through the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind (PCB), the American Council of the Blind (ACB), and the Council of Citizens with Low Vision International (CCLVI).



John Horst, M.S., using assistive technology at work at the PCB.