

Braille Monitor - August/September 2000 Edition

2000 Convention Roundup

by Barbara Pierce

Barbara Walker and Carlos Serván.

One of the most delightful moments of the Board meeting was the brief presentation made by Barbara Walker and Carlos Serván of Nebraska. They came forward to announce that as of July 1 Nebraska was the proud possessor of the Nebraska Commission for the Blind. This is what Barbara Walker said:

I am pleased, on this the two hundred twenty-fourth anniversary of our country's freedom, to bring you news of another declaration of independence. On April 10 of this year Governor Mike Johanns signed into law the existence of the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. On May 8 we held a ceremony at which Governor Johanns; Senator LaVon Crosby, sponsor of the bill; Michael Floyd, President of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska; Pearl Van Zandt, Director of the agency; and I as the Federation's recommended designee for the Commission Board made remarks. I would like to share an altered version of what I said there with you here.

In his 1999 banquet address entitled "The Mental Discipline of the Movement," Dr. Marc Maurer, President of the National Federation of the Blind, said:

"We have the capacity to think and the mental discipline to reach conclusions that will alter the future for us all. We possess the confidence to bring those conclusions to reality. "Our future is bright with promise, because it belongs to us. And there is no force on earth that can stop us."

In Nebraska we put this to the test in our quest to create a Commission for the Blind. In 1943 an agency called Rehabilitation Services for the Visually Impaired was established under the Board of Control. Two years later the Nebraska Services for the Blind became a separate department. In 1962 this agency, now called Nebraska Rehabilitation Services for the Visually Impaired, was transferred to the Department of Public Institutions, and in 1996 to the Department of Health and Human Services under the Partnership Act.

When our efforts not to have this agency included in the Partnership Act failed and it was once again buried in a department where it didn't belong, we turned to concerted action and began in earnest the process of creating a Commission for the Blind. Earlier this year, when the Lincoln Journal/Star carried an editorial in opposition and several of us received a letter from Governor Johanns stating he hadn't yet decided what to do, our multi-year roller coaster ride took another dive, and seeds of doubt once again churned in our stomachs.

Around that time I read an article in the April Reader's Digest in which Judy Sheindlin, commonly known as Judge Judy, said, "If I had to boil my message down to one sentence, it would be that people create their own opportunities." She went on to explain that it happens through "self-discipline, individual accountability, and responsible conduct." That, of course, is how we've done this.

We showed self-discipline when we made calls, wrote letters, responded to the negative newspaper article, and educated legislators (including the one who said he knew about blindness from having lived for years across from the school for the blind in Omaha--meaning, by the way, the school for the deaf; the

school for the blind is in Nebraska City). We showed individual accountability when we sat quietly in the chamber while our bill was debated, even when the previously mentioned Senator said that a vote for our bill would be a vote against the blind. And we showed responsible conduct when we remained respectfully silent when other legislators movingly supported our efforts and resoundingly passed the bill, causing the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired officially to come into being on July 1, 2000.

On June 12 Bob Burns, Bill Orestor, Maya Samms, Dorothy Westin-Yockey, and I received calls from the Governor's office with news of our appointments to the Commission Board. All of us are blind. Four of us are, among other things, members of the National Federation of the Blind. There are three lawyers, a therapist, and I. As a single parent of teenagers, I've dealt with, and sometimes felt like, both a lawyer and a therapist. My term, according to the certificate I received, is from June 7, 2000, through December 31, 2003.

I have, in preparation for this responsibility, been studying the intricacies of our new law. I can't help mentioning one of them that particularly struck me. Section 8 (2) (b) says that the Commission may "facilitate small business incubation." Can't you just imagine a bunch of people in chicken suits perched on nests around a table waiting for eggs under them to hatch? I know. The word incubate can also mean "to cause to develop or take form, as by thought or planning." But that's so mundane.

Be all of that as it may, we in Nebraska have created the opportunity to take ourselves into that bright future which Dr. Maurer spoke of last year. We shall meet it with confidence and claim it with dignity; we shall shape it with love and live it with respect. For we know from where we've come, and neither we nor future generations must ever go back there. It's still up to us, and we're ready to go!

Carlos Servan in his beautiful, strongly accented English, then said:

I don't intend to compete against Barbara's speech.

"If an organization of the blind is not strong enough and independent enough to cause agencies for the blind trouble and do them damage (that is, jeopardize their budget, create political problems for them, and hurt their public image), it is probably not strong enough and independent enough to do them any good either. Likewise, if agencies for the blind don't have enough authority to damage the lives of the blind they are hired to help, they almost certainly don't have enough authority to give them much assistance." This is what Dr. Jernigan most eloquently told professionals in work with the blind in 1994, and the impact of his words still rings today. State agencies for the blind are seriously threatened today unless they work in true partnership with consumers. Several years ago most state agencies for the blind were custodial in nature, concerned about what they called professionalism, and involved with administrative complexity and prestige rather than common sense and what was good for the blind.

Our role as blind people today is to shape our own future and determine our own destiny. This is because sixty years ago the National Federation of the Blind tasted collective freedom. Blind people must be respected and be exposed to good training so that they can use their talents and abilities.

When I, a newly blind person, entered the rehabilitation program in Nebraska--I'm sorry, New Mexico, I feel like a Nebraskan; I am a Nebraskan, by the way.

(You might have noticed my midwestern accent. [laughter and applause]) Eleven years ago I didn't speak English, didn't have a college education, didn't have high expectations about myself, and doubted that I could be successful.

The New Mexico Commission for the Blind under the leadership of Dr. Schroeder elevated my self-esteem and my expectations and supported me. The support was by investing a lot of education in me. They spent money--a good bit of money, by the way. And now I hold a master's in public administration and a juris doctor degree, and I am a deputy director of the newly created Nebraska Commission for the Blind.

This would not have been possible if the New Mexico Commission for the Blind had not been a consumer-driven agency with primary input from the National Federation of the Blind. Considering the intricacies, technicalities, and divided responsibilities under a huge umbrella agency, neither legislator nor governor can track everything down. On the other hand, if you have a board appointed by the governor, the commissioners can inspire and provide the Commission for the Blind much better direction.

When in 1996 the Nebraska Rehabilitation Services for the Visually Impaired was moved into the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services system, both agency personnel and consumers were told there would be no negative impact. Almost immediately, however, both the business manager and the public relations specialist were removed to the state office building and buried under the demands of a 6000-employee entity. Today, however, with the new Nebraska Commission for the Blind and the five Commissioners who are blind under the direction of Barbara Walker, the agency has the hope and willingness to work in partnership with consumers to provide the best services, the type of services they now get.

Dr. Jernigan trained several of our leaders. He gave good education. He believed in investment, and as Dr. Schroeder mentioned at several conventions he attended in Nebraska, successful rehabilitation is the way to get jobs for blind people, not just jobs, but quality jobs, jobs that will allow blind people to use their full talent and capabilities. I have no doubt that this will happen in Nebraska under the new structure. [applause]

President Maurer commented following these remarks:

There is a notion that the existence of separate, identifiable programs for the blind is likely not to continue in the structure of government, that the trends are all against it, that nothing can be done. Look at Nebraska! [cheers] It is not a matter of prediction; it is a matter of decision and work. If we put it together, it will happen; we can make it occur. We've done it in Nebraska.