With AT Help, Vision-Impaired Users Slowly Gaining Their Independence

By John M. Williams

Gordon Rasbury, Iris Buntemeyer and Jodi Jainchill share life experiences. They live near Fort Lauderdale, Fla. They are legally blind. They use a variety of assistive technology products. They purchase many of their assistive technology products from Florida Reading and Vision Technology Inc. (FRAVTI). They are survivors who possess strong feelings of independence. And they are role models for other people with vision problems.

Gordon Rasbury

Rasbury is 48 years old. He is retired and lives on his Social Security disability benefits. He was a teacher for seven years before he went blind. Before losing his vision, he taught English, science and social studies. He said of teaching: “I loved it. The saddest day of my life was when I quit teaching.”

When he started losing his sight, he began looking for ways to maintain his freedom and independence. He sees them as complementary. “Freedom allows me to be independent, and independence allows me to be free.”

Assistive technology, or AT, products have played a major role in allowing Rasbury to be independent. He uses the Intel Reader, Money Counter, Colorino and sometimes JAWS.

The Intel Reader is a portable, handheld device that allows users to take a photo of printed material and have it read back to them aloud.

Money Counter allows blind people to distinguish among different denominations of money. The user places a bill into a device or near a component of the device. The device speaks the bill’s denomination, from $1 to $100. The devices, however, cannot identify bent and wrinkled bills, and users must make sure they are inserting or pointing a bill correctly toward the device before it can be read.

Someone asked me recently if there was anything I liked about aging. I said there was. I’d begun to notice that sitting down was just about as enjoyable as sex. Not as enjoyable, but close. And, as a friend of mine in his early eighties said with a smile when I asked him for his thoughts on aging, “What’s the alternative?”

I turned 60 on October 2. I was not at all troubled at the prospect of turning 30, nor of 40, nor 50. But the approach and arrival of 60 has me thinking.

I am in (or feel like I am in) the home stretch. In a July concert in Kilkenny, Ireland, Bruce Springsteen said, “The older you get, the more it means.”

He’s right. Every moment lived now, every moment enjoyed, even the moments not enjoyed, are all things I don’t want to miss; they all have meaning. I want to experience all of my life as honestly and fully as I possibly can.

There are some realities I don’t like. For example, I now realize the expression “So many books, so little time” is unflinchingly true. I find this annoying because reading is my favorite pastime, and I’ll never have the time to read all the books I want to. (You can bet I’ll try, though.)

Am I eyeing changes in my life? Some. I’ll never give up reading and writing. (The idea of giving up food and water seems easier.) I’ll never stop advocating for equal rights. But am I pondering changes? Yes.

While I can identify with television detective Adrian Monk’s view of change -- “I don’t mind change. I just don’t want to be there when it happens” -- I find myself energized by the prospect of it. Move to a new area? Another country? State? Maybe.

See if I can come up with enough revenue to travel? That would be nice. One of the things on my bucket list is to stand in a room Beethoven was in. He’s been a hero of mine since I was a child and, it is well worth saying, a role model par excellence of someone who did not let his disability stop him from taking part in life. When he wrote the Ninth Symphony -- which, some say, is the greatest symphony ever written -- he was completely deaf.

In short, or perhaps not so short, what I am saying, to
Duckworth, an abrasive, one-term Tea Party Republican, in the 2012 election. As the new representative from the 8th district of Illinois in northwest suburban Chicago, Duckworth became the first Asian-American woman elected to Congress in her state, the first member of Congress born in Thailand and the first disabled woman elected to the House.

It took Duckworth two tries to achieve all these firsts. In 2006, she unsuccessfully ran for Congress in a different Illinois district. “After losing the election, I was devastated,” she said. “I think I cried in the bathroom for about three days. I was deeply invested in the campaign. I put in so much energy and really wanted to win.”

That’s a surprising reaction considering that two years earlier, she nearly died when, as a captain in the U.S. Army, the Blackhawk helicopter she piloted over Iraq was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade. She lost both of her legs and nearly her right arm. She spent the next year recovering and rehabilitating at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Duckworth’s father was a U.S. Marine who fought in World War II, and her mother was a native of Thailand, but her ancestry was Chinese. Duckworth was born in Bangkok in 1968, but her family lived all over Southeast Asia, and she now is fluent in Thai and Indonesian.

Duckworth came to Illinois to pursue a Ph.D. in political science at Northern Illinois University after she earned a Master of Arts degree in international affairs from the University of Hawaii. She joined the Illinois National Guard in 1996 and eight years later, her education was interrupted when she was deployed to Iraq, less than a year before she was shot down.

Between her campaigns, Duckworth served as director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and in 2009, President Barack Obama appointed her assistant secretary for public and intergovernmental affairs in the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

“Improving the lives of those living with disabilities is of the utmost importance to me and is one of my main priorities in Congress,” said Duckworth, who recently spoke with Independence Today about a variety of topics.

Q: You became a helicopter pilot because it was one of the few combat jobs open to women. Why did you want to be in combat? Why weren’t you content to serve your country doing something out of harm’s way?

