# National Convention 2023 General Session III

(Gavel pounding)

MARK RICCOBONO: The morning session is now underway!

[Applause]

Happy Wednesday, Federationists.

To start this morning, we're going to begin with our invocation. So if we could have your attention, this morning's invocation will be offered by the Chair of the NFB in Judaism group. He is the President of the Tide Water chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Virginia, and he's also a member of the congregation Bethel in Norfolk, Virginia. Here, please welcome Stewart Proust.

[Applause]

STEWART: In the book of Leviticus, part of the Torah, or what some people refer to as the first five books of Moses, chapter 19 is considered the holiness code. In verse 2, it says, "Speak to the whole community of Israel and say to them, you shall be holy, for I, your God, Adonai, am holy."

Verse 14 says "You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God. I am Adonai."

Since 1940 the National Federation of the Blind, we have been removing stumbling blocks. We have been removing stumbling blocks of ignorance, of discrimination, of injustice, and low expectations. This is part of the holiness code. This for us is God's work. Another Jewish concept is the concept of repairing the world. In other words, every time we help someone get a job, every time we give hope to a blind person, every time we get a student the educational resources they need, every time we change a discriminatory law or practice, we are making this world a better place. For some of us, it will be one person at a time. We are giving hope. And that is work that God has for those who believe. We're doing God's work. We're making this world just a little better, a little holier.

May we continue in our work. May we continue to grow as an organization.

I want to leave you this morning with a blessing. This is the blessing from the book of Numbers chapter 6, verses 24-26. It is the priestly blessing that the priest would say at the end of the ceremony. (Speaking Hebrew) God eternal, bless you and keep you and be gracious to you. May God's presence shine upon you and be gracious to you and protect you. God's presence be upon you and bless you with peace.

May God bless every one of us with peace today. And let us all say, amen.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Let's see if Bennett is here this morning.

BENNETT PROWS: Bennett is here this morning and everybody does want a door prize! First I'm going to give a virtual too because they deserve it as well at the beginning of the session. Thank you, NFB of Arizona, for sponsoring the virtual door prizes.

[Applause]

The next three names I tell you will win $50 if they do the right thing. Michelle Ditter from Nebraska. Then we've got Theresa Barber from New Jersey. And Elana Jo Lewis from Colorado. If you send an email to prize@NFB.org in the next 30 minutes with the code word "museum," you will win 50 bucks.

Now we have a good prize for the people right here in the room so get excited. We have a hundred bucks plus a little folding blanket but it's not for sleeping during the session. And the winner is Halley Lawrence from Nebraska. We got him, thank you.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. I did ask Bennett if my name was still in the door prize drawings. He wouldn't confirm or deny. But I did register. I did win a door prize once in my, what is this, 27 conventions.

BENNETT PROWS: Few people in there with your same initials.

## Financial Report

MARK RICCOBONO: All right. We have a lot of business to do today and we have a lot of great presentations. So I would like to get underway with our financial report. I would like to note that Norma Crosby of Texas is our treasurer. She does a great job.

[Applause]

She jumped in last year in the midst of our treasurer Jeannie Massay being sick and she helped out and was elected treasurer last year. She does a great job for us. She asked me to go ahead and give the financial report to the convention. I can tell you that she's very conscientious, and if there's something, an expenditure that happens that she doesn't understand, she always asks the questions and she helps to keep us moving forward in a very responsible way.

We do have our audit from 2022. This is available on the website for delegates. It will also be available in the NFB portal. We used to pass copies out, but since people like to carry less paper around, we have it available on the NFB portal for you.

Our financial documents we make available on our website, and they are fully accessible. If you've tried to find the financial documents for many other nonprofits, you've probably found it difficult to find them and they're likely inaccessible.

The audit report for 2022 starts with the letter from the auditors and it has an opinion that the last little paragraph says, in our opinion, the financial statements referred to above present fairly in all respects the financial position of the Federation as of December 31, 2022, and the changes in its net assets and its cash flows for the year then ending in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America.

So this is a good opinion in that there are no exceptions in the audit. The auditors have confirmed that our financial house and its operations are in order. So we like that, first and foremost.

[Applause]

I will give you the statements here, and it starts with the statement of financial position as of the end of the year 2022. Under assets, we have cash and cash equivalence. I will give you just down to the thousands. So, for example, for this we have 4,257,000. I'm leaving out the $20 at the end. So I'll just give you thousands.

Prepaid expenses 823,000.

Receivables 2,131,000.

Investments, 21,968,000.

Other investments, life insurance, 2,726,000.

Property and equipment net is 159,000. That gives us total assets $32,067,000.

Then we have liabilities. We have accounts payable and accrued expenses of $691,000. Deferred revenue of 150,000. And accrued annuity benefit of $28,000. Giving us total liabilities of $869,000.

Our net assets and you may remember that our financial report breaks out our assets in various revenue categories by restricted with donor restrictions or without donor restrictions. So when that happens, I will just give you the total and the with donor restrictions. Most of our funds are not restricted.

So we have total net assets, $31,198,000. That, with donor restrictions is $3,752,000. So our total liabilities and net assets again, $32,067,000.

That's the financial position. Now, we have a number of reports that break down our activities. The first is the statement of activities. Again, I will give you the total, and if any of that total is restricted, I will give you that number, obviously the difference is without restriction.

Under the statement of activities, under public support, for last year we have contributions total 16,771,000. That 235,000 with donor restrictions.

We had donated services of $6,438,000.

We have government grants and contracts of $1,881,000.

Giving us -- hold on a second. Okay. Giving us -- oh, I see. We also have net assets released from restriction. So these are funds that we used as directed by the donors. And so it nets out to zero because it's moving from with donor restriction to without. That number is 208,000. But it's again netted out because it simply moves to without donor restrictions.

Total public support for last year, $25,096,000. of that, 26,000 was with donor restrictions. So pretty good income last year. We also have some other revenue categories that includes sales of our independence products and publications of $306,000. We had net investments for last year. It wasn't a great year in the market, you may have noticed. So this is a negative number. Hold on to your seats. $4,565,000.

That gives us a total revenue number under this category of a negative $4,259,000. So our total revenues overall when you add up these categories for last year is $20,833,000. And of that, our restricted with donor restrictions was a negative $608,000. 20 million is a good number, but we did have expenses last year, surprisingly. The expenses fall into these categories. Under program services, we have blindness integration total $10,863,000. Civil rights advocacy and self-organization was $5,493,000. Nonvisual access technology total was $5,435,000. Giving us total program services of $21,792,000.

Then we also have supporting services, management, and general, which was a total of $724,000. And fundraising total $1,282,000. So our total supporting services with $2,006,000. So our total overall expenses for last year was $23,799,000.

Our changes in net assets for last year was a negative. $2,966,000. Again, the with donor restriction portion of that was the $608,000.

Our net assets at the beginning of last year was were 34,164,000. Of that 4,361,000 was with donor restrictions. At the end of 2022, therefore, our total net assets were $31,198,000.

Although our numbers were down by close to 3 million, you'll note that our investments were down well over 4 million. So that is largely representative of the stock market. We review our investments on a quarterly basis. We have a very strong investment portfolio, and over the course of time, our investments do very well. But you're going to have years like last year that show a down. But as evidenced by our SUN fund, we're in it for the long haul. So don't be too panicked by that.

Now, we have done a good job. We bring money in and we spend it on doing the work, right?

[Applause]

Yeah. We do have the statement of functional expenses which breaks down what I've just given you into the various categories, and it goes into great detail. I will give you the totals for the functional categories. You can dig into how it gets broken out, but I'll just give you the total expense areas. The grand totals, expenses, volunteer services 3,308,000. Salaries $4,635,000. Payroll taxes and related expenses $887,000. Total salary and related expenses was $8,831,000. We then have supplies $465,000. Postage and shipping $1,221,000. Printing and publications $3,628,000. Travel $420,000. Conferences and convention $476,000. Professional fees $1,998,000. Telephones $15,000. Occupancy $575,000. Donated media $3,130,000. Awards and grants $947,000. Information technology $1,671,000. Equipment rental, maintenance, and repair, $11,000. Equipment, Braille and technology center was $218,000. Royalty fees $3,000. Data processing, $143,000. And "other," $5,000. Giving us total expenses before depreciation of 23,766,000. We had depreciation of $32,000. Giving us the grand total of $23,799,000.

So our expenses are very much in line with our planned expenditures. And you can dive into the details of the report if you want.

There is a statement of cash flows that shows you how we finance the organization. Since we have a very long history of not using debt, it's kind of a boring report because we spend the money we have, not money we don't have.

[Applause]

Now, there's many notes in the audit. It starts on Braille page 32 and it goes to Braille page maybe 67. I could read them to you, but it basically tells you what you already know. It tells you about the nature of the organization and our accounting processes and how we manage the various aspects of our treasury. So despite the fact that this is a negative number, I think our financial position from last year is very good.

