



The Spectacle

Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh

Spring 2013

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Gleaning Jewels from Life's Storms

"...good can come from bad. Jewels can be gleaned from the storms a person endures in their lifetime."

This is Kelli Deister's life motto. She truly believes in jewels-from-storms, though her lifetime has been filled with numerous storms. Her challenges range from abuse as a child and in her marriage to her latest hurdle: retinitis pigmentosa, a rare, inherited eye disease that causes slow and progressive degeneration of the retina.



Yet, Kelli is confident, thankful and believes she can con-
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Notice the new look and name — "The Spectacle." We're not quite sure of the last time this newsletter had a name, but thought it was time. This was no unilateral naming decision. All BVRs staff were invited to submit suggestions. We had 47 nominations for "Name That Newsletter" from 21 employees and the judging was intense, even with whimsical entries like "Busy BVRs" and "Hocus Focus"! "The Spectacle" is courtesy of Kimberly Hunter, Employment Transition Services employment specialist. Enjoy this specially prepared Spectacle of the wondrous things we are able to accomplish at Blind & Vision Rehab.

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

The best part of my job is meeting people who have benefited from our programs at Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh. I am overwhelmed with pride to hear their stories and to learn the many ways BVRS has helped them.

Recently, this hit closer to home.


Last year my 3-year-old daughter was screened by BVRS' Preschool Vision Screeners. At that time she did not pass and it was recommended by one of our trained technicians that I take her to an ophthalmologist. I did so, and the doctor confirmed that my daughter had myopia. The doctor suggested that we hold off on glasses because she was only slightly myopic. She explained that a 3-year-old's vision is mostly up close until she starts school and has to look at the blackboard. The doctor recommended we follow up in a year.



*Erika and her daughter
in her new glasses*

Fast forward one year... My daughter was screened again by our screening staff and sure enough, she did not pass. As a matter of fact, she did significantly worse on this screening than the prior year. I scheduled her follow-up appointment with the ophthalmologist and the doctor confirmed that her eyes had worsened significantly. It was time for glasses.

This entire process caused me to think, "Would I have caught this if she hadn't been screened by BVRS?" There were no signs that she could not see well so I wouldn't have known to take her to an ophthalmologist. If I did not work at BVRS, I would not have known the importance of preschool vision screening. There is a strong possibility that my daughter would not have been screened prior to going to kindergarten and that she would have struggled through school until we realized she had vision problems. By that time her brain would have taught itself to see as well as possible with diminished vision, which probably would have affected her vision for the rest of her life.

As her proud mom, I must say she looks adorable in her new glasses. I am beyond thrilled that this was caught when she was young, and so proud that BVRS offers this service. For me, it only solidifies the need for every parent to know the importance of early vision screening and for every young child to be screened. 

PBA Industries Earns 2012 Employment Growth Award


Award from National Industries for the Blind Honors Success in Sustaining, Increasing Employment for People Who Are Blind

Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh (BVRS) has been honored by National Industries for the Blind (NIB) for its efforts to increase employment retention, growth and upward mobility for people who are blind. The 2012 Employment Growth Award honors BVRS for its success and commitment to increasing economic independence for people who are blind.

“We are proud to provide employment opportunities for individuals who are blind in the Pittsburgh region,” said BVRS President Erika Arbogast. “Our staff who are blind are talented and dedicated employees. We are honored to serve as an example in the community of the capabilities of those who are blind.”

The 2012 Employment Growth Award recipients are awarded cash payments from a fund created to recognize and encourage NIB associated nonprofit agencies that grow or sustain employment for people who are blind. Emphasis is also placed on efforts to increase upward mobility in the workplace and job placements.

“It is an honor for me to recognize Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh with a 2012 Employment Growth Award,” said Kevin Lynch, president and CEO of NIB. “BVRS continues to do an outstanding job in creating employment and high-growth career opportunities for people who are blind.”

BVRS is one of 91 nonprofit agencies throughout the country associated with NIB, the nation’s largest employment resource for people who are blind. 



Lacella Colquitt at work at PBA Industries

before




after

Revamped Fitness Center Debuts

We have completed redesigning our fitness center named in honor of Michael A. Romano, Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services (BVRS) of Pittsburgh former board chairperson and retired senior vice president of risk and administrative services for Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield. The Michael A. Romano Fitness Center now occupies a larger space with new exercise equipment thanks to funding from Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, the Robert & Mary Weisbrod Foundation and the William B. McLaughlin Charitable Trust.

Individuals who go through personal adjustment to blindness training at Blind & Vision Rehab are offered an adapted physical education program in the specially designed fitness center.

“A fitness regimen is an essential rehabilitation component for persons who have lost or are losing their vision,” said BVRS President Erika Arbogast. “As these individuals lose mobility and confidence in using their remaining senses, they are especially at risk of injury from falls and chronic illness. Our state-of-the-art center provides a larger and brighter exercise area, along with new fitness equipment for our clients.”

“As a company that’s committed to creating stronger, healthier communities, Highmark is proud to support BVRS’ new fitness center, which will serve as a key community resource for individuals who are visually impaired throughout Allegheny County,” said Evan Frazier, Highmark’s senior vice president of community affairs. 

BVRS President Among Top Leaders

Blind & Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh President Erika Arbogast has been named a 2013 Diamond Award winner by the Pittsburgh Business Times. Diamond Awards honor the region's top presidents, CEOs and executive directors. Erika is among the four nonprofit leaders named and among the 16 leaders in both nonprofit and for-profit organizations. "This award truly belongs to our dedicated board, staff, and especially to our clients who every day face extreme challenges," Erika said. "We are honored to help them reach their goals."



Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald spent an afternoon at the PBA Industries manufacturing and assembly division site on a tour led by BVRS President Erika Arbogast and PBA Industries Director Tara Zimmerman. He is pictured with employee Evelyn Nickel. "We are honored that Mr. Fitzgerald has taken an interest in PBA Industries," Tara said. "He now has an understanding of both the products we produce and the employment opportunities we provide to persons who are vision impaired."



Our Community Transition Program artists went wild with pink in honor of October Breast Cancer Awareness Month and sold their art projects including vases, candle sets and key chains. Their efforts raised \$276 for the Susan B. Komen Foundation. "This group of clients is truly awesome," BVRS Client Services Director Barbara Peterson said. "While these individuals come to us to learn in a structured environment, they end up teaching us and are so happy to be able to give back."

Gleaning Jewels...

(continued from page 1)


quer any limitations the disease may bring to her life. She attributes this new self confidence to the Personal Adjustment to Blindness Training she received earlier this year at Blind & Vision Rehab. The program teaches individuals to manage their lives with vision loss and provides individualized instruction in a variety of areas from communication to safe cooking.

“When I came here I felt very alone and very afraid,” Kelli said on the last day of her seven-week stay. “Now, I don’t feel so alone and afraid. As a matter of fact, I feel very confident.”

Kelli was excited about returning home and putting her new skills to work. She plans to cook more and to create a Braille address book. She also will begin writing her sixth book, “Across Many Bridges,” about vision loss.

She started writing in 2003 as therapy while in an abuse shelter. Three of her books, including the first, “Embracing the Storm: Jewels for Victims of Domestic Violence,” are on domestic violence. One is on Cogan’s syndrome, a chronic inflammatory autoimmune disease that can lead to vision difficulty, hearing loss and dizziness. Kelli has Cogan’s syndrome, which is unrelated to the retinitis pigmentosa, and she wrote the book to help others learn to live with the disease.

Her fifth book, “Grace Is My Lighthouse,” is her autobiography. It is in the first chapter that Kelli writes: “My goal in sharing my memoirs is to share that good can come from bad. Jewels can be gleaned from the storms a person endures in their lifetime.”

When asked about the jewels that she has gleaned, Kelli gives her list: “Determination. Strength. My children (20-year-old daughter and 21-year-old son). Family. And believe it: now BVRS.” 



**From Kelli Deister's first book
of poetry, "Embracing the Storm"**

A Shade of Purple

**Beaten, bruised, and broken
Like a vase that once held
Beautiful, glistening roses
Now shattered into pieces
Memories continuously surfacing
Each individually painful
Bringing with it torrents of emotions
Bursting at the seams of my heart
While seemingly reminding me
My heart is the shade of purple
Out of sight, are these invisible scars
Not revealed to eyes or
hearts of others
Hidden painfully behind smiles
Pressed back and pushed down
Locked up for fear of more pain
Needing a friend to hold onto
Able at times to walk slowly
Needing at times to be carried
Either way, willing to begin
This path of release and freedom**




"I still see (my children) because I visualize their faces, the way they hug me and the touch of them just brings me such comfort. I can smell the soap that they use. When I hear them say, 'I love you Daddy,' I give them kisses and sometimes I can taste the candy that they just ate. I get weak in the knees and have to catch my balance so that I won't fall at just the thought of them. They are my life and with my blindness they are my vision! Life is the biggest sense that I have."

Maurice Redman, father of six, learned a lot during a three-month stay at Blind & Vision Rehab for personal adjustment to blindness training. Maurice wrote the piece above as part of sensory training.



The Auxiliary, BVRS, hosted a picnic at our Homestead site for staff and clients. Members of The Auxiliary, a service organization that began in 1961, provide both volunteer and financial support. Pictured, clockwise from top, staffers Matthew Proper and Jeremy Gilchrist, intern Alek Jaunzemis, and clients Raymond Grote, Joelle Swyka and Nathan Kottler.

BVRS Receives Grants

- Pitcairn and Monroeville Lions donated \$4,600 to BVRS from their 5K Run for Sight.
- BNY Mellon has given a \$70,000 grant — \$20,00 for Preschool Vision Screening and \$50,000 for the Youth Workforce Development.
- The Buhl Foundation provided a \$7,500 matching grant to help plan for long-term sustainability and continued success in PBA Industries.
- The Edith L. Trees Charitable Trust provided a \$30,000 grant to support our Preschool Vision Screening Program. Our vision screening program is our foremost contribution to prevention of blindness. 



On White Cane Awareness Day, Oct. 15, BVRS staff and volunteers from The Auxiliary, BVRS, distributed information on white cane safety at various sites during the morning rush and afternoon lunch hours in Downtown Pittsburgh. Pictured are The Auxiliary volunteer Karen Palestra and BVRS Director of Client Services Barbara Peterson.



St. Lucy's Auxiliary to the Blind, a volunteer organization founded in 1957 to encourage a lifetime commitment of volunteer service in young women, gave us a \$200,000 gift — proceeds from the annual Medallion Ball recognizing young women for their volunteer efforts. Since 1959, St. Lucy's Auxiliary to the Blind has given BVRS \$3,155,366. Pictured (from left) are BVRS President Erika Arbogast, St. Lucy's President Patty Orringer, 2012 Ball Chairperson Jan Kubiska and Co-Chairperson Elizabeth Brunins.

Happenings

29th Annual Corporate Cup Ski Race and Sporting Clays

For race results, bvrspittsburgh.org/race-results.



Above, the winning ski team, representing Lennon, Smith, Souleret Engineering, Inc. included Zolin Cook (with his daughter), Eric Beringer, Ryan O'Mahony and George Ehringer who are pictured with 1994 Olympic Gold Medalist Diann Roffe. At left, the winning sporting clays team, representing Stantec: James Schmitt, Dan Petruzzi and Randy Grossman. Missing from the photo are Tony Bucciero and Tim Cowan. The February event raised more than \$50,000.



2013 PERSON OF VISION CELEBRATION

honoring Arthur J. Rooney, II

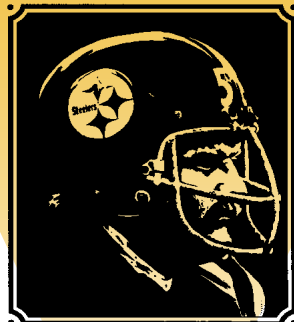
Honorary Chair Sy Holzer

MAY 14, 2013 @ Heinz Field

Contact Cindy Smith, 412.368.4400 ext. 2208, csmith@pghvis.org, for more information.

17th Annual **Steelers**

- REMEMBER -
THE OLD RANGER



in memory of
Ray Mansfield

Alumni Golf Classic
Monday, July 29, 2013
Diamond Run Golf Club




We hope you will join us at this spectacular golf event for a great cause! For more information or to become a sponsor contact: Cindy Smith at 412-368-4400 ext. 2208 or csmith@pghvis.org.

BVRS Names New Board Members...

Amanda Cavill, assistant vice president and project manager for acquired loan accounting - finance at PNC Financial Services, Inc.

David J. McAllister, a partner in the labor and employment law practice group of Reed Smith's litigation department. Mr. McAllister was a member of the Board of Directors of Pittsburgh Vision Services (the former name of BVRS) from 2002 to 2005.

In addition, the Board of Directors has named new officers: Chairman ***Dennis J. Farkos***, Carnegie Mellon University; Vice Chairman ***Dr. Louis A. Lobes, Jr.***, Retina Vitreous Consultants; Treasurer ***John A. Lemmex***, Bayer Material Science; and Secretary ***Peggy Snavelly***, community volunteer. 

... and Welcomes New Employees

Judith Hines has joined the Prevention of Blindness department as a preschool vision screener.

Matthew Mulig has joined the Industries department as a utility worker.

Tiffany Page has joined the Client Services department in Employment Support Services as an employment specialist.

Jim Havrilla is our new receptionist/security guard.

Erin Sabatini has joined the Client Services department in Personal Adjustment to Blindness Training as a rehabilitation instructor.

Ashley Veltri has joined the Client Services department in Community Transition Program as a program assistant.


Lea Edmonds has joined the Development and Public Relations department as a development and grant specialist.

Judith Klingensmith, a retired registered nurse, has volunteered to teach diabetes education classes to clients.

Kenneth Smith has joined the PBA Industries department as a utility worker.

Alicia Olsavsky has joined the Client Services department as a monitor.

Julia Todd has joined the Client Services department as an Employment Opportunities Project employment specialist.

Alecia McFadden has joined the Client Services department as a driver/escort. 



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Pittsburgh, PA
Permit No. 3061

Helping people who are blind or vision impaired achieve their goals

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Combined Federal Campaign: Code 48567

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