A: A member of my family has proudly served our country throughout every period of conflict dating back to the American Revolution, so service has played an enormous role in my life. I think the first time I fell in love
**Book Review**

Rousso Work Engaging, Moving --
Just Don’t Call it ‘Inspirational’

*By Kathi Wolfe*

“My, you do so well,” a middle-aged woman said as I, legally blind, folded my white cane and sat down at a table at a Starbucks one recent morning. “You’re an inspiration to us all.” What, I wondered, had I done to knock this woman’s socks off? Had I won an Oscar or wiped out all computer viruses? No, I’d merely succeeded in securing my wake-up caffeine fix.

If you have a disability, whether you’re a man or a woman, you’ve likely had similar encounters. “Don’t Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back,” a new book by Harilyn Rousso (Temple University Press), speaks engagingly and movingly to the millions with disabilities who know that nothing sticks more to their craw than the I-word (“inspirational”).

There’s an old feminist saying: “The personal is political.” Rousso, a 66-year-old disability activist, feminist, psychotherapist, writer and painter with cerebral palsy, proves that this dictum is still true. In “Don’t Call Me Inspirational,” she deftly uses her life story as well as her insights and experience in activism, feminism, psychotherapy and the visual arts to challenge and demystify cultural myths and stereotypes surrounding disability.

Like many with disabilities, Rousso, president of Disabilities Unlimited and founder of the Networking Project for Disabled Women and Girls, has been on a, by turns, difficult, thought-provoking and exhilarating journey toward acquiring an “out and proud” disability identity. “I want to ... describe my journey from ‘passing’ -- that is, pretending I wasn’t disabled -- to embracing my disability as an acceptable and (on a good day) even positive part of myself,” Rousso writes. “In recent years, I have come to view my disability as a positive source of identity and community.”

The French talk about “the spirit of the stairs” -- those moments when you think of the perfect

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**Commentary**

To Sum it Up: Math Genius Nemeth Was True Guiding Light for the Blind

*By Deborah Kendrick*

His name may not be familiar to you, but for many people who are blind, Dr. Abraham Nemeth’s celebrity trumps that of any movie, music or sports icon. He sits, you might say, at the right hand of Louis Braille. He is the blind mathematics professor who invented the braille mathematics code.

When Abraham Nemeth was growing up, blind children were taught to weave baskets and chairs. The social expectation was that, if a blind man were to have any gainful activity beyond begging, it would be in menial tasks and manual labor.

But Nemeth’s Jewish immigrant parents either didn’t know or didn’t care about those social expectations. His father walked with him around New York’s tenement neighborhood, encouraging him to touch raised lettering on mailboxes to learn the shapes of printed letters and to note that they were walking east or west as they chatted.

His mother sent her blind 6-year-old to the grocer around the corner (who happened to be his grandfather), entrusting him to remember to pick up the bread, the butter, the measure of sour cream.

His grandfather spent hours with him in the temple, teaching him the lessons every boy would need one day for bar mitzvah.

Abraham went to school, learned to read and write braille, and in his teens, developed a passion for mathematics.

By the time he entered Brooklyn College, it was clear that he had a brilliant mind, but a blindness “expert” dismissed mathematics as having no future for a blind man, persuading him instead to earn a degree in psychology.

Two psychology degrees and a wedding later, he was still unemployed. He was hired by the American Foundation for the Blind, stitching pillowcases and counting phonograph needles to support his wife, but his free time always drifted toward mathematics.
I've stuttered for 60 years. I've been embarrassed by it, cursed it, cried over it, and even tried to hide it -- all while praying it would just one day magically disappear. But it never did.

In my mid-twenties, I believed that stuttering was ruining my life. I blamed it for my failure to hold down a job, for ending my relationships and, essentially, for standing in the way of my happiness.

The wounds felt so personal, and yet I had lots of company: Three million Americans are affected by this disorder -- roughly 1 percent of the population -- according to the Stuttering Foundation of America. SFA defines stuttering as speech whose flow is disrupted by involuntary repetitions and the "prolongations" of sounds, syllables, words or phrases, as well as involuntary silent pauses or blocks in which one is unable to produce sounds.

No one knows what causes stuttering. In my case, therapists and psychologists speculated that I might have begun to stutter around second grade, when I was forced to change from writing with my left hand to writing with my right. (Decades ago, lefties were perceived as evil and sinister. Children might be spanked, chastised, or have their left hands tied behind their backs to convert them into righties.)

In high school, at least one teacher a year stopped calling on me after he or she discovered that I stuttered. My French teacher called on me only once over the course of two years. She thought she was doing me a favor, but she was not. Things went better with my science teacher; she would tell me in advance the material she planned to have me read the following day believing, correctly, that if I rehearsed the section over and over, I would stutter a lot less when she called on me.

Iris Buntemeyer

Iris Buntemeyer is 80 and has been legally blind -- which means she has limited vision -- for 10 years. For more than 30 years, she has been an independent distributor for Shaklee Products. She continues to run her business with some part-time help.

Buntemeyer looks decades younger than her age, and she is still exuberant about many things, including golf. She can see the ball at her feet when she tees off, and after she hits it, a partner watches to see where it goes. “I’m told it goes pretty far and straight,” Buntemeyer said.

