



# InSight

Spring 2011; Vol. 36 No. 2

Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment, Inc.

## GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND...

That is what Eric Martin does! And that is why he was chosen to receive the A.V.R.E. Melvin L. Rosendale Employee of the Year award for 2011. Eric was nominated by his peers, chosen by our board of directors, and was cited for his dedication, leadership, and his good humor. His award was officially presented to him at the annual A.V.R.E. Awards and Recognitions Banquet in May.

Eric has Usher Syndrome with a profound hearing loss and increasingly severe vision loss. He came to work in A.V.R.E.'s Business (manufacturing) Division after thirty-three years with another organization. As his vision worsened, he made the decision to change employers, and he has been with us for five years.

Eric operates our manila file folder machine and is responsible for loading the large rolls of paper stock onto the machine, ensuring that the machine is running smoothly, and meeting production requirements. In 2009, we received several extremely large orders from the U.S. Census Bureau. Under Eric's team leadership, we produced approximately 21 million manila file folders in five months! As a result of meeting the order deadlines and producing good quality product, we received a Valued Partner commendation from the Census Bureau. Way to go, Eric and Team!

Eric's vision loss has progressed to the point where he has little usable vision left. But he can still see very large, bold print and can still see well enough to communicate with sign language. Eric's sense of fun and his good humor really becomes apparent when he teaches his coworkers common hand signs to help them communicate with him.



Eric truly exemplifies the high work and personal standards that can be achieved despite vision and hearing impairments. We are very proud to have him on our team.

## Other Awards

The Amy J. Later Citizen of the Year Award for 2011 was presented to Colleen Ciarletta, A.V.R.E.'s Employment and Career Specialist. Colleen was commended for her willingness to participate with other local organizations in a leadership capacity. She is currently on the board of directors of the Boys and Girls Club of Binghamton, and she is a member of the Southern Tier Young Professionals and has served as their Secretary. She participates in the Big Brother/Big Sister Program and has been the "Big Sister" of a nine-year-old girl for the past three years. She rescues shelter dogs and currently has three. She also encourages and provides guidance for healthy living practices to her fellow employees at A.V.R.E. Colleen was featured in our last issue of InSight (Winter 2011).

The 2011 Outstanding Community Service Award was given to the Enterprise Group. A long time and valued business partner of A.V.R.E., the paper company was cited for "its outstanding business and philanthropic support of the A.V.R.E. mission, to the benefit of our employees who have sustained vision loss."

Congratulations to all of our deserving award winners!



**Our Mission: "To assist people who have a vision disability enhance life quality through attaining or maintaining personal and economic independence, and help remove obstacles imposed by vision disabilities."**

## NINA — SETTING THE BAR HIGH

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

Growing up in Sarajevo during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nina Bektic learned the hard way how to overcome traumatic obstacles and to move forward. Nina, her mother and grandmother lived as refugees, but they never gave up. At age fourteen, the war behind them, Nina developed benign brain tumors that caused hydrocephalus, resulting in damage to her optic nerves. Once again, her life was turned upside-down, and she was forced to summon the life-saving skills she learned as a young child.



Thirteen years later, Nina Bektic-Marrero was awarded National Industries for the Blind's Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award for 2011. At twenty-six, Nina has accomplished what it takes some a lifetime to achieve. Rather than being discouraged or held back by her vision loss, Nina has channeled her entire energy into taking control and creating a rewarding life for herself.

The hydrocephalus was treated in the United States, but the brain tumor remained. According to Nina, "The tumor still resides there and doesn't pay rent!" She graduated from an American high school in Greece and received several honors, including President Bush's Educational Award and the Creativity, Action & Service Award for her leadership and volunteerism. She received a full scholarship to Bard College and returned to the United States. At Bard, Nina was inducted into the Trustee Leadership Scholar Program where she developed and coordinated the Visible/Invisible Disabilities Awareness Program (VIDAP). She later implemented the VIDAP model in Serbia. Nina is committed to resolving ongoing human rights violations and advocating for disability rights through public policy reform and mass media campaigns, both here and abroad.

Nina has been with A.V.R.E. since 2008 and is currently the Supervisor at A.V.R.E.'s switchboard operation at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Bronx, New York. She supervises eight switchboard operators who are responsible for all incoming calls, monitoring the hospital's alarm systems and dispatching emergencies to the appropriate staff. Nina is instrumental in training all employees, including operators at two other VA switchboard operations in the Mid-Hudson Valley. She has also implemented new procedures that have earned her unit recognition from medical center administrators, staff and veterans.

