

Hello, my name is Margie DeMars, your past, present and future student. Some of you who may know me, might not recognize me because I'm traveling incognito today. (Big Smile) Ordinarily, my hair is grey, but I prefer to think of it as silver. I look much younger than my 77 years, and I've lost some weight especially for this occasion.

Thank you everyone, for attending the American Council of the Blind of Virginia's presentation. In my portion of this talk, we hope to help you understand some of the real-life experiences and activities of the blind & deaf-blind, and how your role is of utmost importance to us.

President Franklin Roosevelt was right... We have nothing to fear, but fear itself! This is especially true of the vision impaired, especially those with the low vision. Perhaps it is because they are still learning to conquer their fears. Have you noticed how most of the vision impaired shy away from doing anything that is unfamiliar? Whether it is avoiding putting themselves in situations that may be embarrassing? A new location or, heaven forbid, a buffet? The fear of the unknown. I've been a member of various Visually Impaired Support Groups since 2008. The 50+ VIS members were offered 2 Free daytrips per year, plus they could invite a friend or guide – approximately, 12 members would take advantage of this FREE trip. How many AER members do you think would sign-up for a Free trip plus lunch out with friends? Fearful of the unknown. They clearly did not want to travel to unfamiliar places. How can we encourage the vision impaired to take chances? To not get embarrassed, but if you do, learn to laugh about it. It's not the end of the world! Life marches on. The blind and vision impaired are good examples to the sighted.

What is my point of describing the fear issues above? The best way to address some of these issues is with in-person meetings, and to offer as many programs as possible. A senior citizen was reluctantly brought to our support meeting by her daughter. Mary sat with her head down, not taking part in the discussion. I asked her, "Mary, please tell me, what is the one thing that you would like to do, but can't because of your poor vision?" She told me that she'd really like to read her Bible again. I told her that we might be able to help her. I told her about the On-Loan Equipment program, and asked her if she would like to try an Electronic Video Magnifier. Mary returned the next month. I explained about the rural transit system in our town, and encouraged her to please return, even if her daughter couldn't bring her. She became one of the most joyful and out-going members in our group. Some of our members didn't want anything from the group except spending time with other visually impaired people. In-person support meetings are advantageous for helping the blind and low vision to realize their potential, and to live their lives to the fullest!

The ACB of Virginia would like to increase in-person meetings throughout the state. Our newest affiliate is "Southside Outta Sight" located in Danville, and we are working to add a new group in Fredericksburg. Please help us by encouraging your clients to join ACBVA, a local vision impaired group, or if there is none, to consider starting one. You are in the perfect position and have the knowledge to help someone interested in starting a local support group, by giving them suggestions; location near bus stop or in senior citizen facility, making your clients aware of its existence. A support group will help them, their entire community and increase your clientele. Local support groups

attract the visually impaired who are not receiving services and don't know who, what or where amenities are available to them.

I was a little fearful the first time attending the deaf-blind camp, and it was the first time venturing off on my own without family or friends nearby. In 1998, I had perfect hearing in both ears, but lost total hearing in my right ear due to an auto-immune disease attacking my inner ear. The loss of hearing left me with no sound direction. One of my fears was being trapped in a fire with someone yelling, "Over here, in this direction! Follow my voice!" Often times, when someone would call my name they'd say, "Margie, over here!" Sometimes, I would purposely look up into the air and think, "I have no idea where 'here' is." It really made me realize how poor my vision was. Unable to see who was talking, I was always looking in the wrong direction. I had been feeling very unsure of myself. Inadequate to say the least. To make matters worse, my vision continued to deteriorate. With total loss of hearing in my right ear, I fit the parameters of the title Deaf-Blind. Although I knew no other participants, I felt the real need to do something all by myself, independently. After signing up, thinking about the Zip-Line challenge that the camp was offering, also gave to me the sense of adventure. I was on my way!

Some of the attendees were totally blind, with hearing only with the aid of powerful hearing aids. Others had some vision with total deafness, but I was surprised how many were totally deaf and totally blind. Many of these campers did not speak or could not speak clearly.

Much was planned throughout each day. I learned so much from the educational talks. In the front of the class was a teacher or speaker with a Signer nearby. (I learned from the signers that they are limited as to how long they can sign continuously.) Every 15 or 20 minutes, someone yells "Switch!" Those campers who are assigned two signers will change positions. Everyone has the opportunity to ask questions. I was very impressed how every class was conducted.

The games that were played by the entire group were amazing. Somehow, I was chosen to be a mummy. I believe we had three mummies. The rest of the deaf-blind had to wrap us with toilet paper. Wow... talk about working together?! The group covering me worked in unison! One camper noticed that I had a half-inch gap and he made sure to communicate this to the others and they quickly repaired the bare spot. This event was so much fun. Could you imagine several people working together who are blind and deaf communicating with each other?