But her vision problem has left her with some regrets. She can’t drive anymore and, therefore, must depend on others to take her places. Formerly a voracious reader, Buntemeyer can no longer hold a book in her hand. She does not listen to audio books because she says they lack appeal.

“Holding a book in my hand is more personal than listening to one,” she said.
me as much as to you, is this: Remember to live. Aging, like many things in life, can bring on worries, fears, a plethora of what-ifs. Those are all normal and, I suppose, have their place. But none deserve to be at the head of the table when it comes to our decision-making.

Imagine, for example, you are passing a field of flowers, or looking at a beautiful sunset or sunrise. If you (or I) allow the fears, worries and what-ifs of life, the wounds of life, to sit at the head of the table, they will rob us of our right to enjoy the beauty of the flowers, the sunrises, the sunsets. None of life’s wounds deserve that much control. None.

What other changes are in the offing? I’m not sure. Maybe a relationship again someday. Who knows? I recently met a woman for coffee. While the coffee and conversation were pleasant enough, in the email she sent me a short time later, she was livid that I hadn’t somehow figured out that she had just had a $120 hairstyle. Who knew? I wouldn’t know a $120 hairstyle if I tripped over it. The good news is I remembered to live, which included enjoying the memory of a pleasant conversation and a good cup of coffee, $120 hairstyle be damned.

That’s another thing I won’t give up: humor. I couldn’t give up humor if I tried. Sometimes my humor is ram- bunctious at inopportune times.

I recently heard a woman say that life had really taken a turn for the better when, to quote her exactly, “I was able to marry my daughter.” Now, I knew, as did others, that what she meant was that she had gotten well from an ailment she’d been struggling with and was, as a result, able to be present when her daughter was married. Nevertheless, I was still bogged down by the literal quality of her sentence, in which she proclaimed that she’d married her daughter. You’ll be pleased or perhaps dismayed to learn that I stopped myself from walking up to her and saying, “Your husband must be shocked.”

Anyway, having fun in life, enjoying it, is part and parcel of living to the fullest, no matter what age you are. Have at it; enjoy. Remember to live. Believe me, it’s well worth it, at any age. Don’t let the trials and tribulations of life stop you from enjoying the flowers, the sunrises, the sunsets, the women who marry their daughters.

Peter S. Kahrmann writes a blog on disability issues. He resides in Massachusetts.

WE REMEMBER...

Major Owens
(June 28, 1936 – Oct. 21, 2013).
Owens, a New York City congressman who served 24 years in the House of Representatives and played a crucial role in passing the Americans with Disabilities Act, died at NYU Langone Medical Center of renal and heart failure. He was 77.

Owens represented a Brooklyn congressional district from 1983 to 2007.

In a statement, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., wrote: “Our country mourns the loss of a devoted public servant who dedicated his life to lifting up the voices of those who too often go unheard. From the classroom to the halls of Congress, Congressman Owens taught all of us what it means to serve with strength, compassion and commitment to the public good.”

In 1998, in an interview with Josie Byzek in Mouth magazine, Owens discussed his ideas about the disability rights struggle as it related to the ADA.

“The strategy was to link it to civil rights,” Owens said. “It was the best route to get folks to understand segregation fast. Civil rights and women’s rights had a clear history. Making the transition to rights for people with disabilities became easier because we had the history of the other two.”

In September 1988, a joint hearing was held before the Senate Subcommittee on Disability Policy and the House Subcommittee on Select Education. Witnesses with a wide variety of disabilities, such as blindness, deafness, Down’s syndrome and HIV infection, as well...
She uses the Smartview Desktop Video Magnifier and ZoomText Magnifier/Reader. When she places her catalogs and order forms on the Smartview, the materials can be magnified from three to 50 times. She uses the ZoomText software program for magnification, contrast, cursor and mouse enhancements, and to help her read emails and Web pages.

"Being able to read emails with the magnifier on my computer or having them read to me via ZoomText enriches my quality of life," Buntemeyer said. "It's important for me to care for myself, to make my own decisions as long as I can."

**Jodi Jainchill**

When she was 5 years old, 38-year-old Jodi Jainchill was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa. RP is an inherited, degenerative eye disease that causes severe vision impairment and often blindness. RP is dominant on Jainchill's paternal side. The progress of RP is not consistent. Some people exhibit symptoms from infancy; others may not notice symptoms until later in life. Generally, the later the onset, the more rapid the eye deterioration.

Sixteen years ago, Jainchill earned a bachelors' degree from the University of Florida in physical therapy. She obtained her certification from the Institute of Physical Art in manual therapy and a certification from Polestar Pilates in rehab work. She is a part-time independent contractor in the Aventura, Fla., area, where she works with 10-12 clients weekly.

Her RP puts some restrictions on what she can do. There are a variety of specialties in physical therapy; she excels at manual therapy. She is unable to work with patients who have tubes in machines that require monitoring.

It's important for me to care for myself, to make my own decisions as long as I can.
with the military was at basic training. I enjoyed not only the camaraderie but also the challenges. I knew that I’d serve as long as the army needed me.