I want to give you now the 5-month report for this year. Let's see. So this report tells us the financial status of the organization for the first five months of this year. And let me say that we have an ongoing system of tracking our financials. We have regular review of our expenses. A lot of our income we can't predict, and so we're always watching on a regular basis and making adjustments which I think is why we've been able to keep our expenses in line. There are certain things that are hard to predict. For example, our legal fees. We manage those cases carefully, but sometimes, like LACCD, you can't plan for a case to go 6-7 years and we're in it to win it so we stick with it. And by the way, I know we say this every year, a lot of people think that the Federation's legal program is a big revenue generator. Civil rights work does not generate big amounts of revenue, despite what you might think. So we do get fee recovery sometimes, but it's rare. When we take on a case, we take it on to get the relief we're seeking, and if we can get some of the money back into our legal program, that's great.

So for the first five months of the year, our investments were up $867,000. So that's a good thing. In our financial report we have another $327,000 which we count as income that's likely to be generated from our mass mail program based on inventory that we have out there. So in our financial report for the year so far, we show outstanding revenue of $1,195,000. We have revenue that we have actually received through the first five months which is $6,017,000. So we add those two numbers together and we get for the first five months of the year revenue of positive $7,213,000.

We do have expenses. Our expenses for the first five months of the year were $7,480,000. And so that gives us an estimated change in net assets of the first five months of the year of a negative $267,000. Keep in mind, though, that we have not yet -- the second half of the year is always bigger for us than the first half in terms of income. This reflects a lot of the expenses for the convention but not necessarily the income. And part of that income comes in our honor roll call. So I wanted to acknowledge that real quick.

For those affiliates and divisions that sent in or told us about contributions before this convention, I have a report that reflects the contributions and pledges that have been made. It's on the website. If your affiliate division is not on the report, I would encourage you to let us know your pledge because we would like to record it in an updated version of this report. Total commitments made by affiliates and divisions to the Jacobus tenBroek Memorial Fund before this convention was $23,105. To our Kenneth Jernigan Fund, $22,730. To the SUN Fund, $18,875. And to our White Cane Fund, $39,105. So keep those contributions coming.

I think that is what I have to report to the convention about the financial health of the Federation.

[Applause]

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Maurer.

MARC MAURER: Good morning. I want to let you know that one of the protections that we pursue with respect to our finances is that we have a finance review committee that looks at our investments every quarter. I serve on that committee. The President chairs of committee. Mrs. Jernigan is on that committee. I note that we've had a negative result from our investments for the preceding year. I also would tell you that in the long history of the time that we've been doing investments of the kind that we have now, my memory is that 8 out of 9 years we have positive results and sometimes very positive results.

[Applause]

We take some risk in doing the investments that we do, but for a good many years, the interest rate that you could get on invested money if you put it out at interest was less than 1%. And our judgment was and is that we're better off with investments that generate a much higher percentage return than that, even if a year comes which does happen, it doesn't happen every year, and as I say, not very many years, we get investment income far beyond what you can get by putting money out at interest.

So we hire the best advice we can and we review the investments on a quarterly basis. And although we've had a negative year this year, the pattern shows that we have positive years so often and with such sufficient return that I think this strategy is a good one to pursue. And unless the President determines otherwise or the convention does, I would recommend that we continue it.

Now, with all of that being said, I believe that what has been presented is a fair representation of what we have done and I think it is a prudent policy to pursue in the way that we do, and I move acceptance of the financial report.

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you, Dr. Maurer. I know every time I've read this negative investment number, it stops me every time, even though I rationally understand it. So it's great to discuss.

So since it's going to be most of the day, just a reminder that members of the Federation are eligible to vote on matters that come before the convention.

Any discussion on the motion to accept the financial report? By the way, if you do at any point today want to discuss any items, you should get to one of the floor mics which are in the same place as yesterday.

Okay. Hearing none, all those in favor, say aye.

Opposed, say no.

Okay. The financial report has been accepted.

[Applause]

Again, we make our information available in accessible form on the web. You can dive in as deep as you want.

Bennett, did you want to have a door prize?

BENNETT PROWS: I sure do. And I think because we have to do virtual too, we'll do that first. 40 bucks for Catherine Johnson of Colorado. Then we have Lindsay Baum from Utah. And we have Elizabeth Waybright from Maryland. All three of those will get 40 bucks if they send an email to prize@NFB.org, and I hope you can spell this code word which is NOPBC.

And we have a blanket and 75 bucks as a door prize for the people in the room. And the winner is William Black of Utah!

[Applause]

Is he here?

MARK RICCOBONO: Did you find him?

BENNETT PROWS: Apparently not. So we go to Nikki Gaccos, New Jersey. Nikki, are you here?

I bet this person is here. Mary Ellen Jernigan.

[Applause]

From all over the place.

MARK RICCOBONO: She's in the very back of the room. The back wall. Way in the corner. She is here.

Okay. I would like to call on Ryan Strunk.

RYAN STRUNK: Thank you. What up, my PAC? How is everybody doing?

There we are. All right. So I'm going to give you some facts and figures and I'm going to ask you for a couple of things and then I'm going to ask you for a couple of things more and then I'm going to tell you a couple of things.

First, keep helping us burn and churn on the PAC plan. We have an intrepid group back here behind the international section between doors A and B. Make some noise back there. I love how people started making noise around the whole convention hall.

Also, we already have an intrepid four PAC back there. We're working on our six PAC but we're going to need a fit break to make that happen. Please go to the PAC table if you are here in the room. If you're not here in the room or you're looking for something to post on Facebook, go to or send out NFB.org/PAC. Or call us on the phone, 1-877-NFB-2PAC. You can also send us an email at PAC@NFB.org. But one of those ways you can help contribute to this. I understand being risk averse, so help assuage that nervousness for me.

I want to give you some updates on the races. For our PACyderm, Delaware is leading the race with 14%. Nevada is right behind them with 9%. By the way, Nevada, thank you very much for those two sets of coasters.

Then we have the division race, the PACmule. The leading division has eight people. That is the seniors division.

[Applause]

There's a lot of clapping and there's more than eight people clapping so help them out, guys.

Also, you can tell your friends to support the seniors division.

Right behind them with seven is NAGDU.

[Applause]

And in the Honorable mention spot are the parents with five.

And the last one, the PACrat. This is interesting. Leading the PACrat race right now is Colorado with five. And then we have a three-way tie with four apiece: Minnesota, Ohio, and Alabama!

[Applause]

Again, we've got more than 12 people cheering there. And Maryland, thank you for the backpacks.

I'm going to tell you five names of people who came by yesterday afternoon and raised their contribution or started a new one. If they are not in the room but they're here at this convention, please call them, nudge them, tell them to come back to the PAC table. One, Michael Holme of New Jersey. Two, the Denver chapter of Colorado. Three, Cody Bear of Colorado. Four, Dana Ard of Idaho. And five, Carolyn Corrigan of New Hampshire. You will all receive a $25 gift card.

Our total $463,221.70 annual contribution at this convention. That is my report, my Federation community.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you very much to the PAC team. And I'm going to go to Tracy Soforenco.

TRACY SOFORENCO: President Riccobono and our Federation family! The GIVE 20 campaign deserves music. Why does the PAC plan get music and we do not? We need people to advance our mission. If I were to come up with songs for each one of our funds, for our white cane or general fund, I would do "Ain't no stopping us now..."

For our building fund, our tenBroek fund, "Our house, in the middle of Jernigan place."

For the rainy day fund, "Rainy days, our SUN Fund always keeps us up..."

And for our Jernigan fund, "It's never as good as the first time..."

Anyway, clearly I should not be singing! But our give 20 campaign keeps us all excited and motivated! You can give to our give 20 campaign and benefit from this too because you could win a trip to our 2024 convention, the ability to go to Orlando, to experience our convention, with hotel, travel for two, registration, banquet, and $1,000 walking around cash. You can give online or call (410)659-9314 extension 2430. You could go to the back of the room at the give 20 table at the back of the room. Maybe we could have people scream back there? We have 309 people give to the give 20 campaign for $24,000. We have a match from AIRA of $25,000! Let's double your money! Don't leave the hotdogs on the BBQ or brisket on the BBQ! Let's make that happen!

So we're going to Orlando. So we would have to ask, you know, maybe we should be singing at the banquet, I have the pleasure to be able to call out a name. Could it be yours? "Who is the leader of the PAC that's made for you and me?" It could be your name we're calling and singing out at the banquet! Give to our GIVE 20 campaign! Make all of our movement possible through your contributions! Thank you, President Riccobono.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. Thank you Tracy, and thank you to those of you who are still giving 20. Remember, you have plenty of time to do that and I would encourage you to do so so we can get our match done thanks to the team at AIRA.

