



# The Spectacle

Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh

Fall 2014

## Finding Better Ways to Live Life

Brian Rutherford has a degree in costume design. When he lost his vision after a series of strokes four years ago, he came to the realization that some actors and actresses might be quite uncomfortable working with a designer who had to totally rely on touch to adjust

the hem, fix the bodice or pull in the waist of a costume.

Brian's not bitter about giving up his livelihood. It's more like droll wisdom: Some performers just would not want a blind man to touch them for costume adjustments, even for the sake of art.

But Brian has lots of ideas that will keep him in the world of theater, and he believes his training at Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services will help him do that.

The 42-year-old grew up in Pittsburgh and graduated from what was then Point Park College with a theater degree in costume design. After college he spent 11 years working at Walt Disney World in Florida first as a frontline costume host and



ending his Disney career as a production assistant with the entertainment team. Family life then took him to Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

*(continued on page 6)*

### In This Issue

President Erika Arbogast talks about white cane awareness... [page 2](#)

Meet our first-ever Access Technology Center student and find out why he returned... [page 5](#)



Tributes to two former leaders, Rick Welsh and Chuck Noll... [pages 3 & 9](#)

**Changing the lives of persons with vision loss and other disabilities by fostering independence and individual choice.**



*Erika Arbogast  
President*

As the President of BVRs, I'm often asked about blindness and how people who experience it learn to become independent. Because I have the privilege of working with so many individuals who are blind that serve as CEOs, instructors, caseworkers, artists, etc., these questions remind me that the general public still has many misconceptions about blindness and independence.

With White Cane Awareness Day observed in October, I thought it fitting to talk about some false impressions about blindness and navigation. Those of you who have been reading our newsletter for years may remember the week I spent under blindfold. I had to learn how to use the white cane to travel from my home in Cranberry to Homestead and back each day. Through this experience I learned a tremendous amount about the many ways that people react when they encounter a person who is blind.

One of the most definitive things I realized during my week under blindfold was that many people truly don't know how to interact with someone who has limited or no sight. People generally want to be helpful but just don't know how. Often, as they are attempting to help, they are actually creating more problems for the person who is blind.

Because of your connections with our agency, you probably are more educated on blindness than the general public, so I challenge you to have a discussion on this topic with your friends and family. The more we educate the general population, the safer our clients will be. You could center your discussion on the following tips for interacting with persons who are blind:

1. Don't assume that they need help. If they appear to be walking along confidently, they probably don't need help. Individuals learn to navigate through their environment using their senses of touch, sound, and sometimes even smell.
2. If you think they appear to need help, ask. They will tell you yes or no.
3. Do not touch or grab a person who is blind without announcing your presence. If the person needs to walk with you, offer your arm.
4. As a person navigates with a white cane, that cane is designed to run into

*(continued on page 4)*

# *Dr. Richard L. Welsh, Visionary Leader*

**1944 - 2014**


Dr. Richard L. Welsh, a respected leader in the blindness field and our former president, passed away Saturday, September 13, 2014. Dr. Welsh was instrumental in the formation of our agency through a consolidation of the Greater Pittsburgh Guild for the Blind and the Pittsburgh Blind Association. He served seven years as president of the Guild and seven years as president of Pittsburgh Vision Services (our previous name) from 1990 until his retirement in 2004. At the time, he was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

“Across the country, Dr. Welsh was renowned for his knowledge in the field of vision rehabilitation,” said Erika Arbogast, president of Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh. “And he brought that knowledge and insight to Pittsburgh Vision Services. Our national reputation can be attributed largely to Dr. Welsh’s vision and leadership.”

As a young boy, Richard Welsh wanted to be a priest. In an interview earlier this year with Michael Bina, president of Maryland School for the Blind, he explained:

“I ended up working in the field of blindness because I had a cousin who was congenitally visually impaired and who was a student at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children. During the years I was away at the seminary, she and I had corresponded regularly and had become good friends. Shortly after I left the seminary, she invited me to be her guest at a ‘parents’ event at the school that her parents could not attend because of illness and work responsibilities. At that event, I met Bob Hughes, a graduate of the Western Michigan O&M (orientation and mobility) program and I learned about that profession for the first time... I guess you would say that the blindness field found me.”

