



InSight

Spring 2014

Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment, Inc.

OUR 2014 EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Michele LaComb is just about the sweetest, nicest person you could ever hope to come to know. Whoever she meets in the hallway or cafeteria receives her sunny smile and a warm, "Hello! How are you today?" She is genuinely liked by her co-workers, who say she is a pleasure to work with. These are some of the reasons why Michele was selected by her peers to be AVRE's 2014 winner of the Melvin L. Rosendale Employee of the Year award.

Michele was born with Usher Syndrome, a condition characterized by hearing loss or deafness and progressive vision loss. The loss of vision is caused by an eye disease called retinitis pigmentosa (RP), which affects the layer of light-sensitive tissue (the retina) at the back of the eye. Michele now has good hearing with the help of excellent aids; however, her RP began to fully manifest itself about 17 years ago and continues to progress. RP is characterized by night blindness and worsening tunnel vision, and Michele's case is typical.

The prospect of losing most or even all of her vision is challenging for Michele because she is a very talented painter. She works with acrylic paints and describes her style as soft realism. We have featured Michele and her artwork a couple of times in InSight. In 2012, Michele submitted her Holiday card design to National Industries for the Blind's annual contest, and she won! Her winning design was used on all of the cards that NIB mailed to its business partners around the country.

Michele's relationship with AVRE began when she was declared legally blind. She called on us for assistance and received a low vision eye exam, Orientation & Mobility training (long, white cane travel), and vision rehabilitation services to help her with everyday activities at home. With her two children grown and in college, she came to work at AVRE near the end of December, 2010, in an entry level position in our manufacturing business department. A willing and capable worker, Michele floated around within the various departments doing a wide variety of jobs.

Because of her sunny disposition and eagerness to work, Michele was promoted to Team Leader of the Light Assembly Department in July of 2013. There, she oversees a group of employees who are engaged in packaging Goody hair products, JAWS cleaning products, or Rayovac batteries for shipping, or who may be assembling baby layette kits for hospitals or toy kits for day care centers. Michele makes certain her team is supplied with the items they need, sets up the computerized labeling system, and generally keeps things running smoothly for good and efficient production. She is especially proud of the role she played in helping AVRE secure a grant that paid for new computers and label printers for her department.

Melvin L. Rosendale was a respected community member, a member of our board of directors, and a good friend and supporter of the agency for many years who truly believed in us and our mission. After his passing, the annual award was created in his honor, and Michele becomes the 23rd recipient. We are proud of her and very pleased to give her this award!



Our Mission:

"To create opportunities for success and independence with people who have sustained vision loss."

WELCOME ABOARD!

This February, we were pleased to welcome Teri Chamberlin as our new Director of Health and Rehabilitation Services. Teri replaces Rick McCarthy, who is now our Vice President, and she is in charge of all our program services rehab staff.

Teri was born and raised on Long Island and is married with one daughter. A registered and board certified psychiatric nurse, Teri holds a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the University at Albany (SUNY) and a Registered Nursing degree from St. Elizabeth College of Nursing in Utica. Over the past 20 years, she has worked in all levels of care for mental health and substance abuse. For the past 10 years, she was the Director of Clinical Operations at a local employee assistance program.

Teri brings a wealth of experience to AVRE, and we are excited to have her with us!



PROMOTIONS!

It's been a long tradition at AVRE to promote employees from within the agency whenever possible. And we are happy to announce three more new promotions.

Charles (Chuck) Gardner has been with AVRE for 22 years. He began his career with us as Maintenance Supervisor and advanced to the position of Logistics/Facility Manager. Now, as our new Manager of Operations, Chuck will oversee all aspects of business production in our manufacturing department, as well as continuing with his previous responsibilities of overseeing building and equipment maintenance.

Luigi DiRusso came to AVRE in 2010 as a worker on the production floor. With his background in management at IBM, Luigi quickly moved from an entry level position to the team leader for the paper department. As our new Production Supervisor under our Production Manager, he will oversee all areas of production, including supervising and training manufacturing employees.

Derek Suarez has been with AVRE's switchboard call center operation at the Bronx Veterans Administration Hospital since 2010. In his new position as Switchboard Supervisor, Derek will oversee all switchboard employees at the Bronx VA, as well as assisting with operations at the Castle Point and Montrose VA campuses.

Congratulations to all three of these fine employees!

ANOTHER AWARD WINNER!