[Applause]

If you haven't yet registered, please do so. The updated numbers. The top 11, well, there's still a tie for 10th place between Minnesota and Florida. Both with 66 people registered. So we're going to see if somebody can own that top 10 spot. But number 9 is North Carolina with 67 people. So you could easily get in there and knock somebody out of the top 10. Number 8 is New York with 73. Number 6 continues to be Nebraska with 81. Number 5 is Colorado with 91. California is coming in next with 118 people registered. But they're only a little bit behind Arizona, which has 124 people registered. And Arizona is only a little bit behind Louisiana with 130 people registered. Maryland is at number 2 with 170 people registered. And I haven't gotten to 400 yet. Texas is at 384!

[Applause]

Our virtual experience registration is up to 1150. And our total registration through the end of yesterday was 2,462 in person.

BENNETT PROWS: How about a door prize for that?

MARK RICCOBONO: Go for it.

BENNETT PROWS: We have a beauty gift basket and 25 bucks and it goes to Samuel Robbins of Arizona.

Not there. Okay. Kathleen Smith from Texas. Not here.

Next. Oh, she is there. You've got to yell and scream at me or I won't know you're here. If you can't, throw a cane in the air or something. We got her. Thank you.

MARK RICCOBONO: Wave your antennas in the air. You should stay standing so we can get your prize over to you.

## Elections

Okay. I would now like to move to our elections for our national board of directors.

Here is the chairperson from our nominating committee, Pam Allen.

[Applause]

PAM ALLEN: Good morning. Good morning and thank you to all who served on our nominating committee and also to Seth Lambkin for your assistance.

I want to thank Denise Avant, Everlee Hairston, and Terri Rupp for their service once again. And I would like to share the nominating committee recommends the following. For our first board position, Tom Page, Kansas.

[Applause]

Board position number two, Marci Carpenter, Washington.

[Applause]

Board position three, Jessica Beecham, Colorado.

[Applause]

Board position four, Grace Pires, Rhode Island.

[Applause]

Board position number five, Marilyn Green, Illinois.

And board position number six, Tracy Soforenco, Virginia.

[Applause]

And the committee recommends acceptance. Thank you, President Riccobono.

MARK RICCOBONO: Is there a motion to accept the report of the nominating committee?

It's if been moved and seconded to accept the report of the nominating committee.

Any discussion?

All those in favor, say aye.

Opposed, say no.

Okay. So the nominating committee report is accepted.

We will now move to the elections for each position. Note that members of the Federation can vote and are eligible to run for office, and we will take nominations in the order that they have been offered.

So for board position number one, the name of Tom Page from Kansas has been submitted into nominations.

Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations.

Are there any other nominations?

It's been moved and seconded that nominations cease and we elect Tom Page by acclimation. All those in favor, say aye.

Opposed, say no.

Congratulations, Tom. You're elected.

[Applause]

Let's see if we can get Tom to a microphone. He had a late night last night playing with the Haymakers.

TOM PAGE: Good morning. Thank you, Federation family, for your confidence. In 2004 I was in my 32nd year. I found myself in Atlanta, Georgia, at my first national convention. And I hate to say it, but I was a 31-year-old child.

With regard to blindness and myself, I knew very little. Through my interaction since then with the National Federation of the Blind, with everyone, of all walks, of all states, I have learned to understand the utter normality, normalcy, and beauty of blindness. First from learning that from others and later understanding that in myself.

Thank you again for your confidence, and I will do my absolute best to serve in this position in the best possible way. Thank you.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Congratulations, Tom.

Okay. For board position number two, the name of Marci Carpenter of Washington has been submitted into nomination.

Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations.

I'll ask one more time: Are there any other nominations.

It's been moved and seconded. I'll give the guy in the back credit for it. It's been moved and seconded that nominations cease and that we elect Marci by acclimation. All those in favor, say aye.

Opposed, say no.

Marci is reelected. Congratulations.

[Applause]

MARCI CARPENTER: Thank you so much. I want to continue my work bringing people into the Federation. Thank you so much.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: For board position number 3, Jessica Beecham from Colorado has been placed into nomination.

Are there any other nominations?

I heard a name. You will have to get to a microphone. What was the name? Still can't hear ya. I encourage you to get to a microphone because I can't hear ya up here.

All right. Let me ask a second time just to see: Are there any other nominations?

SPEAKER: My name is Brittany Brown from Bakersfield, California, Bakersfield chapter. And I've been on the board for my chapter --

MARK RICCOBONO: Are you making a nomination?

SPEAKER: Yes.

MARK RICCOBONO: Who are you nominating?

SPEAKER: Oh. Me.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. And what is your name?

SPEAKER: Brittany Brim.

SPEAKER: Spell your last name.

SPEAKER: Brim.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations?

Okay. It's been moved that nominations should be closed. All those in favor, say aye.

Opposed?

Okay. We will take nominations by tradition, in reverse order of nominations, so I would encourage our candidates to not take too long. Maybe a minute and a half. Brittany, you're up first. Give us your speech why you should be elected.

SPEAKER: The reason I want to be elected is that I've never been in a board meeting in the national level before and I always have some ideas for like for example fundraiser and all that good stuff for the NFB. That's why I wanted to elect. So yeah.

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you very much.

Jessica?

SPEAKER: Good morning, everybody. Thank you so much, Brittany. No matter which of us wins, I'm sure we can work together to make some really cool things happen for the National Federation of the Blind.

[Applause]

I am excited and inspired by the work for the Federation, and if I'm elected, I will pour my heart and soul into working to build a bigger, brighter, and more vibrant movement so that we can continue to change what it means to be blind.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. All those in favor of Brittany from California, say aye.

All those in favor of Jessica Beecham of Colorado, say aye.

I believe that Jessica has the majority. She's elected.

[Applause]

Thank you.

SPEAKER: Thank you so much to my Federation family. I came to my first convention in Orlando in 2011 as a scholarship winner. The first night I was at convention, I went to my room and I think I had a few tears and I said, I never want to be at another one of these conventions again!

[Laughter]

And by the end of the week, I realized that I had found my family of choice. I love walking through our convention and gaining energy, being inspired, getting ideas, and sharing in the work of our community.

And as a board member, I look forward to being here to listen to each of you, to learn from each of you, and to make the kind of changes that will make our Federation exactly what we want to see.

I always have to mention my mentor Scott LaBarre, who I'm missing especially today.

[Applause]

Kevan Worley, Julie Deden, all of our Colorado crew will be right behind me as we move this Federation forward. So thank you so much.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: For board position number four, the name of Grace Pires of Rhode Island has been placed into nomination. So of you may be saying, well, wait a minute, she was just elected last year. And she was. That was a one-year position that was made available based on Everette Bacon being elected as an officer. So Grace is up for election again.

Are there any other nominations?

I do encourage you if you want to make a nomination to get to a microphone. I heard some name from Arkansas but I'll just let you know I'm a long way away. So are there any other nominations?

Okay. We will wait. But I do encourage you to make your way to the microphones if you're planning to make a nomination. I know you all think it's easy to hear up here, but this is a huge room. Bennett, do you have a door prize?

BENNETT PROWS: Sure we do. We have a Hawaiian basket of macadamia nuts and Kona coffee and T-shirts. So let's see. The winner will be Jeremy Richie from Nebraska.

[Applause]

He's right here. We got $50 in that thing too.

SPEAKER: Mr. President, it's Virginia Robertson from Arkansas, and I want to place my name in nomination to be a part of the board.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. And you're a member?

SPEAKER: Yes. The central Arkansas chapter and Vice President of central Arkansas. I go by Ginger.

MARK RICCOBONO: Virginia Robertson?

SPEAKER: Yes.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. Thank you very much.

Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations?

Okay. It's been moved and seconded that nominations cease. All those in favor, say aye.

Opposed, say no.

We will take the candidates again in reverse order of nominations. So Virginia, you're up first. You have a minute and a half.

SPEAKER: Okay. The reason why I would like to be placed in nomination and would like to have a spot on the board is I've been wanting for some time to be more involved and know more people and do more to help our Federation nationally, and this would give me that great opportunity. I know my colleagues and Federationists in Arkansas know what a fighter I am and what a good job I've done for them and want to continue for them as well.

So I appreciate your nomination.

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you very much, Virginia.

Grace Pires.

GRACE PIRES: Good morning, Federation family. I would like to be reelected because I love this organization and I want to continue to help move our Federation movement forward. I feel like I am the President of the National Federation of the Blind of Rhode Island. I've been serving in that position for almost 14 years. And I've done a lot of changes in our affiliate to improve it, to include everyone. So I would appreciate your continued support and to be reelected to the board position. I've only had it one year so I would like a little more of a chance to continue to serve everyone and make our Federation what we want it to be. Thank you.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you.

All those in favor of Virginia from Arkansas, say aye.

All those in favor of Grace from Rhode Island, say aye.