When I was a cadet in ROTC and we were sitting down with the instructor to decide what we wanted to do and where we would be placed, I was surprised to learn that I did not have to list a combat job. All of the men had to list three placements that were considered combat jobs, but I didn’t because I’m a female. This upset me, so I listed aviation, which was the only branch that would accept females for combat positions. And I got it. I was lucky.

Q: After you were injured and realized you no longer had legs, how was the adjustment process?

A: I thought, "How the heck is my life ever going to get back to normal?” Recovery is not a smooth process. You are trying to process what happened. Your family is going through shock. You have to find a new normal. But I did. I have done things I never dreamed of doing.

I was really fortunate to not only have my husband by my side but also many of my friends and fellow soldiers. In addition, I had tremendous opportunities to meet both combat veterans and wounded warriors. They’re an amazing group of people. It was really the small things that wore me down during the adjustment process, but I had a great support network at Walter Reed, including dedicated doctors who helped me every day.

Q: It seems like you carry your disability very smoothly today. You’re not shy about using a wheelchair in public or letting your prosthetics show. How rocky was the physical and emotional journey between those two points?

A: The explosion didn’t change who I am, and I felt obligated to continue serving after my injuries. I wanted to advocate for servicemen and women who dedicated so much to our country, as well as a new community of which I belonged: the disability community. For me, it’s not so much the big things but the little nuances that really wear me down.

Q: How was this journey in political terms? Before you became disabled, did you have any concept of how many of the obstacles disabled people encounter are political in nature, the result of oppressive public policy?

A: Before my injuries, I didn’t recognize the struggles and obstacles people living with disabilities face. It’s frustrating when I want to go to a restaurant or business that isn’t wheelchair accessible. So, yes, a lot of this does indeed relate to public policy that Congress has the ability and power to change.

Q: What does the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) mean to you? What impact has it had on your life?

A: Senators Dole and Kennedy were true champions in their fight to help enact the ADA. As a wounded veteran, the ADA assists me in overcoming obstacles every day. I would not be where I am today without it. The ADA has made America a stronger and more compassionate nation, and I am forever thankful for this groundbreaking law.

Q: Now that you are in Congress, where does improving the lives of people with disabilities fall on your list of priorities?
as parents of disabled children, testified about architectural and communication barriers and the pervasiveness of stereotyping and prejudice.

Afterward, Owens, a member of the House Subcommittee on Select Education; Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., chairman of the Labor and Human Resources Committee; and Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Policy, vowed that they would make a comprehensive disability civil rights bill a top priority for the next Congress.

That same year, Owens created the Congressional Task Force on the Rights and Empowerment of Americans with Disabilities, which helped expose the extent of discrimination.

Owens named former National Council on Disability vice chairman Justin Dart Jr. the task force chairman and former NCD executive director Lex Frieden its coordinator. Owens asked Dart to hold forums across the nation to shine a spotlight on often hidden discrimination faced by Americans with disabilities. Dart personally headed 63 public hearings, at least one in every state, including ones in Washington, D.C.; Puerto Rico; and Guam. The combined attendance at the hearings totaled more than 30,000.

By the time Congress returned for the next session and revisions were made to the initial draft, with the assistance of national disability consumer organizations, there was strong bipartisan support for the ADA.

The House and Senate passed similar bills, and in mid-July, both chambers passed the final version. President George H. W. Bush signed the bill into law on July 26, 1990, proclaiming that “together we will not accept, we will not excuse, we will not tolerate discrimination in America … Let the shameful wall of exclusion finally come tumbling down.”

At the successful completion of the task force, Dart praised Owens.

“There would be no civil rights without empowerment,” he said.

“Congressman Owens has consistently articulated this to us and backed up his words with action. This task force is evidence of it and perhaps, more importantly, the way he has dealt with it, always backing us up and never leaning over our shoulder paternalistically, but insisting that this task force be the embodiment of empowerment that he intended.”

Dart passed away in 2002. His widow, Yoshiko Dart, echoed her husband’s earlier sentiment.

“Major Owens knew empowerment was essential in passing the ADA,” she said. “So we made it the foundation of our tour. The disability community’s success in passing the ADA would not have been possible without the opportunity, encouragement or support that Major Owens gave us. His contributions to advancing disability rights cannot be overstated.”

“New York City has lost a champion who exemplified the very best of what a Congress member can be,” City Comptroller John Liu said in a statement. “His work in helping to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act will serve as one of his lasting legacies.”

Owens, whose father was a factory worker, was born in Collierville, Tenn. He earned a bachelor’s degree from Morehouse College, a historically black institution in Atlanta, and a master’s of library science degree at Atlanta
A: Improving the lives of those living with disabilities is of the utmost importance to me and is one of my main priorities in Congress.

Q: What are the most critical political issues people with disabilities face? What do you plan to do to change things for the better?

A: The implementation of the ADA continues to be an issue of great importance for disabled Americans. For example, swimming pools were only required to be ADA compliant by January 31, 2013, 23 years after the passage of that historical legislation. It is essential that institutions continue to adapt and improve access for the disabled to meet ADA regulations. A crucial aspect of ADA compliance is government funding and the ability of governments to enforce ADA regulations. In tough economic times, funds committed to ADA compliance must be prioritized.

