



Reading Again and Loving It

Nell Falatek knew she needed help. She could not read at all. She could sign her name to checks — out



of habit — but she could not see her signature.

"I needed help, and I wanted to see what anyone could do for me. Mostly, I wanted a way to drive again without bothering people for rides," she explains. "The loss of independence is absolutely horrible."

Nell, who lives in nearby Dravosburg, probably will not drive again. But thanks to Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh (BVRS) and to her close friend Elaine

Jones, Nell Falatek is now able to read again.

What actually brought Nell to BVRS was her friend, Elaine, who read about our services in a local newspaper. Nell and Elaine have been friends for 38 years. They both say, "We're like sisters."

Nell, who has three children,
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New Location in Brentwood Evening Hours in Homestead

We're here to help!

In addition to our Homestead location, Low Vision Services are now available in the South Hills near Baldwin High School. We also offer Tuesday evening appointments in Homestead. Call us today

412-368-4400

and get back to doing the things you enjoy with tools that cannot be found in a store: powerful magnifiers, special glasses for reading and watching TV, and much more.

President's Perspective

A few months ago I might not have understood as clearly the severity of further cutting public transportation routes in Pittsburgh.

I wouldn't have realized just how many people this would affect. I surely wouldn't have understood how significantly these cuts would affect every aspect of people's lives—work, health, entertainment, independence.



As someone who owns a car and uses it to go everywhere, it is easy to forget about the many people who depend on public transportation—some totally. And for them, it would be no different than permanently taking away the keys to the car.

In November I had the opportunity to experience something that opened my eyes to the imperative-ness of public transportation for individuals who have no other option. As the president of BVRs, I wanted to understand what the individuals we serve experience on a daily basis so I decided to go under blindfold and live my life without vision for a

week. This meant commuting each day from Cranberry to Homestead. In the mornings I took a taxi from my home to the bus stop, a Lenzner bus from Cranberry to Downtown Pittsburgh, walked almost a mile through Downtown to transfer to a Port Authority bus, which then took me to my office in Homestead. My commute home involved three buses and someone picking me up at the bus stop in Cranberry to take me home.

This process was exhausting, not to mention expensive. Each day I woke up at 4:30 a.m. and arrived home around 7:00 p.m. I remember thinking if I had truly lost my vision that I would not be able to continue this commute long term.

Every morning I woke up dreading the commute. My transfers had to be timed perfectly so I would not have to wait even longer to catch the next bus.

One day I had a harder time finding my bus stop in Downtown. By the time I reached my transfer destination, I



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had missed the bus and had to wait 45 minutes in the freezing rain for the next bus to come.

Fortunately, I knew that once I got on that bus to Homestead I could take a deep breath. This bus would drop me off at the entrance way to Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services.

I completed my week under blindfold and have a new-found passion and understanding of the sometimes extreme challenges that individuals with visual impairments experience while commuting each day.

So when I heard about the Port Authority's proposed service cuts, I was dismayed to learn that the bus that brings many of our staff and clients to our facility in Homestead would be eliminated. Instead of dropping individuals off at the entrance to our driveway, the closest bus stop will be almost a mile away, forcing individuals to walk up a steep hill to get to our facility. This would be difficult enough for an individual with vision, especially in the winter. But for individuals who do not have vision, this is just one more significant hurdle to their commute and, ultimately, to their independence.



Additionally, many of the people we serve and even our own staff who have visual impairments have physical limitations as well that would prohibit them from walking up steep West Street.

Plan Reduces ACCESS

With past reductions in bus service, some of our clients and staff turned to ACCESS. However, the current plan to reduce service includes ACCESS and will eliminate pick-up service to anyone farther than $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the closest bus stop. Many of these individuals will lose their only option to get to programming and work.

As an organization that serves and employs individuals who are blind or visually impaired who do not have the ability to drive, we are very concerned about the effect that these cuts will have. The difficulties that these individuals already experience daily with their commute are exhausting. Additional cuts will make it virtually impossible for many individuals to maintain employment, receive services that teach independence, and live their daily lives just like you and I.

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Not Your Everyday Footwear

PBA Industries produces unique products

Stop by PBA Industries, the manufacturing division of Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh on the North Side, and you might get a glimpse of our workers manufacturing giant socks: peat-filled NatureSorb socks that are great for absorbing spilled oils and fuels.