I believe Grace has won the election. So congratulations, Grace.

[Applause]

GRACE PIRES: Thank you so much for placing me once again, your confidence in me. I promise to do my best to continue to serve on this board, on our national board, to the best of my ability, to help push our movement forward.

Just to share a little bit about myself, I came to the United States when I was 10 and because my family wanted know have more of an opportunity. And I went to school and did the normal things, and I always felt like I was searching for something. I felt like there had to be more than what I was experiencing. So finally I joined our Federation family and I was so welcomed. And my first convention I found my home.

[Applause]

I found that I had so much to learn, but now I had something to strive for. I didn't know what to expect. You know? I didn't know a lot of blind people growing up, and so when I met everyone here and felt the love, the mentorship, the understanding of the different things we need to go through, it was -- I don't have the words. It was life changing for me.

So thank you all so much for all you have done for me, and now I want to help other people reach the point that I have reached and continue to grow. Thank you all so much for this honor.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Congratulations.

For board position number five, the nominating committee has placed the name of Marilyn Green of Illinois into nomination. Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations?

It's been moved and seconded that nominations cease and that Marilyn be elected by acclimation. All those in favor, say aye.

Opposed, so no.

Marilyn, congratulations.

[Applause]

MARILYN GREEN: I'm going to try not to cry. Thank you so much for this opportunity. I came to my first convention in 2017 in Orlando, Florida, and let me just tell you, I fell in love and I found a home with each and every one of these people in this room. And I have learned so much and I continue to learn, and I continue to grow with such great mentorship from Patti Chang and Denise Avant and Cathy Randall. So many great people have led me here, and I am so honored for this opportunity. Thank you so much.

[Applause]

Congratulations, Marilyn. And tears are always allowed, so don't worry about that. Hopefully someone closer to you has Kleenex. Ha ha.

For board position number six, the nominating committee has submitted the name of Tracy Soforenco of Virginia. Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations?

Are there any other nominations.

It's been moved and seconded that nominations cease and we elect Tracy by acclimation. All those in favor, say aye.

Opposed, say no.

Congratulations, Tracy.

[Applause]

TRACY SOFORENCO: Like many of you, I joined the Federation because I needed something. I needed alternative techniques so I can be a dad to my toddler daughters. I learned those techniques because my Federation family truly stepped up to help me. But they helped me with more than that. They helped me believe in myself. Our Federation connected me with powerful role models. I connected with a family that had my wife Sharon and our daughters were welcomed and encouraged to be a part of this movement. And they gave me opportunities to serve in my local chapter, to serve in our state affiliate in Virginia, and opportunities to serve on a national level.

You all gave me a life purpose, an ability to have impact on the world and this country that all of my friends would only dream of outside of Federation. Because together we can accomplish our dreams. I am so honored to be part of that effort in our movement and to serve alongside you in changing the lives of people in this country and around the world, and it is an honor to be a member of the National Federation of the Blind.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: All right. Congratulations Tracy and to all of our elected or reelected board members. Let's give them a round of applause.

[Applause]

Thank you very much to the nominating committee and to our chair Pam Allen. Service in this organization happens in many ways, but as noted in the presidential report, the board has a significant duty to manage the organization between conventions. And so we appreciate the significant level of service of our national board members.

Bennett, we should have a door prize.

BENNETT PROWS: Let's have a celebration for the board. For the virtual folks, we've got 25 bucks that will go to Humberto, Jr. from Washington State. To Robert Bellimer from Vermont and Carol Ann Anderson from Alaska. Send an email message within 30 minutes to prize@NFB.org, and use the code word of GIVE 20.

Now, for the board we have 100 bucks to go in the room to Sara Scaperdine from New Jersey. Is she here? Yea. There she is. Okay.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. Well, we've had a lot of numbers and things so it seems like we need to get the blood flowing again. So how about a fit.

SPEAKER: All right, everybody. Let's move our necks to the right, to the left, now shrug your shoulders up and down, up and down. Reach to the right. Reach to the left. Now twist at the hips. Left and right. Step right. Step left. Now shake it out.

Now bounce. Now just moves however feels good to you. Dance it out. Say yee-haw!

All right. Great job, guys. Thank you.

## Building the Movement: Achieving Our Dreams through Strategic Investments

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. This next item is "Building the Movement: Achieving Our Dreams through Strategic Investments." As mentioned in the presidential report, our board of directors felt that it was very important coming out of the pandemic period to reassess and recommit to strategically investing in where we need to build the organization. Our last strategic plan was developed in late 2018. And this convention is the primary vehicle for steering the organization, but between conventions our board wants to have a framework for where we commit our resources and direct the organization. Our strategic plan in 2018, we released in January 2019, and it's a good example that a strategic plan is a framework, not an absolute. You may remember that in March 2020 we started doing a lot of things we had not strategically planned for, such as a virtual convention. The strategic plan is meant to be a guide and where we put our energy. Certainly we could not have imagined much of our work in the last 3 years from the perspective of late 2018. And so we put together a steering committee which was a cross section of members to advise and guide the process to develop a plan that ultimately the board would have to accept and adopt the plan and recommendations, but that was guided by a number of members from across the organization who worked with our consultant over the last year, including activities at this convention last year, to really gather data from a broad cross section of the organization. And I think they've done a great job in doing that.

I hope that you will have an opportunity to review the plan in the July issue of the Braille Monitor and get familiar with it.

The steering committee was made up of members and staff from all levels of the organization. There were a few board members who participated in the steering committee, and we have one of those to guide the panel that's going to present to you the outline of the strategic plan. And so I want to introduce to you in her final moments here as a board member of the National Federation of the Blind, she'll be closing out her term when we adjourn this convention, from Illinois, here is Denise Avant.

[Applause]

DENISE AVANT: Thank you, President Riccobono and fellow Federationists. I'm going to try not to repeat much of what President Riccobono has already told you, but there are some points that I just want to reiterate.

We have been, the steering committee, has been working for the past year to construct a strategic plan that will guide the growth of our organization.

Up here on the podium with me is Trisha Kulkarni, the outgoing President of the National Association of Blind Students. Sanho Steele-Louchart is the next person. And by the way, Trisha is all the way at the end on my left. And then next to her is Sanho, President of the NFB of Oklahoma. He is an attorney and he is also our legal affairs coordinator. Next to him is Lisa Maria Martinez of California. She is chair of the blind parents group. And finally is Denise Brown, who is President of the greater Philadelphia chapter of the NFB of Pennsylvania.

So you can see that these people represent a broad cross section of our organization. And as President Riccobono told you, you can find the strategic plan in the Braille Monitor. I would urge you to review it, sit with it. You will be hearing more as the national reps come out to your state conventions in the fall and the spring.

Now, as I said, we have gone through many phases. One of the big phases is collecting your feedback and hearing your voices as our members. You no doubt remember what you participated in a survey last fall. We want to thank you for your thoughtful consideration and the time that you gave to the survey.

Since 1940, our organization, we have always carefully constructed strategic plans to build on the priorities of our membership and that would be executed by our leaders.

Like our past strategic plan, this plan set forth the next steps for our organization and building our movement.

Now, one thing you can rest assured is that the plan does not change our philosophy or our advocacy direction or the role of the National Federation of the Blind's convention. It is simply a framework by which our board of directors will use to keep our organization moving forward based on our time and on our limited resources.

Our plan has the aspirational statement which says, we imagine a world where blind people can live the lives they want and be as valued and respected members of society. Our mission is that we work tirelessly to improve the lives of blind people by fostering personal empowerment, coordinating nationwide advocacy, and building a network of collective achievement.

The next part of the plan is our values. This is the essence of our organization. The code by which we live. The principles by which we make our decision. Our values as an organization are that we believe in blind people, we lead courageously, we champion collective action, we foster inclusion, and we dream big.

[Applause]

And to help realize our aspiration and mission, we now will move to our commitments. So our first commitment is innovate. And Trisha will give you the highlights of the commitment and the priorities under the commitment. Trisha?

SPEAKER: For a moment I want to take you to another event. Our national student division is hosting a regional seminar where we bring students from across the country to engage in resource sharing and mentorship. On the last evening of our event, we are debriefing and reflecting on our experiences. A student shares that before this event, they had never learned to dream big as a blind student. But after attending the seminar, they wanted to reassess their career.

There is no doubt that in the National Federation of the Blind, we encourage people of all backgrounds to dream big. That is why I am on this stage today.

However, I think about how many circumstances had to align for this moment to be possible. The student had to find our organization. The student had to secure funding to be able to attend. And the student needed to see their experiences reflected in the other people attending the event. But what if these circumstances didn't align? Our first commitment to innovate is to invest in continuing to evolve our program and initiatives to increase opportunity, lower barriers, and raise expectations for blind people.

SPEAKER: Thank you, Trisha. Sanho?