Dr. Welsh spent 25 years as a chief executive officer, first at Maryland School for the Blind, and then returning to his hometown to lead the Greater Pittsburgh Guild for the Blind, and then Pittsburgh Vision Services. He taught at Cleveland State University and at the University of Pittsburgh, and was a mobility instructor at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children. Dr. Welsh held a doctor’s degree in rehabilitation counseling and a master’s degree in orientation and mobility. He received the University of Pittsburgh School of Education Distinguished Alumni Award and was inducted into the Hall of Fame for Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field.

“Rick was a consummate professional and totally committed to individuals who are blind and vision impaired,” said Joe Gordon, BVRS Board member who also served on Dr. Welsh’s Board. “His contributions to the blindness community are unparalleled.” 






## Free Vision Screenings Available

Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services offers free vision screenings for children ages 1 – 6 at area daycare centers and preschool programs. Professional screening technicians screen for vision deficiencies, some of which can save a child’s sight if caught early. Children are evaluated for acuity, muscle balance and color deficiency.

We also conduct vision screenings for adults, who are assessed for acuity and macular degeneration. Vision screenings do not replace professional eye exams, but can detect deviations from normal vision.

For more information, contact Sarah Lewkowicz, 412-368-4400 ext. 2213. 



## President’s Perspective


*(continued from page 2)*

items like garbage cans, curbs, doorways, etc. This is the purpose of the cane, and cane users are trained to navigate around these items.

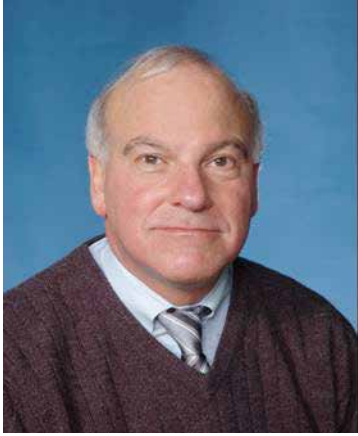
5. People who are blind can hear. There is no need to shout.
6. Talk to a person who is blind just like you would anyone else. Introduce yourself and make sure to talk directly to them.
7. If a person is using a guide dog, please remember that dog is working. Just like the person using a cane needs to be attentive at all times to their surroundings, so does the guide dog. If the dog gets distracted, the owner could end up getting hurt. Never pet or distract guide dogs when they are working. It is also im-

portant to teach children about guide dogs and their purpose.

One of BVRs’ primary focuses is helping individuals who have lost their sight learn how to navigate independently. If we can educate the public about how to interact with individuals who have vision loss, this learning process will be easier. With a rooftop orientation and mobility course at our new location, we’re also optimistic that the learning process will be less stressful. The ability to train individuals on a “closed” course will lessen their fear as they first learn to navigate independently.

We are extremely excited about the future and the many opportunities we will have to both empower those that we serve by teaching independence and to educate the public. 

# First Access Technology Student Returns to Learn Smartphone



John McInerney learned pretty much everything he needed to live safely and independently in just 10 weeks about 22 years ago. And then came the smartphone.

“That’s when I called (Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services).” Actually, he called back.

In 1992, John came to the Greater Pittsburgh Guild for the Blind in Bridgeville (one of our predecessor agencies) for adjustment to blindness training and learned to use a white cane, Braille, as well as assistive technology – all in an accelerated 10-week program. He was one of our very first students in the Access Technology Center, which offers expert training in the use of adapted computers, software, and other electronic devices.


“I have a corporate iPhone, and I had been trying to figure out how to use it,” explains John, who is an engineering director at Westinghouse Electric Company, headquartered in Cranberry Township.

BVRS Access Technology Center staff were able to help. Now, after just two lessons, John is comfortable using his iPhone. He said he needs to work on sending text messages with his smartphone and conceded he may need another lesson. Access Technology Center instructors will be ready if he does call back again.

The real test will come, John says, when he throws away his current not-so-smart cell phone. “And then there’s no going back.”

At age 5 John was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a group of genetic disorders that affect the retina's ability to respond to light, causing a slow loss of vision. He never drove a car, but he did play sports through his college years. He was in his early 40s when he arrived at the Guild dormitory in Bridgeville. “The RP had progressed to the point where I was having a hard time traveling and reading in order to remain functional at work,” John explains.

