**Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired**
**Fall 2021 Courier**

**Everyday Advocacy: Make Your Voice Heard on Issues That Matter to You**

Photo: A folder containing a Council Courier, braille bookmark and a handout on transportation in front of the capitol building.

A safe, walkable community. A well-placed bus stop. An equal opportunity to cast your ballot.

Each of these issues remains central to the Council’s advocacy efforts, and a top priority for people across Wisconsin who are blind or visually impaired.

Yet many people hear the word “advocacy” and immediately think of lobbying state legislators. State lawmakers are certainly an important part of the picture, but often the greatest opportunities for sparking change through advocacy happen at the local level. This is where you can work with others to make an impact right where you live.

**Simple Steps to Get Started**

A local advocate can be anyone who is concerned about the health and welfare of their community. But these residents aren’t only concerned; they are actively seeking solutions.

Consider these steps to start your advocacy efforts at the local level:

* Identify an issue you or your neighbors are passionate about and learn the basics behind the problem.
* Determine the desired outcome.
* Connect with your local elected officials (town or county supervisors, city alders or councilpersons, school board members, etc.) to introduce yourself and get to know them.
* Learn about opportunities to offer input about your chosen issue, such as regular committee meetings or public hearings.

The Council’s Executive Director Denise Jess believes the more you get involved, the more you’ll get to be known and trusted, and your input valued. You may even be asked to serve on a committee or commission, where your views can be part of the formal policy making process.

“It is very important for those of us with vision loss to get involved in our communities,” Denise says.

“Our voice matters. In my work on various commissions, committees and task forces in the city of Madison where I live, I know I’m helping shape a community that is more welcoming, accessible and inclusive for all of us.”

Learn more about the Council’s advocacy at WCBlind.org/

**Excellence Awards Recipients are Making a Difference**

Our 2021 Excellence Awards recipients range from two retired nurses who volunteer their time providing eye screenings in schools to an organization going above and beyond to make a difference in the lives of people who are blind or visually impaired.

**Community Volunteer Service Award for Dedicated and Exemplary Volunteer Service: Doris Dolph and Sally DeVriend**

Retired nurses Doris Dolph of Waukesha and Sally DeVriend of Pewaukee were nominated by Robert Best for their efforts to promote eye care through free screenings in the Waukesha School District.

The pair most recently checked the eyes of more than 1,900 children from 4K through fifth grade at 13 elementary schools. Close to 300 of those students were referred for further eye testing.

**Community Giving Award for Financial and Organizational Support: Lake Wisconsin Lions Club**

The Lake Wisconsin Lions Club of Lodi was nominated by the Council’s Gratitude Work Group.

Our Gratitude Work Group credits emotional and personal connections with the club as reasons for its long-term support. Group members believe those connections are why the partnership between the Lions and the Council is so strong.

**Public Policy Award for Advancing Legislative Priorities: State Transportation Secretary Designee Craig Thompson**

State Transportation Secretary Designee Craig Thompson was
nominated by the Council’s Advocacy Work Group for his efforts
to highlight the needs of non-drivers in Wisconsin’s transportation
planning.

Members of our Advocacy Work Group recognize that the Secretary has shined a light on the impact transportation policy has on the non-driver population.

**Lifetime Service Award for Long-Term Exemplary Achievements in the Blind and Visually Impaired Community: Rhonda Staats**

Rhonda Staats was nominated by Patty Slaby for her years of service and dedication to promoting dignity and empowerment of people who are blind and visually impaired.

The La Crosse woman has been involved in numerous organizations, and is making a difference locally, including in an Amish community where she worked to build understanding and acceptance of vision loss. Rhonda also serves on the Executive Team of the Governor’s Council on People with Disabilities.

**Scholarship Recipients Share Lofty Goals**

Photo: Headshot of Saree Behm
Photo: Headshot of Grace Caine
Photo: Headshot of Lindsey Fritz
Photo: Headshot of Kaitlyn Hippe
Photo: Headshot of Brandon Klas
Photo: Headshot of Luka Santin
Photo: Headshot of Elizabeth Thompson
Photo: Headshot of George Tuttle
Photo: Headshot of Joseph Tuttle
Photo: Headshot of Shayna Wederath
Photo Caption:Scholarship winners, from upper left in order listed below.

Their goals are exciting, ranging from physical and music therapy to teaching and nursing.

Ten outstanding high school and college students with low vision were chosen to each receive a $2,000 scholarship toward continuing their education this year.