During the TODB Camp, a picnic was held. Not in the area of where we were used to traveling, but over a bridge and through the woods. After cooking our own S'mores' and singing songs, I noticed that many of the campers were heading back to the lodge area. When I decided to head back myself, I stopped by the rec building to pick-up a bottle of water. Imagine, complete silence... It was the most wonderful experiences of my life. I was surprised to look-up and see 30 - 35 people sitting on rows of long benches, signing to each other, some in each other's hands, with delightful animation. I had never experienced such Quiet Joy. I will never forget this vision that only God & I was seeing... It was totally beautiful. They rarely get the opportunity to meet with others who truly know and care how the other feels. Their uniqueness, difficulties & Joys!

Truthfully, I just have too much to say and not enough time to say it. May I mention that many of the deaf-blind were leaders, and some were amazingly fearless. I do hope that you have a little glimpse of what I experienced. The most important thing that I learned from this deaf-blind experience? One cannot discount socialization! The learning was good, but the laughter and comradery was the greater need. I was so impressed that I've been volunteering for the TN Organization of the Deaf-Blind since this 2012 Camp. By the way, to my husband's consternation... the Zip-line was thrilling!

Lastly, I'd like to Thank You for your service to me and to all who the government calls disabled. I am addressing all of you as One, because you are One in service... Educating and Rehabilitating those of us in need. In retrospect, you have been helping me to grow and thrive, not only a benefit to me, but for the benefit of others who I have encountered. You were always there right when I needed you!

- Teachers who encouraged me, sitting me close, inconspicuously, in front of the chalkboard
- Large print books in Grammar school
- Large print novels
- Books on 78 speed records, books on tape, and digital cassettes
- Independent Living aides; kitchen devices, magnifying aids, lighting & equipment
- I Can Connect communication tools
- Improved Technology, both digital & hardware
- DBVI Senior Retreat
- NFB Silver Bells Program

In the spring of 2023, I received an email from DBVI offering the Senior Retreat, a 5-day training in various subjects: Braille, VoiceOver, Computer Narrator, Kitchen & Home Tips and, just what I needed most, White Cane Mobility. Six years prior, I had had another auto-immune inner ear attack in my other ear, rendering deaf overnight. I was given mega doses of steroid drugs to bring my hearing back. Thankfully, it brought back 70% of my hearing, but the steroids weakened me and rendered me unstable. At this point, I started using a short white cane. Life marched on. Until I got to the point that I couldn't leave the house without holding my husband's arm. Truthfully, I was wondering if I'd be able to hold the short cane and ambulate with the long cane. My hands ached from arthritis. I was already switching my cane back & forth between hands. The cane seemed so heavy. I dragged my old long cane out, only to discover that it was every bit as heavy. Off to the DBVI Senior Retreat I went, wondering what to expect. On my first mobility training, I was measured and given the most gloriously light cane. Thank you to everyone working in hardware technology! This cane was a Godsend. I quickly realized that, although my balance was poor when I first picked up the short cane, now it was caused from lack of sight. I found that I was ambulating with ease, with more confidence. My little sister announced, "Margie, you're walking much faster!" When you can't see your feet, the short cane is a hazard!

Little did I know, or expect... my husband died 2 weeks later. It was a very sad and difficult time. Some family members strongly suggested that I sell my house and move into assisted living. But because of learning to use the long cane, I was more confident to remain in my home. Thankfully, my home is within city limits. Bus transport is available. Maybe, I needed to prove something. I had no reservations about traveling

by bus, and I am ever thankful for their services. I travel by bus at least 3 days per week. My impersonator, Meg Walker, taught me how to travel up & down escalators. Going down the escalator? That was a fear to overcome. The secret? I closed my eyes, and trusted the feel of my cane. I've discovered that I have just enough sight to be a danger to myself, and everyone around me! My cane is invaluable. Thank you for helping me get to where I am today! Your job is important. I thank God for you. May He bless you and keep you.

Sue Bowmaster, Secretary of the ACB of Virginia is our next presenter. Please welcome Sue Bowmaster..

This *Southside Outta Sight (SOS)* shirt that I'm wearing was the brainstorm of our local chapter member, Wade Elliott. SOS member, June Adams, also wrote a song for our group to the tune of *'Three Blind Mice'*. Keep your eyes on us, were going places! I'd like to share with you this poem, which was written by SOS President Jimmy Nester...

WE THE BLIND, PERCEPTION AND REALITY

Who is it that cannot do?
Some will say it is me and you.
What is it that we cannot do?
We can do many things, even turn a screw.
We can cook, clean, travel, and type.
We use technology and if chosen, we can skype.
We do things different than people with sight.
But we can function just fine with or without light.
Some will say we are an inspiration.
That is not my main motivation.
Giving up is the easy way out.
But it does no good to sit and pout.
So, what is it that we cannot do?
There is nothing, is the only answer that could be true.
And who is it that cannot do?
I'm not sure, but it is definitely not me or you.

James H. Nester