NatureSorb is a premium peat moss harvested in Quebec, Canada. Through a proprietary process, the peat develops a unique characteristic in which it will not absorb water. This natural, environmentally friendly resource absorbs only hydrocarbons (oils and fuels) at about half the cost of using the most common absorbents.

Over the past year, representatives of the distributor, Martlin Distributing, in conjunction with PennDOT's Strategic Environmental Management Program and Pennsylvania Industries for the Blind and Handicapped (PIBH) formulated a manufacturing plan designed to create jobs for PIBH work centers, including PBA Industries.



PBA Industries worker Donald Thorne fills a sorb sock with peat.


Mike Dorsch, of Martlin Distributing, explains, "We came up with the idea of creating a 'vehicle' for delivering the NatureSorb product to the user that requires more than just bagging." That 'vehicle' is a giant sock, pillow or quilted pad made of a special fabric. The work centers obtain the fabric and dehydrated peat moss from the distributor, and their workers cut, sew and fill the socks, pillows or pads, which are then shipped to the desired location.

Currently, PBA Industries workers manufacture NatureSorb products with special equipment that enables a 700 pound bale of peat to be fed through a tool arranged to quickly fill the socks, pil-

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lows and quilted pads.

PBA Industries is manufacturing these products for PIBH and for Martlin Distributing, whose customers are PennDOT and US Airways. PBA Industries Director Tara Zimmerman added, "This product has many potential uses, and we are willing to explore how this product could further benefit the state and other businesses."

Businesses interested in more information can contact Tara Zimmerman at 412-325-7504. 



PBA Industries Supervisor Linda Felton sews a sorb sock.

Former Client Named Employee of the Year

Usually it takes years to achieve employer recognition — whether for number of years worked or for effort. Not for Jeff Hladio, a former client at Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh.

Jeff has been named "Base Supply Center Employee of the Year" by Industries for the Blind, Inc., for his work at the base supply store for the Pennsylvania Air National Guard 171st Air Refueling Wing in Coraopolis. He started there in October 2010.


"I'm very excited. I didn't expect any of this," Jeff said. "This job is a perfect fit for me."

The 30 year old, who is vision impaired and has cerebral palsy, is a hard worker, concedes Hanna Besterman, Jeff's case manager and job coach while at BVRS. "He's actually a hero of our services. I believe our

vocational training helped him to get the 'Employee of the Year' award." Jeff also worked with Diane Celidonia, manager of Employment Support Services, while he was here. In addition, he went through Access Technology training and had a low vision evaluation.

"Jeff is very pleasant, very outgoing. He really wanted to be a part of something challenging and doing meaningful work," Hanna recalled.

"It's been awesome," Jeff said of his job doing "a little bit of everything," including customer service, stocking and receiving at the base supply store. His manager is Mary Connor. "She's a great boss. Great to work for and very supportive," Jeff said.

Jeff received his award March 27 at Industries for the Blind headquarters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.  **5**

Students Build Confidence

Ah, those teen years! They can be awkward and confusing, even in the best of circumstances. Throw in a vision impairment and what to do?

Teens who are blind or visually impaired can take part in Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh's Career and Community Adjustment Program that

is designed to help them transition smoothly into work and adult life.

In this individualized program, students develop independent living skills and earn a paycheck while exploring vocations. Two components of the program are the Employment Opportunities Project, which includes job readiness classes, job shadowing in entry and professional jobs, community work experiences, and mentoring with adults with vision impairments, and jobs through Life'sWork of Western PA.

BVRS also offers summer programs for students who are blind, deaf blind or vision impaired. In the summer Personal Adjustment to Blindness Training, students ages 16 to 21 learn various skills such as Braille, how to use audio devices, labeling to keep track of information and personal items, and introduction to adaptive computer technology. They also learn safe travel and cooking, dining techniques, shopping, grooming and maintaining a home or apartment.


During this five-week program, the students live in the BVRS dorms, where they have the advantage of socializing with their peers. 




Photo by Sheryl Kardos

Joelle Swyka, a junior at Moon Area High School, is pictured with Matthew Proper, BVRS employment transition specialist.

New Summer Camp Planned for August

Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh and the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children (WPSBC) are teaming up to offer a week-long overnight camp for teens ages 14 through 16 who are blind or visually impaired Aug. 5 - 10 at the WPSBC campus in Oakland.