The Council awarded scholarships to these students:

* Saree Behm of Janesville is majoring in early childhood special education at UW-Whitewater and plans to be a teacher.
* Grace Caine of Lowell attends UW-Whitewater, majoring in instrumental music education. She wants to be a band director.
* Lindsey Fritz of Madison is studying nursing at Madison College and plans to be a nurse practitioner.
* Kaitlyn Hippe of Milwaukee attends Calvin University, where she majors in Chinese and Spanish. She plans to be an interpreter.
* Brandon Klas of Cedarburg attends UW-Whitewater for business entrepreneurship. He wants to be in management or operations with a car-related business.
* Luka Santin of Madison majors in jazz and contemporary improvisation at Lawrence University, with plans to work as a certified music therapist.
* Elizabeth Thompson of Madison is attending Madison College and plans to major in education, with a specialty in vision impairment. She wants to work in special education.
* George Tuttle of Drummond attends Carroll University with a major in healthcare administration. He plans a career in physical therapy.
* Joseph Tuttle of Drummond is an agriculture education major at Purdue University. He wants to be a high school agriculture or biology teacher.
* Shayna Wederath is from Clintonville and attends UW-Stevens Point with a major in psychology. She plans to work in rehabilitation therapy.

Congratulations to all the recipients of these awards and scholarships!

The Council is grateful to Associated Bank and NeuGen for scholarship event support.

**Letter from Executive Director Denise Jess**

Photo: Headshot of Denise Jess

Autumn Greetings!

This summer marked my fifth anniversary as the Council’s executive director. As I reflect on these years, I am moved by the deep commitment of my colleagues on the staff and board, the generosity of our volunteers and donors, and the rich diversity of our community partners.

While our feet are firmly rooted in the Council’s foundation and history, we stretch our arms out to expand the Council’s reach with new ventures and relationships. Promoting the dignity and empowerment of Wisconsinites living with vision loss is at the core of everything we do.

In keeping with our traditions, we proudly honored five Excellence Award recipients and ten academic scholars. We transformed our signature events, like the Low Vision Fair, Gallery Night and the Macular Degeneration Symposium, into virtual events enabling safety and access for all. We stretched into new aspects of our advocacy work and built a vibrant online low vision support community. We were able to launch all of these exciting adventures while maintaining our commitment to excellence in serving clients in our Sharper Vision Store and vision services activities.

I look forward with much joy and gratitude to the anniversaries we have yet to celebrate together, including the Council’s upcoming 70th anniversary in 2022. Stay tuned to learn more about that in the months to come. For now, enjoy reading this fall issue of the Council Courier.

Warm regards,

Graphic: Signature of Denise

Denise

**John Foulks Retires from the Council Board of Directors**

John Foulks of Fond du Lac recently retired from the Board of Directors. The entire Council family is grateful to John for his years of service to the organization.

John served as the board’s second Vice President and gave his time to the executive committee and various work groups. He participated regularly in the Council’s Legislative Day.

“John saw the Council’s work as vital for people living with vision loss,” Executive Director Denise Jess says.

“He always offered his support and encouragement in these efforts.” Fellow board member Dan Sippl says John had personal reasons for working on behalf of people who are blind.

“John lost his eyesight to diabetes, which slowed him down for a few years. But he quickly became an asset for those with vision loss,” Dan says.

John is also a board member for the Randolph Sheppard Program, a nonprofit that provides people with visual impairment the opportunity to manage vending operations at rest stops, cafeterias, snack bars, and similar sites across the country.

John’s contributions to the Board will be missed.

**New Customer Care Specialist at the Sharper Vision Store**

Photo: Headshot of Greg Schmidt

Greg Schmidt is the new customer care specialist at the Council’s Sharper Vision Store.

The Madison man comes to the store with years of retail experience, most recently at Habitat for Humanity ReStore. He’s now enjoying getting to know our Sharper Vision customers.

“Many of the store’s visitors are making appointments, which means I get to spend quality one-on-one time with them,” Greg says.

“But no matter how I work with a customer here, in person or on the phone, I really like being able to support their needs. I can’t envision doing anything else.”

Greg is originally from Milwaukee and graduated from the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. He designs comics and books for kids during his off hours.

Greg married his high school sweetheart, and the couple has one child.

**New Team in the Communications Department**

Bob Jacobson and Teri Barr are the new members of the Council’s communications team.

