



We Still
Thrive At
85!
1926 -- 2011

InSight

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Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment, Inc.

A WOMAN AHEAD OF HER TIME

By Joyce Bucci

In this day and age, it is common to find women who have accomplished much in their lives and careers. This wasn't the case in the first half of the 20th century, especially in the very early part when women were struggling to gain the right to vote and to work at careers outside of the home. These women were few and far between, but Mary K. DeWitt was one of them. Language interpreter... suffragette... women's rights advocate... public speaker... professional businesswoman... she was truly a Woman of Achievement.

Mary Kabat was born to lead. She was born in 1890 in a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that became Czechoslovakia, and came to America at the age of six. A very bright child, she quickly learned English and became an interpreter for the Slovak families in the Binghamton community. As a teen, she was often called upon by families whose English was poor to help when they went shopping, to the doctor, or needed a lawyer's services.

In 1913, Mary married Edward Grace, and they had two sons. When Mr. Grace died in 1923, Mary found herself the sole support of her two young sons. One of her first paid jobs was teaching English night classes to Slovak, Italian, and Jewish families, as well as daytime home classes to women unable to leave their small children. She also helped to organize the first local baby clinic and worked at the YWCA. Mary was involved in the local Suffrage Movement, marching in Suffrage parades, and organizing the Binghamton First Ward women to register and vote after that right was granted in 1920.

Feeling that she needed more education, Mary took a leave of absence from her job and enrolled in courses at the University of Buffalo. To support herself and her sons while in Buffalo, she taught night school three evenings per week. When her courses were finished, she returned to Binghamton and her job.

Mary married again, to M. A. DeWitt, but again found herself a widow after only two years. She was offered the job of assistant to the head of the State Employment Service, and was eventually placed in charge of registering unemployed women and helping them to find work. In 1932, she was offered the job that would become her life's work and passion and would set her on the path to her successful career.



Mary K. DeWitt, center, at a BWA Employee Picnic, c. 1935.



Mrs. DeWitt, standing, instructs an employee who is sewing an apron in the early "workshop," c. 1933.

She was approached by two members of the board of the Blind Craft Association. The manager of the fledgling organization had resigned, and she was offered the job. Although she had reservations about her abilities, she accepted the position. She started with seven employees in the tiny "workshop," no equipment except several old looms and sewing machines, and about \$15.00 in the bank account.

Mary wasted no time. She reorganized the work space, added some new items to the production line, taught the employees how to make them, and set out to make the community aware of this little agency that was giving jobs to blind people. And did she ever succeed!

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Our Mission:

"To create opportunities for success and independence with people who have sustained vision loss."

Mary K. DeWitt was the Managing Director of what became the Blind Work Association, Inc. for nearly 30 years before she retired in 1960 at the age of 70. During those years, she took the agency from a tiny, second-floor “workshop” with seven blind employees to a state-of-the-art, three-story facility with over 100 employees. She opened a store front where all of the craft items produced by her workers were sold. She set up displays and demonstrations at job and health fairs around the Southern Tier. She worked tirelessly to “sell” the association to the public by speaking to service groups, social and church groups, and women’s clubs, and through those efforts, she was able to bring important community members to serve on the board of directors. She pioneered contract work with the Federal Government, with employees producing millions of pillowcases for the Military during WW II, and she negotiated sub-contract work with the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company and IBM. She found employment for blind people out in the community, and she created jobs for home workers in outlying counties. She began the forerunner of our Program Services by hiring a social worker, a Braille teacher, and an on-site nurse. She expanded the service territory from Broome County to seven Southern Tier counties, and she created a financial growth from that first \$15.00 to assets worth a million and a half dollars.



Mary K. DeWitt in 1950.

Mary’s retirement from BWA didn’t stop her from being active in both the association and the community. She continued as a consultant to BWA, was active in several service clubs, served on the YWCA boards, and maintained her membership in the Triple Cities Business and Professional Women’s Club until she was 95 years old. In 1982, she provided the history for the Three-Generation Immigration History Project for the Broome County Historical Society.

Mary Kabat (Grace) DeWitt died in 1991 at the age of 101. She created the foundation upon which we continue to build, and she left a lasting legacy of professionalism and a commitment to serving people who are blind or visually impaired that continues today through the programs and services of A.V.R.E.



HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

By Jenn Cubic, A.V.R.E. Director of Development

September’s record rainfall represented the second time in five years that many of us had to contend with extensive flooding. Who could have imagined that the flood of 2011 would be worse than 2006! A.V.R.E.’s Court Street facility was spared, but like so many Broome and Tioga County residents, several A.V.R.E. employees lost everything. Familiar with the wide array of items produced by National Industries for the Blind affiliated agencies, CEO Bob Hanye quickly reached out, through NIB, to our national network to see if any of them could help out with the area’s flood relief.

The response was overwhelming and incredibly emotional! Within days, trucks containing pallets full of products from around the country began arriving on our docks: mops, brooms, paper safety masks, garbage bags, rags, towels, tape, paper cups and plates, blankets, rubber gloves, and even diapers – all top-of-the-line goods that were made by people who are blind! Our docks became a hub of activity as the items were divided up as quickly as they arrived and delivered in the A.V.R.E. truck to relief centers in Conklin, Johnson City, Owego and Nichols. The much-needed supplies helped people clean out their homes and businesses and helped churches feed families. For three weeks, products continued to arrive at our loading docks and continued to be delivered to relief centers.

There were agencies that wanted to help A.V.R.E. employees, in particular. In addition to products, the New Orleans Lighthouse stepped up with a \$10,000 donation to be used to help A.V.R.E. employees rebuild after the flood. Even individual employees from New Orleans sent what they could to help. According to New Orleans CEO Bill Price, their agency was simply doing for others what had been done for them after Katrina. Everyone affiliated with our agency was blown away by their generosity. A few weeks later, Industries for the Blind in Milwaukee held their



annual employee festival. Each year, IB Milwaukee employees raise money at the festival and donate it to an organization they've chosen collectively. This year, they chose A.V.R.E. The funds raised were matched by the agency. Combined with gifts from individuals, IB Milwaukee sent checks totaling almost \$5,400!

A.V.R.E. also set aside \$10,000 to assist affected employees. Numerous A.V.R.E. board members and industry friends made gifts to the special fund that ultimately totaled almost \$30,000! Right away, twelve A.V.R.E. employees were given checks to help with emergency needs. The remaining funds will be distributed, based upon greatest need, after employees have received assistance from state and federal resources.

All of us at A.V.R.E. are fortunate – and proud – to be members of such a generous and resilient community. We're also proud to be affiliated with a network of agencies that reach well beyond local borders to help others in need. As a friend at Outlook Nebraska put it, "It's what makes me love my job!"

We would like to specifically thank these organizations for their generous support and well-wishes:

New Orleans Lighthouse
New York City Industries for the Blind
Envision in Wichita
Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind
Outlook Nebraska
Cincinnati Association for the Blind
ABVI-Goodwill in Rochester
Olmstead Center for the Blind in Buffalo
Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired
in Utica
Southern Tier Association for the Visually Impaired
in Elmira
Clovernook in Cincinnati
Dallas Lighthouse
Industries for the Blind - Milwaukee
Industries for the Blind of New York State
Canberra Corporation in Toledo.

Your generosity and kindness will never be forgotten.