SANHO STEELE-LOUCHART: Hello and good morning convention 2023. I am the legal program coordinator and the Oklahoma affiliate President. One of the titles that was not read today is that I'm also the LGBT+ group head here at the NFB.

[Applause]

Now, let me be clear. I will say my pronouns are he/him/his. And let me be clear that this is not an LGBT issue. This is an issue that involves all of us. Inclusion is a commitment that the Federation aspires to. We've come so far but yet have so far to go. It is sometimes easy to underestimate precisely how far we've come because we're still working every day that we are in this organization, finding and celebrating diverse voices, while also working on the things that we don't know that we don't know.

So personally, the way that this came up for me was that in September of 2005 at 12 years old and in the 7th grade, I realized I had a crush on a boy and I didn't know what to do and I didn't know any gay people. My parents were not gay people let's say. And so that raised some questions.

And then a month later in October of 2005 I suddenly went blind. I had been fully sighted. I had no preparation. No anticipation that I would ever be blind.

So as you might imagine, all of my friends vanished. My family became distant. No one knew quite what to do with me because having two minority identities in my case, one of them was a bridge too far.

Well, then I met the NFB. And from the first NOMC with whom we had that conversation where I talked about a boyfriend or used a gendered pronoun when discussing my personal life, I was accepted. As a blind person. As an LGBT+ person.

Well, and that trend continued. And what I learned over time within the Federation is that even though we are still doing that work, people are willing to learn and to listen and to, in fact, do the work.

Now having just turned 30 and been involved in so many ways, I see the national board and steering committee has this value to include, meaning we include people of all identities, LGBT+, people from different faiths, people of color, we include everyone who wants to come to us and live our philosophy of blindness. That includes members, staff, affiliates. Really the way that they define it is that, in fact, the National Federation of the Blind commits to foster a culture that is welcoming, that is inclusive, that seeks and values diversity within this organization because we know that through diversity, we are stronger.

[Applause]

In closing I will say we seek to include everyone regardless of those identities that you bring to the table. That makes who you are and it adds so much to us. And just on a personal note, if I could go back and tell 12-year-old me that I would one day be in the office of the President of the National Federation of the Blind on a regular basis and, in fact, this week alone in his office -- well, his mobile office -- surrounded by other out, proud, questioning and LGBT people, and that he would ask about our partners without judgment, he would take an interest in our families and what brought us to the Federation and how we could work together, 12-year-old me wouldn't believe it. But thank you so much for making that my reality, and I am bound and determined to make that the reality of others going forward.

[Applause]

DENISE AVANT: Commitment 3 is collaborate and that is Lisa Maria Martinez.

SPEAKER: Innovate, inclusion, and now collaborate. To collaborate is to leverage our community of allies, including employers, policymakers, donors, synergistic organizations, and strategic partners. To maximize impact and effect lasting change.

This commitment is 100% my jam. I have very much believe in collaboration. I am a connector. I love to connect people with each other and see the synergy create magic.

I love to dream big and I love to play the what if game. What if a blind person can get to the moon? What if a blind person could be the President of the United States? What if?

[Applause]

So to collaborate, we need to establish storytelling initiatives that raise awareness of blind people for their contributions across all sectors of society. To collaborate means to leverage our expertise to build relationships with synergistic organizations to advance access and opportunities. To collaborate means to develop curriculum or educators that promotes greater understanding about blindness and affirms of capacity of blind people.

So I encourage you, better yet, I challenge you, I dare you to dream big. I dare you to think of innovative, inclusive projects that we can do. I already believe that we as blind people are the experts. I already believe that. So I'm ready to take that belief a step forward and collaborate with the rest of the world to ensure that everybody in the world knows that the NFB, or the blind of the world, are just as capable as anybody else. Thank you.

[Applause]

DENISE AVANT: Thank you. With the final commitment, dedicate, is Denise Brown.

SPEAKER: Good morning, everyone. As Denise said, the fourth pillar is dedicate. We must devote the financial and human resources required to realize our strategic priorities.

So let's start with the human resources. Can everybody out there just say I? That is the first word of our pledge. In this strategic part of the plan, we must recruit, retain, and build leaders. For those in recruiting, it is not just up to the officers and the membership chairs and the membership coordinators. It is up to all of us to find members for this organization. And where can we find members for this organization? Everywhere. Because everywhere is where blind people go. You meet them on the plane. You're at the sporting event. You're at the theater. You're in the airport. When you find these people, get their contact information. You can give them yours too, but you get it so that you can follow up with them and get them to a chapter meeting or a chapter event.

Okay. Once we recruit them, we want to retain them. Let's give them a reason to stay and be productive in the organization. Make sure they have a mentor so that they can understand this organization and continue to prosper in it.

Let's build leaders. We have leaders who have been in positions for very long times. And there's nothing wrong with that. But we have to build our organization with new leaders. We need everybody to want to do more, to gain the position.

When we talk about the National Federation of the Blind, we love blind people. We dream big. You've heard about the museum. And the dreaming big with the museum, we need financial friends to help us with our museum. But guess what? Say I again! That includes you too. If we are asking others to invest in what we see in our future, it would be nice if you were investing too.

Also we do many programs in the Federation. And we need to evaluate those programs that we are doing in each of your chapters, in each of your divisions. Are they working? Is there something that you need to do to change it so that more people come to the next event? Let's evaluate it and try to make it better.

And I know all of you are going to read the strategic plan and you're going to read it again so that you get a better understanding of it. But guess what? We have to support the plan among this organization. If you don't seem like you're in favor of it, how do you think your members feel? So give this plan a chance. We're working together to build the National Federation of the Blind because we want to be the best. And I'm going to turn this over to Denise Avant to close us out.

[Applause]

DENISE AVANT: Thank you, Denise, Lisa Maria, Sanho, and Trisha. This plan is a framework and it is what the incoming board will be using to guide our organization. But as members, we can't sit on our hands and do nothing. We have to be active participants. This plan represents the promise that together with love, hope, and determination we turn blind people's dreams into reality.

Thank you, President Riccobono. Thank you, fellow Federationists.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you. When we got together with our strategic planning consultants, we used a company called Mission Minded out of San Francisco. They helped us with our branding about 10 years ago, so they know us well. And they outlined for me what would be in the strategic plan. And they said one of the first things would be to develop a vision statement. I said, can you come up with another word? I mean, I have a business degree so I know what a vision statement is supposed to be, but we don't believe in the vision-centered approach. So they came back with aspirational statement which I actually think tells you what it is.

[Applause]

So let's see if the agencies for the blind start to have aspirational statements or if they stick with vision statements.

Anyway, Bennett, you got a door prize or should I keep going?

BENNETT PROWS: We have a very aspirational door prize. It's a draw string bag and health and wellness products, including a neck fan. The winner is going to be Mike Wood, Kentucky. Are you there? Not there. Okay. Sue Cyrus of Michigan.

Okay. Let's try another one. Soan Shamerack from Michigan. Not here.

How about Rhonda Linton from North Carolina?

Ah, we got her. Thank you.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. Great.

## Transforming Corporate America from the Inside: Leadership, Blindness, and a Journey of Opening Doors

Our next presenter I should say we will get to resolution there's afternoon on the agenda. So we have a number of presentations before then. I'm excited about the two that are coming up. I think you're going to be very happy with them as well. Our first speaker is no stranger to the organized blind movement, but I suspect that a good portion of this audience may not yet know her personally, and if you get an opportunity to do so, I encourage you to do that. She's a great person to know and I consider it a real blessing that I've had that opportunity.

Although I think many of you may not be familiar with her personally, I can guarantee you that her work and leadership has impacted your life even though you don't know it. As a blind person, she has been working tirelessly in the communications industry to advocate for equal access and represent the viewpoints of blind people in many space where's blind people aren't present. Probably in most of them she's been the only blind person there.

Her leadership has been particularly deeply meaningful on a number of different levels. She started this part of her career in 1994 at the Pacific Bell in disability marketing. And in 1998 she moved into the wireless field, where she has developed many strategies for enhancing the access for people with disabilities on the state and federal level, in regulatory matters, and in moving companies forward in terms of accessibility. I could share many, many more details about her resume and her accomplishments. What you should know is in addition to that, she is an advocate and her leadership is based in the lived experience of blind people and in the organized blind movement. She is a lifetime member of the Seattle chapter of the National Federation of the Blind. And I think you'll find that her story has a lot that will resonate with you. But I cannot overstate how impressive it is that this woman has done what she has done in corporate America to advance blind people. She's been in and around these conventions, usually because she's encouraged her corporation to be a sponsor here, but her story continues to be part of our story. And so I'm pleased to invite to the podium Susan Mazrui!

[Applause]

SUSAN MAZRUI: Good morning, Federation family. Good morning. Everybody awake?

Okay. I'm going to talk today about "Transforming Corporate America from the Inside: Leadership, Blindness, and a Journey of Opening Doors."