Another important issue is the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This treaty would help guarantee access and protections for disabled persons worldwide — the same protections that Americans earned under ADA in 1990. The convention will help millions of Americans gain the same rights overseas that they have at home.

Unfortunately, despite a bipartisan coalition of senators working together to ratify the treaty last year, it failed because of irrational concerns about the treaty. The treaty would make no changes to current U.S. law and help millions around the world live productive lives. As a member of Congress, I will be a strong advocate for the treaty and encourage my friends in the Senate to ratify it.

It’s important that all American views disability rights as an ongoing struggle and not something that can be achieved with a single law or regulation. The needs of disabled Americans change with new technologies and other developments in our country. The most important thing is that disability rights are made a priority and not a luxury in good times and bad.

Q: How much do you feel your mere presence in Congress improves things for people with disabilities?

A: I can only hope that my presence in Congress brings awareness to the disability community. For example, if an event isn’t wheelchair accessible, I don’t go. While I’ve missed key events I would have liked to attend, my not being there hopefully raises awareness of the importance of making restaurants and buildings more wheelchair friendly.

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We Remember

University.

He worked as a librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library and, in 1966, was named executive director of the Brownsville Community Development project. His involvement in the community caught the eye of NYC Mayor John Lindsay, who tapped Owens to head the city’s new Community Development Agency, which oversaw anti-poverty programs. In 1974, Owens ran for state senator and was elected.

Eight years later, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, succeeding Shirley Chisholm, who retired. Owens’ diverse Brooklyn district included heavily Caribbean-American neighborhoods, upscale Park Slope and a large Hasidic area in Crown Heights.

City Council member Jumaane Williams said Owens “fought to reduce poverty and for the rights of working class New Yorkers.”

Under Owens’ leadership, more than 500 grassroots agencies were funded and thousands of lives were touched.

In Congress, Owens was known as the “Rappin’ Rep” for reading political raps he wrote on the lower chamber’s floor and entering them into the Congressional Record.

In a statement about his former committee colleague, Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the ranking member on the House Education and Workforce Committee, wrote that Owens “was a valued member of the committee who led a decades-long fight for educational equity and pushed for poor students to have access to the opportunity to succeed in school by having equal educational resourc-
When Steve Landau attended Harvard, he studied architecture. For a decade now, he has run his own wildly innovative and creative company, developing tactile-audio tools to enable people who are blind or visually impaired more complete access to educational and artistic experiences. He spends a lot of time closing his eyes and says that his architectural training and degrees assist his thinking in many ways.

“Architecture is all about getting inside the experience of the other person” in order to feel how a given space will be perceived by the end user, he said. In his work as president and founder of New York-based Touch Graphics Inc., he closes his eyes every day, attempting to experience the world of those who will benefit from his projects.

Landau’s first groundbreaking project a decade ago was combining tactile graphics and computer-driven audio in an atlas. Tactile graphics -- raised “pictures” intended to convey images to people unable to see traditional graphical imagery -- are most effective when kept simple and uncluttered. So a simple map, for instance, with major outlines of regions and varying textures for different kinds of land masses, etc., would become cluttered and confusing if it contained all the same information as its visual equivalent. By adding audio, a person can examine the map with her hands, touch a spot of interest and hear spoken information to enhance the learning experience.

In the last decade, Landau has undertaken a variety of educational and artistic projects, combining the senses of touch and hearing in a number of remarkable packages.

The STEM Binder, created by Touch Graphics in collaboration with Smith Kettlewell and others, is a perfect introduction to the power of this audio-tactile combination.

The STEM (science, technology, engineering and math-
which I accepted in front of hundreds of people. That was the only time, over the course of four years, that I spoke before more than a few dozen people and did not stutter. People congratulated me and wondered aloud how I seemed to breeze through my remarks. It was because I’d rehearsed them scores of times before I had to stand up and accept the actual award.

During my junior year, however, I began to experience outright discrimination as I ventured off-campus. It was spring 1966 when I started interviewing for jobs. I sought posts in government, journalism and science. But without exception, every person who interviewed me said that, because I stuttered, I wouldn’t be asked back for a follow-up interview.

In the final days of college, I realized that if I wanted to achieve my career goals, I would have to work longer and harder than my peers so that I could blend in and appear not to have a speech disorder.

Though, unlike many of my classmates, I graduated without a job in 1967, I was still determined to succeed. I intended to show the world that I could make my mark as a writer. A little more than a year later, I left Pennsylvania with about $300 in my pocket, bound for Washington, D.C.

Shortly after I arrived, I met people who saw that I had potential. The Army Times Publishing Co. hired me as an assistant production editor and junior writer, and my boss encouraged me to develop my writing and speaking skills. It took months before I summoned the courage to make my first telephone call to a U.S. senator’s office, but by doing so, I stopped letting stuttering control me and started to control it.

My anxiety about phones went way back. For decades, I would walk to a friend’s house, even if the friend lived a mile or farther away, just so I could avoid having to call him or her. I disliked speaking on the phone even more than I disliked speaking in public.