The Jenda – A Review

By Ralph Gedeon,
A.V.R.E. Vision Rehabilitation Therapist

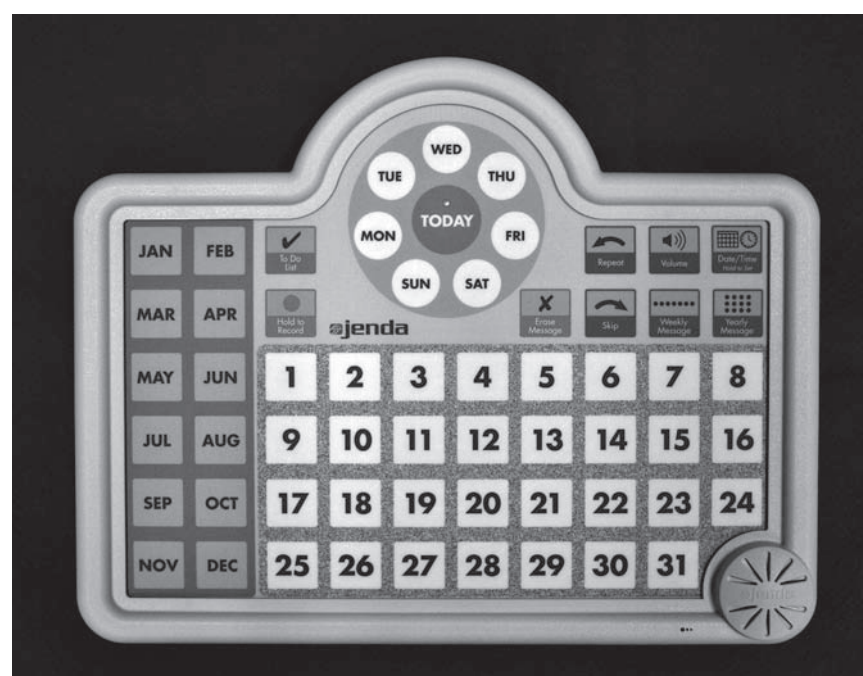
Most of us have, at times, missed important appointments or forgotten a family member's birthday or anniversary. For people who are visually impaired, using a large print calendar doesn't always work. The answer to this problem may be the Jenda Lifetime Voice Calendar. The Jenda is an electronic voice calendar that gives anyone — busy parents, students, seniors, and professionals — the ability to organize appointments, to plan daily activities, and to access clearly recorded information. Simply record each day's activities with your own voice and play it back!

The Jenda is 9 inches wide by 11 inches long and 2 inches thick and weighs only one pound. It is very easy to carry and can hang on the refrigerator door with magnets or lay flat on any surface. Its light gray,

plastic casing is sturdy and can withstand falls. Its design is simple, with two raised borders that frame its left and right sides, along with a casing protrusion on its top middle edge, which indicates proper positioning for use.

The operating buttons are grouped according to their purpose and offer easy access to users, with black-on-white, large-print labels. Although these buttons are imbedded in the surface of the casing, their arrangement and spacing makes the unit convenient and adaptive for blind users. Three AAA alkaline batteries operate the unit, and their compartment is located on the bottom right corner, just below the raised microphone speakers and the flat headphone jack.

This calendar is user-friendly, flexible, and makes scheduling easier to accomplish. The Jenda is quick and easy to use. Its users require no computer skills because there is no software application to learn. Once the calendar is powered on, and after the date and time are set, it is ready to use. Messages can be recorded daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly by simply touching the appropriate buttons and then holding down the record button while talking. The recorded message can be easily retrieved by pushing the same button combinations. Daily messages can be retrieved by just pressing the flashing button, which serves as a reminder that there is a message for that day. While playing messages, different function keys, such as skipping, repeating and deleting, among others, can be applied by only pressing these buttons. The Jenda can store about 900 messages. All stored messages are automatically saved, even when changing batteries; however, messages recorded past 30 days are automatically erased to free up memory space.



The Jenda is a very useful device that could be regarded as an alternate memory bank. It's faster to use than pen and paper and more convenient than "Post-it" sticky notes, and it eliminates the possibility of notes getting lost. Visually impaired users will find that it is easier on the eyes than trying to read illegible handwriting.

The Jenda is sold in our on-site retail store, View-Point. It sells for \$39.95 and comes with magnets, wall mounts, and a desk stand. For more information about the Jenda or to order one, you may call Kim at 607-724-2428.



NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

MEET KATIE!

A.V.R.E. is pleased to announce the addition of Katie Humphreys to our professional staff. Katie recently came on board to fill a newly created position: Manager of New Business Opportunities. She will be looking for new avenues for expanding our existing business and seeking new business partners and customers — all with the goal to continue growing employment opportunities for people who are blind and visually impaired.



Katie comes to us from the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Utica, New York. She will be dividing her time between her office at A.V.R.E. and her home office near Utica, where she lives on a farm with her husband and their two dogs. She will also be on the road, calling on existing customers as well as potential new customers.

Welcome aboard, Katie!