The training he received in using a white cane and Braille, and in particular computer technology, was very valuable, he explains. He was able to continue his career with Westinghouse, where he’s held management positions of increasing responsibility in various engineering functions, such as licensing, plant support, including a two-year assignment at the Millstone Nuclear Power Plant site, and three years as a technical project manager for key nuclear power plant customers.

John has a bachelor’s degree in aeronautical engineering and a master’s degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Notre Dame. 

## On the Road to Independence: *Findin*

(continued from page 1)

It was there in 2010 that Brian had four strokes that caused severe optic nerve damage. He has no vision in his left eye and can only see shades of gray with his right eye. “I can see no detail,” he explains. “It’s bizarre, because it’s not uncommon for me to observe minute details, subtle eye shifts. And I can’t do that anymore.”



When Brian left the ICU following the strokes, he still had vision, though everything looked as if under a blue filter. It was six weeks after the strokes when Brian’s vision began to deteriorate, and his doctors could not explain the progression. Finally, three months later a medical specialist had found that his optic nerve continued stroking following the strokes. He was told the nerves may or may not reconnect.

“There are times when I don’t actually see better, but I do see sparkling lights,” Brian explains. “I am told the nerves may be trying to reconnect.”

That would be a wonderful happy ending, but Brian is not waiting around for the chance that his vision improves. He started doing some research. “I thought ‘There’s gotta be something in Pittsburgh.’” He adds, “There is magic in the three rivers that will pull you back.” That “magic,” along with a nationally recognized adjustment to blindness training program, brought him back to Pittsburgh for the intense, individualized training offered at Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services.

Brian is learning Braille, the correct way to use his white cane, new techniques for eating (“Yeah, finger foods are great,” he jokes.) He says his biggest challenge is using a computer without vision because he used to look at his hands while typing.

“I now have to learn how to really type. I’m a visual learner, and using the computer is definitely my biggest challenge,” he says. “But



## g Better Ways to Live Life

this will be the key to turn because so much of the world is computer based.”

Overall, Brian's goal is to find employment in Pittsburgh's arts community. “My biggest challenge now is that all of my employment history is based on my vision, and now I can't adjust a hemline.” Yet, he's making calls, reconnecting with former professors and classmates from Point Park, and considering various options and ideas. One that he is especially excited about is recording live plays – similar to the radio drama productions of the 1940s – for the vision impaired. Sets and costumes won't be necessary, just a theater company that is willing and a playwright who is agreeable.

This idea started germinating in Louisiana when he visited the local library and asked for plays on tape. The library had nothing – not even Shakespeare, he says. In Pittsburgh, he found the most recent to be a 10-year-old play, followed by a 20-year-old play that has 20 characters. It was recorded by one person. “It didn't work. Even the best can only change their voice in so many ways.”

Other options Brian is considering include a job as a dramaturge (theatrical con-



sultant) with a local theater company or working with the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust as an advocate for the disabled. In the meantime, he's focused on his studies at Blind & Vision Rehab Services and enjoying the company of his fellow students, who are faced with similar struggles in adapting to life with less vision.

“We're all at different places in our lives and we've all come here in different ways,” Brian explains. “But we are all finding better ways to live life in general.”

***“I thought ‘There's gotta be something in Pittsburgh.’”***



## 2014 PERSON OF VISION



Our 2014 Person(s) of Vision are Laura Karet, CEO of Giant Eagle and her company's Team Members. They were honored June 26 at Heinz Field. Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services is grateful for Laura Karet's vision and leadership and for Giant Eagle's commitment to provide gainful employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The event raised nearly \$110,000. This year's speaker was Sherri Rodgers, a Giant Eagle employee and a former BVRS client. She is pictured above with Laura Karet. Pictured at left are BVRS Board Chairman Dr. Louis Lobes, BVRS President Erika Arbogast, Laura Karet, and PNC Bank President Sy Holzer, who served as event honorary chairman. Pictured in the bottom photo are Judy Zaken with BVRS Board members Mike Zaken and Stephanae McCoy.

***Sign Up to Receive This Newsletter Via Email***

If you prefer to receive *The Spectacle* via email, please send us an email at [newsletter@pghvis.org](mailto:newsletter@pghvis.org). Thank you.