Why? Because we all need to be there. I'm going to need your help. Most of you never heard of me. Some of you looked on the agenda and said, this is a good time to go get coffee. And, you know, I just ask if you did, can you bring me back a latte? I would appreciate it.

But the rest of us are going to work together this morning and you're going to help me I hope with this presentation.

Can you tell me if you think the action of an individual can make a difference?

Yes.

Do you think they can do it alone?

No.

So why am I here?

A big part is because I need your help. And I know the organized blind is a very powerful body. In the fall I was invited to the White House for a celebration. And I thought to myself, why is Susan Mazrui being invited? I don't know. Now, I'm used to hearing President Riccobono at the White House. And Anil Lewis and so many of the other leaders going to the White House. It is not the norm for me.

So when I got the invitation, I thought, either they're pretty desperate or they need someone who can fill a seat really well. And unfortunately I can do that.

I was very surprised to find myself sitting behind the First Lady and the President of the United States. It was amazing. My friend who was with me even took pictures of the sign that said First Lady, President. And I thought, probably because I'm relatively nonthreatening. I'm a safe person by these people. They're not going to worry about me at all.

What I was really shocked at, though, was when the First Lady quoted me when she spoke about disability power and pride.

[Applause]

And I realized why I was there had nothing to do with Susan Mazrui, director of global policy at AT&T. It was really who I represented. Because we in the disability community are everywhere. We're parents, we're teachers, we're children. We are in every walk of life. But when we come together, we have incredible power. And I hope you are all proud of what you have done in the Federation to change the world.

[Applause]

So you know a little bit about my career, but you really don't know me as a person. A handful of people maybe in Seattle do and maybe some from Maryland. I am the youngest of six children. My father was an Irish Catholic career military officer. So anybody here who has been in the military or military family, I want to hear a shoutout.

[Applause]

Yes. It is a sacrifice not only for those who serve but the family members as well. And I personally want to thank you.

My mother came to this country in her 20s not speaking or reading or writing English. She came because her country, Japan, was bombed and in turmoil. And I want to know how many of you have come to this country or had family come to this country?

[Applause]

Yes. First generation.

[Applause]

None of these people are wimps. We do not have wimpy people coming here. We do not have people who are wimpy serving in the military.

My family did not believe in coddling. My family had been through so much personal turmoil, seen people die, starve, suffer. So when I lost my vision, it wasn't a great thing, but there was a lot of coddling. The question wasn't will you get a job or go to school or support your family. The question was how. They were not engaged with the blindness movement. I don't know how many blind people they had ever met in their lives. But they knew that with hope and determination, you can do anything.

[Applause]

My mother even, not knowing about Braille or dots labeled our appliances with clear nail polish so I could feel the buttons that were all flat at that point.

Now this is something that I probably will not get a great shoutout on, and that is how many of you here are the grandchild of a Buddhist monk? Okay, so I am kind of used to being the only. I am the granddaughter of a Buddhist monk. This has influenced a lot of who I am and I'll share a little bit of that with you as well.

I'm married. Most of you probably know Jamal. He is an incredible advocate. He is a person who will tell you what you don't want to hear sometimes, and he will do it with passion and stand up for the blind community, whether it's for equitable employment or health insurance. So I've got a pretty good role model there. And we just celebrated our 20th anniversary.

[Applause]

I have two children that I'm very proud of. One is a disability rights lawyer. And she started a law firm which I'm going to mention not to plug but because I love the name. It is Undaunted Law. And we as a community are undaunted. We face challenges. Sometimes even life threatening challenges. With courage.

I have a younger child, 16, and as a teenager lives a life that's undaunted, as most teenagers do. Usually we really like that. Occasionally not so much.

And I have my grandson here today who is at his first NFB camp.

[Applause]

So we are keeping it in the family. And that's what the NFB is about. It's about family.

Now, you've heard a little bit about my career. Most of you know I started in disability marketing. What you don't know is it wasn't a good fit. I have to say I was good with the research, I was good with the competitive analysis, but when people say our logo is going to be XYZ and your first thought is, that might be a little bit of an exaggeration, you probably don't belong in marketing. And if you are a person who looks at the things that are given away at events, T-shirts, pens, those types of things and your first thought is, I bet the budget for this could be used to dig a well for a village somewhere and they could have clean water, you probably need to join me in public policy.

But I was in marketing. That was my job. And at that time, Pacific Bell mobile services wanted to be the first to market in digital wireless technology. It is a huge money making deal. And being first to market means you get more market share. The people who are working there are working 80 hours a week. They're under stress. Everyone is looking at them for the company, for the profit, but more, for jobs. If we do well, people have lots of jobs. If we don't, they don't have jobs.

Now, when we were looking at that, I was doing market research. And I look at Europe. And we did not have digital wireless technology in the United States. But we did in Europe. And what I was hearing from the disability community wasn't good. People who had hearing aids were experiencing what they called bystander interference. If they would walk by someone with a digital cell phone, they might hear a buzzing in their ears. And some people were worried about pacemakers and power chairs. This is critical.

Now, there was a lot of misinformation. So it was difficult. But in marketing, and when you're doing a competitive analysis, it's your job to tell the company things they don't want to know. So I went to the folks who were leading this effort and said, I hate to tell you this, but we have a problem. And I told them what I was hearing and what the concerns were, and I got the most awful voice mail message I've ever had in my life. It was incredibly vitriolic. It was someone very upset thinking I was there to ruin their lives. Why am I causing trouble.

And I could have filed a complaint with HR. I could have said, this is awful, I don't deserve to be treated this way. I didn't. But what I listened to was the feelings behind the statements. I listened to it with compassion. And that's where the Buddhist side comes in. Because if you listen with compassion, you can hear better.

[Applause]

So I called this gentleman back and I said, "I understand you're under a lot of pressure. I understand that this is a challenge for you and you think that maybe I'm there to cause problems. But I'm there to help. And I know that you are a good person deep down and that you want to do the right things but you're under pressure and it makes us sometimes brusque." I was a little exaggerating. It was more than brusque. "And I want to help you" and he called back and apologized. Not only that, but he became one of the strongest disability advocates in our company.

[Applause]

Because people in a business are just that. People. And we all have bad days and we all have hard times and we're all dealing with stressors. Everyone in this room has been discriminated against. Sometimes it's because you're LGBTQ. Sometimes it's because you're female. Sometimes it's because you're short. Sometimes it's because you're a person of color. Sometimes because of your disability or disabilities. It's a real thing. I don't want to minimize that.

But because I had developed this bridge and I said, this is what I'm hearing, people are very concerned, he was able to listen to what I had to say and what they had to say. And we met with folks in the disability community and got information firsthand. Some of it was not accurate. Some of it was very accurate.

And in the meantime what we didn't know was a group of other disability organizations were organizing cross disability saying, we do not want this technology rolled out. We want your regulators to pull the licenses, we do not want approval, we are angry.

So the good news is, I gave them advance notice. And the really good news is, we were able to come forward with a plan of action, a strategic plan to deal with the issue for the company.

[Applause]

And my friend who had yelled at me earlier came with me to the senior leadership and said, we want budget to have a task force. We want to get experts together to look at this issue with facts and opportunities, and we want to do something.

And we did. We got the experts. And who were the experts in the disability community? Those with lived experience.

[Applause]

The best companies in the world will not do the right thing sometimes because they don't listen. And we were able to get all those folks together to help us come up with an action plan. We first met with them and said, what do you want? Not just about hearing aids, but across disability. If you could change a company, if you could change a technology, what would you do?

Then we fainted. Because they wanted everything. Who wouldn't want everything? We want what other people have. Right? We need to be able to speak for ourselves. And we need to provide direction. And we went to the leadership and we said, this is what they want. We want to make what we can happen of it. Give us your best people.

And this is where the military background comes in. We got those folks who had enough knowledge and influence to make a difference. And we did.

Now, you will see this happen over and over again with the many iterations of AT&T. Because of this process of getting those who are advocates into the room with decision makers and speaking for themselves, we have been able to do a lot of things. For example, Cingular Wireless, another iteration of AT&T, was able to offer the first talking cell phone. And because you all said as blind people, we don't want to have to pay more for having access, we don't want to have to pay extra for the screen reader, we were able to offset the cost and we set a pattern that other companies could emulate, which is whenever possible, we don't want our customers to bear the cost of access.

[Applause]

And you will see this all over the place. You will see the fingerprints of this beginning process in the Communications and Video Accessibility Act, in the legislative work that's being done today. It only works if it's driven by all of you. It only works if we have a say. Because otherwise we get laws and regulations that don't work for people with disabilities. They certainly don't work for blind people. And they don't work for companies.

Can we always do it from the inside? And the answer is absolutely not. No one does it alone. We need the carrot and the stick.