Activities at the new Expanding Visions camp will include pre-employment training, orientation and mobility, activities of daily living and recreational activities. The deadline to register is June 1. For more details, call 412-368-4400. 

Volunteer Opportunities for Teens and Adults

BVRS needs teenage volunteers for its summer youth Personal Adjustment to Blindness Training program, **June 25 through July 27**, which helps other teenagers who are blind or vision impaired prepare for college or a career.


As a volunteer, you accompany the students to places like Kennywood, Pirate baseball games, Sandcastle and camping or just spend

time with them in the evening.

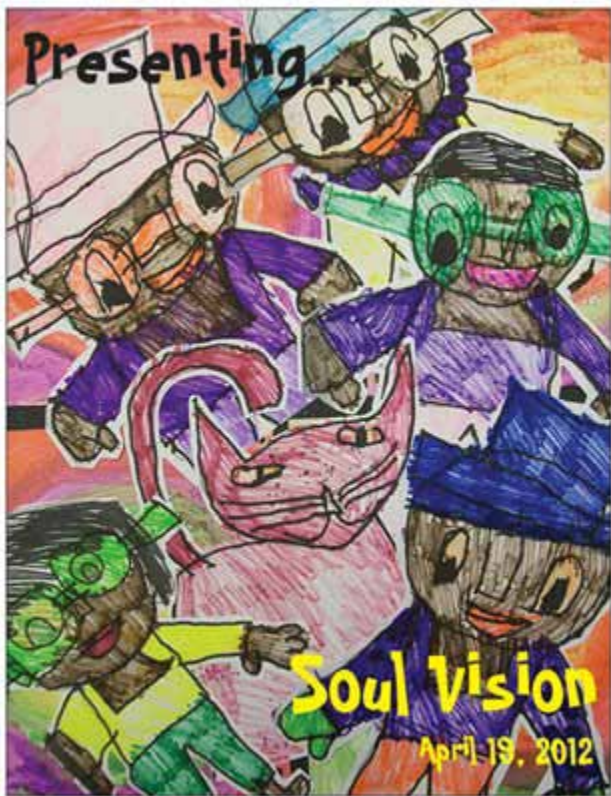
BVRS also needs adult volunteers to help with both the summer program and various areas in the agency throughout the year.

Schedules are flexible, and training is provided. Contact Nancy Schepis, volunteer coordinator, 412-368-4400 or nschepis@pghvis.org.

BVRS Vision Screeners Help at Children's Museum

Preschool Vision Screeners from Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh will be conducting free screenings at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh for "Kindergarten... Here I Come" Friday, April 20 from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. The museum is at 10 Children's Way, Allegheny Square, North Side, www.kindergartenhereicome.org. 






‘Soul Vision’ Art Show Set for April 19

Artists who participate in the day programs at Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh will be featured in the “Soul Vision” art show Thursday, April 19 at our Homestead site.

Regardless of whether we can see or not, all creation begins with a Vision. Here at BVRS, we are learning that each day is a vision, and each piece of art is that vision turned into a reality. Many of our artists have challenges that go far beyond the average range. Some are blind, some are deaf, many have mental impairments, and some have a combination of disabilities.

The nature of this show is to reveal the artistic soul in each of our artists and to inspire each of us in spite of our own obstacles to have some Soul Vision.

Please join us on April 19. An early exhibit and artist meet and greet will be held from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m. The evening exhibit with refreshments is planned for 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. Art and crafts will be available for purchase. 

Preparing for the Soul Vision art show is Camille Crosby.




Featured Artist: Brenda Davis

by *Laura Stuart-Smith, CTP program specialist*
and *Mary Levino, CTP team leader*

Brenda Davis has only been attending the Community Transition Program for one year, but clearly loves to spend her days with us. When Brenda comes to CTP each morning, you hear her greeting everyone long before you see her walk in the door. She is often dressed to the max in colorful outfits with lots of colorful jewelry. She has a huge personality that is almost as big as her amazing smile.

We do a variety of activities in CTP but if you ask Brenda what she would like to do, her answer is some type of art project. She has a definite eye for design and an enthusiasm for color. This is how Brenda became our featured artist.