As I opened up, my career began to expand. I left the Army Times Publishing Co. in 1971 and signed a two-year contract as an environmental writer, covering conferences in the U.S. and Europe. Though I seldom asked questions at those events, I always managed to write decent, factual stories.

Unfortunately, my relationship with my boss began to deteriorate. I believe that it was my stuttering that began to bother him. When an article I wrote won an award, he refused to let me accept it. He collected it on my behalf so I didn’t embarrass him or the organization by getting on stage and stammering through my acceptance speech. So when my contract there was up, I left.

I went on to cover anti-submarine warfare conferences; I also covered the National Aeronautics and Space Administration for Raytheon Services Co. Those assignments took me around the country and throughout Europe. A highlight of my time at Raytheon was an unexpected opportunity to update the merit badge pamphlet for the Boy Scouts of America, which I worked on with my colleague, Bob Service. We created a 64-page booklet that sold more than 50,000 copies in about four months. For decades, the book remained the most profitable merit badge publication in Boy Scouts of America history.

Even though I’d come a long way, I still had some anxiety about speaking on the telephone. I had to overcome whatever remnants were left of that fear when I started working for United Way of America. During the interview phase, my future boss told me, “If you can’t make your own calls, you don’t carry your own weight.”

His statement shocked me. I learned that he had spoken to former bosses who told him of my aversion to calling clients. I remember stuttering when I said, “Mis, Mis. Ah. Mister Pell, Pell, Pell, Pellegrini, I will carry my weight.”

I became the senior staff writer for the communications division, where my duties included public service announcements, articles, speeches and newsletters, while supervising books that we published, as well as fund-raising materials.

The three years that I worked at the United Way were the most creative and productive of my life. I collaborated with the CEOs and staffs of such companies as Xerox, AT&T and Ford. I also worked with leaders of the AFL-CIO, United Auto Workers and Communication Workers of America. Those leaders believed that supporting local United Ways and affiliated agencies made for strong, healthy communities throughout America.

We also crossed paths with celebrities, including actors such as Jack Lemon and Cliff Robertson, and football greats Roger Staubach and Franco Harris. They gave of their time to work on United Way movies, and not once in three years did I hear any comments about my stuttering; only my skills mattered.

Three years after starting work at UWA, however, I was exhausted. The physical toll of long hours week after week made my stuttering worse. The fatigue was reflected in the quality of my work. Burnout motivated me to look for another job. I found freelance editing and writing gigs that paid pretty well. But I wanted to earn what I was worth.

“What are you looking for regarding salary?” a vocational rehabilitation counselor asked me. I told him about $40,000. He reviewed my portfolio and then got quiet for a while.

“How long have you stuttered? It’s quite severe,” he said, apparently perceiving that my career opportunities were limited, even though I had a proven track record...
of 10 years as a writer. He tried to talk me into taking positions that paid half of what I deserved, but I declined.

One month after I left United Way, the late Frank Bowe, then executive director of the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, hired me as his director of communications at a salary of $40,000. And it was up, up, up from there.

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to an overall improvement in quality of life," she said.

As the population ages and lives longer, Kretschmer said that she is selling more products to those in Buntmeyer’s age bracket. “People with macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy are the largest-growing sector of our business,” Kretschmer said. “A large percentage of our business is return customers.”

“I like the fact that Lesa’s company represents multiple manufacturers that allows me to pick from a variety of solutions within any particular category,” Buntmeyer said.

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John Williams is a regular contributor to Independence Today. His website is www.atechnews.com.

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Nemeth Continued from page 4

"When other men played pinochle for a night of relaxation," he said, “I took mathematics classes." To him, the wonders of calculus and physics represented the brand of joy all geniuses seem to find in their chosen discipline.

There was no means of writing complex equations in braille at the time, and so, little by little, he devised his own braille mathematics code.

In 1951, another blind man he knew, also an exception for the era in that he held a Ph.D. in physics, was desperate for a table of integrals he could refer to independently. He asked Nemeth for help.

Nemeth taught Clifford Witcher his private code, and within the year, it had been adopted by a joint committee of experts from the United States and England as the official mathematics code of the blind.

The Nemeth code never earned its founder any money. Its adoption, however, may have played a role in moving him closer toward his dream.

“Wouldn’t you rather be an unemployed mathematician than an unemployed psychologist?” his wife asked him. Thus, he began work at Columbia University on a doctoral degree in mathematics. Meanwhile, his work as a tutor for returning World War II veterans had resulted in a few part-time jobs teaching math.

Nemeth became a full professor at the University of Detroit, where he taught graduate and undergraduate math courses, inaugurated a computer science department and taught computer classes. His expertise was sought by scholars in England and Russia and throughout the United States.

A gifted and self-taught pianist, he picked up extra cash playing in clubs when he was young, and he continued to play at social gatherings, including weekly concerts for fellow residents in his retirement community until shortly before his death.

Disclosure: For five years, I have been working on Nemeth’s biography. I have spent many hours in his Southfield, Mich., apartment, listening to his memories, his jokes, his still amazing piano playing.