Last year, another tragedy struck when Nina lost her husband, leaving her a single mom to her young son. And, yet again, she persevered. She continues to pursue her Masters in Public Administration at Baruch College and is participating in NIB's Effective Supervision Program. She also managed to carve out time to write a book about her life experiences, [The Physiology of Hardship: If It's Not One Thing – It's Another](#). She hopes that others will benefit from her insight.

Severe or sustained vision loss is generally considered a disability. Disability is defined as a condition or state of incapacity. Far from being either incapacitated or incapable, Nina's vision loss is clearly not a disability. It's just one more thing for her to overcome. As she so aptly states, "The sky is the limit and unless I reach for the sky, I will never know my limits and capabilities." Congratulations, Nina! Thanks for setting the bar so high and being an inspiration to all of us.

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## A VERY SPECIAL GUEST

A.V.R.E. held its 24th Annual Awards and Recognitions Banquet on May 14th. The keynote speaker for this year's banquet was a very special guest: United States Army Master Sergeant (Ret.) Jeffrey Mittman. Giving an extremely moving speech, Jeff told his story and his hope for the future.

Jeff enlisted in the Army as an infantryman in 1989. He was deployed to the Gulf during Operation Desert Storm in 1990 and spent five months there in the desert. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, he was sent to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. While there, his platoon conducted more than 100 combat missions without a loss of American life. In 2003, he was again deployed to the Gulf during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Again, his platoon conducted hundreds of patrols and missions without an American casualty.

In 2005, Jeff was redeployed to Iraq as an advisor to the forces of the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior. On July 7, 2005, Jeff's team came under attack. An IED exploded near his vehicle and he was severely injured. The blast injured his right arm and left him without a nose, lips, and most of his teeth. His left eye was also destroyed, and he lost most of his vision in the right one. His injuries were so severe that it was doubtful that he would survive. His strength, courage, faith, and the love and support of his wife and daughters brought him through.  
(continued on page 3)

Jeff has endured more than forty surgeries to rebuild his face. However, nothing can be done to restore his sight. A year after he was wounded, he began a five-week vision rehabilitation training program at the Hines VA Hospital in Chicago. He received Orientation & Mobility instruction and learned how to use a long white cane. Because he didn't regain the full use of his right arm, he taught himself to type using only his left hand and no vision. During subsequent training sessions at Hines, he began learning adaptive technology. He now uses a GPS to help him travel around, a CCTV and digital magnifiers to enlarge documents, ZoomText on his computer, and a Kindle to read the daily newspapers.

Jeff now travels the country to share his experiences and the lessons he has learned. He has received numerous awards from organizations such as the American Foundation for the Blind, the Committee for Purchase from People who are Blind or Severely Disabled, and Lighthouse International. Jeff plans to continue traveling, speaking, and sharing his hope for the future, both for him and for other injured veterans.

## NEW IPHONE APPS

In our last issue of InSight (Winter 2011), we told you about the Apple iPhone, which is completely accessible to people with low or no vision through its innovative combination of touch screen technology and the VoiceOver screen reader. Now we can tell you about two new applications, or apps, that can be added to the iPhone.

### ZoomReader App

First is the brand new ZoomReader app from AiSquared. Using the iPhone's camera, ZoomReader takes a picture of any text and converts the image into text using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology. ZoomReader will then read the text back to you, using a natural-sounding voice. The app also allows you to use live video magnification with up to 4X zoom. It features customizable color filtering and highlighting, text size, and speech rate. Imagine being able to read the small print on a restaurant menu, a clothing price tag in a store, or the ingredients list on a grocery store item, just by using your phone!

The ZoomReader App will only work with the iPhone 4 with iOS 4.2 and higher. The app may be downloaded from the iPhone App Store at [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com) for \$19.99.

### EyeNote App

This new app, launched by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, allows one to identify denominations of U.S. paper currency – a bill identifier on your iPhone! Like the ZoomReader App, it also uses the device's camera to take an image of the bill and then identifies the bill. It either speaks the bill denomination or uses specially keyed vibrations and/or tones when privacy is required. The bill can be held against the camera with either the front or back facing it, and no flash is required. There is a two to four second response time. The app recognizes currency designs from Series 1996 and forward. Simplified on-screen instructions can be read aloud with VoiceOver mode.