When we first decided to have an art exhibit, Brenda illustrated a series of characters wearing eye glasses. Her first exhibit piece, "Eyes Wide Open," was appropriately created for BVRs. Eyes Wide Open is a true example of her unique artistic style. In addition, Brenda creates what she calls "dolls." These mixed media characters are both colorful and well dressed, and Brenda likes to name her dolls after popular television cartoons of her childhood — like Bam Bam and Pebbles.

It's been rewarding for the staff to watch Brenda's artistic abilities grow over the past year as she has explored different mediums and styles. 



Art Work Available at South Hills Candy Shop

The artwork of our Community Transition Program clients is now available at the Goodeelicious Sweet Shoppe, 3520 Brownsville Road, Brentwood. Dee O'Brien, the owner of Goodeelicious, has placed our basket of items in a prominent place in the store.


We invite you to stop in to Goodeelicious, try some of their amazing treats and buy one of our unique handcrafted items. Currently, we are selling cards, hearts, crosses, flower/pens and backpack tags. For directions, visit www.goodeelicious.net. 

Grants Awarded to Various BVRS Programs

Verizon Foundation has awarded Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh a \$5,000 grant to upgrade software for its Access Technology Center, which provides technology training to students of all ages who are visually impaired.

FISA Foundation has awarded BVRS a \$15,000 grant for the expansion of its Employment Opportunities Project serving youth with complex disabilities.

Highmark Inc. has awarded 25 organizations across Pennsylvania, including BVRS, funding for career development and job training through the Highmark Local Workforce Initiative. BVRS received \$55,625 for a combined program using the Access Technology Center with our Employment Support Services.

PNC Charitable Foundation has awarded BVRS a \$20,000 grant to be used for our Access Technology Center. The Center's staff provides instruction on the use of adaptive devices that enable clients to use computers effectively despite their disability. The need to update equipment to keep pace with new technology innovations that open up new opportunities for users requires significant ongoing financial investment for the Access Technology Center. The funds will also allow us to provide training for individuals for whom there is no state funding available. 



Accepting the Verizon Foundation grant from Bill Carnahan are BVRS President Erika Arbogast and Spero Pipakis, Access Technology Center coordinator.



St. Lucy's Auxiliary Ball Benefits BVRS



Earlier this year, officers of St. Lucy's Auxiliary to the Blind presented a \$150,000 check to Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh. The check represents the proceeds of St. Lucy's annual Medallion Ball, which recognizes young women who have made valuable contributions to the community through their volunteer efforts. Pictured, from left, are Patty C. Oringer, incoming St. Lucy's president and 2011 Medallion Ball co-chairperson; BVRS President Erika Arbogast; Mary Frances Dean Johnson, out-going St. Lucy's president; and Mary Lee Gannon, 2011 Medallion Ball chairperson.

Visit from the Senator

State Sen. Jay Costa, 43rd District, toured our Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh facility in Homestead in March. He is pictured with BVRS President Erika Arbogast (left) and BVRS Vocational Training Specialist Meghan Patton (right). They are speaking with Michele Benasutti (far left) and Jamie Garner (foreground), who are part of BVRS' Employment Transition Program.



Girls' Night Out annual benefit party, **Tuesday April 24**, at SouthSide Works Cinema, featuring the movie "The Lucky One," starring Zac Efron and Taylor Schilling.

Highmark Walk for a Healthy Community **Saturday, May 19**, at Stage AE, Pittsburgh's North Shore, featuring a 5K walk and 1 mile fun walk.

For Your Eyes Only annual benefit party, **Friday, June 8**, at a private residence in Sewickley Heights.

84 Lumber/Steelers Alumni Golf Classic, Monday, July 30 at Diamond Run Golf Club, Sewickley

For information, contact Connie Schwartz-Bedo, 412-368-4400 or cschwartz@pghvis.org.


Person of Vision Celebration 2011

Morgan K. O'Brien, president and chief executive officer of Peoples Natural Gas Company LLC, was our 2011 Person of Vision.



The Person of Vision Celebration was held October 13, 2011 at the Westin Convention Center Hotel. Approximately \$140,000 was raised that evening and 250 people attended.

Mr. O'Brien is pictured at right with Honorary Chairperson Raymond W. Buehler, Jr., president and CEO of Schneider Downs & Co., Inc., and BVRS President Erika Arbogast.

BVRS board member Jane K. Yallum was the event chairperson, and Jim Roddey was master of ceremonies. Many thanks to all our sponsors. 