As sharp and brilliant at age 94 as any ordinary mortal one-third his age, his reservoir of memories and jokes seemed bottomless. “Will that one get in the book?” he asked me more than once after regaling me with a joke or pun, limerick or riddle. He loved playing with words almost as much as numbers.

Surrounded by his braille books -- Jewish prayers, mathematics, philosophy and economics -- and his numerous awards and honors (a bust of Louis Braille among his favorites), he quoted his beloved grandfather to me more than once regarding the availability of time.

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October 2013

Abraham Nemeth/Google Images

“What do you mean you don't have time?” his grandfather chided. “You have all the time God created.”

A certain kind of time changed on October 2. Abraham Nemeth, two weeks shy of his 95th birthday, died. His loss is being mourned and commemo-rated throughout our country and beyond. Because of the Nemeth code and the brilliant example of the humble man who devised it, blind young people today do not hesitate to pursue passions in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

But he has given us much more than a mathematics code. He pursued his dream of teaching mathematics when “experts” wanted him to settle for an assembly line. He memorized and traveled complicated subway routes when blind people were not yet even given white canes, because it never occurred to him to refuse any job, such as teaching math or playing piano, that came his way. He worked on perfecting the existing braille...
STEM Binder

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STEM Binder

Image of a three-ring binder filled with beautiful-textured and colored representations of classic STEM images. The periodic table of elements, a human skeleton, and a combustion engine, among others, are familiar to sighted students of science and mathematics; they are also images that have been typically beyond the reach of blind students.

By tapping any point on an image with the Talking Tactile Pen, additional information is learned through audio output. A tap of the textured image of one of the planets on the solar system page, for example, will result in an announcement by a clear male voice that it is Jupiter. Another tap will alert the listener that it is the fifth planet from the sun, the largest planet, and several other details. Yet another tap, and a user will hear how often it orbits the sun, its composition, and so on.

A small chime is heard at the end of an audio explanation to indicate that there is another layer of information to be heard with another tap; a “clunk” sound indicates that the audio segment is over. In this way, an extensive amount of information can be provided to a blind student with a single tactile image. The pen has an internal speaker as well as a headphone jack, is charged via USB, and can be loaded with applications for use with other tactile images.

Landau has also created tactile-audio projects in a variety of science and art museums. At the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum, for instance, a blind person can examine tactile replications of each part of an aircraft and then hear additional details.

Sympathy for Disability Rights Leaders Exposed as Oppressors? Not from Me

By Peter S. Kahrmann

There is a reason ADAPT, a “national grass-roots community that organizes disability rights activists to engage in nonviolent direct action,” according to its website, rightly exclaims “Free our People!” at every turn. People with disabilities in this country are not free.

All too often, their oppressors are some of the very same people who claim to be on their side. Some of the health care providers and nonprofit groups whose leadership publicly claims to support equal rights for people with disabilities support anything but.

My home state of New York is no exception. What is humorous, were it not so sickening, is the put-upon looks on the faces of the aforementioned leaders when they are caught in the act of oppressing those they claim to serve.

Not too long ago, the executive director of a nonprofit agency who pledges devotion to the rights of people with brain injury disabilities blocked people with brain injury disabilities from being on a committee -- a committee that was developing a proposal on behalf of (wait for it) people with brain injury disabilities. As a result of this person’s actions, the committee folded.

While there was some uproar over the executive director’s behavior, not much changed. She is still employed and still tells any and all who will listen that she cares about people with brain injury disabilities.

Let me also mention that, according to some members of the committee who asked not to be named, she said there was no need for people with brain injury disabilities to be on the committee because she spoke for them.

Imagine what would happen if committees were formed to represent blacks or Jews or members of the LGBT community, yet no one from the black, Jewish or LGBT communities were allowed on their respective committees.

What, on the surface, appears baffling is the often flamboyant expressions of pouting on the faces of these oppressors when they are caught and exposed, as if the ones doing the exposing were in the wrong.

Rubbish.

After I exposed the executive director referenced above, I was told that she and some others began to tell people:

Sympathy?

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code, both literary and mathematical, to make it universally comprehensible to blind children and adults, presenting a paper on the topic just a few months before his death.

And, always, he continued in his faith and his music. He prayed and he played.

Nemeth loved telling the true story that his obituary had been published twice! The first occurred in 1984, when a Jewish magazine for the blind mistook a death notice that read “A Nemeth” as being for Abe, rather than for his brother Aaron. In 2000, the Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness, the professional and educational publication published by the American Foundation for the Blind, made a similar mistake upon the death of Abe’s wife, Edna.

“The news of my demise has been greatly exaggerated,” he quipped to me in recalling those two premature obituaries. It tickled him to say such things.

And it tickles me to remember his saying such things.

But what tortures me is that I used his reference to time as a license to procrastinate. It tortures me that he will not read the second half of the book.

I don’t know much about “all the time God has created.” I do know that no matter how much larger than life a person may be, time here eventually runs out. Blind physicists and engineers and math teachers and software designers everywhere thank Dr. Nemeth and say his name daily as they run fingers across lines of complexity written in Nemeth code. As I finish the book, I’ll be thinking about them, but mostly, I’ll be thinking about what humility and genius look like when they merge in one human being.