The EyeNote App will work with the iPhone 3G, 3Gs, and 4. It also works with the 4th Generation iPod Touch and the iPad 2. It can be downloaded from the Apple App Store at [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com) and is totally free.

## DIGITAL TALKING BOOKS

The Talking Book Program has been around for many years. Originally recorded onto phonograph records, a change was made about forty years ago to special cassette tapes. Another change is now taking place: to digital. For more information about this, please refer to the Winter 2008 edition of InSight, where we explained in detail about this change.

In October of 2009, the New York State Talking Book and Braille Library began distributing the first batch of digital talking book machines and digital books. There are many advantages to this new technology. The digital machine is smaller and lighter than the cassette player, the controls are easier to see, the sound quality is better, and the storage device (a data cartridge) is far smaller than a cassette and holds much more information (data).

Another advantage is that in addition to receiving them through the mail, as has been done since the very beginning, the digital books can also be accessed online and downloaded directly onto a special data cartridge. This service is named BARD, which stands for Braille and Audio Reading Download. BARD provides immediate access to the Library's growing collection of digital audio books. Each data cartridge will hold about twenty average-size books. Books that have been read can be deleted from the cartridge, and more books can be added.

In order to successfully download and play digital books, you should purchase a special cartridge and a USB cable. These are available in our retail store, ViewPoint. The cartridge costs \$15.60 + tax, and the USB cable costs \$6.50 + tax. You will only need to purchase the cable once, but you may need additional cartridges, depending on how many downloaded books you want to keep.

The download instructions on the BARD web page are lengthy and can be a little confusing, so Diane McMillan, A.V.R.E.'s Manager of Infants and Children's Services, did some experimenting and offers these suggestions:

1. Plug the USB cable into your computer and attach the cartridge to the other end.
2. Locate the appropriate drive that recognizes the cartridge; for example, it could be the E Drive.
3. On the BARD website, choose the book you wish to download and send it to the drive that now holds the cartridge.
4. The book is now in a zipped folder on the cartridge. You will need to unzip the folder and extract the files, following the procedure for your operating system.
5. You will now have two unzipped files on the cartridge, and you may delete the zipped file.
6. Disconnect the cartridge from the computer and insert it into the digital talking book player, following instructions for your player.

Note: you will not be able to play the book on your computer. The files only work in the player.

If you have any questions regarding the new digital talking books, you may call the New York State Talking Book and Braille Library at 1-800-342-3688.

## CREATING A LEGACY

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

Elsie Wager learned about vision loss when growing up. Her mother struggled with vision problems and eye surgeries from a young age. Despite her vision loss, Elsie's mother was a devoted parent, committed to overcoming any obstacle that dared to stand in the way of raising her family. Her love and determination left a life-long impression on Elsie. Now Elsie wants to make a difference by helping others who are visually impaired.



*Left to right: Elsie Wager, Don Wager, Jenn Cubic*

Elsie and her husband, Don, are retired Broome Community College professors. After thirty-four years, Elsie retired to do volunteer work, while Don continued to teach until 2009 when, after forty-five years at BCC, he retired. Elsie approached A.V.R.E. because she wanted to work behind the scenes to learn more about vision loss and how vision rehabilitation can help improve people's lives. Her many hours of volunteer assistance were invaluable to A.V.R.E.'s professional staff. But Elsie also benefitted by getting to know the staff individually and learning how they worked with consumers to empower them with the skills to work, go to school, and live independently. She was especially touched by stories of babies who were born blind, but who have learned to experience and enjoy their environ-

ments in different ways through A.V.R.E.'s Early Intervention Program.

Elsie has moved on to other volunteer experiences, but she and Don remain good friends of A.V.R.E. and keep up with our progress through InSight and our agency website. They believe in our mission and appreciate the challenges we face in trying to reach the estimated 30,000 people in our service territory who could benefit from A.V.R.E.'s services. They wanted to do more to help us help more people. The Wagers decided to rethink their estate planning and chose to include A.V.R.E. A planned gift to A.V.R.E. was an appropriate and generous way to remember Elsie's mother and supportive father.