We are pleased to announce that Jason Evans has been chosen as AVRE's entry into NYSID's (New York State Industries for the Disabled) William B. Joslin Awards Program! By being our nominee, Jason automatically becomes a "2014 Outstanding Performer" in recognition of his exceptional job performance and personal attributes. In addition, he will be in the running for the 2014 William B. Joslin Outstanding Performance Award, to be presented at the Annual Meeting on September 8, 2014. Jason will be one of about 60 nominees being considered for the top award.



Jason Evans came to work at AVRE in 2011 in the manufacturing department and has performed a variety of tasks there. Currently, he works in the paper sheeting department, which converts roll stock paper into cut copy paper. He has been a member of the team that produces copy paper under the NYSID Preferred Source contract since AVRE began producing paper for New York State in 2013. He inspects and packs reams of paper directly from the machine and then readies them for shipping. When palletizing and stretch-wrapping a pallet, Jason is very precise at stacking the cartons evenly and wrapped firmly to ensure stability during transportation.

(Continued on next page.)

Before losing much of his vision due to multiple sclerosis, Jason was a truck driver... something he really enjoyed doing and still misses. Jason is a willing and eager worker who always greets his peers with a smile on his face and his somewhat-wacky sense of humor in place. He is truly a pleasure to be around!

NYSID is a not-for-profit, member-agency organization that has been meeting the purchasing needs of state and local government agencies while advancing employment for New Yorkers with disabilities. Under the legislatively-mandated New York State Preferred Source Program, NYSID acts as a "virtual storefront" for a statewide network of 165 community rehabilitation agencies and private sector business partners to employ skilled people with disabilities in production facilities and community-based jobs.

The Joslin Awards Program has touched over 400 people over a decade of championing outstanding performance by individuals employed on Preferred Source contracts at member agencies and private sector business partners. We are pleased to be able to honor Jason Evans in this way.



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUND

Our world changes rapidly these days. Technology has changed the way we live our daily lives and how we perform jobs. Expanded public transportation has changed how we travel and where we live. Living longer, better and independently is well within our reach, if we're equipped with the right skills and resources. AVRE's professional vision rehabilitation staff members are constantly working to stay abreast of these changes by learning new techniques and methods so they can provide the best, most up-to-date services possible to people with vision loss.

Like most organizations, we face challenges securing funding to support our vision rehabilitation programming. To help with that, we have created a Professional Development Fund. If you have been a consumer who has benefitted from our services, or if you have a family member who has, or even if you would simply like to help, we are asking you to please consider joining us by making a gift to the fund.

Investing in AVRE... what a great way to help make certain we can continue to follow our mission and vision! As Helen Keller said, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much." Won't you join together with us?

If you would like to make a donation to our Professional Development Fund, you may use the enclosed envelope to mail your check. Please write "Fund" on the memo notation line of your check. Or you may go to our website, www.avreus.org, and click on the Donate button. Type "Fund" in the "Designate your donation to a specific program or fund" form field. Thank you!



THE "SMART" PORTABLE VIDEO MAGNIFIER

Video magnifiers are electronic devices that use a tiny video camera and a display screen to perform digital magnification of printed materials. Also called Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) systems, these come in a variety of types and styles. Some are mounted on a fixed stand that sits on a table and requires the reading material to be placed under the camera and moved across and down the page. The image picked up by the camera is magnified and shown on a large monitor, a computer screen, or a television. While these CCTVs are wonderfully helpful devices, they are expensive, large and heavy, and they are not portable.

In contrast to the stand CCTVs, handheld cameras are portable systems designed for bringing the camera to the material to be viewed. They can magnify almost anything, from reading material to labels on packages of food and medicine bottles. The Mattingly SMART Portable Video Magnifier is one of these. Measuring only 4-1/4 inches long by 3 inches wide by 1/2 inch deep, and weighing only 4 ounces, it is easily carried to wherever it is needed.



The SMART has a 3-1/2 inch LCD display screen, 8 magnification levels (from 2X to 15X), 4 brightness levels, and 4 contrast levels. It also has 4 viewing modes – full color, black and white, high-contrast white on black, and high-contrast black on white. A Freeze-frame option allows the user to temporarily capture a portion of the text being viewed. A unique, removable stand that folds up under the magnifier for easy portability helps to enable steady focusing when using on a flat surface, such as a table or desk. The SMART uses a long-lasting (3+ hours), rechargeable lithium ion battery that can be recharged via either a wall outlet or through a USB port on a desktop or laptop computer.