Jamal has done a little more of the stick work. Many of you who have taken lawsuits have stood up in legislative councils and town halls and said things people do not want to hear. We have to keep saying that. But we need to do it with compassion and we need to work together to find solutions. It's not so that somebody like President Riccobono ends up in the White House. It's so your grandmother can call her grandson. It's because all of you have an opportunity to have jobs and work competitively. As technology is changing, we have to be even more vigilant. Technology is changing so fast. We don't have time to sit back and plan and fix things. We need to be in the companies. We need to be visible as people with disabilities. And we need to be outspoken.

[Applause]

So I ask all of you, can you help look at AI technology, look at XR, look at how they're being embedded in all our systems, and be vocal?

Can you help not fix the world but as a Federation of the blind shape the world to come?

[Applause]

Thank you.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: All right. Thank you very much, Susan Mazrui, for being with us today.

We look forward to shaping the world with you into the future.

BENNETT PROWS: Got a door prize for that?

MARK RICCOBONO: Yeah, it's a good idea.

BENNETT PROWS: We have a big container of exclusive coffee submitted by Puerto Rico with 25 bucks to go with it. And the winner is Annatriya Rodriguez from Texas. Stay standing, please. She is here.

## Shattering Injustice and Raising Expectations: Dedication to Equality by a Blind Attorney

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. All right. Our next speaker is another outstanding champion of equal rights, and she's not afraid of taking on the biggest of the corporations or government bad actors to address injustice. She also happens to be a blind woman, simply striving to live the life she wants.

She graduated with honors from Georgetown Law in 2007 and has in very short time made a difference. She's a member of the bar in New York, California, and the District of Columbia, as well as several federal district courts, the United States Supreme Court, and several courts of appeal.

Most recently, she was the codirector for the access to justice project at public justice where she worked for nearly a decade. Her work, and this will resonate with Federation members, her work is described as focusing on dismantling structural barriers that make it more difficult for people harmed by corporations or government abuse to use the civil courts to get redress. In May 2022 she won a significant victory in a fight against forced arbitration in a case that she argued before the United States Supreme Court.

[Applause]

I am not aware of another blind attorney who has argued and won a case in front of the Supreme Court, so she has done her work in a way that has set precedent in a very motivating way.

She's worked closely on a number of Federation matters but most recently her leadership, she led the arguments in the Court of Appeals on behalf of Joe Orozco.

I could talk for a long time about the many achievements that she's made in what is still quite a young career. I do want you to know, however, that she has been nominated by the President of the United States to serve as the general counsel for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

[Applause]

And this is a nomination that the Federation has enthusiastically supported. I just went over to her and asked if she was confirmed yet. She said not yet. So we'll see at the end if you all still agree she should be confirmed by the Senate.

I should also share with you that it's not just her tremendous work in the legal field. She is described as an avid baseball fan, a fantasy baseball nerd, and she enjoys hiking, cycling, and go ball. Maybe she can give me some pointers on throwing the first pitch in a couple days.

Here is a true champion for equal rights and equal responsibility who is driven by her lived experience, here is Karla Gilbride!

[Applause]

KARLA GILBRIDE: Good morning, everyone!

Thank you to President Riccobono for inviting me here to speak with you all today. As a young child I was convinced that I wanted to be a lawyer. Now, mind you, I didn't have a very good idea of what it was that lawyers did, but I knew that I loved words and I loved using words to get my way.

[Laughter]

My dad used to make a joke about this. He would say, she's going to be a great lawyer someday because the judge will be so tired of hearing her argue that they'll let her win just to shut her up.

But even though my aspirations to be a lawyer went all the way back to childhood, I couldn't have imagined them, I couldn't have imagined as a law student, I couldn't have imagined as recently as 3 years ago that I would have the opportunity to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. As I'll talk about a little bit later, making an argument there is very rare. Most lawyers never get the chance to do it. And I'm not aware of a totally blind lawyer who has ever argued there before I did so last year.

So in thinking about --

[Applause]

In preparing to speak to you all about that experience, I had occasion to reflect on what brought me to that juncture, and what traits and tools made it possible for me to seize that opportunity when it came my way. And I decided it boiled down to three things: I have a stubborn streak, I have strong blindness skills, and I have a passion to fight against injustice.

[Applause]

So going back to the stubborn streak. That also dates back to early childhood. And when I was young, it was really nothing more complex than that rebellious instinct a lot of little kids have to do the opposite of whatever the adults around them tell them to do. And as a general matter, I wouldn't recommend that because usually the adults in our lives are telling us things that are good for us. But I've been totally blind since I was 2 years old, and many of us in the room may have had similar experiences, that sometimes the adults around you are telling you things that are not good for your development, such as, oh, you can just skip that assignment, it would probably be too hard for you anyway. Or, oh, it would be dangerous for you to do that phys ed activity; why don't you sit on the sidelines. And when the adults in my life said those kinds of things to me, my stubborn streak flared up and I wanted to find a way to do the things they said I shouldn't do.

[Applause]

Or as the child me would have put it, oh, yeah? I'll show you! And fortunately for me, I had parents who were fierce advocates, and if they ever witnessed or heard from me about these sorts of incidents, they made clear to that gym teacher or that extracurricular activity leader that low expectations were not acceptable and that I would be included in whatever the other kids were doing.

[Applause]

All you I was fortunate that the administration in my public school also provided me with the supports and services that I needed.

Another thing I'm very grateful to my parents for is that they exposed me to a lot of positive, successful adult blind role models, including members of the National Federation of the Blind.

[Applause]

And those blind adults impressed upon me the importance of gaining a strong foundation in blindness skills like Braille and technology, and I had the good sense to listen to what those adults told me. So I became a proficient Braille user, I learned to use the computer and the internet early in my educational career, and so with those skills in hand, I went off to college after receiving a scholarship from the NFB in 1998.

[Applause]

And when I came to the national convention to receive that scholarship, I also had the opportunity to observe a mock trial and watch blind lawyers like Scott LaBarre in action. And that just reinforced for me that this club of blind lawyers was one I definitely wanted to belong to.

So throughout college and law school, as I gained more experience, I was also exposed to many people from different backgrounds and different life experiences than my own and with different disabilities. And through getting to know those people and learning more about their stories, I gained a more sophisticated understanding of the different identities that we all carry and the different forms of discrimination that we all face. And I also came to appreciate that growing up as a white person in an affluent town on Long Island in a well-funded school district had afforded me a lot of advantages that many of my peers hadn't had. And that the history of injustice and access to opportunity in this country is far more complicated and for more painful than just my gym teacher telling me to sit on the sidelines.

But even as my understanding of discrimination deepened and became more expansive, I never forgot what it felt like viscerally to be held apart, to be treated as less than others. And as I became a practicing lawyer, I would tap into those personal experiences and the feelings that they evoked in me and that they still evoke in me when I experience discrimination to this day, for example when I'm denied service from a rideshare driver with my guide dog, which happens all the time.

So I would tap into those experiences and those feelings to help me better relate to my clients who had experienced different but equally unjust mistreatment, whether it was being sexually harassed by a coworker or being passed over for a promotion because they were Black. That ability to emphasize and have solidarity with others who experience mistreatment has made me a better lawyer. It's fueled my passion to fight against injustice. Because I do agree with what Dr. King said in his letter from a Birmingham jail, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

[Applause]

And because I hold that belief, after I had spent 3 years working as a lawyer with Disability Rights Advocates in Berkeley, California, working on disability discrimination cases, I decided to move back east where my family is from and to take a job at a law firm in D.C. that handles all sorts of employment and housing discrimination cases. And ever since 2011 I've been practicing law in D.C., either in plaintiff's firms or public interest organizations with a focus on workers' rights both for discrimination and people not being paid properly for their work.

And so that workers' rights practice eventually led me in 2021 to meet Robyn Morgan. Robyn was working at a Taco Bell franchise in Iowa, and she realized that she and her coworkers were not being paid over time when they worked more than 40 hours in a week as the law required. So she filed a lawsuit on behalf of herself and her coworkers and initially she was successful, but on appeal, the decision was reversed and this had to do with some complex legal stuff I won't get into involving forced arbitration and such. She couldn't be in court at all. She needed to go to a private arbitrator.

The lawyers who had handled her case in the district court came to public justice, which is where I was working at the time. We have a lot of experience there working on these issues. And they said the only step left for Robyn's case because we lost at the Court of Appeals is to take it to the U.S. Supreme Court. We would like you to handle the case.

And my boss at Public Justice said, well, Karla, you have a lot of experience working on these particular legal issues so if we decide to go forward in the Supreme Court, I think you should handle the case.

So I sat there for a minute and there was a little voice inside my head that said, whoa.

Now, I know the law in this area, I think we have a good chance of winning, but it's the Supreme Court! And as I said before, not a lot of people ever get a chance to argue there. They only take about 80 cases a year. And those 80 cases tend to be handled by a very few repeat player Supreme Court advocates who appear there over and over again.