Deborah Kendrick, a frequent contributor to Independence Today, is a writer and editor.

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es available to them.”

“Major loved the hard work of fighting for America’s poor and middle-class families, for workers, and for the rights of minorities,” Miller wrote. “I offer my condolences to his wife, Maria, and their children, but I also offer them my sincere appreciation for the work that Major did for our country.”

“He was always committed to the empowerment of those with less power,” his son Chris told the New York Daily News. “He never forgot his roots, and he always believed the power (should) be used for good.”

Asked to assess his own legacy at a 2006 retirement party, Owens said he was most proud of an amendment to secure funding for 107 historically black colleges. He also said: “I spent my time and energy organizing people. I certainly didn’t do it by raising money. Fundraising was my greatest failure.”

After leaving Congress, Owens taught in the Department of Public Administration at Brooklyn’s Medgar Evers College.

During Bill Clinton’s tenure, Owens opposed an agreement between the president and congressional Republicans to give states more flexibility in how they spent billions in federal school aid.

“We cannot leave it up to the states,” he said. “They have not done a good job.”

Owens married Ethel Werfel in 1956, the year he graduated from college. The marriage ended in divorce. He later married the former Maria Cuprill.

His son Chris, a Brooklyn political activist, ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination to succeed his father.

Besides his son Chris, from his first marriage, Owens leaves his wife; two other sons from his first marriage, Millard and Geoffrey, an actor who appeared on television as the son-in-law Elvin on “The Cosby Show”; three brothers; a sister; a stepson; a stepdaughter; four grandchildren; and four step-grandchildren.

-- Compiled from various sources

The STEM Binder, portable and powerful, is a truly amazing package that could be of great benefit in any math or science classroom where a blind student is studying.

To learn more, visit: www.TouchGraphics.com.

Deborah Kendrick is a newspaper columnist, editor and poet. Reach her at Kendrick.deborah@gmail.com.
“Watch out for Peter. He’ll turn on you.”

Well, yes and no. If you don’t oppress others or deny people their rights, we’re good to go. If you do, and I catch you, and you are part of an agency, company or group that claims to be on our side, I will expose you. So, if that’s turning on you, so be it. Ain’t nothing compared to the betrayal you’ve inflicted on those you claim to serve.

As I said, the pouts you see on the faces of those exposed are often, I think, there for effect, for influencing the way things appear on the surface. It’s what’s happening under the surface that warrants closer attention. People with disabilities are seen as less than human by some and as revenue streams by many.

On one occasion, a woman who was in an Albany-based program for PWDs wanted to return to work, to get a part-time job. She was a wheelchair user. She landed a part-time job at a local store. Before she knew it, she was in a meeting with the program’s owner and other high-ranking staff. She told me later that they put on quite a show about how much they supported her goal of getting a job. But, they said, they were sure she would not be safe working in the community, at least not at that time. And not being safe meant they would have to discharge her from the program, which might mean she would lose all her services, which might mean she’d lose her housing subsidy, which might mean she’d end up in a nursing home, or homeless. So, the owner said, we have a great idea: We’re going to clear out an office and install a display case with candy and things, and you can sell them to program participants and staff.

Without missing a beat, my friend said, “And, of course, you’ll still be able to bill for those hours?” The owner said yes. Leaving out some of the more colorful and, frankly, applicable words she used when telling me about all this, she said, “Do these people think I’m stupid or what?!”

The answer, in this case, was no. They didn’t think she was stupid. They thought she was controllable. And she was. She was because far too often health care providers are allowed to treat PWDs as if they are nothing more than chattel or revenue streams.

As for those I’ve publically exposed for being oppressors who are upset about it -- too bad. When you betray those you claim to serve, you deserve to be exposed. In fact, were it up to me, you’d be facing criminal charges.

ADAPT is right: Free our people! Free them now.

Peter S. Kahrmann is a writer and an advocate for people with disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act has been the law of the land for 23 years, more actors with disabilities are appearing in TV shows (even in prime time), and annual disability pride parades are part of community life in cities from San Diego to Philadelphia. Yet, it’s still hard not to feel frustrated if you’re someone with a disability. In “Don’t Call Me Inspirational,” Rousso speaks eloquently and personally about both this frustration and the efforts of herself and others who work for change.

Her moments of transformation range from asserting her independence from her father by buying a car on her own to suing a professional group that discriminated against psychotherapists with disabilities.

Without being polemical, humorless or pompous, Rousso lets readers see that you can have a vital, rich life because of, not despite, a disability. How great it would have been if I and so many others had known this when we were young. One can’t help but wonder how helpful this knowledge would have been to my folks, who at my birth, were told that because I was blind, I’d “just be a vegetable.”

“Don’t Call Me Inspirational” is a must-read not only for folks with disabilities but for nondisabled people of all stripes, such as family members, friends, co-workers, teachers, doctors and allies. One book can’t change the world. But Rousso’s work, with its engaging, refreshingly non-“inspirational” writing, could potentially change the hearts of millions.

Kathi Wolfe is a writer and poet. Her new poetry collection “The Green Light” was recently published by Finishing Line Press.