The SMART is simple to operate, with only 6 easy to locate buttons, in addition to its on/off switch. It comes with its wall power transformer and USB charging cord, battery, black velvet carrying bag, removable stand, removable wrist carrying strap, and cleaning cloth.

The Mattingly SMART Portable Video Magnifier is available through our ViewPoint retail store and sells for \$175.50. Please call Kim at AVRE, at 607-724-2428 to order.

RUNNING BLIND

Running. It's great physical exercise, but it takes patience, hard work, and training to get to the point of being able to run a marathon or even a half-marathon. And if you don't have much vision, that challenge becomes even more difficult. But that's a challenge that two AVRE employees who are visually impaired met recently.

AVRE President and CEO Kenny Fernald and AVRE Production Supervisor Luigi DiRusso both participated in the 4th Annual Greater Binghamton Bridge Run this spring. Both men have some vision, but not enough to be able to run independently. Both had sighted running partners to help guide them through the course. Kenny ran with Ken Howell, a 68-year-old runner who works with Positive LifeForce health studio in Endwell, and Luigi ran with his daughter, Lauren DiRusso. Kenny and Ken completed the half-marathon (13.1 miles) in under 2-1/2 hours, and Luigi and Lauren completed the 5K run in about 24 minutes.

When a visually impaired runner runs with a sighted partner, communication is key. However, verbal communication is kept to a minimum, as every bit of breath is needed for running. Kenny and Ken ran side-by-side and were tethered together with a shoelace! With each man wrapping an end around his fingers, the shoelace allowed space between them while allowing Ken to provide directional cues to Kenny. If other warnings were needed, such as when they were approaching a curb or a group of runners, a brief verbal cue would be given.

The two men have developed a good partnership. Kenny trusts Ken to safely guide him, and they plan to run together in more races. Although Kenny's sensitivity to light made it a little tough when running in and out of shadows, he said, "I felt good pretty much the entire time through a lot of good communication between Ken and I. I see my vision loss as an inconvenience, not a barrier. You just have to find a different way to do things. Run with somebody. Be active!" And that's great advice for everyone!



Front, left to right:
Ken Howell, Kenny Fernald. Photo courtesy
of Van Zandbergen Photography.

ADVOCATING FOR ABILITYONE!

AVRE President and CEO Kenny Fernald was recently joined by two other AVRE employees, Accounting Associate Stephen Comency and Development Director Jenn Small, at the 2014 National Industries for the Blind's Public Policy Forum in Arlington, Virginia. Agencies from around the country gather each year to discuss issues pertinent to the AbilityOne program and to meet with elected officials to make them aware of the program's benefits for people who are blind or have other significant disabilities.

Protected by federal legislation dating back to 1938 through the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act, the AbilityOne Program helps to create jobs for people who are blind by giving agencies that employ people who are blind priority to sell their products into the federal market.

Similar to many pieces of legislation, AbilityOne is facing challenges to its program. As a result of government budget cuts and agency downsizings, the sale of AbilityOne products (the Skilcraft brand) has decreased dramatically in the past year, translating into lost jobs for people who are blind. It has also become more difficult to monitor program compliance, and many federal agencies are buying goods elsewhere. Congress is also considering eliminating funding to base commissaries where our service men and women purchase food and daily living supplies at a reduced cost – a major benefit for our troops! Several blind agencies, AVRE included, sell products they manufacture or repackage to these commissaries.

Now, more than ever, it's important to educate our elected officials on how valuable the program is to our industry. We were well received by staff in the offices of Senators Schumer and Gillibrand and Representatives Reed and Hanna. The good news is that Representative Hanna is already an AbilityOne Champion, and Senators Schumer and Gillibrand just supported a bill that would remove the commissary cuts from the chopping block! We're hoping Representative Reed will follow their lead in the House.

It's reassuring to know that our voices can be, and are, heard in Washington DC. Be assured that AVRE will continue to advocate for blind people in this and other ways while continuing to maintain and create good jobs for people with a vision disability.

“TANDEMONIUM!” FOR ALL

Two years ago, AVRE Orientation and Mobility Specialist Erin Kavanagh came up with a great idea. In conjunction with our annual bicycle Race For Sight fundraising event, she proposed a tandem bicycling event for AVRE’s kids with vision disabilities. And “Tandemonium!” was born. The kids and their families love it, and 2012 and 2013 saw great participation. We were thrilled to have several of the racers come over to ride the tandem bikes with the kids as their sighted “pilots,” even after they had just raced for many miles up and down hills!