Pictured above is the Stantec Architecture winning clays team Paul Romano, John DeBlasis, Scott Satkoske, Tim Cowan and Jim Schmitt. At right is the winning ski team from Lennon, Smith Souleret Engineering Eric R. Beringer, Diann Roffe with Baby Cook, Zolin Cook and Ryan O'Mahony.



Ski Race / Sporting Clays Event Exceeds Goal

Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh's Corporate Cup Ski Race and Sporting Clays event was held Friday, February 10, at Seven Springs Mountain Resort. The event raised more than \$39,000. More than \$700,000 has been raised in the 28 years of the fundraiser.

Diann Roffe, a 1994 Olympic gold medalist and a world champion ski competitor, was featured for the ski race. This year was the first for the sporting clays event. Bruce Knepper, vice president US Healthcare East, Stantec Architecture, served as committee chairperson, with members George Ehringer (ski co-chair), Tim Cowan (sporting clay co-chair), Tom Prickett (sporting clay co-chair), Andy Gildersleeve, Tim Chappell, Paul Marlowe, Robin Hages, Ryan O'Mahony, Bruce Coleman, Mark Booth, Chip Desmone and Tom Zogelman.

Mark your calendars for next year's event, which will be held on a Friday in February. 

Reading Again and Loving It

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worked for 30 years as a unit secretary at McKeesport Hospital. She's been retired now for 16 years.

At BVRS, Nell was seen by our op-




Nell Falatek with occupational therapist Melynda Gradich.

tometrists, Dr. Erica Hacker, for a low vision evaluation late last year. Macular degeneration is the cause of Nell's vision loss. While here, she evaluated a variety of low vision devices for reading and completing daily activities, and our occupational therapist, Melynda Gradich, trained her to use these devices independently.

The devices Nell selected include: a magnifying mirror for grooming;

reading stand to hold books and magazines; a small powerful magnifier for reading; bump dots for her microwave dials; telescopes for distance television viewing; and a CCTV for sustained reading.

A few weeks after her evaluation at BVRS, Nell called to tell us she was able to read a book with the training and devices she received from us.

She is very thankful. "It's been a very long time since I was able to read." 

President's Perspective

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What can you do to help?

Contact your legislators and the Governor's office and tell them we have got to find funding for transportation. Ask the Governor to consider implementing the transportation plan that his own hand-picked Advisory group developed to address this funding crisis. For more information on this plan, go to www.tfac.pa.gov.

For details and more photos of Erika Arbogast's week under blindfold, see our website BlindVR.org.

New Members Named to Board

Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh welcomes these new members of its Board of Directors:

Brian Albert, vice president and general counsel for Oxford Development Company.

Dr. Denise S. Gallagher, an ophthalmologist at UPMC Eye Center.

Dr. Laura A. Pallan, an ophthalmologist who has been practicing in the Pittsburgh area for the last 16 years.

BVRS Welcomes New Employees

Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh welcomes the following persons to our staff:

Jeremy Gilchrist has joined the Client Services Department as the coordinator of Employment Opportunities Project.

Tara Zimmerman was named director of our PBA Industries division.

Nancy Giuliotti has joined the Development Department as an individual gifts coordinator.

Kimberly Hunter has joined the Employment Transition Program as a vocational training specialist in Client Services.

Tiffany Taylor has joined PBA Industries as the coordinator of quality control.

Lawal Mohammed has joined the

Client Services Department as a driver/escort.

Lacella Colquitt has joined the PBA Industries department as a utility worker.

Evell Jones has joined the PBA Industries department as a utility worker.

Heather Peterson has joined the Client Services Department as a Community Transition Program specialist.

Stay Informed

Between issues of the BVRS newsletter, check our web site: www.BlindVR.org. We are also on Facebook and would "like" to have you as our next "friend." Just type Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh in the Search box.



Blind & Vision Rehabilitation
Services of Pittsburgh

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facebook.com/pages/Blind-Vision-Rehabilitation-Services-of-Pittsburgh/355511657119

BVRS is a 102-year-old nonprofit agency that serves people who are blind, vision impaired, or have other disabilities. The agency is an equal opportunity employer and service provider and does not discriminate against anyone, regardless of age, sex, race, religion, ethnic background, national origin, or disability.

A copy of the official registration and financial statement may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 800-743-0999.

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