But my passion to fight against injustice prevailed over my doubts, and I thought that what had happened to Robyn wasn't right, there was something we could do about it, and so I said, yes, let's take the case. So we filed our petition. The Supreme Court didn't have to take it. But a couple months later, we found out that they had taken it and we were off to the races.

[Applause]

And that was in November of 2021. A few weeks of that, I found out that Taco Bell had hired to argue the case on their side one of those repeat player Supreme Court advocates who has been up there over and over again. For those who know the law, you might know his name. Paul Clement. At that time he had argued over 100 cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

So at that point, that little voice inside my head that had said, whoa, it got a little bit louder. And it got some company, and there were a lot of little voices suddenly asking a lot of questions. What if you're not ready for this... what if you're not smart enough... what if you can't think on your feet as well as someone who has argued up there 100 times?

And then it took a really toxic turn. These other thoughts came to the forefront. What if you go up there on that big stage and it doesn't go well and people think, well, after all, what do you expect, she's blind...

Luckily, just as that spiral of self-doubt was starting to take hold, that old stubborn streak flared up again. And it had something to say to all of those nagging negative thoughts swirling around my head. It said, oh, yeah? I'll show you!

And so I buckled down and I got back to preparing the case. And that preparation meant reading lots and lots of previous cases, which I did using JAWS. That preparation also involved listening to lots and lots of archival audio of past Supreme Court arguments. Luckily Paul Clement had a large body of work so I had a lot I could listen to.

And the other thing that was helpful and why I wanted to listen to all of these arguments was to try to memorize the voices of the different justices. Since each of them has their own legal philosophy and way of approaching cases, it was very instructive for me to know who was asking me a question. So that I could know how best to respond to it.

Another thing I did to prepare was I put together a list of the most important cases and quotes that I wanted to have literally at my fingertips at the lectern that I could refer to in Braille as I was making my argument or as I was responding to questions.

[Applause]

And having two or three pages of Braille notes is something that I've been doing making a common practice whenever I do a court argument, whether trial or appellate court. But a new thing that I hadn't done in every argument before but that I wanted to be able to do at the Supreme Court argument was to have a way of taking notes when Mr. Clement was arguing. Since we were the petitioner, we would go first. We had brought the case to the court so we would go first. Then Mr. Clement would have his argument time. And I would get the last word in rebuttal. So I wanted to have a reliable way of taking notes so that I could make that rebuttal. And I thought about bringing a Braille display but then I was worried what if the technology fails at a really inopportune moment. So I dug back into my old bag of tricks from blindness skills I hadn't worked on since high school and I brushed up on my slate and stylus skills.

[Applause]

So a couple of weeks before the argument was scheduled, I called the Supreme Court to let them know I was bringing this slate and stylus into the building. I figured they wouldn't know what it was and I didn't want to have a problem with security. And I also asked them, what accommodation they could make for their clock which has a couple of different lights that come on. Yellow light when you have a couple minutes left and then a red light when you're out of time and I asked them could they provide some sort of audible tone, did they have a nonvisual component to their system for people who are arguing who can't see those colored lights.

And they said, huh, we haven't thought about that, this hasn't come up before, but we'll come up with something. And they did. What they did was they had a court employee sit at a table and physically ring a bell when the light came on for yellow, when the light came on for red.

[Applause]

So the day of the argument came, and it really went by in a blur. It lasted about an hour, but it felt much shorter than that because of all the adrenaline that was coursing through my veins, but it was actually surprisingly enjoyable to sort of be engaging back and forth with the justices. Before I knew it, the bell rang and it was time to sit down and I just sat there in disbelief thinking, did I just really do that?

One thing that was strange about the argument because of the COVID protocols that were in place at the time in early 2022, there was no public admitted into the court. So it was just the lawyers, the justices, and a very few court staff. One of the people who was there was the official court sketch artist who draws pictures of the people arguing each case. And those sketches, because photographs aren't allowed in the court, those sketches are what will accompany any media account or article that's ever published about the case later. And I was so proud and so moved that the day after my argument, the official sketch appeared which showed me standing at the lectern speaking with my hands on my Braille notes and --

[Applause]

And a little explanatory caption arrow pointing to my fingers with a note reading "Braille."

[Applause]

And so now in the official archives of the Supreme Court, there will always be that documentation that in March of 2022, a blind person argued at the Supreme Court and they used Braille to do it.

[Applause]

As proud as I am of that, I was equally proud 2 months later in May when in a unanimous 9-0 opinion the court ruled for Robyn Morgan.

[Applause]

And I was able to do my part to help her get the justice that she deserves.

[Applause]

But as proud as I am of all of that, I will be even more proud when I get to hear the next blind lawyer argue a case at the U.S. Supreme Court.

[Applause]

And what I really hope is that after two and three and four and five blind lawyers walk that path, the Supreme Court will decide to invest in some technological solution like a tone or a tactile buzzer for their visible light system because they realize there are so many of us blind people arguing that just having a person ring the bell each time is not a good solution.

But this isn't just a story about the Supreme Court. And I certainly didn't say yes to come speak today just to congratulate myself and say yea me I did a good thing. I came here and I'm sharing this story with you because I know that many, if not all of you, will in the future experience a situation where you will have voices of self-doubt inside your head like the ones that I described earlier. And sometimes those voices aren't just coming from inside our heads. Sometimes they're coming from out there in the world telling us we shouldn't do this, we can't do that, no blind person has ever done this before so what makes you think you can be the first.

And when those voices come into your lives, whether external or internal or both, I hope that by sharing my story with you today, I will have given more strength and more conviction and more force to your own voice when you are able to answer back, oh, yeah? I'll show you!

[Applause]

Because we can all do more than other people think we're capable of. We can all do more than we often believe ourselves that we're capable of. And we can do even more when we support and lift up one another. And that spirit of mutual support and solidarity is one of the things that I admire most about this organization. Especially when it's directed to those who are newly blind or to the next generation coming up.

I am so grateful to everyone who has supported and encouraged me along my journey, including people who are here in the room today and others who are no longer with us. And I am honored to do what I can to pay it forward in the years ahead.

Thank you all so much.

[Applause]

MARK RICCOBONO: I would like to do something. Just in case members of the United States Senate are listening. Now that you've heard her presentation, all those in favor of her confirmation by the United States Senate, say aye!

Opposed, say no.

There you go, Congress! Get it done!

[Applause]

Let's see if the Senate will listen to the organized blind movement. How about that?

Great job, Karla. Thank you very much.

We got a door prize for that?

BENNETT PROWS: Yes, we do. Virtual experiencers, David Duffy of Colorado. Shara Cooper from Florida. And Chris Walker from Virginia. Each will get 30 bucks if they send in, in the next 30 minutes, to prize@NFB.org the code word "elections."

Now we have complimentary book share subscription for one year and 25 bucks and that is going to Michelle Poncik from Texas. Are you here?

How about Fallon Minicello of Florida? Are you here?

Everybody else is here.

How about Zachary --

MARK RICCOBONO: I think you might have her in the back.

BENNETT PROWS: Somehow make yourself visible. Okay. She's jumping in the back. We got her.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. You're going to have more before we adjourn, right, Bennett?

BENNETT PROWS: Yeah, yeah, we'll probably have three.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. So the New Jersey affiliate caucus meeting will take place today, July 5, from 7:00-9:00 p.m. Man, that's a caucus. In room 338 this evening. New Jersey. All are welcome. And it says here, please bring your banquet tickets. This is signed by Lia Stone.

Remember that the portrait studio will be open here and you can also register, and a reminder that the hotel is selling cash and carry lunches downstairs on the third floor. They're very good and very affordable so I recommend them to you.

We are going to take up at 2:00 this afternoon, including resolutions. So after some door prizes, I'm going to give you a little time back.

Bennett, over to you.

BENNETT PROWS: We got a door prize. We got a voucher for a computer from computers for the blind, refurbishes computers, probably a $200 value. Winner is Zachary Ledford, Utah. Are you here?

He's waving his hand back there. We have him now.

MARK RICCOBONO: Scholarship winner. Was that your closing door prize?

BENNETT PROWS: We got one more.

MARK RICCOBONO: One more door prize. Let me say to our scholarship finalists, with Karla having been up here, you can see that a scholarship from the Federation vaults you into all sorts of places. So congratulations again to our scholarship finalists.

One more door prize.

BENNETT PROWS: One more. We have another book share subscription and 50 bucks for your luncheon this afternoon. And the winner is Sierra Elerby of North Carolina. Are you here?

Just walked out.

MARK RICCOBONO: That's what you get for leaving early.

BENNETT PROWS: John Olivera of Massachusetts. We got him.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. We will stand adjourned until 2:00 p.m.

(Gavel pounding).

(Meeting ended at 11:39 a.m. CT)