This year, because the Race For Sight will not be held, we did something a bit different. The event was opened up to AVRE employees and their families as part of our Fitness Challenge through the United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA). In addition, the event was an opportunity to celebrate Olympic Day – a celebration for youth around the world to observe the Olympic values of Fair Play, Perseverance, Respect, and Scholarship.

Held in AVRE’s big back parking lot, about thirty excited kids and adults came together for an afternoon filled with tandem bike riding, food, and fun! To make the day even more special, three current and past Olympians and Paralympians joined us to talk about their Olympic experiences and how they overcame challenges to compete successfully.

Randy Will is a three-time Olympian (’88, ’92, and ’94) who went on to coach the US Bobsled team in 2002, and he even built sleds for the Australian team in 2014. Randy exemplifies a true sportsman. He pedaled the day away with every young biker who asked him! **Kim SeEVERS** is a sighted ski guide who skied with visually impaired skier Stacy Mannella in the 2014 Paralympic games in Sochi. Kim shared stories about how she and Stacy communicate through microphones in their helmets and about how scary it can be to navigate for two while racing through an obstacle course in the snow. **Paralympian Bob Balk** is a bi-athlete who competed in six different Games and won six medals. He continues to advocate for para-athletes by serving as the Chairperson for the International Paralympic Committee Athletes’ Council.

Saying Goodbye to...



Erin Kavanagh

While the event was a great success and everyone enjoyed it immensely, it was also a bitter-sweet day for Erin and AVRE kids and their families. After nine years of working at the agency, Erin had to say goodbye to them.

In addition to Tandemonium, Erin was the creator of the VIBE (Visually Impaired Blind Exercisers) kids’ group.

For the past two school years, Erin and her volunteers, along with guests in the sports genre, have held monthly meetings designed to get the kids up and moving for a healthier lifestyle. This Tandemonium event was Erin’s final VIBE event.

Erin, her husband Colin, and their two dogs and two cats are moving to Arizona where Colin will advance his education. With her bright smile, her contagious enthusiasm, and her zealous dedication to her job, Erin has truly been a breath of fresh air to be around and work with. Erin, we will all miss you, and we wish you the very best of luck!



SIGNING IN!

One way for an agency or business to announce their presence in the community is by way of an attractive and eye-catching sign. While our old signs served us well, we felt it was time for an upgrade. We are thrilled to unveil two brand new signs! We think they look great!



The sign above our main front door is a 3-dimensional sign in our corporate blue color. At night, this sign is back-lighted.



The second sign is free-standing at street level in front of our visitors’ parking lot, where people who are driving or walking past the building will easily see it.

TIDBITS FROM OUR PAST

From 1957 -- Industrial Nurse Service

"We now have a full time Industrial Nurse helping blind workers maintain good health. Keeping employees healthy makes them better workers and helps some retain what slight vision they may have. Our full time Industrial Nurse follows instructions of the employee's physician and of our Advisory Physician. Here are items from her report of the past year:

- 395 visits by employees (to her office)
- 966 telephone calls
- 1,259 emergency care services
- 1,300 medical discussions with employees
- 181 absentee consultations
- 45 meetings attended
- 110 blind and partially sighted employees transported to doctors, hospitals, etc.
- 111 appointments made with ophthalmologists, doctors, etc.
- 192 letters to doctors, Commission for the Blind, insurance companies, etc.
- 99 were examined in the Broome County Chest X-Ray Program
- 86 were tested in the diabetic survey."

Nurse Margaret O'Neil was a busy lady! While we haven't had an on-site nurse in many years, AVRE remains dedicated to encouraging employees to be healthy, physically fit and active through programs such as our Lunch-and-Learn talks that focus on good eating habits, as well as our current Fitness Challenge and weekly weigh-ins.

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Word document on disk or cd,
and regular audio cassette.

If you would like to receive InSight in a different
format, please call Joyce Bucci.

A.V.R.E. serves visually impaired individuals
of all ages who live in the New York counties
of Broome, Chemung, Chenango, Cortland,
Delaware, Otsego, Tioga, Tompkins and Schuyler,
as well as the Pennsylvania counties of
Bradford, Susquehanna and Tioga.

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