We are excited that Elsie and Don are the very first members of our new Founders Society, which is created specifically to recognize people investing in A.V.R.E. through planned giving. Elsie's advice to others contemplating a planned gift: "Be sure to support a cause you're passionate about. Make a difference in someone's life."

If you are interested in following the Wagers' example to include A.V.R.E. in your estate planning, and in finding out about our Founder's Society, please call A.V.R.E. Development Director Jenn Cubic at 607-724-2428.

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## A.V.R.E. OFFERS VISION ASSESSMENTS

By Rick McCarthy, A.V.R.E. Manager of Program Services

A.V.R.E. now offers a new service in our on-site Norman Richterman Low Vision Clinic to people who have a severe loss of vision but who are not legally blind. Any person who has a visual acuity of 20/70 or worse in the best corrected eye and who has had an eye exam by their regular eye care provider within the previous year may come to A.V.R.E. for a Functional Vision Assessment.

The Functional Vision Assessment is offered at no cost to the patient, and is performed by Diane McMillan, A.V.R.E. Certified Low Vision Therapist (CLVT). The assessment includes: near vision assessment, contrast sensitivity assessment, glare control evaluation, and visual perceptual and visual motor functioning assessment to determine the appropriate level of magnification needed for reading and visual perception. During the assessment, the CLVT demonstrates and provides instruction in the use of a range of low vision aids and solutions that may enhance the patient's visual function and compensate for some of the vision loss. Devices that might be demonstrated and recommended include: large print items, reading stands, special lamps, writing implements, hand-held or stand magnifiers, electronic devices, and software. Upon completion of the evaluation, our CLVT will recommend appropriate strategies and/or devices. The patient's only responsibility would be for the cost of the devices they choose.

If issues or problems are identified during the Functional Vision Assessment, the patient will be advised to contact their eye care provider. Patients who have an assessment will have a follow-up visit at 6 months and annually after that to monitor any changes in vision.

A.V.R.E.'s Functional Vision Assessment program was developed with guidance and input from our Chief of Low Vision Clinical Services, Dr. Michael Lange, OD. On days the assessments are conducted, Dr. Lange is available to the Low Vision Therapist for consultation, if needed.

If you (or someone you know) are not legally blind but are experiencing severe vision loss, you may call us at 607-724-2428 to see if you are eligible for a Functional Vision Assessment.

## IN HER OWN WORDS

### Requesting an Accessible Pedestrian Signal

By Samantha Wackford

The ability to cross a busy street and safely make it over to the other side is not often thought of as something that requires courage or effort for the average pedestrian. But for a visually impaired pedestrian like me, this is an arduous task that consists of contending with issues such as poor traffic sounds, lots of right and left turning traffic, cross intersections, and fear of perhaps not safely making it across in time. Thankfully, I no longer have to contend with some of these issues.

About six months ago, I wrote to a Traffic Engineer at the New York State Department of Transportation in Binghamton, requesting the installation of an Accessible (Audible) Pedestrian Signal, or APS, at the intersection of Main and Broad Streets in Norwich, New York. This is a huge and complicated intersection that is quite difficult to cross. I am happy to report that there was a prompt response from Jamie Conn with the Traffic Engineering Department, and within less than six months, the APS was installed!



I wish to convey my gratitude to the Traffic Engineering Department and to the employees who worked on installing the APS. I hope your cooperation will serve as a catalyst for other towns and cities in helping to make a difference in the lives of visually impaired members of their communities. Thank you for helping to reduce my fear of crossing at the intersection. It's definitely a huge contribution in the life of a visually impaired traveler!

## PEDESTRIAN SIGNALS

By Erin Kavanagh, A.V.R.E. O&M Specialist

Pedestrian signals are special signals at intersections meant only for people crossing streets: pedestrians. There are typically three different symbols used on these signals: a white stick figure walking, a solid orange hand, and a flashing orange hand. Each symbol has a different meaning.

The white stick figure walking means that you can start your crossing and you will have enough time to get across. The flashing orange hand means that there isn't enough time for a full crossing, so if you haven't started crossing yet, you should wait. If you are in the middle of your crossing, you still have time to finish. Sometimes there is a visual countdown while the orange hand is flashing, telling you how many seconds are left before the light will change. The solid orange hand means that you should not be in the crosswalk.