KEYBOARDING CLASSES

A.V.R.E. is now offering Computer Keyboarding classes on a beginner level for people who are visually impaired or blind in our on-site ACCESS-Tech lab. The classes are taught by Leloni (Loni) Cordilione, A.V.R.E. Vision Rehabilitation Therapist, and are open to anyone who is legally blind.

The class goals are to:

1. Become familiar with all of the keys on the keyboard and to learn what they do.
2. Learn how to "touch type."
3. Navigate computer programs with minimal use of the mouse.
4. Become familiar with the keystrokes for Windows, JAWS and ZoomText.

The classes will be six weeks in length, with one two-hour class per week. They will take place on Thursdays from 10:00 AM until Noon. Participants do not need to have any prior computer knowledge and do not need to have a computer at home.

The ACCESS-Tech lab is available by appointment for practice sessions.

The cost of the six-week course is \$35. The next class will begin in the Spring of 2012. Space is limited to four people per course, so interested people should call soon to be put on the waiting list. For more information or to sign up, please call Loni at 607-724-2428.



CELEBRATION POSTPONED

We had planned to hold our 85th Anniversary Open House and Celebration on October 13th. Due to the extreme flooding that occurred in September and the difficult circumstances that created for so many people in our area, we made the decision to postpone it. That has now been rescheduled.

Please come and join us on Thursday, May 3, 2012, from 4:00 PM until 7:00 PM, to help us celebrate 85 years of serving people who are blind or visually impaired. Enjoy tours of our facility, brief presentations, and refreshments.

Come and see how far we have come in 85 years and how we still thrive!



BC TRANSIT OFFICE HOURS

The BC Junction Office of Broome County Transit now has different office hours. The office and information phone are now open:

Monday – Friday, 7:00 AM until 4:30 PM
Saturday – 9:00 AM until 5:00 PM
Sunday – Closed all day

There are no changes to the bus schedules, with all buses running as usual.



IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR!

Our 2011 Annual Appeal kicked off in October and is well underway. As you plan your year-end charitable giving, we invite you to think of us! There are several options for giving, and all donations are tax deductible.

For more information, you may call our Development Director, Jenn Cubic, at 607-724-2428.

**Remember --
You can donate to A.V.R.E.
online at www.avreus.org**

**Just click on the
Donate button.**

WHITE CANE DAY DEMONSTRATIONS

On Saturday, October 15th, several A.V.R.E. employees and consumers met at center court in the Oakdale Mall in Johnson City to celebrate White Cane Safety Day. This was the first time in many years that the agency has presented white cane mobility and guide dog demonstrations to the public. It was the perfect opportunity to talk about vision loss and show how a person with vision loss can travel around safely, either with a long white cane or a guide dog.

NYPENN Pathways Brownie Troop 150 was also on hand to create a piece of “touchable art,” and the public was invited to help out. The finished piece will be hung for display and unveiled at our special 85th Anniversary Open House in May.

We hope to make this an annual event and encourage more people to stop by and visit us. It’s the perfect opportunity to promote awareness among drivers and pedestrians and to encourage them to watch out for blind pedestrians who are using a white cane or a guide dog. It’s also the perfect way to show the will and abilities of people who are blind to live and travel independently.



A.V.R.E. employee Jason Evans talks to interested people about how he and his guide dog, Shadow, work together.

USING MY WHITE CANE — A Tough Nut to Crack

By Nancy Valvano, A.V.R.E. Employee

It was a routine eye exam, but I had a sick sense that something was seriously wrong. My eye doctor was very straight forward when he gave me my diagnosis. He told me I had retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a degenerative retinal disease and that I would eventually lose most of my functional vision. I was 32 years old at the time and was responsible for raising my three young boys, ages seven, four, and two. I was thrown into a state of shock and instantly panicked at the thought of not being able to care for my children.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, and life as I knew it was about to change drastically.

My vision gradually worsened, and within two years, I had to give up my driver’s license, since it was neither safe nor prudent to be driving my precious children around. I was also losing my ability to read, and the simplest tasks at home became arduous and frustrating.