# Charles Henry "Chuck" Noll Longtime Champion

1932 - 2014

Charles Henry "Chuck" Noll, chairman emeritus, passed away June 13, 2014. Pittsburghers and football fans around the world remember him as a coaching legend who led the Pittsburgh Steelers to four Super Bowl victories. We remember him as a longtime champion and advocate for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. After retiring from the Steelers, Coach Noll served as Chairman of the Board first for the Greater Pittsburgh Guild for the Blind and then Pittsburgh Vision Services. He continued his relationship of support and involvement with our present agency, serving as Chairman Emeritus until the time of his death in June.

## Steelers ALUMNI MEMORIAL GOLF CLASSIC



The 18<sup>th</sup> annual Steelers Alumni Memorial Golf Classic July 28 at Diamond Run Golf Club was a great success, raising nearly \$90,000 and bringing the total raised from this event to more than \$2 million. The first-place team (pictured above) was from Michael Tarbuck, Jr. & Sons, Inc. Clockwise from right are Steeler alumni and BVRS Board member Mike Wagner; BVRS Board member and former Steeler PR man Joe Gordon greets players and volunteers; Steeler alumni Tony Jeter tees off with the team from Mutual of America.



## Inside Industries



Robin Smith, a textile worker in our Industries division, has been nominated for National Industries for the Blind 2014 Employee of the Year award. Robin has worked in Industries for 2 ½ years. Some interesting facts that Robin shares about her work: She can attach apron ties to 300 aprons a day; sew 10 dozen fitted sheets a day; and hem 30 dozen towels a day. “Robin has a very strong work ethic and truly enjoys the work she is doing,” says Tara Zimmerman, BVRS operations director. “And she always makes the work environment fun.”



Our Industries division hosted elected officials for an open house at its Strip District manufacturing facility again this summer. The 30-minute tours included a firsthand look at the employment and training opportunities available at the facility. U.S. Rep. Mike Doyle and State Rep. Erin Molchany, along with representatives of Mayor Bill Peduto’s and County Executive Rich Fitzgerald’s offices, attended this year’s event. Pictured are Rep. Molchany (left), Tara Zimmerman, BVRS operations director, and Larry Sell, utility worker. Industries has provided meaningful employment and training opportunities for people who are blind in the Pittsburgh community for more than 100 years.



## Around the Agency

Every summer we welcome teens who are blind or vision impaired for a five-week program in which they attend classes to learn skills for living independently. In the evening and on weekends, they get to do fun things – like miniature golfing – with teen volunteers. It's a fun time of the year around here thanks to our students and volunteers!



## BVRS Welcomes New Employees

**Karen Watkins** has joined the Client Services Department as an Employment Support Services vocational training specialist.

**Charlene Howard** has joined the Client Services Department as a Community Transition program specialist.

**Miguel Reyes** has joined the Client Services Department as an orientation and mobility instructor.

**Yvette Wood** has joined the Cli-

ent Services Department as a Personal Adjustment to Blindness Training monitor.

**Chris Ann Stroup** has joined the Client Services Department as receptionist.

**Ross Rosen** has joined the Client Services Department as a Personal Adjustment to Blindness Training monitor.

**Bill Sinning** has joined the Industries Department as Crypton salesperson and business development. 



Every day participants in our day programs are offered creative and stimulating activities and learning opportunities. And every so often, staff arrange a special event, like a retro 1980s prom. Both staff and clients dusted off their vintage outfits for a great day of electric sliding!





**Blind & Vision Rehabilitation  
Services of Pittsburgh  
1800 West Street  
Homestead, PA 15120**

*Helping people who are blind or vision impaired achieve their goals*

United Way: Code 885171

Combined Federal Campaign: Code 48567

NONPROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Pittsburgh, PA  
Permit No. 3061

Phone: 412-368-4400

Fax: 412-368-4090

TDD: 412-368-4095

Toll Free PA: 800-706-5050

[www.bvrspittsburgh.org](http://www.bvrspittsburgh.org)

Director of Development and Public Relations: Leslie Montgomery-Reidenbaugh

Editor: Debra S. Meyer

**AFFILIATIONS:**

National Accreditation Council, Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, Pennsylvania Industries for the Blind and Handicapped, National Industries for the Blind, Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired

