

“The Blind at Work”

President Maurer, distinguished directors, fellow Federationists, honored guests. Thank you.

It is a profound honor to, again, address the delegates of the National Federation of the Blind, assembled in convention. President Maurer asked me to share some of my experiences and observations about the blind at work as owners of small businesses.

In my town of about 600,000 people the blind are at work.

Rehabilitation Counselor, School Teachers, Emergency Services Dispatcher, Base Supply Store Cashiers and Stock Clerks, Call Center Employees, Business Enterprise Program (Randolph Sheppard Vendors), Communication Engineer, Drug and Alcohol Counselor, Psychologist, Massage Therapist, Insurance Broker, Pet Groomer, Administrative Assistant, Machinist, Food Service Worker, Braille Transcriptionist, Systems Analyst, Bookkeeper, Disability Advocate, Assistant District Attorney, Chiropractor

I know of about 100 blind people in my town. I have listed jobs held by about 30. That the blind are at work in diverse occupations is without question. One has only to venture around this room to learn of the blind at work. The question becomes how to encourage, inspire, and educate the other 70%. And, the greater question, I think, how to break down those barriers of stereotype which persist about us even in the second decade of the 21st Century. Those misconceptions and underestimations which limit our pursuit of the American dream. The answers to the questions begin with the National Federation of the Blind.

This is my 30th consecutive National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind. Before finding this organization I had just about given up hope of ever finding work of a kind that would not only put food on my family's table, but would truly be fulfilling work. The National Federation of the Blind gave me hope. You still do every single day.

As I sought purchase on the firm foundation of federation philosophy, the most empowering philosophy of blindness ever conceived, I was offered the opportunity to attend the Colorado Center for the Blind. Near the end of my training at our NFB/CCB boot camp Diane McGeorge, then the executive director, called me into her office for a chat. She asked, “so, now what?” I confessed that I did not know. She said “look, it's time to know”. Diane continued, “There are openings in the Randolph Sheppard Program, (BEP).” “Well”, I stammered, “I have always said that I will never do one of those, well, you know, blind jobs.” Diane retorted, “So, how's that been working out for you?” I interrupt this narrative to say that this was well before Dr. Phil. Maybe Diane should have had her own TV talk show, but I digress. I took her advice. I reluctantly entered the Business Enterprise Program. I found that I like being a storekeeper; that old snack bar. The Blind Stand - in a state building, in the basement, under the stairs, beneath the leaky pipe in the ceiling, across the hall from the linen closet, and just down the hall from the men's room. Location, location, location! “Who would ever want to come down here?” I thought, but with the support and exhortations of my NFB colleagues I began to find gratification developing solutions to the most vexing problems of Randolph-Sheppard Business Operations. There were many. The embarrassment I felt when first working in a “blind stand” gave way to an increased

earnestness, and self-awareness. I found that if I brought a heart of service, creativity, constant vigilance, attention to detail, and if I was simply unwilling to accept “no” for an answer there was money to be made, opportunity to be built, and satisfaction to enjoy.

When the state Business Enterprise Program said that the Randolph-Sheppard Statute did not apply to military food service contracts, I began to write letters, on my own, to procurement officials at Colorado Army and Air Force bases; unwilling to take “no” for an answer. When contracting officials at Buckley Air Force Base finally agreed with me that, yes, Randolph-Sheppard did apply to these contracts; only then did I go back to the state agency showing them how it should be done. Of course, I had a pretty good young lawyer at the time. His name? Scott LaBarre. I knew the cafeteria business. I knew nothing about large military contracting practices and procedures. I did not have a million dollar line of credit. I knew this when I wrote the letters. With typical NFB vibrato and enthusiasm I figured we would cross those bridges when we came to them. We simply found a company possessing the expertise, and required credit line, and formed a joint venture company; something business owners do every day. How did I know, almost 17 years ago, when I began writing the letters to DOD officials that these contracts were subject to the Randolph-Sheppard priority? For one thing, I had read the law. Something more state agency officials and blind vendors ought to do. But, there were several other reasons, and I knew each of them. I knew Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, Dr. Marc Maurer, Dr. Fred Schroder, and Mr. James Gashel. They too had read the law. They said that the Randolph-Sheppard Act absolutely applied. That was good enough for me. I had the National Federation of the Blind. During the 12 years Worley Enterprises managed large military contracts we hired hundreds of people with disabilities. In fact, Randolph-Sheppard vendors hire people with disabilities at a rate 2 ½ times that of private industry, and hear this, Ability One, we pay minimum wage or better.

The “you can do it” spirit of the NFB/CCB Training had its intended effective. I tried my hand at businesses other than Randolph-Sheppard. Some of them even made money. Some did not. And, I have had to beg forbearance, forgiveness, and understanding from family, customers, and investors. These were very tough times. Always, the Federation spirit sustained me. You still do, every single day. Winston Churchill said, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.” Abraham Lincoln said, “My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure.”

Not being content, perhaps the most interesting Worley Enterprises venture began two years ago. We had a small brand development business working with local retailers. We were asked to do some consulting for a new franchise concept, Roosters Men’s Grooming Center. I was intrigued. I decided to help the group market this new brand, and purchased franchises of my own. We opened our first Roosters Men’s Grooming Center about 14 months ago. It’s just starting to break even. We plan to open two more locations in the next year. The Roosters experience combines modern grooming techniques with classic barbershop elements. We strive to provide men with a customized experience through services and products that reaffirm what it means to look and feel like a man. Come in for the Classic Club Cut, the Hero Cut for military and veterans, relax and enjoy the affordable extra luxury a man deserves with a great close shave, so soothing we may have to wake you up when you are done. Come

on in we will offer you a beer! Find out about our award winning Roosters Remembers Veteran's Video Project, produced by Worley Enterprises at Facebook/RoostersMGC, or WorleyEnterprises.com.

Believe me, I've been asked, "a bald guy like you owning a barbershop? How ironic!" My reply, "I am an entrepreneur. Next week I'm opening a Len's Crafter."

What do I do at work? I don't cut hair. When I managed a snack bar I rarely flipped a burger. I hire and manage people, I try to inspire them. Sometimes I fire them. I develop marketing collateral. I make sure the books balance, and we meet all of the legal and fiduciary obligations required to own a business. I sweep floors, hang pictures, and I dream up cool stuff for others to do. I am the face of Roosters in the community; sponsoring and attending Chamber lunches, civic, arts, and sports events. I am one of the 27 million small business owners in America. I am one of the blind at work.

Of course we can manage businesses. We are Federationists. As chapter members we take leadership positions. We believe in personal responsibility. We sell candy bars. We plan, manage, and bake the goods for bake sales. We write articles and edit newsletters. We work to market the brand of the NFB, our very own whozit. We learn to advocate for ourselves and others. We bring service to the community. In the NFB we are willing to take risks to advance the things we believe. Those skills are the skills of entrepreneurship.

When a sighted employer, with her misconceptions about the blinds capacity to work at a high level, blocks our path, self-employment may be an answer. When they won't hire us, we will hire ourselves. We have a small business loan program. We have the NFB eBay project. There are numerous home-based businesses. Some have been successful at network marketing. There are over 3500 franchise concepts across 80 different industries. The Randolph-Sheppard Program remains viable for some. Despite its systemic challenges, 2300 blind people earn, on average, \$48,000 per year. It is real work. It is not easy. Our philosophy never said it would be easy to be the blind at work. We just say given training and opportunity we can compete. Blind or not, to embark on a path towards self-employment means having the courage to risk; having the conviction to leave the perceived security of an hourly or salaried position. It may mean being able to convince a financial institution that the venture is likely to be profitable. It means embracing the ethos of the entrepreneur; abandoning any pretense that there is such a thing as a guaranteed income. We, who are blind, may also have to change an often held mindset that what we need will be given to us, and instead dare to say in actions what we have boldly proclaimed in words. Those who do may find stimulating and profitable opportunities to create, claim, and conquer.

At this convention we have passed a resolution, calling upon Congress to amend the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act. The amendment would mandate inclusion of for-profit businesses, owned by people with disabilities, into the Ability One system. The current system, as you know, rewards highly paid CEO's and managers of so-called non-profits employing people with disabilities at less than the minimum wage. These same non-profits receive virtual exclusivity on federal contracts for more than 11,000 goods and services. People with disabilities who are true entrepreneurs and pay competitive wages ought to have a shot at some of these contracts. Entrepreneurs take risks. It seems that many within

Ability One just take advantage. There are some within the Javits-Wagner-O'Day system doing laudable work. Non-profits doing good work surely will not object to people with disabilities moving from the assembly line to business ownership with a profitable bottom line. We will advocate for the evolution of an Ability One which includes an element of business ownership. We will continue to militate for fair wages and equal treatment for all of the blind at work. There are some within Ability One who have said, privately, that they are with us in spirit, but for political reasons are unable to offer strong support for our minimum wage legislation.

In my town, I have spoken out forcefully against the unfair labor practices of Goodwill of Southern and Western Colorado. Some Goodwill board members and supporters of my acquaintance have sent scathing emails to me. There have been public statements and phone calls, leaving no doubt that my small business could easily become a boycott target. Roosters Men's Grooming Center depends on community support and patronage. If I can stand up for fairness in the face of implied threats to my fledgling business, there is no excuse for large, entrenched Ability One non-profit institutions, who say they are sympathetic to our cause, not to join us on the barricades. I say, publicly, and without reservation, to the Goodwill of Southern and Western Colorado, their supporters, and allies, you simply do not understand the resolve of the National Federation of the Blind. You cannot intimidate me. You will not kill my spirit, or close my business. Thirty years ago, I found the people and philosophy of the National Federation of the Blind. You have sustained me. You still do, every single day.