Photo: Headshot of Bob Jacobson

Bob joins the staff as communications director. He brings more than 20 years of experience in nonprofit communications to the Council, including staff positions with organizations involved in child advocacy, community development and philanthropy.

Bob has also served many other nonprofits over the years as a freelance writer, editor and communications consultant. Most recently, Bob worked at the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, overseeing provider communications in the Division of Medicaid Services.

Originally from Detroit, Bob holds a degree in sociology from Michigan State University. “I’m delighted to be back in the nonprofit sector and thrilled to be at the Council, an organization that understands the importance of strategic storytelling in pursuit of our mission,” Bob says.

“It’s a privilege to support the work Council staff performs every day to empower people who are blind and visually impaired to live well and with dignity.”

Photo: Headshot of Teri Barr

Also joining the Council’s communications department as a part-time content writer is Teri Barr. She’s an award-winning TV and radio journalist and is currently also a business news podcast host.

Teri grew up in Northeast Wisconsin and attended the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh for Radio-TV-Film, Journalism and Political Science. You may remember her work as a TV news anchor in Wausau, Green Bay and Madison. She moved around the country during her television career too, but Teri is happy to be home.

“I believe in using your talents to make a difference,” Teri says. “Working at the Council is honoring my goals of sharing inspiring stories and leaving the world a better place because of it. I’m finding the staff, partners and clients feel the same. It’s a special place to be.”

**Funding and Virtual Events Help Us Stay Connected**

**Grants Provide Personalized Low Vision Products**

Photo:Adaptive products in a Personalized Low Vision Kit include magnifiers, large print crossword puzzle book, bump dots and large print playing cards**.**

It’s a primary goal of the Council to provide life-changing tools to people who are adjusting to vision loss. It is also important to include training in the use of those tools.

Thanks to grants from the Madison South Rotary Foundation, the Evjue Foundation and an anonymous funder, the Council’s Vision Services staff is meeting these goals. Twenty-two people received Personal Low Vision Kits this year.

“Without this type of support or financial assistance, many of these people cannot afford to purchase the variety of items they need to continue with their daily living tasks,” Council Fund Development Director Lori Werbeckes says.

Each personal kit ended up being unique and individualized based on the client’s needs. Kits included items like reading magnifiers, lighting, cooking utensils, talking watches or clocks, large print calendars, and talking thermometers or pedometers.

The Council also provided low vision evaluations and in-home learning on use of the tools.

“Adaptive products for blindness are not covered by Medicare or supplemental insurance, so most of these kits were prepared for low-income seniors who are experiencing a loss of vision,” Lori says.

“We are so grateful for this supportive funding.”

**Join The Council for These Free, Virtual Events**

**Virtual Low Vision Support Group, Meeting Monthly**
Our Low Vision Support Group is a safe place for you to talk with others who are visually impaired or caring for someone with low vision. This free support group is facilitated by Council Vision Services staff and meets online via Zoom the second Monday of each month.

Sign up now to get the link or call-in number for the next meeting by contacting Brent Perzentka at 608-237-8112 or by email at BPerzentka@WCBlind.org**Access Technology Classes, Meeting Monthly**
The topics of our access technology classes range from taking photos with your phone to using delivery service apps and online grocery shopping. Open to everyone, a new “how to” is shared free, online via Zoom, every month.

Sign up now to get the link or call-in number for the next class by contacting Jim Denham at 608-237-8104 or by email at JDenham@WCBlind.org.

**Gallery Night, Friday, November 12**
Our annual Gallery Night highlights the amazing art created by people from across Wisconsin who are visually impaired. Paintings, photos, sculptures and more will be featured during this free, online virtual event. Watch for more details, coming soon.

You can learn more about Gallery Night, view last year’s virtual exhibit, and watch last year’s virtual event on the Council website at <https://wcblind.org/events/gallery-night/>Make an appointment for vision services or a Sharper Vision Store visit. Vision services include vision rehabilitation, low vision evaluations and access technology training. Store appointments are perfect for finding the right adaptive equipment for you or a loved one. To book an appointment, call 800-783-5213 or email us at Info@WCBlind.org.

The programs you’re reading about in the Courier are made possible by generous gifts to the Council. Please consider mailing a contribution in the enclosed envelope or donating online at [WCBlind.org/donate](http://www.wcblind.org/donate). Your gift will help someone in Wisconsin as they adapt to life with vision loss. Thank you!

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