Fortunately, my doctor was very knowledgeable when it came to low vision resources, and he put me in touch with our local vision rehab agency, Lighthouse International. I started receiving low vision services, and within a few months, my home became a sea of touch dots, talking gadgets, and magnifiers, all of which helped make my daily routines more manageable. I was also introduced to the latest computer assistive technology which enabled me to use a computer again. My level of functioning at home was improving, and I felt comfortable in my home and safe, even with suffering the occasional bumps and bruises from knocking into furniture and kitchen cabinets left open. I felt secure in my familiar environment and didn’t see the need to venture out for much.

Truth be told, the need was there since I had a family. I had errands to run, groceries to buy, school meetings to attend — all the wonderful things that keep a Mom so busy. The problem was that the mere thought of venturing out on my own petrified me. I live in a wonderful town with everything in walking distance (train station, shopping, entertainment, doctors), yet I was frightened to leave the safe haven of my home. I was becoming dependent on others to take me out or run my errands for me. My town was familiar enough to me, but I did not feel safe or confident navigating curbs, sidewalks, steps and crossing busy intersections. I experienced an overwhelming sense of anxiety and fear every time I went out alone.

I was very thankful for the next phase of my vision rehab process: orientation and mobility instruction. The first thing my instructor did was order a long white cane that was suitable for my height. My first reaction was, “Do I really need to use the cane?” I still had a good amount of functional vision and felt that I compensated fairly well, in spite of my vision loss. I seemed to manage without it all these years. I was concerned about what people would think, especially those who knew me but were unaware of my vision loss. Only my close friends and family knew of my condition, and I wasn’t ready to share it with the world. It was clearly evident to me that using the cane would be a tough nut to crack.

I began working with my mobility instructor on a weekly basis, navigating my neighborhood and learning many useful techniques. I was amazed at how much easier it was to get around with my cane. I was able to keep up a quick pace, pedestrians would clear the path when they saw me approaching with my cane, and cars were much more attentive. I walked with confidence, and I was able to hold my head high — literally keep my head up since I didn’t have to look

(Continued on the back.)

down all the time. The people who would give me dirty looks when I bumped into them were now considerate and helpful. I found that traveling with my cane was a much more enjoyable experience. I felt safe and I was getting out more on my own.

So why was it, that even with this new revelation, I was reluctant to use my cane when I was out with my family? Truth be known, I was still playing the role of normal, sighted Mom when I attended school functions, family events, etc., and it was becoming increasingly difficult to do this. My wake-up call came when my husband took me to a concert and I went to the ladies room on my own. I tripped over and stepped on the teenagers that were sprawled out in the hallway leading to the bathroom. Needless to say, I was mortified. From that day on, I decided I would take my cane with me whether I was alone or with my family. I finally realized the necessity of having it with me, not only for navigating, but more importantly for identity purposes.

Yes, it was definitely a tough nut to crack, but once opened, life has become much more full and enjoyable. My children have become spoiled from the perks that come along with using my cane — sight impaired seating at concerts, pedestrians clearing the path when we are walking in New York City, and not having to wait in the long line at the Empire State Building, just to name a few! I now have a true sense of independence and dignity when I am out with my family and friends, and I do not feel like I am a burden to anyone.

October 15th is recognized across the country as White Cane Safety Day. It was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 to promote safety and independence for people who are blind and visually impaired. The day helps to generate awareness to drivers of the need to yield to people using white canes, especially now with the growing use of quiet hybrid and electric cars. It is also a celebration of the accomplishments of those blind and visually impaired individuals who can travel independently and freely to their jobs, school, and community events.

This day has a significant meaning for me since the white cane has given me a sense of freedom, confidence and independence, allowing me to live my life to the fullest.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

FREE MATTER
FOR THE
BLIND

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Large Print (14 pt), Braille, emailed text,
Word document on disk or CD,
and regular audio cassette.

If you would like to receive InSight in a different
format, please call Joyce Bucci.

A.V.R.E. serves visually impaired individuals
of all ages who live in the New York counties
of Broome, Chemung, Chenango, Cortland,
Delaware, Otsego, Tioga, Tompkins and Schuyler,
as well as the Pennsylvania counties of
Bradford, Susquehanna and Tioga.

A.V.R.E. is an Affirmative Action and
Equal Opportunity Employer.

If you would like more information about A.V.R.E.
and its services, please feel free to contact us.

"Seeing things differently!"