While there are most likely pedestrian signals wherever there are traffic lights with crosswalks, there aren't always pedestrian buttons to push. This is because some signals are programmed to be fixed-timed, rather than user-activated either by vehicles or pedestrians. Traffic signals are now controlled by computers, and traffic engineers study each intersection and make the decision whether they should be on a fixed-time loop or actuated (user-activated).

The computer knows that cars are waiting because of sensors in the lanes beneath the pavement. For the computer to know that a person wants to cross, the person has to press the pedestrian button. The computer will then find a good time to change the light long enough for a person to get across. Knowing that it takes a person more than three times longer to get across than it does a vehicle, traffic engineers program the computer for each intersection accordingly.

There are many intersections that are complicated, with traffic coming from many directions. These can be difficult to maneuver through safely, and people really need to rely on the pedestrian signals that are installed. Unfortunately, these signals provide visual information only, which means that they are not accessible for people with low or no vision. The intersection of Main and Broad Streets in Norwich used to be an example of an actuated intersection that was not accessible for a person with a visual impairment. When Samantha began trying to cross, she was concerned and slightly angry because she didn't have access to the information she needed to figure out the right time to begin her crossing. Fortunately, she learned about APS (Accessible, or Audible, Pedestrian Signals) pedestrian buttons that have speakers to tell you what the pedestrian signal says. These APS are becoming more wide spread and in our region can be found in Binghamton, Endwell, Ithaca, Cortland, and now Norwich.

APS are not always necessary. At intersections that are fixed-timed, there are crossing strategies that blind people use safely and effectively every day — strategies that do not require the use of a pedestrian signal. If, like Samantha, you need to cross (or have been crossing) at an actuated intersection and are now concerned and feel it needs an APS, you can advocate for one and start the process yourself, as she did. Go online to: <http://oandm.aerbvi.org/RequestSignal.htm> for information on how to proceed. You will need to type the address exactly as it is, including the capital letters. If you have difficulties, you may call A.V.R.E. Orientation & Mobility Specialist Erin Kavanagh at 607-724-2428 for support and assistance.



## AGENCY NEWS

### Off To Albany!

On April 4, 2011, A.V.R.E. Program Services staff members Rick McCarthy, Loni Cordilione, and Erin Kavanagh traveled to Albany to participate in the New York Vision Rehabilitation Association (NYVRA) lobby day. For the past ten years, NYVRA has spearheaded an advocacy effort to secure a bill in the NYS legislature that would license Vision Rehabilitation Professionals, and A.V.R.E. has supported that effort. A.V.R.E. staff met with several Assembly members and Senators, including Assembly Members Donna Lupardo and Clifford Crouch. All seemed supportive of the legislation, and Ms. Lupardo has been a bill sponsor.

The Licensure Bill would elevate the Vision Rehabilitation Profession, insure that specialists have the proper credentials and high standards, and would encourage more people to consider entering the field. To date, sixty-two members of the State Assembly have signed on to the bill, with seventy-two needed to bring it to a vote. The bill was unanimously passed by the Senate in 2008, but will need to be passed again before going to the Governor for signature into law.

### Kids' Vision Screening

A.V.R.E. had the chance to return to its earlier roots by assisting with pre-school vision screenings. In April, the Binghamton Lions Club and the Alliance of Binghamton conducted a joint vision screening at the YWCA, and A.V.R.E. lent its support, both technical and with personnel. The Alliance has been doing pre-school vision screenings for years, and their staff

was originally trained by a former A.V.R.E. employee and Braille teacher, the late Jane Backus. For many decades, A.V.R.E. performed this function at our facility. If a vision problem, such as amblyopia, is identified, the child is sent home with a letter to the parents suggesting they see an eye care professional for further evaluation.

### A.V.R.E. is Elder Friendly!

A.V.R.E. has been certified as Elder Friendly by Action for Older Persons. The Elder Friendly Certification Program helps businesses better serve their senior customers. The certification lets people know that A.V.R.E. takes customer service seriously and wants to meet the needs of our aging population. Attention to small details like large font on printed materials, high contrast colors to mark special areas, and real people answering phones are just some of the ways Elder Friendly businesses cater to the needs of senior customers. We are proud of our certification and our committed staff who made it possible!



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**InSight is published quarterly by the  
Association for Vision Rehabilitation  
and Employment, Inc.**

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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!"***